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DAVID LIVINGSTONE  
(19TH MARCH 1813–1ST MAY 1873)

ALISTAIR WILSON, LECTURER IN MISSION AND NEW TESTAMENT  
AT EDINBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

INTRODUCTION

According to Professor Andrew F. Walls, ‘If any “man in the street”—at least, in any British street—were asked at any time in the last century to name a Christian missionary, it is likely that he would name David Livingstone.’<sup>1</sup>

The first of May 2023 will be the 150th anniversary of Livingstone’s death and so it is appropriate that we give some attention to this famous missionary at this time.

Many Christians have encountered, and presented, Livingstone as a ‘hero of the faith’. Such terminology is used on a number of books about Livingstone, particularly those written for young people.<sup>2</sup> Ruth Tucker comments, ‘David Livingstone was the hero of Victorian England—and a hero for generations to follow.’<sup>3</sup> According to John MacKenzie, ‘He was lionised to a greater extent than almost any other figure of the nineteenth century such that he was elevated to the status of a Protestant saint endowed with virtues that, for a period, placed him almost beyond criticism.’<sup>4</sup> No fallen



(Photo: Thomas Annan (1829–1887), Public domain)

<sup>1</sup> Andrew F. Walls, ‘The Legacy of David Livingstone’, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (1987), 125. Available at <https://www.bu.edu/misology/missionary-biography/1-m/livingstone-david-1813-1873/> [Accessed 03/08/2022].

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sam Wellman, *David Livingstone: Explorer and Missionary, Heroes of the Faith* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2004), 155.

<sup>4</sup> John M. Mackenzie, ‘David Livingstone – Prophet or Patron Saint of Imperialism in Africa: Myths and Misconceptions’, *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 129 (2013), 277.

human being is capable of living up to such adulation and it was, therefore, inevitable that other writers would hold rather different opinions of Livingstone.

Tim Jeal, who originally published his biography of Livingstone in 1973 and then produced an updated version in 2013, writes,

Whatever [my biography's] other merits may be, I think its longevity is mainly due to my having gained access to a wide variety of previously unpublished papers which enabled me to present a portrait of Livingstone strikingly different from the hagiographical depictions of my three biographical predecessors.<sup>5</sup>

Jeal assesses Livingstone in terms that are far from heroic,

Livingstone, with his missionary aims and his almost messianic passion for exporting British values and culture, seemed to his successors to have provided the moral basis for massive imperial expansion.<sup>6</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, the so-called 'scramble for Africa' would see European leaders carve up the vast majority of the continent of Africa in an effort to exploit the rich resources of Africa for the benefit of their own nations. Was Livingstone complicit in this?

With respect to Livingstone's character and personality, Ruth Tucker comments, 'He was a frail, temperamental human being with serious personality flaws that hindered his ministry throughout his entire life.'<sup>7</sup>

Mark Shaw and Wanjiri Gitau wisely comment, 'The truth about Livingstone probably lies somewhere between these extremes of opinion.'<sup>8</sup>

MacKenzie comments elsewhere that 'the name of Livingstone has been invoked, often in wholly contradictory causes, in so many controversies associated with empire and its demise in the twentieth century, with cultural and political issues in the United Kingdom in the same period, and in the identities formed in the Scottish diaspora throughout the world.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tim Jeal, *Livingstone* (New Haven, IN: Yale University Press, 2013 [1973, 1985]), xi.

<sup>6</sup> Jeal, *Livingstone*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Tucker, *From Jerusalem*, 155–156.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Shaw and Wanjiru M. Gitau, *The Kingdom of God in Africa*, Revised and Updated (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2020), 195.

<sup>9</sup> John M MacKenzie, 'General Editor's Introduction' in Justin D. Livingstone, *Livingstone's Lives: A Metabiography of a Victorian Icon, Studies in Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), xii.

According to T. J. Thompson, ‘Victorian biographies of David Livingstone (and indeed, many more modern studies) tended to be almost entirely hagiographic, ignoring the complex nature of Livingstone’s character.’<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the brochure for the 2022 Westminster Conference asks, ‘Esteemed through generations as an example of Christian piety and celebrated as a pioneer missionary, should we still consider him a hero of the faith or relegate him to a villain of history?’<sup>11</sup> I will attempt to help us reach an informed and reflective response to this question.

My purpose in this paper is not to provide a substantial biography of Livingstone. Many useful secondary sources are available, ranging from short dictionary articles to full-scale critical biographies. I have consulted many of these works and the footnotes show how frequently I have learned from the work of other writers, but I attempt to draw particularly on the primary source of David Livingstone’s own work, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, published in 1857 by John Murray of London.<sup>12</sup> The full subtitle of the work, in the lengthy form typical of the time, is ‘including a sketch of sixteen years’ residence in the interior of Africa, and a journey from the Cape of Good Hope to Loanda on the West Coast; thence across the continent, down the river Zambesi, to the Eastern ocean’. This, in itself, tells us a good deal about Livingstone’s remarkable life, particularly as many dramatic events took place after this initial narrative was completed. I will provide some brief biographical details for those who may not be familiar with the details of Livingstone’s life, but I will quickly move on to analysis of several significant questions relating to his life and work.

