

AFRICA BIBLE COMMENTARY

AFRICA BIBLE COMMENTARY

***A One-Volume Commentary
from Over 100 African Scholars***

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ZONDERVAN ACADEMIC
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Africa Bible Commentary, Second Edition

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FOREWORD BY DR MASTER O. MATLHAOPE

African theological scholarship need not be the preserve of theological scholars. Rather it is a source of edification for the African church and for the global church. Many years ago Dr Byang Kato described the problem of the African church as theological anaemia. Similarly in 1994 at a Pan-African Leadership Assembly (PACLA) in Kenya, church leaders from ecumenical backgrounds, including evangelicals, described the church's problem as 'deficient knowledge and faulty application of Scripture.' These two diagnoses underscore the importance of the *Africa Bible Commentary* as a needed and relevant resource for the African church.

Today Africa is now very much the global centre of Christianity and the diaspora outside the continent continues to grow. Consequently, the ecclesial and spiritual characteristics of African Christianity are likely being felt beyond Africa. This commentary is thus also an important missiological tool for the world.

Contrary to the notion that Christianity in Africa is a colonizers' religion, it actually predates the colonial era. Its introduction to Africa is recorded in the account of the Ethiopian eunuch's meeting with Philip (Acts 8:26-40). By the second and third centuries cities like Alexandria, Carthage and Hippo emerged

as intellectual and theological hubs of the Christian faith, giving the church such leaders as Tertullian, Athanasius and Augustine. All these and many others made monumental contributions to the development of Christian doctrine, often standing at the forefront of the theological debates that shaped the church as we know it today. The *Africa Bible Commentary* follows in this tradition, adding to the authenticity of Africa as a legitimate hub of the Christian faith.

While Christianity in Africa has been described as a mile wide and an inch deep, this description also applies to the church globally. The resultant global maladies are a source of real concern and call for the urgent attention of church leaders and Christians everywhere. That is why I wholeheartedly commend the *Africa Bible Commentary* to every Christian seeking to grow in their faith, their understanding of Scripture, and their role as a member of the body of Christ around the world.

Master O. Matlhaope

Secretary General

Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA)

June 2025

FOREWORD BY REV DR CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT

One of the blessings of mature adulthood is the ability to reproduce. The *Africa Bible Commentary* has been doing that already throughout its first twenty years, since so many of its original contributors went on to write their own books, which one Christian leader described as the ABC producing babies. Both by its own existence in multiple languages and by all it has inspired, this book has been amplifying the mature voice of African biblical scholarship throughout Africa and increasingly to the global church.

But now with this second edition, the ABC has done much more than produce babies or clone itself. With the whole book being thoroughly revised, such that almost half the book consists of entirely freshly written material, and with almost double the number of distinct topical articles, this is a commentary that

speaks with a voice that is up-to-date, well-informed and authentically African.

In Langham Preaching movements the gold standard for biblical preaching is that it should be marked by faithfulness to the text of Scripture, clarity of presentation and relevance to the cultural context. This outstanding volume of accessible exposition passes all three tests. And as such it is not only an invaluable tool for the churches of Africa, but also a priceless gift from Africa to the global church.

Christopher J. H. Wright

International Ambassador

Langham Partnership

June 2025

FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION BY DR JOHN STOTT

The Bible has an indispensable part to play in the church member's personal discipleship and in the pastor's preaching ministry. But this statement assumes that they can understand it. Hence the wonderful provision of the *Africa Bible Commentary*. One of the most significant recent developments in the churches of Africa is the rise of sound biblical scholarship. The church is fortunate indeed to see this resurgence in the continent that gave us such interpreters as Augustine and Athanasius. The *Africa Bible Commentary* is a publishing landmark, and I congratulate the

contributors and editors on their achievement. Its foundation is biblical, its perspective African, and its approach to controversial questions balanced. I intend to use it myself in order to gain African insights into the word of God. Indeed, I hope it will have a worldwide readership, so that we may better grasp 'with all God's people' the full dimensions of Christ's love (Eph 3:18).

John Stott

December 2005

FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION BY THE MOST REV DR ROBERT K. ABOAGYE-MENSAH

The phenomenal growth of the church in Africa brings with it many challenges. One of these challenges is how to sustain the numerical growth while ensuring that the faith of Christians is firmly grounded in the revealed and written word of God – the Holy Bible. Grounding the people's faith in the Bible requires intensifying the teaching ministry of the church. This, in turn, creates a need for appropriate tools to assist pastors, seminarians, theologians, lay preachers and Christian education teachers to teach effectively. The *Africa Bible Commentary* written by African theologians has come at the right time!

What makes the *Africa Bible Commentary* unique and relevant is the fact that it has been written by African theologians who love the Lord and are committed to the life of the church. They write out of their matured practical experience in teaching the Bible within the Christian community. The content of the commentary can thus be described as tried and tested material that will help others towards Christian maturity when prayerfully used.

In interpreting the biblical text, the authors have also been able to bring together Christian spirituality and the depth of their understanding of African culture and religion.

The *Africa Bible Commentary* will also be useful to Christians outside the African continent who want to enrich their own understanding of the Bible by stepping outside their own culture and experience. In so doing, they will gain insights into their own culture as well, for the African scholars who contributed to the commentary also have a rich and varied experiences of the life of the church outside Africa.

I wish to express my deepest appreciation to all those who contributed to the writing of this commentary and enthusiastically recommend it to Christians everywhere who want to understand the Bible in order to live out and share their faith.

Robert K. Aboagye-Mensah

Presiding Bishop The Methodist Church, Ghana

February 2006

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Twenty years ago a vision that was born in the hearts of our elders had taken shape in the form of the *Africa Bible Commentary*. The seed that was planted has grown into a large tree whose nourishing fruit enriches the lives of many African Christians today. The *Africa Bible Commentary* is a blessing to many students, pastors, preachers and church leaders in Africa. The work is now available in seven major languages spoken in Africa. Outside of the continent it has inspired a host of contextual one-volume Bible commentaries in various parts of the world.

Though some critics contended that the *Africa Bible Commentary* was ‘not African enough,’ others maintained that it was a ‘monumental work,’ a ‘major achievement.’

Why Was a Revision Needed?

Africa has changed massively in the past twenty years. Technology and the internet is even more accessible and more affordable, social media is part of our daily lives, and same-sex relationships and the discussion of such things is less taboo. The COVID-19 pandemic shook the world and highlighted the fragility of human life, terrorist attacks are more frequent and religious extremism is on the increase. Despite this, and amid conflicts and political unrest that forces migration, the church in Africa continues to grow and with it so do its challenges. In light of all these challenges the decision was made by the editorial board of the *ABC* to embark on a revision. Almost eight years later we have here the revised and updated commentary.

A proverb from Burkina Faso states that ‘an old man sitting down can see further than a young man standing up.’ While we are now the senior scholars in Africa, when we began this journey eight years ago we were the younger scholars, who inherited the leadership of this project and the responsibility for carrying this vision established by our predecessors. The vision of the *Africa Bible Commentary* has not changed. It is to equip African Christians with Scripture, promote discipleship and further the kingdom of God. The most effective way to achieve this is by helping Christ followers to study the word of God and practice it in their lives, and for them to passionately share what they have learned.

What’s New?

The Commentaries

This revised edition of the *Africa Bible Commentary* has been updated with additional material that is relevant to the church in Africa today. In the commentaries, more attention has been paid to the needs of students both in terms of introductory materials and exegesis. Thus this second edition of the *ABC* is more robust on the exegetical level, and more relevant and up-to-date on the contextual level.

All commentaries now begin with new, standardized introductions to enhance their usefulness to students.

Fifteen commentaries are new:

- **Old Testament:** Genesis, Deuteronomy, 1 Samuel, Esther, Psalms (Books 2,3,4,5), Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Micah
- **New Testament:** Mark, Acts, Romans, 1 & 2 Thessalonians

Twelve commentaries are extensively revised:

- **Old Testament:** Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel
- **New Testament:** Luke, Revelation

Thirty-nine are retained from the first *ABC*, with minor to significant editorial changes and new introductions.

The Articles

There are 122 articles in the revised edition of the *ABC* compared to sixty-eight in the first edition.

- Seventy-five new articles were added
- Forty-seven articles were retained from the first *ABC*
 - Seventeen with major revisions
 - Thirty with minor changes

The Authors

Fifty-three new authors contributed to this revised edition. The total number of contributors stands at 111. Twenty-one authors are women, whereas there were only nine in the first *ABC*.

We are saddened to acknowledge the passing of the following authors who contributed to this second edition or whose work is included from the first edition:

- Eshetu Abate: Philipppians
- Tokunboh Adeyemo: Judges, Daniel, 2 Peter, Jude, and several articles
- Nicodeme Alagbada: Micah
- Kwame Bediako: Article on “Scripture as the Interpreter of Culture and Tradition”
- Daniel Bourdanne: Article on “Prosperity Gospel”
- Douglas Carew: Hosea
- Musa Gotom: 1 and 2 Kings
- Augustine Musopole: Obadiah
- Uzodinma Obed: Article on "House Fellowship"

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support of many individuals and institutions around the world, to whom we give our thanks. However we must also celebrate the labourers who carried this to the finish line:

Elizabeth Mburu, Coordinator and New Testament Editor
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Isobel Stevenson, Chief Editor
Dahlia Fraser (†), Copy Editor
Aiah Foday-Khabenje, Former Board Representative on behalf
of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa
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Luke Lewis, Director of Langham Publishing
Joe Kapolyo, Theological Advisor

Rosemary Muthoni Mbogo, Theological Advisor
Matthew Michaels, Theological Advisor
Hassan Musa, Theological Advisor
Onesimus Ngundu, Theological Advisor
James Nkansah, Theological Advisor

Yacouba Sanon
General Editor, Africa Bible Commentary, Second Edition
June 2025

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION

Everything begins with an idea, a thought, or a concept. As the idea grows, possibilities begin to emerge, riding on the wings of creative thinking. It is like the seed in the parable of the Sower that falls on good soil and yields a bumper harvest (Matt 13:8). In the case of the *Africa Bible Commentary (ABC)*, this harvest has sprung from an idea that began to grow in the minds of a number of African church leaders and a cross-section of overseas missionary partners working in Africa.

The History of the ABC

In September 1994, representatives of Protestant churches, both ecumenical and evangelical, gathered in Nairobi, Kenya, for the Second Pan Africa Christian Leadership Assembly (PACLA II). At this historic meeting, Christian leaders identified deficient knowledge of the Bible and faulty application of its teaching as the primary weakness of the church in Africa. They recognized that the church in Africa was a mile long in terms of quantity, but only an inch deep in terms of quality. The Bible needed to be interpreted and explained to the people in familiar language, using colloquial metaphors, African thought-forms and nuances, and practical applications that fitted the African context. After all, God is closer to the people when he speaks in their language, as St Augustine of Hippo once said.

Inspired by the conference, academics set to work and produced many books. But these ended up in the libraries of academic institutions and in the hands of theological students and their professors. These books did not meet the needs of the millions of believers and their pastors who do not have the privilege of a seminary education. So a dream was born among the leadership of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA). They dreamed of an African Bible commentary produced by seventy African scholars and theologians, male and female, Francophone and Anglophone, who would both explain the text of all sixty-six books in the Bible and apply the Bible's teaching to contemporary Africa. As Professor Bediako stated, such a book would be "a fundamental resource for the church in Africa: for Christian thought, action and scholarship."

Many dismissed the idea as no more than a dream. Besides the problem of getting scholars from diverse ecclesiastical traditions and theological viewpoints to cooperate, there were the daunting logistical problems posed by the state of communications across the vastness of the African continent. Could seventy African theologians and scholars work together, keep to deadlines, and produce a mammoth work like the *ABC* at a reasonable cost?

One of the few to believe that it could be done and to throw its weight logistically and financially behind the project was SIM, which lived up to its name as Serving in Mission. This missionary organization has had an active church-planting ministry in Africa for more than a century. Its literature arm, under the leadership of Jim Mason, has long been conducting pastors conferences and

giving out books to assist pastors in their ministry. They, too, had been contemplating the idea of providing pastors with a Bible commentary written entirely by African scholars.

The Executive Committee of the AEA, the leaders of SIM, and others who had expressed interest in the project thus met on the campus of the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST), another project of the AEA. Four of those at that meeting from 29-31 January 2001 became the editors of the *ABC*. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nigerian), the General Secretary of the AEA, became the General Editor. Samuel Ngewa (Kenyan), a professor at NEGST, assumed responsibility for editing all New Testament commentaries submitted in English. Tewoldemedhin Habtu (Eritrean), also a professor at NEGST, assumed responsibility for editing Old Testament manuscripts submitted in English, while those submitted in French would be edited by Issiaka Coulibaly (Ivorian), a lecturer at the Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de l'Alliance Chrétienne (FATEAC) in Côte d'Ivoire. In 2002, Solomon Andria (Malagasy), another professor at FATEAC, joined this group and assumed responsibility for New Testament commentaries written in French.

Two of those present at the initial meeting accepted positions as editorial advisors. They were Dr Isabel Phiri (Malawian), Professor of Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Dr Yusufu Turaki (Nigerian) of the International Bible Society, Enugu, and a Professor at Jos ECWA Theological Seminary (JETS), Jos.

The SIM representatives, Dr Jim Plueddemann, General Director of SIM USA (American) and Mr Jim Mason, International Literature Consultant of SIM Canada (Canadian), were invited to serve as technical partners. Another technical partner was Mr Pieter Kwant, Managing Director of the Piquant Agency, Carlisle, UK (Dutch) and the International Programme Director of Langham Partnership International. Three other leaders who had expressed interest in the project sent their apologies for being unable to attend. They were Dr Dirinda Marini-Bodho, the initial Old Testament Editor – French, Dr Kwame Bediako and Dr Tite Tienou.

At this first meeting, terms were defined, roles were clarified, terms of reference were spelled out and budgets were approved. It was agreed that the *ABC* would also include articles on issues affecting the continent, and so a list of these issues was drawn up, as well as a list of writers who could be asked to address them.

Five of the major resolutions passed at this meeting have served as editorial guidelines for this project:

- The *ABC* should be a readable, accessible and affordable one-volume commentary that pastors, students and lay people can easily use.
- The *ABC* should be African in terms of its authorship and its content, which must reflect its African context. While remaining true to the biblical text, it must apply biblical teachings and truths to African realities.

- The contributors to the *ABC* should be chosen to reflect the diversity of Africa as regards denominations and languages, and should include both men and women. The theological editors will respect this diversity, within the bounds set by the AEA Statement of Faith.
- As part of their contract, contributors to the *ABC* would be expected to accept the AEA Statement of Faith as a guideline for their work.
- The *ABC* project should be owned by Africans and should be managed independently, although under the ultimate supervision of the AEA.

After this meeting, possible contributors were approached. They were urged to embark on individual research and to work both from the original Greek and Hebrew texts and also from translations of the Bible into their mother tongues. Writing workshops were organized in different parts of the continent. A number of writers were assisted to take a sabbatical in order to find time to write. Writers from the same area were encouraged to interact in order to encourage each other and critique each other's work.

The Contents of the ABC

The *ABC* is not a critical, academic, verse-by-verse commentary. Rather, it contains section-by-section exegesis and explanation of the whole Bible as seen through the eyes of African scholars who respect the integrity of the text and use African proverbs, metaphors and stories to make it speak to African believers in the villages and cities across the entire continent. The application is both bold and faithful. Thus the *ABC* does not speak of a Black Jesus. To do so would be a travesty of the Bible story and cheap scholarship. Instead, the *ABC* is true to the text and honest to its context both in Bible days and in our day.

The *ABC* is, in fact, a mini-library that equips pastors and teachers to teach the churches and encourages students and church members to study God's word for themselves.

Of special benefit are the up-to-date specialist articles dealing with burning issues and problems such as poverty, favouritism, HIV/AIDS, refugees, war, politics and so on. And all this information is in one volume, which is easy-to-use, easy to handle, surprisingly light to carry, and very affordable! Even better, it is being published in both English and French, and will soon be translated into several African languages.

Using the ABC

What can the *ABC* be used for? At the top of my list is personal devotion. As general editor, I had to critique and correct every manuscript. But after completing this task, I began to use the manuscripts for my quiet time. For the shorter books, I first read the entire book in the Bible and then the commentary on the book. For the longer books, I read between five and ten chapters a day and then read the corresponding commentary. My spiritual life has been enriched, and I strongly recommend this approach.

I have also used portions of the *ABC* for my sermon preparation and pulpit ministry. While doing this, I have learned many new things about African peoples of whom I previously knew

nothing. For example, until I read the *ABC* on Leviticus, I did not know about the Iraqw tribe in northern Tanzania who are of Semitic extraction and have much in common with the Hebrews.

All of the *ABC* editors are seminary professors. All of them have used some portions of the *ABC* as part of their class lectures. In fact, some students at the NEGST who interacted with my own manuscript on 2 Peter sent me their comments, expressing their agreement or disagreement with what I had said. Such discussion is beneficial for all of us as we seek to understand and apply God's word. This experience confirms that the *ABC* will be a powerful resource book for fellowship group discussions and even for Sunday school classes in churches. I expect to find the *ABC* in every library of every Bible college, seminary, university and other institution of higher learning throughout Africa and beyond.

I also strongly recommend the *ABC* to every missionary working in Africa or intending to serve in Africa as it will give them insights into the Scriptures and into Africa that can only benefit their ministry.

Though the *ABC* is written by Africans and primarily for Africans, it can be used with benefit by those who are not Africans. In fact, reading the Bible through African lenses may help to inspire others with the dynamism and excitement that is common in African churches.

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- The editors for their sound and erudite scholarship with a touch of spiritual anointing, as well as for their selfless, sacrificial service.
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- Our prayer is that just as God used his word to ignite the fire of Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth century, he will use the *ABC* to do the same in Africa today. Amen!
- Tokunboh Adeyemo**
General Editor, Africa Bible Commentary, First Edition

THE VISION

The *Africa Bible Commentary* is a one-volume commentary written and edited by African biblical scholars on all the books of the Bible. The general aim of the commentary is to make the word of God speak relevantly to African realities today. More especially, it targets Christian leaders at the grassroots level – pastors, students and lay leaders – who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can be instrumental in the establishment and nurture of a vibrant church in the continent. A one-volume commentary

on the whole Bible is, by its very nature, a major exercise in compression, with a rigorous discipline governing what needs to be included and what needs to be omitted. This volume, therefore, does not delve into critical and exegetical details. Based on the firm conviction of and belief in the divine inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture, it seeks to offer the reader a contextual readable and affordable guide.

The fruit of that vision is now in your hands!

GUIDELINES FOR USING THE *ABC*

Here are some suggestions to help readers who are unfamiliar with Bible commentaries to find the information they are looking for in the *Africa Bible Commentary*.

I need information about who wrote a book in the Bible, where, when and why.

Each book starts with a general introduction that attempts to answer some of these questions. Additional information can also often be found in general introductory articles like the ‘Introduction to the Pentateuch’ and ‘Introduction to the Prophets.’

I want to get an overview of a whole book of the Bible.

Read the commentary on that book. The individual commentaries in the *ABC* were written to be read as a whole and are not just discussions of individual verses.

I need help preparing a sermon or a Bible study.

1. Read the article on ‘General Principles of Interpretation’ for guidance on how to approach passages of Scripture.
2. Go to the commentary on the book that you will be teaching from.
3. Look at the Outline of Contents to get some idea of how the passage you will be dealing with fits into the whole book.
4. Find the subheading in the Outline of Contents that includes your passage.

5. Turn to that subsection and read it. It can also be a good idea to read the subsections on either side to see the passage in context.

6. Look up any cross-references (marked with ‘see’ or ‘see also’) to see what light the rest of the Bible throws on the passage. The approach taken in the commentary may suggest a structure you can use for your sermon, or it may suggest applications that can be made. If there is one main topic in the passage (for example, marriage) you may also find it useful to read the articles in the *ABC* that relate to marriage. All the articles are listed in the table of contents.

I need to know what the Bible has to say about a specific topic.

Scan the list of articles at the front of the commentary and see whether any of them address your topic. For example, if you want information about healing, you could look at the article on Healing, and also at related articles on HIV/AIDS, Suffering, Witchcraft, Ancestors and Prayer, all of which may be relevant to your thinking about health and disease.

I have read the commentary, but I want to know more about a book in the Bible.

At the end of each commentary, the author lists books for further reading. You can also consult books from the commentary series listed on the Abbreviations page. These books are sometimes cited in the *ABC* by their abbreviations.

ABBREVIATIONS

Books of the Bible

Old Testament (OT)

Gen, Exod, Lev, Num, Deut, Josh, Judg, Ruth, 1-2 Sam, 1-2 Kgs, 1-2 Chr, Ezra, Neh, Esth, Job, Ps/Pss, Prov, Eccl, Song, Isa, Jer, Lam, Ezek, Dan, Hos, Joel, Amos, Obad, Jonah, Mic, Nah, Hab, Zeph, Hag, Zech, Mal

New Testament (NT)

Matt, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Rom, 1-2 Cor, Gal, Eph, Phil, Col, 1-2 Thess, 1-2 Tim, Titus, Phlm, Heb, Jas, 1-2 Pet, 1-2-3 John, Jude, Rev

Translations of the Bible

ESV	English Standard Version
GNT	Good News Translation (formerly GNB)
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
KJV	King James Version
KJV21	21st Century King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NASB1995	New American Standard Bible 1995
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NRSVUE	New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition
NLT	New Living Translation
RSV	Revised Standard Version

Commentary Series

AB	Anchor Bible Commentary Series
ABC	Africa Bible Commentary Series
ABCS	Asia Bible Commentary Series
ACNT	Augsburd Commentary on the New Testament
ApOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BCOT	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament
BCOTPB	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Prophetic Books
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentary
BTCPC	Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation
BST	The Bible Speaks Today

CBC	Cornerstone Bible Commentary
CBCOT	Cambridge Bible Commentaries on the Old Testament
CCF	Commentaries for Christian Formation
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
EB5	Encountering Biblical Studies
EBTC	Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary
EvBC	Everyman's Bible Commentary
FOB	Focus on the Bible
HK	Hendriksen and Kistemaker
ICS	Illuminations Commentary Series
INT	Interpretation Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ITC	International Theological Commentary
JPSBC	Jewish Publication Society Bible Commentary
IVPNTC	IVP New Testament Commentary
NAC	New American Commentary
NCB	New Century Bible Commentary
NCCS	New Covenant Commentary Series
NIBC	New International Bible Commentary
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
OTL	Old Testament Library
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
REBC	Revised Expositor's Bible Commentary
SGBC	Story of God Bible Commentary
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
TBC	Torch Bible Commentary
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentary
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentary
TPC	The Preacher's Commentary
TTCS	Teach the Text Commentary Series
UBOT	Understanding the Bible Old Testament
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary

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SCRIPTURE AS THE INTERPRETER OF CULTURE AND TRADITION

The *Africa Bible Commentary* attempts to relate the Scriptures and African cultures and seek ways in which the gospel may be seen to be relevant to African cultures. As we do this, we as readers and as writers need to avoid oversimplifications about the nature of this relationship.

What Is Culture?

Culture comprises far more than just music, dance, food and artefacts. Our culture is our world view that is fundamental to our understanding of who we are, where we have come from and where we are going. It is everything in us and around us that defines us and shapes us. When we turn to Christ as Lord, we are turning over to him all that is in us, all that is about us and all that is around us that has defined and shaped us. Thus salvation encompasses not just our 'souls,' but also our culture at its deepest level. We need to allow Scripture to become the interpreter of who we are in the specific concrete sense of who we are in our cultures and traditions.

What Is Scripture?

But acknowledging the centrality of Scripture to our identity does not mean that we demonize our own traditional cultures or learn to quote certain verses and chapters as proof texts to support particular positions we hold because of our denominational or traditional background. The centrality of Scripture is more fundamental than that, and its significance much larger.

Scripture Is a Prism

When light passes through a prism, a rainbow of colours is revealed. Similarly, when our cultures pass through the prism of Scripture, we see them in a new way. The light and shade intrinsic to our cultures are revealed. We are no longer being defined by our traditions, but are allowing Scripture to interpret those traditions.

Scripture Is a Record of God's Engagement with Culture

Scripture is more than just a record of the history and religion of Israel and the early church. Rather, it records God's dealings with his people and with their culture, and is itself the fruit of that engagement. It thus provides a yardstick or a model for encouraging, identifying and controlling all subsequent engagements of gospel and culture in the continuing divine-human encounter that characterizes our faith.

Scripture Is a Road Map

Scripture is the authoritative road map on our journey of faith, a journey that began before we first believed in Christ. This road map reminds us that the journey we are on did not begin at the point when we ourselves received the map. By looking at the map in Scripture, we can see where we have come from and how we got to where we are. It also points us in the direction we need to take if we are to reach our destination.

This understanding is one that the early preachers of the gospel stressed when they so often used the phrase 'according to the Scriptures.' Paul reminds Timothy of the guiding role of Scripture (2 Tim 3:16). He demonstrates its use when he recounts part of the history of the Israelites and concludes, 'These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us' (1 Cor 10:1-11).

Too often, preachers tend to pick a particular text and use it as a launch pad for presenting their own ideas, but apostolic preaching was not like that. It presented the meaning of Scripture as a whole and applied that meaning to the concrete cultural and social situation of the hearers. That is what we have to do if Scripture is to be the road map for getting us to our destination.

Scripture Is Our History

All the references to Scripture in the NT are referring to the OT. The majority of those addressed would have been Gentiles, who did not share the Jews' cultural background; yet Paul refers to 'our forefathers' when speaking to Gentile Corinthians (1 Cor 10:1). Israel's history had become their 'adoptive' history, for all believers in Christ become children of Abraham (Gal 3:26-29) and are grafted into the original olive tree (Rom 11:7-20). And all believers were slaves who have been set free (Gal 4:7). All of us have been adopted into Christ with our traditions, and are therefore transformed with our traditions. The God of Israel is not a tribal God but the God who created all humanity.

Scripture Is the Basis of Our Identity

The earliest church was tempted to see Gentile Christians as second-class Jews, latecomers. But at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) the apostles recognized that God was doing something new. Paul makes the same point when he writes as if there are now three categories of persons: Jews, Gentiles and something new, called the church of God (1 Cor 10:32; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:14-18).

In the early decades of the church, some Christian writers spoke of Christians as a third race. The first race was the Jews; the second, the Gentiles; and the third was the Christians. The basis of this new identity was religious, not ethnic, national, social or cultural in the narrow sense. We have become 'a kingdom of priests to serve God and his father' (Rev 1:5-6; 1 Pet 2:9-10).

Scripture Is Our Story

Scripture is not just a holy book from which we extract teaching and biblical principles. Rather, it is a story in which we participate. When David Livingstone preached in Africa in the nineteenth century, he is said to have always referred to the Bible as the 'message from the God whom you know.' In other words, Scripture speaks to us because Scripture speaks about us. And it speaks about us because we are a part of the gospel we preach. Paul was very aware of this. He emphasized that

God had had mercy on him, and that now he was called to preach to others (1 Cor 15:8-11).

