

Mission Matters in the New Testament: Some Postcolonial Probing from an Afrocentric Perspective

SNTS Vienna, Austria

August 4-8, 2009

Gosnell L. Yorke, Northern Caribbean University, Jamaica

INTRODUCTION

As a former Translation Consultant with the United Bible Societies (Africa Area—1996-2006—Yorke 2006) and having just served as one of the co-chairs of the SNTS Seminar (2005-2008), to wit, “The NT, Oral Culture and Bible Translation”, perhaps it would come as no surprise that, in addressing the topic at hand, I have opted, at the outset, to invoke the language which one uses quite frequently within the context of Bible translation. I am referring to the expression, “key term” (Yorke 2003:1-13).

To provide some structure to, and rationale for, the paper as a whole, then, I have decided to fix and focus my attention on four “key terms” drawn from the title of the paper itself. In the order to be discussed, these “key terms” are as follows: 1) perspective; 2) postcolonial; 3) afrocentric; and 4) mission. Only after commenting briefly on each of these “key terms” would I then be in a position to address some of the missiological issues arising out of the New Testament as a whole—by way of illustration.

PART ONE

A. Perspective

The very nature of language; the limitation of the human imagination; the “imprisonments” imposed on us by culture, personality, gender, and upbringing; the particularities of our own socioeconomic and other contexts; and the presence of sin in the life of the believer-cum-biblical scholar, one who is *simul iustus et peccator*—are all factors and forces that make what we see and say inevitably perspectival in nature.

In addition, the present profusion of doctrinal formulations and the proliferation of distinct and discrete Christian denominations worldwide—be it in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, Oceania, Latin America, the Caribbean or elsewhere--all of which derive their *raison d'être*, supposedly, from the impulse of Christian mission and identity, is

clear empirical testimony, it seems to me, to the validity of this bold claim. As human beings, we seem able, ultimately, to see only “through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12--KJV). Echoing Bultmann and others, our presuppositions, preunderstandings and biases of whatever kind impose limits on us which no amount of life experience or even formal education seems able to eradicate entirely. It is this “fact of life”, for example, which John Elliott, our NT colleague, captures in his own creative way. He writes: “All perception is selective and constrained psychologically and socially; for no mortal enjoys *the gift of ‘immaculate perception’*” (Elliott 1986:5—emphasis mine).

Granted, I must also concede that those who now occupy the periphery *vis-à-vis* the centre; the “Two-thirds world” *vis-à-vis* the so-called “First world”, have also been heavily influenced by those Christian theologians and others who are committedly engaged in seeing and saying things from the perspective of the oppressed, the poor, the powerless, women and the weak. I have in mind those Christian theologies often referred to as Liberation theologies or those which I choose to refer to as Two-thirds World Christian theologies, pointing to the experiences and expectations of those who now constitute the vast majority of the world’s population but who find themselves, for the most part, at its periphery (Yorke 1995: 4-6).

Felder, the African-American NT scholar, for example, makes the following observation:

European/Euro-American biblical scholars have asked questions that shaped answers within the framework of the racial, cultural, gender presuppositions they held in common. This quiet consensus has undermined the self-understanding and place in history of other racial and ethnic groups (Felder 1994: xi).

Essentially, the point is this: because of our particularities, presuppositions, preunderstandings, and, therefore, our limited perspective on things, in other words, our “maculate perceptions”, we are being admonished as NT scholars and others to avoid, as much as possible, the pretentious claim that any one person or a homogenous group of persons is capable of engaging in a missiological (or any other) reading of the New Testament such as would make such a reading timelessly applicable in its appeal, all-inclusively embracing in its scope or univocal and universal.

For this reason, then, I must now turn to the next operative word, our next “key term”, in the title of the paper, to wit, postcolonial.

B. Postcolonial

In the *Dictionary of Translation Studies* (Shuttleworth and Cowie, eds. 1997), no mention is ever made of postcolonial or postcolonialism and its ongoing inter-/trans-disciplinary impact on current academic discourse. In stead, the entries jump from polysystem theory to post-editing. And this is not in the least surprising given the relatively recent appearance of the term in the literature as a whole (Punt: 2008; West 2008). The early exponents of postcolonialism include Said, Spivak and Bhabba (Ashcroft *et al.*, eds.: 2000) although we ought also to include some others from the Two-thirds world like Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o (Africa), and Fanon (the Caribbean) as well. Those who have sought to incorporate the insights of postcolonialism into biblical studies generally (including New Testament studies) would include scholars like Sugirtharajah (1999), Segovia (2000, 2007), Dube (2000), West (2007) and, more recently, Kvammen (2008).

