

# GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Everything begins with an idea, a thought, or a concept. As the idea grows, possibilities begin to emerge, riding on the wings of creative thinking. It is like the seed in the parable of the Sower that falls on good soil and yields a bumper harvest (Matt 13:8). In the case of the *Africa Bible Commentary* (ABC), this harvest has sprung from an idea that began to grow in the minds of a number of African church leaders and a cross-section of overseas missionary partners working in Africa.

## The History of the ABC

In September 1994, representatives of Protestant churches, both ecumenical and evangelical, gathered in Nairobi, Kenya, for the Second Pan Africa Christian Leadership Assembly (PACLA II). At this historic meeting, Christian leaders identified deficient knowledge of the Bible and faulty application of its teaching as the primary weakness of the church in Africa. They recognized that the church in Africa was a mile long in terms of quantity, but only an inch deep in terms of quality. The Bible needed to be interpreted and explained to the people in familiar language, using colloquial metaphors, African thought-forms and nuances, and practical applications that fitted the African context. After all, God is closer to the people when he speaks in their language, as St Augustine of Hippo once said.

Inspired by the conference, academics set to work and produced many books. But these ended up in the libraries of academic institutions and in the hands of theological students and their professors. These books did not meet the needs of the millions of believers and their pastors who do not have the privilege of a seminary education. So a dream was born among the leadership of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA). They dreamed of an African Bible commentary produced by seventy African scholars and theologians, male and female, Francophone and Anglophone, who would both explain the text of all sixty-six books in the Bible and apply the Bible's teaching to contemporary Africa. As Professor Bediako stated, such a book would be 'a fundamental resource for the church in Africa: for Christian thought, action and scholarship'.

Many dismissed the idea as no more than a dream. Besides the problem of getting scholars from diverse ecclesiastical traditions and theological viewpoints to cooperate, there were the daunting logistical problems posed by the state of communications across the vastness of the African continent. Could seventy African theologians and scholars work together, keep to deadlines, and produce a mammoth work like the ABC at a reasonable cost?

One of the few to believe that it could be done and to throw its weight logistically and financially behind the project was SIM, which lived up to its name as Serving in Mission. This missionary organization has had an active church-planting ministry in Africa for more than a century. Its literature arm, under the leadership of Jim Mason, has long been conducting pastors' conferences and giving out books to assist pastors in their ministry. They, too, had been contemplating the idea of providing pastors with a Bible commentary written entirely by African scholars.

The Executive Committee of the AEA, the leaders of SIM, and others who had expressed interest in the project thus met on the campus of the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST), another project of the AEA. Four of those at that meeting from 29-31 January 2001 became the editors of the ABC. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nigerian), the General Secretary of the AEA, became the General Editor. Samuel Ngewa (Kenyan), a professor at NEGST, assumed responsibility for editing all New Testament commentaries submitted in English. Tewoldemedhin Habtu (Eritrean), also a professor at NEGST, assumed responsibility for editing Old Testament manuscripts submitted in English, while those submitted in French would be edited by Issiaka Coulibaly (Ivorian), a lecturer at the Faculté de Théologie Évangélique de l'Alliance Chrétienne (FATEAC) in Côte d'Ivoire. In 2002, Solomon Andria (Malagasy), another professor at FATEAC, joined this group and assumed responsibility for New Testament commentaries written in French.

Two of those present at the initial meeting accepted positions as editorial advisors. They were Dr Isabel Phiri (Malawian), Professor of Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Dr Yusufu Turaki (Nigerian) of the International Bible Society, Enugu, and a Professor at Jos ECWA Theological Seminary (JETS), Jos.

The SIM representatives, Dr Jim Plueddemann, General Director of SIM USA (American) and Mr Jim Mason, International Literature Consultant of SIM Canada (Canadian), were invited to serve as technical partners. Another technical partner was Mr Pieter Kwant, Managing Director of the Piquant Agency, Carlisle, UK (Dutch) and the International Programme Director of Langham Partnership International.

Three other leaders who had expressed interest in the project sent their apologies for being unable to attend. They were Dr Dirinda Marini-Bodho, the initial Old Testament Editor – French, Dr Kwame Bediako and Dr Tite Tienou.

At this first meeting, terms were defined, roles were clarified, terms of reference were spelled out and budgets were approved. It was agreed that the ABC would also

include articles on issues affecting the continent, and so a list of these issues was drawn up, as well as a list of writers who could be asked to address them.

Five of the major resolutions passed at this meeting have served as editorial guidelines for this project:

- The ABC should be a readable, accessible and affordable one-volume commentary that pastors, students and lay people can easily use.
- The ABC should be African in terms of its authorship and its content, which must reflect its African context. While remaining true to the biblical text, it must apply biblical teachings and truths to African realities.
- The contributors to the ABC should be chosen to reflect the diversity of Africa as regards denominations and languages, and should include both men and women. The diversity in the contributors should also find expression in their commentaries.
- As part of their contract, contributors to the ABC would be expected to accept the AEA Statement of Faith as a guideline for their work.
- The ABC project should be owned by Africans and should be managed independently, although under the ultimate supervision of the AEA.

After this meeting, possible contributors were approached. They were urged to embark on individual research and to work both from the original Greek and Hebrew texts and also from translations of the Bible into their mother tongues. Writing workshops were organized in different parts of the continent. A number of writers were assisted to take a sabbatical in order to find time to write. Writers from the same area were encouraged to interact in order to encourage each other and critique each other's work.

