This important volume is an attempt to highlight, for a wider readership (and perhaps for biblical scholars working in “the West,” in particular), the rich resources for biblical interpretation that have come, and are still coming, from the continent of Africa.

The book opens with an introduction written by the two editors, after which the contents are arranged in five main parts. Part 1 is entitled “Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives.” The first four essays by J. Ukpong, G. West, K. Holter, and G. LeMarquand are particularly helpful surveys of the recent history of the Bible and biblical interpretation in Africa and provide useful orientation to the topic for those who are not familiar with recent developments. They also provide a context for some of the more narrowly focused essays that follow. Other essays in this section include J. A. Loubser’s discussion of the use of the Bible in Coptic Christianity, M. Dube’s hermeneutical reflections on John 1:1–18, and R. Carroll’s interesting but idiosyncratic reflections on a visit to South Africa in 1993.

Part 2 is entitled “Particular Encounters with Particular Texts” and opens with three historical papers, followed by essays that consider issues of biblical interpretation relating to various parts of Africa: Northeast Africa; West Africa; East and Central Africa; and Southern Africa. The very diversity of topics, approaches, and geographical contexts...
makes it inevitable that any given reader will be drawn to some essays more than to others. Most readers will be confronted by one issue or another that is completely unfamiliar. This is a great benefit in terms of facilitating greater understanding of different cultural and religious contexts, but it also demands a lot of the reader, who will seldom be able to rely on any existing knowledge of the particular people group or other issue under consideration.

The first five essays of part 3, “Comparison and Translation as Transaction,” focus on comparative readings of the Bible and African issues. For example, T. Mafico writes on “The Biblical God of the Fathers and the African Ancestors,” and G. Ntloedibe writes on “Ngaka and Jesus as Liberators: A Comparative Reading.” The remaining four essays deal with Bible translation, which has been very significant for the discussion of how the Bible relates to Africa, particularly through the work of L. Sanneh.

Part 4, entitled “Redrawing the Boundaries of the Bible in Africa,” contains some of the most accessible essays in the volume. They are rather diverse: K. Holter considers the biblical material on Africa, including the contested question of how one should define “Africa”; J. Ukpong reports on the significance of “popular” readings of the Bible in Nigeria for “academic” readings; G. West expounds the “contextual Bible study” approach that he has championed for some years; and, finally, M. Dube reflects on how “To Pray the Lord’s Prayer in the Global Economic Era.”

Each essay concludes with a bibliography, and these make interesting reading in themselves. Some would not be out of place in any typical Western institution (a collection of standard historical-critical works), while others are much more distinctively African, the majority of works having been written by African scholars. Some are quite conservative theologically, while others ignore conservative scholarship altogether, and some (thankfully) make reference to a representative range of works. Even these bibliographies provide a window into the impact of the training of the authors on their work.

Pages 633–800 are occupied by a classified (and sometimes annotated) bibliography of works relating to Africa and biblical interpretation, which forms the final part of the book. This excellent resource, compiled over many years by G. LeMarquand, includes a considerable number of unpublished masters and doctoral theses that would otherwise be more difficult to trace. It should be an important tool for those who wish to engage with African scholarship in their own research. The book concludes with indices of biblical references, names, and subjects.
This is a diverse collection of essays in a number of ways: very different geographical locations, methods, and theological perspectives are represented. This is acknowledged by the editors, who note in passing that the original pool of potential essays was considerably larger and that the aim was always to provide a medium by which voices might be heard that otherwise would have gone unheard. A number of the essays published in this collection have been published previously, but that is of little consequence, since the original publication is frequently in a journal that would not be widely read outside of Africa.

The editors indicate in their introduction that they hope for “an inter-textual conversation within the book between the essays” (2). This hope is fostered by regular editorial cross-references to other articles, although this is easier to achieve in those articles that are more general in scope and methodological or historical in content.

Several themes come through strongly: Africans do not have to accept interpretations of the Bible that are presented to them but are free to read the Bible for themselves from their own perspectives; the Bible must be interpreted so as to speak to the hopes and fears and pressing issues of African people. These are surely helpful emphases. Yet it is hard to avoid the danger of allowing that which is valued in one’s culture to dominate the Bible’s voice. I felt there were signs that this was happening in a number of essays, and if this happens, is it really biblical interpretation that is being done? Interestingly, much of the academic study of the Bible in Africa is still consciously done in service of the church and thus tends to have a more grounded feel than some work coming out of some more widely known institutions of learning.

Perhaps the main benefits of this collection of essays are that some African authors have been given an opportunity to let their work become more widely known, which may help to foster their scholarly work and that of their colleagues, and that this body of work will become more widely known in the rest of the scholarly world in the hope that African scholarship will become more fully integrated into the wider scholarly discussion of the interpretation of the Bible.

Ironically (as the editors are well aware) the high price of this well-produced book effectively places it beyond the means of those working in Africa—not only individual scholars but even many institutional libraries. This in itself may be a stimulus to consider how the privileged may be able to provide further resources for the good of biblical scholarship in Africa and other parts of the world where similar economic constraints are deeply felt.