

Learning to Read the Bible in Limuru: Textual and Hermeneutical Reflections of a Non-African Guest

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Introduction

In January of 1987 my wife, Wendy, and our first-born, David, arrived in Kenya where I was to teach New Testament here at St. Paul's United Theological College. We came to this continent and to this country quite uninformed – ignorant, actually, of the riches of Africa. The Western press is able to paint something of a picture of the problems of Africa and of the beauty of African wildlife – but little of the wealth of African culture and tradition or of the reasons why Africa is in such trouble much of the time.

We also came ignorant of Kenya in particular. We had been appointed by the Anglican Church of Canada to go to the Sudan. We began conversations about Sudan in 1983. There had been a decade of peace in Sudan. Although the South was desperately poor, there was hope put in education and development. But the latest phase of civil war began in 1983 and by 1986 the war had heated up to such a degree that the town of Mundri was threatened. Mundri housed a small Anglican theological school called Bishop Gwynne College. We had seen pictures of the college, including pictures of the house in which we would live. We had learned something (not much upon reflection) about life in Southern Sudan and we were anticipating becoming members of the Bishop Gwynne College community. Six weeks before we were to leave for Sudan, we were informed by the mission personnel staff in Canada that it was too dangerous a place to send a young family with a baby. We were asked to go to Kenya to “wait until Sudan got better.” We are still waiting for Sudan to get better. But now we were in Kenya – ignorant and unprepared.

Frankly, our mission board and the theological college where I had studied in Canada were not of much help in our preparation; neither seemed to know of the existence of African theology, much less African biblical studies. I found myself attempting to teach New Testament and (for some reason!) Systematic Theology to students although I had little understanding of their questions or their context. They were very patient with me and we agreed together that I would tell them what I had learned and that they would contribute questions and issues from the African context so that we could work out how or whether this theology with a Western accent that I was teaching was any help at all.

We shared at least three common commitments, though. The first was a trust in and love for the Lord Jesus Christ that led to a love for one another. Love for Jesus leading to love for the fellowship seems to be an important principle of the Revival Movement. My students at Limuru believed me when I told them that I had a testimony! My wife and I went to fellowship meetings and *Keshas*¹ and worshipped the way the students wanted to worship. In fact some members of the administration were concerned that we were becoming friends of students. The adversarial atmosphere between administration and students was fairly high in the late 80s at St. Paul's, and it was considered unseemly (by some) for a member of the teaching staff to befriend students. Thankfully I was ignorant of this as well – at least for a while. These students and their families were sisters and brothers in Christ. That was all that mattered. My status as a member of faculty meant little to me.

Our second shared commitment was to the Bible. We, both the students and myself, believed that the Bible spoke God's word and that careful attention to the scriptures would help us personally, would help our families, would help the churches, would help Africa, would help the world. Since I was not a “systematic theologian,” I made a deal with the students who had to listen to me that I would take the syllabus and teach each topic by first looking at what the Bible seemed to say about it. In the meantime I would spend time studying, trying to find out what the “theologians” had to say. The students were happy. I was relieved. The Bible ended up as our chief text for systematics – and everyone passed the dreaded external exams.

Our third shared commitment was to Africa. I knew little of Africa as I've said, but I had met some Africans in Canada and I had found their faith contagious. I wanted to help build up the church in Africa, but there was also something about African Christianity that I knew that the old, tired churches in the West needed.

And so with these three commitments shared with my students I began my experience of teaching the Bible in Africa. Here are a few things that I have learned about the Bible from Africa since that time.

1. Learning about the cross: Galatians 3:13

In the second week of teaching Systematic Theology to the BD II class I was required to begin a section on “the atonement.” Following my plan I began by giving a lecture on what the Bible said about the cross. Since theology should not be divorced from history, I reasoned, it would be best to begin by talking not about the meaning of the cross, but about the fact of crucifixion. So I began by describing in some detail this Roman method of execution. It was a fairly gruesome lecture, I think, as I recounted the process of torture and humiliation that crucifixion entailed. I also spent some time discussing Greco-Roman and Jewish reactions to this method of execution, from Cicero saying that the word “cross” should not even be mentioned in polite company,² to the Jewish revulsion over crucifixion because it reminded them of Deuteronomy 21:23: “Everyone who is hanged on a tree is under God’s curse.”

