

## **Biblical Interpretation: Some Afro-Anglican Perspectives** by Kortright Davis

The most critical and essential factor involved in the Afro-Anglican approach to Biblical interpretation is the underlying understanding of the nature of GOD, as a basis of faith, and the meaning and appropriation of such a presumed nature into the historical narratives and existential expectations of daily living. This has all sorts of implications for Afros, especially for those who are deeply conscious of their particular experiences in the throes of countervailing personal and cultural circumstances and socio-religious paradoxes. What do these assertions really mean?

First, they mean that a basic approach to the meaning of GOD is driven inevitably by one's social, cultural, historical, and existential location. For Afros, the nature of the God of the Bible has to be consistent and continuous from the Genesis motif right up to the contemporary times in which they live. All the manifestations of God's activities and designs must in some way be understood as having meaning for them in their present situation. Their basic meaning is that God is unconditionally on the side of the poor and the oppressed, and that the God of justice, peace, and righteousness is incessantly creating and providing new ways of transforming forces of evil and dehumanization into divine catalysts for freedom and liberation. The Exodus saga is primordial; not just because of an escape from Egyptian captivity, but more especially because the God of Moses is an African God (viz. Burning Bush story), and that God is also made known in the New Exodus (Easter story), and is continuing to be made known in the innumerable little experiences of divine liberation and transformation.

Second, they mean that the God to whom the Bible seeks to bear witness is interminably seeking to be in a covenantal relationship with the people who wrote what is in the Bible, with those who transmitted the Bible, with those who have propagated the Bible (albeit with some imperfections and misrepresentations about the will and ways of God – slavery, women, dietary values, outsiders, etc.), and with those who would earnestly seek to find truth and salvation through a patient embrace of its messages. This forces on the Afro spirituality and hermeneutic an almost instinctual habit of listening to God through the Word, but with a ready dose of cultural suspicion towards those whose presumed exegesis might in fact be eisegetical enough to impose their own assumptions, and provide biblical justifications for so doing.

So in accepting the Christian affirmation that the Bible is the "Word of God", Afros are constantly challenged to articulate and interpret very carefully what is the meaning of the word "of", in a somewhat "Clintonesque" fashion! They assert that the term does not mean "God's words", as in 'directly spoken by God'. (The slogan: *God wrote it / I believe it / That's it!* does not apply.) They also affirm that the human and cultural contexts out of which the biblical material springs are in some ways held captive by that contextual framework, thereby requiring that God's liberating work is necessary and continuous in the reading of the Bible itself. They further recognize that in the origins of the various texts in the biblical collection there is predominantly a movement of the human word towards God, rather than a perception and reception of the divine word towards the human. But such a movement does not lessen the efficacy, or the divine revelatory value, of the sacred text. The text is, and remains, sacred because we Christians say that it is, and Afros fully embrace and respect its sanctity in many elaborately cultural, religious, and ritualistic forms – mixed with awe and wonder, and sometimes with fear and trembling. The physical text is sometimes treated like the Ark of the Covenant! In any case, the "Word of God" is for Afros synonymous with the "Word to God", but, in the end, GOD is not defined by prepositions of any kind.

Third, they mean that as Afros strive to affirm and live into the fullness of their own humanity, they are faced with spiritual, cultural, socio-political, and historical challenges from which their own understanding of GOD cannot be excluded. At the very least, people of Afro descent and complexion are still distinguished in the global community as the only people whose claims to be fully human have not yet been universally accepted, let alone respected. (It really does not matter even if you are the President of the United States, and the Leader of the only super-power in the world!) So what it means to be human in such a climate of implicit / explicit negation can only be confronted spiritually by a radical embrace of the Biblical phrase "Image of God" (Genesis 1:27), and by a constant return to the meaning of John 10:10b – *I am come that all may have life, and have it in all of its fullness*. All this is coupled with a firm determination to declare whether or not God takes sides. In a climate where there is an almost arrogant assertion that God is on the side of those who make such a claim, Afros generally prefer to struggle with the right to make the claim that they are on "The Lord's side". It makes for better and more mature spiritual awakening for them, particularly when they hear of religious leaders (non-Afro) making the claim that God has already told them who is going to be the next President of the United States in 2013!

