

Case Study – Sudan and South Sudan

Background: This Case Study is drawn from “The Bible and the Environment”: a leadership seminar for theological educators in the Episcopal Church of Sudan (ECS). Facilitated by Dr Ellen F. Davis and held in Juba, Sudan, 28 to 31 July 2010

The Province describes itself in the following way on the Anglican Communion website: The Church Missionary Society began work in 1899 in Omdurman; Christianity spread rapidly among black Africans of the Southern region. Until 1974, the Diocese of Sudan was part of the Jerusalem archbishopric. It reverted to the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury until the new Province, consisting of four new dioceses, was established in 1976. Civil and religious strife and a constant flow of refugees have challenged the Church.

Introduction: The Seminar was convened as the first annual Leadership Seminar for members of the Theological Education Commission of the ECS. The Commission is composed of the principals of the five theological colleges of ECS chaired by Bishop Hilary Garang Deng (Malakal) with his deputy, Bishop Peter Munde (Yambio). The Commission meets each July for two days of business but in 2010 this was followed by the three-day Seminar. The topic was chosen because this pilot program also functioned as a unit within The Bible in the Life of the Church project.

Participants: Approx 20 members of ECS (and a few guests) were actively engaged in each of the 6 study sessions. Participants were bishops, clergy and lay people from six dioceses and four of the five ECS theological. There were a handful of guests from the UK and the USA giving an *international element* to the seminar. One unexpected and noteworthy participant was Mrs. Mary Aluel, a hymn composer whose work was learned and sung by many Sudanese Christians through the two decades of genocidal war that ended in 2004. Her songs continue to be widely used, and we heard several of them at a large worship service in Juba. Although Aluel is primarily an artist rather than an academic, she has five years of formal theological training (in Kenya) and thus ranks as an important and *creative theologian* within the Sudanese church.

Format: The program was designed to keep participants *actively engaged in conversations* throughout the three days. Each day began with Morning Prayer, followed by a light breakfast; lunch was eaten in community with the day concluding with Evening Prayer and dinner.

The Seminar itself was designed as a series of *small-group discussions*, most of which were focused on one or more biblical texts – *as per the syllabus*. These discussions (an hour or less in length) were followed by plenary discussions, led by Ellen Davis. *There were no lectures*. The syllabus was followed quite closely, although the discussion of the Song of the Three Young Men was eliminated from the final session, since *it does not function as Scripture for ECS*.

Focus and Content of the Discussions: discussion focused on two kinds of questions: exegetical (What is the meaning of these texts?) and hermeneutical (What principles are we applying as interpreters?). As the syllabus indicates [see outline at the end], hermeneutical questions were the explicit focus of discussion at the first and the final sessions; the other sessions were exegetical discussions of seven biblical texts, which had been chosen for the Bible project.



Observations from the seminar: participants explicitly and repeatedly articulated a number of hermeneutical principles:

- The quality of one's Christian life is a major factor in reading the Bible well.
- We read the Bible in personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and we seek him in the Scriptures. E.g., when the prominence of seed in Genesis 1 was discussed, people noted that seed holds the promise of future life and is therefore an important symbol of Jesus Christ, the seed of a restored humanity.
- The Bible should be read as a whole, with one part commenting on other parts. The *facilitator reminded the group* that this principle features prominently in Anglican preaching and poetry of the seventeenth century (e.g. George Herbert's "Holy Scriptures II"). On this same point one of the participants contrasted contemporary Anglican preaching with a Reformed ("Presbyterian") style of verse-by-verse exegesis.
- The Bible is the *best* commentary on itself, and biblical scholarship should be read critically and selectively, according to how far it accords with the basic presuppositions of biblical faith. E.g. commentators who exclude the possibility of miracles *a priori* should not be trusted.
- The Bible is *trustworthy* and is given for the sake of guidance and encouragement (although it may also condemn us).
- Studying the biblical texts in Hebrew and Greek is very important, but that opportunity is not yet widely available in Sudan.
- 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. There is a strong sense that we participate in the biblical story through teaching and preaching, song and prayer, which leads to a highly interactive mode of interpretation, akin to rabbinic midrash (explained).
- Implicit throughout was that the Bible must be interpreted in relation to its contemporary context as well as its ancient historical context.

Several members of the Seminar said that this set of questions, about the theological significance of our relationship with the non-human world, is one they had never before encountered, and that it is of crucial importance, especially in the post-war (God willing!) years. People noted that many habits of caring for the earth and other living creatures have been lost. ECS is giving much attention to agricultural training throughout the country, and I spoke about the dangers associated with the industrial-scale farming (toxic chemical inputs, genetically modified seed, economic destruction of local agricultural economies), which is now poised to advance rapidly in Sudan. One member of the Seminar, Dr Peter Morris M.D., reported on his meeting with Lise Grande, Deputy General for the UN in Sudan, who said that church representation "at the table" is crucial to the protection of poor farmers in this time of economic transition.