Justin Livingstone has written an important study of ‘the use, function, and evolution of the biographical tradition that has drawn sustenance from the Victorian era’s foremost missionary and explorer, David Livingstone’.<sup>13</sup> He explains,

This book, then, is not another biography. Its terrain is not the chronicle of Livingstone’s life from factory ‘piecer’ to international superstar, nor an account of his missionary activity and explorations in southern and central

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<sup>10</sup> T. J. Thompson, “Livingstone, David,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, ed. Timothy Larsen et al. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 370.

<sup>11</sup> Westminster Conference 2022 brochure.

<sup>12</sup> David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, (London: John Murray, 1857).

<sup>13</sup> Livingstone, *Livingstone’s Lives*, 2.

Africa. It is, rather, a book about biography, an examination of the ways in which one subject has been used, abused, represented and remembered.<sup>14</sup>

Livingstone's study offers valuable reflection on the ways in which writers have engaged with David Livingstone's life.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

- Born in Blantyre, Lanarkshire, Scotland: 19th March 1813
- Studied Medicine and Theology: 1836–1840
- Joined London Missionary Society: 1838
- Travelled to Africa: December 1840 (arrived 1841)
- Relocated to Mabotsa, with Kgatla people (working under Mosielele): 1843
- Relocated to Kolobeng, with Kwena people (working under Sechele): 1845
- Mauled by a lion:
- Married Mary Moffat (daughter of Robert and Mary Moffat) in Kuruman: January 1845
- Crossed the Kalahari
- Sent his family back to Britain and began journey across Africa as 'nduna' of Sekeletu of the Makololo: 1852
- Returned to Britain and published *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa: 1856–58*
- Various expeditions, with a second return to Britain: 1858–1873:
- Death of Mary Moffat: 1861
- Meets Henry Morton Stanley: late October/early November 1871
- Died in Chief Chitambo's village (modern Zambia): 1st May 1873
- Funeral in Westminster Abbey: 18th April 1874

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<sup>14</sup> Livingstone, *Livingstone's Lives*, 2.

According to Scott Sunquist, ‘history is neither a record of what happened in the past nor a list of supposed facts of the past. History is the art of telling as accurate a story about the past as possible. Because history is the story of people and not things, it is told in a way that reflects how people live and how we hear about human lives.’<sup>15</sup> This paper attempts to listen to a range of testimony concerning David Livingstone and to offer reflections that treat all of that testimony seriously.

### **Origins**

David Livingstone ‘missionary and explorer, was born in the Lanarkshire village of Blantyre, Scotland. His family was originally of Highland origin, a factor in Livingstone’s character and thinking that has often been under-emphasized in reference to his linguistic and cultural empathy with Africans.’<sup>16</sup> Livingstone reflects that,

Our great-grandfather fell at the battle of Culloden, fighting for the old line of kings; and our grandfather was a small farmer in Ulva, where my father was born. ... Finding his farm in Ulva insufficient to support a numerous family, my grandfather removed to Blantyre Works, a large cotton manufactory on the beautiful Clyde, above Glasgow; and his sons, having had the best education the Hebrides afforded, were gladly received as clerks by the proprietors, Monteith and Co.<sup>17</sup>

### **A Hard Life**

Young David’s life was characterized by limited resources and hard work. He writes,

The earliest recollection of my mother recalls a picture so often seen among the Scottish poor—that of the anxious housewife striving to make both ends meet. At the age of ten I was put into the factory as a “piecer”, to aid by my earnings in lessening her anxiety. With a part of my first week’s wages I purchased Ruddiman’s “Rudiments of Latin”, and pursued the study of that language for many years afterward, with unabated ardor, at an evening school, which met between the hours of eight and ten. The dictionary part of my labors was followed up till twelve o’clock, or later, if my mother did not inter-

<sup>15</sup> Scott W. Sunquist, *The Shape of Christian History: Continuity and Diversity in the Global Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2022), 34.

<sup>16</sup> T. J. Thompson, “Livingstone, David,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, ed. Timothy Larsen et al. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 366.

<sup>17</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches*, 17–18.

ere by jumping up and snatching the books out of my hands. I had to be back in the factory by six in the morning, and continue my work, with intervals for breakfast and dinner, till eight o'clock at night. I read in this way many of the classical authors, and knew Virgil and Horace better at sixteen than I do now.<sup>18</sup>

The role of a 'piecer' was dangerous and demanding: 'His job involved ducking under the cotton spinning jenny machines to tie together the broken threads, with the machines moving the whole time.'<sup>19</sup> Evidently, young David Livingstone was exceptionally motivated with the result that he could make the most of his academic abilities in spite of demanding family circumstances and the rigours of long hours and a dangerous employment.

