

A Maasai Encounter with the Bible: Nomadic Lifestyle as a Hermeneutic Question
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“Have you happened to read the Bible? The Bible is full of stories explaining Israelite nomadic way of life, which is also the Maasai way of life. In the Bible, we find people keeping livestock and sacrificing them to God. That is why I like to hear stories from the Bible. There are stories about people similar to the Maasai who keep livestock, which they got from God, a practice that is different from that of farmers,” states “Meitamei,” a research participant from the Maasai people group in Tanzania, East Africa (2). This quote offers multiple clues to Zephania Shila Nkesela’s significant research, with his research question, “How can a reading of some selected Old Testament texts with Maasai informants facilitate a liberative reflection vis-à-vis the marginalization they experience?” (12). As a revision of his PhD dissertation, this monograph engages the current challenges of a traditional pastoralist people group which include socio-cultural marginalization, oppression, and loss of traditional grazing lands. Conflicts between the indigenous Maasai and encroaching farmers, as well as other investors, have resulted in violence. While some commonly known biblical narratives represent battles, there are also peaceful methods of conflict resolution. Nkesela’s exploration engages community Bible readings that reflect these peaceful means together with other semi-nomadic identity issues. The original investigation was part of a PhD project at VID Specialized University funded by the Norwegian Research Council and supervised by Knut Holter.

The overview of the project in chapter one establishes the research question and approach with descriptions of the methodology along with ethical considerations. Nkesela’s summary of the Maasai people group is vital for understanding the distinctive cultural reflections. Chapter two describes the theoretical framework of inculturation theory for contextualized Old Testament (OT) studies in Africa. It includes a survey of current research and especially draws upon the seminal work of the Nigerian scholar, Justin Ukpong, with cognizance of relevant critiques. Ukpong’s inculturation approach “seeks to make the African, and for that matter, any social-cultural context, the subject of interpretation” (43). Ukpong engages in dialogue with historical-critical methods—that are applied as a servant, not a master (44)—and the “ordinary” readers for a holistic interpretation that is actualized in concrete life situations (45). The reading of three OT texts with Maasai research participants who produce contextual meaning (211) is described in the inculturation hermeneutics of chapter three. Nkesela defines

the research participants as “indigenous readers,” because “they are not doing their scriptural reading from an academic point of view, but rather they use their culture and life experience as a foundation,” as they reflect on OT texts in a liberative way in relation to their marginalization (65). With information collected through qualitative research methods—utilizing individual and group interviews during initial and follow up visits—the selected texts for this project were:

- Gen 13:1–12, the narrative of Abraham and Lot, semi-nomadic pastoralists who peacefully resolve land conflict caused by the strife between their respective herdsmen;
- Exod 13:17–22, the text describing the ancient Israelites fleeing Egypt after the tenth plague, and the LORD going before them and leading them with a pillar of cloud/fire; and
- Jer 35:5–10, an obscure passage regarding a test of the Rechabites, who refuse to drink wine and obediently neither building homes nor planting vineyards in faithful obedience to their ancestor’s command.

Chapter four integrates the findings of the Maasai indigenous readings from the previous chapter with critical OT studies that include both Euro-American and African scholars. For this dialogue, Nkesela applies Holter’s “complementary model, where the two interacting dialogue partners acknowledge each other as equal participants despite the different contributions they make” (113). Despite different backgrounds, Nkesela argue that this approach “brings a mutual respect that takes seriously the contribution of each dialogue partner in serving the community” (113). A discussion of OT studies in Africa in chapter five places Nkesela’s contribution to the larger field in general and specifically to the niche of Maasai biblical hermeneutics.