### **The Contents of the ABC**

The ABC is not a critical, academic, verse-by-verse commentary. Rather, it contains section-by-section exegesis and explanation of the whole Bible as seen through the eyes of African scholars who respect the integrity of the text and use African proverbs, metaphors and stories to make it speak to African believers in the villages and cities across the entire continent. The application is both bold and faithful. Thus the ABC does not speak of a Black Jesus. To do so would be a travesty of the Bible story and cheap scholarship. Instead, the ABC is true to the text and honest to its context both in Bible days and in our day.

The ABC is, in fact, a mini-library that equips pastors and teachers to teach the churches and encourages students and church members to study God's word for themselves.

Of special benefit are the up-to-date specialist articles dealing with burning issues and problems such as poverty, favouritism, HIV/AIDS, refugees, war, politics and so on. And all this information is in one volume, which is easy-to-use, easy to handle, surprisingly light to carry, and very affordable! Even better, it is being published in both English and French, and will soon be translated into several African languages.

### **Using the ABC**

What can the ABC be used for? At the top of my list is personal devotion. As general editor, I had to critique and correct every manuscript. But after completing this task, I began to use the manuscripts for my quiet time. For the shorter books, I first read the entire book in the Bible and then the commentary on the book. For the longer books, I read between five and ten chapters a day and then read the corresponding commentary. My spiritual life has been enriched, and I strongly recommend this approach.

I have also used portions of the ABC for my sermon preparation and pulpit ministry. While doing this, I have learned many new things about African peoples of whom I previously knew nothing. For example, until I read the ABC on Leviticus, I did not know about the Iraqw tribe in northern Tanzania who are of Semitic extraction and have much in common with the Hebrews.

All of the ABC editors are seminary professors. All of them have used some portions of the ABC as part of their class lectures. In fact, some students at the NEGST who interacted with my own manuscript on 2 Peter sent me their comments, expressing their agreement or disagreement with what I had said. Such discussion is beneficial for all of us as we seek to understand and apply God's word. This experience confirms that the ABC will be a powerful resource book for fellowship group discussions and even for Sunday school classes in churches. I expect to find the ABC in every library of every Bible college, seminary, university and other institution of higher learning throughout Africa and beyond.

I also strongly recommend the ABC to every missionary working in Africa or intending to serve in Africa as it will give them insights into the Scriptures and into Africa that can only benefit their ministry.

Though the ABC is written by Africans and primarily for Africans, it can be used with benefit by those who are not Africans. In fact, reading the Bible through African lenses may help to inspire others with the dynamism and excitement that is common in African churches.

## Acknowledgements

We praise God for all he has accomplished. And it is also important that we acknowledge the significant contributions made by certain organizations and individuals without which the ABC could not have been born.

- The AEA for officially sponsoring the ABC and giving the editorial board the academic and management freedom to function.
- SIM for facilitating the logistics and finances required to move the process forward to its completion.
- NEGST for serving as the academic centre for the ABC, hosting our meetings, and making its library and other facilities available to visiting scholars.
- The Langham Partnership International for providing scholarships to enable many of our scholars to proceed on sabbaticals in order to write.
- Institutions of higher learning (including UNISA, GIMPA and Biola University) and retreat centres for hosting ABC scholars during their sabbaticals.
- Technical teams in Europe and Canada for helping with the administration, copyediting, translation, proofreading, typesetting, tracking down missing writers, and the like.
- The advisors for wise counsel, penetrating academic and theological insights and invaluable contributions.

- The editors for their sound and erudite scholarship with a touch of spiritual anointing, as well as for their selfless, sacrificial service.
- All sixty-nine contributors for making history in our generation by producing the first ever one-volume Bible commentary for the church in Africa.
- Zondervan, WordAlive and Oasis for agreeing to publish, distribute and market the ABC.
- Jim Mason, Pieter Kwant, Isobel Stevenson, Krysia Lear, Maybeth Henderson, Sue Prior and Judy Milasi for your ability to juggle multiple ABC balls without dropping any of them.
- All those individuals and groups in Africa and around the world who have supported this project in prayer.
- All those who have given generously to cover the many expenses incurred in producing the ABC.
- Finally, I would like to thank Dr John Stott CBE for writing a foreword to the ABC and Dr Robert Aboagye-Mensah, Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Ghana, and the many others who have honoured the ABC with their endorsements.

Our prayer is that just as God used his word to ignite the fire of Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth century, he will use the ABC to do the same in Africa today. Amen!

Tokunboh Adeyemo,  
General Editor,  
Africa Bible Commentary  
February 2006

## THE VISION

### *Vision statement for the ABC drafted in January 2001*

The Africa Bible Commentary is a one-volume commentary written and edited by African biblical scholars on all the books of the Bible. The general aim of the commentary is to make the word of God speak relevantly to African realities today. More especially, it targets Christian leaders at the grassroots level – pastors, students, and lay leaders – who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can be instrumental in the establishment and nurture of a vibrant church in the continent. A one-volume commentary on the whole Bible is,

by its very nature, a major exercise in compression, with a rigorous discipline governing what needs to be included and what needs to be omitted. This volume, therefore, does not delve into critical and exegetical details. Based on the firm conviction of and belief in the divine inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture, it seeks to offer the reader a contextual readable and affordable guide.

The fruit of that vision is now in your hands!