

THE AFRICA BIBLE COMMENTARY

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Introduction

On July 5, 2006, the *Africa Bible Commentary* was officially presented to the wider public.¹ The *ABC*, as the commentary is known, is a joint project of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa and the International Mission Organisation, SIM (Serving in Mission).² The press-release states that the *ABC* is a one-volume, 1600 page Bible commentary, written by Africans for Africans.³ The *ABC* gives a 'section-by-section exegesis and explanation of the whole Bible as seen through the eyes of African scholars'.⁴ Besides the Bible commentary, the *ABC* also includes 72 short articles on relevant social, cultural and theological issues. The book has a separate section called *Guidelines for using the ABC*, to aid non-academic readers in using the commentary.⁵ In total seventy African scholars from a variety of countries and denominations were involved in the project.

The launch of the *ABC* in Nairobi attracted considerable attention, in Africa and abroad. Not only the church press, but also secular media, such as the South Africa Broadcasting company and the BBC, have paid

¹<http://www.africafiles.org/article.asp?ID=12277&ThisURL=/interfaith.asp&URLName=Interfaith%20Relations>; consulted: August 21 2006.

² Serving in Mission (SIM) is the continuation of the Sudan Interior Mission. When the Sudan Interior Mission merged with mission organisations working outside Africa, it was decided to maintain the acronym SIM. In 2000 the name 'Serving in Mission' was adopted. For further information about SIM see www.sim.org.

³ Details T. Adeyemo (ed.), *The Africa Bible Commentary: a one-volume commentary written by 70 African scholars*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan 2006. ISBN-10: 0-310-26473-1. In Africa *ABC* is published and distributed by World Alive Publishers, Nairobi and by The book consists of 1584 pages to be exact.

⁴ T. Adeyemo, 'General Introduction', *Africa Bible Commentary*, ix.

⁵ 'Guidelines for using the ABC', *Africa Bible Commentary*, xi ff. Note: the total number of articles is 79, but some are introductions to Bible books and/or parts of the Bible rather than articles on social, cultural or economic topics relating to Africa.

attention to the book.⁶ The BBC Africa-News headlines on July 5 cited the *ABC's* general editor Tokunboh Adeyemo, who stated that *ABC* was intended as 'a weaving of word of the Bible and the word of Africa'.⁷ The article continues: 'Written by 70 contributors from 25 countries, the Africa Bible Commentary aims to explain the Bible from an African perspective. It contains local proverbs and folklore to help interpret the scriptures. The commentary also addresses contemporary issues such as HIV/AIDS, female genital mutilation, refugees, ethnic conflict and witchcraft.'⁸

The ink of the *ABC* is barely dry on the eve of the publication of the 2006 volume of *Analecta Bruxellensia*. Therefore, the author of this article cannot claim to have read all 1600 pages of the *Africa Bible Commentary*. Yet a thematic volume on 'The Bible in Africa' would not be complete without some short impressions of this new monumental work of African Biblical scholarship. This article wants to give a brief introduction to the *ABC*, sketching the background of the commentary, its intended purpose and highlighting the way in which the authors of the *ABC* have endeavoured to contextualise their commentary to the African setting.

Background

The first seeds for the *ABC* were sown in Nairobi in 1994, during the second Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly (PACLA II). At some stage during this convention African Christian Leaders identified 'deficient knowledge of the Bible and faulty application of its teachings' as a major flaw in African Christianity. Though rejoicing about the enormous church growth in Africa during the last century, the African leadership expressed concern about the fact that quantitative and qualitative growth had not kept pace with each other in the African churches, especially not on the grass-root level.⁹ Though African Biblical scholars have published a substantial number of books and articles – among them the grand work *The Bible in Africa* edited by Musa Dube and Gerald West¹⁰ – the majority of the publications are aimed at an academic readership. Hence the Executive

⁶ E.g. http://www.sabcnews.com/south_africa/general/0,2172,130825,00.html (consulted: August 24 2006); <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5152234.stm> (consulted: July 6 2006)

⁷ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5152234.stm>; date, July 5 2006.

⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5152234.stm>; date, July 5 2006.

⁹ T. Adeyemo, 'General Introduction', viii.

¹⁰ M.W. Dube and G.O. West (eds), *The Bible in Africa. Trajectories, trajectories and trends*. Leiden: Brill 2001.

Committee of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa decided there was a need for a commentary meant for 'Christian leaders at the grassroots level – pastors, students, and lay leaders.'¹¹ The mission organisation SIM, which had been involved in the distribution of books for pastors and evangelists, had also been contemplating to initiate an all-Africa Bible commentary project. Thus, the two organisations joined hands in the *ABC* project.

In January 2001, there was a meeting on the *ABC* at the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST). Participants were the AEA Executive Committee, some representatives of the SIM leadership and a number of others who were interested in the project. During the gathering an editorial board of four was selected: Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nigerian) was elected as general editor, Samuel Ngewa (Kenyan) was chosen as editor for the New Testament commentaries submitted in English, Tewoldemedhin Habtu (Eritrean) would assume responsibility for editing Anglophone Old Testament commentaries, whilst Issiaka Coulibaly (Ivorian) would take on editing the Francophone Old Testament contributions. In 2002, the group was extended by a French-speaking editor for the French New Testament contributions (Solomon Andria, a Malagasy). With Adeyemo, Habtu and Ngewa connected to the NEGST in Nairobi and Coulibaly and Andria connected to the Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de l'Alliance Chrétienne (FATAC) in Ivory Coast, the editorial board had two continental concentration points, one in East Africa and one in West Africa, representing English-speaking as well as French-speaking countries. Both were firmly grounded in evangelical academic theological institutions.¹² Kwame Bediako (Ghana), Isabel Phiri (Malawi) and Yusufu Turaki (Nigeria) were asked to serve as theological advisors. The meeting agreed on five editorial guidelines for the *ABC*:

- 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

¹¹ T. Adeyemo, 'General Introduction', x.

¹² It is commendable that right from the start the editorial board consisted of people from both Anglophone and Francophone Africa. All too often there is little communication and cooperation between the Anglophone and Francophone parts of Africa.

true to the biblical texts, it must apply biblical teachings and truths to African realities;

- The contributors of ABC should be chosen to reflect the diversity of Africa as regards denominations and languages, and should include both men and women. The diversity of contributors should also find expression in their commentaries;
- 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.¹³

Only five years later, in July 2006, the English edition of the *Africa Bible Commentary* has been realised.¹⁴ A French edition is expected in 2007 and there are plans for other translations of the ABC in languages such as Portuguese, Swahili and possibly Amharic.¹⁵ Considering the funds necessary for the project, the difficulties in communications within Africa and the time investment of the generally overburdened African theologians who most of the time serve in the double function of pastors and lecturers, this is a major accomplishment.

Contextualisation

The *Africa Bible Commentary* aims to be a contextualised African Bible commentary. The vision statement for the *Africa Bible Commentary* explicitly mentions that the intention of the commentary is 'to make the word of God speak relevantly to African realities'.¹⁶ Contextualisation as a term became popular in the 1970s when the Theological Education Fund (WCC) adopted the expression in their report *Ministry in Context*.¹⁷ Within theology contextualisation refers to those theologies that emphasise the interaction between context and gospel and have special attention for theologies conducted 'from below'.¹⁸

¹³ T. Adeyemo, 'General Introduction', ix.

¹⁴ The first print consisted of 46.000 copies.

¹⁵ <http://www.sim.co.uk/standard.asp?id=1448>; Consulted: August 24 2006.

¹⁶ 'The Vision', *Africa Bible Commentary*, x.

¹⁷ TEF commission on mission and world evangelism, 'Ministry in Context, the Third World program of the Theological Education Fund 1970-1977, 31

¹⁸ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: paradigm shifts in theology of mission*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1991, 420ff.