Africans have a strong sense of their pre-Christian religious journey and should be alive to this participation in Scripture. This was certainly true of the Liberian prophet William Wadé Harris (1865-1929). He was the first distinctive African Christian prophet of modern times, and a man who brought many people into the church. Harris cut himself off from his Grebo life and family in a radical conversion, but he did not live without ancestors or a community. He simply changed his family connections to those based on faith in Christ as known through the Scriptures. His was a spirituality of vital participation totally indigenous to his African way of being within a community. He did not think in terms of what Moses saw or Jesus did in the Bible, but of how his new ancestors, Moses, Elijah, and supremely Jesus Christ, interacted with him. That was how he broke through to many people and they became Christians.

In African culture, participation in a common life constitutes community and marks out an ethnic group. When a libation is poured, the community recites the names of all those who are absent, treating them as present. Traditional believers summon their ancestors, and they believe that these ancestors are present at the ceremony that follows. (Do we have a similar confidence that Jesus is present when we pray?)

In Christian terms, we participate in Christ, and thus also in the resources and powers of the entire community composed of those who are also one with Christ through the Spirit. This community includes both the living and the dead (Luke 20:33-38). It is a transcendent community in which the human components experience and share in the divine life and nature (2 Pet 1:4).

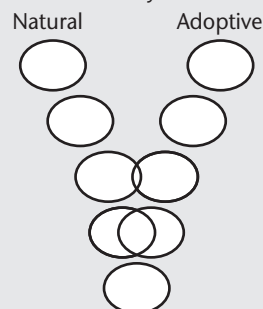
Bringing Scripture and Culture Together

We should not focus on extracting principles from the Bible and applying these to culture. Scripture is not a book existing independently of us. Scripture is the living testimony to what God has done and continues to do, and we are part of that testimony. The characters in Scripture are both our contemporaries and our ancestors. Their triumphs and failures help us understand our own journey of faith (Rom 11:18). Scripture is not something we only believe in; it is something we share in. That is why the people in the Bible will not be made perfect without us (Heb 11:40), nor we without them.

The application of Scripture to our cultures is a gradual process of coming together, of life touching life. Our particular culture encounters the activity of God in building up a community of his people throughout history, a community that now includes us and our particular traditions, history and culture. We will gradually come to share in a family likeness that is not measured by ethnic particularity but by nothing less than Christ himself (Eph 4:13).

Scripture and culture are like merging circles, gradually coming to have one centre as we increasingly recognize ourselves in Scripture and Scripture becomes more and more recognizable as our story.

The process of bringing the gospel and culture together takes more than one generation. To look for a once-and-for-all biblical 'answer' to a particular cultural problem is to misunderstand the process whereby a community and people come to see themselves as called into the people of God and come to participate in that community.



The process takes several generations, both ancient and modern. All the endeavours of believers from many backgrounds wrestling with gospel and culture are an integral part of our story. To fully understand the impact of the gospel engaging with any particular cultural environment, we need to know of the struggle of ancient Israel to come to terms with the uniqueness and the majesty of Yahweh, their backslidings, apostasy, calamity, tragedy and triumphs. We also need to know how African earth shrines relate to God's way. We need to know how the gospel was brought from Alexandria to Axum, how it was taken from Ireland to the English, how it was taken from south-eastern Ghana to the Upper East Region. No part of the story of the people of God is alien to any other part of the story or is more important than any other part. The gospel has no permanent resident culture. It is as we take the experiences and the struggle in one context and funnel them through our own reading and experience of the Scripture in our mother tongue that we find that other Christian stories illuminate our story.

Scripture, Language and Culture

Mother-tongue Scripture has a fundamental place in the engagement of gospel and culture. If people recognize that Onyankopon (as God is called by the Akan of Ghana), the God they have known from time immemorial, is their Saviour, and that the coming of the gospel is what they have looked forward to, then God is continuing to ensure that they will hear him, each in their own language so that they can marvel at his majesty and his love for them. Our mother tongue is the language in which God speaks to each of us. He does not speak in a sacred language, but in ordinary language, so that we may hear him and realize that this gospel is about us and that we have been invited to join a company drawn from every people, tribe, tongue, nation and language (Rev 7:9).

Kwame Bediako

(Adapted from Kwame Bediako, 'Scripture as the Hermeneutic of Culture and Tradition,' *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 4, No. 1 [June 2001], pp. 2-11.)

THE OLD TESTAMENT

INTRODUCTION TO THE PENTATEUCH

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three parts, known as the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. Over the centuries, these three sections came to be seen as equal in status as sacred Scripture, as can be seen from Jesus' reference to them in Luke 24:44-45. Here we will be focusing on the first of them, the five books of the Law, which the Jews traditionally attributed to Moses. Christians know these books as the Pentateuch, a Greek word that means 'five books.' The Jews refer to them as the Torah, a word that broadly refers to God's teaching, instruction or guidance to his people. Thus, as a whole, the Pentateuch is the expression of the will of the Lord, expressed through stories, individual and collective laws, ceremonial prescriptions and festivals.

The five books in question are the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The English titles of these books derive from the titles used in the Latin translation known as the Vulgate and the ancient Greek translation known as the Septuagint. But in the original Hebrew, their titles are derived from the opening words of each book, or key words in the first verse of the book.

The opening words of Genesis are 'in the beginning' (*bereshith*) and the book itself tells of three beginnings:

- Genesis 1–3 deals with creation and the disobedience of the first man and woman.
- Genesis 4–11 deals with the beginning of human life after the fall and includes the stories of Cain and Abel, Noah and his descendants, the tower of Babel, and the call of Abraham.
- Genesis 12–50 focuses on the beginnings of Israel and contains stories from the lives of the patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. These men are the vessels of God's revelation that will be shared with other nations through the people of Israel.

In Hebrew, the book of Exodus is known as *Shemoth*, 'names,' a reference to the opening list of the sons of Jacob who moved to Egypt. The English name refers to the fact that the book covers the departure of the Israelites from Egypt some four hundred years later. The book follows on from Genesis as it shows the creator God creating a nation and assigning an identity to his people. Exodus can be divided into six parts:

- Exodus 1–3 deals with the entry of Jacob and his sons into Egypt, the death of Joseph and his brothers and sisters, the coming of a new pharaoh, the suffering of the Hebrew people, the birth of the deliverer and the revelation of God to Moses.
- Exodus 4–15 deals with Moses' return to Egypt, the theologically loaded plagues that preceded the Israelites' departure from Egypt, the establishment of the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea.

- Exodus 16–20 deals with the encampments and battles after the crossing of the Red Sea, the visit of Moses' father-in-law Jethro, the grumbling of the Israelites about water and food, and the establishment of the covenant between God and his people at Sinai.
- Exodus 21–28 gives details of the covenant and the laws associated with it, as well as detailed instructions regarding the tabernacle and the priestly regalia.
- Exodus 29–34 deals with the consecration and duties of the priests and the observance of the Sabbath. It culminates in an account of the idolatrous worship of the golden calf.
- Exodus 35–40 deals with the handing over of the new tablets of the covenant written by Moses, the people's contributions for the building of the tabernacle, and the artisans charged with constructing the tabernacle and all its furnishings. It culminates in the setting up of the sanctuary and the tent of meeting.

In Hebrew, the book of Leviticus is entitled *Vayikra*, meaning 'and he called,' in reference to God's calling on Moses to instruct the people in how they are to worship him. Whereas in the book of Exodus God brought the people of Israel out of Egypt physically, in Leviticus he brings them out Egypt spiritually. He lays out the form of a new religion, distinct from the Egyptian religion they had known, even though it incorporates some familiar elements of surrounding religions. Some modern readers may struggle with the lack of scope for individual reflection and freedom of choice in this book, but it speaks to Africans who know the importance of laws in traditional societies. Leviticus can be divided into four sections:

- Leviticus 1–7 deals with the procedures for sacrifices.
- Leviticus 8–10 deals with the respect the people should show the priests.
- Leviticus 11–16 deals with abstention from acts that would result in physical impurity.
- Leviticus 17–27 deals with moral or liturgical failings.

In Hebrew, the book of Numbers is entitled *Bemidbar*, meaning 'in the wilderness,' for it deals with the years the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness. The English title derives from the numerical information in the censuses recorded in the book. Numbers is divided into three sections:

- Numbers 1:1-10:10 deals with the preparation of the people before their march to the promised land. It begins with a detailed enumeration of the people of Israel.
- Numbers 10:11-21:35 deals with the people's journey to Kadesh Barnea, followed by their forty-year stay in the desert and their departure for the land of Moab.

- Numbers 22:1-36:13 describes the events that took place in Moab before the people entered the promised land, the land of Canaan.

In Hebrew, the book of Deuteronomy is *Eleh hadevarim*, meaning ‘these are the words,’ referring to Moses’ three long speeches in which he conveyed God’s message to the people. The English title derives from the Septuagint, where the book is called the ‘second law’ or ‘repeated law’ because Moses reiterates some of the laws given in earlier books to ensure that they are not forgotten. The book is divided into three parts:

- Deuteronomy 1:1-4:43 covers Moses’ address to the Israelites while they were still in the wilderness east of the River Jordan.
- Deuteronomy 4:44-28:68 is a speech in which Moses reminds the people of the faithfulness of God and warns against slipping into idolatry. It includes the famous Jewish statement of faith known as the *Shema* (Deut 6:4-5) that Jesus quotes in Luke 10:27.
- Deuteronomy 28:69-34:12 is Moses’ farewell speech in which he reminds the people of all that the Lord has done for them in the past, arranges for a ceremonial renewal of the covenant between the people of Israel and the Lord, and warns about the consequences of breaking the covenant.

Scholars are drawn to the Pentateuch because of the richness and complexity of these books, and arguments rage about their authors, date of composition, form and content. Scholars have also carefully compared the Hebrew Masoretic text (MT) with the Septuagint (LXX), the ancient translation of the Hebrew Bible for Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt, as well as with the Aramaic version of the Torah that is known as the Samaritan Pentateuch, and with other ancient documents. They have identified some variations between these texts, but the differences are minor and do not imply any falsification of the sacred Scriptures. On the contrary, the sheer number of texts and translations demonstrates the high regard in which the Jews held the word of God and the importance they attached to people being able to understand it.

Africans, too, are drawn to the Pentateuch. We feel at home in it because of the many social and cultural affinities between the world it describes and the world of traditional Africa. Many African peoples have their own creation stories that include the initial fault of a couple and redemption that preserved the people group. Similarly, there are many African stories related to the flood. For instance, the Bayombe people of the DRC and Angola speak of heavy rains far away and the survival of

man in a ship. The creation stories of the Bangala and Sango peoples in the CAR and the Dongo in Benin speak of God living on the waters and dominating them. The belief that God dwells on a sacred mountain or in a sacred forest is also widespread across Africa.

But the Pentateuch is not familiar merely because of these historical myths. It also speaks to us because it reflects beliefs and practices that are similar to those in our African context. For instance, Africans have long believed that men and women are intrinsically linked and are subjects created by God. We also understand the importance of genealogy, and of knowing our lineage and passing on the history of our own ethnic group. We understand the Pentateuch’s emphasis on the family unit, especially the extended family, which includes our ancestors. We too respect the aged and celebrate the blessing of long life. The laws relating to taboos, polygamy, widow inheritance, and the care of orphans and strangers resonate with African life, as do the laws that are clearly set in the context of a rural society. Africans too believe that words have power, and can be used to bless and to curse. The idea of covenants or treaties is also familiar in Africa, and we can easily grasp the idea of God being present with his people and a protector of his people, despite their faults.

The key idea to emerge from the Pentateuch is that suffering is the result of sin, in particular the sin of refusing to worship the one and only God. God provided a sacrificial system as a way to deal with sin (a system that was also known in Africa) but, as the letter to the Hebrews makes plain, the blood sacrifices prescribed in the Pentateuch are no longer necessary. They have been replaced once and for all by the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross.

The other key message of the Pentateuch is that God not only created the heavens and earth but also wants humans to care for his creation while maintaining a close and worshipful relationship with its creator. Thus the Pentateuch does not only point to the way of salvation in Christ, it also shows us how we should live.

As we endeavour to understand and interpret the Pentateuch, we would be wise not to legalistically apply individual laws to our current context. Instead, we should try to determine the civil, moral and religious principles that God intended should apply in ancient Israel and in the church today. Let us also remember that Jesus is the fulfilment of the law (Matt 5:17) and that his new command is that we should love one another (John 13:34-35; Gal 5:14; 1 John 2:3-11; see also Lev 19:18). Love is the essential trait of his disciples.

Kitoko Nsiku

GENESIS

It is said that if you forget where you came from, you won't know where you are going. This truth applies to individuals and to humanity as a whole. We need to know our origins before we can answer the crucial questions that bother all of us, whether consciously or unconsciously. Questions like 'Why is there something and not nothing?' 'Does the universe have a beginning and an end?' 'Is there a creator or source of all things?' 'What does it mean to be human?' 'Where does humanity come from?' 'What purpose do we serve?' 'What happens after death?' Genesis gives us the Creator God's answers to these questions. To ignore this book is to ignore our origins and the origin of all things, resulting in an identity crisis and anxiety about our destiny.

The book's title, 'Genesis,' derives from a Greek word that refers to beginnings such as birth, origins and lineage. The choice of this title is appropriate, for Genesis deals with many beginnings, including the origins of the universe (heaven and earth), sea and land, plants and animals, men and women. It tells of the beginnings of marriage, of agriculture, and of human sin. It tells of the entry of violence and corruption into this world and of God's judgment on sinful human beings. The author draws up a table of nations and traces the genealogy of the family from which Abraham and the people of Israel would descend. We discover the origin of the diversity of languages and cultures on earth. Most importantly, the author reveals God's plan to bless all the families of the earth through the descendants of Abraham.

Historical Context

Author

The question of the authorship of Genesis is inextricably linked to the authorship of the Pentateuch, the group of five books that the Hebrews called the Torah (Instruction) or 'the Law,' namely Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

These books are also sometimes called the books of Moses, in line with the traditional view that all five were written by Moses. In light of the role played by Moses in the founding of Israel as a nation, this claim is justified. However, many among those who

hold the traditional view would acknowledge that Moses could not have written every part of the Pentateuch, such as the recording of his own death (Deut 34:1-8). Other passages that would be difficult to attribute to Moses include 14:14, with its reference to the territory of Dan, a name that would only be given to that region after the Israelites had entered the promised land.

However, nowhere in the Pentateuch is Moses explicitly named as the author of these five books and the entire document is written in the third person and in the past tense, so that it tells us what Moses said and did (e.g. Deut 1:5; 4:41, 44; 5:1). Thus some argue that the author of Deuteronomy must have lived long after Moses' death, particularly if he could write 'to this day no one knows where his grave is' (Deut 34:6b) and 'no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face' (Deut 34:10).

Those who believe Moses to be the author of the Pentateuch do not see the lack of explicit mention of Moses having written it as a problem because they see Moses as more a spokesman for Yahweh than an author in the modern sense of the word. They also point to the fact that both David and Luke refer to the Pentateuch as the 'law of Moses' (1 Kgs 2:3; Luke 2:22). Jesus too refers to the 'book of Moses' when speaking to the Sadducees (Mark 12:26) and uses the expression 'Moses and the Prophets' to refer to all the OT Scriptures (Luke 16:29-31; 24:27). Above all, supporters of Moses' authorship cite Deuteronomy 31:9: 'Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the Levitical priests, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel.' Here the word 'law' could refer to God's stipulations, decrees and commandments that Moses transmitted to the Israelites (Deut 4:44-31:9), but it could also be seen as referring to the first five books of the Bible, with Genesis being the first.

As far as Genesis is concerned, 1-11:9 provides unique information about the origins of everything. While it is true that similar stories about the creation of the world circulated in the ancient world, a case could be made for Moses having drawn on oral or

written sources. The stories in the second section of the book (11:10-50:26) which focuses on the ancestors of the Israelites and their families may have been passed down orally from generation to generation. The belief expressed in this commentary is that God inspired Moses and guided him in the selection, ordering and writing of the contents of the book. God's purpose was to reveal himself to humanity.

Date

Opinions differ as to when the Pentateuch was written, but 1 Kings 6:1 allows us to fix it with a high degree of certainty: 'In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites came out of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in . . . the second month, he began to build the temple of the LORD.' The fourth year of Solomon's reign was around 966 BC. From this we can deduce that the exodus took place around 1446 BC. Since Israel spent forty years in the desert, the people would have entered the land of Canaan around 1406 BC. It follows that Moses must have written the Pentateuch between 1446 and 1406 BC.

Those who argue for a later date for the exodus propose a date around about 1297 BC or 1290 BC. However, it may be argued that the date of 1446 BC seems to align better with the biblical data.

Combining this information with the ages given for the patriarchs would lead us to consider Abraham's entrance to Canaan as having taken place around 2000 BC.

Addressees and Purpose

The people of Israel whom Moses led out of Egypt were the primary audience for Genesis. The book presents Yahweh as the origin of all things and seeks to arouse gratitude, respect and trust for all that he has done for Israel. It sets out to explain how the people of Israel began, tracing their descent back to creation and how they ended up in Egypt. That is why the book is centred on the narration of events in which the patriarchs are the main protagonists. The book also prepares its readers for the account of the covenant God entered into with his people at Sinai (Exod 19).

Literary Context

Genre and Style

The first part of Genesis (1-11:9) is known as the primeval history. There is still disagreement as to its literary genre. Some regard it as a historical narrative, while others regard it as more in the nature of a mythological narrative, that is, a folktale or legend that serves a particular purpose. Subgenres within this section include genealogies, battle reports and aetiology (explanations of the cause or origin of things). There is also poetry, with the writer often placing poetic discourse at the end of narrative sections. Thus the creation narrative ends with Adam's poetic speech (2:23), followed by an epilogue (2:24); the account of the fall (3:1-13) ends with a poetic speech (3:14-19), followed by an epilogue (3:20-24); and the story of Cain and Abel (4:1-22) ends with a poetic discourse (4:23-24), followed by an epilogue (4:25-26).

The second part of Genesis consists of patriarchal narratives intertwined with anecdotes, side stories and genealogies that deal primarily with the origins of the ancestors of Israel and its neighbours. As in the first block, there are poetic discourses followed by an epilogue (48:15-16, 20, 21-22; see also 49:1-50:14). Other genres in this section of the text include dialogue and legal agreements.

In regard to the genre of genealogy, it is important to note that genealogies often provide only the general outlines of family descent, and do not necessarily include every single ancestor. The genealogies in Genesis are presented in two ways. Linear genealogies follow the line that runs through the father to the firstborn son and so on (ch. 5; 11:10-26). Segmented genealogies, on the other hand, have a more irregular pattern but provide more details on the family or tribe. They usually move from father to son and include one or two descendants of the third generation (chs. 10; 36). Readers should pay close attention and seek to discern what is the main point the author is trying to communicate in each genealogy.

Structure and Literary Flow

The book of Genesis covers a very long period, from the creation of heaven and earth to the death of Joseph in Egypt. It makes extensive use of genealo-

gies (*toledot* – 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 36:9; 37:2) to structure the narrative as its scope narrows from the entire human race in the primeval history (1-11:9) to one particular family in the patriarchal history found in 11:10-50:26. The geographical scope of the text simultaneously narrows from the whole earth to more specific settings, particularly Mesopotamia and Canaan (chs. 1–38) and Egypt (chs. 39–50).

The primeval history deals with the creation of the universe and of human beings, the entry of sin into the world and God's judgment on the world. God is here presented as a personal God who is actively involved in the events of this world. He is also portrayed as entering into a covenant with Noah and his descendants and with all creation. These opening chapters shed light on the emergence of God's people and end at the point where Abraham, the covenantal ancestor, emerges on the historical scene.

The longer second part (chs. 12–50) deals with God's plan to bless all the families of the earth through the descendants of Abraham. It relates Abraham's calling and the covenant Yahweh made with him, which continues through Isaac, Jacob and the twelve sons of Jacob who are the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. The book ends with the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob who was God's agent in Egypt to save the lives of the people of Israel. His conviction that the family of Israel would return to the land of Canaan lays the groundwork for the account of the exodus that follows in the next book.

Immediate and Canonical Context

As the first book of the Bible, Genesis is key to understanding the rest of the Bible for its central theme is the adoption of Israel as God's people, a theme that plays out across the rest of Scripture. The book ends with the Israelites in Egypt, so preparing the way for the book of Exodus, in which the people leave Egypt and set out for the promised land. The account of their journey there occupies the next four books, which along with Genesis comprise the Pentateuch. There are some who argue for a Hexateuch as they wish to include the book of Joshua, with its account of the Israelite's entry into the promised land, with the other five books.

Theological Context

The interpretation of Genesis is often influenced by current theories on human origins and by philosophical currents. In this commentary, we adopt the historical-grammatical method, taking into account the contributions of other disciplines such as linguistics and archaeology. Our interpretation also relies on the understanding that Genesis was never intended to be a scientific treatise. It is a theologically oriented text that is key to understanding the great basic doctrines of Christianity, including the doctrines of God, creation, human nature, original sin, good and evil, redemption and restoration.

God the Creator

The book of Genesis presents God as the sole creator of all things and sovereign in the universe. He has no rival and there are no other gods besides him. It thus asserts a strong monotheism in contrast to the polytheism of the surrounding nations. It also asserts that reality consists of God and his creation. It follows that so-called 'natural laws' do not derive from nature itself but are God's laws inscribed *in* nature. God is the sole lawgiver in the physical and spiritual sphere. It also follows that those who disrespect or abuse created things are guilty of disrespect for the Creator.

Human Beings

Genesis reveals that the transcendent Creator is also immanent in that he cares about his creation and about the human beings whom he created in his own image. We are not simply the random results of evolutionary processes. The fact that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God means that every human being, regardless of their sex, ethnicity or other characteristics, should be treated with dignity and respect.

Genesis also teaches that humanity is essentially one. There is only one human race. The concept of race is foreign to the creation order and has no place in God's dealing with people.

God not only created human beings, he also created an environment in which they were intended to flourish and even delegated part of his role to human beings as he gave them authority over the earth. Human beings were thus made responsible for the earth ecologically, morally and socially. But

they exercise this authority under God, meaning that any laws that human beings put in place should be in conformity with God's will and should respect his creation, both human and material.

When people rebel against God and harm his good creation, God acts in judgment, but his good plan for them still includes their redemption, bringing them back into a good relationship with him. He accomplishes this through the victory of the woman's offspring, and specifically through one of Abraham's descendants.

God's Covenant

Genesis lays out the need for salvation and the foundations of God's plan of salvation (12:2-3). Given that a key element of this plan was God's covenant with Abraham and his biological and spiritual descendants, the plan involved making choices. So the stories in Genesis reveal a God who is constantly making sovereign choices as he selects individuals through whom he will work to accomplish his plan.

In Genesis, God's covenant with Abraham was not primarily about salvation but about his continued revelation to humankind. God is transcendent and therefore unapproachable, but when he created human beings, he condescended to make himself known to Adam (Gen 1-2). However, the relationship God intended to have with human beings failed because of sin (Gen 3-7; 11:1-9). Yet God did not give up on humanity (Gen 8-10). Just as he did with Adam, God restarted the process of building his relationship with human beings through Noah. The covenant with Abraham and his descendants therefore follows his initial plan. It was based solely on God's unconditional love for the man God has chosen from his family and clan. Through this covenant, God intended to bless not only Abraham and his descendants but also the rest of humanity. Thus, the concept of blessing is closely related to the making of the covenant. This is made clear in the rest of the OT with the adoption of Israel as God's own people.

Truth, Ethics and Obedience

Readers of the book of Genesis will be struck by how often the behaviour of the main characters is at odds with biblical ethics. Both Abraham and Isaac

lied about their relationships to their wives (12:11-13; 20:2; 26:7). Jacob and his mother Rebekah lied to deceive Isaac into blessing Jacob, so cheating Esau of his inheritance (27:1-40), Rachel lied to her father Laban (31:33-35) and Jacob resorted to dubious tactics in an attempt to increase his herds (20:37-43). Does this mean that the end justifies the means? Certainly not! Rather, we are reminded of the abundance of God's grace. He receives us as we are and seeks to change our characters so that we become like him.

When assessing the ethical behaviour of people in the Bible, there are two things that need to be borne in mind. First, the Bible records what historical individuals actually did. It does not say that God approved of their actions. Yes, these were people of God – but only by reason of his grace, not because they deserved this status. Second, these people had only a limited knowledge of the will of God. God was only just beginning to reveal himself to them. It would be many years before he gave the law to Moses, spelling out his will for almost all aspects of life. These individuals cannot be our examples in all areas, for they were still toddlers in their knowledge of God. They had never been given the Ten Commandments (Exod 20), nor had they heard the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). Thus we, who have a far fuller revelation of God's will through Jesus Christ, need to respond to the bad behaviour of people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Rachel as we would respond to toddlers who do something that we, as adults, know is wrong. We do not hold a toddler responsible in the same way we would an adult, nor do we think that their behaviour is a model for us to imitate. Rather, we acknowledge that what the child has done is wrong, and then we allow them to experience grace from us as we continue to train them in right and wrong. The end has never justified the means. God's grace works in imperfect people.

Having said that, we must remember that some of these patriarchs gave unquestioning obedience to the little they did know of the will of God. Abraham, for example, is called the father of those who believe (Gal 3:7, 9). He was even prepared to offer his long-awaited only son if that was what God commanded (ch. 22). We may have the advantage of knowing

more about God's ethical will, but we may know less than the patriarchs did about obedience.

Relevance to the New Testament

The election of Abraham and his descendants that began in Genesis culminates in Jesus Christ, who is the fullness of God's revelation. Through him God inaugurated a new covenant relationship with humanity (Rom 5:12-14). NT believers confess that they worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who were the ancestors of the Israelites (Acts 3:13; 7:8; Rom 4:1-24; Rom 9:9; Ga 3:7-9, 14; Heb 11:11). Through faith in Jesus, all believers are now children of Abraham, justified and blessed. As Christ's followers, when we read the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs in Genesis 12–50, we acknowledge that we are beneficiaries of a process that began a long time ago and confess that we worship the same God who has revealed himself to us through his son Jesus Christ.

To better understand the reasons behind God's persistent pursuit of humanity, we need to return to the very beginning of the book of Genesis. Indeed, the Christian understanding of God, human beings, sin, and God's plan for humanity derives its origins from the first three chapters of Genesis. These chapters are foundational to the entire Christian doctrine of creation, manhood and womanhood, marriage, sin and salvation, which is offered only through Jesus (Matt 19:1-6; Rom 1:18-28; 5:12-21).

Relevance to Africa

The creation and origin stories, institutions, daily activities and concerns described in Genesis are often similar to the stories, institutions, activities and concerns of people in Africa. African readers therefore come to the book of Genesis with a pre-understanding that facilitates its interpretation.

One key teaching of Genesis to which we in Africa need to relate is the unity of the human race. All human beings, regardless of the colour of their skin or their ethnicity, are descended from Adam and Eve. This understanding of our common humanity should compel every human being to treat other people with respect and uphold their dignity, rejecting racism and tribalism.

Genesis is also clear that every human being, whether male or female, is made in the image of God (1:26-27). It follows that men and women have equal dignity. Thus, the alleged subordination of women to men is not justified in the creation order, although as many instances in Genesis reveal, it has deep cultural and social roots. That is why Paul instructs believers to pay attention to social roles when these are relevant (e.g. 1 Tim 2:13). Genesis, does, however, support a differentiation between male and female. Any attempt to erase this distinction is unnatural.

