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Introduction : The Birth and Growth of Bible in Africa Studies (BIAS) Series

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Introduction: The Birth and Growth of *Bible in Africa Studies (BiAS)* Series

Joachim Kügler and the Intentional
Subversion of Western Epistemological
Dominance

Abstract

In October 2004, Joachim Kügler, as Professor for Biblical Studies at Bayreuth University, received Honoured Serima Taruona as a PhD candidate. Prior to that he was already working with Eric Soga Onomo, who was at the Catholic Seminary in Bamberg. Soon after, the team grew with the arrival of Jacques Owono from Cameroon. By 2010, when Kügler presided over the graduation of his first PhD mentee, the brood under his care and mentorship had grown to seven. To date, Joachim has overseen at least six PhD graduates and hosted not less than six Alexander von Humboldt and Georg Forster Fellows over almost two decades since he started working with African biblical studies candidates. One of the most significant contributions, besides hosting and mentoring students and researchers, was the creation of the *Bible in Africa Studies (BiAS)* series in 2009. This introduction is a brief narrative of the journey of BiAS and its implications for Biblical Studies in Africa and by African scholars.

Keywords: *Bible, Africa, Subversion, Epistemology, Dominance, Bias*

1. Introduction

Having enrolled for a diploma in religious studies at the University of Zimbabwe in 1997, I was quickly attracted to the study of the Old Testament and to a lesser extent, the study of the New Testament. My two lecturers then, Rev. Dr. Philemon T. Chikafu (May His Soul Rest in Peace)

and Rev. Dr. Aynos M. Moyo, teaching Introduction to the Old Testament and Introduction to the New Testament respectively, challenged me and inspired me at the same time. The Bible was not what I thought it was! The Bible was not as straightforward as I always believed it to be! One need not be a Christian (or Jew) to study the Bible!

Looking at the course outlines for these two courses that I was taking, it was a collection of the who is who in biblical studies: Julius Wellhausen, Gerhard von Rad, Norman K. Gottwald, John H. Hayes, Lawrence Boadt, Hans Conzelmann, Rudolf Bultmann and many others. What was conspicuous by its absence, were biblical scholars from Africa. To be a biblical scholar, was to be a “European” biblical scholar. We were taught to approach the Bible like the disinterested and unbiased European and North American scholars, whose books became our daily epistemological diet. Our lecturers were merely directing us towards this ideal of imitating European scholars. Academic essays had nothing to do with our lived experiences, only what could be objectively extracted, “exegeted” from the text and context of the Bible was legitimate and valid!

A certain degree of dissatisfaction began to emerge when I could not reconcile how the objective, universal approach to the Bible could address the Bible like it was a dead text that had no bearing in contemporary communities when all around me, the Bible was either saving lives or destroying lives. It was shaping communal norms, values and practices. How could these lived experiences be excluded from the academic study of the Bible? For what use will be a study of the Bible that excludes this very lived experience of so many Christians around the world? Being accepted by Joachim Kügler to pursue my PhD studies under his mentorship at Bayreuth University became a turning point in my professional development, especially expressed in the creation of BiAS, as an alternative centre of power – a margin plugged to the centre for subversive purposes.

2. Power and Dominance: Control of Ways of Knowing

As I was working towards the completion of my PhD thesis, Prof (this has been Joachim’s name to me and my family – every other Prof must be

qualified by name, only him is my unqualified Prof!) and I started discussing where to publish my thesis, which is a requirement for graduation. There were many publishers that we could have approached but we started exploring other non-existent options, we started exploring the possibility of subverting existing structures by creating an alternative centre of power with an unapologetically biased preference for often disadvantaged biblical scholars from Africa.

We were very clear that the current publication industry, especially as it related to biblical studies, was dominantly western. The main publishers were based in Europe and North America, and it was them that successfully distributed their published books across the world, their books were found in small seminaries in Africa, Asia, Pacific, Caribbean, Latin America etc. Their published authors were the “reference scholars” for biblical studies globally and that meant their epistemologies were regarded as the “true” epistemologies that had to be studied and embraced by all aspiring biblical scholars from around the world. By possessing the truth about and of the Bible, western biblical scholars possessed power and dominance to judge all other scholars of the Bible.

We also were aware of some developments in some parts of the global south, where biblical scholars were studying the Bible differently from the approaches in the west. There were even some publishers who were willing to publish such materials, however, they did not have the infrastructure to compete against the established publishers in the west. That meant there were materials, good materials, written and published in Africa that never saw the academies across the continent, let alone the world. Many of them did not explore their own national contexts. Studies done at one Zimbabwean university remained unknown to students and staff at a university in a neighbouring town or city. These studies could not exercise influence nor inspire an alternative perspective because they were not accessible.

We also were aware of excellent studies done by African biblical scholars in some of the leading universities in Europe and North America, yet these were also not easily accessible to the students of the Bible in Africa. They were not as aggressively marketed in Africa as the books of the white scholars. So books by black South African scholars were unknown to Zimbabwean biblical studies students, across the Limpopo River, yet we knew

theories, hypotheses and models developed by North American and European scholars. There was a clear structural and systemic intentionality in the manner knowledge, ways of knowing, and sources of knowledge and knowing were being controlled in the world of biblical studies. Western biblical studies was accuser, prosecutor, judge and jury on what constitutes “good biblical studies”! Could we do something about this?