Robert Schreiter in his book *Constructing local theologies* has identified two steps in the process of contextualisation: the analysis of the context and the identification of specific needs or concerns of a context. Analysis, according to Schreiter, is done by listening carefully to a culture/context in order to understand its rhythm, its structures, strengths and weaknesses. The analysis is followed by an evaluation of the particular needs and concerns of a context and leads an agenda for contextualisation. Should the community for example be in need of reconstituting their social identity, then contextualisation could focus on the development of an 'ethnographic theology'; if the community is more concerned with social change and countering oppression, then contextualisation could concentrate on developing a liberation theology.¹⁹

Schreiter²⁰ and scholars like Justin Ukpong²¹ and David Bosch²² have roughly differentiated between two strands within contextual theologies. All three point to an inculturation (or indigenisation) model and a socio-economic model (such as liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology etc.).²³ Both components of contextualisation, attention for

¹⁹ R. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1985, 39ff.

²⁰ R. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 12-16.

²¹ J.S. Ukpong, 'What is contextualization?', *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, 43(1987), 161-168.

²² D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 420ff. Joan Burke, writing about inculturation, distinguishes between two types of inculturation: inculturation from the top down and inculturation from the bottom up. With 'inculturation from the top down' Burke indicates that form of inculturation that starts with the study of traditional institutions and concepts in view of adapting them to Christian practice. With the term 'inculturation from the bottom up' Burke refers to that type of inculturation that is based on the lived experience of people. Though this form of inculturation also requires a great deal of study and reflection, the starting point of this form of inculturation is the lived experience of people who have received the gospel and shaped it into their own cultural concepts. J.F. Burke, *These Catholic Sisters are all Mamas! Towards the inculturation of the sisterhood in Africa, an ethnographic study*, Leiden: Brill 2001, 198ff. Burke argues that this latter form of inculturation is closer to the people and their immediate experience and therefore should receive precedence over inculturation from above. J.F. Burke, 'Religious Profession Rites as Barometers: The Igbo - Nigeria' in A.Gittins, *Life and Death Matters: the practice of inculturation in Africa*, Nettetal: Steyler Verlag 2000, 159-173.

²³ Ukpong, Bosch and Schreiter each have their own nuances and emphases, but generally speaking distinguish between these two main models, immediately adding that the two strands easily melt together.

inculturation and for the socio-economic and political context, can be found with the *ABC*.

The *ABC* was written by a large group of authors; seventy in all. This means that there is no homogeneity in the way in which the contextualisation process has been done. Rather, there is a large variety in the ways in which - and the extent to which - contextualisation is realised. Some commentators, such as Felix Chingota (Leviticus), Isabel Phiri (Ruth) and Joe Kapolyo (Matthew), have an abundance of references to African contexts, whilst others, like Tewoldemedhin Habtu (Ezekiel), Douglas Carew (Hosea) or Paul Kisau (Acts of the Apostles), are far more reserved in making connotations to the African setting.

The *General Introduction* Of the *ABC* speaks about making use of African proverbs, metaphors and stories to make it speak to African believers in the villages and cities across the entire continent.²⁴ The range by which contextualisation is realised, however, is much wider than the *General Introduction* would seem to suggest. Apart from African proverbs, metaphors and stories, the *ABC* commentators make use of analogies between the Biblical setting and the African context, insert African folktales, give examples from and applications to everyday African life, make exhortations to the African reader and refer to important and well-known African personalities and events. Often the examples, stories or proverbs cited betray the background of the author. The seventy-plus short articles on African issues that are included in the *Africa Bible Commentary* are also a means to contextualise the commentary. They give an in-depth examination of topics specifically relevant to the African public.

Modes of contextualisation

As stated above, the *Africa Bible Commentary* makes use of a variety of ways to contextualise the Biblical message for African readers. Roughly speaking, three modes - analogy, proverbs and folktales - focus on the African cultural context (inculturation). Four other methods - examples, applications to the African context, exhortations and references to African personalities and events - focus on the socio-economic and political

²⁴ T. Adeyemo, 'General Introduction', viii and ix. Note: Added is: '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 Biblical story and cheap scholarship.'