The opening chapters of Genesis also set out the double mandate given to human beings to promote social culture and agriculture. Human beings must manage their environment and be accountable to the Creator for their stewardship. The many environmental disasters of our day should prompt us to revisit our original mandate and evaluate our stewardship of the environment before God. He has blessed Africa with vast natural resources; it is up to us to use them wisely and to safeguard our environment from pollution and abuse of all kinds.

In reminding us of our fallible creaturely state, Genesis also reminds us that we fulfil our purpose, our destiny, through having a deep faith in God expressed in full obedience to his will. God has a plan for our lives. The life of Abraham illustrates what it means to live a life of faith, trust and obedience despite many trials.

Genesis also calls on us to live with justice and integrity, for it teaches that God judges sin and distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked. However, it also teaches us much about forgiveness. The life of Joseph serves as an example of what it means to live with forgiveness motivated by an unwavering trust in God.

Finally, Genesis offers a message of hope. We see the difficulties endured by people like Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Jacob and Joseph, but we also see that God was with them, and working in their circumstances to bless them and work towards the fulfilment of his good plan for his people. Like them, we endure personal and communal suffering and live in a context where bad governance and corruption abound. But like them, we can trust that God is still at work for our good (Rom 8:28).

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COMMENTARY

Part 1

1:1-11:26 Yahweh and Abraham's Ancestors

The goal of the first major division of Genesis is to present God as the unique originator of all things, including human beings and their environment. It deals with the creation of heaven and earth and everything in them (1:1-2:3) and the specific creation of human beings (2:4-25), highlighting their special relationship with the Creator. It describes the harmony that characterized the beginning of creation: harmony between God and his creation and harmony among creatures. The remainder of this section (3:1-11:26) reveals how human beings fell into sin and how the initial harmony gave way to violence, divine punishment and the confusion of communication between humans. It also introduces the ancestors of Israel and specifically those of Abraham, the man who would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

The internal structure of chapters 1–11 is marked by repeated use of the *toledot* formula, 'This is the account of,' meaning 'here are the origins of' or 'here is the lineage of.' Early in the book we read 'this is the account [*toledot*] of the heavens and the earth' (2:4); followed by 'this is the written account of Adam's family line' (5:1); 'this is the account of Noah and his family' (6:9); 'this is the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons' (10:1); 'this is the account of Shem's family line' (11:10); and 'this is the account of Terah's family line' (11:27).

1:1-2:4 Creation

All cultures have their own creation myths. The Malian scholar Amadou Hampâté Bâ, for example, writes that the Mande peoples of Mali teach that Maa Ngala (God-Master) began by creating twenty beings, who comprised the whole universe. But he found that none of these creatures was suitable to become his *kuma-nyon*, or interlocutor. So he took a bit of each of them, mixed them together and created a hybrid being whom he named Maa, a name that incorporated the first word in the divine name. He then designed a special body for Maa, carefully designing it to represent the world in miniature. There are clear similarities and the differences between this

creation myth and the Genesis account. A key point is that this myth, like many others in Africa, assumes that there is a supreme God who created the universe.

The author of Genesis was not living in a cultural vacuum, but within an environment with shared knowledge and world-views. He would have been aware of the many creation myths in the surrounding cultures. Some commentators even claim that the cosmogony of Genesis 1 depends on, or is based on, a creation process identical to that of the Mesopotamian creation account known as Enuma Elish. Others speak of a prophetic appropriation or correction of the Mesopotamian myth by the author of Genesis. It is always difficult to tell to what extent one people borrowed from another, but what is clear is that there are major differences between the account of creation in Genesis and in the Enuma Elish.

First, the theology of Genesis is monotheistic, while that of Enuma Elish is clearly polytheistic. Second, in Genesis, Yahweh is uncreated and is the only creator, whereas in Enuma Elish the gods themselves are created by Apsu and Tiamat, who in turn were brought into existence by a 'creative force.' Third, in Enuma Elish, the pre-existence of matter is assumed. By contrast, in Genesis creation is the unique act of bringing into being what did not exist, and this by the instrumentality of God's sovereign and majestic 'let there be ...' (ch. 1; Heb 11:3). Fourth, in Enuma Elish the created gods fight among themselves for supremacy. However, the creation account in Genesis does not presuppose any primeval chaos or hostile monster opposed to Yahweh's creative plan. Thus, there is no creation battle in the book of Genesis. The monsters and the sea are all part of Yahweh's creation. Finally, in Genesis, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and vested with authority over the earth, whereas in Enuma Elish, human beings are created as slaves of the gods. The similarities that do exist between Genesis and Enuma Elish thus concern only non-essential features of creation.

1:1-2 Framework

Genesis opens with a solemn statement that summarizes God's creative act: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth* (1:1). The Hebrew verb translated 'create' is found fifty-four times in the OT, eleven of which are in Genesis (1:1, 21, 27; 2:3-4; 5:1; 6:7) and the rest spread from Exodus to Malachi (Deut 4:32; Ps 89:13, 48; 148:5; Isa 40:26, 28; 21:20; Jer 31:22; Amos 4:13; Mal 2:10). Except for Joshua 17:15 and 18, it always has God as its subject. Here it indicates that God brought into existence the heavens and the earth, which did not exist before the divine act. This simple statement is rich in implications. It establishes that the universe has a beginning and is not eternal; that God precedes the beginning; that God is alive, personal and intelligent; and that heaven and earth are not emanations of God but his creation.

The author then sets the scene by giving a description of the state of the earth during the first stage of its creation. He begins by saying that it was *formless and empty*, indicating that it lacked structure and contents (1:2a). The prophet Jeremiah makes a striking reference to these words when he uses them with reference to his vision of the desolation of the nation when God acts in judgment on sin; there is nothing left (Jer 4:23).

All was dark, but *the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters* (1:2b) like a protective eagle hovering over its brood and teaching them to fly (Deut 32:11). The words convey the nurturing care with which God forms this world.

Modern science comes to the same conclusion as Genesis: the oldest universe was without structure, but the present universe is richly organized in all dimensions. What happened between these two stages? This is what Genesis explains in the creation story (1:1-2:4).

1:3-2:4 The Days of Creation

The account of the six-day creation is organized so that the events of each day follow a seven-part pattern: (a) introduction: *God said*; (b) divine command: *Let there be X*; (c) what happened: *And there was X*; (d) divine appreciation: *God saw that it was good*; (e) divine naming: *God called*, (f) divine action: *God separated, God made, God created, God blessed*; (g) delimitation of time: *And there was evening, and there was morning* – the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth day (1:3-31).

On the first three days, God created the framework for life: light, sea, sky and dry ground. During the next three days, he returned to each element of this framework of life and gave it contents: the luminaries, aquatic creatures, flying creatures and earthly creatures. The human being is presented as the crowning glory of God's creative work. Creation culminates in God's rest.

1:3-5 Day one

The account of creation begins with a divine command reported in the form of a direct quotation, introduced by *God said* (1:3a). This formula is repeated nine times in the first chapter of Genesis (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 29). Then follows the divine command: *Let there be light* (1:3b). The imperative used here and in subsequent verses reveals a living God who speaks and gives orders. But God's words are more than just orders; they are creative and accomplish something, for it is through his word that the order is carried out: *and there was light* (1:3c). This understanding of the power of words is shared by many Africans when it comes to names, blessings and curses.

Some have asked how there could be light before there was a sun, for the sun was only created on the fourth day. The answer is that Scripture declares that God is light (Isa 10:17; 1 John 1:5). He does not need the sun to give light (see Rev

21:23). Moreover, it was he who created the sun and endowed it with the property of producing light. God separated light from darkness, so creating day and night (1:4).

There is considerable debate on how we are to understand the expression *there was evening, and there was morning – the first day* (1:5), specifically as regards the interpretation of a 'day.' The Hebrew word *yôm* translated as 'day' can be applied to a longer period of time, leading some commentators to see it as a literary device rather than a literal twenty-four hour period. Others argue that the expression 'there was evening, and there was morning' necessarily refers to a literal period of nightly rest from evening to morning (while also acknowledging that God does not need such rest – see Isa 40:28). What is more important than this controversy is recognizing that the account of creation reveals a methodical God who created different things one after another with a precise purpose. One by one the Lord puts in place all the elements necessary to sustain the human beings for whom he is creating this world.

1:6-8 Day two

On the second day, God performed a second creative act, commanding that there be a *vault* to separate the waters below from those above (1:6-7). The expression *And it was so* (1:7, 9, 11, 15, 24, 30) emphasizes the correspondence between God's command and its fulfilment. When God commands, things happen exactly as he commanded.

The Hebrew word translated *vault* in the NIV can also be translated as 'expanse' (ESV), 'dome' (CEV, NRSV), or 'firmament' (RSV, NKJV). Whichever term is used, it is this expanse that God called *sky* (1:8). The same Hebrew words translated 'sky' and 'vault' are also found in Psalm 19:1: 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.'

1:9-13 Day three

God did a double work on third day. By his word, he gathered the waters together in one place and allowed *dry ground* to appear (1:9). He then named this ground *land* and called the mass of waters *seas* (1:10). This word translated 'seas' does not necessarily refer to bodies of salt water but to any large body of water. The prophet Jonah referred to God's actions on this day when he affirmed that he worshipped 'the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land' (Jonah 1:9).

God had now set in place the three environments that support life: the sky, the sea and the land. His second work on the third day was the creation of the vegetation to cover the land: *seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds. And it was so* (1:11-13). The great variety of plants in this world is the work of God, and each bears its own unique seeds or fruit, as Jesus reminded us when he said, 'By their fruit you will

recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?’ (Matt 7:16).

1:14-19 Day four

On the fourth day, God created individualized bearers for the light that he had created. He thus created the great luminary (the sun), the small luminary (the moon), and the stars, which he placed in the celestial expanse and assigned the functions of illuminating the earth, distinguishing day from night, and serving as signs to mark festival seasons and the passage of the years (1:14-19). God was clearly anticipating the way human life would develop on earth over the course of history. These lights have continued to shine on both ‘the evil and the good’ across the centuries (Matt 5:45).

1:20-23 Day five

On day five God continued to populate the living environments of the waters and the sky. He created birds as well as innumerable creatures that live in the seas, including *the great creatures of the sea* (1:20-21). These are sometimes interpreted as ‘whales’ (KJV) or as ‘sea monsters’ (RSV) and the same word is used elsewhere in Scripture to refer to reptiles, like the snake into which Aaron’s staff was changed in Exod 7:9-12. Ezekiel used it when he described Pharaoh of Egypt as a great monster (Ezek 29:3; 32:2). In the ancient Near East, sea monsters were regarded as forces of chaos, powers that were hostile to God. But Genesis makes it clear that God created them and they are subordinate to him. More than that, he blessed them along with all else that he had created: *Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth* (1:22).

This is the first of many occurrences of the verb ‘bless’ in Genesis. Sometimes, these blessings are pronounced by human beings, in which case they are merely an expression of a human desire in the form of a prayer to God or the gods (e.g. 24:60; 31:55). The fulfilment of these desires is completely beyond human control. By contrast, God’s blessing is an action: God makes possible what he expresses in his blessing. Saying that *God blessed them* means that God endowed them with the properties and abilities necessary to accomplish what he wanted them to do. The God who created all animals, from the great to the small, from the flying to the crawling, endowed them with fertility so that they were capable of filling the seas and multiplying on the earth.

Again there was evening and morning (1:23).

1:24-31 Day six

God had commanded the earth to produce vegetation on the third day, and on the sixth day he commanded the land to *produce living creatures* (1:24). The greenery that would be their food had logically preceded them on the earth. So *God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along*

the ground according to their kinds (1:25). The word translated ‘kinds’ has a broader scope than our modern term ‘species.’ It refers to groups of plants and animals that can cross-pollinate or mate with each other, so ensuring that they can reproduce. The distinction of animals according to their kinds would later also serve a religious function, making it possible to ‘distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten’ (Lev 11:47).

God created all kinds of life on earth, including the rich fauna and flora of Africa, and we should value them as his creation and work to create the conditions in which they can survive. Then his creation of life culminated in the creation of human beings. This statement on its own should be enough to establish that no human group is superior to another. He created all of us, and it follows that there is no place for racism, ethnocentrism and tribalism.

A number of features of the account of the creation of human beings make it clear that there are radical differences between them and other creatures. First, while the other acts of creation begin with imperatives such as ‘Let there be . . .’, ‘Let the water . . .’, ‘Let the land . . .’, God introduces the creation of human beings with a solemn formula: *Let us make mankind* (1:26a). The plural ‘us’ has been the subject of various interpretations. Some see it as a vestige of polytheism, others as the association of angels with creation. Both these views are untenable in view of the absolute monotheism of Genesis. But the interpretation becomes clear in the light of the prologue to John’s Gospel: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made’ (John 1:1-3). The beloved Son of God is described by Paul as ‘the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together’ (Col 1:15-17). When we combine this with the reference to the role of the Spirit of God in creation (1:2), we can conclude that creation is the work of the triune God and therefore the plural ‘let us’ reflects God’s triune nature.

God’s next words are even more crucial for our understanding of human nature: *in our image, in our likeness* (1:26b). But what does it mean to say that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God? The multiplicity of answers to this question testifies to the difficulty of defining what elements of human nature are being referred to. It certainly includes the ability to enter into relationships, to love, know, be creative, feel, think, plan, communicate complex ideas and seek to fulfil one’s destiny. But regardless of which specific features we focus on, there can be no denying that being created in the image and likeness of God gives us a unique

dignity. We are not the product of chance but part of the realization of a divine plan. We are also called to love, serve and glorify the Creator because, just as the money that bears the image of Caesar belongs to Caesar and must be returned to him (Mark 12:13-17), so human beings who bear the image of God belong to God and must be returned to him.

This unique relationship to God establishes the pre-eminence of human beings over the rest of creation. It also establishes that we are not to murder (9:6) or curse our fellow human beings (9:6; Jas 3:9-10). Human life is sacred and inviolable because every human being is created in the image and likeness of God. This too undermines racism and ethnocentrism and lays a secure foundation for human rights.

In our world, which has been scarred by sin, we do not always see God's image clearly. But believers in Christ, who is 'the image of the invisible God,' will enjoy the privilege of seeing full restoration of that image as they are 'conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters' (Rom 8:29).

God also set out a specific task for humanity. He created them to *rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground* (1:26c). This covers all creatures, whether aquatic animals, land animals or flying animals. The mandate given to human beings was the wise management of other creatures. The God who rules over all things has delegated some of his power to those he created in his image and likeness. It is, however, worth noting that this God-given authority extended only to living creatures, not to their fellow human beings. Our fellow human beings bear the image of the Creator, and thus are not to be dominated but served (John 13:13-14; Gal 5:13; Eph 5:21).

The same truth applies to relations between the sexes. Men were not given authority to dominate women (and vice versa). All that has been said above applies to both men and women (1:27). Both are created in the image of God, with equal dignity and responsibility. The status of both is reinforced by the threefold repetition of the verb 'created' in this verse. Sexism, that is, segregation on the basis of sex that leads to the disregard of women, is an attack on this principle. However, it must also be noted that this verse also affirms the principle of gender distinction. The only creation difference within the human species is that of biological gender, or sex. Any attempt to blur the distinction between men and women contradicts this principle.

Another key difference between human beings and all other creatures appears in 1:28a. There God's blessing and his command *to be fruitful and increase in number* is identical to the command given to all other creatures (1:22). But whereas God merely told the other creatures in general what to do, the wording in 1:28 is specific: God *said to them*. Human beings are in a relationship with God in which God speaks to them.

In speaking to human beings, God did not only bless them and tell them to multiply like all other creatures, he also commanded them to *subdue* the earth and rule over other living creatures (1:28b; see 1:26). God renewed this blessing for Noah and his sons (9:1, 7). This mission was not a heavy burden but a gift from God. Human beings were to occupy and enjoy, not fear, creation. This mission indicates that the first way in which all of us can glorify and serve God is by caring for his creation.

The Creator God also decided sovereignly on the diet of humans and animals. Human beings were told that they could eat all seed-bearing plants and all fruit (1:29), while animals could eat *every green plant* (1:30). These words do not necessarily imply that humans were meant to be vegetarian. Later on, God himself would instruct the Israelites to eat the meat of the sacrifices they were to offer to him. But it is true that, directly or indirectly, human beings as well as animals depend on vegetation for their sustenance (see 9:3-4).

The sixth day ends with a superlative appreciation of all that God had done during the six days: God saw all that he had done: *it was very good* (1:31). The divine goal had been achieved and God expressed his satisfaction at a job well done.

God may have viewed his creation as good because it breathed order. Each element was created at the appropriate time and occupied the place which allowed for the harmony of the whole. It was also filled with rich diversity. God created different species within each vegetable and animal family, each 'according to their kinds' (1:11, 12, 21, 24). Each kind was told to multiply (1:11, 20-22, 28). Finally, his creation was full of meaning, for it served the purpose of bringing pleasure to God and to those beings he had created in his image. We who are in the image of God should imitate his creation in what we create. Thus, for example, we should build a church in Africa that is a place of order, of diversity, of sharing, of meaning rediscovered and of celebration (Matt 28:19; 1 Cor 12:4-27).

2:1-4 Day seven

The chapter division in our Bibles means that we miss the author's careful use of an 'inclusio' or envelope structure for his account of creation. Its opening words, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (1:1) are paralleled by the closing phrase, *Thus the heavens and the earth were completed* (2:1a).

A descriptive phrase is also added 2:1b as the author speaks of *all their vast array*, referring to all the beings that fill heaven and earth. The Levites echoed this verse when they praised God saying, 'You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you' (Neh 9:6). In the context of Genesis 1,

the 'vast array' or 'host' (ESV) refers not only to the sun, the moon and the many stars that God had arranged in the sky like an army, but also to the earth and the seas and all that they contain.

A few English translations like the CEB follow the ancient Greek translation known as the Septuagint and report that God finished his work on the sixth day. The purpose of this reading seems to be to avoid any suggestion that God was still working on the seventh day, and only finished his work on that day. However, the NIV avoids any possibility of that interpretation with its translation, *by the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing* (2:2). Having finished, God *rested from all his work*. After the daily period of rest between evening and morning, God brought his work of creation to a complete end and stopped creating new things.

God's rest does not imply fatigue on his part, as the prophet Isaiah points out: 'The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom' (Isa 40:28). Rather, the mention of rest is part of a divine lesson on work that is included in the entire narrative of the creation week. It is as if God is saying, 'Do as I, your Creator, do. Work for six days of the week. Rest each day between evening and morning. Don't do any work on the seventh day; take that whole day to rest from all the work you were doing on the previous six days.' To drive this point home, *God blessed the seventh day and made it holy* (2:3a; see also Exod 20:11). His rest on the seventh day is the foundation of the Sabbath rest and the right of every worker to daily and weekly rests. Such rest is indeed a blessing!

The words, *This is the account of* in (2:4a) represent the first use of the *toledot* formula, which is found thirty-nine times in the OT, including thirteen times in Genesis (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1, 32; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 13, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2). It marks off sections of the text and can refer to what precedes it or what follows it. Here, it indicates that the account of the creation of *the heavens and the earth* has been concluded. However, in the second part of the verse the same information is repeated, but the order of the words is changed to *the earth and the heavens*. The change indicates that the focus from now on will be on what happens on earth, for from 2:5 on the narrative deals mainly with the creation of the man and woman and their environment.

Another expression that is used here for the first time is *the LORD God* (*yhwh 'ēlohîm*). This combination is found forty times in the OT, half of them in Genesis 2 and 3. However, the four letters forming the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) represent by far the most common form of the name of God in the OT. It appears 6828 times in the Hebrew Bible, 165 of which are in Genesis. However, readers may not recognize this because in modern Bibles the name is almost always transcribed as LORD, using small capitals. This translation reflects the Jewish belief that the name of God was too sacred to be spoken.

Yet this translation seems to obscure the point that Yahweh is God's personal and covenant name, and as such reminds us of who God is – that he is a person. So in this commentary, the name Yahweh will often be used when referring to God.

No one today knows exactly how to pronounce this name, because the Hebrew original did not include vowels. In the past, it was sometimes translated as Jehovah, but today it is more commonly written as Yahweh. Its exact meaning is obscure.

2:5-3:24 Eden and the Fall

After having told how the heavens and the earth were created, the biblical writer now retells the story, this time zooming in on the creation of human beings and the start of human history, and where things went wrong. He also establishes a second vital element in human identity: not only are we made in the image of God, but we are also made to live in community. It is in community that we manifest the image of God. That is why God created the first human relationship, establishing a community as an example for us to follow.

2:5-25 The Garden of Eden

Chapter 2 goes into far more detail about God's creation of the man whom he put in the garden of Eden that he had specially planted for him (2:7-9). God then gave him instructions (2:16-17), assigned him his first task (2:19), and created the woman and brought her to the man (2:20-22). The intensity of activity on this sixth day shows that it is the culmination of God's creative act.

The author begins by setting the scene: *Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground* (2:5). Readers may wonder how the absence of plants can be reconciled with the earlier account of God's creating vegetation on the third day (1:11-12). The problem is solved when we recognize that chapter 1 deals with the creation of the whole world, whereas chapter 2 focuses on conditions in one particular place, the garden of Eden. In other words, here the words 'earth' and 'ground' refer to the land and soil that will be occupied by the garden of Eden. This argument is strongly supported by the context, which speaks of God specifically planting a garden (2:8) to accommodate the human being he had made and filling it with trees (2:9). This was the place prepared for those who would be created to 'work the ground' (see 2:15).

Here, we are also given more details of God's creation of human beings, which was described in broad terms in 1:26-30. First, he *formed a man*, not out of nothing but out of *the dust of the ground* (2:7a). Divine omnipotence and intelligence shape this dust into a body that the psalmist rightly describes as 'wonderfully made' with every part just where God wanted it to be (Ps 139:14; 1 Cor 12:18).

Science is unable to tell us the origin of life, but the Bible tells us that it comes from the living God, who has power over life and death (Deut 32:39; Neh 9:6; 1 Tim 6:13). Life was in the creative Word that was with God at the beginning of creation (John 1:4) and infused life into his creation (1:20, 24, 30; 2:7, 19). Yet while all life comes from God, not all life is the same. It is only in the record of the creation of human life that we read that God *breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being* (2:7b). The apostle Paul referred to this verse when he contrasted Adam and Christ, saying that ‘the first man Adam became a living being’ whereas Jesus, the second ‘Adam’ became ‘a life-giving spirit’ (1 Cor 15:45).

God’s loving care for those he created is evidenced by his planting *a garden*, not just for his own enjoyment or because he needed a place for himself but as a place where human beings could thrive (2:8a). The ancient Greek translation of the OT known as the Septuagint translated the word ‘garden’ using the word ‘paradise,’ which is why Eden is also sometimes called ‘the earthly paradise.’ In 2:10, the garden is given the specific name of *Eden*, a word that may mean ‘delight, pleasant, luxurious’ (Ps 36:8). The prophet Isaiah speaks of Eden as ‘the garden of the LORD,’ a place of joy and gladness, praise and singing (Isa 51:3; see also Ezek 28:13; 31:9). The prophet Joel compared his country to the garden of Eden, but warned that it would become a desert, a place of devastation after God’s judgment (Joel 2:3). Thus, the idea

CHRISTIANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Africans have long seen connections between the created world and human life. Our traditional belief that created objects harbour a vital life imposed responsibility on individuals and communities to respect sacred objects, species and spaces, including forests, rivers, mountains, rocks, trees and animals. Africans knew that their survival and well-being depended on their proper relation to their environment. We understood that the spheres of the physical and the spiritual can meet in a healthy way.

Today, however, most African villages and cities are littered with trash. Despite the efforts of heroes like Prof. Wangari Maathai (who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work), there is widespread environmental degradation. Deforestation is exacerbated by the fact that millions of households use firewood as their primary source of energy. In Kenya, for example, households are estimated to burn about 5.6 million trees daily. Efforts to ensure a sustainable continent for coming generations have been neglected, and Africans rate environmental issues last in a list of social issues that need to be addressed.

It is clearly high time that Christians and the church in Africa grasp the importance of the environmental mandate in the Scriptures. In Genesis, God creates human beings ‘so that they may rule’ over his creation (Gen 1:26). Many have interpreted ‘rule’ (or ‘dominion’) as allowing us to manipulate creation for our own short-sighted reasons. But Genesis 2:15 reminds us that God primarily expects us to take care of creation. We are to be God’s stewards, taking care of the environment for the good of the created order, including animals, birds and fish as well as human needs. This responsibility applies whether we are farming, fishing, mining, or working in energy generation, engineering, construction, trade or medicine.

Humanity’s fall in Genesis 3 disrupted earth’s harmonious order and led to the reality of a groaning creation awaiting redemption. Paul’s words in Romans 8:18-22 reminds us that although we tend to think of Christ’s work of reconciliation

in terms of our personal reality, the NT has a bigger vision for the creation and cosmos. God’s plans include the liberation of creation. Note how often the apostles speak of ‘heaven and earth’ or ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (Eph 1:10; Col 1:16-20; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1-4). Whereas some advocates for the environment focus on the purely practical purpose of ensuring the sustainability of life, Christians have an additional reason for supporting them in their work – our redemption is tied up with the redemption of the earth. It is part of what we are praying for when we say, ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt 6:10). As Africans we understand the close ties between the physical and the spiritual. Yet too often African Christians live as if their spiritual life is disconnected from the physical details of their day-to-day lives. We need to be reminded that biblical Christianity not only reconciles us to God but also brings healing, mending of relationships, and wisdom in decision-making and in utilizing God’s good gifts around us.

As Christians, we need to proclaim the value of maintaining the ecological balance that should exist between human beings and nature. Failure to do so would be catastrophic for human life. We must also teach our children to have reverence for nature, not worshipping it but caring for it and helping to sustain it for our own survival. We must encourage people and businesses to focus on sustainable energy use that does not degrade the environment – moving from burning firewood to making more use of renewable sources like solar and wind energy. We must encourage a healthy view of money and balance consumption with sustainable practices such as proper waste disposal, recycling and the erection of ‘green’ buildings. We must also advocate for the conservation of the flora and fauna that God has created. Our authority for doing this stems from God who is our sovereign, our sustainer and our redeemer.

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of the garden of Eden may be more a theological pointer to a place where God dwells, a sort of sanctuary, than to a specific piece of land (see also Ezek 47:1-12).

We do now know where the garden was located; all we are told is that was *in the east* (2:8b), that is, in the direction from which the sun rises. On the basis of 2:10-14, some believe that it was located in Mesopotamia, between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. However, one cannot be dogmatic on this point (see below).

The garden was filled with all kinds of *trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food* (2:9a), and at its heart were two unique trees, whose placement reflected their importance for human life. The first was the *tree of life* (2:9b). It appears that this was a tree God had invested with the property of maintaining and prolonging life (3:22, 24; see Prov 3:13-18), although it could not bestow life since life is a gift from God. A similar concept of a tree that is the source of longevity is found in some ancient Near East texts. We do not know whether Adam and Eve were allowed to eat the fruit of this tree while they were in the garden. It is certainly presented as being in a different category to the other trees that were 'good for food.'

After Adam and Eve's disobedience, they were cut off from access to the tree of life, which is never mentioned again until the book of Revelation, where it appears four times, not in a garden but in a city. In Revelation, Christ promises those who overcome that they will be given 'the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God' – the latter being the Greek translation of 'the garden of God' (Rev 2:7; see also 22:2, 14). The final setting for this tree is in the new Jerusalem: 'On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations' (Rev 22:2).