Responses: Many participants reported that the discussion format worked very well. The opportunity for educators themselves to think together was one they greatly valued; several also commented on how the Seminar would influence their own teaching e.g. "Most of us stand in front of our students and pour out information like water into empty cups. But you started by drawing out what was already in our minds; now I realize that I need to work with what is already in the minds of my students." Another, "Three days ago, I would have said I knew the Bible very well. Now I see how difficult it is to interpret even the first two chapters. These three days could change the way students all over Sudan read the Bible."



Further reflections from the facilitator: In contrast to the West, no hermeneutic of suspicion has thus far emerged among Sudanese Christians. As speakers of multiple languages, Sudanese are sensitive to the connotations and semantic ranges of particular words, and it was encouraging to see that as the Seminar went on, people began to pay attention to the implication of words even in translation. E.g., when Col. 1.6 speaks of the gospel “bearing fruit” throughout the word, is this a conscious echo of Genesis 1, which seems to be the theological base for the whole chapter?

The Bible is constantly related to many aspects of Sudanese life: social, economic, and political history (especially the recent experience of war), African Traditional Religion, the natural world and the rich relationship with it which has been characteristic of village life through the generations. One of the important findings was the extent to which traditional practices are congruent with the values that the Bible upholds. For example, humans are meant to have a genuine relationship with animals (as inferred from Adam’s naming of the animals in Genesis 2), a value that was much better honored by non-Christians in the village than it is now by Christians in the city (where, for instance, donkeys are worked without sufficient care).

People spoke with great sensitivity about the problem of disharmony between people and animals that Genesis represents as an effect of “the fall”: How can we live in harmony with snakes, scorpions, and (especially) the Nile leopard? Many participants knew stories of snakes allowing themselves to be used as pillows by people fleeing into the bush during the war, but they said that would no longer happen, that snakes are again fearful of people. One of the bishops said that when they have a rat infestation in their house, the first thing they do is pray that they may see any disharmony in their immediate social world – and then they stop up the holes! We had a rich discussion of the way that a bull’s name may be appropriated for its owner in African Traditional Religion, at first casually and then formally, after the animal is sacrificed – a strong affirmation of the relationship between human and non-human creatures.



Syllabus for the training programme

Day 1

Introduction to the ACO Project, "The Bible in the Life of the Church"

Two foci of our work at this Leadership Seminar:

- Study of texts related to the topic, Bible and the Environment
- Identifying the principles that (should) guide our reading of the Bible.

Smaller group exercise (groups of 3; 60 minutes), followed by plenary:

How did I first **encounter the Bible?**

Has my way of hearing and reading it **changed** over the years, and if so, what caused those changes?

If there is **one principle that governs my interpretation of Scripture**, it is....

Day 2 morning - The Bible and the Earth

Group exercise (groups of 6)

First, each person will share with the group:

- An **object or a verbal picture** that expresses something important about my relationship with "nature"/ non-human creation.
- A **biblical verse** that helps me to see or express the theological significance of my relationship with "nature"/ non-human creation.

Second, based on what you have just done, reflect as a group on the following questions:

How has the Bible shaped your "reading" of the non-human world?

How has the non-human world shaped your reading of the Bible?

Plenary:

How does the biblically witness about the character of the world compare with or challenge the views of African Traditional Religion(s)? of modern industrial culture?

Day 2 afternoon - Created in and for Relationship

Texts: Genesis 1:1 to 2:3 and 2:4 to 2:25

Group exercise (groups of 6):

What is the theological significance of **seed** (Genesis 1)?

What is the theological significance of Adam's **naming the animals** (Genesis 2)?

What role does **eating** have in both chapters?

How might we understand the **particular role of humans** on the basis of the creation story? Does the word "environment" express our relation to the world?

Why do we need **both parts/"versions" of the creation story**? What would we be missing if we only had one chapter and not the other?

Followed by plenary to report findings

Day 3 morning - The Workings of Creation

Texts: Psalm 104 and Mark 4

Larger group work on texts, followed by plenary:

How does **Psalm 104** develop our understanding of the place of humans within the created order, beyond Genesis 1-2?



What does **Mark 4** tell us about how the created order functions under God's dominion (rule)?

Day 3 afternoon - Envisioning the End of the World

Texts: Jeremiah 4:11-31 and 2 Peter 3:1-13

Larger group work on texts, followed by plenary:

How would you relate **Jeremiah's** vision to the destruction you have seen in your land?

How does God respond to human acts that destroy the land?

Does **2 Peter's** teaching on "the day of God" guide us in responding to the destruction we now experience (or cause)?

Is the vision of 2 Peter complementary to Jeremiah's, or are they in conflict?

Day 4 morning - The Theological Significance of Creation

Text: Colossians 1:3-29

Larger group work:

How does **Colossians** shape or challenge your thinking about God's relationship to the non-human world? Does it cast new light on the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2?

Concluding plenary on hermeneutics:

What principles are emerging in our study of Scripture?

Is there such a thing as a distinctively Anglican perspective on Scripture?

Is there such a thing as a distinctively Sudanese perspective on Scripture?

(How) have these three days changed or clarified our thinking about biblical interpretation?