### *Livingstone's Christian convictions*

David Livingstone was brought up in a Christian home. Although the family had belonged to a presbyterian church initially, they later become associated with a Congregational church. Livingstone was clearly instructed in the Christian faith while young and soon came to a personal experience of Christian faith.

Great pains had been taken by my parents to instill the doctrines of Christianity into my mind, and I had no difficulty in understanding the theory of our free salvation by the atonement of our Savior, but it was only about this time that I really began to feel the necessity and value of a personal application of the provisions of that atonement to my own case. The change was like what may be supposed would take place were it possible to cure a case of "color blindness". The perfect freeness with which the pardon of all our guilt is offered in God's book drew forth feelings of affectionate love to Him who bought us with his blood, and a sense of deep obligation to Him for his mercy has influenced, in some small measure, my conduct ever since. But I shall not again refer to the inner spiritual life which I believe then began, nor do I intend to specify with any prominence the evangelistic labors to which the love of Christ has since impelled me. This book will speak, not so much of what has been done, as of what still remains to be performed, before the Gospel can be said to be preached to all nations.<sup>20</sup>

Even in this clear Christian testimony, we see a statement of the reticence which characterized Livingstone with respect to speaking of his Chris-

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<sup>18</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches*, 18–19.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.david-livingstone-birthplace.org/david-livingstone-and-the-blantyre-cotton-works> [Accessed 29th March 2023]

<sup>20</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches*, 19.

tian faith. This perhaps contributed to the perspective of some that he was more of an explorer than a 'missionary'. This passage leaves us in no doubt, however, about the reality of Livingstone's Christian faith.

### ***Studies and China in Mind***

It is clear that Livingstone's Christian faith quickly shaped his plans for his future career. He writes,

In the glow of love which Christianity inspires, I soon resolved to devote my life to the alleviation of human misery. Turning this idea over in my mind, I felt that to be a pioneer of Christianity in China might lead to the material benefit of some portions of that immense empire; and therefore set myself to obtain a medical education, in order to be qualified for that enterprise.<sup>21</sup>

This comment indicates that Christian convictions motivated Livingstone's plans for future service. It is also clear that he regarded medical training as the most appropriate manner in which he might be 'a pioneer of Christianity'.

Livingstone's hard work and dedication led him to studies in medicine and divinity. The latter point to a conviction that ability to read the Greek New Testament and to explain Christian doctrine would be necessary skills for his future calling. The toil of cotton-spinning, to which I was promoted in my nineteenth year, was excessively severe on a slim, loose-jointed lad, but it was well paid for; and it enabled me to support myself while attending medical and Greek classes in Glasgow in winter, as also the divinity lectures of Dr. Wardlaw, by working with my hands in summer. I never received a farthing of aid from any one, and should have accomplished my project of going to China as a medical missionary, in the course of time, by my own efforts, had not some friends advised my joining the London Missionary Society on account of its perfectly unsectarian character. It "sends neither Episcopacy, nor Presbyterianism, nor Independency, but the Gospel of Christ to the heathen." This exactly agreed with my ideas of what a missionary society ought to do;<sup>22</sup>

The closing lines of this quotation demonstrate that Livingstone's Christian convictions were strong but not sectarian.

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<sup>21</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches*, 20.

### **Qualified**

Livingstone was an excellent student, who demonstrated independence of thought and judgement. While these are admirable qualities, they clearly led him to have a rather awkward examination.

Having finished the medical curriculum and presented a thesis on a subject which required the use of the stethoscope for its diagnosis, I unwittingly procured for myself an examination rather more severe and prolonged than usual among examining bodies. The reason was, that between me and the examiners a slight difference of opinion existed as to whether this instrument could do what was asserted. The wiser plan would have been to have had no opinion of my own. **However, I was admitted a Licentiate of Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons.** It was with unfeigned delight I became a member of a profession which is pre-eminently devoted to practical benevolence, and which with unwearied energy pursues from age to age its endeavors to lessen human woe.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps it was already clear, even to Livingstone himself, that his determined commitment to a position or to a task might have significant consequences. Nonetheless, Livingstone indicates self-awareness regarding the limitations of his knowledge and sought to be a 'life-long learner'. As he wrote,

The want of time for self-improvement was the only source of regret that I experienced during my African career. The reader, remembering this, will make allowances for the mere gropings for light of a student who has the vanity to think himself "not yet too old to learn".<sup>24</sup>

### **A Change of Plan**

All appeared to be progressing smoothly towards Livingstone travelling to China, but then international conflict demanded a change of plan. Due to this conflict, Livingstone, could no longer travel to China. Livingstone explains,

But though now qualified for my original plan, the opium war was then raging, and it was deemed inexpedient for me to proceed to China. I had fondly hoped to have gained access to that then closed empire by means of the healing art; but there being no prospect of an early peace with the Chinese, and as another inviting field was opening out through the labors of Mr. Moffat, I was induced to turn my thoughts to Africa; and after a more extended course of theological training in England than I had enjoyed in

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<sup>23</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches*, 22.

