

Foreword

Joachim Kügler (with Rosinah Gabaitse & Johanna Stiebert)

Following the conference on “Bible and Practice” held at Bamberg, Germany, in 2009, the idea of dedicating a volume to the same theme but with special focus on Africa was born. And the result was not only a book, (BiAS 4)¹, but a series of meetings also. Since then the University of Bamberg, on the initiative of the Chair for New Testament Studies, holds a biannual conference on *Bible in Africa Studies*. This conference is jointly organized with colleagues in the fields of Theology and Biblical Studies, and other related fields in Africa. The conference has the aim of deliberating on pressing issues in the world and, more particularly, in Africa. The initiative started with the first meeting, held in Germany in 2010 at the imposing Kloster Banz (cf. BiAS 7), with the second held in Gaborone, Botswana, in 2012 (cf. BiAS 17) and the third, structured according to the regulations of a Humboldt-Kolleg, held in Windhoek, Namibia, in 2014 (cf. BiAS 20).

At Windhoek, those who attended the conference on religious, social, and political issues relating to *The Bible and Violence in Africa* decided by a clear majority that the next BiAS-meeting should deal with *The Bible and Gender Troubles in Africa*. Regarding the location, the majority favored the idea that the conference of 2016 should be held at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare. It was especially Dr Obvious Vengeyi, who shouldered the burden of organizing all the necessities for the meeting. Everyone who knows somewhat about the socio-economic challenges experienced by Zimbabwe under the reign of the “the other son of God” during the agony of his last years, will understand that preparing an international conference under these circumstances did not mean less than what Germans call a “Herkulesaufgabe” (Herculean labour). At the end of the day we had a wonderful meeting at the University of Zimbabwe, superbly organized by our hosts at Harare. We cannot thank Pro-

¹ All the volumes of BiAS series are listed at the very end of this volume.

fessor Vengeyi and his supportive friends at Harare enough for all that they have achieved for the BiAS family!

The discussions at Harare were characterized by two phenomena which participants from the West would not readily have expected. First, the fact that the topic of gender troubles attracted much more men than women: both the participants and the presenters of papers were predominantly male. Some participants suspected that women scholars were not well informed about the event but the call for papers was sent out to so many scholars – male and female – all over sub-Saharan-Africa – that this is not a very convincing explanation for the preponderance of men at this gender conference. It may probably be more correct to understand this as a symptom of the somewhat awkward feelings of disconcertion among male academics in contemporary Africa when it comes to the gender topic.

This goes along with the second observation: while in Germany – and many other countries of the West – male academics attending a gender conference would mostly be part of the gender fairness movement, many of the male participants at Zimbabwe gave the impression that for them gender debates are something that should be fought against, because they are something ‘unbiblical’ and ‘un-African’, threatening their masculinity. I [JK] will never forget how these feelings came to the fore at an unexpectedly long and most vivid discussion following the presentation of Kudzai Biri on single women in Zimbabwe (cf. her article in this volume). In an almost eruptive way so many men – most of them ‘professional Christians’ as biblical scholars and/or pastors of Pentecostal or mainline churches! – uttered the wish to get rid of the colonial heritage of Christianity, which destroyed pre-colonial gender order, especially by fighting against traditional polygamy. It is in this line that women (and men) standing up for gender justice often are attacked as “coconuts”² – brown on the outside, white on the inside. One sees them

² Although coconuts are delicious and healthy food, the expression is meant derogatory and shows that racism is not a Western privilege. Insinuating that African feminists or womanists are brain-washed by Western/white/colonialist ideology is an unfair stereotype of course. On the other side it also has some truth in it since championing the cliché of a real African woman staying at home, caring for children and kitchen, results in declaring that every woman participating in any public discourse, be it academic or political, is doing something un-African. The mere fact that a woman is speaking publicly or publishing texts in books or periodicals makes her a “coconut”. Of course, this

as agents of a foreign Western agenda, which causes gender troubles – understood as troubles among the genders³ – by inviting African women to challenge the traditional ideal of the submissive woman. As a non-African non-woman, I cannot say if African women in this point really need any incentive from abroad, but it is obvious that no culture, no country and no continent is an island in modern times of mass communication, and intercultural exchange might be a characteristic of human development since ancient times. It is at least highly probable that even without any colonial past Africa would have to face dramatic changes and developments in many socio-cultural fields – including gender concepts, which by the way have changed in so many details through the times and keep changing permanently. Only 50 years ago horse-riding was typically male in Germany, while it is now typically female, most fashionable among teenage girls. While long golden ear-rings are seen as typically female in many cultures, it was typically male in Ancient Egypt, a privilege of the king as ‘the man of the men’. However, these changes mostly happen without being noticed and without touching the basic structure of patriarchy. What African (and many other) societies experience now is much more, it is a fundamental challenge of this structure and men who fear for their power have every reason to be worried about this kind of gender troubles. The question is, if the gender justice movement is just a kind of fashion, which one can fight and stop, or if it is a wave unstoppable. If it is a wave the alternative is: either you learn to swim, or you drown. The water is no enemy to those who know how to swim, and men who have learned that the topic of gender justice is dealing with their own liberation too, might finally experience that there is plenty of life outside the iron cage of traditional macho-masculinity.