During the break in the class a student approached me and said, “What you said about hanging as a curse is just what my people think.” I was intrigued and asked to hear more. He said that among the Bukusu people when a person commits suicide by hanging, they are not buried. The family hires foreigners to take down the body. The body is burned and thrown into the river. The tree is uprooted and burned. No funeral is held. And no child is ever named after that person. This is done because otherwise a curse will come on the land (actually Deuteronomy goes on to say the same thing about a curse on the land). I encouraged that student to continue to think about this and to write his BD project on the pastoral problems involved in preaching the cross to a group of people who think hanging is a curse.³

And of course this was not the only time that African culture confronted me with the reality of the cross. The singing of hymns and songs rich in sacrificial imagery strike a Western visitor as somehow more “real” when sung with Christians who have probably seen actual goats and chickens sacrificed in the hope that rain will come or to seal a covenant between quarrelling people groups.

As modern African biblical exegesis began to be published in the latter half of the twentieth century, perhaps the largest single interpretative issue was the relationship between African cultures and the cultures of the Bible. African authors wrote learned studies which pointed out that there were similarities between African traditions and traditions found in the scriptures. Much has been done in this area and much more is still possible. From the perspective of a Westerner much of this work is exciting simply because it throws new light on the ancient biblical text.

2. Learning about injustice: Matthew 2:13-18

I recall my first Christmas in Africa. It was 1987. My wife Wendy and our baby boy David had been in Kenya for about a year. Cara, our daughter, had been born in November. We were supposed to have gone to teach in a small theological College in Mundri, Sudan but the Anglican Church of Canada wisely discerned that the war in the Sudan was heating up and we were diverted to Kenya. A few months after we arrived in Kenya four of our would-be colleagues in Sudan were kidnapped by the Sudanese Peoples’ Liberation Army and disappeared for almost two months in the Sudanese bush. After his release, one of the hostages, the Rev. Marc Nikkel, a mission partner of the Episcopal Church serving in the Sudan, returned to Africa. Unable to return to Sudan, he taught with us at St. Paul’s for almost a year. We had maintained a strong interest in things Sudanese, so it was a joy to have Marc living next door. A few days before Christmas he gave me a report prepared by some Mennonites who had surveyed the situation in a particular area of Sudan around the town of Rumbek, an area of the Southern Sudan which had recently been devastated. The authors of the report detailed atrocities beyond description. One of the most striking details, however, was the fact that in a vast area of hundreds of square miles they had found no living children: they had been killed, succumbed to starvation, fled as refugees, or carried off as slaves. A few days after reading this report I opened my Bible to read the lesson for the daily office: it was December 28 and this was the lesson:

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son." Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more" (Mt 2:13–18)

The stories of Sudan and the massacre of the innocents under Herod are now somehow fused in my mind. Sometimes reading the Bible in a new situation, or with new eyes, reading the Bible in a "mission" context will confront the reader, perhaps even assault the reader, with its message. To be in Africa meant that I was compelled to reflect on Scripture in ways that I had not previously dreamed. I came to Africa ostensibly to teach the Bible to theological college students – but I ended up being taught the Bible in remarkable and often very uncomfortable ways.

3. Learning about God's presence: Daniel 3

In the small town of Mundri in the Equatorial region of Southern Sudan, where our family had first intended to go, there is a small Anglican theological institution called Bishop Gwynne College. The school has been abandoned since 1987 when the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army took control of the compound kidnapping four expatriate members of the college staff and holding them as hostages in a vain attempt to gain the attention of the world to the plight of Southern Sudan.⁴ The chapel of that college, which is still intact,⁵ is octagonal in shape. On three-quarters of the wall space is a mural. The subject of the painting is a biblical scene which is widely considered to be the one of the most frequently mentioned Bible stories in Sudan: Daniel 3, the story of the three men in the fiery furnace. Sudanese often refer to Daniel 3 as a key text. According to Samuel Kayanga, who was a student in Limuru in the late 1980s, there are several Sudanese songs about this story. "Many people in Sudan live their life in a fire situation. It is only by looking back that they can see the hand of God delivering them."⁶ In fact stories of miraculous deliverance are fairly common in Sudanese conversation. Bishop Nathaniel Garang, for example, as a way of explaining the story of the three in the furnace, tells a story of bullets tearing up the ground on both his right side and his left side, but leaving him unharmed. The same miraculous deliverance that the Hebrews experienced is also believed to be experienced in Sudan.⁷ Similarly Joseph Acuil of Wau Diocese reported to me that in Sudan, "Someone is bitten by a snake, people pray, Jesus heals them. Many songs are composed about that story. They were put in fire, but because they trust in God, God was able to deliver them."⁸