Glasgow, I embarked for Africa in 1840, and, after a voyage of three months, reached Cape Town. Spending but a short time there, I started for the interior by going round to Algoa Bay, and soon proceeded inland, and have spent the following sixteen years of my life, namely, from 1840 to 1856, in medical and missionary labors there without cost to the inhabitants.<sup>25</sup>

The reference to the ‘opium war’ draws attention to the wider context of imperialism to which we shall return shortly. A brief account of the relationship between the opium war and Christian mission can be found in Professor Brian Stanley’s book, *The Bible and the Flag*.<sup>26</sup> At this point it is not necessary to go into the circumstances in detail. It will suffice to say that when Britain forced China to permit the import of opium by means of military force, Britain was, in the words of Stanley, ‘fighting a war of aggressive economic imperialism’.<sup>27</sup> The end of the war created a complicated situation for mission: ‘The British missionary movement (and also the American) thus welcomed the favourable outcome for missions of a war fought in the cause of free trade – a war whose morality it had consistently criticized.’<sup>28</sup>

According to Sunquist,

China was forced open for trade by foreign gunships. Coming off those ships were opium traders with their kegs of Indian-produced opium, and missionaries with their Hong Kong-printed tracts and Scriptures.<sup>29</sup>

## QUESTIONS

In the remainder of this paper, I wish to address three main questions with respect to David Livingstone:

- Was he really a ‘missionary’?
- Did he support and enable imperialism?
- Did he act inappropriately towards his wife and family, towards his colleagues, and towards the people of Africa?

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<sup>25</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches*, 21–22.

<sup>26</sup> Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant missions and British imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 104–109.

<sup>27</sup> Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, 106.

<sup>28</sup> Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, 107.

<sup>29</sup> Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 94–95.

As we attempt to answer these questions, we will see, I suggest, that the harshest judgments of Livingstone have been unduly harsh, but also that we should be very cautious about describing him as a ‘hero’ without appropriate qualification.

#### WAS LIVINGSTONE A ‘MISSIONARY’?

The simple answer is ‘yes’! We may identify several items of evidence which clearly point to this conclusion:<sup>30</sup>

- Livingston joined the London Missionary Society (1838)
- Livingston stated his intention to serve as a Christian missionary
- Livingston frequently refers to his Christian convictions
- Livingston refers to his conducting acts of worship

To illustrate this point, we might consider the following comment by Livingstone,

The general instructions I received from the Directors of the London Missionary Society led me, as soon as I reached Kuruman or Lattakoo, then, as it is now, their farthest inland station from the Cape, to turn my attention to the north. Without waiting longer at Kuruman than was necessary to recruit the oxen, which were pretty well tired by the long journey from Algoa Bay, I proceeded, in company with another missionary, to the Bakuena or Bakwain country, and found Sechele, with his tribe, located at Shokwane.<sup>31</sup>

Livingstone clearly indicates that he followed directions from the LMS as he developed his work in Africa.

Elsewhere, Livingstone describes a meeting he had with a group of Africans in which he explained biblical accounts and their significance in the light of Jesus Christ.

Shinte was most anxious to see the pictures of the magic lantern; .... The first picture exhibited was Abraham about to slaughter his son Isaac; it was shown as large as life, and the uplifted knife was in the act of striking the lad;

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<sup>30</sup> Justin Livingstone, Livingstone, Justin D. “Livingstone’s Life & Expeditions.” Adrian S. Wisnicki and Megan Ward, eds. *Livingstone Online*. Adrian S. Wisnicki and Megan Ward, dirs. University of Maryland Libraries, 2015. Web. <http://livingstoneonline.org/uuid/node/76ab1aa0-2bf4-4c42-adf7-c8c4ee960236..> Accessed 28/11/2022.

<sup>31</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches*, 22–23.

the Balonda men remarked that the picture was much more like a god than the things of wood or clay they worshiped. **I explained that this man was the first of a race to whom God had given the Bible we now held, and that among his children our Savior appeared.**<sup>32</sup>

The more complicated answer to the question, ‘Was Livingstone a missionary?’ is ‘Yes, but ...!’ There are several reasons for this view. First, Livingston understood his role as a Christian missionary as ‘much more than is implied in the usual picture of a missionary’. In particular, he considered addressing the physical needs of the African people a fundamental aspect of his calling. With particular reference to the impact of lack of food on the ability of people to engage seriously with the process of learning, he writes,