Sugirtharajah, for example, gives us a fairly useful working description of postcolonialism and its dominant attributes. In dialogue with recent literary and cultural criticism, he comments as follows:

It [postcolonialism] is a way of critiquing the totalizing form of Eurocentric thinking and of reshaping dominant meanings. It is a mental attitude more than a method. It is a critical enterprise aimed at unmasking the link between idea and power, which lies behind Western theories and learning. It is a discursive resistance to imperialism, imperial attitudes and their continued incarnations in such wide ranging fields as politics, economics, history and theological and biblical studies (1998:93).

From Segovia, who favours the expression, “postcolonial optic”, we draw a more expansive, wide-ranging, two-tier description of postcolonialism as a whole. He writes (and I quote him *in extenso*):

A first dimension of a postcolonial optic in biblical criticism involved an analysis of the texts of ancient Judaism and early Christianity that takes seriously into consideration their broader sociocultural contexts in the Near East and the Mediterranean Basin, respectively, in the light of an omnipresent, inescapable, and overwhelming sociopolitical reality—the reality of empire, of imperialism and colonialism, as variously constituted and exercised during the long period in question. A second dimension of the proposed postcolonial optic in biblical criticism involves an analysis of the readings and interpretations of the texts of Jewish and Christian

antiquity that takes seriously into account their broader sociocultural context in the West, [...] in the light of the same omnipresent, inescapable, and overwhelming sociopolitical reality that surrounded the production of the texts of ancient Judaism and early Christianity—the reality of empire, of imperialism and colonialism, now with regard to the Western imperial tradition of the last five hundred years (Segovia 2000).

In her 2008 doctoral dissertation done at/for the School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, Norway, Kvammen highlights for us the basic vocabulary driving postcolonialism. Lexical items such as mainstream and margin, centre and periphery, the colonizer and the colonized, mimicry, mockery and hybridity (and, at times, diaspora) all feature in the active writing vocabulary of scholars of postcolonialism (Kvammen 2008: 1-8).

And since those in the Afro-world in general, be it in Africa or throughout her diaspora such as here in the Caribbean (including its own “mini-diaspora”; see Reid-Salmon 2008), would readily be numbered among the marginalized or the peripheralized peoples on the planet, the next “key term” to which I will now address myself, however succinctly, should hardly appear surprising.

C. Afrocentric

“Afrocentric” is an adjectival spin-off from the term Afrocentrism and Afrocentricity (used interchangeably) and they are all of relatively recent vintage. “Afrocentric” appears, for example, in the writings of Caribbean scholars like Shepherd (2007: 46) while afrocentricism is the object of Ngugi’s attention concerning which he writes:

I was horrified when I returned (from the University of Leeds, England) to Kenya in 1967, to find that the Department of English [at the University of Nairobi] was still organized on the basis that Europe was the centre of the universe. Europe, the centre of our imagination? Ezekiel Mphahlele from South Africa, who was there before me, had fought hard to have some African texts introduced into the syllabus. Otherwise the department was still largely oblivious to the rise of the new literatures in European languages in Africa let alone the fact of the long existing tradition of African-American literature and that of Caribbean peoples. The basic question was: From what base did African peoples look at the world? Eurocentrism or Afrocentrism? (Ngugi 1993:8).

Ntshuga, a retired Black South African (Xhosa) Presbyterian minister and a graduate of the University of Fort Hare (the alma mater of Mandela, Mugabe and others), is quite right in pointing out that, “African-Americans are now [also] talking about Afrocentrism”. Within biblical studies, perhaps no one does it more eloquently than Felder, the NT scholar. Not only is he author of the ground-breaking book, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family* (1986), editor of a collaborative work with other African-Americans, *Stony the Road We Trod: African-American Biblical Interpretation*, but he also served as General Editor of the *Original African Heritage Study Bible*, based on the KJV (1993). In his chapter entitled, “Cultural Ideology, Afrocentrism and Biblical Interpretation,” appearing in *Black Theology: a Documentary History*, Felder writes:

An examination of the term Afrocentricity will make clear what I and other black biblical scholars have found helpful in correcting the effects of the cultural ideological conditioning to which we have all been subjected. Afrocentricity is the idea that the land mass that the ancient Romans routinely called Africa and the peoples of African descent must be understood as having made significant contributions to world civilization as prospective subjects within history rather than being regarded as merely passive objects of historical distortions. Afrocentrism means reestablishing Africa as a center of value and source of pride, without in any way demeaning other people and their historic contributions to human achievement. The term as used [in biblical studies], refers to a methodology that reappraises ancient biblical traditions, their exegetical history in the West, and their allied hermeneutical implications..., [demonstrating] clearly that we have arrived at a new stage in Biblical interpretation (Felder 1993).

