

A review of the *Africa Bible Commentary*

by

Dr Christopher Pepler¹

**Adeyemo, Tokunboh (general editor) 2006. *Africa Bible Commentary*.
Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers.**

My qualifications for reviewing this commentary are two decades in full time pastoral church leadership and a decade of academic research and teaching. Right up front, however, let me describe the limitations of this review. Firstly, I have not read all 1,585 pages of this one-volume commentary on the whole Bible. Instead, I have focused on the first three chapters of Genesis, the first 15 chapters of Exodus, Malachi, John, Acts, First Corinthians, and Revelation. I have not read all of the 78 articles but I have attempted to follow key threads through them. The second limitation is my own cultural background and education. I was born in South Africa, have lived here my whole life and my ancestors go back to the 1820 settlers. However, my cultural upbringing was decidedly Western in orientation. My education too was heavily influenced by European thought patterns and traditions. The commentary I have been asked to review has been produced almost exclusively by black Africans whose roots go back not to the 1820 English settlers but to the migratory tribes of the African continent. Compared to them I lack understanding of many of the

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cultural nuances and heart attitudes implicit in much of the work I am reviewing.

In the vision statement it says, “The general aim of the commentary is to make the word of God speak relevantly to African realities today.” The African Bible Commentary (ABC) has certainly fulfilled this aspect of the vision. The various commentaries within the ABC include references to African traditions and cultural idiosyncrasies as well as aspects of modern application within the current African reality. In addition to this, the majority of the articles cover issues ranging from “Christian Education in Africa” to “HIV and AIDS” and “Initiation Rites”. I found most of the articles I read informative and I have no doubt that they will be of benefit to Christian pastors and teachers throughout Africa.

The quality and depth of the various commentaries differ fairly substantially. For instance, I found the commentary on the first fifteen chapters of Exodus excellent. The author’s comments are very informative. He uses several African sayings and makes many helpful applications of the text within the African context. He avoids liberationist themes as well as allegorical interpretations. The commentary on John’s Gospel is also very good. The treatment of 1 Corinthians 14 is particularly good. The commentary on Malachi, however, is not as good. In Malachi 2:13-16 the author misses a key opportunity of dealing with the endemic problem of wife abuse. Also, in 3:8-9 the author essentially endorses the practice of tithing without commenting on other understandings and applications of the concept of Christian financial giving. I was disappointed with the commentary on Genesis 1-3. I found that it failed to introduce some important current theological issues such as the evolutionist versus creationist debate—this issue is skipped over with the words, “This account of the creation in six days (whether taken literally as twenty-four hour days or figuratively as representing long periods of time) reveals a methodical God who created different things one after another with precise purpose.” Also, it does not give at least introductory pointers to the major treatments of key doctrines such as the Holy Trinity—all that the two authors write about this key doctrine is, “the plural ‘let us’ also suggests the community of the Godhead, which involves three persons—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (Barnabe Assohoto and Samuel Ngewa, 11). In addition, it deals inadequately with major current African issues such as stewardship of

the natural habitat and domination of women by men. The authors' comments on the issues they do address are rather moralistic and "preachy". A more serious problem for me is that the authors place the nature and impact of original sin primarily in the context of a breakdown in original community rather than rebellion against God. I was also surprised that the authors give no introduction to or Scriptural evaluation of the major African creation myths such as the Shilluk "an African story of the creation of man" and the Yoruba "the creation of the universe and life".

The ABC gives much valuable information on, and insight into, African traditions, customs and cultural peculiarities. In most of the commentaries I read, the authors have made a serious attempt to provide relevant and helpful insights and applications. There are however some disappointing exceptions. Citing the commentary on Genesis again, the authors make a number of contextual applications that I don't find helpful. For instance, with reference to God's creative words "let there be", they attempt an application to African context with, "If we listen to his word and submit our plans to his will, he can speak to raise Africa to new heights" (Barnabe Assohoto and Samuel Ngewa, 11). Generally true perhaps, but not specific enough to be either helpful or particularly contextual. Another attempt at making the commentary on Genesis relevant to Africans says, "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" (13). Again, this is generally applicable but neither particularly African nor within the context of the passage.

I would expect a one-volume commentary produced by so many scholars to contain a range of doctrinal understandings. I think the editor was correct in not enforcing strict compliance to one particular doctrinal or philosophical position. For instance, the commentary on Ephesians 1:4 appears to support typical Calvinist teaching (although the commentary on the next few verses appears to moderate or even negate this). It would have been helpful if the author had been required to present at least the essence of the major competing views. I found this to be a weakness in the ABC as a whole. Another example is 1 Corinthians 12 where the author gives a particular, and conservative, interpretation of what constitutes a Word of Wisdom and a Word of Knowledge, without exposing the reader to other major understandings of

these gifts. Much of the material I reviewed is essentially one-dimensional in that the authors present their views without introducing the other major viewpoints.