Some Sudanese point out that God does not always deliver. For them, an important part of the story in Daniel is when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are asked if God is able to deliver them. Their answer: "God is able...but if not" (Daniel 3: 17-18) has particular significance for Sudanese. They have seen God deliver, but they have also seen suffering and death and know that deliverance does not always come. But they believe that God is with them in the fire nonetheless.

Once again, as a Westerner I found this very challenging. We in the West tend to live lives which are sheltered from the kind of suffering we call "persecution." When most people in Europe or North America think of the persecution of Christians they think of those Christians who were thrown to the lions during the Roman Empire. Although this is changing, too few Western Christians are aware that their sisters and brothers are oppressed for their faith in places like Sudan.

4. Learning about discipleship: Matthew 21:1-10

The Thursday afternoon "Fellowship" meetings at which my wife and I were regular attendees while at St. Paul's were sources of much encouragement. They were sometimes, however, a source of some

confusion for non-African visitors. During our first year in Limuru a Church Army officer named Trajan came up from Nairobi to preach on more than one occasion. He was a great preacher. But at one point in one of his sermons he lost me. At what was a dramatic point in a sermon on discipleship he looked at the gathered congregation and asked, "And what do you see when you sit on a donkey?" to which (to our astonishment) the entire congregation (except my wife and me) answered back "a cross!".

Of course I understood the biblical allusion. Trajan was referring to what we know of as "Palm Sunday," the procession of Jesus into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey.

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

"Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" (Matthew 21:1-10)

The so-called "triumphal entry" of Jesus into Jerusalem portrays Jesus taking up the role of king. But this is a different kind of reign than the ordinary first century Jewish onlooker would have imagined when hearing or reading the terms "Son of David," "Messiah" and "king" are apparently used so freely in this text and in the stories which follow in the passion narrative. Jesus is a king but his crown is of made of thorns, his attendants (on the right hand and on the left) are political prisoners, his throne is a cross, royal robe is his nakedness. Clearly Trajan was correct – when Jesus was sitting on the donkey on his way into Jerusalem surely he foresaw that his doom was to be handed over to sinners and executed. But how did the congregation at the Fellowship meeting know the answer to Trajan's question? A mystery.

A few weeks later another preacher came to the Fellowship meeting, a priest from Mt. Kenya South. And once again, at a particularly important point in the sermon he asked the question, "what do you see when you are sitting on a donkey?" And once again the Fellowship answered "a cross!" This time I had to find out what was going on. Clearly there was some secret knowledge which was being kept from the *Wazungu*. So right after the meeting I went to a place in the compound where I knew there would be a donkey and I had a look. Sure enough, there on the back of the grey animal was a dark line of hair extending the length of the spine and across the donkey's shoulders there was another dark line – the two lines together forming "a cross." If I had mounted that donkey and looked down at its back the way Jesus must have done on his way into Jerusalem I would have been looking at a cross. The donkey itself was a visible symbol of what Jesus was to encounter at the end of the Passion Week.

For Trajan and the other preacher the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem was transformed into an instant lesson on discipleship. To follow Jesus is a matter of following him on the road of service. To be a Christian "is not to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45).

A contemporary Sudanese Christian song makes the same point, but this time not by alluding to the donkey in the gospel story but by a reference to an African forced, as it were, into a position of discipleship in the Passion story: "We call and cry before so that you would hear/ embrace us intimately for we are your children/ Let us carry the cross and follow you/ Let us be like Simon, the man of Cyrene,/ who followed you to the place of the skull."⁹ Christian discipleship does not lead inexorably to the "health and wealth" that so many preachers of the so-called "prosperity gospel" proclaim. Discipleship leads to suffering on behalf of others, following the way of Jesus.