The second unique tree in the garden was *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* (2:9c), which will be discussed at 2:16-17.

In 2:6 it was said that the garden was watered by streams that came up from the earth rather than by rain. In 2:10-14, we are also told that it was also watered by a *river*. We are not given the name of this river but are told the names of its four branches. In the ancient Greek translation known as the Septuagint, the names of two of these rivers were translated using the names of well-known rivers, the *Tigris* and the *Euphrates*. However, in Hebrew the river's names are given as Pishon, Gihon, Hiddekel and Perate. If we use these names, we will be less prone to making ideology the basis for our identification of the location of the garden of Eden. Nor is there any point in the fierce debates about whether Eden was in Africa or in the Middle East, for the issue can never be resolved, especially as the flood of Noah's time would have erased all evidence of it. It is futile to look for the location of Eden. All that is clear is that it was fertile and well watered.

Having described the garden the author returns to the point he made in 2:8, but this time he gives the reason why God placed the man in the garden: *to work it and take care of it* (2:15). This place was created specifically for a human being and a human being was needed to cultivate it. It is significant that God created a paradise for the man, but still expected him to do work in it – for the Hebrew word translated 'work' also means to 'serve,' to 'be someone's slave.' God made the earth to be a habitat for human beings and assigned human being the specific task of caring for this habitat. From the beginning, human beings have been called to work like God, in whose image they are made. Laziness is therefore unacceptable to God. So is the overexploitation and destruction of the earth that humans are engaged in today, both of which are contrary to the original mandate given to human beings by their Creator.

Human beings were generously allowed to eat the fruit of any of the trees in the garden except one: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:16-17). This knowledge could refer to the ability to discern and discriminate between good and bad, the capability to make moral or aesthetic judgments, or the opportunity to access knowledge reserved to God alone. However, none of these explanations is fully satisfactory. The issue seems to be the prohibition itself rather than the properties of the tree. The prohibition was reinforced by a clear statement of the consequences of disobedience: *for when you eat from it you will certainly die*. The Hebrew text is very emphatic on this point (see comments on 5:5).

This command reminds us of two key attributes of God. First, he is a personal God with a will that he can impose on another personal being. Second, as the creator he has the right to give orders to his creatures and to determine what is good or right and what is bad or wrong. We should not restrict this just to specific actions. 'Good and evil' represent the totality of moral reality, embracing all moral and ethical categories. The only appropriate human response is to listen to God's command and obey it.

We now come to the only negative assessment in the creation story: *It is not good for the man to be alone* (2:18a). Loneliness contradicts the vocation of humanity. From the very beginning, a human being is a being-in-relationship. Human life reaches its fullness only in community, for no one is an island, and each of us must live as a neighbour to our neighbour.

God accordingly created a *helper* (*êzèr*) for the man (2:18b). This term is sometimes used to suggest that women are subordinate to men and only suited to helping their husband. Those who argue like this may be surprised to learn that in the Bible God is often the one who is described as a helper. He is the helper (*êzèr*) of his people and of those who trust in him (Exod 18:4; Ps 121:1-2). This meaning is reflected in the name Ebenezer, which commemorates God's help to his people (1 Sam 7:12). A helper is someone who renders a

DANIEL

The book of Daniel bears testimony to the faith and courage of Daniel and his three friends, who were forcibly removed from their homes in Jerusalem and carried off to Babylon, hundreds of kilometres away. These four young men showed remarkable courage, faith and perseverance as they refused to succumb to the temptations of a foreign culture. Despite their refusal to conform, Daniel rose to prominence in Babylon. The story encourages believers to remain faithful to God despite hardship and persecution and to be responsible citizens wherever they are.

The book of Daniel also looks beyond the immediate situation (chs. 1–6) and points to God’s ultimate victory in the course of history (chs. 7–12). It ties together the history of the Jews and of the Gentiles from the seventh century before Christ until the end of all human history and governments – when ‘the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah’ (Rev 11:15). Its detailed prophecies concerning God’s programme (7:17–18, 21–22) give us a preview of how the Messiah’s kingdom will end the world powers and help us to interpret the book of Revelation.

Historical Context

Author and Date

Chapters 7–12 of this book are written using first person pronouns (I, me, my) and the author clearly identifies himself as Daniel (see 7:2, 28; 8:1–2; 9:2; 10:1–2; 12:4). Jesus himself refers to Daniel as the author when he quotes the prophecy in 12:22 (Matt 24:15). Ancient Jewish tradition also supports this attribution of the book as evidenced by the testimony of Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian.

However, in chapters 1–6 and in 7:1–2, Daniel is spoken of using third person pronouns (he, him, his) and so some commentators argue that someone else must have written these chapters. However, it is possible for an author to write about himself in the third person, as the apostle Paul does in 2 Corinthians 12:1–4.

If Daniel is the author, the book must have been written in the sixth century BC. However, there are some who claim that the second half, at least, must

have been written much later, in about the second century BC. They base this assertion on the accuracy of the predictions regarding the reign of Alexander the Great and suggest that a historian pretending to be Daniel must have written the second half at a time closer to those events. But to refuse to accept predictive elements in Scripture is not only to deny the Bible but also to question the existence of an all-knowing personal God who has power both to predict and reveal minute details of future events. According to the Yoruba of Nigeria, the priests of their gods can foretell the future and reveal secrets. It is, therefore, not incredible that the Most High God could reveal past, present and future secrets to his servants as he did to Daniel.

We are not sure of exactly when the book of Daniel was written, but the chronology of the book is as follows:

- 605 BC – Nebuchadnezzar subdues Jerusalem. Daniel is among the more than three thousand Jews deported to Babylon (1:1; see 2 Kgs 24:1–2; Jer 52:28).
- 597 BC – Second batch of deportees, including the prophet Ezekiel, are taken to Babylon (2 Kgs 24:8–15; Jer 52:29; Ezek 1:1–3; Dan 1:1).
- 586 BC – Judah falls and Jerusalem is destroyed. A third batch of Jews are deported (Jer 52:30).
- 539 BC – Babylon captured by a coalition of Medes and Persians (Dan 5:25–31).
- 538 BC – The exiles are permitted to return to Judah by a decree of Cyrus, king of Persia (Ezra 1:1; Isa 44:24–45:7). By this time Daniel would have been eighty-four years old, and probably too old to travel.
- 536 BC – End of Daniel’s seventy years of prophetic ministry (Dan 10:1; 12:4, 13).

Recipients and Purpose

From 605 to around 535 BC, the Jews were scattered across first the Babylonian and then the Persian Empire. Many were living as exiles in foreign lands, and all were subject to a foreign ruler and a foreign administration. Living under such circumstances engenders humiliation, frustration and suffering.

So the book seeks to encourage the Jews who were uprooted, persecuted or tempted to give up by describing how Daniel and his friends endured trials and persecutions because of their obedience to God. It illustrates the power of faith and resilience while living in a hostile environment and facing persecution. Moreover, the book highlights the faithfulness of the God of Daniel and his sovereignty in human history and in the lives of individuals.

Literary Context

Genre and Style

The book of Daniel is a blend of narrative and apocalyptic genres. The narrative section recounts the stories of Daniel and his three friends in the imperial court in Babylon (Dan 1–6). Other court stories in the OT involve Joseph (Gen 39–41) and Esther/Mordecai (Esth 1–10). The second section of the book of Daniel is mostly apocalyptic. This genre of literature is based on revelations usually mediated by an angel to a human agent. It projects readers in the future as it discloses the events to come from the perspective of God's final salvation for his people. In Daniel, prophecy and apocalyptic merge to create a unique style (see 8:23–25; 11:3–45). Like other apocalyptic writings, the book is meant to provide comfort and encouragement to God's people in difficult times.

Structure and Literary Flow

The book was originally written in two languages. Chapters 1:1–2:4a and chapters 8–12 were written in Hebrew, the language of God's covenant people, Israel. The message of these later chapters is largely apocalyptic, showing God's future plan for his people. Chapters 2:4b–7:28 were written in Aramaic, the lingua franca of the Gentile world in Daniel's day. The message of these chapters (barring chapter 7) is largely historical, showing God's dealing with Gentile empires.

Despite the change in language, the book is still a unity. The great human image of chapter 2 (Hebrew) closely parallels the vision of the four beasts of chapter 7 (Aramaic). The contrast between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of this world runs through the whole book. His kingdom is said to be eternal four times in the first half (2:44; 4:3, 34; 6:26)

and three times in the second half (7:14, 18, 27). But the most powerful unifying factor is Daniel himself: he is the interpreter of dreams in the first half and the dreamer in the second.

Immediate and Canonical Contexts

The book of Daniel is the last and shortest of the writings of the group known as the Major Prophets (see Introduction to the Prophetic Books). In Christian Bibles, it is positioned after the long book of his contemporary Ezekiel, and is followed by the book of Hosea, the first of the so-called Minor Prophets. However, in the Hebrew Bible it is not placed among the Prophets but in the Writings, where it is grouped with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which also include portions in Aramaic and deal with later events in Jewish history.

Theological Context

The Sovereignty of God

Sometimes when we look at history it feels as if its course is as erratic as the route of a ship with a drunken pilot. But the OT prophets had a very different perspective, one that is well summed up by Stan Rougier, a French priest: 'God writes straight with curved lines.' The prophets knew that whatever happened, God was still sovereign over Israel and the nations (see Amos 1–2; Isa 13–23; 41–42; Jer 46–51). The book of Daniel thus offers us a profound theology of history. It repeatedly shows, both implicitly and explicitly, that the God of heaven, the Most High, is the one who 'changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others . . . He is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes' (2:21; 4:17; see also 1:2; 2:28; 4:25; 5:26 and 7:26). His rule is right and just and eternal (4:17; 7:14). Despite the opposition of world empires to his rule and the persecution inflicted on his people, his kingdom will last forever (7:15–27). Truly, he is the God of history.

Not only is God the God of the history of nations, he is also the God of individuals, as is clearly demonstrated in the lives of Daniel and his three friends (1:1–21; 2:46–49; 3:19–30; 6:1–23). Their lives glorified God in ways they would never have anticipated, for as the songwriter Noël Colombier, says God 'leads us where he wants by winding paths.'

The Faithfulness of Believers

The book of Daniel makes it clear that God does not systematically remove ungodly leaders. Sometimes he allows them to thrive, and even to persecute his people. In such times, when scriptural values clash with societal values, Daniel and his three companions stand as an example for believers to imitate. Like them, we should adopt a holy and righteous lifestyle that reflects our faith in a powerful and holy God. They also show us that it is possible for faithful believers to serve with distinction under ungodly regimes without compromising their convictions.

Relevance to the New Testament

The book of Daniel is seldom quoted by the writers of the NT. In the Gospels, the few allusions to Daniel are put on the lips of Jesus himself. He drew on Daniel's vision of a 'son of man' (Dan 7:13) when he referred to himself as the Son of Man (Matt 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27; see also Acts 7:56). Thus, he portrays himself as the one who will someday put an end to all human powers and establish everlasting dominion.

Jesus also explicitly referenced Daniel when he warned about 'the abomination that causes desolation' (Matt 24:15; Mark 13:14; see Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11; see 8:11). Many interpreters relate this prophecy to the desecration of the temple by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century before Christ, or to similar events in the first century AD.

Scholars are divided about the extent to which the writer of the book of Revelation was influenced by the book of Daniel. Certainly, Revelation references the vision of a son of man in Daniel 7:13 (see Rev 1:7, 13; 14:14) and sometimes draws on language and imagery derived from Daniel. For example, Revelation 1:1 and Daniel 2:28-29 both speak of a revelation of what is to come, and the various descriptions of Christ and the rewards he offers to the faithful in Revelation 1:9-3:22 have some parallels with the contents of Daniel 10:2-12:4. The strange beast that rises out of the sea in Revelation 13:1-10 shares some of the features of the four beasts of Daniel 7:1-14.

Popular Christian interpretations of the end times tend to draw heavily on the book of Daniel, especially regarding the succession of world powers. But it is important to note that the writers of the Gospels

and of Revelation draw on the book of Daniel mostly with regard to the coming of the kingdom of Christ. Their main concern is not to link the prophecies of Daniel 11 with specific empires and individuals but to testify to the eschatological realization of the kingdom of Christ. Believers are encouraged to be wise and ready to endure suffering as they wait for the final victory of their Saviour and King (Rev 13:11-18; 19:11-21; see also 1 Pet 4:12-16).

Relevance to Africa

Change is possible in Africa, one person at a time. It took the courage of Daniel and his friends to shake the politics of a powerful empire. Their acts of resistance in the face of a colonial power were rooted in the conviction that the God they served, though apparently hidden, was the sovereign God who ultimately runs the world. No matter how terrible the despotic regimes that Africa has endured, God has not relinquished his ultimate rule over human affairs. We should never despair of the prospect of his intervention.

Faithfulness to God is possible, one hurdle at a time. Neither the lure of the dominant culture nor the threats of the empire could deter the resolve of Daniel and his friends to remain faithful to God. They put God first. In parts of Africa where being a follower of Christ is risky, believers may take comfort in the track record of Daniel and his friends and entrust their own lives to God who will reward their faithfulness in due time.

Integrity is possible in Africa, one person at a time. In a context of rampant despotism and nepotism, Christians in Africa can serve God with the utmost moral excellence as demonstrated by Daniel. He offers the church in Africa a model of integrity that is desperately needed today. We need men and women of stalwart character and faith like Daniel and his friends who can resist colonial ideologies that seek to rob Africans of their identity and dignity. The Babylonian system deliberately set out to alienate Daniel and his friends from their roots: they were given a foreign education and their names, diet, and clothing were all changed. It took faith and courage to resist and reverse the alienation process.

The Akan of Ghana have a symbol that depicts a bird flying with an egg in its beak, its legs facing forward while its head is turned backward. It

represents the concept of *sankofa* which means to go back, search and take. Strikingly, this is what Daniel himself did. He went back and searched the Scriptures as he sought to understand the future of his people (Dan 9:1-3). We in Africa do not need to interpret *sankofa* as a call to return to our ancestral religions, which have not helped the African peoples. Rather, the concept calls us to return the creator who revealed himself through his Son, the one who will ultimately defeat the beast and its acolytes (Heb 1:1-4; Rev 19:11-21).

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COMMENTARY

1:1-21 Tough Times Don't Last, Tough People Do

Africa has been variously described as 'a retarded continent' by Ali Mazrui; 'a lost continent' by the World Bank; 'a hopeless continent' by *Time* magazine; and 'a bleeding continent' by former President Moi of Kenya. Africans of the twentieth

century had to fight to regain their human dignity and reassert their identity after ruthless deportation, an inhuman global slave trade, cultural dislocation, and forceful occupation by foreign colonial powers. It was a tough century.

The twenty-first century does not look promising either. Africa's problems include pandemics, climate change, disputes over land tenure, corruption, and the rise of militant Islamists. Over twenty-five per cent of the world's seventy million refugees are Africans. Many of them are Christians. It is no wonder that the story of Daniel and his three friends, who as teenagers knew what it was to be exiles subjected to forced removals, speaks to us as an example of how to triumph in trials and endure through hard times.

1:1-7 Captivity

Daniel begins with history: the capture of Judah's capital city, Jerusalem, by the superpower of his day, the Babylonian Empire under the leadership of its king, Nebuchadnezzar. This took place in the *third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah* in approximately 605 BC (1:1).

The moral apostasy and idolatry of the ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel had already led to their fall to the Assyrians in 722 BC (1 Kgs 11:5; 12:28; 16:31; 18:19; 2 Kgs 21:3-5; 2 Chr 28:2-3). The Lord had warned Judah, the southern kingdom, that it faced a similar fate. Jeremiah lamented: 'Judah's sin is engraved with an iron tool . . . their children remember their altars . . . I will enslave you to your enemies' (Jer 17:1-4). Later, Jeremiah named Nebuchadnezzar as the enemy into whose hand the Lord would deliver his people, saying they would be captives for seventy years (Jer 25:8-11). Daniel had no doubt that the fall of Judah represented divine judgment: *And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God* (1:2; see 2 Kgs 24:1-2; 2 Chr 36:5-7).

Jehoiakim himself remained in Jerusalem as a vassal (or slave) king to Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs 24:1), but a large number of the Jewish upper classes (Jer 52:28) were deported to Babylon. Eight years later, another large group of Jews were deported, including King Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim, and the prophet Ezekiel (2 Kgs 24:8-15; Jer 52:29; Ezek 1:1). The third and final deportation, together with the destruction of Jerusalem itself, took place in 586 BC during the reign of King Zedekiah (2 Kgs 25:1-12; 2 Chr 36:20).

When the deportees arrived in Babylon, the best of the Jewish exiles were selected for training to serve in the king's palace. The standard was high: Their parents must be either royal or members of the nobility; physically, they must be young and without any blemishes; politically they must be well informed, diplomatic and wise; and publicly they must be handsome, teachable and persuasive. They were to study *the language and literature of the Babylonians* for three rigorous years, while living at the king's court and eating his food

(1:3-5). Moses went through a similar programme in the court of Pharaoh (Acts 7:22).

We are not immediately told why the four Hebrew lads, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, are specifically mentioned (1:6). But what we are told is that their captors immediately began a process of depersonalization, starting by changing their names. To Semitic people, names are not merely labels. Just as African names connect Africans with their ancestors, their tribal values and collective destiny, so do those of Hebrews. *Daniel* means 'God is my judge.' *Hananiah* means 'whom Jehovah has favoured.' *Mishael* is a question: 'Who is what God is?', and *Azariah* means 'Yahweh has helped.' These young men must have been raised in godly Judean homes. Daniel may even have been a descendant of King Hezekiah, a God-fearing king (see 2 Kgs 20:17-19; Isa 39:6-7).

In order to disconnect them from their ancestors, their covenant relationship with Jehovah, and their collective destiny as a people, Ashpenaz gave them names derived from Babylonian deities (1:7). *Belteshazzar* means 'Bel's prince,' after Bel, the patron god of Babylon (Isa 46:1; Jer 51:44). *Shadrach* means 'inspired by the sun-god, Aku.' *Meshach* means 'who can be compared to Shak?' the name under which the Babylonians worshipped the goddess Venus. *Abednego* means 'servant of the shining fire,' an allusion to the fire god or a corruption of the name Nebo.

Africans, too, have had their names changed. Some have been given names or have taken names from their colonial masters. Others have been forced to drop their African names upon their conversion to Christianity (or Islam) and replace them with so-called 'Christian' names, which are nothing more than European names. Recently, however, some Christians whose family names have a connection with traditional deities have been replacing them with titles like 'Oluwa,' which means 'Lord' or simply 'Jesus.' Daniel and his friends had no choice about their names, and both sets of names are used interchangeably in the book. However, where they had a choice, and where it mattered most, they chose for the Lord, Yahweh.

1:8-10 Separation of Daniel and Friends

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself (1:8 NKJV). In the Bible, the heart is the point of connection with God, where the mortal meets the immortal. It is what determines our belief system, dictates our morals and values, and directs our actions. Whenever God is looking for a woman or man to use, he checks their heart (1 Sam 16:7; 1 Chr 28:9). Our Lord identified the heart as the manufacturing centre for evil thoughts, attitudes and behaviour (Mark 7:20-23).

Daniel resolved to discipline both his heart and his body. Such self-control is terribly lacking among the spiritual leaders of our day. The problem he faced was that both the Babylonian food and the way it was prepared did not conform

to the law of Moses (Lev 7:11; Deut 14:3-21). Moreover, the food and the wine would have been offered to the Babylonian gods. Partaking of them would result in religious defilement. He therefore refused to conform. The NT's call for believer's separation from the world is similarly a call to nonconformity (Rom 12:1-2; 2 Cor 6:14-18; 1 John 2:15-17).

Leadership is the ability to influence others. Though only Daniel is specifically mentioned as having decided not to compromise on his diet, the official response to his request is directed to him and to his three friends (1:10). It is worth noting that this response is shaped by God working behind the scenes (1:9). The principle still holds that God honours those who honour him (see 1 Sam 2:30).

1:11-16 Sacrifice that Pays Back

It seems that the chief official transferred oversight of Daniel and his friends to a junior officer with the title *melzar*, which is best translated as 'warden' or 'steward.' Daniel very politely requested that he and his friends be allowed a ten-day test on a vegetarian diet with only water to drink (1:12-13). The boys did not boycott the king's food, for they still accepted vegetables and water. Nor did they demand special treatment; they requested it politely. (Note that this incident cannot be used to argue for vegetarianism. Daniel was not concerned about eating meat as such but about avoiding religious contamination. The four boys were making a sacrifice, which was why the officials were hesitant to grant their request.)

The steward consented to Daniel's request (1:14), undoubtedly due to God's favour, though this is not explicitly stated. At the end of the ten days, Daniel and his friends *looked healthier and better nourished* than their peers (1:15). For such an effect to be that noticeable in just ten days must have involved divine intervention.

1:17-21 Spiritual Endowment of Daniel and Friends

God had blessed their outward appearance and he also poured out his invisible spiritual gifts of wisdom, knowledge, understanding and skill upon Daniel and his friends who had chosen to honour him by not compromising (1:17). This is God's way of honouring them in return and is consistent with God's character and manner of doing things. Whenever he calls someone to any task, he equips them with the appropriate tools in the form of talents, training and the spiritual gifts needed to get the work done (see Exod 31:1-6; Luke 4:18-19; Acts 10:38).

The fact that God gives spiritual gifts does not eliminate the need for rigorous human training. Daniel and his friends did not drop out of college. They studied hard and completed the three-year programme assigned by the king (1:18; 1:5). Although all four of them were blessed with an intelligent understanding of Chaldean literature (as required by their curriculum – 1:4) and were able to distinguish the true from the false, only Daniel had understanding of visions

and dreams. God was equipping him for the role he would play in later years.

Godly servant leaders for church and society are desperately needed across Africa today. Daniel has modelled for us where to begin – with a personal faith in Christ – and how to continue – with an uncompromising commitment to Christ and diligent service.

King Nebuchadnezzar was not only intelligent enough to be able to interview his scholarly citizens but also to hold them accountable. The state under his leadership had invested heavily in these students. At the end of their education and training he examined them thoroughly (1:19-20). Contrast this with the attitude of many African heads of state who at best sideline intellectuals or at worst eliminate them. Nebuchadnezzar did not invest in them in order to be entertained but so that they could assist him in solving the tough problems of governing a nation. The best assets for any nation are people who are well trained, well equipped and well behaved.

At the end of the gruelling examination, the king found Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah to be *ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom* (1:20). What this means is that the king was astonished at how smart and forthcoming the Hebrew lads were in response to every question he asked. It was clearly a sign of God's blessing upon their lives. Concrete evidence of their wisdom will be seen in chapter 2.

Some have argued that 1:21 does not belong in chapter 1. That is possible. It is clear that the book is not in strict chronological order, for if it were chapters 7 and 8 would precede 5 and 6. However, such details do not affect the accuracy of Daniel's record.

2:1-49 God's Reign in a Crisis

Mortals have long believed that behind the visible lies the invisible, behind the tangible lies the intangible, and behind the natural lies the supernatural. The power and knowledge available in the invisible world are believed to be far greater than is available in the visible world. Consequently rulers have surrounded themselves with consultants, advisers and wise men who are believed to possess esoteric knowledge that can be used to solve life's enigmas. Moses' Pharaoh had his wise men, sorcerers and magicians, and so did Daniel's Nebuchadnezzar. Just as King Saul consulted the medium at Endor in his days of trouble (1 Sam 28:7-19), so many African political leaders today turn to mediums and witchcraft, especially when elections loom.

2:1-13 The Crisis of a Concealed Dream

King Nebuchadnezzar had the dream recorded here during *the second year of his reign* (2:1), yet it seems that Daniel had already finished a three-year training programme. The explanation for the mismatch in the dates is that for one year

Nebuchadnezzar reigned jointly with his father, Nabopolassar, who died in September 605 BC. In the Chaldean system of reckoning, that first year was not credited to Nebuchadnezzar's reign. Thus his second year coincided with the third and final year of Daniel's training.

Visions, dreams and prophecies are means of communication between the spirit world and the material world and can reveal present and future realities (e.g. Gen 37:41). Nebuchadnezzar was thus disturbed when he had a number of dreams, including one in particular that troubled him (2:3). So he summoned his certified spiritual experts – *magicians, enchanters, sorcerers* and the distinguished priestly caste called 'Chaldeans' in the original text – and asked them to explain his dream (2:2).

Speaking on behalf of all the consultants, the Chaldeans (*astrologers* in the NIV) responded to the king (2:4). The text at this point includes a note that what follows is in the language called Aramaic. Hebrew and Aramaic were sister languages. The Jews spoke primarily Hebrew, while the Babylonians and Persians spoke primarily Aramaic, which was the diplomatic and commercial language of the empire. Daniel

was fluent in both. From 2:4 to 7:28 he wrote in Aramaic, partly because the heterogeneous population of Babylon used it freely.

The Chaldeans were expecting things to be easy: *Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it* (2:4). But the king would have none of it. He wanted them to tell him his dream and its interpretation. They would die if they failed, but would be handsomely rewarded if successful (2:5-6).

Was the king deliberately withholding the dream in order to test the claims of his wise men, or had he actually forgotten it? He may not have been able to recall all the details, but it seems that he could remember enough of it to be able to tell if they lied to him (2:9).

The counsellors were dumbfounded, and the king was horrified by their failure. He demanded an answer on the spot, reminding them of his threat to kill them and destroy their houses (2:5, 8-9). Still they refused to take the risk of guessing wrong. In desperation they declared: *There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! . . . No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans* (2:10-11). Their answer fitted with the belief that there are

DREAMS

Dreams are part of the natural functions of consciousness, but they occur during sleep when other functions of the body and mind are resting. This is what distinguishes dreams from visions, which come while someone is awake. Some dreams are so minor that we do not remember them, while others can be so vivid that they cause nightmares. Sometimes, after a particularly vivid dream, people may turn to diviners and religious leaders to inquire about the meaning of their dream. The dreamer may be filled with fear that their dream foretells some disaster in the future, or they may become overconfident if they regard the dream as predicting success.

Christians should not deny that some dreams may be sent by God. All of the twenty-one dreams recorded in the Bible were messages from God and were fulfilled. Ten of these dreams are found in Genesis, and six of the dreamers were rulers. In each dream, God revealed something that enabled the dreamers not to change the future but to change their behaviour. For example, Pharaoh's dream, as interpreted by Joseph, led him to store food to save his people from a coming famine (Gen 41). Daniel, too, interpreted the king of Babylon's dream about future kingdoms and events (Dan 2). In the NT, Joseph had a dream that convinced him that Mary's pregnancy was from God (Matt 1:20), and Pilate's wife had a vivid dream about Jesus (Matt 27:19). Clearly, God can and does sometimes use dreams to reveal specific information to people. Today, we still sometimes hear of God using dreams to reveal himself to people in places where the gospel has not yet reached. Joel 2:28 also makes it clear that God sometimes speaks through dreams.

