

"And the rulers of the nations shall bring their treasures into it"

A Survey of Biblical Exegesis in Africa

By Grant LeMarquand

FOR MOST of the first two millennia of Christian history the geographical centre of Christianity has been the northern hemisphere. During this century a radical shift has been taking place. Most of the western world is now secularized, with church membership shrinking drastically, and Christian influence on the wane.

Growth in Africa

The situation in the southern hemisphere is quite different. Particularly in Africa the Church has been growing at an amazing rate. According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, in 1900 there were 10,000,000 Christians in Africa, mostly in Ethiopia, Egypt, and South Africa. Christians made up only 9.2% of the African population. By June 1980 there were approximately 203,500,000 Christians in Africa, amounting to 45.4% of the population. The current growth rate of the Churches is 3.55%, well above the birth rate of 2.7%. At the current rate of growth there will be 400,000,000 Christians in Africa by the year 2000, or about 50% of the population.

Church structure around the world has not yet caught up to this reality. At the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops in 1988, for example, the bishops from Canada, the U.S., and England by far outnumbered the bishops from Africa, in spite of the fact that there are more Anglican Christians in Nigeria alone than in all three of those Western countries combined.

Similarly, Western scholarship has not yet caught up to the reality of African Christianity. Can you imagine, for example, attempting to compile a bibliography of western biblical scholarship? How about narrowing the subject to German scholarship, or even Canadian scholarship? The task would be enormous. And yet when I mentioned to a former professor that I was working on African biblical scholarship he scratched his head for a moment and then responded, "There isn't enough material." Indeed, even the fact that one can try to compile a bibliography on the use of the Bible in Africa suggests that African scholarship is at a very early stage. Nevertheless, the Bible is being translated, read, and interpreted by African theologians, and although little of their work is known in the West, I believe that it is in our interest to know about this work and to reflect on the implications of this new branch of scholarship.

This paper will take the form of a report rather than an argument. I am assuming that most readers are unfamiliar with African biblical scholarship, because African scholarship is in one sense new on the scene and because much of the work of African biblical scholars is either unpublished or only published locally. Much of this presentation will be a kind of academic "show and tell."

Varieties of African Theology

Before we examine African exegesis per se, it is useful to make two comments about African theology in general. one about its methods and one about its focus.

First, John Mbiti divides "African Christian Theology" into three areas: written, oral, and symbolic.

Written African theology is the privilege of a few Christians who have had considerable education and who generally articulate their theological reflection in articles and (so far few) books, mostly in English, French, German, or another European language. Oral theology is produced in the fields, by the masses, through song, sermon, teaching, prayer, conversation, etc. It is theology in the open air, often unrecorded, often heard only by small groups, and generally lost to libraries and seminaries. Symbolic theology is expressed through art, sculpture, drama, symbols, dance, colours, numbers, etc. ("The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology," p.84)

Little has been written about "oral" and "symbolic" Christian theology in Africa. In his book *Images of Jesus: How Jesus is Perceived and Portrayed in Non-European Cultures* (Eerdmans, 1990), Anton Wessels included two chapters which make reference to African art. African liturgies which take account

of African cultural symbols and traditions are now being written and used (the Anglican liturgy from Kenya, for example). Some studies have been done of African preaching, the most thorough being the work of H. W. Turner on the preaching of the Aladura churches of Nigeria (*Profile through Preaching*, London: Edinburgh House, 1965). Other examples include the small but volatile book of four sermons by Bishop David Gitari, *Let the Bishop Speak*, published in Kenya together with the press clippings reporting on the sermons and the reactions of Kenyan politicians to the sermons (Nairobi: Uzima, 1988). Much more work needs to be done on the songs, sermons, prayers of African Christians and on the use of the Bible in this oral and symbolic theology.

This paper will focus on written African theology, and in particular on what is written about the Bible by Biblical scholars in the African context.

Second, John Pobee from Ghana has summarized the driving theme of African theology by saying that when so-called third world theologians gather, the Latin Americans want to talk about "justice," the Asians want to talk about "religion," and the Africans want to talk about "culture." This is true of all branches of theology in Africa, whether written, oral, or symbolic, popular or academic. We will return to this observation later in the paper.

