AFRICA STUDY BIBLE: GOD’S WORD THROUGH AFRICAN EYES
An Interview with John Jusu and Matthew Elliott

Could you give an example of how reading with African eyes allows new insights to emerge from the Bible?

Consider the text on the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is preaching, “You are the light of the world, and the salt of the earth.” Well, I (John Jusu) spoke to a theologian from the southern region of Africa, and he explained that the Western commentaries on this topic did not make sense to him. These commentaries explain that salt preserves and adds flavor. But he told me that to him, light gives direction and reveals our path, and therefore salt should follow the metaphor and also give direction.

I asked him to explain, and so he told me a story: “In my village, when there is drought, the monkeys know where there is water. But, they will not lead humans to that water. So, the people will trap a monkey and tie it up. Then, they will feed it salt. After a day or two, the monkey will become very thirsty. At this point, the humans will release the monkey. Then, the monkey will not care if the human beings are following it or not; it will make straight for the source of water in order to satisfy its thirst.”

Here is the lesson: If your Christianity does not make people thirsty for the water of life, then it is worth nothing.

How did the Africa Study Bible come about?

In 2005, after ten years working in Africa, our leadership at Oasis International was convinced there was a great need for Bibles that fit the African context, bringing the power of Scripture to the continent in a new and culturally relevant way. Over the next years, we explored a number of options with major Bible publishers. Eventually, our board decided to embark on a landmark study Bible project that would eventually be named the Africa Study Bible (ASB).

In 2011, leaders from Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone Africa and from across the continent, gathered in Accra, Ghana to form the final vision. They framed the content and features as well as the emphasis on discipleship and application. Under the direction of Dr. John Jusu and our editorial committee, a preview in the form of the Gospel of John was created in 2012.

For the next two years, a small staff concentrated on forming the writing team and in 2014, as writing began to pour in, the translation, review, and editorial team grew and eventually numbered over thirty, mostly part time. Our final

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1 Matthew 5:13-16.
writing team includes over 350 individuals from fifty nations. We are on track to release the Bible in English in early 2017, including a full Bible app, with the Gospel of John already available on iOS and Android.

**What motivated the development of a study Bible for Africa?**

Over four hundred million Protestant Christians in Africa do not have a Bible written to meet the needs of their own cultures. Discouraged by the lack of an African voice in Bible commentaries and study Bibles, many African leaders have affirmed that the time is ripe for Africans to bring their own insights and reflections on the Bible to their continent and the world.

People are not growing because they are not able to come directly to the fountain and drink. The Bible feels like something they cannot understand, because it is explained to them using language and context that does not match their daily lives. That is why the Africa Study Bible is so necessary. This Bible will be the first study Bible that features African pastors and scholars writing for the African experience. African proverbs, stories, history, and insight are incorporated into the notes to teach people how to apply the Bible in their own context, rather than how a Western book or teacher applies the Bible to their context. For example, the Africa Study Bible will teach a village preacher to share their wisdom in a way that resonates with their hearers' daily experience. Filling the need for communicating God's truth in a more effective and culturally relevant way was in the editors' minds from the start.

**Since Africa is such a large, diverse continent, what is it that defines an African way to read the Bible?**

Africa is quite a diverse continent, but there are similarities, common issues, and a shared cultural core that make Africans authentically African. Our socialization processes are often similar and the overall ethos of community values is unique. Reading the Bible as story and the traditional responsibility to pass on our wisdom, in this case our Christian heritage, is one shared idea. The manner in which we pass this heritage – in the form of stories, proverbs, and real-life events – is another thread that runs across Africa. Reading the great stories and re-telling them over and over again defines our approach to reading the Bible. We could go on about similar problems, crisis, colonialism, and even health crises that create common needs and perspectives on suffering. In the midst of our diversity, there is a common core that makes us both members of our own nations and members of Africa. The ASB attempts to speak with this voice.