But, while acknowledging this truth, we should also acknowledge that dreams are not God's normal mode of communication with us. Christians already have a direct line of communication with God. He has already revealed himself to us through Jesus Christ, and we have access to him through prayer and the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:26; Heb 1:1). We should run to God in prayer and share our concerns with him in the name of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 5:7). God has also revealed his will to us in his word, the Bible. God will not reveal something in a dream that contradicts the guidelines he has laid down for us in his word. And the Bible also includes warnings against those who misuse dreams and falsely claim to speak for God (Jer 23:25-32; 29:8-9).

If our dream involves someone else's life, we would be right to expect that God would speak to them too if the dream comes from him. For example, a young woman should not agree to marry a young man merely because he tells her that he had a dream in which God revealed to him that she would be his wife. She needs to hear from God for herself before making such a major decision.

To sum up, before seeking the counsel of any 'man or woman of God' regarding the interpretation of a dream, we must remember that we ourselves have the word of God and the Holy Spirit, and that we can approach God through prayer at all times. We should seek his guidance for ourselves, rather than immediately seeking input from someone else.

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things which the gods know but humans do not. Nevertheless, the king angrily rejected it because these men were supposed to be representatives of the gods and had been trained to reveal secret things. Furious, he ordered the summary execution of all the wise men of Babylon (2:12). The severity of the sentence was probably attributable to the fact that their comments in 2:10-11 had not been very tactfully phrased.

Daniel and his companions had not been among those summoned to the king, but his edict applied to them as well. The executioners sent to kill the wise men went to find Daniel and his friends (2:13).

2:14-23 The Counsel of Daniel

It didn't take long for Arioch, the captain of the king's guard, to locate Daniel. Making polite use of his God-given wisdom, Daniel was able to gain information about what was going on, secure an audience with the king, and obtain a stay of execution (2:14-16). The text does not say how much time he was given, but it cannot have been very long given the king's desperation and anger. While it is possible that Daniel's request was granted partly because the king's anger had subsided, it cannot be denied that God's hand was upon him. 'When the LORD takes pleasure in anyone's way, he causes their enemies to make peace with them' (Prov 16:7).

Daniel immediately engaged his colleagues in fervent prayer (2:17-18). Proverbs says 'It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings' (Prov 25:2). Knowing this, and trusting in God's invitation 'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know' (Jer 33:3), Daniel and his companions turned to prayer. Their prayers were addressed to *the God of heaven* (2:18), a way of referring to God found in only three other books of the Bible: Ezekiel, Nehemiah and Revelation. The young men's prayers were direct, specific and desperate. They knew that failure to get an answer meant death. It has been said that God doesn't answer just any prayer; rather, he answers desperate prayer made in accordance with his will.

True to his promise, God revealed the king's dream to Daniel *in a vision* (2:19). In dreams, which usually come at night, the dreamer is passive and only the subconscious mind is involved. By contrast, a vision can occur at any time of the day or night and it is usually interactive and participatory. When Saul of Tarsus had a vision of the Lord on the road to Damascus, he talked to Jesus. Similarly there was interaction between the Lord and Ananias when he received a vision instructing him to go and pray for Saul (Acts 9:10-17).

Daniel's response to receiving the vision was to worship and praise the revealer (2:20-23). Daniel's concept of God embraced his almighty wisdom, his omniscience and his omnipotence. God has power to readjust times and seasons, to raise up rulers and remove them, to reveal deep and secret things, and, of course, to redeem his people from death and

destruction by making known to Daniel what the gods of the Chaldeans could not reveal. We have no record of his prayer, but his praise remains indelible. That's the way it should be for all believers: more praises than petitions!

2:24-45 Divine Construction of World Empires

Confident that the Lord had answered his prayers, Daniel immediately requested an end to the execution of the wise men (2:24). Arioch quickly took him to the king, announcing *I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means* (2:25). He gives the impression that Daniel had not been allowed to see the king before (but see 2:16). Yet the way the king addressed Daniel, probably using his Babylonian name, *Belteshazzar*, shows that he saw through Arioch's self-serving introduction (2:26).

Daniel's humility as he addressed the king also stands in sharp contrast to Arioch's arrogance. He started by stating clearly that no one in Babylon or anywhere in the world could disclose the king's secret dream, *but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries* (2:27-28). This is a powerful public testimony to the greatness of our God. Remember that at this time Daniel must have been about twenty years old, fresh from college. He was defending his Babylonian colleagues by underscoring their (and his own – 2:30) human limitations, and thereby gave all the glory to God.

He then proceeded to describe what Nebuchadnezzar had seen in his dream (2:31-35). The king must have been awestruck as Daniel described each detail of the statue. It was made of metal, with its head of gold, its breast and arms of silver, its abdomen and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron and its feet a mixture of iron and clay. There was thus a clear deterioration in quality from the golden top to the clay feet. There was a corresponding decrease in weight along with an increase in hardness from top to bottom (except for the feet of clay).

Daniel then went on to reveal how a rock that was cut out without human hands struck the image at its weakest point and crushed it to powder that was carried away by the wind, leaving no trace of the great statue. Meanwhile the rock *became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth* (2:35).

Daniel did not ask the king whether his description of the dream was correct (2:36). The source of his revelation cannot lie (Titus 1:2). So he went straight on to the interpretation of the dream (2:36-45) in terms of five different empires:

- The *head of gold* represented Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian kingdom (2:38). He himself is described as *the king of kings*, a title that indicates dominion and supremacy. But Daniel immediately reminds him that he has not achieved this position by his military might but by the divine appointment of *the God of heaven*, the Supreme King who reigns in heaven and on earth. For now, he reigns on earth by delegation: *He has given you dominion and power and might and glory* (2:37).

- *The chest and arms of silver* represent a kingdom that Daniel does not name but describes as *inferior to yours* (2:39a). That kingdom is later identified as that of the Medes and Persians, who conquered Babylon in 539 BC (5:26-31). The dual origins of that kingdom are reflected in there being two arms.
- *The belly and thighs of bronze* represent a kingdom that is also not identified until a later revelation (2:39b; see 8:20-21), where it is named 'the kingdom of Greece.' Alexander the Great led the Greek army in a series of military advances that began in 334 BC and overran the Medes and Persians.
- *The legs of iron and feet partly of iron and partly of clay* represent a fourth world empire that is one kingdom in form but diverse in composition (iron and clay) and in substance (ten toes). Of the four metals, iron is the strongest, and as *iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others* (2:40). This should not be interpreted as meaning that the fourth kingdom will find the three previous kingdoms still existing, for according to the text the first was destroyed by the second, and the second by the third. Rather, the materials of the first two kingdoms were incorporated in the third and are destroyed with it. Yet this iron kingdom that ruthlessly crushes everything in its path is characterized by division and incoherence. This is clear from the fact that iron and clay do not mix well, as well as from the presence of two feet and numerous toes (2:41-42). The inner discord is further complicated by the fact that *the people will be a mixture* (2:43). This expression can be literally translated as 'they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men.' Some interpret this as referring to the marriage politics of the rulers, while others think it describes a democratic form of government as opposed to a dictatorship, or an attempt to mix the rule of law with rule by violence. Whatever the case, the fourth kingdom will not achieve real unity.
- *The rock* represents a kingdom that will destroy all the other kingdoms, including the iron kingdom. The great human statue will be shattered by a rock not cut out by human hands that will become a great mountain and fill the whole earth. Daniel identified that fifth kingdom as established by *the God of heaven*, who will never leave it *to another people*, and as being indestructible and eternal (2:44-45). Later, in Daniel's own vision, this fifth kingdom is given to the holy people of the Most High (7:18).

The terminal points of the first three kingdoms are clear from the prophecy itself and from history. The Babylonian Empire succumbed to the Medo-Persian Empire in 539 BC, and it in turn fell to the Greeks between 334 and 331 BC. The Greek Empire crumbled under the Roman invasion in 146 BC. The date of the end of the fourth kingdom is less clear. In the dream it ends with the sudden catastrophic impact of the stone followed by the establishment of the kingdom of God.

Since this has not yet happened in history, 'the times of the Gentiles' have not yet ended and world governance is still operating under the aegis of the fourth kingdom with all of its strengths, diversity and weaknesses. The fifth kingdom is yet to come (compare 2:28).

2:46-49 Honour for Daniel

Overwhelmed by Daniel's ability to reveal and interpret his dream, Nebuchadnezzar fell down in worship before Daniel (2:46), but he exalted and praised Daniel's God (not Daniel) as the most supreme ruler and revealer of secrets (2:47).

Before this most powerful king at the time, Daniel, by prayerful and constructive engagement, had proved that his God reigned. In the face of the crises confronting Africa today, it will take more than roadside signboards to convince the world that Christ is the answer. We need Josephs and Daniels who are able to reveal secrets, interpret dreams and resolve enigmas.

Daniel not only brought glory to God but was himself promoted to the position of governor over the whole province of Babylon, as well as being appointed as chief executive officer over all the wise men (2:48). Unlike Joseph who was given an Egyptian wife (Gen 41:45), Daniel's gifts did not include a wife. Fittingly, he remembered his three prayer partners. His request that they also be given positions of power and influence in the province was granted by the king (2:49). Many who gain power forget those who helped them get there. Daniel did not.

3:1-30 Faith Under Fire

Nebuchadnezzar may have constructed the golden image towards the middle of his forty-one year reign, when he was at the zenith of his power. Or, more likely, he may have been inspired by Daniel's interpretation of the dream, in which case it would have taken place earlier.

3:1-7 Command to Worship an Idol

Nebuchadnezzar celebrated the news that the God of heaven had given him 'dominion and power and might and glory' (2:37-38) by erecting an imposing golden image as an object of worship. The image stood 27 metres high, as tall as a nine-storey office block, and was 2.7 metres wide. It cannot have been of solid gold, for the weight and cost would have been prohibitive, but it had a dazzling coating of gold. It stood *on the plain of Dura*, about fifteen kilometres from Babylon, the capital city (3:1).

There has been much speculation about why Nebuchadnezzar erected the statue. It seems likely that he was trying to impose a new state religion. As a despot, he regarded failure to accept this religion as treason, punishable by death (3:2-7). Among the Akan of Ghana and the Yoruba of Nigeria, the supreme traditional king is also regarded as an immortal and

all-powerful deity, who is said to be second-in-command to the gods. When he dies, he is worshipped as one of the ancestors. However, these traditional kings differ from Nebuchadnezzar in that they do not force their subjects to worship them.

3:8-12 Charge Against Daniel's Friends

The Chaldeans, whose lives Daniel and his friends had saved (2:24), resented the promotion of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So they accused them of disrespect to the king (they *pay no attention to you, Your Majesty*), disloyalty (they don't *serve your gods*), and disobedience (they don't *worship the image of gold*) (3:8-12).

The first accusation was clearly untrue, for they had obeyed the order to attend the dedication ceremony (3:2-3). The other two charges were partly true, in that they did refuse to violate the First Commandment (Exod 20:3). But in all other respects they were loyal to the land and served the king faithfully.

Why was Daniel not charged too? He may have been away on official business, or he may have been left out because of his special relationship with the king. More likely, he was left out because the jealousy focused only on those responsible for the province of Babylon (3:12).

3:13-18 Courage of Daniel's Companions

Courage has been described as fear that has said its last prayer. The three young men must have been terrified as they were threatened by the furious king (3:13-15) but they refused to compromise and demonstrated a robust faith in God. They were neither superstitious nor fanatical, but they had a confident faith in God and submitted humbly to his will (3:17-18). They had no doubt about God's ability to deliver them. They were also convinced that he would (3:17b), since Nebuchadnezzar had openly challenged him (3:15c). But they were aware that the battle was not theirs but the Lord's (2 Chr 20:15). Should the Lord choose not to deliver them through death, so be it (3:18). They would rather burn than bow to idols!

The heroic example of these men has inspired Christian martyrs throughout history (Heb 11:34), including the forty-five Ugandan martyrs (1885-1887) who were tortured to death because they refused to renounce Jesus as Lord, the twenty Coptic Christians beheaded on a beach by ISIS in Libya in February 2015, and the forty Christians killed in a church in Nigeria in June 2022. Their only crime was to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. We should be ready to show the same commitment, for Christ's absolute Lordship demands absolute surrender.

3:19-25 Conflagration Made Seven Times Hotter

The young men's polite yet bold response only fuelled the king's anger. Consequently he commanded that the furnace be even hotter than usual (3:19). Believers sometimes face

extreme trials, especially in the Islamic world. In various parts of Africa, church buildings have been destroyed and believers who were formerly Muslim have been killed for their faith.

Nebuchadnezzar's furnace was so hot that the fire blasted the soldiers who threw the youths into the furnace (3:20-23). This was an act of God's judgment before the king's eyes. But there was more. He had thrown three bound men into the fire, but could now see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looked like *a son of the gods* (3:24-25). Nebuchadnezzar could not recognize the pre-incarnate Son of God, and so he described him as an angel or a divine being (3:28).

The Lord here fulfilled his promise: 'When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour' (Isa 43:2-3).

3:26-30 Commendation of Daniel's Friends

Nebuchadnezzar was awestruck as he called out to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, addressing them as *servants of the Most High God* (3:26). He had encountered this God as a 'revealer of mysteries' before (2:47), but now he encountered him as a deliverer (3:28-29). Unfortunately Nebuchadnezzar did not embrace this God for himself. He merely declared that this God was unique in being able to save his servants and forbade any insults to him on pain of death.

The three Hebrew men had earned the king's respect and he promoted them (3:30). Interestingly, after the miracle they neither reprimanded the king nor bragged about their faith, as many would do today. It was the Lord's battle to start with, and the Lord's opponent, Nebuchadnezzar, had admitted defeat. What more could be said? We hear nothing more of these men in the rest of the book.

4:1-37 Humiliation of King Nebuchadnezzar

The stories about Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel span the forty-three years of his reign, from his rise to power, through his fall due to pride, to his eventual repentance, followed by his salvation and restoration. His case speaks of the long-suffering mercy of God who desires all people to be saved (1 Tim 2:1-7). It also speaks of the faith and tenacity of Daniel, who refused to compromise his principles but did not cease to serve the king. The events described in this chapter come towards the end of Nebuchadnezzar's life.

4:1-18 Nebuchadnezzar's Declaration and Dream

King Nebuchadnezzar records a testimony of his conversion and gives an account of the dream God used to reach him. Daniel may have been the king's scribe, for he had been the evangelist who proclaimed to him the way of salvation: *Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness*

by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue (4:27). We desperately need bold prophetic witness like this in Africa today. Though it took the king some eight years to come to grips with this call to repentance, he eventually did so, and humbly made public his story by way of the decree recorded here.

The first three verses are the formal introduction to the decree. They give the sender's name, *King Nebuchadnezzar* (4:1a), and state to whom the decree is sent, namely his own subjects and others outside his realm (4:1b). The formal greeting that the NIV translates as *May you prosper greatly!* (4:1c) was actually *Shalom*, a common expression of good wishes in Semitic languages (see also 6:25). The king then sets out the purpose for which he is writing, namely to share the amazing signs and wonders wrought in his life by the Most High God (4:2-3).

Nebuchadnezzar describes his kingdom as enjoying peace and prosperity (4:4). By this time he had subdued Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, Egypt and Arabia, and had accumulated enough wealth to make Babylon one of the most fabulous cities of the ancient world. (Similarly, the mineral resources of Africa were looted by colonizing powers and used to develop the great capital cities of London, Paris and Lisbon.) Nebuchadnezzar's affluence was a source of pride (4:30).

At this point in his career he had another dream, which he remembered. But once again his Babylonian experts could not interpret it for him (4:5-7; see also chapter 2). It is also possible that they were afraid to interpret it, fearing the king's reaction when he learned what this dream meant.

Daniel was finally called in. Nebuchadnezzar addressed him by his Babylonian name but acknowledged that he had a different spirit within him (4:8). Though the king was still a polytheist at this stage (hence his reference to *gods*), he nevertheless distinguished the spirit that was the source of Daniel's wisdom as *holy* (4:8, 9, 18). In 2:47 he had spoken of Daniel's God (singular), so it is also possible that he may have used a plural form as a way of showing respect.

Nebuchadnezzar's remark that *no mystery is too difficult for you* (4:9, 18) sets a goal for true servants of God. They should be problem solvers, not sources of problems. God assigned this role to the prophets in both the OT and NT. They were messengers of hope in every grim situation (Deut 13; 1 Kgs 17-18; Luke 4:18-19; Acts 10:38).

Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed of an enormous tree that provided food and shelter for all (4:10-12). In his dream, he saw a divine messenger issuing a command for the tree to be cut down, its branches trimmed, its leaves stripped and its fruit scattered. Its stump and roots were left in the ground, albeit bound with iron and bronze (4:13-15a). Then, in a dramatic twist, the image changed from a tree to a man drenched with dew and left to live among animals in the field (4:15b). Worse than that, the man was given the mind of an animal for a period of seven years (4:16). Still in the dream,

the king was told why this was being done: *So the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people* (4:17).

Few dispute that God reigns supreme over human affairs in general. What many find hard to understand is why a good God has allowed notoriously wicked leaders to hold power over many African nations. We may also be baffled by the description of African chiefs, kings and presidents as 'the lowliest of people,' for few of them are characterized by humility. But like Nebuchadnezzar, they must all eventually face the reality that they are human, with few grounds for pride in themselves. God has given them abilities and opportunities, and he can just as easily remove them. The same is true for each of us.

4:19-27 Daniel's Decoding of the Dream

This time, the spirit of the holy God gave Daniel instant understanding of the dream. But he was troubled because of what it foretold for the king he had been serving for more than thirty years and for whose salvation he must have been praying. Diplomatically, he began his presentation by wishing that the dream were for the king's enemies (4:19). Then without mincing words he decoded the dream: *Your Majesty, you are that tree!* (4:22). The tree represented Nebuchadnezzar at the height of his glory. The Most High had issued a decree that Nebuchadnezzar would be afflicted with a mental illness for seven years until he acknowledged God as the Sovereign Lord (4:24-25). When he repented and acknowledged God, his kingdom would be restored to him (4:26).

Daniel concluded his interpretation with an invitation: *Renounce your sins by doing what is right* (4:27). This is consistent with prophetic indictments throughout the ages: Nathan before King David (2 Sam 12:7); Elijah before Ahab (1 Kgs 18:18); and John the Baptist before Herod (Luke 3:19-20). The church in Africa needs such a prophetic voice today. In the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was such a voice. In the days of Idi Amin in Uganda, the late Archbishop Janani Luwum provided such a voice.

4:28-33 Nebuchadnezzar's Derangement

Judgment did not happen immediately, and so Nebuchadnezzar ignored his dream. Twelve months later he stood on the flat roof of his palace, admiring his achievements. It is reported that the outer wall of his palace was nine kilometres long. There were two other battlemented walls within and a great tower and three gates of bronze. Nebuchadnezzar credited all he had achieved to his own power and saw it all as contributing to his own glory, with no acknowledgment of God (4:28-30). Like Lucifer's, his pride led to his downfall (Isa 14:12-15). Suddenly the verdict fell from heaven: *Your royal authority has been taken from you* (4:31-32). There

could be no doubt as to the connection between the crime and the punishment.

Immediately Nebuchadnezzar became insane, and was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. He paid no attention to his personal hygiene and his hair became wild like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws (4:33). It seems that although he was relieved of his royal duties, he was protected, kept in the palace gardens away from abuse by common people.

This disease in which a person thinks he is an animal is known as *insania zoanthropica*, or *boanthropy* when the person thinks he is an ox. A case similar to Nebuchadnezzar's is said to have been observed in a British mental institution in 1946. Similar cases exist today, but treatment is now available for sufferers.

During Nebuchadnezzar's period of insanity, his son, Awel-Marduk, is said to have reigned as his regent (Jer 52:31). Daniel continued to serve as head of the wise men and must have worked to ensure kind treatment of the king in the light of his interpretation of the dream and the hope of Nebuchadnezzar's restoration.

4:34-37 Nebuchadnezzar's Decision and Restoration

Salvation involves personal conviction and repentance, even for Nebuchadnezzar. After seven years of humiliation, God brought him to a point where he no longer raised his heart in pride, but rather raised his eyes to heaven in humble surrender (4:34a). God responded in mercy and restored his sanity. Consequently the king burst out in praise and worship, not of Daniel as he had done some thirty-seven years ago (2:46), but of God whom he described as *the Most High*, a name he must have picked up from the divine messengers in his dream (4:17, 25). It has been said that nothing is more insane than human pride, and nothing is more sober than praising God. That this once arrogant king bows down and humbly worships *him who lives forever* is evidence of an inner transformation (4:34b-35).

Nebuchadnezzar's royal honour and splendour were returned to him. His advisers and nobles (including Daniel) sought him out and he was restored to his throne in even greater glory (4:36).

Nebuchadnezzar concluded his testimony with one of the most powerful statements of faith in God recorded in the Scriptures: *I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just (4:37)*. His words reflect the fruit of Daniel's influence and prayer for him. Prayer is never in vain!

5:1-31 God Removes a Blaspheinous King

Daniel was not a historian and did not pretend to be writing a history of the empire. He was a prophet and a statesman. His

reason for including this chapter is to show that the prophecy regarding the fall of Babylon (2:32, 39) was fulfilled in October 539 BC. The resulting change in government would affect his own people.

5:1-4 Blasphemy of King Belshazzar

Belshazzar is introduced as the king of Babylon (5:1) and a son of Nebuchadnezzar (5:2). Critics have used these two statements to challenge the historical accuracy of the book of Daniel, alleging that no king by the name of Belshazzar ever reigned in Babylon, let alone was a son of Nebuchadnezzar. However, the discovery of the Nabonidus Cylinder and of writings by the Babylonian historian Berossus and the ancient Greek historian Herodotus have provided archaeological support for the biblical record.

Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC and was succeeded by his son, Awel-Marduk (562–559 BC), also known as Evil-Merodach (2 Kgs 25:27-30; Jer 52:31-34). He was assassinated by his brother-in-law, Neriglissar (559–555 BC). Neriglissar's son, Labashi-Marduk (555 BC), reigned for only nine months before being assassinated and replaced by Nabonidus (555–539 BC), who was married to either a daughter or a widow of Nebuchadnezzar by the name of Nitocris. Belshazzar was their eldest son. Though Nabonidus did not come from the royal line of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar was descended from him through his mother. Just as David is called the father – meaning ancestor – of Jesus in Luke 1:32, so Nebuchadnezzar could be called Belshazzar's father.

Nabonidus reigned for seventeen years. For thirteen of those years, he ruled jointly with his son Belshazzar, whom he stationed in Babylon while he himself lived at Teima in Arabia. This co-regency explains the way Daniel refers to Belshazzar and also explains why the reward offered in 5:7 is to be made the third highest ruler – there were already two rulers.

According to Herodotus, the events described in this chapter took place on one of the great festival days of the Babylonians. Cyrus the Persian had already been besieging the city for about three months and hope was fading. Nabonidus had tried to relieve the city but had been beaten back by the Persian army. As often happens in a time of crisis, the king turned to a combination of religion and licence to try to boost morale. He invited a thousand of his nobles and his wives and concubines to a great banquet. Then, probably to assert their faith in their Babylonian gods who, supposedly, had granted them victory in the past against the Jews, the king ordered that the gold and silver goblets that his grandfather had captured seventy years earlier in Jerusalem be brought out and used (5:2). So the guests drank from the vessels from God's sacred temple while they praised their *gods of gold and silver . . . and stone (5:3-4)*. Belshazzar was challenging the holy God of Israel.

Like Belshazzar, we in contemporary Africa often turn to wine, women and witchcraft when a crisis comes. These offer no solutions.

5:5-9 Writing on the Wall

God did not let Belshazzar's challenge go unanswered. Suddenly, a supernatural hand appeared, writing a verdict on the wall where the king could see it (5:5). Though the king was able to feign no fear of the war outside the city, he could not hide his horror at this apparition. He turned pale and his wine-bolstered courage deserted him to the point *that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking* (5:6).

He called loudly for his experts (5:7), who hurried in. They had failed his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar in his hours of crisis (chs. 2 and 4), and they failed Belshazzar too, intensifying the king's perplexity and fear (5:8-9).

5:10-17 Reward Rejected

Hearing the uproar, the king's mother came in (5:10). (She is referred to as *the queen*, but must have been the queen mother as Belshazzar's wife was already present at the party – 5:2-3). She spoke calmly and reminded her son about Daniel's incredible feat in the days of Nebuchadnezzar (5:11-12). The king listened to her and immediately summoned Daniel, asking him to interpret the writing on the wall (5:13-15). If Daniel was successful, he was promised money, fame and a position next in rank to the king himself (5:16; see comments on 5:1-2).

Many ministers of the gospel in nation after nation in Africa have sold their birthrights and compromised the truth for luxury or position. But Daniel rejected the king's offer in no uncertain terms (5:17). Nevertheless, he was prepared to read and interpret the writing.

5:18-24 Like Father, Like Son

Before interpreting the inscription, Daniel reminded his terrified audience of how Nebuchadnezzar had been deposed and disgraced for seven years – a fact known by every member of the royal family – until he bowed down to *the Most High God* (5:18-21). He then went to the heart of the problem, saying: *But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this* (5:22). He denounced Belshazzar's blasphemy and folly. *You have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven* (5:23), meaning that the king was on a collision course with the Lord God who held his life in his hand.

A popular song in Nigeria has a similar theme. It sings of a recent head of state who arbitrarily abused his power and defied every constituted authority at home and internationally. But when God said 'Enough!' his military might could not avert his death.

5:25-31 Message of Judgment

God's memo to Belshazzar read: *MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN* (5:25). *Mene*, repeated twice for emphasis, means *numbered*. God was telling Belshazzar: 'Your time is up!' (5:26). The word *tekel* means *weighed*, and has a secondary meaning of 'found too light.' God has found Belshazzar to be too light morally and spiritually (5:27). The word *parsin* means 'broken' or *divided*, and has a plural ending to indicate the plural nature of the conquering power: *Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians* (5:28).

Some have asked: 'Why the Medes and Persians' when the Persians were the stronger in this coalition? The answer may lie in Daniel's knowledge of the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah many years before (Isa 13:17-22; 21:1-10; Jer 51:33-58). Daniel would have remembered his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, where the golden head was succeeded by the chest and arms of silver (2:32, 39).

Belshazzar carried out his promise of honouring and rewarding Daniel and proclaimed him the third highest ruler in the kingdom (5:29). Apparently he was not expecting an immediate fulfilment of the message. Many people in our day make the same mistake. But *that very night Belshazzar . . . was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two* (5:30-31).

6:1-28 Persecution of Righteous Daniel

'Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution' (2 Tim 3:12) and Daniel was no exception. 'A servant is not greater than his master,' says Jesus, 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also' (John 15:20). Unfortunately we are bombarded by an unbiblical painless (or pay-less) theology that wants a crown without a cross. Yet the importance of persecution is attested by the amount of space given to it in both the OT and the NT and in this book of Daniel.

6:1-3 Daniel's Position Under a New Regime

Darius the Mede took over from the slain Belshazzar. Yet there is no record of any king of Babylon with this name, and there seems to be confusion in Daniel's record between Darius and Cyrus (1:21; 6:28). Evangelical scholars offer three possible solutions: a) Darius is another name for Cyrus the Persian, b) Darius was actually Cambyses, the son of Cyrus, and c) Darius is another name for Gubaru, the governor Cyrus appointed over Babylon immediately after the fall of the city.