3. Bible in Africa Studies (BiAS): Our Response

When Joachim Kügler was preparing to leave Bayreuth University to join the University of Bamberg, there was a degree of uncertainty for me: what did this mean to me and my studies. However, for Prof, this move was beginning to interest him even more: Bamberg had a publishing house, the University of Bamberg Press (UBP). Could we use this to launch a series that would begin to address what we were observing in the publishing world? Conversations with the leadership at UBP quickly made it clear that this was a real possibility, but what would that series be called? UBP needed a name! This is how *Bible in Africa Studies* (BiAS) came about. Prof had taken a deliberate and preferential option of working with budding and established scholars from Africa and he was not interested in shepherding them into standard European biblical studies but wanted to create a platform for co-learning, exploring the intersection of European and African approaches to the Bible, embracing the intersectionality existing between the “ancient text” and the “living text” of the Bible.

It dawned on us as we settled for the series name, *Bible in Africa Studies*, that its acronym would be “BiAS” and in our conversation we tried to see if this acronym would be good or bad for the series. I opined that while “bias” carries negative connotations associated with marginalizing others without due regard to their well-being, our intentions were intentionally biased to subvert an existing system that was biased at its core. We were going to embrace the BiAS that were pursuing, we were intentionally looking to provide a platform for African biblical scholars to put their approaches and studies of the Bible on the global map. Having the materials published both in print and online versions would make these materials accessible to a global audience, not only in Africa. This series would change the game and it has!

A collection of essays by Lovemore Togarasei became the first publication in the series in 2009 followed by the PhD thesis of David Bishau (2010) and Gunda's PhD thesis, the first supervised by Joachim Kügler (2010). What has happened since 2009, has been an exponential growth of BiAS, which even birthed a sub-series, *Exploring Religion in Africa* (ERA), for materials and books that were not explicitly, biblical studies, but rather religious and theological studies, yet still focusing on Africa. In all, to date, BiAS and ERA have forty volumes and counting! Without saying it, BiAS has been postcolonial and decolonial, it has been a subversive approach to biblical studies.

4. The Editorial Team – Inclusivity and Daring

From the conversations between Prof and myself, an editorial team started to take shape. The first to be invited to the team was Lovemore Togarasei, a New Testament Professor from Zimbabwe who was an experienced research fellow hosted by Joachim Kügler. Then followed two associate editors, Zimbabwean professors in the study of religion, Nisbert T. Taringa (May His Dear Soul Rest in Eternal Peace) and Ezra Chitando. Through their presence and work, BiAS birthed ERA. It was a male only editorial team and we all were uncomfortable because all of us were fully aware of the gender imbalance in the world.

To plug this anomaly, from volume 32, the editorial team is now as follows: Kudzai Biri (African Traditional Religions), Ezra Chitando (World Christianity), Rosinah Gabaitse (New Testament), Kathrin Gies (Old Testament / Hebrew Bible), Masiwa R. Gunda (Old Testament / Hebrew Bible), Joachim Kügler (New Testament / Responsible for the contact with UBP), Johanna Stiebert (Old Testament / Hebrew Bible), and Lovemore Togarasei (New Testament). This has allowed BiAS to achieve gender equality and more significantly, gender equity in its composition and function. With the retirement of Joachim Kügler, the balance will tilt in favour of females. There is room for continuously and creatively looking at the editorial needs of BiAS.

One of the unsung (s)heroes of this subversive intervention by Joachim has been Frau Irene Loch, whose tireless work in all the volumes of this series has been outstanding and greatly appreciated. Frequently, she has

worked beyond the remit of her job description to make these publications possible. The staff of UBP have also been outstanding allies.

5. BiAS: The End of the Beginning – a Continuing Journey

The retirement of Joachim Kügler has caused some uncertainty in our minds, was this going to be the end of BiAS? As we counted down the years, we at some point thought we were on journey to bury BiAS because we needed an active Professor at the University of Bamberg, who was willing to embrace the vision and aspirations of BiAS and therefore give BiAS a life beyond the active service of Joachim Kügler in the university. Our prayers have been answered in the most emphatic of ways, not only did we get one Professor, we got two Professors who have embraced BiAS and therefore have assured BiAS of an existence beyond its founding father. We welcome Professors Kathrin Gies and Uta Poplutz, specialists in Old and New Testament studies, at the University of Bamberg, who have accepted the baton from Joachim Kügler and will preside over the continued growth of BiAS. Long live BiAS!

6. This Volume

Joachim Kügler has interfaced with numerous African scholars, not only in biblical studies but across the various areas of religious studies. The contributors to this volume are not all the scholars he has worked with; they are just the few that responded to the call and came through with chapters. If all had responded, then this book would have been much bigger and richer! What you will encounter in this volume are chapters that explore the ways in which Joachim has impacted biblical studies in Africa through his openness to embrace alternative perspectives, challenging such perspectives and allowing himself to be challenged by them as well. Joachim Kügler, as Ezra Chitando articulates in the first chapter, has been an ally par excellence for biblical studies by African scholars. His impact suggests it is possible to build a community of scholars based on acceptance of diversity, embrace of constructive criticism, and a shared re-envisioning and re-imagination of a future that is shared and co-owned.