

Moving Towards A Genuinely Intercontinental Mode Of Reading Scripture

Reflections of the work in South Sudan

(Background: Ellen Davis was invited as a theological consultant to join the Steering Group. During the period of the BILC project Ellen, with others, visited South Sudan to facilitate workshops for leaders within the Episcopal Church of Sudan. She decided to use the focus and concerns of the project to determine the nature of these workshops and the following reflection comes out of her longer reports of this work. Unlike the other reflections this is the only one where an 'outsider' i.e. someone not resident in that region, contributes to the reflections.)

Dr Ellen Davis and others participated in five intensive sessions of Bible study and discussion held at three different locations in South Sudan between May 2010 and July 2011. Ellen herself summed up the experience by reporting that, "when I lead workshops such as these, I often conclude by articulating my hope that our work is a step toward creating a genuinely intercontinental mode of reading Scripture, among Anglicans and more widely among Christians."

The team Ellen was part of facilitated the exploration of, among other topics, the BILC project's Case Studies of 'Bible and the Environment' (2010) and "Transforming Unjust Social [Economic and Gender] Structures" (2011). These topics had special pertinence in this time and place of acute social change, just as the newest nation in the world, the Republic of South Sudan, is emerging. Its significance is epitomized in the observation of the Rt Revd Hilary Garang Atem Awer, Bishop of Malakal, who commented: "Our society was destroyed through nearly fifty years of war; our traditional cultures are mostly lost. If we do not have Scripture as a moral guide, then we have no alternative to everyone doing the thing that seems to them good right now." Compare the summary remark of the Deuteronomistic Historian: "And there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 17:6. 21:25).

The way these sessions were conducted is outlined fully in the report that is signposted at the end of this Reflection. The results were of "fresh readings" and "surprising outcomes".

Each discussion focused on two or three kinds of inquiry: often tracing in detail the historical background, story line, and/or theological reasoning in the biblical text; sometimes practicing prayerful reading of the text (*the practice of lectio divina was introduced and used on several occasions*); and always asking how a given text might speak to and for the Sudanese church at this time.

Somewhat surprising to both the Sudanis and the Westerners was the extent to which these several ways of approaching the text yielded something that the Sudanese readers judged to be completely new, namely a slow probing reading that reveals multiple kinds of meaning.

One theological student in Renk pointed to the difference between receiving information about the Bible that is poured out by a lecturer "like water into empty cups" and "ruminating" on particular texts (*an image readily embraced by interpreters well versed in the ways of cattle!*).

Although all participants had previously considered the Bible to be the point of orientation for their faith, the Sudanis repeatedly exclaimed at their discoveries of precise points of connection between their experience and the experience of the biblical audience.

They appreciated an integrative mode of reading that drew together spiritual, economic, and social dimensions of meaning, so they could see for the first time that a social and economic statement such as Deuteronomy 15, Ezekiel 27 or the book of Revelation is at the same time a theological statement. Although they felt that they were just starting to learn how to read in this way, it became evident that the Sudanese readers have an interpretive advantage over Westerners, once they are encouraged to draw such connections, since their traditional social and economic structures resemble at many points those reflected in the biblical text.

From these workshops all those involved distilled from many statements, both explicit and implicit, eight interpretive practices and principles. All of these inter-related principles were repeatedly articulated by members of the workshops and checked for accuracy and agreement by the discussion leaders. In brief these are:

- ~ The quality of Christian life, both individual and corporate, is a major factor in reading the Bible well.
- ~ The danger of "bad theology" is real – and bad theology should be named as such!
- ~ The Bible is trustworthy and is given for guidance and encouragement, although it may condemn us.
- ~ The Bible should be read as a whole, with one part commenting on other parts.
- ~ The Bible is to be related to the contemporary contexts in which it is read.
- ~ Studying the biblical texts in Hebrew and Greek is very important and much desired. While that opportunity is not yet widely available in South Sudan, the Sudanis, as speakers of multiple languages, are sensitive to the connotations and semantic ranges of particular words, and the implication of words even in translation.
- ~ We read the Bible in personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and we seek him through Scripture, in both Testaments.

~ Some element of inspiration is at work in the interpretation of Scripture, which is not wholly different from the inspiration of the biblical writers themselves.

So what might a genuinely intercontinental mode of reading Scripture look like? The experience of these workshops in South Sudan suggests the following elements of an answer:

1. An approach grounded in prayer and seeking to foster friendship.
2. Study groups and leadership teams that include both men and women, although at times it may be beneficial for women in particular to have some meetings by themselves.
3. Where possible, including participants and/or leaders from more than one denomination.
4. Opening up the texts chiefly by asking questions, supplemented by brief explanatory remarks.
5. Keeping all discussion close to the biblical text, and explaining how interpreters can responsibly draw inferences from it, or perceive fruitful ambiguities.
6. Using application as a test of validity for our interpretations: Does the text guide and challenge the church toward faithful action that builds up the body in this place and time?

Ellen Davis