5. Learning about allegorical reading: Acts 27

Not every reading of the Bible is received favourably by those who hear it. And not every reading of the Bible is accurate or wise. As was the custom at St. Paul's that, towards the end of every academic term, that one of the Sunday evening Holy Communion Services would be led by a group of students. It had been a particularly tense year. Students and administration had had a number of disagreements and trust was not running at a high level. The preacher, who shall remain nameless, chose as his text a lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, the 27th chapter. He began, as many African sermons do, simply by retelling the story. This is often a helpful way of reinforcing the message and of highlighting particular aspects of a text. The preacher was able to tell the story of Paul's shipwreck in a vivid and compelling way. It would have been good and helpful if it had stayed a "retelling" in general terms. The sermon began, however, to mutate from a retelling of the text into an allegory. Slowly the congregation became aware that the ship being referred to in the sermon was no longer a ship, but an institution in peril and in desperate need of rescue. In fact the institution in question was an educational institution whose leaders were forced the ship onto the rocks. And the educational institution was soon revealed as a theological institution – and one very close to us. The story had left the waters of the Mediterranean ocean and become transformed into a lesson about our current crisis at St. Paul's. Even then the preacher could have saved himself but on he went (perhaps throwing himself upon the rocks!) to name the names of the pilot and the navigator of the ship. The student, of course, was expelled the next day.¹⁰

This incident has often led me to wonder about the value of an allegorical method of reading scripture. The technique is quite popular in many African circles although frowned upon by most teachers in African theological institutions. Most students will no doubt be aware of the possible abuses of the method. St. Augustine's famous allegorical use of the parable of the Good Samaritan is often cited as the wrong way to use the biblical text:

The man (Adam) going down from Jerusalem (the city of heavenly peace) fell among robbers (the devil and his angels) who left him half dead (spiritually dead). The priest (the OT priesthood) did not help, the Levite (the OT prophets) did not help, the Good Samaritan (Christ) helped, binding up wounds (stopping sin), pouring in oil (hope) and wine (exhortation to spiritual work), put him on the beast (the body of Christ), took him to the inn (the church), paid two coins (the commandments to love God and neighbour) to the innkeeper (Paul) until his return (Jesus' resurrection).¹¹

Obviously allegory can be abused. Clearly this kind of eisegesis is a danger to be avoided. This is not just because there are so few controls on this kind of reading, but also because love requires treating the "other" (in this case the text) with respect. In the words of N.T. Wright,

In love...the lover affirms the reality and the otherness of the beloved. ...When applied to reading texts, this means that the text can be listened to on its own terms, without being reduced to the scale of what the reader can or cannot understand at the moment. ...At this level "love" will mean "attention": the readiness to let the other *be* the other, the willingness to grow and change in oneself in relation to the other.¹²

To act in love in regard to the biblical text means that the reader will not abuse the text, will not beat the text into submission or force the text to say something that the reader wants to hear. Love will mean close attention to the original context of the text as well as to the contemporary needs and aspirations of the readers. African exegetes have had much to say about reading the text of the Bible in ways that actually make a difference in the lives of African people.¹³ We need also to be sure that it is the biblical text which is being read and not simply our own clever ideas read into a text. At the same time, the so-called "original" meaning of the text does not empty the text of its meaning. That Sunday evening sermon did point out that there was a connection between the text in Acts and the situation in St. Paul's at the time. Perhaps we need to re-think allegorical reading and find ways to pursue such readings as long as they do not do violence to the text.

6. Learning about honour and shame: 1 Corinthians 11: 17-34

Shortly after our family arrived in Limuru a church dignitary came to the campus to bless a new building. Naturally a meal was involved. This seemed good to us – the visit of a leader of the church who was also one of the leaders of the college should be a time for a celebration feast! I was not quite prepared for this meal, however. In the new cafeteria a high table was set up with a clean, white tablecloth, fresh cut flowers and good china. The administration and the visiting leader sat there. They were served an excellent meal (including a fair bit of meat). The rest of the tables had no table cloths or flowers, but there were plates (not china) and food of a decent quality (although less meat was involved). The faculty and senior staff of the college and their families as well as some other visitors sat there. Outside were the students. Although they had no tables or chairs, they were given food (although they had no meat). The workers of the college were not fed.