Within the context of our Seminar, then, Afrocentricity or Afrocentrism, as a specific subset of postcolonial studies in general, is an attempt to re-read the New Testament but from a premeditatedly Africa-centred perspective and, in doing so, attempt to break what for some is the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Western biblical scholars have long enjoyed in relation to the Bible. Early attempts so far have sought to put Africa and Africans back in the New Testament by amplifying the voice of those who are already there and by raising their profile and visibility (Yorke, 1995). Afrocentric hermeneutics, as conceived and practised, is meant to be both a hermeneutics of suspicion ideologically and a hermeneutics of liberation psycho-socially-cum-politically.

Before we proceed to extract some illustrative mission-related materials from the New Testament against such a postcolonial and afrocentric backdrop, however, let us pause,

just long enough, to provide a relatively brief disquisition on our fourth and final “key term” as well, to wit, mission.

D. Mission

Perhaps it is defensible to say that the basic message of the New Testament, in spite of its rich diversity, is really about God’s glory demonstrated in His all-embracing kingdom-building love made manifest in Christ (Schreiner 2008). This is a message which ought to be at the very heart of any attempt to engage in meaningful mission to the world at large—then and now (Jn. 3:16-21; Mat. 28:16-20; Acts 1:1-8; 4: 12; 17: 16-34; Col. 1:15-20; Rev. 14:6-12; van Aarde 2007; Keown 2008; Novenson 2009:365-373). Marshall is correct, I think, in pointing out that: “New Testament theology is essentially missionary theology” and that a “recognition of this missionary character of the documents will help us to see them in true perspective and to interpret them in the light of their intention” (2004: 34-35). And in his large two-volume tome (almost 2000 pages!), Schnabel also rightly underscores the centrality of mission in the New Testament as a whole (2004).

Motivated by a sense of Christian supersessionism and armed with texts such as those to which I have just referred (see above), European missionaries like David Livingstone and James Taylor, risking both life and limb at times, “fanned-out” to the four corners of the earth (encompassing Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean) in search of souls for the kingdom as they sought to be faithful to the missionary mandate as understood then (Spickard and Cragg 1994: 298-300). Serving as both sacred text and textbook, the Bible, translated into various indigenous languages and used to promote literacy acquisition in the “mission field”, played a pivotal role in the whole kingdom-building enterprise (Dietrich and Luz 2002; Yorke 2004).

The problem, of course, is that such a kingdom-building missionary thrust was not being carried out in a vacuum but was inextricably linked to that of empire construction as well. For those at the “receiving end” of this imperial enterprise, especially those falling within the sphere of influence of the various European powers (and later, those of North America), the “missionary movement” proved to be both a boon and a bane. Spickard and Cragg, for example, are right, I think, in pointing out that: “The scope of European and North American missionary activity in the nineteenth century was extraordinary. Wherever empire went, there too went missionaries;” or that: “As the search for markets, raw materials, and international prestige drew Western soldiers and traders abroad, missionaries went with them” (1998: 301 and 302 respectively; Yorke, forthcoming).

In terms of the Americas (of which the Caribbean is but a part), there are scholars from the region who, perhaps lacking some degree of nuance in their use of language at times, affirm that:

The conquest and colonization of the Americas, like Asia, Africa and Australia, were accomplished with the gun and the Bible....Historically, religion has been used to rationalize and consolidate military conquests, preserve empires through mental enslavement of the conquered, and destroy resistance by debasing and vulgarizing the culture of subject peoples....The institution entrusted with its propagation was the Christian church—Roman Catholicism and Protestantism (Hylton 2002: 1; cf. Yorke, Davidson and Ukpong, forthcoming).

In terms of the Caribbean itself, for example, we are reminded that during the second voyage to the region (in 1493) of Christopher Columbus, the so-called “discoverer of the New World”, he landed with 17 ships and 1,500 people; and that among them was a Rev. Bernardo Boyl and twelve other members of the clergy as missionaries (see Lampe, ed. 2001:3). In fact, Asante, in one of his chapter titles appearing in his 400-page volume, juxtaposes “missionaries, merchants, and mercenaries” (Asante 2007: 209-221).