**Would an Africa Study Bible written in, say, Arabic, French, Hausa, or Yoruba be very different from this study Bible written in English?**

About half the notes of the Africa Study Bible were written in French, Arabic, Amharic, and Portuguese then translated into English. Translation of the Africa Study Bible into French has already begun with Portuguese to follow. So this Bible is not “written” in English. With authors from 50 countries, you can rightly say the study Bible was written in Arabic, French, Hausa, and Yoruba. The editors’ job was to take this diversity and make sure it spoke a common language that could be understood by all.

**Would you agree that we always read the Bible in a context? If so, would it be better if other study Bibles name their context, which is often the North Atlantic?**

In general, words are understood in context as one thing in one place might mean something very different in another context. So we must be context sensitive. This does not just apply to the Bible but to all forms of communication. You can better understand what a person is saying if you understand the context in which they are speaking. Let us give an example. In some cultures, reading that Jesus ate with his disciples speaks volumes about the humility of Jesus even more than Jesus washing the feet of the disciple because feet washing is not a culturally understood event in these contexts. So it is always good to understand the cultural context of a piece of communication to be able to appreciate what is happening. So the ASB aims to both contrast and compare African and biblical culture to help us understand the Bible better. For other study Bibles, there is cultural influence, but many of those biblical resources are looking for the meaning of the text, not applying the text. A Greek word’s meaning is the same around the world. But the ASB concentrates on applying truth to a specific culture, so it is different than most study Bibles. Therefore, a study Bible should be named according to its purpose, not its culture. In our case, the purpose is to apply truth and make it understandable for Africa – and the world through African eyes.

**What is your understanding of biblical hermeneutics, or of how we interpret and apply the Bible?**

God’s word is divine, authoritative and eternally true. Notwithstanding, our interpretation of that truth, our hermeneutic, can be flawed because we are sinners being saved by grace. We must note that although some of the first methods were developed by Africans, in modern times hermeneutical principles and theories were developed within a cultural milieu and context that was not African. We received these traditions which were promoted in Bible schools and this helped us greatly to understand the Bible. But Africa is now of age, and we can start to re-examine these theoretical and interpretive frameworks in view of both believing in the power of God’s Word and being African. We need to learn from the Western historical-critical method, but also more fully integrate our understanding of things like story, ancestors, and wisdom. A great example might be our approach to suffering. In the West they struggle more with the question, “Why do we suffer?” In Africa we want to know, “How do we suffer well?”
Where would you situate the approach of the Africa Study Bible among movements in biblical hermeneutics, such as feminist, postcolonial, rhetorical, narrative, structuralist, poststructuralist, social-scientific, or canonical criticism of the Bible?

Should it be in any of these categories? Each of these is a fragment or perspective for understanding truth, a very narrow fragment at that! This taxonomical approach to understanding reality is less about integration and more about finding truth for your group or special interest. Interestingly, writers and editors of the Africa Study Bible came from all these traditions and the editors tried as much as they could to integrate their thoughts into a coherent whole so that Africa can hear God’s voice from a holistic perspective and not from any of specific category. It is very hard to achieve, but our aim was to be holistic, seeking a “historical biblical orthodoxy.” We would say we aimed to find a common core of orthodoxy proclaimed by, for example, Thomas Oden in his recent works on both Africa and the Church Fathers and in his biography.1

What topics did you deal with that are not often dealt with in study Bibles? I notice articles on tribes, ancestors, witches and diviners, leadership in Africa, the African diaspora, the similarities between the cultural worlds of the Bible and Africa, missions as Africans, Christianity’s African roots, African Christian ethics, polygamy, reading and applying the Bible in modern day Africa, and how Africa has contributed to Christianity, among others.

This is true, the topics addressed in our Articles and Learn Notes came out of our initial discussion in 2011. In addition to those topics, we also addressed widows and orphans, slavery, suffering, money and possessions, parenting, marriage, cults, land and labor, politics, witchcraft and witchcraft accusations, etc. All the issues chosen were done so with great intentionality due to the specific needs of the church in Africa.

Were there books of the Bible that really came alive when read from an African perspective?

