

# ***Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus* by Kenneth N. Ngwa**

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## **SHORT BIO**

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In *Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus*, Kenneth Ngwa places the experience of the ancient Israelite community in conversation with the concerns and experiences of contemporary Africana peoples. He correlates the Exodus community's struggle for survival with the challenges faced and opportunities awaiting Africana peoples in their global struggles for liberation and thriving.

Ngwa defines Africana as referring to intersecting epistemologies, theories, and praxis of communal meaning-making and identity formation by persons of African descent across time and space. He constructs an overarching theoretical framework that accesses multiple Afro-diasporic interlocutions and synthesizes them beyond geographic and ideologic borders. These multiple interlocutions coalesce under a hermeneutic umbrella that resists restriction to one methodology. Instead, he deploys narrative, postcolonial, and ideological hermeneutics to explore the Exodus as both a Biblical story and a literary and liberation motif. In this monograph, Ngwa demonstrates the breadth and depth of Africana hermeneutics, engaging with Afro-

diasporic interlocutors and issues of importance to Africana history, contemporary experiences, and future possibilities.

In the first chapter, “Tears of Redesign: Birthing Exodus and Badass Womanism,” Ngwa engages with the scholarship of womanist theologians and biblical scholars, harnessing the bold question-raising and creative meaning-making that Africana women engender to advocate for the recovery and creation of communal identities. His conversation partners in this chapter include noted Biblical and non-biblical writers like Alice Walker, Delores Williams, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Musimbi Kanyoro, Musa Dube, and Madipoane Masenya. Ngwa transgresses gender norms by engaging women scholars and practitioners as primary thought partners throughout the book. He also demonstrates that one does not need to self-identify as a woman to practice womanist biblical interpretation.

In the second chapter, Ngwa identifies three material locations in the Exodus: Egypt, the wilderness, and the Mountain. He argues that each location possesses its own ideological character and, in some ways, each contributed to the triple threat confronting the Israelites, which he describes as erasure, alienation, and singularization. He correlates these triple threats, or triple traumas, with the slave ship, the slave castle, and the postcolony, all significant physical and ideological contexts in Africana history.

In chapter three, Ngwa reads Exodus 2 in dialogue with Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, resulting in the development of, what he names, the Gershomite-ogbanje concept. He defines Gershomite-ogbanje as “a mode of postcolonial identity and hermeneutics that depicts the fragility of life in the colonial space and the capacity to survive...to survive in and as a communal body”.<sup>1</sup>

In the fourth chapter, Ngwa makes a significant analytical move by naming the land as a central character in the Exodus story. He leverages the work of Wangari Maathai’s Green Belt Movement and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the “changing material and ecological resources of African-descended communities and epistemologies . . . in order to make

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth N. Ngwa, *Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022), 84.

interpretation accountable and liberative".<sup>2</sup> This framing invites Africana readers to grapple with our complex and multivalent relationships with land, continental and diasporic, holding in tension *theft of land with theft from land* and cultivation of land with destruction of land. When applied to the Exodus story, this prevents the reader from glossing over the narrative destruction of ecological Egypt during the Exodus and the ideological justification of such destruction in biblical scholarship.

Consistent with chapter four's focus on earth and land, chapter five centers Miriam as a mechanism for exegeting the Exodus' water motif. Miriam is the older sister of Exodus' central character, Moses. When a genocide was exacted on all Hebrew babies, Moses' mother hid him in a basket on the Nile River, and he was drawn from the river by the Pharaoh's daughter. Miriam, who was watching in the distance to see what would happen to her brother, approached and offered to find a wet nurse from among the Hebrew women to assist with the infant's care. In her cunning, quick wit, and unbeknownst to the Pharaoh's daughter, she arranged for her mother to accompany Moses to the palace and serve as his nurse and caregiver. Miriam resurfaced later in Exodus as an outspoken prophet.<sup>3</sup> For Ngwa, Miriam embodies "resistance to necroecology-ecological death".<sup>4</sup> Through her participation in Moses' rescue from the waters of the Nile, her critique of Moses' decision making and subsequent punishment, leading the community in song at the sea crossing, and ultimately her death at Kadesh, Ngwa posits that Miriam represents the "eco-political transformation of alienation, the transformation of erasure, and the manifestation of communal identity".<sup>5</sup>