Not surprisingly, then, our fourth and final key term, “mission”, continues to arouse in those now situated in the Two-thirds world feelings of profound ambivalence—given the less-than-wholesome experiences which they have had with “Christian mission”—be it in Africa, Asia, Latin America or the Caribbean.

My basic argument, then, is this: if those who are situated within the “Afro-world”, who are sometimes made to feel despised and rejected, are ever to engage in any meaningful postcolonial rehabilitation of the expression, “Christian mission”, and then to appropriate it in ways that are entirely wholesome and life-affirming as God in Christ would wish, then we need to at least return to the *fons et origo* (source and origin), to wit, the New Testament itself where the justification for that mission is first articulated. And it is that to which we now turn—however briefly.

PART TWO

Although scholars like Marshall have suggested that mission is at the heart of NT theology, I suspect that it will generate little or no debate among us in contending that there can be no meaningful missiology without an appropriate Christology. And this is of absolute importance, it seems to me, since Christians in the Two-thirds world generally

tend to embrace Jesus, with passion and conviction, as both Saviour and Lord. In a relatively recent (1980's-90's) East African-produced series on African Christianity, for example, it was not by accident that in addition to volumes with titles like *The Bible in African Christianity*, *Pastoral Counselling in African Christianity*, and *Ethics and Morality in African Christianity*, the African scholars from throughout East Africa and elsewhere also incorporated an earlier volume into the series entitled, *Jesus in African Christianity* (1989; see www.acton.co.ke).

In discussing the early Christian mission, therefore, it is most fitting that we also address ourselves to the more fundamental question as to who Jesus is/was (cf. Mk. 8 *et par.*)—the one from whom we have received, according to the NT writers, the mandate to engage in mission in His name and on a scale that encompasses far more than the mere local (Mat. 28:16-20; Acts 1:8; cf. Rev. 14:6-12).

The rest of this second part of the paper, then, will be devoted to some illustrative materials which are meant to conscientize us to some of the possible postcolonial and afrocentric implications of some passages/pericopae found within the NT as a whole. A fuller discussion will have to wait for a more appropriate time and place.

A. From the Synoptic Gospels

Of the three Synoptic gospels, Matthew alone records that Joseph, Mary and Jesus were once refugees in Egypt, Africa, in their (Joseph's and Mary's) concerted effort to foil Herod's murderous plot and ploy (Mat.2:1-18). Matthew also records that their escape to, and return from, Egypt, Africa, was in providential fulfillment of Hosea 11:1, to wit, "out of Egypt [Africa] have I called my Son"—a kind of "new Exodus" of sorts.

For Afrocentric NT scholars, however, there is much more to it than that. The fact that the Roman puppet king chose to execute "all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men" (Mat. 2:16 RSV), must also mean that Jesus was kept for more than a fleeting moment in Egypt, Africa. It is not inconceivable, for example, that, given the psycholinguistic dynamics associated with language acquisition and the rate of psychomotor development, that Jesus might well have learned to walk and talk in Africa (Yorke 1995: 12)!

That is not an Afrocentric comment which one would find in any of the "standard commentaries". In fact, I found no such Afrocentric comment or an indication of such a possibility in any of the commentaries consulted. If we are not sufficiently careful as NT scholars/commentators, the tendency, it seems to me, is to unwittingly "de-africanize"

the NT by simply reproducing or recycling, in different words and ways, the same basic information that resonates more with the cares and concerns of the (First?) world in which the scholar/commentator is situated.

From an Afrocentric perspective, the importance of this comment on the Matthean pericope should not be missed. For one thing, it undermines immediately the false and psychologically unwholesome impression which is sometimes created among Africans and those of African descent that it was the European (and later, the American) missionary who first brought Jesus to sub-Saharan or tropical Africa. A pericope like the one before us, however, apprizes us that Jesus, during his tender and vulnerable years, made contact with the continent which, unfortunately, has often been perceived as “the dark continent” fit only for Christianity, commerce and civilization (Lampe, ed. 2001: 296).

In addition, there are those who are committed to an afrocentric perspective or reading of the pericope who would go even further by insisting that the Egypt/Africa episode of Matthew also has implications not only for who Jesus is/was but also for how he looked! They would insist that the mere fact that Jesus and His earthly family were Afro-Asiatic in culture and less caucasian in colour and complexion (and, therefore, could be more readily camouflaged in the Egyptian/African population) should mean that we ought not to equate Him with Leonardo da Vinci’s (Italian) artistic portrayal or any Western iconic representation of Him (Felder 1993:192; cf. Nolan 1993: 2-4). Brown, however, an African American NT scholar himself, has rightly expressed his dis-ease with this afrocentric reading of the passage and has insisted instead that the Jewishness of Alexandria and Egypt as a place of refuge might well have been the principal reasons for Jesus and his family for migrating there (Brown in Blount *et al.*, eds. 2007: 89).

