



Reclaiming Revelation

Postcolonial Hermeneutics, African Liberation, and the Theology of Hope and Resistance

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Waweru, Humphrey Mwangi. *The Apocalypse of John and Liberation Theology in Africa.* Lanham, Maryland, USA: Lexington Books, 2024. Pp. ix+188. US \$100.00 (paperback), \$ 90.00 (ebook)

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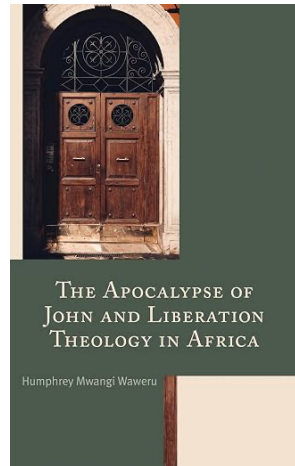
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Humphrey Mwangi Waweru is a senior lecturer in philosophy and religious studies at Kenyatta University. He is well known for his postcolonial biblical scholarship. In this book, Waweru rereads the Apocalypse of John through a postcolonial interpretive lens, presenting it as a liberative text for the African context that subverts colonial hermeneutics. The topic and issues that the book raises are important for both African biblical interpretation and liberation theology, as they are informed by the realities of African society.

The book of Revelation has distinctive literary features that make it difficult to interpret. As a result, it has often been neglected or misused in Africa and beyond. However, the book contains relevant messages of hope and comfort. By depicting that ultimate victory belongs to God, it encourages readers to face the future with resilience.

In Africa, colonial and imperialistic cultural hegemony historically eroded and subordinated indigenous cultures and practices. Because the Bible has been frequently weaponized to legitimize imperialism, it came to be considered as a



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tool of oppression. This process created “a ‘self-validating’ world” (vii, 6, 14, 37) in which European domination was presented as natural and permanent. Furthermore, mainstream biblical studies are primarily shaped by a Western academic paradigm. Waweru argues that addressing these legacies demands an alternative way of reading biblical texts suitable for addressing these and other related issues. In such a process, this same text can be regarded as an instrument of liberation in African hands. Doing so requires the re-appropriation of the biblical text to empower African readers to critique oppressive structures while addressing postcolonial socio-political challenges.

Waweru contends that one cannot read the Book of Revelation in isolation from its first-century socio-cultural context. Hence, he briefly discusses standard introductory issues such as authorship, literary genre, the source of apocalyptic literature, and methods of interpretation. He argues that reading the book solely from a historical perspective focusing on historical meaning (though legitimate) reduces its contemporary impact for Africans who share structural similarities with John’s first audience(s). Thus, this book employs postcolonial criticism specifically employing contrapuntal reading as a primary methodology.

The term “contrapuntal” originates from the musical concept of counterpoint and was first introduced into literary theory by the postcolonial theorist Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism*.¹ Said argued that texts should be read simultaneously attending to various, at times competing, voices. Adopting such an approach highlights that the Bible is inherently “polyphonic” (multi-voiced rather than monophonic). Applied to Revelation, contrapuntal reading engages with the biblical text along with African voices from “culture, democracy, modernity, and Christianity interacting, resulting in a proper counterpoint” (5). However, the intention of this listening is not for comparative analysis; rather this approach allows a dynamic conversation between the African context and the Apocalypse of John. The aim is to examine the two separately as distinct lines of thought and to discover fresh or unexpected ideas by keeping them separate.² The attempt is to introduce “a new way of ‘producing theology’” (vii) where listening to others is prioritized. This method involves African culture and exhibits commitment to the readers’ world, including their lived experiences. Even if contrapuntalism is participatory and emancipatory, it is not at odds with Western methods. Waweru, in essence, aims to liberate the Apocalypse from colonial hermeneutics

¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

² In African biblical studies, comparative study mainly focuses on examining continuities, tensions, and intersections between the Bible and African religions.

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by exploring three key perspectives: apocalyptic communities, African cultural heritage, and contemporary Christian trends within biblical studies.

The contemporary African is marked by systemic injustices where many dictators have come and gone and still dictate in the post-independence era. There are many social challenges emanating from colonial and neocolonial legacies and some of the challenges emerge from post-independence African leaders. In such a context, the concept of “apocalypse” is not perceived as only as a prophecy of the end time, but as a text that “unveils” insight into present socio-political realities following colonialism (2–3).

Comparing the apocalyptic settings with the current situation in Africa, the author highlights that apocalyptic writing emerges in times of crisis. As a result, apocalyptic literature “made life tolerable under intolerable situations with its emphasis on God’s final and perfect solution. This is the element that makes Africans more attracted to this book” (15). Allan Boesak pioneered Black liberation theology in Africa during the apartheid era.³ Waweru draws from such a legacy and frames the book of Revelation as a theology of hope and resistance which can be applicable to anytime or every age. Technically speaking, the book proposes a new way of reading — a new paradigm of apocalypse through the lens of African experiences such as colonialism, the quest for self-identity, and oppression.

Apocalyptic literature presents the present as imperfect and looks for solutions to the current problems; this, in turn, makes it an African text. Since Africa is facing numerous modern problems and seeking liberation and solutions, this literature encourages African readers to pursue liberation and resist accommodation of oppressing powers. Apocalypse is also fitting with Africa’s future expectations of better living.

The commentary section of the book demonstrates the practical application of this methodology. For example, the destruction of “Babylon” is connected to the modern struggle against structural injustices and political oppression in Africa. The reality of demonic forces is recognized within African worldviews, yet their power is shown to be limited because the God of the Apocalypse conquered them. This gives hope to African readers and indicates that these forces do not control the lives of believers. The sealing of the 144,000 is interpreted as a form of divine protection that gives security to Africans who are oppressed by their own leaders and who are in the midst of trials and afflictions. The two witnesses are presented as a model for African churches’ prophetic

³ See Allan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987).

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ministry to speak out against social, moral, and ethnic injustices, even at the cost of affliction or martyrdom. Conversely, failing to exercise one's prophetic ministry may threaten the existence of the church. God's judgment is regarded as liberative justice against oppressors, for God judges the oppressor.

A major strength of the book is that it contextualizes Revelation for African readers through the integration of African cultural and theological concerns and by emphasizing on hope, resistance, and divine justice. The book also emphasizes the theology of hope and resistance, presenting Revelation not merely as an eschatological text, but as a source of inspiration for contemporary readers seeking societal transformation and liberation. Furthermore, Waweru avoids single-focused critique by equally confronting postcolonial African leaders who perpetuate oppression, noting that post-independence leadership can sometimes prove as oppressive as colonial rule or first-century emperors.

Contrapuntal reading is an interpretive method rather than historical claim about the authorial intent. As a result, the potential risk of contrapuntal reading is that it may overshadow the historical context for it focuses on contemporary ethical or political questions or it may risk reading contemporary concerns back to ancient texts. Fortunately, Waweru avoids subjective overreach by balanced integration of postcolonial reading with literary and historical-critical analysis. By holding the three horizons together — the ancient text, African culture, and current trends in biblical studies — Waweru offers an ethical and responsible reading of Revelation. However, the book could have been further strengthened by incorporating more concrete, localized case studies from across the African continent.

Overall, *The Apocalypse of John and the Liberation Theology in Africa* is a well-written and valuable contribution to New Testament studies, African biblical hermeneutics, and liberation theology. By reframing Revelation as a text of transformative hope, divine justice, and resistance, Waweru offers us an ethically responsible, engaging dialogue partner for theologians, pastors seeking to address pressing socio-political realities in Africa and beyond.