The last explanation enjoys the most support. The language of 5:31 and 9:1 supports the interpretation that Darius was a sub-king under Cyrus. He is described as 'ruler over the Babylonian kingdom' (that is, of Babylonia – 9:1), whereas Cyrus is referred to as *king of Persia* (that is, of the empire – 10:1). Just as Belshazzar was co-regent with Nabonidus, his

father, so Darius the Mede was co-regent with Cyrus the Persian, the senior partner in the coalition.

Darius had vast administrative ability. He rejected the despotic rule of the Babylonians and introduced a system based on power sharing. He appointed 120 district assistants under three provincial governors, one of whom was Daniel. His reason for doing this was primarily economic: *So that the king might not suffer loss (6:1-2)*. By this time Daniel must have been more than eighty-four years old, with over sixty years of public service behind him. His knowledge of Babylon and his record of integrity meant that it did not take long for Darius to notice him. As a result he *planned to set him over the whole kingdom (6:3)*. ‘Do you see someone skilled in their

work? They will serve before kings; they will not serve before officials of low rank’ (Prov 22:29).

Daniel was a statesman who served three different regimes with integrity. We should seek to emulate his qualities as we strive to be salt and light in our generation. Someone has said: ‘Christians should be so “Daniel-good” that they cannot be ignored.’

6:4-9 Plot Against Daniel

Daniel’s favour with the king aroused the jealousy of his fellow officials, men who were probably much younger and anxious to get ahead. What started as jealousy turned into envy, envy turned into racial hatred (see the label in 6:13), and hatred turned into a plot.

CHRISTIANS, POLITICS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Some evangelicals are so turned off by the dishonesty often seen in political life that they shy away from politics for fear of being contaminated by association with it. Others see political issues as a way to engage with society by being salt and light in the public sphere. Ultimately, the question boils down to whether individual Christians and churches should be involved in matters that are not strictly religious. In answering this question, we need to listen to the voice of Scripture and to those who have devoted themselves to the study of what can be called public theology, that is, theological reflection on the types of engagement Christians should have with the public sphere and how they can actively influence society and bear witness within it.

The Bible contains many examples of believers who were involved in the political lives of their communities – think of Joseph, Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel. But it is not enough to limit our involvement to exceptional leaders. The OT prophets were unequivocally involved in the life of their communities when they spoke out against injustice perpetrated by their political, religious and economic leaders.

Our role must not only be to sit in our churches and condemn the evils of our societies. Passages like Isaiah 58 make it clear that we must also demonstrate holistic care for others. Jeremiah called on the exiled Jewish community in Babylon to ‘seek the peace and prosperity of the city’ (Jer 29:7). Then as now, cities were centres of political power. The politics of Babylon were hostile to the Jews, but they as a community were still to work for the benefit of the city as a whole, and not just for the good of their own community. This is a message that churches in the cities of Africa need to take to heart. We must be committed to urban ministry.

While our context is different to Jeremiah’s, social issues such as injustice, poverty, and marginalization are still with us today. If we take the prophetic ministry of the church seriously, we must scrutinize how we are influencing the communities that we serve in light of the Bible’s message. This will ignite

processes whereby church ministries and structures begin to examine their public roles. We must move beyond mere theological interpretation to practical involvement. We must consider how we can relate theology to the real-life circumstances of the communities and people we engage with.

Examining the Bible, we see many examples of ways Christians should influence the socioeconomic and political focus in the public sphere. For instance, we are called to take care of God’s creation (Gen 1:28), and so must work to combat environmental degradation. The Bible calls on us to care for the poor, which may mean working to provide them with food, medical services, education and economic opportunities. We are also commanded to care for strangers, which means we must be concerned for refugees and internally displaced people, helping to provide for their material needs and also addressing the issues that led them to flee their homes. Doing this effectively inevitably involves engagement with the public sphere. We can take Joseph as our model, as he worked within the public service to equip a non-Christian nation to survive famine and avoid catastrophe (Gen 41:41-49, 56-57).

There can be no doubt that the Bible commands Christians to be involved in all spheres of public life, working to promote social development and social justice. It does not specify exactly how we must do this. Just as the early church and Jesus’ disciples held onto Jesus’ teachings about loving our neighbours and creatively responded to issues they faced, so we too must be creative in the way we engage issues in our communities.

We must also help those who are called to enter politics or some specific area of public service to prepare spiritually for their work and to see themselves as ambassadors for Christ in the public arena. We must also find ways of keeping them accountable, for it is easy to succumb to the enormous pressures on those in public office and the lure of opportunities for self-enrichment.

Lukwikilu Credo Mangayi

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

You could say that Acts of the Apostles is like a rope that ties the two halves of the NT together into one bundle. It connects the Gospels and the Epistles by telling how Jesus' disciples continued the ministry he handed over to them and spread the gospel around the known world, so establishing the churches to which the NT letters were written. Its demonstration of the power of the gospel offers encouragement to us today.

Historical Context

Author and Date

No one specifically claims to be the author of the book of Acts. However, we know that the author must have been the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, for both these books are addressed to the same person, and Acts is described as the sequel to Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:1-3; Acts 1:1).

We also know that the author of Acts was one of Paul's companions, for he sometimes uses the pronoun 'we' (16:10-17, 20:5-15, 21:1-18, 27:1-28:16). He is traditionally identified with Luke, the doctor whom Paul mentions in several of his letters (Col 4:14; Phlm 24; 2 Tim 4:11).

The dating of this book is not certain. Some scholars date it to the early AD 60s on the basis that the book ends with Paul in prison in Rome in about AD 60 but does not mention his martyrdom in about AD 66 nor the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. Other scholars favour the early AD 70s, arguing that the book is silent about those significant events because they are unrelated to its purpose (1:8).

Recipients and Purpose

The book is addressed to Theophilus (1:1), a man whose name means 'lover of God.' It has sometimes been suggested that this was just a generic name for believers, but it is more likely that he was a Greek official who sponsored the writing of this book and of the Gospel of Luke. Although addressed to Theophilus, the book is also intended to inform a broader Christian audience about the progress of the gospel beyond Jewish geographical and ethnic

boundaries as Jesus' disciples carried out his commission to preach the gospel from Jerusalem to 'the ends of the earth,' which in this context meant Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire (1:8). The book provides believers with a historical account of the origins of Christianity and lays the foundations for defending the Christian faith when attacked by adherents of other religions and hauled before the authorities, whether Jewish, Roman, or Greek. It reassures believers by showing what the Holy Spirit was doing in the church and how Jesus Christ fulfilled his promise to guide the disciples as they bore witness to him.

Literary Context

Genre and Style

Like the book of Luke, Acts presents itself as an authentic historical record of events based on materials the author has carefully assembled. However, while the gospel is a theological biography, Acts is historical-theological narrative since it focuses on more than one person. The author also makes use of several subgenres of ancient history writing, including travel narratives, voyage and navigational narratives, and political history. As was common at the time, the record includes long speeches and descriptions of the reactions of the listeners.

When it comes to style, Acts has a high literary quality. Like Luke's Gospel, it has a wide-ranging vocabulary and the author writes in both literary Greek and Greek influenced by the Palestinian Aramaisms of the day. The author can present dramatic descriptions of events (e.g. ch. 27), and speeches, which are edited versions of verbatim speeches (as per ancient historiography). The speeches show Luke's literary artistry by adding variety and vividness, interpreting important theological themes, and propelling the plot forward (e.g. 2:14-40; 3:12-27; 7:2-52; 17:22-31).

While much of the book is written in the third person, as an account of the activity of others, in 16:10-17 and 20:5-28:31 the author uses the first-person plural ('we') implying that he participated in the events recorded. His knowledge of geography,

local politics and customs, seafaring and the world of the first century support his claim to be a participant and an accurate historian.

Immediate and Canonical Context

The opening verses (1:1-2) indicate that the book of Acts builds on an earlier work known to Theophilus, which is assumed to be the Gospel of Luke. This close association between Luke and Acts is obscured in our Bibles, where the Gospel of John comes between these two books. It seems appropriate, given that Acts ends with Paul in Rome, that the book that immediately follows it is Paul's great letter to the church in Rome.

The inclusion of the book of Acts in the canon has never been disputed, but there are scholars who maintain that there are inconsistencies between the portrayal of Paul in Acts and in his letters. For instance, did Paul go to Jerusalem after his conversion to confer with the apostles or not? (Acts 9:19-30; Gal 1:16-20); was he known to the churches in Judea or not? (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2; Gal 1:21-22). Most of these differences can be explained in terms of the differences in purpose and perspective between Luke and Paul.

The book is structured around the two main missionary thrusts in the post-Easter period: Acts 2–12 deals with the mission in Jerusalem and Samaria, while Acts 13–28 deals with the mission to the Gentile world.

Theological Context

The Holy Spirit

Although the book is called the Acts of the Apostles, it could more accurately be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes in fulfilment of Christ's promise (1:4) and empowers believers to continue the work of Jesus Christ (1:8). The power of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to salvation is on full display in this book.

Opening Up to Non-Jews

In the book of Acts we see a gradual distancing between Christianity and Judaism as Christianity is increasingly rejected by Jewish people and accepted in the Gentile world. Aspects of the OT laws that presented a barrier to non-Jews are done away with

and there is a shift from worshipping in the temple and synagogues to worshipping in believer's homes.

The Spread of the Gospel

At the start of the book, Jesus is preached in Jerusalem (6:7), then the message is preached to the Jews' neighbours in Samaria (9:31; 12:24), and then across the Gentile world (16:5; 19:20) until it ends with Christ being preached in the capital of the Roman Empire (28:31). The book thus shows how Jesus' words in 1:8 are fulfilled.

Prayer, Signs and Wonders

Prayer, signs and wonders have a prominent place in the life of the early church, driving home the message that the church always depends on the Holy Spirit and prayer for its survival.

Ministry

Acts stresses that evangelism and mission were carried out voluntarily by individuals as they were led by the Holy Spirit. Holiness and personal devotion are key to evangelism and mission in the book of Acts. We are challenged to emulate the many men and women who willingly gave themselves to the work of the ministry and used their gifts, possessions and circumstances to advance the work of Christ.

Relevance to Africa

The content of Acts is not purely descriptive, merely stating what took place; there are also places where it is prescriptive as it addresses theological issues and lays down guidelines that are still highly relevant to the church in Africa.

The Power of the Holy Spirit

We need the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome the powers of darkness in Africa. Africans traditionally believe in the existence of clean and unclean spirits that can possess individuals and endow them with various powers. Similar beliefs are found in the book of Acts. For example, in 16:16-18 we encounter a girl who is possessed by a spirit that enables her to predict the future but is opposed to God. Acts makes it clear that the Holy Spirit who comes from God is far superior to all other spirits. The church should thus emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit as

a change agent in Africa, working in people's hearts to enable them to change their lifestyle for good.

Prayer and Fasting

Prayer and fasting have been standard practices in many parts of Africa for many centuries, for it was believed that the process of prayer and the self-discipline of fasting would invoke the presence of the divine in the midst of the people. In Acts, we see the disciples devoting themselves to fasting and prayer as a means of humble submission to the power and the will of Jesus Christ. Christians in Africa would do well to contextualize and incorporate the practice of our ancestors alongside that in the book of Acts as we worship Jesus Christ. Our fasting and prayer are one way of testifying to our absolute obedience to Christ.

Community

Acts has much to say about living in community. Such a lifestyle is congruent with the African value of ubuntu. Our ancient communities survived through communal living before the coming of other nations to Africa. But Acts also redefines the concept of community. It shows that belief in Christ makes ethnic boundaries more porous. The importance of our ethnic affiliation is subsumed in our affiliation with the new 'tribe' of God, the family of believers.

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COMMENTARY

1:1-5 Introduction

Throwing a stick into an African plum tree brings down sticks that were previously thrown into it. So in the opening verse of Acts, Luke throws in a reminder of his 'old' book (the Gospel

of Luke) to remind his readers of all that he had set out in his previous book. The reminder should bring down a tumble of memories about what Jesus did while he was physically on earth. But Luke also throws in the word 'began,' for he says that he was describing what Jesus *began to do and to teach* (1:1). This inevitably provokes questions. *Theophilus* (who might have been Luke's patron – see also Luke 1:1-4) and other readers would wonder, 'If that was the beginning, what happened next? What have his disciples been doing since that amazing day when they met their resurrected Lord?'

The Gospel of Luke ended with Jesus physically risen from the dead and *giving instructions* to the disciples before he was *taken up to heaven* (1:2; see Luke 24:45-50). He was presented in a way that marked him out as far more powerful than any African ancestors, for not only was he physically resurrected on earth but he also exists in the immortal realm of the spirit: the realms of the dead and spirit beings. When such a person issues instructions it is important to know what they are, and whether they have been carried out. Luke answers those questions too in this new book.

First, however, Luke establishes that the resurrection was real. Jesus did really suffer and die and he did really rise from the grave, for he provided his followers with *many convincing proofs that he was alive* (1:3a; see Luke 24:40-53). Others may have been resuscitated after being dead for a short period, and in John 11 Lazarus was raised from the dead, but he would die again. Jesus is the only person in all history to have risen from the dead and remained alive. The disciples were convinced of this. They knew that he was no ghost or spiritual manifestation, nor a man who had barely survived torture and been given up for dead but who had somehow survived. They saw him repeatedly over a *period of forty days*, the same length of time for which he had once fasted and been tempted in the wilderness (Luke 4:2). There could have been no better proof of the reality of his bodily resurrection than the physical health they saw in him and the fact that he actually ate meals with them (1:4a; Luke 24 41-43). The Greek legends may also have spoken of people interacting with Greek gods, but those gods did not maintain close personal contact for such long periods.

The main topic of conversation between the disciples and Jesus at this time was *the kingdom of God* (1:3b). This is not an earthly kingdom; it is the place where righteousness and justice reign (John 18:36). Jesus was about to return to his Father, and the disciples would be responsible for administering this kingdom on earth. So, like any king, Jesus gave instructions to his subjects on how they were to administer and extend his kingdom during his absence. These instructions were not solely for the disciples Jesus met with after his resurrection; they also apply to us who follow him and are part of his kingdom today.

The first thing the disciples would have to do was remain in Jerusalem and *wait for the gift my Father promised* (1:4b-5;

Luke 24:49). They were not just to rush out and start doing things on their own. The same principle still applies today. To be successful in Christian ministry we must stay in the presence of the Lord, listening to his guidance and waiting for his power, rather than acting independently.

The gift the Father would soon bestow was the Holy Spirit who would guide them in their work. In Luke, his coming is spoken of as a baptism with fire, rather than the water baptism practised by John the Baptist (Luke 3:16). Fire symbolized purification and the ability to prophesy (e.g. Isa 6:5-8), as would be shown at Pentecost. The coming of the Spirit would mark the beginning of the church.

The importance of having access to spiritual power is well understood in Africa, where circumcision, sacrifices and libations have traditionally been believed to help one gain access to the powers of the spirit world. The Ibibio and Igbo people in southern Nigeria, for example, believe that spirit power enables an *abia idion* (diviner) to perform miracles, deliver people from evil forces, and anoint and protect rulers. Initiation and fattening rituals (*mbobi*) were also believed to be guided by spiritual power acquired from the ancestors, and those who had the most access to the spirit world were the most successful in dancing competitions and in life. It was this type of thinking that led Chinua Achebe to have one of his characters say, 'Those whose palm kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble.' One who is a carrier of the spirit of the ancestors has no fear of any other power since he is believed to be protected by those who gave him the spirit to work for them.

In some respects, these ideas are similar to the beliefs Christians hold about being empowered by the Holy Spirit. He empowers Christ's disciples to do the work to which they have been called without fear. He is given to help Christians do the work of the ministry of Jesus Christ and make him known in a wicked world. Just as nobody used to perform special functions in Africa without the backing of the spirits of the ancestors, so nobody performs the work of Jesus Christ without his Spirit. Every believer should walk in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9).

However, it is vitally important that we recognize that the Holy Spirit is superior to all ancestral spirits. The Holy Spirit comes directly from God the Father and is different from ancestral spirits, which may come from powers that are not of God. He is superior to all other spirits because he is pure without any evil intent. But above all, the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, which makes him God.

1:6-11 Ascension of Jesus

Jesus' talk of the kingdom of God reminded the disciples of the time when Israel had been a kingdom. They probably also remembered that Jesus had earlier spoken about the 'times of the Gentiles' being limited (Luke 21:24). Now that his mission

as the Messiah had been fulfilled, would Israel's subjection to the Romans be ending soon? Would Israel again become an independent kingdom? (1:6). Their question reflected their understanding that the outpouring of God's Spirit would usher in the restoration of Israel (Joel 2:28; Zech 12:10). They were thinking in terms of an earthly kingdom where they could rule as chiefs and kings.

But Jesus had a very different understanding of his kingdom (John 18:36). So he told the disciples that they did not need to know any details about when God will act to establish his throne on earth (1:7). What they did need to know was that the power associated with his kingdom is not the power to rule and govern (or even to oppress as is so often the case for human governments) but the power to proclaim Christ who can transform people and reconcile them to God. That would be their task, and they would receive all the power (*dunamis*) they needed to enable them to be his *witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* (1:8). The rest of the book of Acts deals with how they set about accomplishing this task.

Having assigned the disciples their task, Jesus ascended to heaven (1:9). Jews hearing of this event might have been reminded of Elijah's ascension to heaven (2 Kgs 2:11). However, Jesus' ascension was different from that of Elijah. Elijah had not died and been resurrected before he was carried to heaven. He ascended at the end of his natural life. It is also very different from Greek and Roman stories in which heroes who died became gods, thus ascending to heaven. By contrast, when he ascended, Jesus was 'the firstborn from among the dead' (Col 1:18). No African ancestor has done this. None of them has attained the level of supremacy that Jesus has. His divine power is unquestionable and surpasses all other power.

Luke's account of the ascension here in Acts is slightly different from his account of the same event in Luke 24:50-53, but this should not surprise us for it is not unusual for people to focus on different elements of the same event when writing about it in different contexts.

The amazed disciples then heard two other voices with a message for them. There is a West African saying, 'Examine what is said, not the one who speaks,' but in this case the message and the speakers together vouched for the authenticity of the message, for the speakers were *two angels* (1:10). They assured the disciples that Jesus had indeed been taken up into heaven in human form, and that he would eventually return to the earth in human form, in the same manner in which he was taken up (1:11). Their message about Jesus' departure is full of hope, for his resurrection and ascension confirm both his divine status and his promise that we too shall enjoy eternal life with God.

This passage thus teaches profound truths about who Christ is and what it means to be his disciple. Our calling, like that of the disciples, is to proclaim a kingdom that begins

in the hearts of human beings and enables them to walk in righteousness, justice and the fear of God.

1:12-26 The Election of Matthias

After the disciples came back from the Mount of Olives, they went straight to the *room where they were staying* to wait for what the Father had promised to give them (1:12-13; see 1:4; Luke 24:49). All of the Twelve except Judas were there (see Luke 6:14-16). The list of names Luke gives here is slightly different from the lists elsewhere in the NT (e.g. it omits Nathaniel – John 1:45-49; 21:2). However, it is likely that some of these men had two names, like many Africans who have both a name in their mother tongue and an English or French name. The Twelve were joined by the women who had long been part of Jesus' ministry (Matt 27:55; Luke 8:2-3; 23:49, 55-56; 24:1-10). Luke makes special mention of the presence of *Mary* (Jesus' mother) and *his brothers*, who seem to have come to faith after Jesus' resurrection (1:14b). One of these brothers was the James who would become a leader in the church in Jerusalem and the author of the letter of James (12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19; 2:29).

This gathering of all the disciples in one place reminds us of the communal gatherings that have united Africa for many centuries. It was not that the disciples had nowhere else to go; they wanted to be together. It was what some Akwa and Cross River people in southern Nigeria call *mbono ndito ete ye eka* ('the gathering of brothers and sisters in a community'). Being together helped them maintain their focus and purpose as they waited.

During this time of communal waiting, they jointly sought the face of God. The Greek word *homothumadon*, translated *all joined together* (1:14b), can also be translated as 'with one accord' (RSV) or 'with one mind' (NASB). This is the way the church should function, as a real ubuntu community, with one focus, desire and purpose in praying earnestly as we seek the face of God through Jesus.

Luke's Gospel repeatedly shows Jesus praying (e.g. Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28) and he taught his disciples to pray too (Luke 11:1-4). They learned from him that prayer is an essential part of life and ministry. The success of every Christian community depends on its engagement in prayer, as well as in studying God's word and putting it into practice. Churches in Africa know something of this, for they are highly engaged in praying. But it seems that the type of prayer we are engaged in does not always transform our lives and communities. Are we really committed to hearing from God when we pray and then obeying him? Or is our prayer transactional, an attempt to manipulate God into doing what we want?

The disciples' prayers were not answered immediately, but it seems that God did speak to Peter about a task that needed to be done. It is striking that it is Peter, who had denied Christ three times, who can speak as a leader to the

gathered group of about 120 disciples (1:15). He is someone who has experienced the forgiveness and restoration of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:34).

Peter began by pointing out that Judas' betrayal of Jesus was a fulfilment of OT prophecy (1:15-17; Ps 41:9; Luke 22:21-22). Luke then adds a brief aside describing Judas' appropriately shameful death (1:18-19). In Matthew, we are told that Judas hanged himself (Matt 27:1-5), but here we are told that he *fell headlong*. These accounts are different but not contradictory since it is possible that Judas' body burst open when it eventually fell to the ground or was cut down.

Returning to Peter's speech, we are told that he quoted Psalms 69:25 and 109:8 to indicate that the position Judas had left vacant needed to be filled (1:20). This would send a clear message that his actions were condemned by the other disciples. Moreover, by ensuring that there were twelve of them, the apostles would testify to the symbolic restoration of God's people (Luke 22:28-30).

Peter spelled out the qualifications required to fill Judas' position. The first was that the person should be *one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us* (1:21). It is said that 'those who are the first to step into a running stream know the depth of the stream.' The disciples wanted someone who had witnessed Jesus Christ's ministry and heard all his teaching because they had walked with him, listened to him and followed him everywhere he went. In other words, the person was probably a disciple from the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he was baptized by John to the time of his ascension to heaven (1:22a). The next qualification, which follows from the first one, is that the candidate must be qualified to testify publicly to Jesus' resurrection (1:22b).

Two people who met these qualifications were nominated: *Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias* (1:23). The former may possibly be the brother of the Judas called Barsabbas in Acts 15:22, 32. We know nothing about these men except their names. And yet we do know something about their characters. They were prepared to serve without demanding a prominent position. They had followed Jesus for years, and while the apostles fought about who would be first (Luke 22:24), these men had simply followed Jesus, even when many others abandoned him after the bread of life discourse (John 6:66).

The fact that both these men were qualified for the position was, however, not enough. It was crucial that the believers know the Lord's will in this matter, for God is the one who appoints leaders (Rom 13:1). So the whole group prayed that God would reveal which man he had chosen to replace Judas Iscariot (1:24-25).

The method used to determine God's will was similar to the OT method of discerning God's will by using the Urim and Thummim (Exod 28:30; 1 Sam 14:41), and was the method used when assigning duties in Solomon's temple (1 Chr 24:7;

25:8). It excludes the electioneering that distinguishes modern elections in which leaders rally support along ethnic lines and encourage hostility to those who support their opponents. Making the choice by lot also eliminates the possibility of rigging the election so that the results are known before voting even takes place. What would have happened was that once the qualified candidates had been identified, stones or pieces of pottery, each marked with the name of a candidate, would have been placed in a container. Someone would have been asked to put in their hand and select one of them, and the person whose name was on that stone or pottery shard would be regarded as having been chosen by God. The election conducted by the disciples was thus transparent, free and fair. The name that emerged on the lot was that of Matthias, and so he became the one to replace Judas (1:26).

The process followed above is a model for how people should be appointed to church offices. First, the need for someone to fill a particular position should be clear, as should the qualifications required and the future duties of the one appointed. A key requirement should be their faithful walk with Christ over a long time. Once suitable candidates have been identified, there should be a time of prayer to seek the Lord's will over who should be appointed to the position. Only then should a final decision be made. This choice does not necessarily have to be made by casting lots, unless the candidates are equal in all other respects. Elsewhere in the NT, important decisions are made in reliance on the guidance of the Holy Spirit without resorting to drawing lots (e.g. Acts 13:2; 15:22; 2 Tim 2:2). However, at this time, the Holy Spirit had not yet been given.

Politicians too can learn from this example of clarity, transparency and respect when conducting elections. This is important because 'a goat will always give birth to a goat and not a lion.' In other words, a wrong start will always give a wrong ending. When politicians corrupt the election process and foment violence, they bring the entire system of governance into disrepute and promote a political culture that adversely affects the entire nation. And when we as voters decide whom to vote for on the basis of ethnicity or bribes, rather than humbly seeking the Lord's guidance, we should not be surprised when those we elect create divisions, practise nepotism, and allow a culture of corruption to flourish.

2:1-13 The Coming of the Holy Spirit

Each year, thousands of Muslims from around the world travel to Mecca for the hajj. Similarly, the Jewish festival known as the Festival of Weeks (Deut 16:10) drew Jews from all over the world to Jerusalem. Because this festival took place fifty days after Passover, it was also known as Pentecost (from the Greek word *pente*, meaning 'fifty'). It would have begun a little more than a week after Jesus' ascension, while the disciples were still all gathered together in Jerusalem, as

instructed by Jesus (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4), waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit (2:1). God had delayed his gift until the right day for his message to be made known to people from across the world.

Suddenly, the Holy Spirit descended with a sound *like the blowing of a violent wind* and the appearance of *tongues of fire* (2:2-3). Wind had long been associated with the powerful, unpredictable, life-infusing presence of God (e.g. Ezek 37:9; see also John 3:8) and John the Baptist had prophesied that the Messiah would baptize people with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16). God's appearance at Sinai had also been accompanied by fire and billowing smoke (Exod 19:18). In Africa too, supernatural events are often associated with violent wind, thunder and storms.

As the Holy Spirit filled the disciples, they *began to speak in other tongues* (2:4). In African cultures where masquerades are performed, it is said that the language of masquerades can only be understood by those who have been initiated into the masquerade society. In giving these disciples new languages, Jesus was initiating them into a different way of life than the one they were familiar with. Yet, in contrast to the secret language referred to above (and probably to the experience of tongues in Acts 10:44-46 and 19:6), the languages spoken by Jesus' disciples on this occasion were languages those around them from other nations could understand (2:5-6). The purpose of these tongues was not to validate the believers' experience but to communicate a message to their hearers. All cultures know that 'a tree does not move unless there is a wind,' and the events of this day would prove to those gathered in Jerusalem from around the world that the wind of God's Spirit was powerfully at work.

Those who heard the disciples, including Jews and *converts to Judaism*, that is, Gentiles who had chosen to follow the Mosaic law, were amazed at how they were able to speak all the languages represented in Jerusalem on that day (2:7-12). These included African languages, for Acts specifically mentions people from *Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene* (see also Luke 23:26). Africa's people have always been included in God's plans, and the Africans in Jerusalem at Pentecost would have conveyed the word of Jesus in their own languages to their own people.

Many centuries earlier at Babel, humans had lost the ability to communicate with one another in a common language (Gen 11:1-9). Here in Jerusalem, God's gift of tongues on the day of Pentecost removed the curse of Babel and gave his people the ability to communicate across cultures in the power of the Holy Spirit. This gift significantly united the whole world in Christ Jesus and testified to the reconciliation of all humanity to God through him.

