

From “Out of Africa” – A Global Christian Perspective

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Introduction

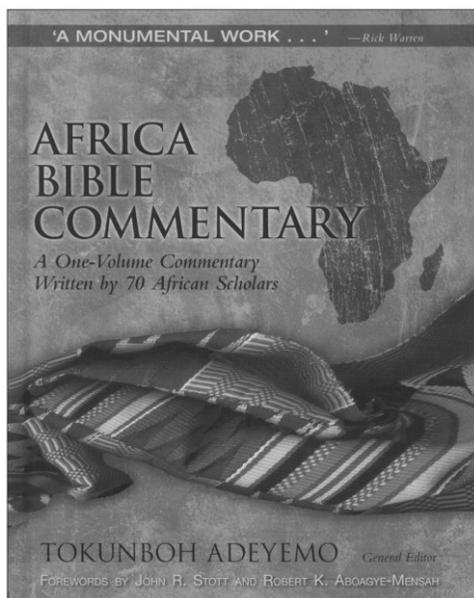
The following article has several purposes. My chief goal is to inform the reader about select contemporary Christian literature which mainly comes “out of Africa”.¹ I want to assist western Christians to see that they need to be more aware of the shifts which have and are taking place demographically in the Christian world.² It is very easy for us in the West to read everything published in the West and forget that there is a wider corpus of Christian publishing beyond the West. This is my primary purpose, and therefore the first three sub-points deal with: *Africa Bible Commentary*, African theologians and Rwanda. This brief article is my acknowledgement of the African Christians’ contribution to the whole body of Christ. I also have an agenda to alert all western Christian workers who may be travelling to Africa of material they could read to learn more about Christianity in Africa or about Africa in general. Finally, I have included a regional descriptor to help address matters of higher education in Africa as well as to provide a brief glimpse into some political matters relative to Africa over the last fifty years. The last two sub-points – Regional Africa: Anglophone, Francophone and Lucophone and Contemporary African Politics: 50 Years of Independence – deal with these matters.

¹ I have always enjoyed the phrase “out of Africa”. Most believe it can be traced back to Pliny the Elder, who likely first used it, and of course more recently it has been made popular in the book by Karen Blixon and subsequent movie.

² Readers may be aware of the seminal writings of Philip Jenkins which speak of this “shift”. See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Rise of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Africa Bible Commentary

The year 2006 will be remembered in African church history because of the release of *Africa Bible Commentary* (ABC). I will always recall being taken to a Christian bookshop in Nairobi in October, 2006, and seeing available for purchase this long-awaited volume.³ How delighted I was to have a copy in my luggage to take home and read. All Christians live in the Bible and in their local/national/continental world. Thus we all must apply the Scriptures



to the context of our place of daily life. Failure to do so makes the Bible irrelevant. True, some may over-contextualize and lose the balance of Scripture. That can be a real problem. However, I do not believe that is the case here with ABC, where I find a proper contextualization in applying the Scriptures is the goal.

Africa Bible Commentary is “a one volume commentary written by seventy African scholars” under the general editorship of Tokunboh Adeyemo and represents a first in publishing. As John Stott writes in the foreword, “A publishing landmark...Its foundation is biblical, its perspective African, and its approach to controversial questions balanced” (vii). All contributors are from Africa and write with the goal of meeting the needs of African pastors and students and offering African insights “into the biblical text that transcend Africa in their significance”.

This book has been published in Nairobi by WordAlive Publishers and in the rest of the world by Zondervan Corporation, with the copyright held by the ABC Editorial Board, Association of Evangelicals of Africa. Generally the NIV has been used for quotations.

³ Thank you, Dr. Chung of Grace Bible College, for taking me to the bookstore!

The layout of the book has the normal features associated with such large volumes: general introductions, guidelines for using the *ABC*, abbreviations and contributors. One striking point about the contributor list, which I had not noticed until a brother pointed it out to me, is that there is no contributor from South Africa; from southern Africa, yes, but not the nation of South Africa. Nationals from Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Benin, Madagascar, Congo, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Angola, Malawi, Mali, Ivory Coast, Eritrea, Namibia, Zambia, Central African Republic, Chad, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Burkina Faso and Uganda were involved in this project. I would encourage all who pick up this book to read through this list of contributors – what a wonderful learning experience to read of the work of God’s people across the mighty continent of Africa.