The text which came to mind immediately was James 1:2-5 which warns of the dangers of welcoming the rich and powerful and ignoring the needs of the poor. Perhaps even more important is a Pauline text. Whether we are Reformed, Presbyterian, Methodist or Anglican we are familiar with the Pauline version of the words of institution from 1 Corinthians 11:23-26:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

In these four verses Paul reminds the Corinthian church of the tradition which Paul himself had received and which he had passed on to them. Unfortunately most of our lectionaries omit the verses which frame Paul's recording of this bit of traditional material. Paul speaks of the tradition for a pastoral reason: the meals (and it is fairly certain that most early Christian "eucharists" were real meals, involving much more than simply token amounts of food) in Corinth were not a reflection of the Lord's will for his church. Listen to Paul's warnings:

But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not...

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another – if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home – so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.

These two paragraphs form brackets around the familiar recounting of the story of the Last Supper. In the first paragraph outlines the problem: there are divisions in the congregation which appear to be divisions of class or wealth. Some are eating and drinking too much; others are going hungry. Some are being well treated; others are "despised" and "humiliated." A bit of Greco-Roman background will help fill in the background. In Paul's day celebratory meals were often held by organizations called *collegia*. People joined these organizations for a variety of reasons which need not detain us here but the important thing

to note is that they joined at a variety of levels. Some members hosted the meetings or were the “patrons” of the gathering – since they paid the bills they and their friends were treated the best, being given lavish amounts of food while reclining at table. A second rung of members would eat in the same room, but in an outer circle at the feet of the guests of honour. Others would eat outside in the courtyard. Evidently the Corinthian “Lord’s Supper” (note that Paul says that their behaviour shows that it is not the Lord’s Supper which they are eating!) had taken on the characteristics of the pagan Greco-Roman society – they are making distinctions among themselves based on class and wealth. As a result, Paul says in the closing paragraph, they are profaning the meal and endangering themselves. They are under judgement.¹⁴

Perhaps the kind of meal I witnessed in Limuru when our church leader came to visit was simply the copy of a pattern of meal behaviour learned during British colonial times. It certainly does not reflect the meal practices of Jesus who welcomed the poor and the sinners at his gatherings.¹⁵ As is true in every culture, not everything that I witnessed in the African church reflected the mind of Christ.

7. Learning about the church: Revelation 7

In May of 1998 I was privileged to accompany a group of Canadian theological students to Kenya where they spent over a month in parishes around the country seeing how ministry is done in this context. On the last Sunday that we were in the country we were invited to attend a Nairobi congregation of the Holy Ghost Church of East Africa. This congregation met behind a set of flats in Nairobi. They were quite poor, but they had purchased a piece of land next to the local garbage heap and they had begun to build a church. In the meantime they met outside. As the Bishop got into his robe I noticed that the people in my group were going to be the only ones at worship that morning that did not have white robes. The congregation had already arrived and was singing, and each one of them had his or her own robe. Of course as an Anglican priest I found this somewhat ironic since I was usually the only one *with* a robe. The Bishop turned to me and said, “you will be expected to give a word.” So, I was the preacher. This seemed to give me little time to prepare, although actually I ended up with a couple of hours of preparation since the service took a bit of time! As the worship progressed and I began to implore God to give me something to say I found myself pondering this group of white-robed Africans in front of me and to wonder about their lives. “Who are these people, dressed in white robes,” I thought. It dawned on me that there is a biblical text that asks precisely the same question! That text became the text of my sermon that morning and I have subsequently had the opportunity to meditate on the passage at greater length. Here it is:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where they have come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

“Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.
They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Rev 7:9-17)

Several things should be noted about this “great multitude.” The passage itself, of course, helps us to understand what question should be asked of the text. The author of the book, who is identified as “John” is asked by one of the elders, “Who are these?” (v.13). John recognizes that the elder is probably more of an authority on these matters and throws the question back at him. The text in fact identifies this multitude in several ways.