Finally, chapter six coalesces the analysis into a summary of findings and implications from this case study. The two main themes are: “The first was that Abraham and Lot lived a life that was similar to the traditional Maasai semi-nomadic ways of life. As the informants find similarities between their traditional lifestyle with the Bible, they felt support vis-à-vis their situation of marginalization by other people. The second was the issue of land. The informants compared the land conflict between Abraham’s and Lot’s herdsmen to the one they are experiencing in relation to farmers and other investors. Instead of continuing to fight, according to Maasai tradition, some informants started to think of adopting a peaceful way of solving the conflict as they learned from Abraham” (214). Nkesela summarizes the implications of his examination, “Reading the Bible with Maasai informants may not give a simple and direct solution to the socio-cultural marginalization that is currently facing the Maasai community. Instead, however, the reading may facilitate some liberative reflections” (211).

Nkesela’s thoughtful research “looks at a possibility of improving the Maasai way of reflecting on their problems through reading the Bible” (72). This leverages a PhD project in a noble pursuit that aligns with the majority of contemporary African biblical studies. Much of the scholarly study in Africa engages biblical interpretation

with application, especially connected to contextual issues and life interests. This integration brings a vitality to biblical studies and not only corrects the false narrative of the neutral researcher that is still prevalent in modernist Euro-American academies, but it also endorses the examination of the Bible as Scripture within academic study. Integrating Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutic that incorporates both classic historical-critical methods and the insights from "ordinary" readers also demonstrates that academic biblical studies can be both in service to the Church and integrate robust scholarship, which together can serve as checks against the pitfalls of both narrow normative readings and hegemonic interpretations. This is part of the insightful contributions of African biblical hermeneutics.

The careful ethical considerations of this study are reflected in hearing indigenous voices (chapter 4) prior to the comparison and contrast with critical scholarship (chapter 5). This structure also aligns with the strategy of inculturation hermeneutics, as Nkesela argues, "The completeness of the meaning of the text does not end with the indigenous readings of biblical texts; rather, it is the result of the interaction between the contemporary contexts and the text in its context" (114). With a value of "reading with," there is a moral prerequisite to be sympathetic to indigenous readers and being open to the "other." Yet, when one of the dialogue partners is Scripture, which the Maasai hold as authoritative (212), "equal" is not a careful description of the collaborators here (170, distinct from professional exegetes in 113). One model that holds the tension of an authoritative text with openness to contextual interpretation is seen in Daniel Patte's "Introduction" to the *Global Bible Commentary* (2000). Patte locates three poles in interpretation, including "legitimate"—in reference to grounding in the biblical text—and "plausible" hermeneutical considerations, while allowing for varied validity within contextual interpretations. Thus, further dimensionality of interpretation could nuance the analysis, as well as more examination on the theory of culture and Bible, expanding beyond two perspectives (194), such as Stephen Bevans' analysis (2002).

With the purpose of looking "at a possibility of improving the Maasai way of reflecting on their problems through reading the Bible" (72), the outcomes of the study have some beginning evidence. Nkesela writes, "As they pondered the text, they said that in Maasai areas, anyone who wants to practice pastoralism has to search for grazing areas first to avoid conflict with other people who are living there" (77). Also, one woman stated, "Why don't we stop fighting and strive for peace in our area? If this worked for Abraham and Lot, why not for us?" (87). However, Nkesela identifies the tentative nature of the outcomes, writing, "Through interaction with these texts, there was an offering and receiving process between the readers and texts that *might* lead to a *possibility* of transformation in thinking" (186, italics mine). From a realist perspective, I wonder how relatives resolving with land conflicts through generosity (Abraham toward Lot) will actually transform the conflicts between non-relative people groups (Maasai and farmers) and, more dubiously, with profit-driven

business investors. Yet with a perspective of hope knowing that the Holy Spirit can bring transformation, the participants stirred up for working toward peaceful means of resolution may prevent the call to arms of the warrior age-set. Though, the solutions may be enacted through statutory laws protecting indigenous land rights rather than customary Maasai law. All in all, Nkesela has facilitated important biblical reflection in support of the Maasai in their contextual struggles.