Each book of the Bible is dealt with by a single contributor with the exception of Genesis, Deuteronomy, and 1 and 2 Samuel, which each have two authors. I have been reading portions for about four months now and find it in general to be exegetically accurate, applicatory and very acceptable. I found the work done on the Gospel of Mark by Victor Cole to be of consistently high quality. Like any collection with this number of writers, it is difficult to maintain stylistic unity and purpose. For example, the commentary on the Gospel of Luke I found more thematic in approach. I could make exactly the same overall comment upon the *Bible Speaks Today* series – some volumes are more exegetical than others, some more thematic in approach and some attempt to blend or steer between the two. So it is with the *Africa Bible Commentary*.

I believe all readers will also greatly benefit by reading the nearly one hundred separate articles interspersed throughout the commentary. In this regard the style is reminiscent of many popular study Bibles today which contain interspersed thematic articles. These range from articles on debt (779), female genital mutilation (37), persecution (1564), refugees (321) and street children (1240) to taboos (159) and witchcraft (374). Needless to say, right here one can learn much about Africa and Christianity. We are grateful to our African brothers and sisters for sharing so much with us in these articles to help Christians in other parts of the world grow in our understanding of African Christianity.

The book concludes with a glossary, which, although only five pages long, covers many key terms. If all readers study these terms, their Bible reading will be enriched. Two or three well-placed maps would have enhanced certain sections of the commentary; for example,

the seven churches in Revelation or the Bible lands of Jesus' time on earth.

It has often been said in missiology that missions should strive for the "three selfs" in indigenous churches – self-propagation, self-support and self-government – but to these must be added a fourth, "self-theologizing". There is certainly a need for this development. I see *Africa Bible Commentary* as a very positive move in this direction, whereby the indigenous leaders are writing commentaries for the Church, and not only for the African Church. All of us can benefit from this volume, with its fresh insights, easy-to-read style and balance of mind and heart engagement. Though its primary audience is African pastors, students and laity, it is hoped that the whole world will be blessed.

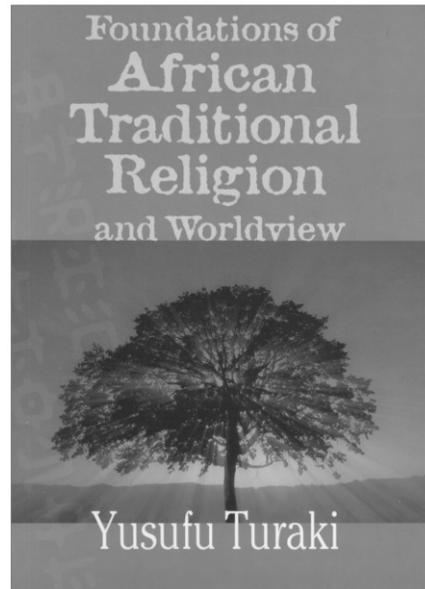
Students of the Bible and of Africa should also be aware of two other books which apply the Bible's teaching directly to the culture of operation and do not just try to treat everything through western eyes. Wilbur O'Donovan's two books, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* and *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa* would be excellent books for all Christian workers preparing for ministry in Africa or to refugees in the western world. O'Donovan writes as an evangelical Christian with thirty-five years of experience as a missionary in Nigeria and Ethiopia. The latter book, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa*, covers many topics which can now be found in the new *Africa Bible Commentary* topical articles. Since O'Donovan's book is now out of print (© 2000), the *ABC* will serve as a helpful read to all unable to locate the O'Donovan books.

In *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa*, O'Donovan briefly picks up a theme to which one needs to become sensitive – "urban Africa". There are several complexities of urbanization in Africa: many urban centres pre-date the Colonial period; many have expansive informal settlements; many are dealing with increasing secularization and its challenge to modern evangelism; many wrestle with the place of ethnic/tribal churches; and an additional recent theme, many newer urban centres face the challenge of the loss of the traditional African value of respect for the elderly. A new phrase I have heard many times now is "Out of urban Africa" as a parody on Karen Blixon's *Out of Africa*. O'Donovan raises the theme of urban Africa in his *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa* (52-53) in his effort to "discuss and analyze some of the immense difficulties confronting modern Africa from a biblical perspective". Thus it is essential to include books like *ABC* or O'Donovan's in one's reading before commencing work in Africa.