Be that as it may, all three Synoptists, it is further pointed out, agree that an African helped Jesus carry his cross (see Mk. 15:21; Mat. 27:32; Lk. 23:26). In his second volume (to which we are about to turn in the succeeding section), Luke also mentions Simeon (perhaps, Simon of Cyrene) who is called black (*Simeon hou kaloumenos Niger*) and Lucius of Cyrene (North Africa) as being among the Antiochene church leadership (Acts 13:1) helping to drive and determine the direction of the mission of the early Church.

B. From the Book of Acts

At the outset (and to repeat), Luke records that the mission of the early church was to encompass far more than the mere local (Acts 1:8). In mentioning the “ends of the earth” to which the mission should be extended, the question is whether or not he had

Rome, the seat of the empire, primarily in mind or, perhaps, Ethiopia (now Sudan) in Africa instead. Generally speaking, the assumption is that it is the former (Rome). However, Wetherington is quite right, I think, in pointing out that: “in the mythological geography of the ancient Greek historians and other writers as well, Ethiopia was quite frequently identified with the ends of the earth in a way that Rome was definitely not” (Wetherington 1988: 290; also see Herodotus, *Hist.* 3:25.114; Strabo, *Geog.* 1.1.6; Philostratus, *Vita Apoll.* 6.1).

When it comes to a discussion of Acts 8: 26-40 in which Phillip, the evangelist/missionary, meets and missionizes the Ethiopian court official/eunuch who is heard reading aloud from the Jewish Scriptures (perhaps from the LXX), Wetherington’s comment is also apropos—in spite of his opting not to give the Ethiopian explicit mention or recognition in the Section Heading of his commentary. There, we read about “Philip and the Unique Eunuch” (p. 290). Nevertheless, he makes the pertinent observation that in this episode, we see a “mission that potentially would reach the ends of the earth, as the eunuch went on his way to Ethiopia” (Wetherington 1998: 290; Mikre-Selassie in Renju and Yorke, eds. 2004). Marshall’s comment is also germane here, it seems to me, in that he points out that this story is “again concerned with the missionary expansion of the church...[in which] the Ethiopian comes from the far south” (Marshall 1980: 160).

It means, then, that in spite of what some perceive as Luke’s fixation on Rome as the centre of his own narrative world, especially in his second volume (Loubser 1994: 59-69), he at least mentions the conversion of the Ethiopian (Acts 8) *before* that of Cornelius (Acts 10)—implying for those committed to an afrocentric reading of the episode that the first Gentile convert to the early Church was not Cornelius, the European, but the Eunuch of Ethiopia in Africa. Conzelmann should be credited for at least pointing out that the “story was apparently told in Hellenistic circles as the first conversion of a Gentile...thus rival[ing] the account of Cornelius’s conversion in chap. 10” (Conzelmann 1987: 67). However, I am not entirely persuaded by his follow-up comment, that: “Luke has placed the story here so that it now functions as a prelude to Cornelius’s conversion” (p. 67). Query: why a prelude? The episode seems to stand on its own and functions within the context of Luke’s second volume as a clear indication that, of a truth, and as the Apostle Paul would later inform the philosophers at the Aeropagus in Athens, that God who was made manifest in Christ is “no respecter of persons” but that “of one blood, He has made all the nations of the world”—encompassing Africa, Asia, Europe and elsewhere (Acts 17: 16-34; also see Williams in Blount *et al.* eds. 2007: 235-238).

Given the psychologically uplifting and profound afrocentric significance of the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, it should come as no surprise, perhaps, that it continues to attract much scholarly attention from those who are numbered among the “displaced, dispersed, despised and dispossessed” of the earth (Yorke 1995a); those who find themselves at the margins and among the wretched of the earth (*Les Damnés de la Terre*)--invoking the language of the English translation of one of the Caribbean most outstanding postcolonial writers, namely, Frantz Fanon. One such example of this positive afrocentric attraction to the Ethiopian episode is that of Gifford Rhamie, the Afro-British student of the NT, who is now busily engaged in writing a dissertation on the passage itself. His working title (which is quite germane to our Seminar) is: “The Ethiopian Eunuch: Ideology and Missions in the Acts of the Apostles (8:26-40).” In a comment which he shared electronically with me a few days ago, he writes:

My contention in the paper [dissertation] is that the strategic place of the text of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), notwithstanding his personhood and religious identity, serves to deconstruct the sensibilities of some of the implied readers of Acts and to provide the probable exegetical, and thereby missiological link to the early Christian Church in Africa” (Rhamie in an e-mail dated July 21, 2009).

