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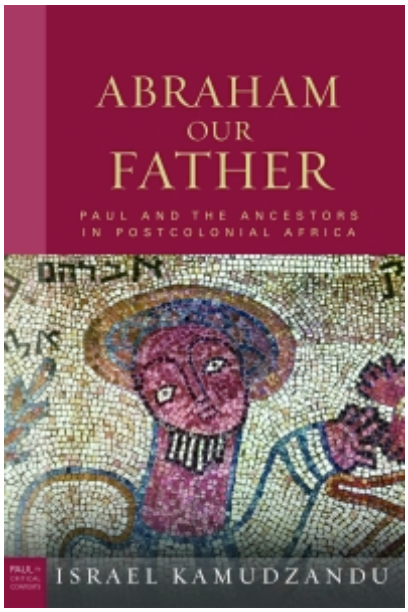

Israel Kamudzandu

Abraham Our Father: Paul and the Ancestors in Postcolonial Africa

Paul in Critical Contexts

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This slim volume is an abbreviated version of the author's already-published doctoral work, *Abraham as Spiritual Ancestor: A Post-colonial Zimbabwe Reading of Romans 4* (Brill, 2010). Kamudzandu's goal is to illustrate the contribution made by Zimbabwe's indigenous religions, specifically the ancestor worship of the Shona people, to the development of postcolonial Christianity. He does this by drawing a threefold parallel between (1) Shona ancestor veneration, (2) Paul's appeal to Abraham in Rom 4, and (3) Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*. According to Kamudzandu, Paul's discussion of Abraham is based on the *Aeneid* story. Aeneas is the prototypical ancestor allowing Paul "to creatively construct Abraham as a spiritual ancestor" for all people of faith (5).

Chapter 1, "Empire, Gospel, and Culture," introduces the precolonial development of ancient "Great Zimbabwe" and the fortunes of its descendants. A particularly insidious feature of Western colonialism was the harnessing of Christian missions to European imperialism. Kamudzandu illustrates this connection by describing missionary hostility towards Shona ancestor veneration. Shona ancestors were "regarded as founders of a nation … and spiritual agents whose role is to communicate the message of God to the people" (14). For example, Kamudzandu describes a nineteenth-century resistance leader

named Nehanda, a woman imbued with spiritual power who predicted her resurrection as "a new Abraham" for the people of Zimbabwe (19).

Chapter 2, "Zimbabwe's Religious Cultural Configurations," continues this discussion with some recognition of positive contributions made by Western missionaries, such as education, literacy, greater respect for women, and, eventually, missionary opposition to colonial exploitation. But these benefits were accompanied by a religious imperialism that failed to recognize the inherent truth value of indigenous spirituality, seeking instead to supplant traditional, African religion with Westernized Christianity. For Kamudzandu, the issue "at the center of this confrontation was: How is African traditional religion to be preserved?" (24). Rather than practice a truly biblical Christianity, missionaries indulged their own "cultural ego," using the Bible "as an ideological book" that could pressure Africans into abandoning traditional religion. Thus we come to the need for postcolonial biblical interpretation, "a reactive or dissident reading of the Bible" performed by Africans reclaiming their indigenous religious heritage (35).

Kamudzandu returns to the example of Nehanda, the Zimbabwean spiritual ancestor who inspired the Shona to struggle against colonial captivity and fight for the promised land of postcolonial independence. In this way, she fills the same role for Shona Christianity as Aeneas did among Greco-Romans and Abraham does for Jews and Christians. However, since "ancestry was a foreign concept to Western culture" (40), missionaries were blind to these inherent cultural/spiritual affinities linking biblical and African religion. Once African Christians were able to set aside the blinders of missionary Christianity, the stage was set for "accepting and contextualizing Jesus Christ into the category of spiritual and faith ancestry" (40). Of course, all Christian missions is by definition a form of *religious* imperialism whether or not it comes with colonial entanglements. Unfortunately, Kamudzandu gives no attention to how one's theology of mission, independent of *colonialism*, would determine one's attitude toward such "religious affinities." He also fails to observe the important distinction between form (e.g., encouraging indigenous people to use their own musical styles in worship [28, 37]) and function (e.g., enrolling Nehanda among the spiritual ancestors with Abraham and Jesus) in religious expression.

