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**TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH: A CURSORY  
AFRO-MISSIOLOGICAL TAKE ON ACTS 1:8**

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**INTRODUCTION**

David Bosch, the late South African who, for many years, taught at the University of South Africa, has come to be associated by many in missiological circles with his magisterial tome, to wit, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (1991). In its Twentieth Anniversary Edition (2011), the volume is touted by *Christianity Today* (2014) on the Cover of the Third Printing and Twentieth Anniversary Edition as “one of the 100 most significant books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”

So wide-ranging and impactful is Bosch's book that it has now been translated and published in several languages, to wit, "Chinese, Korean, French, Indonesian, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Japanese, and Hungarian, not to mention a South Asian edition in India...[and with] other translations ...currently underway into German, Czech, Turkish, and Polish" (Bosch, 2014:xv). At this phenomenal rate of translation, it is not inconceivable that, one day, it might well be translated into Jamiakan as well!

And not surprisingly, perhaps, throughout Bosch's big book, we encounter predicable mission-related texts like the Matthean Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20 *et parr* [Mk. 16: 14-18; Lk. 24: 44-49; and Jn. 20: 19-23; cf. *Didachē* 7:1]). It is a Matthean Great Commission which, in recent years, has been the object of close, careful and, at times, critical postcolonial scrutiny from the perspective of the Global South (see, for example, Klauber and Manetsch 2008; Raschke 2008 and especially Yorke 2014).

In Bosch's book, we also encounter a discussion of the so-called Lukan Manifesto (Lk. 4:16-20)--one which seeks to encapsulate Jesus' paradoxically peace-promoting but conflict-generating pro-poor and people-liberating mission (see Yong 2016: 341). In Bosch, we also find discussed John's apocalyptic and global sounding multicultural and multilingual missiological mandate which was initially addressed to the late-first century CE Christian communities of Asia Minor (Rev. 14:6-12).

Further, and in keeping with this relatively succinct article, we also encounter Acts 1:8 which appears like a recurring decimal or a leitmotif throughout Bosch's book as a whole (see, for example, the following pages from the original 1991 unchanged Edition: pages 66, 88, 91, 94, 138, 146, 154, 244, 252, 254, 355, 294, 298, 312, 313, 328, 343 and 364). And Hans Küng, one of the enthusiastic endorsers of the Twentieth Anniversary Edition of the Bosch volume, has himself made repeated use of the self-same text (Acts 1:8) in one of his own ecclesiological classics, to wit, *The Church* (see Küng 1976: 391, 453, 455 and 479).

In terms of Acts 1:8 (the last part), the general tendency of Bible commentators, scholars and translators when dealing with the text is basically twofold, namely: a) either to make some serious exegetical and contextually appropriate attempt to ascertain what, most likely, Jesus might have meant when he uttered the words recorded (presumably in Aramaic initially) at the end of Act 1:8 and later translated and/or transmitted to us in the Hellenistic Greek by Luke himself, to wit, καὶ ἕως ἑσχάτου τῆς γῆς (*kai heōs eschatou tēs gēs*), translated as: “and unto the uttermost parts of the earth” (*King James Version* or *King James Bible*) or “and to the ends of the earth” (*New International Version*); or b) scholars settle for some general and universalizingly applicable translation such as “and everywhere in the world” (*Contemporary English Version*). In a few cases as well, nothing is made of that section of the verse in that it attracts little or no comment (see, for example, Pelican 2005).

Illustrative of the tendency to settle for a rather generalizing or universalizing missiological comment on the last and requisite section of Acts 1:8 is not only Stott in his Acts Commentary in which he endorses Newbigin's similar treatment of it (1990:44) but so also is Holladay in one of the more recent and relatively comprehensive Acts Commentaries (2016). Earlier examples would point to scholars like Fernando in his own Commentary (1998), Balge (1993), Barclay (1975) and Willimon (1988).

Although reference is usually made to Acts 12-28 in which we encounter Imperial Rome literarily situated at the centre of Luke's seemingly Eurocentric narrative world, we still encounter a somewhat a-contextual comment on what, presumably, is the original global appeal of Acts 1:8, the text in question. In this latter section of the Book of Acts (chaps. 12-28), Dr. Luke's second volume, the Gentile author has his initial hearers follow along with, and then leave an itinerant and, later, incarcerated Paul at, the very heart of the Roman Empire (28: 16-31). It is this, perhaps, which provides some justification for some scholars to engage in a somewhat homiletically driven generalization or universalization of the expression, “καὶ ἕως ἔσχατου τῆς γῆς” (*kai heōs eschatou tēs gēs*). For Smith, the expression provides justification to use the text as a basis for what is regarded as Luke's invitation to his implied readers to engage in a more global missiological reading of it (see Peter-Ben Smith 2016).