simple fact usually is overseen silently when women engage in re-establishing patriarchal gender role models. But even the most conservative woman participating in public discourse shows that – in the words of Bob Dylan (1964) – “the times they are a-changing” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7qQ6_RV4VQ).

³ Obviously, nobody understood ‘gender trouble’ according to the concept of Judith Butler, who coined the expression. Firstly, she would see patriarchal gender order as something that is making troubles, and she would, secondly, also say that ‘doing gender’ (the cultural pressure put on every person to adapt to standardized, heterosexual gender norms) in itself is a problem, a suppressive, dehumanizing process. According to Butler ‘undoing gender’ is necessary because gender is trouble. Cf. J. Butler, 1990, *Gender trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge.

Unfortunately, many of those who spoke out for traditional gender order during the Harare conference did not deliver articles for this volume. Therefore, we cannot document their arguments adequately in this volume. On the other hand, we had the chance to integrate a lot of articles that were not read at the conference of 2016. We already have done so in previous BiAS volumes only this time considerably more so. Due to various factors the peer review process took a long time so that we could not finish editing as early as planned but we hope that this volume was worth waiting for. I am extremely grateful that my dear Humboldtian friends and colleagues, Johanna Stiebert and Rosinah Gabaitse, came to my help and shared with me in the burden of editing this book, although they had not even taken part in the Harare conference. Without their highly effective help this volume would not have seen the light of the public before the next BiAS conference.

We also have to pay tribute to the tremendously supportive work of Mrs Irene Loch and we do so with great gratitude. Finally, we say thanks to our student helper Johannes Löhlein who – as a special service to our readers – created an index of the biblical texts mentioned in this volume.

The editors dedicate this volume 22 of BiAS series to LILLY PHIRI, a scholar who was a strong fighter for justice but died far too young. Born 1983 in Kabwe, Zambia, she studied Theology in Kitwe in Zambia. From 2006-2011 she worked as a Minister of Religion for the United Church of Zambia. Later, her interest in gender issues, especially in the context of HIV/AIDS led her to South Africa where she continued her studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, under the auspices of Sarojini Nadar and Gerald West, two internationally renowned authorities of Contextual Theology/ Biblical Studies. In her three degree-projects (Honours, Master, and PhD) accomplished there, she developed a theology with a clear option for the marginalized. For example, she connected the theological concept of human dignity as *Imago Dei* with the rights of sexual minorities, especially of men loving men, in the context of HIV/AIDS. Methodologically she contextualized theological systematics with empirical studies, especially in her home country. In 2016, after a research stay at the University of Leeds, UK, she applied for a post-doc research stay of two years at the University of Bamberg, one of the few German centers for Bible in Africa Studies. In her project she planned to go about the gender topic from a new perspective by examining the religio-cultural semantics of breast-feeding, something typically feminine, but with a clear “queer” potential. She wanted to find out how

the patriarchal theology of Ancient Christianity interpreted and used the topos of breast-feeding. Her special interest was to find out why ancient Christian texts like the Odes of Solomon⁴ developed a cross-gender concept of God and Christ (as a breast-feeding father or son) without leaving behind the patriarchal framework of their time. Her idea was to contextualize these ancient Christian concepts with the traditional African milk symbolism of her Zambian culture. Shortly before being awarded an Alexander von Humboldt Scholarship for this thrilling project, Lilly Phiri passed away in 2017. As academics we cannot set her an epitaph of stone, but we can try to build her a monument of critical ideas honouring her spirit. So, let us go on working *in memory of her!*

⁴ The Odes of Solomon are Christian songs from the 2nd -3rd century CE. Several times the odes mention divine milk given by God (Father or Son), e.g. 8:16; 14:2; 19:1-4; 35:5. Cf. Michael Lattke, *The Odes of Solomon. A commentary (Hermeneia)*, Minneapolis 2009; Joachim Kügler, *Why Should Adults Want to Be Sucklings again? Some Remarks on the Cultural Semantics of Breast-feeding in Christian & Pre-Christian Tradition*, in: L. Togarasei/ J. Kügler (eds.) *The Bible and Children in Africa (BiAS 17)*, Bamberg: UBP 2014, 103-125: 108-109.