African setting. The articles form a separate category in which often both aspects are highlighted.

The first method of contextualisation that jumps to the attention of the reader is that of analogy. As has often been pointed out by scholars such as Mbiti²⁵ and Ukpong,²⁶ there are numerous parallels between Biblical customs and worldview and African customs and worldview.²⁷ The authors of the *ABC* have made abundant use of parallels to contextualise the message of scripture. Solomon Andria, for example, in his commentary of Colossians 1:15, where Jesus is called the firstborn over all creation, points out that also in many African cultures the firstborn has certain privileges.²⁸ Anastacia Boniface-Malle draws a parallel between the prescribed punishment for adultery in the book of Numbers (Num. 25:13) and that of the Meru people of Tanzania.²⁹ Many more analogies are mentioned, such as the belief in diviners (Obad. 1:1), the breaking of taboos and purification rites (Rom. 5:12) and arranged marriages (Mt. 1:18), to name just a few. A topic like circumcision (Gen. 17:10-14 and Col. 2:11) is not just subject of an analogy, but also time serves as an opportunity to criticise traditional harmful practices such as female genital mutilation. In a short article that is linked to the Gen. 17 story, Silicy Mbura Muriithi vehemently rejects FGM and calls upon the churches to campaign against these and other traditional harmful practices. Thus, analogy both serves as an affirmation of certain traditional practices as well as an opportunity to condemn certain behaviours.

²⁵ J. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African background*, London: Oxford University Press 1971.

²⁶ J. Ukpong, *Ibibo Sacrifice and Levitical sacrifice: a comparative study of the sacrificial systems of the Ibibio people of Nigeria and ancient Israel as recorded in the book of Leviticus*, Rome: Urbaniana Press 1987.

²⁷ Ukpong in his article on 'Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa' has observed that comparative studies between the world of the Bible and the African reality formed the first phase of biblical studies in Africa. J. Ukpong, 'Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa' in M. Dube and G. West, *The Bible in Africa*, 13.

²⁸ Commentary to Col.1:15; *ABC* 1451.

²⁹ Commentary to Num. 25:13; *ABC* 197. Note: she also draws the attention to the death penalty in Shari'ah law for adultery, especially for women.

Another mode employed is the usage of African proverbs. John Mbiti, renowned for his involvement in the *African Proverbs Series*,³⁰ in his eminent *Introduction to African Religion* states that proverbs and myths form 'a rich deposit of the wisdom of many generations' which has been handed down orally for centuries. They are 'therefore, a major source of African wisdom and a valuable part of African heritage.'³¹ The *ABC* features a rich collection of African proverbs throughout the commentary; the remarks on Deuteronomy (Luciano Chianeque and Samuel Ngewa) alone include more than 15 of them. Also the booklet of Ruth abounds in proverbs. Chianeque, for example, enlightens the passage of Deutr. 2:25 where Israel has to conquer the Transjordan area with the Ovimbundu proverb 'It is God who pounds ombowe for the one-armed person'. He writes: 'When preparing ombowe, a food made from cassava, it is first boiled and then pounded with a pestle. A normal person holds the pestle with both hands, but for the person with only one arm, it is God who helps him or her to pound ombowe. The Israelites might feel weak compared to the nations they confront, but God will be their second arm.'³² Commenting on the clash between Peter and Paul which is mentioned in Gal. 2:11ff, Samuel Ngewa cites the Kamba proverb that 'Axes in one basket will not fail to clang,' and adds: 'It is not surprising that there was sometimes disagreement between Peter and Paul, who were both strong leaders in the young church.'³³ Thus, the message of scripture passages is summarized or elaborated upon by proverbs.