African Biblical Scholarship

Now to African exegesis. Let me review the potential candidates for a survey of African Biblical scholarship.

(1) *Patristic African Exegesis*. I said that African biblical scholarship is a new thing. In one sense this is true. In another sense, as Martin Hengel reminds readers in the foreword to Teresa Okure's recent *The Johannine Approach to Mission* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr), "the two most important commentaries on John from the early church were written by Africans." Origen started his book on John in Alexandria and Augustine wrote his *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus CXXIV* in Hippo. "Indeed," wrote Hengel, ". . . the two most important centers of Greek and Latin theology, Alexandria and Carthage, lay on African soil.")

We should not be too hasty to exclude the great exegetes of the ancient Church from a survey of African Christianity. These "African Fathers" are an important memory for modern African Christians to reclaim.

(2) *Missionary Exegesis*. In the modern period Christianity was brought to Africa by Western missionaries. Missionary expansion into Africa involved great dedication and often great suffering for the missionaries. I have met few African Christians who are not thankful for the work of missionaries, both past and present. I have also met few African Christians who are unaware of the cultural blindness and the racial prejudice of much mission activity. One cannot spend many days in Africa before one hears this story: "When the white men came they told us that our way of praying was wrong — one should not pray with one's eyes open but with one's eyes closed. So we closed our eyes to pray. When we opened our eyes we had the Bible but the white man had the land. The trick now is how to get the land back while keeping the Bible."

The missionary who came with the Bible was also the interpreter of the Bible. Most black clergy and most African biblical scholars in Africa today from the so-called "mainline" Churches or "mission-founded" Churches were trained by white teachers who, to one degree or another, used Western methods of exegesis. Most text books in African seminaries were written in the West, out of a Western philosophical and theological tradition, with Western needs and interests in mind. Few African scholars wish to jettison this Western learning; but fewer believe it to have been adequate. Note the opinion of Samuel Abogunrin, in his preface to the *African Bible Commentaries*:

When Christianity, which from the earliest period has existed in parts of North Africa and Ethiopia, was introduced into the rest of Black Africa, the world view of Western Christian theologians retained only a veneer of Biblical world-view. The world-view of the Western missionaries who preached the Gospel in Africa had by then become quasi-scientific.

Western teachers continue to teach in African seminaries, to translate the Bible into African languages (see Philip Stine & Ernest Wendland's *Bridging the Gap: African Traditional Religion and Bible*

Translation) and to write books of Biblical exegesis directed to the African reader (see Burney). These efforts are usually encouraged by African leaders, but more effort is needed in the training of scholars who have first-hand knowledge of African languages, traditions, and needs to carry on the work of scholarship in that context.

(3) *White South African Exegesis*. Another potential candidate for a survey of African Biblical scholarship is the work of white South African Biblical scholars in South African universities and seminaries. They have tended to concentrate more on textual criticism and literary-aesthetic criticism than in Europe and North America, probably because these areas of criticism are less likely to raise the doctrinal hackles of the very conservative Churches in South Africa.

Mbiti excluded them from his purview in *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford, 1986) because white South African scholarship is "still European" and "closed to the realities of African presence." "I do not draw from this strand of Christianity in my presentation," he wrote, "because it does not speak the language of indigenous African Christianity and because it has excluded itself from African life" (p.18). I have much sympathy with Mbiti's position, and it would be much simpler to exclude this material for two reasons:

First, it is voluminous. A number of theological journals, some dedicated exclusively or substantially to biblical scholarship, are published in South Africa: *Scriptura*, *Neotestamentica*, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, etc. Commentaries and monographs have been produced by white South African scholars for years. To survey this material would be an awesome task.

Second, it is disturbing. To read Kittel's *Wordbook* is one thing; to read it knowing that this eminent German scholar was wearing a Nazi armband as he did his editorial work is quite another. Similarly, it is impossible to read white South African biblical scholarship without being aware of the racist system in which this work has been and is being produced. In fact the apartheid system has made it possible for South Africa to have so many universities and seminaries in which white students may study and white professors may teach and do research.