African Theologians

I really wonder how many times western Christians have read a book or article by an African evangelical theologian. For all our talk about globalization, internet communication and travel, I think many of the reading lists in western theological curriculum still have not moved very far in including living, non-western theologians. My plug has been given that we do need to be willing to make some adjustments here.

One writer and one book to start with would be: Yusufu Turaki’s *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview*. Turaki was one of the theological advisors for the ABC and has taught in Jos, Nigeria, and in Nairobi, Kenya. This book combines the modern subject of worldview studies with an application of this lens to African traditional religion. It is a very helpful approach for western Christians who have been taught the language of worldview studies. Here are the twelve chapter titles:



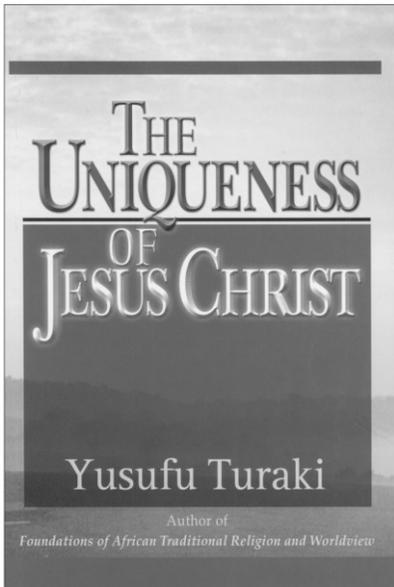
- Defining Religion
- African Traditional Religion
- Fundamental Theological Beliefs
- Fundamental Philosophical Beliefs
- Fundamental Ethical Beliefs
- The Supreme Being
- Gods, Divinities and Spirits
- Communication with and from the Spirit World
- The Acquisition of Power
- The Exercise of Power
- Being Human
- The Meaning of Life

There is no doubt that Turaki’s book will be read alongside or even replace some of J. S. Mbiti’s books, such as Mbiti’s 1975 *Introduction to African Religion*, or E. B. Idowu’s 1973 work, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. I am certain that Turaki’s book will become a

new textbook for many African colleges; and since it is so concise (128 pages), what an excellent primer for any going to Africa as missionaries, short or long term.

Turaki's other book on Christology is a delight to read. Here is the development of "self-theologizing". This book, *The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ*, began in the classroom in the 1980s when Dr. Turaki was teaching in Jos, Nigeria. Some of this material has been presented in lecture format at other locations, including Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi.

Turaki's goal is to develop "a biblical basis and foundation for presenting and proclaiming Jesus the Messiah as the only valid, authentic and unique Saviour of the whole world and the mediator between God and man." It is more than a Christological study, as one will find sections on the implications of the theology of who Christ is. Chapter six, "The Mission of the Church", chapter seven, "Christianity in the Midst of Cultural and Religious Plurality", and chapter eight, "Uniqueness of Christ in the Context of Plural Cultures and Religion" take the subject of Christology and apply it in many very engaging ways. To speak of being reconciled in Christ



does have implications for the mission of the Church (pp. 89-98). I am very encouraged and blessed to see such books being published from "out of Africa". They are a real blessing to all who are interested in the worldwide Church.

Rwanda

The *Haddington House Journal* receives many books to review, some of which I may not at first instance select to read. There was one that came in during the last year that I was not at first drawn towards. Perhaps this was because the book was about Rwanda, and after seeing the movie "Hotel Rwanda", released in 2004, I was not sure if I could stomach reading a book about the 1994 genocide in that country. Also, reading a few clips from Roméo Dallaire's *Shake Hands with the Devil*,

I was unenthusiastic about the theme. However, after reading Meg Guillebaud's *After the Locusts: How costly forgiveness is restoring Rwanda's stolen years*, I began to think differently. Rays of hope began to be kindled in me once again.