Not only proverbs, but also folktales and myths are part of the traditional corpus of African wisdom. Scholars like Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro have used folktales as *leitmotifs* in their theologies.³⁴ Also in the *ABC* there are references to folktales and other African stories. The most elaborate tale can be found in the commentary to Matthew 7:5ff where Joe

³⁰ J.S. Mbiti (series editor), *African Proverbs Series*, Five Volumes. Pretoria: University of South Africa (UNISA) Press, 1997. (Also published by Nairobi: Daystar and Ibadan: Sefer Publishers).

³¹ J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, Oxford, Heinemann 1991 (second edition), 8. The book has a chapter which lists African proverbs starting from page 208.

³² Commentary to Deut. 2:25; *ABC* 215.

³³ Commentary to Gal. 2:11ff.; *ABC* 1418.

³⁴ Oduyoye, M.A., *Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1995. In *Daughters of Anowa* Oduyoye makes use of Akan and Yoruba myths. M. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2002, 13. Kanyoro uses one of the famous hyena myths in her book.

Kapolyo relates a Bembe folk story about outsmarting a leopard. The account is told to enlighten Jesus' saying that one should not give dogs what is sacred nor throw pearls to pigs.³⁵ The use of folktales and other stories not only ties in with the African custom that knowledge and wisdom are transmitted by means of stories, but also points to an important African contribution to theology in general, that of narrative theology.³⁶ The in-depth articles of the commentary form an in-between category of contextualisation.³⁷ On the one hand, there are articles that address socio-economic and political issues such as debt (Stephen Adei), refugees (Celestin Musekura), street children (Solomon Gacece), religious pluralism (Tokunboh Adeyemo) and land (Dwight Mutonono and Makoto Mautsa)³⁸, whilst at the same time cultural issues such as female genital mutilation (Sicily Muriithi), funeral and burial practices (Joe Simfukwe), initiation rites ((Judith Milasi) and taboos (Ernestina Afriyie) are discussed.³⁹ Also

³⁵ Commentary to Mt. 7:6; *ABC* 1124. Kapolyo writes: 'The point of Jesus' saying about pearls and pigs can be illustrated by using a Bembe folk tale about a dangerous leopard that lived in a very tall tree. Many attempts to lure it down from the tree had failed. One day a man brought a dog and a goat to the tree. He tied them up and offered them food. He set *nshima* [a staple food for humans, which dogs eat and goats don't] before the goat and grass before the dog. Each refused to eat the food it was offered. But the man persisted in trying to get the dog to eat grass and the goat to eat *nshima*. The watching leopard eventually told the man to give the *nshima* to the dog and grass to the goat. The man responded with the proverb: '*Kalangilala wa muntu: apalama*' [He who would guide a man must draw near]. If the leopard really wanted to help him, then it would have to come down from the tree and show him how to feed the two animals. Then the man went on trying to feed each animal the wrong food. Eventually the leopard could no longer bear such stupidity, and came down from the tree, grabbed the *nshima* and put it in front of the dog and set the grass before the goat. But while it was doing this, the man brought out his axe and killed the leopard. A key element of this tale is the stupidity of trying to feed good food to an animal that will not eat it. Everyone knows that this is futile, and that the only result will be frustration for all concerned. The same idea lies behinds Jesus' saying: *Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw pearls to pigs.*'

³⁶ For more details about narrative theology see M.A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2001, 17 ff.

³⁷ A few articles focus on biblical scholarship only e.g. A. Ndjereou, 'Introduction to the Pentateuch', *ABC*, 7; S.Ngewa, 'Intertestamental Period', *ABC*, 1099 etc.

³⁸ S. Adei, 'Debt', *ABC*, 779; C. Musekura, 'Refugees', *ABC*, 321; S. Gacece, 'Street children', *ABC*, 1240; T. Adeyemo, 'Religious Pluralism', *ABC*, 1532; D. Mutonono and M. Mautse, 'Land', *ABC*, 290.