In contradistinction to this contemporizing, universalizing or generalizing approach to Acts 1:8 (last part), however, I wish to suggest that this *Tendenz* is neither exegetically faithful to, nor contextually compatible with, what, most likely, Luke had the resurrected Jesus, just prior to his post-resurrection departure from them, had in mind when he (Jesus) first uttered these words to his eleven dispirited and despondent disciples in Jerusalem when He charged them to proclaim the Gospel beginning in Jerusalem, then spread to Samaria to the north and then fan out to the ends of the earth.

Rather, Acts 1:8 (last part), a text which, except for two very minor and insignificant variants appearing earlier in the verse and which therefore poses no real text-critical difficulties or challenges for the interpreter and/or the translator (see Omanson 2006: 217-218; *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition* [2010] *ad loc*; and *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*<sup>28th</sup> Edition, *ad loc*), really points us in a very different exegetical and a specific geographical direction.

In essence, the proposal here is that the expression should best be grounded and understood within its more immediate Greco-Roman context or setting and in ways which make us take cognizance of its possible original relevance for the continent of Africa, the outer and southern limits of the then sprawling Roman Empire.

## **THE AFRO-ROMAN CONTEXT OF ACTS 1:8 (LAST PART)**

When attempts are made to situate geographically the relevant section of Acts 1:8 (last part), we find scholars debating as to whether or not we should consider Rome or elsewhere as its primary referent (see Conzelmann 1987; William 1973; and Williams 1985). In terms of Rome, for example, justification is usually sought by appealing to *Psalms of Solomon* in which, presumably, Pompey, coming from Rome, is considered to have come “from the ends of the earth” when he made his way to Jerusalem, Jewish territory, in 63 BCE and “subordinated Hyrcanus to the legate of the new province of Syria” (Grant 1970:25; also see Bruce, 1988; and Polhill 1992).

Grant, for example, continues by observing that: “the 17<sup>th</sup> of the *Psalms of Solomon* criticized the last of the kings [of Israel], killed or exiled by a foreign ruler, [and that] the second psalm alluded to Pompey even more clearly” (Grant 1970:25). In addition, Conzelmann, along with other scholars like Schwartz (1986), also appeals to Isa. 49:6 alongside *Psalms of Solomon* 8:15 in suggesting that Rome might well have been in view in Acts 1:8 (past part). In fact, Conzelmann further hazards the

guess that Spain, further West, might well have been the referent of the last part of the verse as well (also see Thornton 1977).

What is generally not sufficiently appreciated, in our view, is that the expression, “καὶ ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς”, as commonly understood at the time, can and should be stretched to include not Rome or Spain out West *per se* but Africa in the south instead (see Witherington 1998; and I. H. Marshall 1980). The more common understanding of the expression referred not to Rome as the seat and centre of Empire but to Africa, representing the outermost reaches of the Empire itself and beyond (see Herodotus, *History*. 3:25.114; Strabo, *Geography*. 1:1.6; and Philostratus, *Vita Apollonius* 6.1).

Witherington is correct in stating 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” (Witherington 1998: 290).

Grant also reminds us that at the time of Augustus’s death (14 BCE): “the empire consisted of Italy and more than thirty provinces of varying size and importance...and in the case of Africa and Asia there were ex-consuls” (Grant 1970:6). At one time, Alexandria, Egypt (Africa), even rivaled Rome as the seat and centre of all culture and learning (see Ajayi in Middleton, ed.:1997: xix-xxv).



In sources such as Herodotus, Thucydides, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and Strabo, we find repeated but somewhat vague references to Africa, south of the Sahara, as constituting an integral part of the then (and-not-entirely-) known world ( see Ajayi in Middleton 1997:xx). In fact, Claudius Ptolemy’s map, with its reference to “Inner Libya”, encompasses all of tropical Africa (see Ajayi in Middleton: 1997: xx). And not only Herodotus but also Homer and others refer to Ethiopia (perhaps more representing present-day Sudan) in their works (see Mudimbe in Middleton, ed.: 1997: xxvii-xxxii).