Fourth, they mean that since GOD is essentially mystery – completely devoid of any physical or material characteristics to which we can point – the claims that we make, the language that we use, the expectations we invoke, the experiences we describe, and even the moral judgments we prescribe, must all in some way be driven by that which is provisional on the one hand, and progressive on the other. Afros make the claim that "God is God all by himself" (gender-based usage not to be held indictable!). They also make the claim that GOD continues to be like a work in progress, for GOD is still in the business of self-disclosure, and is full of surprises – "moving in a mysterious way". Afros can fully understand therefore, that the God of the Christians is not a Christian, that God is not even an Anglican (however much we might wish to think so!), and that God offers innumerable ways of coming to God, and hearing from God, of which Christians are not aware. Divine Inclusivity is in – Human Exclusion is out!!

This openness to allow God to be God is very much an essential part of the Afro spirituality, and enables Afro-Anglicans to make common cause with all the other sectors of the Black religious experience and expressions, even if the variations of language and liturgy, or of theological discourse and moral persuasions, might sometimes pose some surmountable difficulties. In any event, Afros hold fast to the notions that what unites them in common cause for the liberation of the race is far more important than what threatens to separate and divide. A culturally enlightened spirituality that liberates notions of GOD from any sectional captivity, in addition to an allegiance to a hierarchy of moral values and collective strategic incentives for the naming and confronting of the common enemies of progress and freedom, all come together under a divinely inspired rubric. That rubric says that those who suffer for righteousness' sake, and struggle for justice and human equality, are rooted and grounded in the Divine-human covenantal relationship to which the Bible bears witness, and really makes the Bible true. "The B-I-B-L-E, That's the Book for me" they will often sing!!

Fifth, they mean that in the light of all that has been outlined above, certain givens are inherent and operative in the Afro-Anglican use and interpretation of the Bible. They may briefly be listed as follows: (i) The Bible is the Word of God; and God speaks to us in multiple ways through the reception and embrace of the sacred text. (ii) Scripture is a basic source of Christian Theology emerging from preliminary experiences of various faith traditions, which are also sources of

Christian Theology. (iii) The *Authority* of the Bible is accepted as including its Moral, Spiritual, Liturgical, and Theological dimensions – all subject to the progressive revelation of God received through prayer, study, genuine research, and the transcendent voice of the *sensus fidelium*. (iv) The *Authentication* of the Biblical tradition is always an ongoing gift of grace that is brought together by a living and lively faith, a purposeful and purpose-filled process of reasoning, and an allegiance to the Gospel tradition, as empowered and sustained by God’s Spirit. (v) The *Applicability* of the Bible as the Word of God is central to the vitality of the Christian life, to the values of Christian witness, and the virtues of Christian engagement in the proclamation of God’s in-breaking Realm (Kingdom). (vi) Afro-Anglicans hold fast to the Bible as a source of Comfort, Counsel, Communication, Comprehension, Challenge, Compassion, and Community-building; but not as a tool for Conflict, Confrontation, and Condemnation. (vii) For Anglicans in general, and Afro-Anglicans in particular, the creative and imaginative use of Scripture in Word and Song, in Liturgical expressions of all kinds, in personal discourse and collective enquiry, in family discipline and public dialogue, in socio-political analysis and cultural critique, all render this Sacred Treasure an essential basis for human meaning, spiritual growth, moral guidance, and personal fulfillment.

In conclusion, these brief reflections on some of the perspectives involved in an Afro-Anglican Biblical interpretation are not meant to be exhaustive in any way, for they merely scratch the surface of all that goes on in the hearts, minds, lives, and gatherings of Afro-Anglicans for worship, work and witness. Afro-Anglicans may not be theologically astute and articulate to give full and methodical expression to what lies within their embrace and understanding of God’s Word in the Bible. But at the very least, they hold fast to the Anglican Collect by which they ask God for grace to “Read, Mark, Learn and inwardly digest” the sacred texts, so that by patient embrace they may hold fast to God’s unchanging Truth. That Truth may come either from the text, or through the text, but always from God – from the One in whom they live, and move, and have their very being.

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He has been a member of ARCICII, the Inter-Anglican Theological & Doctrinal Commission, and the Faith And Order Commission (WCC). He has been credited with coining the term “Afro-Anglicanism” in preparation for the First Afro-Anglican Conference (1985), and to have been actively engaged in the formulation of historic Afro-Anglican documents including: *The Codrington Consensus*, *The Cambridge Declaration*, *But We See Jesus*. He has been Professor of Theology at Howard University School of Divinity since 1983, and Rector (part-time) of the Church of the Holy Comforter, Washington DC, since 1986.

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