³⁹ S. Muriithi, 'Female Genital Mutilation', *ABC*, 37; J. Simfukwe, 'Funeral and Burial Rites', *ABC*, 1462; J. Milasi, 'Initiation Rites', *ABC*, 101; E. Afriyie, 'Taboos', *ABC*, 159.

culturally important theological issues such as dreams (T. Adeyemo), healing (Kingsley Larbi), polygamy (Isabel Phiri) and ancestors (Yusufu Turaki) pass the review.⁴⁰ Though the authors do not hesitate to take a theological stance, most articles are balanced and carefully worded. Isabel Phiri, for example argues that there is a tendency towards polygamy in the New Testament. She adds, however, that though most women reject polygamy and most evangelical denominations encourage monogamous marriages as God's ideal, polygamists can and should be accepted as full members of the church.⁴¹ Likewise, Yusufu Turaki on the topic of ancestors does not condemn ancestral worship as such, but states that 'Jesus has come to fulfil our African ancestral cult and has taken the place of our ancestors. (...) All the 'intermediaries' of African theology or of any other religion or culture, are inferior to the person and work of Jesus Christ.'⁴² Thus the articles seek to search to formulate theological stances on the day to day African realities.

Contextualisation is also done by means of examples from the African context. Daniel Bitris in his commentary to Amos 8:6 (about salesmen using false scales to cheat the poor) states:

These business practices are not confined to Amos' time. Some local traders still know the bottoms of their measures upwards to cheat unsuspecting customers. They adjust their scales so that they do not show true weights. When potatoes, oranges, tomatoes and other fruits and foodstuffs are sold in heaps or bags, some traders place defective ones or very small pieces at the bottom of the bag, while claiming that everything in the bag is the same size and quality as the ones on top. Oils may be mixed with poorer quality or cheaper products. Some of these ways of cheating not only steal customers' money but also hurt their wealth. Amos' condemnation of these practices still resonates today.⁴³

The examples in the *ABC* are many. The story of Mt. 2 is exemplified by the plight of Angolan refugees in Zambia (Meheba Resettlement Scheme),

⁴⁰ T. Adeyemo, 'Dreams', *ABC*, 993; K. Larbi, 'Healing', *ABC*, 447; I. Phiri, 'The Bible and Polygamy', *ABC*, 429-430; Y. Turaki, 'The Role of the Ancestors', *ABC*, 480.

⁴¹ I. Phiri, 'The Bible and Polygamy', *ABC* 430.

⁴² Y. Turaki, 'The Role of Ancestors', *ABC* 480.

⁴³ Commentary to Amos 8:6, *ABC* 1039.

Jesus' saying of salt and light is illustrated by the salt production in the Mpika district in Zambia whilst the parable of the hidden treasure (Mt. 13:44) is explained with the example of the discovery of the Zambia Copperbelt Mines in 1922.⁴⁴

Examples as well the applications of biblical passages to the African contexts – another mode of contextualisation - make the *ABC* lively and enticing to read. The biblical texts receive new and up to date dimensions which address day to day issues. The theme of the book of Esther - discrimination on the basis of race – applied to the African context, speaks about the condemnation of tribalism, racism and apartheid (Est. 3:6).⁴⁵ Is. 56:6ff., which speaks about the stranger who feels lost in his new setting, is applied to disintegration of traditional community structures due to rapid urbanisation and globalization.⁴⁶

Often the examples from and applications to the African context are followed by exhortations to the (African) readership. The already quoted commentary to Matthew 2:13ff by Joe Kapolyo not only connects the story of the flight to Egypt to the reality of millions of African refugees but also admonishes his readers not to despise refugees: 'We must not despise refugees or other marginalized people. The signs are already clear that Europe will most likely be saved from the logical fulfilment of humanistic secularism by the masses of downtrodden migrants from the developing world. In big cities like London, the majority of churchgoers are recent immigrants from the southern hemisphere.'⁴⁷

Last but not least the *Africa Bible Commentary* contains numerous references to African public personalities and events. Particularly striking is the reference to the martyrs under the regime of Idi Amin at the end of John's gospel (John 21:21); martyrs who died in the expectation of resurrection in Christ.⁴⁸ Similarly arresting is the parallel between Herod and Mengistu in Mt. 2:9-11.⁴⁹ But these are just two examples among many. Paul Kisau in his commentary of the letter to the Romans mentions

⁴⁴ Commentary to Mt. 2:13ff, *ABC* 1112; Commentary to Mt. 5:13, *ABC* 1120; Commentary to Mt. 13:44, *ABC* 1138.