The heart of the book unfolds in chapter 3, "Postcolonial Shona Christianity." Kamudzandu asserts that Paul's appeal to Abraham in Rom 4 is a direct "response to the *Aeneid*" (47). Though I confess that Kamudzandu's argument is not always clear to me, apparently Paul mentions Abraham not to explain why he preaches a law-free gospel to Gentiles but to demonstrate that Jews and Christians have their own unifying ancestral counterpart to Aeneas, the cultural ancestor who unified the Greeks to the Romans. Kamudzandu insists that his insight into this "Aeneas-Abraham connection" is a new hermeneutical discovery made possible by his African sensitivities to the spiritual role of

ancestors, something that neither the missionaries nor contemporary "Western New Testament scholarship" could ever grasp (47).

Next, Kamudzandu deconstructs the colonial missionary project, asserting that the missionaries' cultural prejudices blinded them to the gospel; without providing any examples or substantiating evidence, he accuses Western missionaries of: (1) failing to grasp Paul's "offering salvation to *all* on the basis of grace alone" (48); (2) "suppressing" the concept of "Christ as the image of God and the message of the Holy Spirit" (49); (3) offering only vague, abstract notions of God and Jesus (50); (4) claiming that Jesus was exclusive to Christianity rather than understanding him as the ancestor belonging "to all people, races, and nations" (51); and (5) failing to grasp the existential dimension of faith (51–55). In fact, the missionaries "preached a different gospel" unrelated to Paul's message (59). Although no one would dispute that Victorian missionaries were beset with a powerful ethnocentrism, as are most peoples of the world, the portrait painted here of Western Christianity makes a reader wonder how any of them, as inept and theologically misguided as they were, ever managed to make a single convert or plant one indigenous Christian church.

Finally, once the Shona felt free to jettison Western misrepresentations of the gospel, Kamudzandu argues, they could recognize the natural affinities between their indigenous religion and genuine biblical teaching. They determined that the ancestors were worshiping the God of Abraham long before any missionaries arrived (60). Furthermore, theological concepts such as the incarnation and the propitiatory value of Christ's death on the cross became understandable as "intrinsically African" ideas (49, 55–56).

Chapter 4, "Aeneas—A Constructed Ancestor," explains the significance of the *Aeneid* in the Greco-Roman world. Though it is never clearly stated, Kamudzandu's argument seems to be this: Paul's supposed paralleling of Abraham with Aeneas provides a biblical paradigm for observing analogous parallels between indigenous religion and biblical teaching. In other words, if Paul could do it, so can we. Unfortunately, Kamudzandu does not explore the limits or the usefulness of such parallels, how to distinguish legitimate parallels from illegitimate, whether they concern matters of form or function, and how one addresses possible syncretism.

Chapter 5, "Aeneas and Abraham Paradigms," investigates Philo's and Josephus's literary portraits of Abraham. Philo depicts Abraham as a cultural hero who embodies Stoic and Platonic ideals. Josephus describes him "as the typical national hero, such as was popular in Hellenistic times" (89), a wise man, philosopher, and discoverer of monotheism.

In chapter 6, "Conclusions and Implications," we are told, "What now remains is to offer some similarities and differences between Aeneas and Abraham," explaining their importance to African Christianity (98). Though the reader is repeatedly told that these comparisons explain Paul's reference to Abraham in Rom 4, we continue to wait in vain for the literary, exegetical, and theological study of Romans that is required to make that point. Instead, we are given generic comparisons between the *Aeneid* and the Abraham story in Genesis and *not* in Rom 4. The implication for postcolonial theology is that "Abraham's story is suffused with faith in the divinity, thus rendering him an ancestor who can fit into all believing societies of the world" (101). But it is unclear what role, if any, the gospel of Jesus Christ should play in the faith of "all believing people."

In closing, I will mention several elements that pervade the book. First, it is ironic that a strident critique of Western ethnocentrism merely replaces one set of cultural prejudices with another. Without giving any attention to the hermeneutical challenges posed by all human subjectivity, the reader is simply told that readings emanating from Africa are superior to those offered by the West. The second oddity follows in that the superiority of "authentically African" interpretations are confirmed with citations to mainline, Western scholarship. The inherent contradiction between these first two points seems to go completely unnoticed. How can the appreciation of faith's existential dimension be attributed to uniquely African sensibilities while footnoting Rudolf Bultmann (51)? Third, many of the "uniquely African" insights strike this reviewer as mere restatements of historic, Christian theology, another observation implied by the author's exclusive dependence on Western authorities. Fourth, one could conceivably argue that Paul's appeal to Abraham, of all people, implies its own enthocentric, cultural arrogance. After all, Paul requires his Gentile converts to become educated in ancient, Jewish literature and the theological relevance of Jewish patriarchs. But the importance of this sort of ethnocentrism for Jewish Christians, for Gentile converts, and indeed for all humanity is never noticed nor addressed.