And in moving from a first tier postcolonial analysis of Luke’s apparent pro-Rome posture and orientation as reflected especially in his second volume to that of the second tier (i.e., the history of interpretation of the Book of Acts itself—see Segovia 2000 again), we see how a number of ideologically driven Western scholars, given the human limitations and “maculate perceptions” to which we are all subject (referred to in Part One of the paper) have tended to view and then comment on Paul’s itinerant missionary ministry in the latter part of Acts (chaps. 12-28). It is quite instructive, for example, to note that it was only during the nineteenth century missionary expansion of the Euro-American church into the Two-thirds world at large that a home base/mission field typology was first foisted upon these chapters—presumably to justify the mission thrust of the Euro-American churches and Mission Boards constituting the home base—the sending centres. As Townsend has pointed out, however, such a typology was not “seen” in Acts chap. 12-28 by either the Fathers or the Reformers themselves (Townsend 1986: 99-104).

C. From the Epistles

In the epistles generally associated with Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles and the Jew from the diaspora, who himself, according to Luke, was mistaken for an Egyptian (African) during his own missionary ministry, we encounter one who was at least

committed (in principle) to the demonstration of an all-inclusive mission—one which transcended culture, socioeconomic status, gender or any other human-created barrier (Berlin Wall?) which we are so prone to erect within the human community (Gal. 3:28 and I Cor. 12: 13).

One such passage, of course, with its clarion call for an all-inclusiveness in Christ, is that of Col. 3:11. Whether or not we identify Paul himself as the author of Colossians or give the credit to some anonymous other who might have written under his (Paul's) apostolic influence (directly or indirectly), we would all agree, I think, that any meaningful discussion of matters, missiological or otherwise, arising from the *Corpus paulinum* must at least include Colossians as well (Yorke 1991:79-95).

In Col. 3:11, NT scholars struggle with how best to analyze the literary structure of the text. The question hinges on the determination of how many antitheses we encounter there. In the author's mention of Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, Barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, for example, the challenge is to determine whether or not we have three or four antitheses in all; in particular, whether or not, along with the other three (Greek/Jew, circumcised/uncircumcised, and slave/free) the words, "Barbarian, Scythian" also constitute an antithesis as well.

Generally, the scholarly *communis opinio* is that there are three antitheses but that the Barbarian/Scythian pair actually breaks the rhythm of the text—with two antitheses preceding the pair and one coming after it. For McDonald, for example, "the list of terms that are juxtaposed antithetically (as in Gal. 3:28) is interrupted with the mention of barbarians and Scythians" (McDonald 2000:139); and for Harris: "While the fourth pair are opposites...the third pair [Barbarian/Scythian] are (sic) not, for the Scythian...was a notorious example of the "barbarian", the non-Greek who could not speak Greek (Harris 1991: 154).

In the other antitheses, scholars rightly understand the author of Colossians to be underscoring the all-inclusiveness of Christ and the missiological significance for those who might fall within his sphere of influence. Such barriers to be transcended in Christ include the ethnic (Greek/Jew), the cultural (circumcised/uncircumcised) and the socioeconomic (slave or free).

However, it can be argued that the Barbarian/Scythian pair also constitutes an antithesis—in spite of not having a connector such as *kai* as is the case with the two antitheses preceding it. The mere absence of *kai*, however, does not in and of itself render the Barbarian/Scythian pair a non-antithesis since, in the Greek, we do not have a connector of any kind between "slave" and "free" coming after it either. The truth is,

that has not prevented scholars, and rightly so, I think, from treating the last pair as an antithesis as well.

When it comes to the Barbarian/Scythian pair, however, scholars tend to fix and focus their attention (again) typically on the supposed crassness of the Scythians who settled to the far north around the Black Sea (located in Southern Russia) and the cultural chauvinism of the Greeks who considered all non-Greek-speakers to be barbarians--with *barbaros* serving as a kind of onomatopoeic (mis)representation of the baby-like speech sounds supposedly made by those who had a language other than Greek, considered the language of civilization and culture, as their mother-tongue.

O'Brien, for example, writes as follows: "The Scythian represents the lowest kind of barbarian who was probably also a slave" ; and quoting Josephus (see *Contra Ap.* 2, 269), comments that "the Scythians were little better than wild beasts" (O'Brien 1982:193; also see).

