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Journal of the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre
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Biblical Exegesis in African Perspective

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Themes of future issues:

Vol. 6, No. 2 (December 2003)

The Impact of the African Renaissance on Theological Education in Africa - a Perspective from Zimbabwe

Vol. 7, No. 1 (June 2004)

The Church in Africa: Historical Consciousness and Patterns of Engagement



Editorial

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Thought* takes off from the theme considered in Vol. 5, No. 1, June 2002, 'The Challenge of Mother Tongue for African Christian Thought'. It focuses on one specific area where mother tongues may be held to be significant and to present a challenge – the field of biblical exegesis and interpretation and the implications of mother-tongue Scriptures for biblical exegesis in the African context.

For almost half a century, African theology has been establishing its distinctive features and staking a claim as standing on its own terms and in its own right within the historical tradition of the Christian theological enterprise. This cannot be said, to any great extent, of African Biblical Studies. Biblical Studies, and particularly the study of biblical languages, has either been a dwindling or a neglected field within African theological formation, or it has followed so closely the traditions as received from the West, that there has been little distinctive about it, and consequently little of direct relevance for the life and witness of the church in Africa.

The Western theological enterprise was for a long time shaped by the context of Christendom, from which all religious plurality was forcibly excluded, resulting in an incapacity to enter into other worlds of meaning. This impoverishment was compounded by the stranglehold of the Enlightenment world-view that sought to eliminate the Transcendent from Western accounts of reality. Biblical Studies was perhaps the most acculturated of the theological disciplines in this respect, and this may be one reason why it has taken so long for Africa to see its way forward in making its own distinctive contribution.

However, in recent years, there has come a growing appreciation of African 'readings' of the Bible, and of the new insights in interpretation that these bring to the Christian Scriptures. One fruit of this is the substantial collection of essays edited by Gerald West and Musa Dube, *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 2000). Yet these developments, significant as they are, have not had discernible impact upon the other areas of Biblical Studies, notably the studies 'behind the text' and 'in the text', to use current terminology.

The discovery of the theological significance of the Scriptures in African mother tongues is bringing a new excitement about exploring these other dimensions of the study of the Scriptures. There is, first, a new awareness of the role of mother-tongue Scriptures in engaging with the religious and cultural worlds that provide the setting in which Christians and churches witness to the gospel in the African context. This has prompted a desire to go deeper into the mother tongue itself, and to critique the vernacular translations of Scripture that have so far been produced. It has also brought about the realisation that this cannot be done well without adequate competence in the original languages of Scripture – Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek – or without participating in the dynamics of religious and cultural engagement within the pluralist world of the biblical witness.

All the articles in this issue address the matter of biblical exegesis from an African perspective, though they may

approach it from different angles. In order to bring a historical perspective to bear, and to show that the concern for African biblical exegesis within African theology is of long standing, even if it was not for some time specifically followed through, we reproduce, with the authors' permission, two articles that derive from an earlier period. They are representative – one could have drawn on other writers also – of a period in which African theology was setting parameters in a number of directions, and providing seminal insights that others would subsequently build upon.

Mercy Oduyoye's article, drawn from two chapters in her book, *Hearing and Knowing* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), shows her to have been a pioneer in the African readings of Scripture that have flourished in later years. She examines afresh, from the distinctive perspective of an African woman, the biblical narratives relating to the creation and the exodus. The message of liberation and redemption that resonates through the biblical narrative is clearly one that an African Christian, alive to the realities of Africa, picks up readily and is one that at the same time speaks into the African context, opening up new horizons for exegesis and interpretation.

The article by Kwesi Dickson is taken from his book, *Theology in Africa* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984). Its particular merit for our purposes is that it explores the meaning of the biblical, and particularly, Pauline, narratives about the cross of Christ with the awareness that culture is important for theological understanding, and that Christians in Western and African contexts are bound to see the biblical meaning and significance of the cross from different angles. Kwesi Dickson thus provides a rationale for an African biblical exegesis that takes seriously both biblical text and African context, in the consciousness that both can engage with each other on terms that will differ from those employed in traditional Western Biblical Studies, and indeed need to do so. Just as Paul expressed his faith 'using the resources of his cultural heritage', so must African Christians also have the freedom to exegete, interpret and participate in the biblical meaning of Christ's death, using the resources of their own cultural heritage.

Kwame Bediako's article is the first of four contemporary pieces by African scholars and sets parameters for an African biblical exegesis that gives full weight to the Scriptures translated into African mother tongues. He argues that 'biblical exegesis may not be taken as completed when one has established meanings in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek', but needs to 'continue into all possible languages in which biblical faith is received, mediated and expressed'. Mother-tongue Scriptures, the sign and the fruit of a truly culturally translatable faith, become the channel for effective engagement with the religiously and culturally plural world of Africa. Mother-tongue Scriptures constitute a challenge to develop a biblical exegesis that is evangelistic and missionary as well as didactic, just as the Septuagint did in the era of the earliest church.

Samuel Tshehla's article develops one aspect of this challenge, in that the African biblical exegete is called to share the life of Christ that the Scriptures bear witness