In addition to other adverse influences, the general uncertainty, though not absolute want of food, and the necessity of frequent absence for the purpose of either hunting game or collecting roots and fruits, proved a serious barrier to the progress of the people in knowledge. Our own education in England is carried on at the comfortable breakfast and dinner table, and by the cosy fire, as well as in the church and school. Few English people with stomachs painfully empty would be decorous at church any more than they are when these organs are overcharged. Ragged schools would have been a failure had not the teachers wisely provided food for the body as well as food for the mind; and not only must we show a friendly interest in the bodily comfort of the objects of our sympathy as a Christian duty, but we can no more hope for healthy feelings among the poor, either at home or abroad, without feeding them into them, than we can hope to see an ordinary working-bee reared into a queen-mother by the ordinary food of the hive. *Sending the Gospel to the heathen must, if this view be correct, include much more than is implied in the usual picture of a missionary, namely, a man going about with a Bible under his arm.* The promotion of commerce ought to be specially attended to, as this, more speedily than any thing else, demolishes that sense of isolation which heathenism engenders, and makes the tribes feel themselves mutually dependent on, and mutually beneficial to each other.<sup>33</sup>

Second, in 1857, Livingston resigned from the London Missionary Society.

Third, subsequent to his resignation from the London Missionary Society, Livingston spent his later life pursuing ambitious travel projects, at least some of which did not seem to have any clear relationship to Christian mission as typically understood.

<sup>32</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 221.

<sup>33</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches*, 35–36. Emphasis added.

Livingstone trained as a scientist and devoted a considerable amount of time and effort to observation of the world around him. With regard to Livingstone's scientific work on one particular journey, Andrew Ross comments,

On the journey [1853–1856] Livingstone spent a great deal of time gathering and noting all kinds of information about the insects, animals and people of that stretch of Africa. ... No other European traveller in southern and central Africa in this period commented on the fauna and flora in such detail or with such scientifically trained accuracy of observation.<sup>34</sup>

Tim Jeal describes Livingstone as a 'missionary-explorer'.<sup>35</sup> According to Stephen Tompkins, however, 'David Livingstone was not a great missionary. He wasn't even a good one.'<sup>36</sup> These comments raise the prior question, what is a 'missionary'?

### *How do we define 'missionary'?*

Our perception of Livingstone as a missionary may depend partly on our definition of a 'missionary'? We may also have to consider Livingstone's activities as a doctor, scientist, and cartographer as part of his 'calling'. Do we operate with a 'sacred-secular divide'?<sup>37</sup>

- Was Livingstone engaging in 'holistic' or 'integral' mission?
- 'A Traditional Missionary'?

Alice Ott states that 'Livingstone was anything but a "traditional" missionary.'<sup>38</sup> Ott's view seems to be confirmed by Livingstone's own words,

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<sup>34</sup> Andrew C. Ross, *David Livingstone: Mission and Empire* (London: Hambleton Continuum, 2002), 85.

<sup>35</sup> Tim Jeal, *Livingstone* Revised and expanded edition. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), xi.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Tompkins, 'David Livingstone. Hero or Failure?'. <https://www.reform-magazine.co.uk/2013/02/david-livingstone-hero-or-failure/> [Accessed 03/08/2022]

<sup>37</sup> On the concept of the 'sacred-secular divide', see Mark Greene and Ian J. Shaw (eds), *Whole Life Mission for the Whole Church: Overcoming the Sacred-Secular Divide through Theological Education* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2021).

<sup>38</sup> Alice T. Ott, *Turning Points in the Expansion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 174.

Sending the Gospel to the heathen must, if this view be correct, include **much more than is implied in the usual picture of a missionary, namely, a man going about with a Bible under his arm.** The promotion of commerce ought to be specially attended to, as this, more speedily than anything else, demolishes that sense of isolation which heathenism engenders, and makes the tribes feel themselves mutually dependent on, and mutually beneficial to each other.<sup>39</sup>

We may feel that Livingstone's portrayal of a missionary is a caricature (and it does seem to be an image that he uses on more than one occasion, as we will see below), but his words make clear that he did not consider himself to confirm to the 'usual picture of a missionary'.

Andrew Ross cites another passage which both reinforces the comments Livingstone made in the quotation we have just considered and hints at the frustration Livingstone felt in response to accusations he apparently received.

My views of what is missionary duty are not so contracted as those whose ideal is a dumpy sort of man with a Bible under his arm. I have laboured in bricks and mortar, at the forge and at the carpenter's bench, as well as in preaching and in medical practice. I feel "I am not my own". I am serving Christ when shooting a buffalo for my men, or taking an astronomical observation, or writing to one of His children who forget, during the little moment of penning a note, that charity which is eulogized as "thinking no evil"; and after by His help got information, which I hope will lead to more abundant blessing being bestowed on Africa than heretofore, am I to hide the light under a bushel merely because some will consider it not sufficiently, or even at all, *missionary*?<sup>40</sup>

Alice Ott considers Livingstone to be a missionary, but a missionary who was engaged in what might be described as 'holistic' or 'integral' mission.