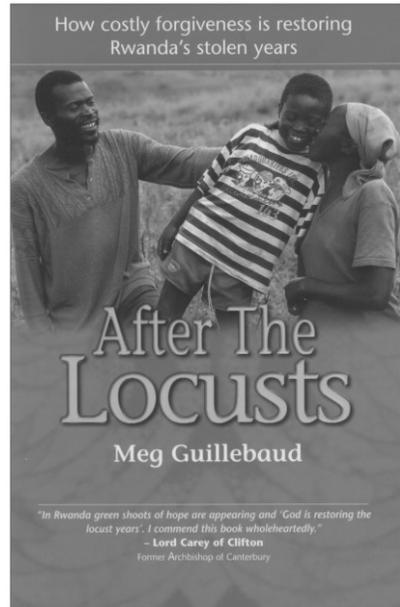
The Guillebauds are one of the missionary family dynasties of Africa. Meg comes from the third generation, and her nephew continues to be involved in African ministry. They represent a name amongst Rwandan Episcopalians and the Church Mission Society (CMS), with roots in Rwanda and Burundi, reaching back to 1922. Harold Guillebaud (the grandfather) helped translate the New Testament into Kingarwanda and is buried in Burundi.

In Meg's other book on Rwanda, *Rwanda: The Land God Forgot?*

(2002), she describes the genocide of 1994. *After the Locusts* is the story of living with the aftermath and the whole human desire for revenge, yet the call to forgive. Here is Rwanda, 1995 onwards:

In 1995, Rwanda in many ways resembled a field after the locusts had left. It was still green with an incongruous beauty, but ugly scars of war were everywhere, and a smell of death. Despair and devastation was visible in every face. Tales of horror poured from every new visitor. The church, too, was thoroughly demoralised after its failure to stand up for the right. Many churches had been scenes of dreadful massacres; many church leaders were in exile, fearful to return and face implication in those terrible events; and their people felt that they had lost the right to speak words of healing and peace in the dreadful aftermath of the genocide (pp. 9-10).

What follows in this book are stories of many Rwandans struggling with how to deal with repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. The author introduces us to several Christian agencies working for healing and reconciliation in Rwanda. Interspersed through the stories and



descriptions is the author's developing theology of forgiveness and reconciliation, which I think culminates on page 164:

As Christians we are called to be peacemakers, and have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation. It is possible, though difficult, to forgive someone who has not confessed his crime and asked for forgiveness, but true reconciliation is impossible without movement on both sides, confession and repentance on the one hand, and forgiveness on the other.

I am aware of some strange things in this book, yet sometimes it is the least expected books which really force you to think well beyond your normal parameters and to gain insight. Yes, the reading list at the back of the book "is all over the map", yet if one finds the thread in *After the Locusts*, one is greatly enriched. (I believe the author should have been more objective and discerning with several entries included in her bibliography, as some may actually contradict her thesis.) Meg summarized this book in an interview: "It's a theological reflection on forgiveness. It's a book on forgiveness with illustrations from Rwanda."

If one really wants to prepare for work in Rwanda or South Africa, here is a book with which to start. It comes "out of Africa", through the missionary eyes of a western family long connected to Africa. I think the bottom line for all who read this is that it's not just about Rwanda, it's really about each of us.

Regional Africa: Anglophone, Francophone and Lucophone

For the purpose of modern missions and education, Africa can be divided into the following four main regional groupings: Anglophone Africa, Francophone Africa, Lucophone Africa and Arabic Africa. Africa is simply so large and diverse, sixty-one countries/territories at a recent count, and it is complex in terms of its linguistic realities. Are there any ways of developing a linguistic strategy by region? Yes, there are, and if one starts to identify some unifying linguistic structures to this vast continent, these help in developing modern, educational missions strategy.