It is exactly for this reason that Mbiti's decision to bracket out white South African scholarship is impossible. Biblical scholarship in South Africa is not simply transplanted European scholarship. This may be true of the exegetical methods used, but neither the historical critical method nor the user of these methods is as "objective" as the 19th century formulators envisioned. In a pair of articles in the South African journal *Scriptura* ("The Ethics of Interpretation: New Voices from the USA" and "The Ethics of Interpretation and South Africa" 33), Dirk J. Smit outlined three stages in the history of white biblical scholarship in South Africa.

In a first stage, prominent scholars played an important role in legitimizing apartheid and opponents were ostracized from the South African scholarly scene. In a second stage, the socio-political interpretation of the Bible has been strongly rejected, in the name of the ethos of scientific research. At present, in a third stage, the debate between scientific, historical scholarship and committed, socio-politically involved reading, is urgent but diffuse, since it is being argued at so many different fronts. (quoted in Gerald West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1991, p. 32)

White South African scholarship has been shaped by and has supported the structures of apartheid. Until recently these scholars have at worst attempted to use the Bible, especially the stories of the curse of Ham and the conquest of Canaan, to defend Afrikaner nationalism and so-called "separate development." At best they attempted to ignore the societal context in which their scholarship was being done. By not treating white South African scholarship Mbiti has ignored part of the African context — a context of oppression, supported in large measure by Christian institutions and by Western-style institutions of higher learning.

(4) *Liberation Exegesis in South Africa*. I will concentrate less on this section than on the next, partly because the situation in South Africa is better known to us in the West, and the works of black South African theologians are much more readily available, and partly because liberation theology in South Africa is much less distinctive than "African" theology, having much in common with American black theology and Latin American liberation theology.

Biblical exegesis as it is practised by black theologians in South Africa, and by a growing number of white theologians, is done within a context of struggle. Black biblical scholars cannot ignore the fact that they live within an oppressive system. Gerald West has discerned two trends among liberation scholars, one which focuses on the text and one which looks behind the text for the ideology that produced it. Some, like Allan Boesak, and like most liberation theology in Latin America, find liberation themes in the text. The Exodus becomes a paradigm for theological reflection. The Bible is, therefore, read as a liberating text. Those who find justification for apartheid in the Bible are told that they are misusing the Bible.

Others look behind the text for clues to the ideology that produced it. Itumeleng Mosala criticized Boesak for not recognizing that the text itself is a product of class struggle. In his study of *Luke*, for example, Mosala argued that the theme of the poor in Luke's writings, a theme so well liked by liberation writers, is in fact not a liberating theme for the poor. The text of *Luke* itself treats the poor as a subject — but the text is written by and addressed to the rich. "By turning the experiences of the poor into the moral virtues of the rich, Luke has effectively eliminated the poor from his Gospel," Mosala argued. He advocated a hermeneutic which uses an explicitly Marxist materialistic analysis to "liberate the Bible" by exposing not only its oppressive use, but its origins in the struggle of oppression.

What is significant in the works of both groups is the centrality of the context of the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa. Whether the reading is literary, focusing on the text (Boesak), or sociological, focusing on the situation behind the text (Mosala), the exegete desires the liberation of the community.

(5) *Biblical Exegesis in Independent Africa*. There is a growing corpus of biblical scholarship emerging in independent sub-Saharan Africa. Very little of this literature falls in the category of what Mbiti misleadingly calls "pure" scholarship, that is, exegetical work which focuses on the context of the biblical world without any explicit attempt to relate the text to the contemporary situation. In 1986 Mbiti was able to point to only one example of this type of exegesis, the dissertation of Leonidas Kalugila, *The Wise King: Studies in Royal Wisdom as Divine Revelation in the Old Testament and its Environment* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1980). Mbiti evidently did not know of Pobee's *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul* and we now have Teresa Okure's *The Johannine Approach to Mission*, and a number of other important studies.

Although the African context is not mentioned explicitly in the text of any of these three works (with the possible exception of footnote 11 on p. 296 of Okure's book), it is doubtful whether any were written without an eye on the African situation. In his preface Pobee gives the following as one of the reasons for his choice of thesis topic: "Though a happy and privileged sojourner in Cambridge, my heart was bleeding for my motherland, Ghana, which had come into the grip of a corrupt and ruthless tyrant and government. While I laboured to follow my calling as a New Testament scholar, I also agonized over the fate of loved ones back home, my parents and the Church of God."