Christianity and civilization, when combined with the essential element of commerce, was a mid-nineteenth-century attempt to eliminate the systemic social injustice of slavery and the slave trade in Africa. It was thus an early attempt at "holistic mission," though that was a term that neither [Thomas Foxwell] Buxton nor Livingstone would know or use.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 35-36.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew C. Ross, *David Livingstone: Mission and Empire* (London: Hambleton Continuum, 2002), 122-123.

<sup>41</sup> Ott, *Turning Points*, 175.

## WHAT WAS LIVINGSTONE'S RELATIONSHIP WITH IMPERIALISM/ COLONIALISM?

Did Livingstone support and/or enable 'imperialism' and/or 'colonialism'? In order to answer this question we must spend some time clarifying the definitions of the key terms. Brian Stanley's 1990 book remains a nuanced and authoritative discussion of the topic and we will use his definitions in the following section.<sup>42</sup>

### ***'Imperialism'/'Colonialism'***

Stanley acknowledges that, 'The missionary movement stands accused of having been in consistent liaison with an unholy historical partner described interchangeably as imperialism or colonialism.'<sup>43</sup> Although these terms are often used interchangeably, there is value in precisely identifying the connotations of a series of closely related terms.

### ***'Imperialism' Defined***

According to Stanley,

The essence of imperialism is control by an alien national or racial group; such control may be primarily political or primarily economic, and need not imply formal territorial rule; it may also be contrary to the original intentions of the imperial power, or only indirectly related to these intentions.<sup>44</sup>

### ***'Colonization' Defined***

Stanley then shows the relationship between 'imperialism' and 'colonization':

From the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries European imperialism most frequently took the form of colonization, the movement to establish white settler communities in the non-European world<sup>45</sup>

### ***'Colonialism' Defined***

While similar in sound, 'colonization' and 'colonialism' are to be distinguished:

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<sup>42</sup> Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag* (Leicester: Apollon, 1990).

<sup>43</sup> Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, 33.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, 34.

<sup>45</sup> Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, 34.

The alternative (and largely subsequent) expression of imperialism known as “colonialism” is distinguished from colonization by the fact that the alien dominant group remains non-resident in the imperialized territory.<sup>46</sup>

Stanley continues, ‘Colonialism, therefore, may be defined as that form of imperialism in which the imperial power imposes governmental control on a territory without resort to large-scale human settlement.’<sup>47</sup>

How, then, did Christians come to terms with the imposition of imperial power on other nations? Stanley suggests that theological convictions regarding divine providence played a significant part both in their accepting the circumstances being worked out on the world stage and also in their having a sense of moral responsibility to speak out against injustice. Stanley explains,

Christian belief in divine providence goes a long way towards explaining why most missionaries and their supporters accepted imperialism as a general historical process, but the converse of their belief in providence was their unrelenting insistence on moral and spiritual responsibility – an insistence which again and again led missionaries to challenge and criticize the reality of imperial policy on the field.<sup>48</sup>

### ***The ‘Three cs’: Christianity, Commerce, and Civilization***

In an address given to Cambridge University on 5 December 1857, David Livingstone said,

I beg to direct your attention to Africa; I know that in a few years I shall be cut off in that country, which is now open: Do not let it be shut again! I go back to Africa to try to make an open path for commerce and Christianity; do you carry out the work which I have begun. I leave it with you!<sup>49</sup>

What did Livingstone mean when he said, ‘I go back to Africa to try to make an open path for commerce and Christianity’? Was he complicit in the exploitative project of those who sought financial gain? Several questions arise with respect to the relationship between Livingstone and Imperialism:

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<sup>46</sup> Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, 34.

<sup>47</sup> Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, 70.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa* (Abacus, 2015 [1991]). Kindle Edition, 26.

***What was Livingstone's attitude towards imperial authorities?***

Livingstone recognised imperial authorities, but it is also clear from some of his statements that he was angered by imperial aggression. It is perhaps also the case that he exercised some self-censorship so as not to publicly criticise authorities. We shall see each of these approaches in the following citations.

*Civilization, Christianity, and Commerce*

With a view to this, the missionaries at Kuruman got permission from the government for a trader to reside at the station, and a considerable trade has been the result; the trader himself has become rich enough to retire with a competence. Those laws which still prevent free commercial intercourse among the civilized nations seem to be nothing else but the remains of our own heathenism. *My observations on this subject make me extremely desirous to promote the preparation of the raw materials of European manufactures in Africa, for by that means we may not only put a stop to the slave-trade, but introduce the negro family into the body corporate of nations, no one member of which can suffer without the others suffering with it.* Success in this, in both Eastern and Western Africa, would lead, in the course of time, to a much larger diffusion of the blessings of civilization than efforts exclusively spiritual and educational confined to any one small tribe. These, however, it would of course be extremely desirable to carry on at the same time at large central and healthy stations, *for neither civilization nor Christianity can be promoted alone. In fact, they are inseparable.*<sup>50</sup>

*Did Livingstone 'open the way' for colonial expansion?*

Gambian scholar Professor Lamin Sanneh who, along with Professor Andrew Walls, was a pioneer in the discipline of World Christianity, presents a sympathetic account of Livingstone's work in his important book, *Translating the Message*. Yet his account is not uncritical. He writes,

This is in no way a defense of Livingstone against the view that he helped open the way for colonialism in Africa, thrusting Africa into the world economic and political system. In fact he did do that, and perhaps worse. His wish to see the Zambesi region develop into a successful commercial field—cultivating and exporting cotton, fostering intertribal harmony, and rechanneling energies previously expended on the slave trade—had in it the seeds of imperial rivalry and expansion.<sup>7</sup>

However, he then identifies a significant difference in his eyes between the goals of missionaries and colonialists,

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<sup>50</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 36. Emphasis added.