Anglophone, or English-speaking, Africa embraces an incredibly large population group – 350 million – and includes areas in west, east and southern Africa. Francophone, or French-speaking, Africa has a population of over 184 million. Lucophone, or Portuguese-speaking,

Africa has a population of almost 32 million.⁴ Although lower levels of the educational structure often employ regional languages, higher education in each of these three regions is conducted in one of the three major languages, thus allowing higher level theological education to be conducted through three main common languages. This has strategic significance for both theological education and missions. Naturally all three of these linguistic groupings are “left-overs” from the colonial period in Africa, and we find Portuguese speaking Africa importing many theological works from Brazil. A recent change in South Africa is that all universities must teach in English, not Afrikaans. Again, in terms of higher education in Anglophone Africa we can immediately see the significance.

Contemporary African Politics: 50 Years of Independence

There is a sea of current books on African politics. I recall the first book I ever read on African politics in the early 1980s. It was short, 166 pages, yet it stirred my mind and heart for the people of Africa. It is now 2007, and I have had many opportunities to learn more about Africa first-hand since then, yet I confess I find it so very difficult to attempt any meaningful summary about contemporary African politics. In part this is because it is a continent with sixty-one countries and territories, and generalities are dangerous! Therefore I have decided to limit comments to a few words on my most recent reading on African politics, Martin Meredith’s *The Fate of Africa: From the Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair, A History of Fifty Years of Independence*. The author is an Englishman who lived in Africa, where he was a foreign correspondent/reporter. He was there for fifteen years – the years of independence – and he describes his work as a foreign correspondent as “often related to wars, revolution and upheaval.”⁵ So it is in part “out of Africa”. Today the author is a research fellow at St. Antony’s College, Oxford, and widely viewed as one of the world’s most knowledgeable men on modern Africa.

This particular book, *The Fate of Africa*, is very much a narrative history of particular countries in Africa. As such, it is free of extensive footnotes and allows the reader to have an easier read. One may not

⁴ *Overseas Council International Strategic Plan 2001-2010* [Updated 2003] (Indianapolis: Overseas Council International, 2003). I am grateful to Dr. Manfred Kohl for sharing this resource with me.

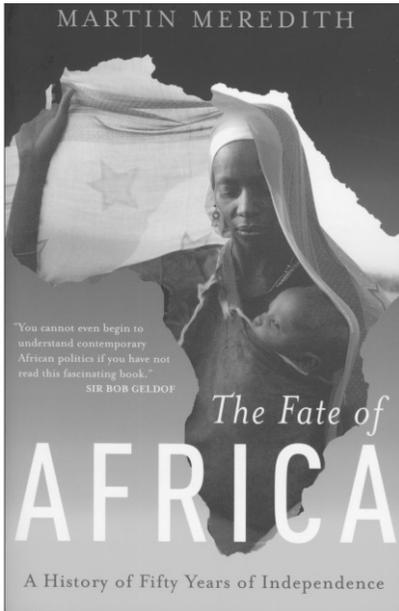
⁵ Martin Meredith, *The Fate of Africa: From the Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair, A History of Fifty Years of Independence* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), no page number, “Author’s Note”.

agree with all the author's perspectives, but certainly one cannot criticize the readability. (Chapter notes at the back of the book are very minimal and focus on suggestions for further reading.)

Meredith commences with an excellent introductory chapter (pp. 1-14), which could easily be a stand-alone essay. There is just so much packed in here. It appears to be an embodiment of one man's whole lifetime of study, reflection and commentary.

The book is divided into four parts with several chapters in each.

The unfortunate thing is that none of the four parts is titled – a small matter, yet in my estimation, one that detracts from the goal to be accessible to readers. Part one (pp. 17-137) is about early leaders and focused countries: Kwame Nkumah, Ghana, the Suez Crisis, Algeria, Jomo Kenyatta and the Mau Mau Rebellion, the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Nigeria, Sudan, Rhodesia, Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa and apartheid. So it does appear that the author is more or less working chronologically. Allow me to select only one chapter, chapter seven, "The White South" (pp. 116-137), to make a very cursory comment. Meredith summarizes South African apartheid politics with great ease for the amateur



reader. I am amazed by his skill in *précis* writing – few can do this so well. After South Africa he moves to Rhodesia, then to Angola and Mozambique. For some reason I found his section on Rhodesia just “fell off” in mid-stream, perhaps because he had aroused my interest so much that I wanted more. You then have to work your way through the index and trace Southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe chronologically through other parts of the book.