The greatest strengths of the ABC are its African character and its many excellent articles and commentaries. However, its Africanisation is also its most problematic area. Syncretism is a constant potential threat to the integrity of both the Bible and the church. Another allied challenge is the need to guard against interpreting the Bible from the current cultural context. The ABC does not demonstrate a consistent policy concerning these issues. In several instances, the authors come perilously close to the line between exegesis and eisegesis. Here are a few examples. In the article entitled “New Family Relationships”, the author refers to sacrifices for protection but does not comment critically or evaluate in any way against the Biblical revelation. In the article on “Taboos” (Ernestina Afriyie, 159), the author states that “we should carefully examine taboos to see what they tell us about God and his self-revelation.” The conservative evangelical approach would be to evaluate taboos against the Scriptural record rather than to accept them as a peculiar form of general revelation. The article entitled “The Role of the Ancestors” (Yusufu Turaki, 480) contains a number of potentially problematic statements, such as “... some African theologies have proposed that Jesus be presented as an African ancestor. This idea is not without merit, for Jesus is like the ancestors in that people can take their problems to him.” The author then qualifies his statement by saying, “But there is a danger that making him an ancestor may be tantamount to reducing his post-resurrection elevation as Lord of lords”. He then proposes that “the best approach may be ... [to say] that Jesus has come to fulfil our African ancestral cult”. This approach is fraught with difficulties and dangers. It assumes that most traditional African religions are both “of God” and generally similar to the religion of the ancient Hebrews. I do not believe that either of these assumptions can reasonably be supported from Scripture or from an analysis of many forms of traditional African religion. In the article “Yahweh and Other Gods” (Abel Ndjerareou, 861), the author makes a similar claim when he writes that “we can use the name of the Supreme Being of African peoples to refer to God.” Could we equally argue that Allah is just another name for the God of the Old Testament, or that Krishna is just another name for Jesus? Counterbalancing

these tenuous contentions, I found the article “Syncretism” (Lawrence Lasisi, 900) to be well reasoned and helpful. Here the author argues for the legitimacy of “adapting any traditional elements that make one’s faith more culturally relevant.” He goes on to caution Evangelicals not to “allow their fear of syncretism to prevent them from contextualizing their faith to allow for meaningful local expression of it.” Then he makes the all important observation that “such contextualization must be accompanied by a firm stand for the absolutes or cores of the gospel message. We need to be rigorous in guarding against any form of Christo-paganism, but there is nothing wrong theologically and missiologically with integrating culture and the gospel as long as the finality and supremacy of Jesus Christ alone as our Lord and Saviour is not sacrificed at the altar of multicultural and religious relativism.” Well put indeed!

Just as the first commentary in the ABC is problematic, so is the first article, “Scripture as the Interpreter of Culture and Tradition” (Kwame Bediako, 3-4). This lead article contains a number of questionable statements. Contextualisation and enculturation are complex issues and perhaps a longer and deeper article would have more adequately presented the author’s ideas. As it stands, however, I found the article contentious and potentially misleading. For instance, “Africans have a strong sense of their pre-Christian religious journey and should be alive to this participation in Scripture” assumes acceptance, as I have previously noted, that most traditional African religions are godly and that African history parallels, or even equates to, Biblical history. Certainly several traditional beliefs and practices appear to belie the contention that in general African traditional religion should be regarded as holy. The author also states that “[w]e should not focus on extracting principles from the Bible and applying these to culture.” In my opinion, that is exactly what we should be doing. Our culture certainly influences the way we read doctrine, but the general direction of interpretation should be from Scripture to culture and not from culture to Scripture. The commentator later writes, “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”. Here a traditional African god is presented as the God of Scripture and a manifestation of Jesus! In my view, the author has stepped well over a crucial contextual line here.

The ABC is a valuable contribution to the body of commentaries available and has a unique range of Africanised comments and applications. However, parts of it need to be read with discretion. Most of it is excellent, but some commentaries and articles are questionable. Whilst it provides valuable background and African contextual material, it tends to lack adequate introductory treatment of several key issues and doctrines. A careful re-editing could greatly improve this work and provide a second edition purged of dubious comments and enhanced by the inclusion of a fuller range of introductions to doctrines and key societal issues. The commentary will most likely continue through several reprints and we should regard it as a work in progress. It constitutes a major undertaking and the editor has done a remarkable job of bringing great diversity generally within sound Scriptural parameters. With suitable attention to its tendency towards theological one-dimensionality and its attempts to justify traditional African religions rather than evaluate them against the Biblical record, the ABC should evolve into an even more worthy one-volume African commentary of the Bible.