Similarly, Okure says in the preface to her study,

My interest in mission dates back to my childhood days, and was inspired by my living experiences of mission in the African context. I was often struck by the contrast between certain statements of Jesus found mostly in John's Gospel concerning his mission from the Father and the actual conception and exercise of mission which obtained in my context. This contrast belonged mostly in the order of the attitude of the missionary to the work and the people, and of the method in the exercise of mission. The whole experience raised for me a number of unanswered questions concerning the relationship of the mission exercised in my context to the

mission of Jesus. In the course of my biblical studies, however, I had completely forgotten that I had these questions. The choice of the topic for this work was therefore not consciously connected with them. This was largely due to the biblical discipline itself which, like most theological disciplines of this century was, and to a large extent still is, literary and academically oriented, not designed to address real life issues. It was only afterwards, indeed as I was reflecting on a suitable preface for this book, that I remembered that I had had these questions, and that here in the pages of this book I had finally found personally satisfying answers to them.

No such statement can be found in the preface to Kalugila's book, but as I read his book I could not help but think that the choice of the topic of royal wisdom may have been determined in part by the opportunity to compare the Old Testament view of kingship with an ancient African (that is, Egyptian) view of kingship. This "hunch" was confirmed by a personal conversation with Kalugila in 1993.

These works which on one level appear to be "pure" scholarship, works that focus on ancient literatures in their own historical and literary context, turn out to have been determined in part by a far different context, the present day context of African suffering, African mission, and memories of African glory and honour.

Apart from these three books, very little biblical scholarship from Africa has the world of the Bible as its primary focus. Although I know of no African scholar who is not interested in reading the Bible in its original historical and literary context, none, that I know of, are willing to leave the text in the past. The context of the reader tends to be a higher priority than the context of the text.

Actually, this way of stating the issue, as a dialect between reader and text, needs a bit of refinement. No African would conceive of the individual alone as the interpreter. Mbiti sums up the worldview of the African with the words "I am, because we are" (*African Religions and Philosophy*, Nairobi/London: Heinemann, 1969). The dialectic or dialogue, therefore, is not so much between reader and text as between community and text. The African reader of the text cannot be separated from her or his context in the community.

The four main issues

For this reason African exegesis is far more explicit than Western scholarship in its interest in how the Bible relates to the cultural situation. Four contexts from the African world appear to be uppermost in the minds of African exegetes: the context of mission, the context of African traditional religion and culture, the context of suffering, and the context of faith. We will discuss these briefly in turn.

Context of mission

(1) *The Context of Mission*. African Christians have an acute awareness of having been "evangelized," of having received the Gospel from outside, from the West. They are also aware that the gospel which came to them from the western missionary, no matter how well-intentioned that missionary may have been, was a westernized gospel. When Livingston preached in England about the need for missionaries to go to Africa he did not say that they were needed just for the purposes of bringing Christianity, but to bring to Africa both Christianity *and* civilization.

It has been no simple thing to discern the difference between the Gospel and Western culture, between charity and cultural imposition. To take a notoriously difficult and complicated example, when missionaries came to Africa some condemned polygamy as unchristian and unbiblical. When the Bible was translated into African languages it did not escape notice that many of the great heroes of the faith had a lot of wives. Examples of this kind can be multiplied.

An excellent example of exegesis done against the background of the missionary context is Mbiti's *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (Oxford, 1971) . The title of the original thesis from which the book developed is significant: "Christian Eschatology in Relation to Evangelisation of Tribal Africa." The issue which Mbiti attempted to deal with is the disjunction, not only between African culture and western culture, but also between African culture and the bible itself. The problem which he grappled with is the difference between (1) the NT concept of time, (2) the futuristic eschatology of the teaching among the Akamba of Kenya of the Africa Inland Mission with its dispensationalist stress on the second

coming of Christ, the millennium, the rapture, etc., and (3) what Mbiti takes to be the African conception of time.

The concept of time in Africa (or least in Akamba society) is very different from the Western concept. "[A]ccording to traditional [African] concepts, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present, and virtually no future. The linear concept of time in western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking" (*African Religions*). He argued that the New Testament occupies a middle ground between the concept of time of the missionaries which is vertical and future oriented, and the more horizontal and present oriented concept of African thought.