First of all, they cannot be numbered. Actually, they had (somewhat confusingly!) already been numbered in verse 1 of the chapter: they are the 144,000. This interpretation of this number has caused problems for centuries with various groups claiming to be members of this select number. We must remember that almost everything in the Apocalypse is symbolic, and this number should certainly be treated as symbolic. If 1000 is a number which means simply “a large group” and 144 is recognized as 12 x 12, then 144,000 is probably a way of saying “the complete people of God.” (Remember that 12 is the number of the tribes of Israel and the number of the apostles.) “The large multitude that no one can number” is simply a different way of viewing the same group. There is no need to worry about whether one is part of the exact number – the number of a simply a symbolic way of saying “all of God’s people.”

Second, they are those who have come out of “the great tribulation.” This is probably a reference to the political and religious situation of persecution during the time the book was written. As I worshipped with the Holy Ghost Church of East Africa that morning I was reminded that they, that we, are in a world of suffering and pain and evil. Their world and mine is place were political corruption, AIDS, war, and a variety of other demons seem to set the daily agenda. But the text also says that this is (no matter how long it may seem from our perspective) a temporary situation. This text promises that there will come a time when there will be no suffering: no hunger, no thirst, no tears (vv.16-17).

Third, this is a great “washed” multitude. They are, the elder says, “washed in the blood of the Lamb.” The image probably strikes most of us in the sanitized Western world as somewhat grotesque. It is, however, simply one part of a long line of biblical passages which link purity and forgiveness of sins to sacrifice. In the book of Revelation Jesus is “the lamb that was slain” (see 5:6) but is now risen. The image links the Christian tradition back to its Jewish roots in the temple tradition where animal sacrifice connected the worshipper to God. It is continued in our Eucharistic liturgies every time we echo the words of John the Baptist when we say or sing the *Agnus Dei* (“O Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us,” see John 1:29). The Revival Movement continues to remind us that the church only exists because of the blood of Jesus. This multitude is that great thong which has found “salvation” (v.10) through their allegiance to the crucified one, through their faith in the lamb of God, Jesus, who in the words of another New Testament writer “loved them and gave himself for them” (Galatians 2:20). They have turned their lives away from other allegiances, towards the God who in the cross has turned to them.

Fourth, they are “from every nation, tribe, people, and language” (v.9). They are a worldwide people, a global gathering. It must be noted that they do not become “homogenized” by joining this multitude. Cultural distinctiveness is not lost but, rather, all that is good in their particularity is redeemed. In Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, African or *Mzungu*.

Fifth, the great multitude of human beings is only one part of a greater crowd around the throne. The angels are there and so are the “four living creatures.” This group was first mentioned in Revelation 4 and seems to represent all of the animal life of the created world (domestic and wild animals, birds and human beings: see 4:6-7). We are not alone in our world – and, it seems that God, who “hates nothing that has been made” (Collect for Ash Wednesday), has a plan not only for human beings but for all of creation. (The Revelation is not alone in this, of course: see Psalm 96:11-13, Jonah 4:11, Luke 19:40.) Some in Africa are beginning to remind the world of the intricate connection between all of life and that to do violence to the environment, to the earth, to the animals, will ultimately result in violence to human beings as well.

Sixth, the vision tells us that the multitude, together with the creatures and the angels are at worship. Their ultimate purpose, it seems, is doxological. Redeemed humanity adds its voice to “all in heaven and earth” who are gathered around the throne of God in praise (vv.10-12).

Finally, this great multitude is protected by God's presence. The Greek word in Revelation 7:15 is an interesting one. In the NIV we read that God will "spread his tent over them." The NRSV says that God will "shelter them." The Greek word "skenos," tent, forms the root of the verb here. God will "en-tent" them, or perhaps we should say he will "tabernacle" them. The idea seems to be that God, whose presence was made known to the people of Israel through the coming of the "*shekinah*" (God's glory) to the Holy of Holies, will one day shield and protect God's people from every harm by enfolding them in the divine presence.

The vision of the Revelation is a vision of renewal and redemption which recognizes that the world is in desperate need of being "saved." The Bible is clear that the world as we know it is not the way God wants it; therefore much of the Bible is the story of God's rescue of the world, and God's plan to remake the world. It is the story of God's plan to bring all things together, "to unite all things, in Christ" (Ephesians 1:10). Being with that congregation of the Holy Ghost Church in East Africa once again opened me to seeing things in the biblical text that I had not seen before.