Mission aimed at the establishment of national churches and envisaged a future without itself, whereas colonialism saw only the perpetuation of dependency.<sup>51</sup>

### 'Benevolent Colonialism'

If Livingstone was influenced, even to a limited extent, by the attitudes and activities of colonialism, we should nonetheless recognize that 'colonialism' may be understood to have taken different forms at different times. According to Bevans and Schroeder,

[Henry] Venn and Livingstone are representatives of the wave of missionaries during a time that would later be called *benevolent colonialism*. The next phase of this missionary period was to be shaped by the advent of high imperialism.<sup>52</sup>

We may have legitimate concerns concerning David Livingstone's links with colonialism, but we should be careful not to ascribe to him the attitudes and approaches seen in the 'Scramble for Africa' which dates from a later period.

Justin Livingstone highlights an interesting feature of Livingstone's *Missionary Travels*: comments which were in the original manuscript but were omitted in the final published book.

*Missionary Travels* is also interesting for what it leaves out. In the original handwritten manuscript of the book, for instance, Livingstone had included a substantial critique of the Cape Frontier Wars, in which he criticised colonial violence at length. Perhaps in fear of alienating the establishment, or perhaps at Murray's prompting, this passage – running to almost thirty pages – is excluded from the published text (Livingstone 2011; Livingstone 2014).<sup>53</sup>

What do these deleted comments tell us? I suggest that they offer conflicting evidence. On the one hand, the deletion of the comments suggests that Livingstone gave in to pressure (of one kind or another) not to criticise the authorities in print. On the other hand, the existence of a substantial section of critical material in the handwritten manuscript indicates that Livingstone was in no way supportive of the actions of the

<sup>51</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 153–154.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 214.

<sup>53</sup> Justin Livingstone, 'Livingstone's Life and Expeditions', <https://livingstoneonline.org/life-and-times/livingstone-s-life-expeditions> [Accessed 19/11/2022]

imperial authorities. This latter point is reinforced by Livingstone's comments reproduced by Ross in his biography. Livingstone wrote,

But while England has been sympathizing with the struggles for freedom which she herself knows how to enjoy, she has been struggling to crush a nation fighting as bravely for nationality as ever Magyar did ... We are no advocates for war but we would prefer perpetual war to perpetual slavery. No nation ever secured its freedom without fighting for it. And ever[y] nation on earth worthy of freedom is ready to shed blood in its defence. In sympathising with the Caffres we side with the weak against the strong.<sup>54</sup>

According to Ross, 'No later colonialist would have written as Livingstone wrote of the Xhosa attempt to defend their autonomy, at a time when an official British document referred to them as "irreclaimable savages"'.<sup>55</sup>

Ross cites a comment of Livingstone's to indicate the level of solidarity that he showed to the African people: 'There is not a native in the country but knows now for certain whose side I am on.'<sup>56</sup>

#### HOW DID LIVINGSTONE RELATE TO AFRICANS?

We can address this question in two ways. First, we may consider how Livingstone spoke of his relationship with Africans in his own writings. Second, we may consider how Africans related to Livingstone, as far as we can discern this.

- What attitude did Livingstone display towards Africans?
  - Language
  - Description of culture
  - Description of character

#### *Language used of Africans*

Livingstone uses several terms with respect to Black Africans which we would now either consider offensive or, at least, potentially problematic:

- 'Caffres'<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ross, *David Livingstone*, 242–243.

<sup>55</sup> Ross, *David Livingstone*, 243.

<sup>56</sup> Ross, *David Livingstone*, 244.

<sup>57</sup> This term, particularly in the form it was widely used of Black Africans in South Africa ('the K word') is recognised to be deeply offensive and its use

- ‘Heathen’
- ‘Savages’
- ‘Natives’
- ‘Negros’

An initial word of caution is that we should be careful not to use a modern standard to evaluate an earlier time. In some cases, terms that have negative connotations in our society were regarded as more ‘neutral’ in the time they were used by historical figures.