The New Testament . . . makes it absolutely clear that Time is subject to Eschatology and not vice versa. Whenever Christians have reversed this order of priorities, they have ended up with a false Eschatology. . . . Time helps us to understand the horizontal dimension of Eschatology; but Eschatology has also the vertical dimension which is non-temporal and which defies all attempts to "horizontalize" it. (*New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*).

Mbiti has been criticized on a number of grounds, particularly for seeming to imply that Africans have little or no concept of the future and for generalizing from Akamba ideas to Africa in general. His method, however, of reading the New Testament with one eye on the context of the first century context and one eye on the African missionary context is typical of African exegesis.

Context of culture

(2) *The Context of African Culture*. Related to the kind of reading we find in Mbiti's monograph is a large corpus of material which attempts to read the Bible against the background of African culture. It has long been noted that there are similarities between the biblical world and the African world. African Old Testament scholars in particular have highlighted the continuity, and the discontinuity, between Africa and the Bible. Some, like Modupe Oduyoye, have attempted to trace genealogical relationships between the Bible and Africa on the basis of linguistic and cultural similarities. Most, like Kwesi Dickson, are content to see analogical relationships between these cultures.

Two examples of the similarity between the Africa and biblical world will suffice to show how biblical interpretation in Africa differs from Western interpretation.

First, the miraculous. The worldview of the West after the Enlightenment, and the dominant assumption in biblical scholarship, has little room for miracles. Many African scholars see this anti-supernaturalistic bias as detrimental to interpretation. Abogunrin has noted that "Western Biblical exegetes think it necessary to reinterpret spiritual forces and demon-possession." Africa, however, needs a reading of the Bible which emphasizes "the power of Jesus which destroys the power of the devil and delivers from all evil spiritual forces" (*African Bible Commentaries*). In *The Synoptic Gospel Debate* he wrote that "The majority of African Christians still live in the world of the New Testament, where belief in demons and a host of unseen supernatural powers was potent and real. A Jesus emptied of all the supernatural contained in the Gospels would be meaningless in the African context."

Second, family and society. As we have seen, the individualism of the West is foreign to Africa. Africa shares with the Biblical world the sense that the community defines the individual. This is expressed in such things as the veneration of ancestors and the establishing of covenants often involving sacrificial ritual, customs which African cultures share with the Bible. The titles of two recent doctoral dissertations serve as examples of the importance of these themes: C. S. Mngadi's "The Significance of Blood in the OT Sacrifices and its Relevance for the church in Africa" (*Theologia Evangelica* 15/3 [1982]) and Samuel Ngewa's *The biblical idea of substitution versus the idea of substitution in African traditional sacrifices: a case study of hermeneutics for African Christian theology* (Ph.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1987). In a very different context the film "Prophet Healers of Northern Malawi" which was shown at the SBL/AAR meetings in November 1991 contained footage of a sacrificial ritual of a tribe in Northern Malawi who have been influenced by the Bible and who now follow instructions from the book of *Leviticus* in performing their rites.

The unifying theological issue underlying this search for the common ground between the Bible and African culture is general revelation. African theologians and Bible scholars are concerned to show that God had not abandoned Africa until the missionaries came. Just as God was at work in the cultures of the Bible, so he was at work in Africa. Biblical revelation may be unique and necessary but it was not completely new. What is more, if God could work within the culture of the Israelites in the Old Testament and the Greco-Roman world in the New Testament period, surely God could work within African culture. At the least there was in African culture what the African theologian Clement of Alexandria would have called a "preparation for the gospel." "In relation to culture, the Gospel is not meant to remove Christians from their cultural environment," wrote Abogunrin. "The Gospel seeks to retain everything that is beautiful in every culture" (*1 Corinthians*).

This leads us back to our previous issue of the missionary context. One of the reasons why Africans are so concerned to establish the common ground between the Bible and African culture is precisely because the missionaries said that African culture was "satanic." Once Africans could read the Bible, its culture seemed very close to the culture of which they had been taught to be ashamed. The theological buzz words in many African works on the Bible are "incarnation," "adaptation," "inculturation," "indigenization." African scholars attempt to move from the culture of the biblical periods to the cultures of Africa, comparing, contrasting, attempting to relate the biblical world to their world. Listen to Abogunrin in his commentary on *1 Corinthians*: "By the study of *1 Corinthians* we can examine discipline in African Churches both now and in the past in the light of the situations in Africa and Corinth and how Pauline the Church in Africa is with regard to the exercise of discipline." Ironically, perhaps, Biblical scholarship functions in giving people back their traditions.