Conclusion

A few years ago I met a former professor of mine at an academic conference. I had been in Africa teaching and had returned to my native Canada to study. He asked me what I was working on. "African biblical scholarship," I replied. He looked a bit puzzled, scratched his head and then suggested, "There isn't enough material, is there?" This was not a professor who was out of touch with biblical scholarship. He was, in fact, very interested in new modes and methods of attempting to understand biblical texts. Neither was he an unkind man. Like the disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus who didn't know that there was a Holy Spirit until Paul asked them (Acts 19:1-7) he simply did not know that there was an "African biblical scholarship."

Disturbed by my professor's response I immediately set out to demonstrate the existence of my field of interest! In a few days I mailed him a bibliography of some 15 pages. Of course much of the material I knew of was either published in Africa or was in the form of unpublished dissertations. Perhaps my former teacher could be excused for not knowing. That was over a decade ago. With the abundance of recent publications by African biblical scholars and about African biblical scholarship, some of this material published in the "West," there is no longer any reason to claim that "there isn't enough material." To paraphrase the Apostle, "They are without excuse, for what can be known [about the reading of the Bible in Africa] is plain for all to see."¹⁶

In many ways African culture and African experience can help the church around the world to understand the Bible. But how can the rich biblical insights which Africa can provide become a part of the genetic code of our theological colleges? I know of few African theological institutions that teach courses on "Reading the Bible in Africa." I have simply stumbled across most of the first things that I have been privileged to learn about the Bible from Africa and Africans. My hope is that institutions like St. Paul's can be more intentional about this process of biblical reflection in the light of African culture and experience.

¹ A *kesha* is a particular East African manifestation of a "prayer vigil" or all-night prayer meeting involving singing, dancing, preaching and testimonies.

² See Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the ancient world and the message of the cross*. (London: SCM, 1977), 42.

³ See Eliud Wabukala, "The Idea of Hanging on a Tree among the Babukusu People of Kenya and Implications for the Teaching of the Message of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ." St. Paul's United Theological College, Limuru, Kenya: Unpublished thesis, 1988. Cf. Eliud Wabukala and Grant LeMarquand, "Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree': Pastoral Implications of Deuteronomy 21:22-23 and Galatians 3:13 in an African Context" pp. 350-59 in Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, eds. *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

⁴ For an account see Mark R. Nikkel, "Hostages of the Situation in Sudan,' 1987: Christian Missionaries in Wartime" *Anglican and Episcopal History* 71/2 (2002): 187-222.

⁵ According to Canon Baringwa of the ECS Dioceses of Lui and Mundri, in Nairobi, June 2002.

⁶ Interview in Nairobi, June, 2002.

⁷ Interview in Nairobi, May 2002.

⁸ Interview in Kabare, Kenya, June 2002.

⁹ The song was written by John Chol Ater and is quoted in Dau, *Suffering and God: A Theological Reflection on the War in Sudan* (Nairobi: Paulines, 2002), 225.

¹⁰ He was reinstated several months later and was able to graduate with his class and has had a fruitful ministry.

¹¹ From Augustine, *Quaestiones Evangelionium* II.19, as summarized in R.H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 46.

¹² *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 64.

¹³ See especially the wonderful essay by Teresa Okure, "I will open my mouth in parables' (Matt 13.35): A Case for a Gospel-Based Biblical Hermeneutic" *New Testament Studies* 46/3 (2000): 445-63.

¹⁴ On this text and its background see especially, Suzanne Watts Henderson. "If Anyone Hungers...': An Integrated Reading of 1 Cor 11:17-34" *New Testament Studies* 48/2 (2002): 195-208.

¹⁵ See, for example, Luke 15:1-2; A good discussion of the whole issue of Jesus' table fellowship can be found in Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984; now reprinted by Trinity Press International, 1998).

¹⁶ That bibliography has grown considerably from the original 15 pages. See now Grant LeMarquand, "A Bibliography of the Bible in Africa," pp.633-800 in West and Dube, *The Bible in Africa*.

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