Some years ago, Murphy-O'Connor, in his relatively short commentary on 1 Corinthians, made a somewhat tantalizing suggestion in his treatment of the text (Col. 3:11)—a suggestion which I think should be seriously considered especially since it is one which has some important ramifications for an afrocentric reading of the text itself. It is a suggestion which, unfortunately in my view, has not been taken up by NT scholars writing since the publication of Murphy-O'Connor's commentary in the 1980's.

Murphy-O'Connor suggested then that the Barbarian/Scythian pair is also an antithesis but one which is meant to capture the geographic and racial reach of the early Christian mission. He opined that whereas the other antitheses point to the ethnic (Greek/Jew), cultural (circumcised/uncircumcised) and socioeconomic (slave/free) significance of Christ, that the Barbarian/Scythian antithesis moves us in the direction of both the geographic reach and the racial relevance of Christ and, by extension, of the early Christian mission itself.

In short, Murphy O'Connor suggested, *en passant*, that we ought to maintain the balanced literary structure of the text as a whole with its four antitheses and that the real point of the Barbarian/Scythian antithesis is that it underscores the ultimate irrelevance of one's geographic location or the racial group to which one happens to belong. Drawing mainly on the writings of Strabo, the geographer, Murphy-O'Connor suggests that, most likely, "Barbarian" is in fact a veiled but less-than-entirely complimentary reference to Ethiopians who were considered by the Greeks as non-Greek speakers who inhabited the ends of the earth—the far south—just as the Scythians were known to inhabit the far north.

Murphy-O'Connor also suggested that the point of the third antithesis in the chain is that the Christ event has relevance for those who might be as caucasian as the Scythians, hailing from the far north, to those who might be as African as the Ethiopians, hailing from the far south. In language somewhat rather colourful, he makes the point that the author of Colossians is insisting that, among other things, Christ is to be made meaningful to everyone—metaphorically speaking, from the whitest Scythian in the far north to the blackest Ethiopian in the far south; thus emphasizing (again) the geographic reach and racial relevance of Christ and the early Christian mission.

From an afrocentric perspective, this is the sort of treatment which should, I think, be captured in the ongoing scholarly discussion and debate—rather than one which seems to have been ignored by those scholars hailing mostly from the First world or “the West”. Such an afrocentric reading of the text resonates not only with the postcolonial preoccupations of those Two-thirds world Christians who fall among “the Rest” but it is also empowering for those self-same persons who sometimes see themselves as occupying the margins and, therefore, do not really count.

CONCLUSION

Here, then, is the conclusion of the whole matter: to be relevant to the Two-thirds world which has undergone (and continues to undergo) its own postcolonial and post-empire transformation, Christian mission should seek to speak to the pressing existential preoccupations of those intended as objects of that mission. And like in the early church, that mission must be all-inclusive in its reach and relevance.

This is particularly important, it seems to me, within the context of contemporary Africans and those throughout her diaspora (both old and new) who sometimes are made to feel that they are an afterthought in God's mind and mission. An afrocentric reading of the NT, as hereby briefly illustrated in this paper, is meant to provide that ring of relevance and all-inclusiveness such as would make Africans and those of African descent (among others) feel entirely at home in the ever-growing family of God—an ever-growing family made possible by the ongoing mission of the church as inheritor of an earlier Christian mission going back to Jesus himself—as per the NT documents in which is recorded matters having to do with his words, his works, and the worth he is to all his faithful followers—then and now.

SELECTED LIST OF REFERENCES

Asante, Molefe Kete 2007. *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony*. New York: Routledge.

Aschcroft, B. *et al.* eds. 2000. *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London, UK: Routledge.

Blount, B. K. *et al.*, eds. 2007. *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.

Conzelmann, H. 1987. *The Acts of the Apostles in Hermeneia*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.

Dietrich W. and Ulrich Luz, eds. 2002. *The Bible in a World Context*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.

Dube, M. 2000. *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. St. Louis, MS: Chalice Press.

Elliott, J.H. 1986. "Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament and Its Social World: More on Methods and Models." *Semeia*. Decatur, GA. Scholars Press.