Part two (pp. 141-328) moves more into an overview of African independence and the immediate aftermath. This is more thematic and covers a much broader canvas than part one. Here economics, education, labour, ethnicity, nationalism, etc., are addressed together with narrative history on the Biafran War and the rise of Idi Amin in Uganda and Bokassa in the Central African Republic.

Part three (pp. 331-440) deals with Ethiopia and Mengistu and the famine of 1984, Muslim/non-Muslim divides in Chad and Sudan, AIDS, economic decline, “democracy”, and Nelson Mandela amongst its topics.

Part four (pp. 443-688) concentrates upon African events from 1990 to 2005. Others have commented that here there is much that is depressing: the Algerian conflict, the Rwandan genocide, and the world of Liberia, Sierra Leone and modern Nigeria. Chapter thirty-one is devoted to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, chapter thirty-three to Zimbabwean disruption and chapter thirty-four to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on South Africa, or the “new-Africa” and her renaissance. The final pages of this chapter (pages 681-688) present a very sobering reflection on the current situation, that in the hands of man, all is not well. Here is where, as a Christian, I wished for this book to incorporate my basic premise. I serve the sovereign God of the universe, and that gives me a perspective where I do not hope in man’s ingenuity to solve this world’s problems. I see the heart of the issue rather as men are sinners in need of redemption. In other words, my Christian worldview of a sovereign God, a depraved humanity, a Redeemer and grace colours my reading of world news. If you are seeking such a perspective, you will be disappointed with *The Fate of Africa*. However, this is not to say that I have not found this book beneficial.

So, readers, if you have time for only one book on contemporary African politics, I highly recommend *The Fate of Africa*, not because it is published by one of the Christian publishing houses and will conclude with a Christian viewpoint, but because it paints a fifty year overview of modern Africa. No one should be involved in work in Africa without reading it. I am not usually in the habit of quoting pop stars, but I do agree with Irish pop/rock singer, Bob Geldof, “You cannot even begin to understand contemporary African politics if you have not read this fascinating book.” The book is large, 752 pages. It contains several black and white photographs and some fine sketch maps.

Summary

My first goal was to help readers become more sensitive to the reality of the place of modern Africa in today’s global Christian context. I am firmly convinced that we need the whole Church. We are impoverished if we neglect to read about, listen to and learn from the

whole Body. I encourage all to learn from each other. I thank my brothers and sisters in Africa for all they have taught me.

I close with this little biblical vignette “out of Africa”. Psalm 126 has been a favourite of mine for many years. Verse five is one I have had on my wall since 1981, “Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.” Readers can do their own background study here, but I want to share what my African brothers have shared with me. Would you grind the last few seeds you have to make flour when you are in a drought or would you hold them from immediately being used to feed your children and instead plant them in the soil in faith that a harvest will come? The parents who decide to plant those few precious seeds cry because their children are hungry, but they have faith. They sow them as seed, literally crying with deep tears, but they believe they will reap “with songs of joy”. Just the other day I read the following by Glenn Penner, Chief Executive Officer of The Voice of the Martyrs, quoting Philip Jenkins:

Philip Jenkins in his new book, *The New Faces of Christianity*, describes how he was discussing this psalm with some West Africans who were from an agricultural society not unlike the biblical one in which this psalm was originally written. They pointed out that the psalm must have been written when times were very hard and food short, a situation which these West Africans could identify with. They pointed out that the people “would have been desperately tempted to eat their seed corn but resisted the temptation because they knew that, if they did that, they would have nothing to eat” (*The New Faces of Christianity*, Oxford University Press, 2006: 73). Jenkins quotes a traveler to the Middle East in the 1850’s, W.M. Thomson, who witnessed this in his observations: “In seasons of great scarcity, the poor peasants part in sorrow with every measure of precious seed cast into the ground. It is like taking bread out of the mouths of their children; and in such times many bitter tears are actually shed over it” (*ibid*).⁶

⁶ Glenn Penner, “Sowing With Tears”, February 17, 2007. <<http://www.persecution.net/weblog.htm>> (March 2, 2007).

I need my African brethren as I minister. Together may we “go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, and return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with us”.

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