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is not intended as a model for what ought to be happening in our churches today, nor does it indicate that speaking in tongues is essential for salvation. It was a unique and spectacular fulfilment

BIBLE TRANSLATION IN AFRICA

The Bible was originally written in the everyday languages of its first readers. Thus some sections were written in Hebrew, others in Aramaic, and others in Greek. As its message spread, it became necessary to translate it for new audiences. Thus the Hebrew OT was translated into Greek – the *lingua franca* of the period – sometime around the second century BC. This translation, known as the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX, using the Roman numerals for seventy), was made in the city of Alexandria in Africa. Many of the Gentiles and Jews for whom the Greek NT was written would have been familiar with the *koiné* (common) Greek in which it was written.

In Jesus, God came and spoke to people in a specific culture in a way they could understand. Believers were instructed to follow his example, and thus wherever Christianity spreads, it takes on the cultures and languages of the new believers. After all, as St Augustine of Hippo in North Africa is reputed to have said, God seems nearer to people when he speaks their language.

Some of the first translations of the complete Bible were produced in North Africa. It was translated into the ancient Egyptian dialect known as Sahidic around AD 300 and into the dialect known as Bohairic around the sixth century. The Bohairic version is still the official version of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Nubia and Ethiopia also received the gospel quite early. The Ge'ez translation of the Bible, dating from around AD 500, is still in use today in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The next wave of African translations came with the nineteenth-century evangelical revival. Christian missionaries used the infrastructure and opportunities provided by European imperial conquest, for colonial expansion and the spread of missions went hand in hand. The missionaries realized that success in communicating the gospel would require mastering African languages and that they would need to translate the Bible into these languages in order to grow churches and disciple Christians. So they set about the task of translation, which involved developing a written form for many African languages, preparing grammars and lexicons, translating the Scriptures, and teaching new converts to read their own African languages so that they could engage with the Scriptures.

The successful achievement of these tasks set in motion a complex set of unintended developments. One was that missionaries could no longer claim a monopoly on God's word or control the process they had set in motion. The Bible in

the vernacular empowered the church in Africa to evangelize, plant churches and open new frontiers independent of missionary control or of foreign mission centres. There can be no doubt that the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Africa owes an enormous debt to Bible translation.

Among the best known of the early African translations are the Malagasy Bible produced by David Jones and David Griffiths in 1835; the Tswana Bible translated by Robert Moffat in 1857; the Twi Akuapem Bible produced by Johannes Christaller and J.A. Mader in 1871; and the Swahili Bible translated by Johann Krapf and Edward Steere in 1891. While these translations are associated with European translators, African translators were also active. Bishop Samuel Adjai Crowther, the first African bishop in the Anglican church, produced the Yoruba translation of the Bible in 1884, and Duta Kitaakule worked with the missionary George Pilkington to produce the Luganda Bible in 1896.

The work of these pioneers provided a model for current translation work in Africa, which includes revision of missionary translations, the production of vernacular translations for peoples who still lack Bibles in their own languages and for youth and children, culture-sensitive study Bibles in African vernaculars created specifically with African audiences in mind, African Bibles in new audiovisual and electronic media, and translations of liturgies for use in worship. The baton has been passed from the missionary translator to the mother-tongue translator, in most cases with technical support and funding from Bible agencies dedicated to the translation, publication and distribution of the Holy Scriptures.

Some urban Africans, who have grown up with the Bible in English, French, Portuguese or some other colonial language, are tempted to think that the Bible in these languages is all that is needed for theologizing, Christian writing or exegetical work in Africa. But the majority of African peoples depend on the Bible in the vernacular for all these activities. Thus it is vitally important that biblical exegesis be done in the languages in which the majority of believers interact with the word of God – their mother tongues.

The future of African Christianity is inextricably intertwined with the future of the languages and cultures in which the majority of African people think and express themselves. It is in these languages that the Holy Scriptures must provide spiritual nurture and support for the life of faith, love and hope.

Aloo Osotsi Mojola

of Christ's promise to send the Holy Spirit into the world. This was the first time God's power was revealed in this way.

When people speak in tongues today, the gift is different because their words are incomprehensible to most of those hearing them. Yet tongues still have a place in our worship and personal devotion, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 14.

Interpretation and understanding from the hearers are clear signs that those speaking in tongues are doing so through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In spite of this phenomenal display of the power of God at work, not everyone believed what the disciples were saying. Hearing these men and women speaking strange languages,

some people made no attempt to understand them and simply dismissed what they were seeing and hearing as babbling under the influence of alcohol (2:13).

2:14-36 Peter's Sermon in Jerusalem

Peter responded to those who doubted and criticized the power of God that day. He had often been the spokesman for the disciples and his close relationship with Jesus had been restored after the resurrection. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, he was the natural person to speak on behalf of his fellow disciples (2:14).

Luke now changes the genre from narrative to a speech. This speech serves three purposes: it shows the fulfilment of Jesus' promise that the disciples will be his witnesses in Jerusalem (1:8), it explains what has happened in 2:1-11, and it results in many Jews turning to Christ and the establishment of a new Christian community (2:37-40, 41). It is one of the most important speeches in the history of the early church.

Peter started off with a very down-to-earth reminder that it was far too early in the morning for the disciples to be drunk yet (2:15). Given that it was a festival day, Jews could not break their fast until at least 10 a.m. He attributed the disciples' strange behaviour to the fulfilment of an OT prophecy about the coming of the Holy Spirit (2:16), and quotes Joel 2:28-32 to prove his point. Like Africans, the Jews revered those who could look into the future, and Joel was one of the prophets whose words were taken seriously. Peter was saying that the disciples to whom the Spirit had come were the first to benefit from the fulfilment of a prophecy that affirmed that the Spirit of God is meant for all people, irrespective of their gender, ethnicity and age (2:17-18). It is what enables them all – men and woman, young and old – to declare the good news of Jesus Christ to all humanity, as they were doing on that day as they spoke in tongues and through Peter's preaching. The coming of the Holy Spirit made for a powerful demonstration of unity in diversity and marked the dawn of the messianic age (Isa 2:2; Mic 4:1-3).

Culturally, Africans know what it means to be empowered by an extraordinary force in order to perform a specific function. No priest, *idibia* or *sangoma* or *abia idion* or *kuhani* in Africa has ever functioned without being acquainted with the power of the ancestors that resides within that community. An even greater truth is witnessed here in this text. Nobody can function as a Christian unless they are acquainted with the spirit of Christ.

Peter believed, based on Joel's prophecy, that the pouring out of the Spirit was one of the signs that the end of the age, the great and glorious day of the Lord, was near (2:18-20). In the midst of this calamity that would befall all humanity, only those who call *on the name of the Lord will be saved* (2:21). Calling on the name of the Lord goes beyond words

to include both faith and response. His hearers needed to do this urgently!

But who is 'this Lord' on whom they are to call? In answering this question, Peter addressed all those around him as *fellow Israelites*, establishing that he was not addressing them as an outsider but was speaking to his kinsfolk, men and women related to him by blood, religion or common ancestry. Then he started to talk about *Jesus of Nazareth, a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs* (2:22). Most of those around him would have heard of Jesus of Nazareth and his miracles. Some might even have witnessed them and heard Jesus teach in the temple. The amazing things he had done were solid proof that his ministry was approved by the God of the Bible (whom some of us now call Akwa Abasi Ibom, Chukwu, Ubagiji, Oludumare, uThixo, uNkulunkulu, Mulungu, or Onyame). God had empowered Jesus to heal diseases, provide food for the poor, destroy witchcraft, raise up the humble, deliver those affected by evil spirits and help sinners.

What had happened to Jesus less than two months earlier had not taken God by surprise. After all, God knows the end from the beginning and the beginning from the end; he knows the taste of water before he drinks, and has all the knowledge that is hidden from humanity. God had permitted wicked men to put Jesus to death on the cross (2:23). More than that, God had raised Jesus from the dead. God controls the spirit world and the world of the dead, and so death could not keep Jesus in its prison (2:24; Rom 1:4; 1 Cor 15:12-20).

To assure his hearers that resurrection was possible, Peter quoted the words of King David (2:25-28; quoting Ps 16:8-11). This great Jewish leader spoke of not being abandoned to death and decay but, said Peter, pointing to David's tomb, David had died a thousand years earlier and his body had decayed (2:29). David had actually been speaking as a prophet (for the Jews recognized him as such) and was predicting what would happen to Jesus, his descendant. David had died and been buried; his body had decayed and his spirit remained in the realm of the dead. By contrast, when Jesus died and was buried, his body did not decay and he was restored to life, as the disciples know because they have seen him and been with him after his resurrection (2:31-32).

In traditional Africa, only those with a certain family or clan lineage were allowed to assume the throne. David was assured by God that the same would be true of his throne (Ps 132:11). In fact, one of his descendants would sit on it forever – meaning that he would never die (2 Sam 7:12-13; Ps 89:35-37). Jesus met the requirement of being a descendant of David and was even addressed by the title 'Son of David' (Matt 1:1; 9:27; 15:22; 20:30; Mark 10:47-48; Luke 1:32; 18:38-39). His resurrection proved that he was not just 'a son of David' but 'the Son of David,' the Messiah who would sit on David's throne forever (2:30). Peter's parallel phrases

the resurrection of the Messiah and raised this Jesus to life are an explicit assertion that Jesus is this Messiah.

David's psalm can be interpreted as meaning that not only did David foresee the Messiah's resurrection, but he also believed that this Messiah would restore him to life one day, after many years in the land of the dead. This hope goes far beyond the sort of hope many rulers have that their descendants will thrive and bless their native land.

Jesus had not only been raised from the dead, he had also ascended into heaven and was now at the *right hand of God* (2:33; Luke 22:69; Heb 1:2-3). He now rules in the place of the greatest power in heaven and on earth. No African god has ever assumed such a position in the spiritual or physical realm as Jesus has, whose power is not limited by space, season and time. He can do anything he chooses, and all the spiritual powers of this world are under his control. From this place of power, he has sent the Holy Spirit to empower those who trust in him.

What the people of Jerusalem were witnessing was the result of Jesus' power over all powers. The dominion of the great King David cannot even be compared with that of Jesus. *David did not ascend to heaven*, but in Psalm 110:1 he acknowledged that the Messiah is seated there, where God the Father (*the Lord*) tells the Messiah (*my Lord*) to sit down at his right hand (2:34-35). No mere human can sit there. He is the only one who can be seated with God in heaven because he is *both Lord and Messiah* (2:36). As Lord, he holds the power of life and death; as the Messiah, he has been anointed to save those who believe in him.

No other being in the universe has such power. And this all-powerful Lord is the one Peter's hearers had crucified! No wonder they were overcome with fear!

2:37-47 The Effects of Peter's Sermon

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the same Peter who a mere two months earlier had been terrified by a question asked by a servant girl (Luke 22:55-57) had now preached the gospel of Christ to a large crowd. The crowd's response was further evidence that the Holy Spirit was at work.

2:37-41 Repentance and Baptism

Horried to learn that they had crucified God's Messiah, the people turned to the apostles, asking, *Brothers, what shall we do?* (2:37). We should pray that through the power of the Holy Spirit our preaching, too, will prompt our hearers to ask the same question and seek God's mercy for their souls.

Peter's answer was short and to the point: *Repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins* (2:38a). Repentance is what John the Baptist had preached (Luke 3:3). It refers to a genuine sorrow for one's sin that results in transformation of the heart and turning

away from the wrong one has been doing with the intention of never returning to it again. Such repentance is called for in all areas of life, including our personal and family life, as well as in our economic, social, cultural, religious and political involvement.

But Peter's call to repentance goes further than John the Baptist's did, for it involves not only turning from sin but also turning to Jesus. Peter is echoing Jesus' own words in Luke 24:46-47: 'The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.'

Repentance is an inward act and baptism is the outward expression of this inner repentance and commitment to follow Christ. It is an act of obedience, an unashamed declaration that one stands on the side of Jesus Christ and his church. We are affirming that we have decided to let go of African traditional and ancestral worship and worship Christ instead.

It is important that we see baptism in this light, and do not treat it merely as a ritual one has to undergo to gain membership in a church, just as some African cultures require people to undergo initiation rites if they want to become full members of a group. Yet it is true that baptism is the initiation rite for joining the Christian community. But not any baptism will do. What is required is baptism 'in the name of Jesus Christ' because without faith in his sacrifice on the cross, there is no forgiveness of sin.

Peter also assures his hearers that they will receive *the gift of the Holy Spirit* (2:38b). This gift, which God promises to all who come to Christ, is like his stamp of ownership, the confirmation of membership in the family of God. The Spirit's presence within us is the guarantee of salvation to all who receive and believe in Jesus Christ.

Some of those listening may not have been sure whether they qualified for God's promise of salvation, so Peter assured them that this offer was open to all his Jewish brothers and sisters and their children, and also to *all who are far off* (2:39). Those last words imply that the offer was open to all the converts to Judaism mentioned in 2:11 as well as to people of all races and ethnicities, as we will see in the rest of the book of Acts. The gospel of Jesus Christ is meant for all.

Wherever the gospel is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, it produces fruit. On this occasion, it produced spectacular results as three thousand people turned to Christ (2:40-41). On other occasions, in different contexts (e.g. when Paul preached in Athens and when preaching in a Muslim community), the harvest is smaller. What is important is not the numbers but faithful proclamation and spiritual growth in those who turn to Christ. The numbers turning to Christ must have further convinced the disciples that the kingdom of God must begin in human hearts rather than in specific geographic realms.

2:42-47 Formation of a New Community in Christ

If baptism marks initiation into a new community, the next step is living together in the new community. In Africa, people do not gather just for the purpose of eating, seeing the moon and telling stories – they could do those things at home on their own. But they come together because that is what communities do, in a spirit of ubuntu. The same is true of Christian communities that are created by the power of the Holy Spirit. Whenever believers in Jesus gather in one mind and heart, there is always something to gain from such a gathering.

These new believers devoted themselves to the things of God. They met together to pray and to listen as the apostles taught them from the Scriptures and passed on what they themselves had been taught by Jesus, much of which must be included in the Gospels we read today (2:42). They also rejoiced and were awed to witness many *wonders and signs performed by the apostles* (2:43).

One of the features that distinguished this new community was their purity of heart and the enthronement of Jesus as they obeyed his command to worship with all their hearts and to love their neighbours (Luke 10:27). This was the reason they decided to share everything they had. It inspired their willingness to sell their *property and possessions* in order to care for one another and particularly for those who were in need (2:44-45). We must learn from these early believers. In a materialistic era when many are encouraging Christians to accumulate possessions for themselves rather than sharing them with others, we must continue to emphasize the need to care for one another in the body of Christ.

The believers gathered to worship *together in the temple courts* where Jesus himself had so recently taught (Luke 20:1; 22:53), and when not in the temple, *they broke bread in their homes and ate together* (2:46). In the ancient world, sharing a meal was a sign of acceptance and communion. When two former enemies agreed to eat together, it was a sign of forgiveness and reconciliation. It meant that they could trust each other and not fear being attacked if they let down their guard. Eating together would have created a high level of trust and love among these early believers. It is something we may need to do too, for a ministry of hospitality can break down the ethnic and other barriers that so easily arise within the church, separating different genders, age groups, and levels of ability. Believers who worship together should know each other.

Luke's use of the term 'breaking bread' reminds us of Jesus, who 'took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me"' (Luke 22:19). Jesus' identity was also revealed when he broke bread in Emmaus (Luke 24:30). As they broke bread together, the early believers obeyed the Lord Jesus by remembering what he had done for them. Holy

Communion was a part of their lives, not an occasional ritual in a church building.

The joy, generosity and unity of the new believers impressed those around them and nourished their own hearts, leading them to praise God still more. The believers enjoyed the favour of God and the goodwill of the people around them because of their actions as followers of Christ (2:47a).

Today, we need to remember that growth is not a goal we should strive for in order to impress others with the size of our church. Rather, growth should follow from the way we demonstrate our love for God, our care for one another and our respect for human dignity. When we live in that way, we will see a reduction in poverty, death, diseases and sickness. Like the early believers, we will also see an increasing number of people coming to know God. In fact the kingdom of God was extended to such an extent through their activities that those being saved from the power of darkness were added to the church daily (2:47b).

We should also remember that this joyous, united, and popular church was a blessing from God as the church began. Later, as Jesus had warned the disciples, his followers would not enjoy such favour. Persecution would come and the believers would be scattered (Luke 21:12; Acts 5:17; 8:1). But they would never forget their glorious foretaste of what life could be like in the kingdom of God.

3:1-4:1-22 A Healing Miracle

We have been told that the early disciples of Jesus were devoted to the things of God and met regularly in the temple for prayer (2:45) and that 'wonders and signs' were done by the apostles (2:43). Now Luke gives us an example of one such miracle. It demonstrates that while faith in Christ Jesus does not always precede healing, true miracles can lead to salvation. It also reveals that salvation is not just spiritual but holistic, encompassing the entire person. This is very important for Africa's social, economic, political and cultural deliverance.

3:1-11 Healing a Blind Man

Just as Muslims pray five times a day at set hours, so the Jewish people used to have three set times for prayer, in the morning, afternoon and evening. Those who lived in Jerusalem would sometimes go to the temple to pray there, and the early Christians continued this tradition. Not surprisingly, Jewish religious customs played a major role in how Christianity was practised during its formative years. That is why Peter and John were heading to the temple at three in the afternoon (3:1).

Also like Muslims, Jews were encouraged to give alms to the poor. So beggars would often congregate near the entrance to the temple, just as they gather today in African markets. Many of those who beg suffer from some disability.

The man Peter and John met had been born with his legs so deformed that he could not walk. He had to be carried to the temple each day to beg (3:2). Like African beggars, he was probably known by sight to many of the worshippers and would have had a place where he regularly sat.

As Peter and John passed him, he appealed to them for money (3:3). But they had no money of their own to give him because the community held everything in common. However, they did not use this as an excuse to ignore him. Instead, they entered into conversation with this beggar. Peter essentially said 'I do not have a naira or kobo, rand or cent, shilling or dollar, cedi or eco or CFA franc to give you. But what I can give you is the ability to walk: *In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk*' (3:4-6). Clearly Peter and John recognized that they could not offer healing on their own authority but only by the authority of Jesus. It is important that Christian leaders do not forget this and become proud of their successes, leading them to advertise their ability as healers more than the Christ who gives the gift of healing.

The two apostles then helped the crippled man to stand on his own two feet for the first time in his life. His begging career was ended and he was set free to enjoy a normal life (3:4-7). Sadly many so-called miracles today are publicity stunts, intended to bring glory not to God but to the one performing the miracle. But this miracle was genuine. The power of Jesus was demonstrated through Peter and John to effect the healing.

It is important to note that Peter and John did not ask the man anything about his own faith before healing him. This shows that we cannot say that faith is a prerequisite for healing, and accuse those who are not healed of not having enough faith. But while this healing is not rooted in the man's faith, it does evoke faith in him, leading to his salvation.

There is a saying that 'one who receives a favour from the gods in secret should not hesitate to let his kinsmen know it in the open' and this is exactly what this man did. He could not contain his joy. He was torn between leaping and shouting in celebration and clinging to the apostles who had been the instruments of his healing (3:8, 11a). His exuberance quickly attracted a crowd, who gathered in *Solomon's Colonnade*, a part of the temple where Jesus had taught, and attracted opposition (3:9-10, 11b; see John 10:23-39.)

3:12-26 Peter's Address to the Crowd

Luke returned to the narrative genre as he told the story of this healing, but now he again adopts the speech genre as he recounts Peter's words to the gathered crowd. In this speech Peter again stressed the resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

He began by identifying with the crowd and letting his fellow Israelites know that what had happened was not a demonstration of the apostles' power but of the power of God himself through *his servant Jesus*. The word 'servant' was a reminder of Isaiah's prophecies about the suffering

that God's servant would undergo (Isa 52:13-53:12). It was the God of their ancestors (*Modimo le badimo, Abasi mme ete nyin, Iqwe ka Ala*), the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob who was honouring Jesus whom the people had rejected (3:12-14). They had killed an innocent man; more than that, they had killed the *Holy and Righteous One* (7:52; 22:14; see also Lev 11:44; Luke 1:35), the very *author of life* (John 6:27, 50-51, 63; Phil 1:21) while saving the life of Barabbas, *a murderer* (Luke 23:18-19). But God had raised Jesus from the dead, as the apostles and those with them could testify. It was through their faith in Jesus that this man had been healed (3:15-16).

Peter acknowledged that his fellow Jews and their leaders had not been aware of what a terrible thing they were doing when they killed Jesus Christ (Luke 23:34). In the same way, we too have sometimes sinned in ignorance. It was ignorance that led some cultures in Africa to kill twins or engage in human sacrifice. Today, too, there are sins that are committed in ignorance, as when mobs attack foreigners or people accused of witchcraft, and when those with disabilities are abused or kept locked up out of sight. But sinning in ignorance does not mean that we are not guilty of sinning. We cannot use ignorance as an excuse; we still need to *repent* of our sins and *turn to God* if we hope to escape punishment for our sins and enjoy the *times of refreshing* that Africa longs for (3:19). This is true even when God chooses to use our sins for his purposes, as he did when he allowed the people to kill Jesus in order to fulfil the prophecies that the Messiah would suffer and his suffering would bring salvation to humanity (3:17-18; Ps 2:1-2; Isa 53:7).

The same Jesus whom his people killed is the one who will save those who killed him from sin and punishment (Zech 12:10). Sometimes, as the Igbo proverb says, *Elelia nwa ite o gbonyuo oku* ('The person you reject today will be your helper tomorrow'). Peter stressed to his hearers that the hope of Israel is Jesus whom they killed. He is now in heaven waiting for the time when God in his mercy will send him a second time to complete his promised restoration of humanity (3:20-21; 1 Cor 15:20-28; Eph 1:10; Heb 10:12-13).

Peter pointed to Moses, one of the most revered prophets in Israelite history, and assured his audience that Jesus is the prophet Moses had prophesied God would raise up and to whom the people of Israel *must listen*. Listening involves both hearing his teaching and obeying his commands, for the voice of Jesus is the voice of God. Peter reminded his hearers that in the same prophecy Moses had said that *anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut out from their people* (3:22-23; Deut 18:15, 18, 19). Clearly this threat applied to Peter's hearers, for they had refused to listen to Jesus – but so have many in Africa.

Peter asserts that the coming of the Messiah (Jesus) had been foretold by prophets such as Samuel and other prophets after him. Here he is using Samuel as simply the first in a

EPHESIANS

The Swahili saying *Tukisikia hatuelewi, tukijifunza tunajua* makes the point that if you want to master some skill, it is not enough to be told how to do it – you must practise it yourself. Ephesians makes the same point. In the first part of the letter, Paul uses indicative verbs as he explains general truths; in the second part, he uses imperative verbs as he tells believers how they must live because of these truths. As the Ephesians apply the truths they have been taught, they will grow in their understanding of these truths.

Historical Context

Author and Date

Most scholars recognize Paul as the author of Ephesians. The evidence within the letter itself (1:1; 3:1) and ancient tradition support his authorship. Although a few scholars in the past century have disputed Paul's authorship on the basis of differences in language, style and doctrine between this letter and his other letters, their arguments do not provide strong reasons for rejecting his authorship.

The letter was written while Paul was under house arrest (3:1; 4:1; 6:20), probably in Rome, where he was a prisoner between AD 60 and 62 (Acts 28:30).

Recipients

In 1:1 the recipients of the letter are identified as Christians living in Ephesus. This city in what is now the southwestern part of Turkey was the location of the great temple of Artemis that was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Paul had preached there for several years (Acts 18:18-21; 20:31) and the miracles that had accompanied his ministry confirmed his message and clearly demonstrated the victory of Christ over occultism (Acts 19). Given the time and work Paul had put into founding the church in Ephesus, we can understand why he would write to it. However, the words 'in Ephesus' (1:1) are not found in some of the best manuscripts. This omission, combined with the lack of specific references to any problems in the local church and the absence of specific greetings, may indicate this

letter was meant to be circulated widely among the Christian churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey).

Purpose

Unlike most of Paul's letters, Ephesians does not address any particular problem, dispute or heresy. Paul writes to remind believers of the blessings or riches they enjoy in Christ and how these reflect God's eternal purpose and grace. He also makes it clear that these blessings and riches should affect how believers live.

Literary Context

Genre and Style

Ephesians is a letter that follows the letter-writing conventions of the day. However, the greeting at the start of the letter is very brief (1:1-2) and the ending is largely impersonal (6:21-24), which has led some to suggest that it resembles a sermon or speech.

When it comes to style, Ephesians has some of the longest Greek sentences of any book of the New Testament (e.g. 1:3-14; 15-23; 3:1-7), although this feature is obscured in English translations. It also has a high percentage of prepositions, participles and unique vocabulary. The marked similarities between parts of this letter and the letter to the Colossians (compare Eph 5-6 and Col 3-4) and the fact that both of these letters were delivered by Tychicus (Eph 6:21-22; Col 4:7-8) suggests that Paul probably wrote them both at much the same time, which may explain the similarities in style and content.

Immediate and Canonical Context

In the first part of this letter, Paul stresses the grace of God and believers' inability to earn salvation. He explains the blessings or riches enjoyed by believers in Christ (1:3-3:21) and the strategic position of the church in God's universal plan of salvation. Human divisions based on race, ethnicity, culture and religion are broken down in Christ. The second part of the letter deals with the details of how Christians should live in unity (4:1-6:24). Paul addresses what unity means in practice in the church and the family,

the use of spiritual gifts and how to wage spiritual warfare.

With regard to canonical context, Ephesians belongs to the group of New Testament letters known as the Pauline Epistles. It comes after Galatians and before Philippians. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon are commonly referred to as the Prison Epistles.

Theological Context

The Saving and Reconciling Work of Christ

God alone in Christ provides salvation despite the unworthiness of sinners. It is the amazing power of grace that accomplishes this. Christ alone is able to bring about reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles and to bring peace between them. Reconciliation and peace go beyond human boundaries to the restoration of relationships between God and humankind, and between God and the cosmos.

The Spiritual Privileges and Responsibilities of the Church

The church is a holy temple, Christ is the chief cornerstone, and God lives in it by his Spirit. Believers are members of God's household. Christ is exalted above all powers, a victory that believers share in. Even though the church consists of various ethnic groups, it is to be characterized by unity because Christ has broken down all the barriers of hostility. The unity of the church is based on the unity of the Godhead. The church, which is unified under Christ, testifies to the unified universe in God's new creation.

Christian Conduct

Christians are to grow in knowledge of the gospel and love for Christ and for one another. Who Christ is and what he does defines the life of a believer. This must be expressed in practical ways. It is this love that demonstrates the genuineness of the Christian faith. There is a radical difference between the new life and the former one of sin. This newness has implications for all social relationships.

Spiritual Warfare

Believers are to put on the full armour of God as they fight against the hostile spiritual powers of darkness. Because Christ has already won the victory and is

seated at God's right hand, believers too can expect to be victorious. The unified church is able to stand against the onslaught of the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

Relevance to Africa

Is Africa's problem rejection of truth or ignorance of truth? The book of Ephesians deals with both. It also deals with another major issue in Africa, namely how peoples of different ethnic, racial, cultural and religious backgrounds can live together in peace, love and harmony. Those who long for lasting peace, unity and stability among African peoples and nations would do well to apply the divine principles for living found in this book. They would also do well to take note of Paul's teaching on spiritual warfare and prayer, for many Christians in Africa still live in fear of harmful spiritual powers and curses, and some churches exploit these fears.