Mudimbe, for example, writes: “From the mythical period of Homer to the Alexandrian Renaissance, Africa and Africans are portrayed in literature, art, and even philosophy (in Aristotle, for instance) as ordinary human beings” (Mudimbe in Middleton, ed.: 1997: xxviii).

This observation is entirely in keeping with Luke who, in spite of what appears for some to be his rather Eurocentric focus and fixation on Rome as the center of his own narrative world, especially in his second volume [Acts], agrees with Mark that an African helped Jesus carry his cross (see Matt. 27:3, Mark 15:21; and Luke 23:26). Luke also mentions Simeon (perhaps Simon of Cyrene, North Africa) who is called black (*Simoen hou kaloumenos Niger*) and Lucius of Cyrene as being among the church leadership in Antioch (Acts 13:1). Luke also implies that the first Gentile convert to early Christianity was not

Cornelius, the European (Acts 10), but the Eunuch of Ethiopia (Acts 8), the African (Yorke 1995: 12-13; 2012; 2000).

In commenting on the Ethiopian episode as recoded in Acts 8:26-39 and which he labels, “Philip and the Unique Eunuch”, Wetherington also 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; also see Mikre-Selassie in Renju and Yorke, eds. 2004). Marshall’s comment is also germane here in that, for him, the story about Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch is “again concerned with the missionary expansion of the church...[in which] the Ethiopian comes from the far south” (Marshall 1980: 160).

In light of these observations, then, perhaps one ought to be a bit more charitable towards Luke in not lambasting him for any alleged Eurocentric narrow-mindedness on his part since, unlike Matthew, for example (see Matt. 8:11), where Jesus is recorded as making mention of only the East and the West as the directions from which believing Gentiles will come in their hearty response to the missionary pull and influence of the kingdom of heaven, Luke adds the other two cardinal points of the North and the South as well (see Lk. 13:29)--thus making the eschatological and missiological words of Jesus much more encompassing in both scale and scope.

In commenting on Acts 1:8 (past part), Felder, Editor of the *Original African Heritage Study Bible* is also correct in stating that: “In the first century, biblical Ethiopia proper (present-day Sudan) constituted the uttermost southern part of the known world, which then only included the outer reaches of the Roman Empire” (Felder [editor]: 1993 *ad loc.* Also see Talbert, ed. 2012).

In light of the forgoing, therefore, I would suggest that the last part of Acts 1:8, to wit, καὶ ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς (*kai heōs eschatou tēs gēs*), is primarily a reference not to Rome or even Spain to the West of it but, instead, to Africa, the outermost reaches of the Roman Empire way down South or “to the ends of the earth.”

In short, a text like Acts 1:8 (last part) should really be taken as a clear geographical cue and a missiological clue as to the direction in which the earliest expansion of the Christian faith was to have spread or gravitated within the context of the Roman world within which Luke initially wrote.

## CONCLUSION

In an age when more and more biblical scholars, particularly those who find themselves existentially located or situated in the Global South such as in the Caribbean, are writing passionately about the need to rectify the wrongs of history; the need to engage in a sustained postcolonial interrogation of the received Europe-dominated and sometimes human rights-denying

missionary tradition (see Yorke in Smith and Jayachitra, eds. 2014; also Barnett 2006), perhaps an Afro-missiological take on Acts 1:8 (last part) is most fitting.

For one thing, a text such as this should serve to remind us that the missionary move and march of the early first century CE Christian Church should not be so construed as to suggest that the large and vibrant continent of Africa is an afterthought in the *missio Dei*; that it is of subsidiary relevance in God's mind and mission or that it is a continent, ever prone, in the view of not-a-few uninformed Afro-pessimists, to diseases, disasters and even death; or that, as a perceived "dark and dreary continent", approximately three times the size of the continental USA, it was anxiously waiting to be penetrated and eventually balkanized by European and Euro-American missionaries, merchants and mercenaries in the name of God, gold and glory in the nineteenth century and beyond (see Molefe Kete Asante 2007).

Rather, and according to the received missiological tradition as preserved for us in the New Testament writings in general and the Book of Acts, Luke's second volume, in particular, Africa was in fact the focus of God's missionary attention and concern from the very inception of the Christian Church and, therefore, is a continent which should clearly be brought within the ambit of any meaningful discussion of the mission and expansion of earliest Christianity as well—not just Europe, Asia or any place else.

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