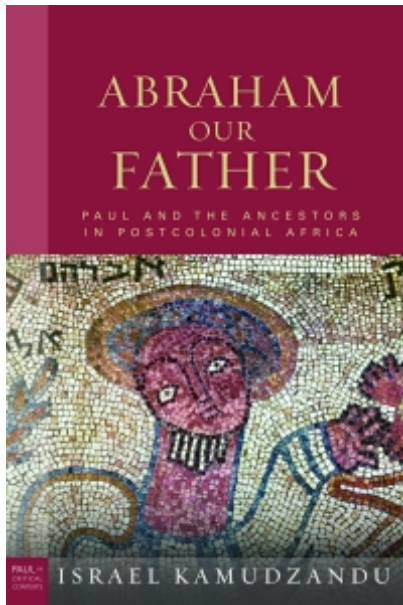


RBL 04/2014



Israel Kamudzandu

Abraham Our Father: Paul and the Ancestors in Postcolonial Africa

Paul in Critical Contexts

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013. Pp. xiv + 120, Cloth, \$49, ISBN 9780800698171.

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This work is a reading of Rom 4 focusing on the reference to Abraham as an ancestor from the perspective of a Zimbabwean. Kamudzandu examines Aeneas in Greek and Roman mythology as the backdrop for the portrait of Abraham as an ancestor in Rom 4, then argues that the appropriation of similar mythology in Africa leads to a better grasp and appreciation for the import of “Abraham our father” in Rom 4.

As a Shona scholar and clergy with first-hand experience in colonial rule and apparent missionary propaganda, Kamudzandu recounts the use of biblical texts to serve British colonial interests in his homeland. The converse is also evident; literacy programs gave locals access to education and ability to read the Bible in the vernacular. The Shona, a people group in Zimbabwe, believe in the presence and activity of ancestors in their family and community. It is in this frame that the notion of Abraham as an ancestor resonates. In the author’s words, “the way Shona Christians came to understand Abraham as an ancestor has important resonance with the way Paul originally sought to present Abraham in the context of an alternative ancestor myth.” (1)

Based on a careful study of Aeneas in Vigil, Livy, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, the author contends that those portraits of Aeneas and their sociopolitical ramifications lie at

the background of Rom 4. Apparently, Paul was aware of a Roman propaganda with the mythology of Aeneas and sought to counter it with an alternative ancestor mythology. Kamudzandu asserts, “there is no doubt that the recipients of Paul’s letter to the Romans were familiar with the age of Augustus, especially its ideological stance regarding Aeneas as ancestor of Greeks and Romans” (3).

A survey of British colonial history in Rhodesia and the evolution of ancestral myths associated with the independence of Zimbabwe provides the framework with which “Abraham” in Rom 4 is understood. For example, British colonizers and missionaries promoted education and evangelism but also engendered the assimilation of Africans into their “superior Western culture.” The arrival of Cecil Rhodes in southern Africa, following an invitation from David Livingstone, is particularly notable. Rhodes employed shrewd ways and forged treaties with local leaders that paved the way for subsequent exploration and the exploitation of local resources. Later his millionaire businessman status and political connections in England led to the naming of the country Rhodesia. Kamudzandu indicts the interface of colonial rule and missionary endeavors and alleges that “the goal of colonists and missionaries was threefold—to civilize, evangelize, and colonize” (19). Consequently, mission centers, schools, and hospitals served as training grounds for colonial enterprises.

A brief ethnographical account of the Shona people introduces readers to an outstanding female figure named Mbuya Nehanda. Nehanda would later become a major ancestor figure in the quest for independence. The Shona cosmology traces its ancestral home to “Great Zimbabwe.” The people believed in the existence of one Supreme Being (Mwari) and in deceased ancestors as founders of the nation who still maintain an active role in the affairs of their people. The Mwari cult later became a threat to missionaries and colonists due to its potential to draw the Africans together for a common cause.

From 1896 to 1897, Nehanda championed an uprising against colonial rule under the auspices of Mwari. She marshaled courage and mobilized the people for resistance until the colonial authorities arrested and hung her. As a deceased ancestor, she became the patron for liberation and unity in the fight for independence. “Thus Nehanda is venerated in present-day Zimbabwe as a spiritual founder of a postcolonial Zimbabwe” (16). The author draws parallels with Nehanda and Aeneas to correlate the sociopolitical background of Paul’s original readers with the Shona people, especially since Abraham is perceived as a unifying and liberating ancestor. “While Aeneas and Abraham were competing ancestors in the Greco-Roman world, the British Empire represented by Cecil Rhodes, competed with indigenous culture with its allegiance to ancestors and Christian missionaries” (19).

The African Christians appropriated “Abraham our father” as an ancestor through the prism of identical beliefs vis-à-vis the colonial/missionary efforts to demonize African ancestors. They found the missionary interpretation insufficient, as their songs and vernacular readings brought fresh insights to their understanding of “Abraham our father.” The motif of Abraham as the father of a multiethnic community is read analogously to the Nehanda mythology. For the Africans, Abraham is a wanderer, victorious warrior, and the ancestor with whom different tribes found equality just like Nehanda.

The multiethnic composition of postcolonial Zimbabwe lends itself to such affinity with “Abraham our father” in Rom 4. Apparently Paul’s knowledge of the Aeneas mythology prompted this apologetic portrait of Abraham as the ancestor for the community of faith. Moreover, Philo and Josephus depict Abraham as a superior ancestor in piety and virtue. History shows that ancestors “are invoked in seasons when identity is under attack, and to invoke one’s ancestor is a cry for legitimacy” (93). Kamudzandu insists that Rom 4 must be understood against the background of prevailing propaganda with the Aeneas mythology in order to grasp its sociopolitical import. The Aeneas-Abraham paradigm resonates with the African belief in ancestors. Thus “the Shona people of Zimbabwe can easily revisit their ancient ancestral traditions and claim Abraham as their faith ancestor” (101).

The thesis of the book is well-presented. Its significance for biblical studies is the suggestion that the Aeneas mythology is significant to our understanding of Rom 4, as part of a letter written to Rome. The book challenges prevailing scholarship to observe the cultural distance between the West and the biblical world and underlines closer parallels that exist between the social context of the text and African culture/folk beliefs. Methodologically, it employs a postcolonial approach from a Zimbabwean perspective while simultaneously examining Rom 4 in the light of its sociopolitical context. The tone is civil, the content challenging, and the style accessible. I highly recommend it to scholars and students because it brings issues of race, culture, and colonialism into the interpretative task without being unnecessarily confrontational, becoming combative, or projecting victimhood. This a very good read for cross-cultural awareness in biblical interpretation.