In the final chapter, Ngwa parallels Israel's experience at the Mountain with the post-liberation call to confront the vestiges of oppression and to reimagine empire. Through an African (Cameroonian) postcolonial lens, he reminds emancipated communities that structures of empire must not just be escaped, they must also be deconstructed, dismantled, or, at minimum,

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<sup>2</sup> Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 22. See also Wangari Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (New York: Lantern Books, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> For more on Miriam as a prophet, see Wilda C. Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 139.

<sup>5</sup> Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 153.

transformed. He cautions that this work is often ongoing and is the culmination of liberation. For Ngwa, liberation is incomplete unless it is accompanied by redesign.

*Let my People Live* offers a transgressive and redemptive reading of the Exodus that invites Africana readers to move beyond suffering and oppression in the narrative and to harness that suffering to envision a liberated future. An element of that liberated future entails defining and redefining individual and collective identity. In that vein, Ngwa posits Joseph and Moses as sites of identity formation. In setting the context for the Israelite-Egyptian entanglement, he writes,

[t]he first narrative lacuna, the first release of communal tears, in this storied journey is that the oppressive Pharaoh did not know Joseph . . . Pharaoh's epistemological amnesia . . . is corrosive to the communal and interpretive existence of the Hebrews.<sup>6</sup>

Ngwa's exegesis of Joseph's experience in Egypt is an invitation to interrogate the relationship between the natural forgetting that happens over time, forced memory loss or erasure, failure to intentionally remember, and the development and sustainability of communal identities. Ngwa lays this foundation to build upon it a hermeneutic of liberation. However, as a reader whose ancestors were forcefully separated from their land, language, and community in ways that suppressed and erased embedded and embodied memory, this illuminates the dual dilemma of living under a system that has forgotten you while grappling with your community's collective forgetting.

For Ngwa, Joseph's narrative, on the one hand, foreshadows the threat facing all of Israel: the threat of erasure. On the other hand, he describes Moses as an endangered and displaced Hebrew-Egyptian, a refugee who was once an endangered, exposed, and adopted child. Lifting Moses' own self-definition of alienness from Exodus 2:22, Ngwa sees Moses' words as an interpretive trope for his entire diasporic community, that they are neither *this* nor *that*. Instead, they are somewhere in between. Rhetorically, he proffers that this trope gets mapped onto the national story: "Israel

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<sup>6</sup> Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 37

endangered in Egypt, alienated in the wilderness, and adopted in the mountain area".<sup>7</sup>

Ngwa demonstrates the complex relationship between land/location and identity. As he traces Israel's movement, or migration, from Egypt through the wilderness to the mountain, he chronicles the formation of the community's identity. He argues that the Hebrew identity developed in response to attempted erasure and that it was shaped by migration. Since this migration began in Africa, this diasporic Hebrew community should be understood as an African diaspora. This theory raises new interpretive questions such as: are there any similarities between this ancient African diasporic community and contemporary African diasporas; and what would be the impact on Ancient Israel's history if the Exodus community's experiences were read as the experiences of an African diaspora?

*Let My People Live* offers the field of biblical studies a concrete example of exegetically sound cultural hermeneutics. Ngwa fuses Africana interpretation with womanist interpretation, enabling Bible readers in the African diaspora to see their interests and issues centered in Biblical interpretation. He engages Africana history, literature, art, and figures as interpretive companions, creating new approaches to the Exodus story. Moreover, Ngwa's book debunks the myth that womanist interpretation can only be deployed by those whose embodiment is black and woman. He does this by amplifying women's voices and other marginalized Biblical characters, centering black women's issues and concerns and engaging black women's voices as interlocutors; all central tenants of womanist biblical interpretation. Ngwa's book would be a value-adding text to any Africana, postcolonial, liberation, or womanist biblical interpretation focused course.

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<sup>7</sup> Ngwa, *Let My People Live*, 84

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