

Foreword

THANKFULLY, MOST PEOPLE WORKING in Christian mission and in theological education today recognize the importance of the cultural context in which Scripture is read. This context, we have come to see, plays a role not only in how Scripture is read, but also in the theological reflection that follows such readings. The significance of this lies in the fact that Scripture is read in a wide (and increasing) variety of settings. Keon-Sang An's study of biblical interpretation of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church (EOTC) explores one important—and mostly overlooked—cultural reading.

Keon-Sang An's book makes very clear that a contextual reading of Scripture does not mean anything goes—that any reading of Scripture is just as good as any other. Quite the contrary, he carefully describes the way contextual readings emerge out of clearly defined community configurations and express the traditions embodied in those communities. Such readings are thus constrained by their context, while at the same time they are also enabled by this. And in the case of EOTC, as in many other contextual readings, the end goal is that the Bible is truly “heard” in that place, that the power of Scripture is allowed freely to have its way.

Keon-Sang frames the conversation within the recent Evangelical reflection on Scripture and culture—which represents his own setting. Evangelicals have been known for their desire to let Scripture be the final authority in faith and practice. But in their attempt to find the one true reading of Scripture they have sometimes acted as if cultural influences were optional or even harmful. The aspiration for a true and undistorted biblical reading is certainly laudable, but it does not allow them, as they think, to escape from reading contextually—it rather expresses a particular hermeneutical tradition that derives from Evangelicalism's roots in the Reformation and subsequent revivals and renewal movements.

Important as this tradition may be, it is not privileged. And this study demonstrates how much Evangelicals have to learn from a tradition founded and developed in a completely different setting.

Keon-Sang An's important study of the hermeneutics of the Oriental Orthodox Church uncovers a centuries-long tradition of faith and practice that is carried by a living tradition of preaching. Moreover he shows how this pattern of interpretation is not simply an ecclesial tradition but also a cultural and political repository. Embedded within these practices are not only primal elements of Ethiopian indigenous religion, but also theological accents stemming from ancient Hebrew and Syriac sources. And in them he also discerns political impulses that have been formative in Ethiopian history.

Central to explication of the EOTC treatment of Scripture is an understanding of the carriers of that tradition (which might usefully stimulate Evangelicals to ask a parallel question: what are the primary carriers of their interpretation of Scripture?). In the case of EOTC, Keon-Sang introduces us to the *Andemta* Commentary which has brought together the combined voices of readers of Scripture over time (initially an oral tradition) that interlaces a striking diversity of strands, and that in turn allows preachers to discover richer meanings—a procedure resonating especially with the Syriac notions of symbolism, one figure with many senses. The written commentary then is the aggregation of many voices—much like the Jewish accumulation of Rabbinic sources—to clarify texts for subsequent believers.

But the commentary is not an end in itself; it serves the larger purpose of informing the ongoing practice of preaching, which for the EOTC becomes an oral transcription of God's truth for the sake of present-day application. As for Evangelicals, though with strikingly different patterns, preaching for the EOTC is central to the practice of worship. For the EOTC preaching is meant to open narrative windows, based on a rich variety of voices, to reach a spiritual goal: "to bear good fruit." Here too Evangelicals will find material for reflection. While they are proud to move from history to symbol, the EOTC moves in the opposite direction, from symbol to history. Both value the historical and the theological, though they arrive there by different paths. And both find their theological center in the person of Jesus Christ, though they represent Christological traditions developing in different landscapes and over terrain unrecognizable to the other.

Their different geographies have meant these traditions have long lived in isolation from one another. Keon-Sang An's important study gives evidence that, happily, this isolation is coming to an end. This fresh opening allows us to contemplate a collective future, of mutual learning, as we together grow up into Christ in all things.

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