- Felder, C.H. "Cultural Ideology, Afrocentrism and Biblical Interpretation." *Black Theology: A Documentary History*. Two Volumes. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Harris, M. J. 1991. *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: Colossians and Philemon*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Hylton, P. 2002. *The Role of Religion in Caribbean History: From Amerindian Shamanism to Rastafarianism*. Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing.
- Keown, M.J. 2008. *Congregational Evangelism in Philippians: The Centrality of an Appeal for Gospel Proclamation to the Fabric of Philippians*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster.
- Kvammen, I.A.K. 2008. *Imperial Presence in the Assembly: An Interpretation of Jas. 2: 1-13 with a Postcolonial Optic*. Dissertation Series/School of Mission and Theology, Volume 6.
- Lampe, A. ed. 2001. *Christianity in the Caribbean: Essays on Church History*. Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press.
- Marshall, I.H. 1980. *Acts* in Tyndale New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Marshall, I. H. 2004. *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1993. *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. Nairobi, Kenya: East Africa Educational Publishers.
- Novenson, M. V. 2009. "The Jewish Messiahs, the Pauline Christ, and the Gentile Question." *Journal of Biblical Literature*. 128: 2—pages 357-373.
- O'Brien, P. 1982. *Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*. Word Biblical Commentary. Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Punt, J. 2007. "Intersections in Queer Theory and Postcolonial Theory, and Hermeneutical Spin-offs." *Neotestamentica: Journal of the New Testament Society of South Africa*. Volume 41:2—pages 382-398.
- McDonald, M. 2000. *Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*. Sacra Pagina Series.

Reid-Salmon, D. 2008. *Home Away from Home. The Caribbean Diasporan Church in the Black Atlantic Tradition*. London, UK: Equinox.

Schnabel, E. J. 2002. *Early Christian Mission*. Volumes One and Two. Downers Grove: Ill: InterVarsity Press.

Schreiner, T.R. 2008. *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Segovia, F. ed. 2000. *Interpreting Beyond Borders*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

----- . 2008. "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*. Volume 30:4—pages 489-502.

Shepherd, V. A. 2007. *I Want to Disturb my Neighbour: Lectures on Slavery, Emancipation and Postcolonial Jamaica*. Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers.

Shuttleworth, M. and M. Cowie, eds. 1997. *Dictionary of Translation Studies*. Manchester, UK: St. Jerome Publishing.

Spickard, P.R. and Kevin M. Cragg. 1994. *How Everyday Believers Experienced Their World: A Global History of Christians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Sugirtharajah, R.S. ed. 1998. *The Postcolonial Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Sugirtharajah, R.S. 1999. *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Townsend, J.T. 1986. "Missionary Journeys in Acts and European Missionary Societies." *Anglican Theological Review* 68: 99-104.

Van Aarde, A. 2007. "Jesus' Mission to All of Isael [sic] Emplotted in Matthew's Story." *Neotestamentica*. Volume 41:2—pages 416-436.

West, G. O. 2008. "Doing postcolonial biblical interpretation @ home: ten years of (South) African ambivalence." *Neotestamentica* 42:1—pages 147-164.

Wetherington III, B. 1998. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.

Wilt, T. ed. 2003. *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*. Manchester, UK: St. Jerome Publishing.

Yorke, G. 1991. *The Church as the Body of Christ in the Pauline Corpus: A Re-examination*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

-----1995a. "The Bible among English-speaking Blacks in the Diaspora: Links with African Christianity," in *The Bible in African Christianity*. Edited by H. Kinoti *et al.* Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers.

----- 1995b. "Biblical Hermeneutics: An Afrocentric Perspective." *Journal of Religious Thought*. 52:1—pages 1-13. (A slightly different version of this article had earlier appeared in *Religion & Theology/Religie & Teologie* [University of South Africa]. Volume 2:2—pages 145-158.)

-----2003. "Bible Translation in Africa: An Afrocentric Perspective." *The Bible Translator: Technical Papers*. United Bible Societies. 51:1-13.

----- and P. Renju, eds. 2004a. *Bible Translation and African Languages*. Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers.

----- 2004b. "Bible Translation in Anglophone Africa and her Diaspora: A Postcolonialist Agenda." *Black Theology: An International Journal* (formerly, *Black Theology in Britain: A Journal in Contextual Praxis*). 2:2—pages 153-166.

----- 2007. "Hearing the Politics of Peace in Ephesians: A Proposal from an African Postcolonial Perspective." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30:1—pages 113-127.

-----Forthcoming. "The United Bible Societies and Bible Translation in the Anglophone Caribbean: A Postcolonial Phenomenon." In *The Encyclopedia of Caribbean Religions*. Illinois: Illinois University Press.

-----, S. Davidson and J. Ukpong, Forthcoming. "The Use of the Bible in Africa and her Diaspora," in *The Africana Bible*. Edited by H. Page. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.