Some have seen this kind of reading as "non-political." It seems more interested in traditions, matters of worship, and health than liberation politics. On the contrary, however, African theology, including exegetical theology, is engaged in the attempt to reclaim that which was and is helpful in African life and thought. (What Michel Foucault called "subjugated knowledges" and "dangerous memories."). As Pobeé has said in a sermon given in Canada, "where two or three are gathered together, there is politics."

Context of suffering

(3) *The Context of Suffering*. The issue of suffering is important for exegetes in independent Africa as well as South Africa. Independence is not liberation. Independence has not done away with war, hunger, exploitation, tyranny. These issues, as we have already seen from the quotation from John Pobeé's thesis, are crucial for African exegetes. Articles with titles such as "God the Father and Hunger in Africa: Give Us this Day Our Daily Bread," "The Community of Goods in the Early Church and the Distribution of National Wealth," remind us that what we read and how we read will very often depend on the situation in which we live.

Context of faith

(4) *The Context of Faith*. In the West biblical scholarship has been done primarily within the academy. There, in the interest of "objectivity," "scientific" scholarship, critical methods are used to uncover the meaning of the text in its original context. The faith stance is considered to be, or hoped to be, irrelevant in the unbiased search for truth. Liberation theology, feminist theology, and indeed post-modernist thought in general are now questioning the assumptions behind this kind of "detached" scholarship.

In Africa there is no rift between biblical scholarship and a believing scholar. Faith and exegesis go hand in hand. Perhaps the most eloquent (and least polemical) example of this is once again from the preface of Teresa Okure's monograph. After acknowledging the help of parents, supervisors and funding agencies we read an acknowledgement unlike any I have seen in a thesis written by a western scholar:

This litany of acknowledgements would be incomplete without the special mention of Jesus. The statement of the Psalmist applies most aptly in my case: "If the Lord had not been my help," this work would never have seen the light of day (Psalm 94:17). Jesus' unflinching help sustained me most tangibly throughout my entire course of study in ways that might be described as miraculous. . . . For the schooling in trust which he provided for me through these trying circumstances, I am deeply grateful to him. It is but a small token of gratitude that I should

dedicate this book to his Mother on this feast of her birthday, September 8, as her birthday present.

Conclusions

(1) *Problems.* The most pressing problems for African biblical exegesis are practical ones. There is rarely enough money for African scholars, seminaries, and universities to buy books. Most scholars are writing in their second or third language. Publishing houses in Africa have a very small market for scholarly books. The best educated theologians have a very short teaching and research life since they are usually snatched up into denominational leadership very quickly. War, political unrest, and lack of water play havoc with the running of theological institutions.

(2) *Signs of growth.* On the other hand, Biblical studies in Africa is beginning to garner attention, both inside and outside of the continent. The Society of Biblical Literature now has a seminar called "The Bible in Africa, Asia and Latin America." A project called "Interpreting the Bible in African Contexts: Implications for Biblical Studies in a Global Context" is now under way jointly sponsored by the University of Glasgow, the Catholic Institute of West Africa, and the Department of Religious Studies, Harare (and funded with German money). A journal, *The African Journal of Biblical Studies*, and a commentary series, *The African Bible Commentaries*, have been published in Nigeria.

(3) *Issues and challenges.* The most pressing scholarly issue for the African exegesis is whether a hermeneutics which so stresses the reader pole of the text-reader continuum will be aware of the constant danger of bypassing the text itself. For the Western scholar, African exegesis is a reminder that the text has, is and will be read in more than the ancient historical context and the academic context.

In the end, says the Book, "the last will be first." It may be that the most significant readings, at least in the eyes of the Creator, are not those of detached, objective scholarship but of committed, engaged scholarship. If any of the "rulers of the nations" who bring their treasures into the New Jerusalem are biblical scholars they may turn out to be the poor of the nations who have sought to be faithful readers of the text for their people.

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