Here is one good example: nations in Africa were divided up by Europeans, not necessarily along traditional ethnic and tribal lines. As a result, different ethnic interests within a nation have caused war, poverty and great hardship. Now take the book of Joshua and think about living as twelve tribes within one nation. This is the reality the nations of Africa are living in today. Africans can help teach the church what Joshua means to nations made of tribes that each hold traditional tribal lands.

I, John, could not find a book that did not connect directly to my life as an African. Every book in the Bible speaks to one or more African issues – from family issues in Genesis to the hope of the suffering Christian in Revelation, God has spoken to us in Africa. It is not the book, but reading the book in our own context that creates the connection.

What was the most challenging aspect of creating the Africa Study Bible?

The coordination of the many moving parts of the ASB has been a learning process. Our more than 350 authors worked in difficult conditions, often with limited access to good internet and recent technology. In most instances, they are already burdened with great responsibility as leaders in their country. The realities of Africa often make simple tasks more difficult. Further, working with this large and diverse writing team slowed the process and made quality control more difficult. Most authors had never written for a project of this nature, so extensive coaching and revisions were often required. We underestimated the requirements for this interaction. However, especially in areas of our weakness, we saw God provide in perfect ways. Where we are weak, he is strong.

As you created the Africa Study Bible, are there ways you wish the project could have gone farther in shifting the norms of study Bibles?

If we knew what we do now in 2011 would we have done some things differently. Yes! But overall, the story of the ASB is a story of God making our path straight and overcoming our weaknesses and lack of knowledge.

It is our desire that an integrative hermeneutic emerges from the ASB that allows people to approach the text from a less biased framework, not forcing the text to fit our own framework. That was one of my, John’s, greatest challenges – writers forcing portions of Scripture to conform to their own interpretive frameworks even when it was clearly not in that text. So both Westerners in Western study Bibles and Africans need to learn to read the Bible in a way that impacts culture but does not make our own culture the framework for interpretation. If we set a good example in this, I will be happy.

What would you like to see happen in the lives of those who use the Africa Study Bible, especially university students?

We hope to see disciples of Jesus in Africa grow to really understand how to apply the Bible to their daily lives. We hope too that Christians around the world will understand the Bible better because African wisdom and perspective brings them closer to God's truth.

IFES leaders were a core part of our writing team, and they are wonderful students of God's Word. So first, a big thank you! A common proverb in Africa is “when elders speak, the gods have spoken.” We wish that the young people of Africa will appreciate God's voice in the rich wisdom of the African elders which has been captured and passed on to them in this Bible. Many have grown without the benefit of the wisdom of African elders. Our hope is that they will listen to them as they share their experiences of what God has done for them through the stories and proverbs. We further hope that the Bible might provoke a type of thinking in the minds of University students - that which will give them pride to be African and the desire to share their own testimonies of growth in their own stories as they contribute to the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of Africa. We hope it will equip them to be life-long students of God's word who correctly apply the word of God to their unique context.

Do you have any final comments?

The ASB is a testimony to our great God. It was an effort beyond any of our ability, far beyond what we understood seven years ago when we started. So, *Soli Deo Gloria*, God did it. We hope it will be a fragrant and acceptable offering to God that blesses all who read it.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**John Jusu**, *Africa Study Bible* Supervising Editor, was born in Sierra Leone. He earned his master's degree in Christian education, Master of Philosophy degree and PhD in education. He has served as Dean of the School of Education, Arts and Social Sciences and teaches in the Educational Studies Department at Africa International University in Kenya. John also works with Overseas Council as the Regional Director for Africa. He and his wife Tity have three children in addition to twenty-four children rescued from distressed situations for whom they offer fulltime care.

**Matthew Elliott** serves as president of Oasis International and project director for the *Africa Study Bible*. Matthew earned a bachelor's degree in economics and master's degree in New Testament at Wheaton College in the United States as well as a Masters of Theology and a Doctorate of Philosophy in New Testament studies from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. He was ordained at the College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, under Dr. Kent Hughes. He is the author of *Faithful Feelings: Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament* (IVP/Kregel) and *Feel* (Tyndale House). Matthew, his wife Laura, and their three children reside in the Chicago area.