⁴⁵ Commentary to Est. 3:6; *ABC* 562.

⁴⁶ Commentary to Is. 56:6ff, *ABC* 846.

⁴⁷ Commentary to Mt. 2:13ff, *ABC* 1112.

⁴⁸ Commentary John 21:21; *ABC* 1296.

⁴⁹ Commentary Mt. 2:9-11; *ABC* 1111.

the genocide in Rwanda and the ongoing civil war in Congo, whilst Joe Kapolyo connects the beatitudes to the crisis in Darfur and makes numerous references to Apartheid, Nelson Mandela and the Sharpeville Massacre (e.g. Mt. 13:31, Mt.22:15). Also the clashes between Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria are mentioned (Dan. 3:19 and Dan. 10:13) whilst Tokunboh Adeyemo in the same commentary to Daniel makes a number of references to the enormous debt of African countries (Dan. 1:1ff and Dan. 11:20). References like the above-mentioned do not just enlighten the biblical text but also make clear that the Bible is a book which still has a message in the world of today.

Topical highlights

Though the *ABC* addresses a variety of Bible books and a variety of contextual topics, three are particularly outstanding and reiterated throughout the commentary: the position of women in church and society, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the integrity of political and religious leaders.

One of the topics that is frequently discussed in the *ABC* is the position of women in church and society. The commentary on the demands of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num. 27) spark off a discussion on the right of women to inherit land (not always allowed according to tradition custom).⁵⁰ Levirate marriage is discussed and rejected, (Gen. 38:10 and Deutr. 25:10)⁵¹ as well as wife battering (Col. 3:8).⁵² Also food taboos for women and other forms of discrimination and submission of women are condemned.⁵³ Any form of discrimination on the basis of gender is discouraged and women's ordination is seen as a possibility (1 Peter 2:9).⁵⁴ Njambura Njoroge, in her contribution *The role of women in the church*, explicitly states that 'women and men are equally called and empowered to participate in the same mission of the church'. She goes even one step further and writes: 'where churches have listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit and have accorded women their rightful place in all ministries in the church, women have been ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament.'⁵⁵ A call for equality indeed.

⁵⁰ Commentary Num. 27: 1-11; *ABC* 198-199.

⁵¹ Commentary to Gen. 38:10; *ABC* 67; Commentary to Deutr. 25:10; *ABC* 243.

⁵² Commentary to Col. 3: 18ff; *ABC* 1456-1457.

⁵³ Commentary John 4:1; *ABC* 1259.

⁵⁴ Commentary to 1 Peter 2: 9ff, *ABC* 1520.

⁵⁵ N. Njoroge, 'The Role of Women in the Church', *ABC* 1471.

From the numerous references to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the *ABC*, it is clear that the pandemic forms an always present context in which African theologians theologise. One of the articles is dedicated to the topic, written by the Ugandan Peter Okalet⁵⁶ and gives specific attention to the churches' calling amidst the epidemic. Commentaries with reference to HIV/AIDS are omnipresent. Isabel Phiri frames her commentary of Ruth in the context of HIV/AIDS. Writing about Naomi's family as a family of refugees, she states: 'Such displacement by famine is very familiar to Africans. Being a refugee is a stressful experience for anyone, but it is particularly difficult for women and girls because it can lead to sexual abuse and the spread of HIV/AIDS.'⁵⁷ And a few verses later she comments on Ruth 1:18 where Naomi expresses bitterness because she felt that 'the Lord's hand had gone out against me'. Phiri writes:

She [Naomi] regarded the deaths of her husband and two sons as a punishment from God. She repeats this view in 1:20-21 when the women of Bethlehem greet her. Some scholars have echoed Naomi's interpretation, insisting that God was punishing her family for having gone to live in a foreign land that worshipped other gods. These are the same scholars who see HIV/AIDS as a punishment from God. This interpretation does not concur with the experiences of other Hebrew people who sought refuge in foreign lands during famines.⁵⁸

Also, other passages such as the commentary to Deutr. 25:10ff. Mt. 8:1ff and to Rom. 5:4, 1 Peter 1:1 etc. speak about HIV/Aids. All commentators speak about the pastoral calling of the church to break the stigma around HIV/AIDS and to care for the widows and orphans.

Another topic which features regularly, is the topic of leadership, political as well as religious. The *ABC* abounds in references to unjust political systems and appeals to church and political leaders to guard their integrity. To name just a few, passages like Numb. 8:26, John 1:27, 2 Cor. 9:7 or Hebr. 13:20, all discuss the issue. Yoilah Yilpet comments on Micah 3:1-4:

Many African countries suffer under corrupt, selfish and tyrannical leaders. Officials have been corrupted by the love of money, and a bribe is required before any service is rendered. Employers do not

⁵⁶ P. Okalet, 'HIV/Aids', *ABC* 667.

⁵⁷ Commentary to Ruth 1:1, *ABC* 320.

⁵⁸ Commentary to Ruth 1:18, *ABC* 321-322.

pay their workers their wages on time. Injustice reigns in our law courts, where accepting bribes is the order of the day. Even some Christian ministers and priests are more interested in monetary gain than in serving God and the people. We need prophets and ministers like Micah to teach and preach the truth of God's word. All office holders must be warned to fear God and realize that they are ultimately accountable to him.⁵⁹

No one having read the *Africa Bible Commentary* can entertain any doubts that the biblical message demands reliability in leadership and equal opportunities for all people. In that sense, the commentary itself, with its many appeals to abandon tribalism, racism and other forms or marginalization of people, and its pleas to strive for a just and peaceful society, serves as a prophetic voice in Africa.

Conclusion

The *Africa Bible Commentary* is an open-minded African bible commentary which openly and sensitively addresses prominent cultural and socio-economic issues in Africa from a biblical perspective. The many examples from Africa, the proverbs, the stories and analogies make the commentary a joy to read. The *ABC* stimulates the mind as well as the spirit. The contributors represent a wide range of nationalities and denominations and it is to be expected that it will receive a wide and positive reception among churches and church members in Africa. Being an initiative of the EAE the *ABC* has no Roman Catholic contributors, which is regrettable yet understandable. A first response from the Roman Catholic side to the commentary has been that though the Roman Catholic Church can not accept the *ABC* stance on certain issues such as homosexuality, women's ordination and divorce, the *ABC* is a valuable tool for reading the Bible in Africa. The response also points out that at times the commentary tends towards fundamentalism.⁶⁰ Fact is that not all contributors take into account what literary type of text they are commenting upon. The fact that Gen. 1-3 or the book of Jonah might be of a different literary genre than e.g. the gospels does not seem to have influenced the exegesis. Also, newer methods of exegesis, such as post-colonial exegesis, do not feature in the commentary.

⁵⁹ Commentary to Mich. 3:1-4, *ABC* 1052.

⁶⁰ <http://allafrica.com/stories/200608030599.html>; Consulted: August 21 2006.

Nevertheless, despite these few drawbacks, my admiration for the commentary and for its authors is deep. The *Africa Bible Commentary* is a major accomplishment: scholarly, ecumenically and organisationally. The book is a joy to read, both for theological and devotional purposes. And the *ABC* is a book which is what claims to be: 'an 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 for African believers and in the villages and cities across the continent.'⁶¹ A major achievement indeed!

⁶¹ T. Adeyemo, 'General Introduction', *ABC* ix.