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5:8-14 Walk as Children of Light

5:15-20 Live Wisely

5:21-6:9 Live Responsibly

5:22-33 In marriage

6:1-4 In the family

6:5-9 At work

6:10-20 Into Battle: The Armour of God

6:21-24 Conclusion

COMMENTARY

1:1-2 Greetings

Africans generally regard someone who does not greet others as rude. Such a person will have little spiritual or social impact. Thus we can appreciate the care Paul takes to greet his readers in a way that communicates both his care and love for them.

As is customary with letters of the time, Ephesians includes mention of the author and recipients, in addition to the greeting. Paul begins by introducing himself as *an apostle of Christ Jesus (1:1a)*. He uses this term to identify himself as one of the original apostles who had seen Jesus and been divinely commissioned to represent him (1 Cor 9:1). Paul was the last to be added to this group, and he acknowledges that he had seen Christ in unusual circumstances (Acts 9:3-5; 1 Cor 15:7-8). These apostles laid the foundation that everyone else builds on (Eph 2:20-22). However, the term 'apostle' was also sometimes used of other Christian missionaries and is listed among the gifts of the Holy Spirit (4:11; see also Rom 16:7). Today, the title is sometimes used by church leaders and those who have been pioneers in establishing new churches or new Christian ministries.

Paul stresses that his apostleship is *by the will of God* (see also Gal 1:1). Consequently, his message comes with divine authority. Because of his past (see Acts 26:9-11), Paul is very aware that God's appointment of him as a messenger of the gospel is indeed an expression of his grace.

Paul uses two words to describe those to whom he is sending this letter: they are *God's holy people* and *faithful (1:1b)*. The term 'holy people' is not a description of what they are like but of what God has done for them. It indicates that they have been set apart for God and made pure and consecrated for his service, and thus it applies to both OT and NT believers. We cannot make ourselves 'holy people.' We are made such by the Lord. By contrast, the word 'faithful' refers to our commitment to maintain a good relationship with the Lord through holding fast to his word and being obedient to him. Just as in Africa we have obligations to the clan to which we belong by virtue of our birth, so now that God has chosen us to be part of the clan of 'holy people,' we have obligations to one another and to God. Any failure or refusal to live up to these obligations marks us as unfaithful.

The greeting *Grace and peace* is a common one in both Hebrew and Greek, but gains rich meaning from its association with *God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:2)*. 'Grace' is the act of giving freely when the giver is under no obligation to do so. It is quite different from giving because one has been bribed or persuaded to give. God's grace is shown in his redemption of human beings through Jesus Christ, something that was done purely on God's initiative,

as Paul is well aware (1:11-12). For Paul, grace is also God's transforming power.

Consequently, when Paul prays for grace for the believers, he is praying both that God's grace will work in their lives, transforming them, and that this grace will be apparent in their actions as they themselves show grace to others and gratitude to God.

'Peace' is not a natural state for human beings, for as a result of sin we are more familiar with hostility, conflict, selfishness and anxiety. But Christ's kingdom is characterized by peace – peace between God and those who follow him, and peace among believers. Sadly, peace is not a constant reality on the African continent. The ongoing violence in the Eastern Congo and attacks by terrorists groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al Shabaab in Kenya are examples of the ongoing wars and violence that reveal the deep need for the virtues of grace and peace. So does the prevalence of violence against women in many parts of the continent. Girls and women are subjected to violence inside and outside the family as they endure female genital mutilation, sex trafficking, domestic violence, sexual assault and rape. All of this suffering reflects the presence of sin in our lives.

1:3-3:21 Christians' Status in Christ

1:3-23 Chosen, Redeemed and Sealed

In the original Greek, 1:3-14 is all one long sentence. This type of blessing is based on the Jewish *berakhah* ('blessing') that played an important role in synagogue worship. Here it has been transformed into a Trinitarian hymn sung by the early church in praise of God the Father who chose believers, God the Son who redeemed them, and God the Holy Spirit who sealed them. Such celebrations of all the persons in the Trinity should still play an important part in our worship today.

1:3-6 Chosen by the Father

Paul starts by praising God the Father for who he is and all he has done. Speaking of him as the *Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:3a)* establishes the unique relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son. But it should not be misunderstood as implying a biological relationship. Rather, it is a theological concept that recognizes that Jesus Christ and God are both equal and eternal.

The God who created the heavens and the earth is the same one who gives us *every spiritual blessing in Christ (1:3b)*. In other words, he gives us the blessings that flow from Christ's redemption of us. These blessings are not material but spiritual; they are what is necessary for salvation and godliness. They are given to us in the *heavenly realms*, that is, the place to which Christ has been raised (1:20) and to which, by union with him in faith, all believers have been raised (2:6). Because of God's blessings, believers in Christ

can face spiritual realities with confidence, unlike those who live in fear of the spirit world and resort to witchdoctors for protection.

One of the blessings the Ephesians have received is that God *chose us in him [Christ] (1:4a)*. What an honour, to be specially chosen by God to receive his gift of salvation! This was no impulsive decision, but was made *before the creation of the world*. God selects believers individually, while Jesus Christ does the work of transforming them into a community, the church, his body. The election of believers and the gift of eternal life do not date from the cross of Christ but are part of God's eternal plan. Jesus Christ was the one who put this plan into effect, making these blessings a reality that all who believe in him may obtain.

The two great purposes for which believers are chosen are to be *holy* and to be *blameless (1:4b)*. God wants us to reflect his glory by demonstrating his holiness or purity in our lives. Both in the OT and in African traditional religions, animals for sacrifice had to be *blameless*, that is, without any blemish. Unlike these animals, we are not called to be physically perfect, but we are called to be morally perfect. This does not mean that we never sin. It means that if God has chosen us in Christ so that we can be blameless before him, all of our life should be dedicated to him.

Some people claim that God's choice and predestination of believers **(1:5a)** is unfair because it selects some and excludes others. What they fail to see is that the underlying motive for God's choice and predestination is *love (1:4c)*, which does not exclude anyone (John 3:16). Those excluded in the end are those who refuse God's offer of salvation (John 3:17-19).

Another thing that God has done for the readers is to adopt them as his sons and daughters **(1:5b)**. Adoption is a legal process that makes believers co-heirs with Christ. This special family relationship changes our whole perspective on and relationship to God. He is no longer remote and unapproachable, but becomes a Father who is near and dear to us.

Adoption is purely an act of God's grace, rooted in his *pleasure and will (1:5c)*. It is not done out of pity or motivated by selfishness or by what someone has done. Thus we should respond with thankfulness, praise and worship **(1:6)**. Africans know how to give praise and honour to national heroes such as Nelson Mandela and Miriam Makeba. Our understanding of what God has freely done for us should evoke even more praise and worship than we give to human leaders.

1:7-12 Redeemed by the Son

Having carefully explained the foundation of God's redemptive plan, Paul moves on to the drama of the cross that put it into effect. Jesus became the sacrificial Lamb for us, whose death freed us from slavery to sin and the world that had been our fate since our rebellion against God in the garden of Eden. Christ's death made peace possible between God and

us. Whereas previously the readers had been under God's wrath and judgment, now God could graciously offer *forgiveness of sins (1:7)*. The cross of Christ gives forgiveness its legal and righteous basis in dealing with the sin problem. No wonder Paul speaks of *the riches of God's grace*! When it comes to matters of redemption and forgiveness, God is never stingy. No matter how much we have sinned, he always has enough grace to redeem us and forgive us.

But while God's grace is given freely, it is not given recklessly. His actions are guided by *wisdom and understanding (1:8)*. 'Wisdom' is knowledge of the true reality of a situation, rather than of superficial facts. 'Understanding' is the discernment required to distinguish between reality and falsehood. We are always uncertain and doubtful because we have to rely on guesses and assumptions. God knows all things as they really are. We need to pray that he will share his wisdom and understanding with us as we try to follow him and work to build up his church.

God has already given the readers some insight into his thinking, for he has revealed to them *the mystery of his will (1:9a)*. This 'mystery' is God's plan of salvation that was revealed through Christ. This plan extends beyond the mere salvation of humanity to embrace all things in heaven and on earth – the entire universe **(1:10)**. The entire universe needs salvation because the fall of humanity in Genesis 3 produced a universal state of chaos and conflict (Rom 8:19-22). But at the climax of time, God will bring all things into unity and make them all subject to Christ. Jesus Christ will then be the ruler of the entire universe!

There is no way we could know that such a plan exists if God did not reveal it to us. This revelation is also a result of God's grace, here described as *his good pleasure (1:9b)*. He was under no external obligation to reveal it.

The fact that the will of God is so closely tied to Christ's work of redemption and that he is the one who is to rule has important implications. God has planned from eternity to make Jesus Christ the only means of obtaining salvation (John 14:6). Africans are familiar with the concept of intermediaries. In African traditional religions, intermediaries were often needed when approaching the ancestors or deities, and the ancestors themselves were regarded as intermediaries with the spirit world. Christ, however, is the perfect intermediary between God and humanity. All others who claim to be intermediaries must be working outside of God's will. Thus Christ should not be taken lightly or ignored. The same point is made by Paul's constant use of the phrase *in Christ* in this letter. It was 'in Christ' that God executed his plan of salvation, and it is only 'in Christ' that humanity obtains this salvation.

Paul says that *we were also chosen (1:11)*. However, these words can also be translated 'we were heirs.' In the OT, the Israelites were God's chosen people. Now believers in Christ

have also been chosen, and they have Christ as their inheritance.

The first to believe Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah were Jews like the apostles (1:12). Although many Jews rejected Jesus, there were some who believed. The faith of these few Jewish believers brought great honour, glory and praise to God. What a delight to know that our faith in Jesus Christ does the same!

1:13-14 Sealed by the Spirit

In the previous verse, Paul spoke specifically about the first believing Jews, and now he speaks of the believing Gentiles to whom he is writing. Paul assures them that they have been fully incorporated into the community of believers, the body of Christ, and thus are also heirs in Christ, equal to the believing Jews.

A distinction has to be made between merely hearing the gospel of Christ and the hearing of faith, which brings salvation. The Ephesians had truly *heard* the gospel, which is here referred to as *the message of truth*, for they had *believed* it (1:13). The gospel is no falsehood, but the truth that leads to salvation and liberation from sin and bondage. Anyone who believes this message of truth has salvation and is sealed by the Holy Spirit as a mark of identity or possession. This mark is similar to the chalk mark that an Igbo host in Nigeria puts on the wrist of a visitor. Both the chalk mark and the *seal* indicate that this person is to enjoy the privileges and protection of the entire community.

Jesus Christ sent the Holy Spirit to apply the benefits of redemption in the lives of the believers, that is, to fulfil the promises made by the Father and the Son. Not only does the Holy Spirit mark them as *God's possession*, but he also guarantees that they will indeed receive the full *inheritance* that God has graciously promised them (1:14). What the Holy Spirit does brings praise, honour and glory to God.

1:15-23 Thanksgiving and prayer

After this song of praise to the Triune God for his plan and work of salvation (1:3-14), Paul turns to thanksgiving and prayer for the believers at Ephesus. He has heard good news about their faith and their love for other believers, and he responds with joy and thanksgiving (1:15-16a). We too should rejoice when we see and hear that God is at work, rather than being envious of the success of others. When we recognize that all that God gives is from his grace, we will respond graciously.

Paul also commits himself to praying for the believers (1:16b). He does not indulge in habits that destroy a community of believers, such as not caring for one another, gossiping, being critical and circulating petitions against others. Nor is he the sort of person who will forget old friends and stop praying for them.

The primary thing for which Paul prays is that God will do even more work in the believers. He prays that the truths he has been teaching in 1:3-14 will take root in the inmost hearts of the believers at Ephesus.

His prayer is addressed to the *glorious Father* (1:17a). God is 'glorious' because of his exalted nature and his marvellous and gracious deeds. This is the God who planned our salvation from eternity and saw it implemented by Jesus Christ, his dear Son. This God is capable and gracious enough to give the Holy Spirit to help believers apply his spiritual blessings in their lives. The Holy Spirit is the *Spirit of wisdom and revelation* (1:17b) because he reveals the mind of God to us. Without him, it would be impossible for ordinary men and women to experience spiritual empowerment and exercise spiritual wisdom, insight and discernment (1 Cor 2:6-16).

The Holy Spirit is very different from the spirits that are worshipped in traditional religions. He is a person, not just an influence or a force. He cannot be manipulated or placated as spirits are in traditional religions. He is also holy and so cannot be associated with anything unholy or demonic. He helps us know God much more deeply (1:17c). Without his revelation and wisdom, our knowledge of who God is and what he does for us will be shallow and weak.

The second thing for which Paul prays is that *the eyes of your heart may be enlightened* (1:18a). The heart was regarded as the seat of human emotions, the source of all thoughts, judgments and feelings. Sin has blinded it to the things of God, and only the divine light shed by the Holy Spirit can lighten its darkness and enable it to see clearly. The readers' natural spiritual blindness means that they were unaware of three things: the hope of their calling, the riches of their glorious inheritance, and the extent of the power of Jesus' resurrection (1:18b-19). We may have an intellectual knowledge of these things, but we need to convert this 'head knowledge' into a 'heart knowledge' that excites us and moves us to love and action. The only way that this can be done is through prayer.

The enemies of Jesus thought that they could harness the power of death to silence him, but instead God used his death to demonstrate that his power is even greater than that of death and to glorify and exalt him (1:20a; Phil 2:8-11). What a contrast between his power and that of the ancestors, to whom some still pour libations!

Jesus is now seated at the *right hand* of the Father, in a place of honour, power and authority that far exceeds that of all other powers and names, whether human, demonic or angelic, both present and future (1:20b-21). He is ruler of the universe!

Africans believe in the existence of many spirit beings and mysterious spiritual forces and powers, and fear them. But they can take courage from the fact that Christ's authority and power are far greater than that of any spirit being. All such beings are subject to him since God has made him their

supreme ruler and sovereign Lord (Phil 2:9-11). They are so low compared to him that they can be said to be *under his feet* (1:22a).

God has made Christ *head over everything for the church* (1:22b). Jesus died to save people and call them into his church, and now God has given him all the power that is needed to build his church. Christ's supreme power was at work in the growth and expansion of the young church in the first century, despite the hostility it faced and the opposition of human and spiritual authorities and powers. And that same power is still at work today to protect his church, empower it and ensure its success.

If Christ is the head, then the church is *his body* (1:23a). Individuals who come to faith in Christ join a new community, a new humanity, in which there is fellowship and communion with the Lord and with each other. Christ provides all the resources his body needs to sustain it. He knows how to construct a new humanity out of the one ruined by sin. He quickens that which was dead. He recreates that which was in ruins. He regenerates that which has been deadened by the power of the flesh. He restores that which has been exhausted and impoverished. He nourishes that which has been starved and withered. He pours his life into his church, so that the church becomes *the fullness of him who fills everything in every way* (1:23b). The church itself becomes transformed into his image, so that believers become more like Christ and represent him to the world.

But Christ's redemptive work does not manifest itself only in the formation and filling of his body, the church; it also fills the whole creation. His sustaining and preserving power is for both the church and the world. That is why it is important for the church in Africa to open its eyes to environmental and social issues and do what is necessary to care for our world.

2:1-10 Made Alive with Christ

Paul has described Christ's position (1:20-23), and now he describes the position of those who believe in Christ. Whereas believers were once dead to God as a result of a life of sin (2:1-3), their salvation in Christ has made them alive to God (2:4-10).

2:1-3 Old condition: Dead to God

Before they came to know Christ, the believers in Ephesus could be described as dead in their sins (2:1) because their lives were controlled by the power of sin. Their behaviour and attitudes meant that they had as little ability to relate to God as they would have had if they were dead. Their lives were moulded by two forces: *this world* and *the ruler of the kingdom of the air* (2:2). The latter expression describes someone who exerts influence in the atmosphere as well as on earth, and who thus influences the whole world. This ruler is Satan, and it is his 'unholy spirit' that makes people disobedient to God. There is a strong spiritual correlation between disobedi-

ence to God and slavery and bondage to Satan. His aim is to make a sinful life seem so natural that when their behaviour is challenged, people will simply reply, 'But that is how the world works!'

Paul stresses that it was not just some of them who had been spiritually dead. Every single believer, whether Jew or Gentile, had been among those who were disobedient (2:3a). For proof of this, we need look no further than our former way of life, which was dominated by our flesh. We were once quite happy to do whatever it suggested, regardless of what God thought of our actions. At times, Satan or demons may have exerted a direct influence on us, but most of the time we were simply doing what our own flesh suggested. There is therefore no need to blame demons and resort to demon exorcism every time we fall into sin! It is our own nature that condemns us. We inherited this nature from Adam, who sinned and brought God's judgment on all humanity (2:3b).

2:4-10 New condition: Alive to God

What a contrast between God's character and ours! While human beings are disobedient and rebellious, God is gracious, merciful and loving (2:4). Instead of punishing our rebellion and disobedience with death, God responds with love, making us alive in Christ (2:5). No wonder Paul celebrates the *grace* of God in saving us when we had done nothing to deserve it!

God has done three important things for the Ephesian believers: he has made them alive with Christ, raised them with him, and seated them with him (2:6). The resurrection of Jesus demonstrated God's power to give life to that which was dead, and he has used that power to bring us to life and give us victory over both physical and spiritual death (see also 1:9). Instead of being under the influence of sin and Satan, we are now under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Believers share not only in Christ's resurrection but also in his authority, power and rule over principalities and powers in the entire universe. Like the Ephesian believers, we have become co-heirs with Christ! Like Christ, we are victors over sin, Satan, the world systems and death. This truth should be a powerful source of security for African believers in Christ Jesus who live in fear of menacing spiritual and physical forces and powers that seem to surround them.

The reason why God has done these things for believers is to *show the incomparable riches of his grace* (2:7). Believers have done nothing to deserve exaltation with Christ. But God has saved and exalted them to demonstrate his love, grace, mercy and kindness towards humanity now and in *coming ages*. Paul hammers this point home in 2:8a: Their salvation is not the result of any human effort or thought. It was planned by God the Father, implemented by God the Son, and is applied to them by God the Holy Spirit. All that they have to do is to accept it by *faith*.

The readers cannot even take credit for that faith, for it too is *the gift of God* (2:8b). They cannot generate faith on

their own. It comes to them through hearing the gospel of salvation or the word of God and responding to it through the power of the Holy Spirit. We receive grace before we are saved! God does not give us his grace after we have believed; he extends it to us while we are still sinners and in rebellion against him, so that we can believe.

African traditional religions tend to be transactional, encouraging the belief that we get rewarded for doing good deeds. This world view still affects many African Christians, who mistakenly believe that our salvation is earned by doing good works. If that were the case, we could boast that our salvation is something we deserve – a personal achievement. But our salvation is not something we can boast about. In fact, boasting is a sign of the pride that keeps us from acknowledging our dependence on God. Because God has taken responsibility for all aspects of our salvation, the Ephesian believers have nothing to boast about (2:9). They should instead be ashamed of their hopelessly sinful condition before God's grace reached us. Salvation is a gift, and like all gifts it is to be received with humble gratitude that overflows in praise and worship.

By God's grace, the readers are transformed into what God intended us to be. Paul reminds them that they are *God's handiwork* because he first created human beings in his own image (Gen 1:26) and then recreated us to bear his image by doing what God has been doing throughout the ages: *good works* (2:10; see also 2 Cor 5:17). We do not do such works before we are saved, and they are not a precondition for salvation. Rather, they are the fruits of salvation and show our gratitude for the grace we have been given. The more we receive the work of grace, the more fruit the Holy Spirit enables us to bear in terms of good works. These works will bring God glory, honour and praise.

2:11-22 United in One Body

An African man from a rural village met an evangelist in the city and became a Christian. Going to church for the first time, he was amazed to see someone there from an ethnic group that his own people despised. He angrily demanded, 'What is this dog doing in the church? Don't you realize that this pig has polluted the church? If you knew where he comes from, you would never have admitted him!' His attitude to a fellow believer was similar to that of Jews towards Gentiles, and vice versa. That is why Paul finds it necessary to speak of the position of both Jews and Gentiles in the church and to remind them that although they had once been separated by religion, culture and ethnicity, Jesus Christ has now united them in a new community.

Most of the believers in Ephesus were Gentiles. Paul reminds them that the Jews had dismissed them as the *uncircumcised* and had proudly called themselves *the circumcision* (2:11a). Circumcision was the rite that God had instructed Abraham to perform on every male descendent to secure that

child's place in the nation God had chosen. The Jewish pride in being God's chosen nation led them to be contemptuous of others, so that the adjective *uncircumcised* was an insult and not merely a reference to a physical state.

Paul knew the dangers posed by such pride and intolerance, so he reminds the Jews that circumcision is a human operation performed by other humans, in stark contrast with the work that God himself does in believers (2:11b). At the same time, he reminds the Gentile believers that before they became believers, they were a) *separate from Christ*, that is, they knew nothing about the promise of the Messiah; b) *excluded from citizenship in Israel*, that is, they had no part in the nation of Israel or in the coming kingdom of God; c) *foreigners to the covenants of the promise*, that is, they had no legal standing in regard to the covenants that God had made with the Jews and his promises to the Jews; and consequently they were d) *without hope and without God* (2:12). Paul emphasizes that the Gentiles had nothing to hope for in God as long as they were separated from Christ.

But whereas they had previously been 'separate' and 'foreigners,' who were *far away* from God, now they have been brought *near* (2:13). They had not gained this new position of privilege by birth or any human ritual, but through the grace of God, expressed in *the blood of Christ*. His blood had cleansed them of their transgressions and sins and had sealed a new covenant that was far superior to the Jewish covenant because it was sealed by God himself, unlike the covenant that was sealed by circumcision done by human hands.

In bringing Jews and Gentiles together, Christ himself has reconciled them to each other, and at the same time he has reconciled both of them to God (2:14). He has created a new harmony, just as Isaiah prophesied when he called the coming Messiah 'the Prince of Peace' (Isa 9:6). The *dividing wall* that separated the Jews from the Gentiles was very real. It was a barrier that kept Gentiles from entering the inner parts of the temple in Jerusalem. This was what Jesus Christ destroyed on the cross. In him there is no barrier or dividing wall between the Jews and Gentiles. In fact, in him all human differences, hostility and barriers are resolved. Jesus Christ has a cure for the evils of racism, tribalism and divided humanity.

Just as Jesus Christ abolished the enmity between Jews and Gentiles, so he abolished the Jewish ceremonial law *with its commandments and regulations* that had also been a barrier between them (2:15a). The Mosaic law made strict demands that could not possibly be kept perfectly and emphasized the differences between Jews and Gentiles, but Jesus fulfilled the law and established the new covenant by his death on the cross (see Heb 7–10).

In Christ, both Jews and Gentiles are one. He has made them into *one body* in himself (2:15b-16). They have become a new community, the church. What made this possible was the atoning work of Christ on the cross, which destroyed their enmity and brought reconciliation and peace.

Jesus Christ's gospel of peace and reconciliation was preached both to Gentiles *who were far away* and to Jews *who were near* (2:17). Both groups needed to hear the message. The Jews were privileged to have had Jesus preach to them directly, while the Gentiles had received his message through his apostles.

Once again, we have all three persons of the Trinity working together to reconcile Jews and Gentiles to each other and to God: the atoning work of Christ made reconciliation possible, and the Holy Spirit gives both groups access to the Father (2:18).

Paul now returns to his starting point in 2:12, reminding the Gentiles that before they became believers they were *foreigners and strangers* and not full *citizens* of the kingdom

of God. Many Africans who live in the diaspora, particularly in the West, have opted to take citizenship in these foreign countries. Legally, they are no longer foreigners but enjoy the full rights and benefits accorded to natural-born citizens of these countries. However, in many cases, they are not fully accepted and continue to be treated like outsiders. This is not the case with the kingdom of God. In Christ, the Ephesians not only have full rights of citizenship but also the privilege of being *members of his household* (2:19). They are now brothers and sisters with the older citizens and family members. They can have confidence in this household because it is built on a solid foundation of a) *the prophets* who foretold the coming of the Messiah, b) *the apostles* who proclaimed the gospel of Christ and founded churches, and c) *Christ*, who fulfilled the

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

In the African world view, unity is strength. The larger the unit, the better. This applies not only to the individual family (traditionally polygamous, so as to increase the number of people in the unit) but also to the clan and to the tribe. Each group traces its origins to a particular hero and is united around certain beliefs and practices. The same is true of the church.

The English word 'church' comes to us from the German *kirche* and the Scottish *kirk*, but the word has even older roots in the Aramaic word *kenishta* and the Greek word *kuriakon*, both of which mean 'belonging to the Lord.' The church is thus 'the tribe of Jesus' – called out of all tribes and nations but without renouncing those groups. However, it may at times call for practices and beliefs that override those of one's earthly ethnic group.

In the OT the term used for such a group was *qahal* ('a people called together by Yahweh') which was translated into Greek as *ekklesia* ('those called out') and used in the NT to refer to the church. The caller is God, the means of unity is faith in his son Jesus Christ, and the governing constitution is the Bible as read and obeyed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The members are referred to as believers in Christ.

The church is both an organism and an organization. It is an organism in that it is united around the saving work of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit no matter where each member is located. It is an organization in that it gathers around a common purpose and doctrine and acknowledges particular officers as leaders. The organism aspect is more important than the organizational one, but the organization is necessary if the church is to accomplish the Great Commission. The organism aspect was, however, the focus when Jesus said, 'I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not overcome it' (Matt 16:18).

Metaphors used to describe the nature of church include:

- *The body of Christ*. Jesus is the Head (the ultimate leader) who gives the church (as an organism) its life (Eph 1:22–23 and Col 1:18; 2:19).

- *A temple/building/house of God*. The focus of this metaphor is the unity of the church, for in the construction of a building each of the construction materials has a role to play. This metaphor also emphasizes the ownership of the church. It belongs to God, not to people. Jesus is both its foundation (1 Cor 3:9-17) and the chief cornerstone – the stone that controls the design of the whole building (Eph 2:20-21). The prophets and apostles are also referred to as foundations in the sense that they were the church's first leaders and the people whom God used as the initial transmitters of its doctrine and practice (see 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 2:4-8).
- *The bride of Christ* (Eph 5:31-32; Rev 19:7; 21:9). Each individual believer is intimately related to Christ from the moment of justification until the marriage ceremony presented in Rev 19:5-9.
- *A flock* (John 10:16, 27). Through his servants (initially the apostles, but now pastors, priests, or any other title used to designate those dispensing his message), Jesus gathers the members together, gives them direction, and looks after the needs of each member.
- *A vine* (John 15). The focus of this metaphor is the believer's need to be 'connected' with Christ if there is to be any nourishment for growth.

Those who belong to the church have been placed on earth for a mission. Jesus referred to this mission using the terms 'salt' and 'light' (Matt 5:13-16). Just as salt preserves food from rotting, so believers are called upon to stop the world's moral decay. Just as light helps us see our path, so believers are called to point all people to the true light (John 1:9) who changes lives – creating love where there is hatred, reconciliation where there is hostility, and hope where there is desperation. This is what the church in Africa, and worldwide, is called to do.

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