We cannot, however, excuse Livingstone’s use of language on this basis. Livingstone is aware that at least one of the terms he uses to describe black Africans, namely ‘Caffre’, is regarded by the African people as an ‘insulting epithet’, yet he uses it repeatedly nonetheless. In describing the various African ‘families’, Livingstone writes,

The Makololo, or Basuto, have carried their powers of generalization still farther, and arranged the other parts of the same great family of South Africans into three divisions: 1st. The Matebele, or Makonkobi—the Caffre family living on the eastern side of the country; 2d. The Bakoni, or Basuto; and, 3d. The Bakalahari, or Bechuanas, living in the central parts, which includes all those tribes living in or adjacent to the great Kalahari Desert. 1st. The Caffres are divided by themselves into various subdivisions, as Amakosa, Amapanda, and other well-known titles. *They consider the name Caffre as an insulting epithet.*<sup>58</sup>

It is unclear why Livingstone continues to use the term freely despite acknowledging its offensive nature. Livingstone has apparent respect for the African people so perhaps he would not have used this term in their presence. Perhaps he uses this term in a work written for a European readership because he recognizes that it is a term widely used by his compatriots. Whatever the explanation might be, Livingstone’s continued use of a term which he knows to be insulting to the people he lives and works with appears to be a significant failure in judgement and Christian love.

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would open the user to accusations of hate speech. I have retained the word in the citations of Livingstone’s own words for the sake of historical accuracy since it is significant for our understanding of Livingstone. I do not intend to cause any offence and I hope readers will understand the reason for including the word.

<sup>58</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 155–156. Emphasis added.

Similarly, Livingstone can refer to the Africans as ‘poor savages’, as in the following quotation:

When I spoke to Mr. Hendrick Potgeiter of the danger of hindering the Gospel of Christ *among these poor savages*, he became greatly excited, and called one of his followers to answer me. He threatened to attack any tribe that might receive a native teacher, yet he promised to use his influence to prevent those under him from throwing obstacles in our way.<sup>59</sup>

It is important to notice that, in this recorded incident, Livingstone is acting in the interests of the Africans contrary to those who would deprive them of educational opportunities. It is also significant that Livingstone sometimes uses rather pejorative language of the people of the United Kingdom so we should not understand his terms as indicating a sense of racial superiority, though we might well ask whether his language is evidence of some form of paternalism based, perhaps, on class or education. So, for example, Livingstone writes with respect to certain African people,

**They might be called stupid in matters which had not come within the sphere of their observation, but in other things they showed more intelligence than is to be met with in our own uneducated peasantry.** They are remarkably accurate in their knowledge of cattle, sheep, and goats, knowing exactly the kind of pasturage suited to each; and they select with great judgment the varieties of soil best suited to different kinds of grain. They are also familiar with the habits of wild animals, and in general are well up in the maxims which embody their ideas of political wisdom.<sup>60</sup>

Modern readers rightly balk at Livingstone describing the African people as ‘stupid’ but it immediately becomes clear from contact that he does not mean ‘foolish’ or ‘incapable’ as a general characteristic of the people but rather he speaks of a lack of knowledge or skill with respect to a particular matter with which they have not been familiar. With respect to the matters they know well, Livingstone states that they are ‘remarkably accurate in their knowledge’. What’s more, he commends the Africans (in the same breath as denigrating a group of his own people in a startlingly dismissive phrase) as those who showed, in some areas, ‘more intelligence than is to be met with in our own uneducated peasantry’.

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<sup>59</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 47. Emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 30.

### ***Description of Language and Culture***

Livingstone devoted himself to understanding the Tswana language thoroughly. His notes on the language were later important to linguists. He describes his commitment to grasping the language and culture of the African people among whom he lived and worked.

Here [Lepelole (now Litubaruba)], *in order to obtain an accurate knowledge of the language, I cut myself off from all European society for about six months, and gained by this ordeal an insight into the habits, ways of thinking, laws, and language of that section of the Bechuanas [Batswanas] called Bakwains, which has proved of incalculable advantage in my intercourse with them ever since.*<sup>61</sup>

Ross describes how Livingstone developed his knowledge of African culture as follows,

Livingstone undertook two further extensive journeys. On these journeys he travelled with African companions only. The first of these journeys lasted from 10 February 1842 until end of June 1842. The second began in mid February of 1843 and ended with his return to Kuruman on 20 June 1843. ... They were a means of Livingstone getting to know the language and the people. ...

He also gained considerable insight into the thought and culture of the Tswana. ... All of this already marked him out from most other missionaries in Africa at that time, who showed neither serious interest in nor any sympathetic understanding of African culture.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Description of African Character***

Livingstone often speaks highly of Africans, showing them considerable respect, yet he sometimes tends towards 'paternalism'. For example, he speaks highly of the Batswana, and by extension all African people, 'The Bechuanas, moreover, in all probability possess that imperishability which forms so remarkable a feature in the entire African race.'<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, in describing the beginnings of his relationship with Sechele, Livingstone writes,

I attached myself to the tribe called Bakuena or Bakwains, the chief of which, named Sechele, was then living with his people at a place called Shokuane. *I was from the first struck by his intelligence, and by the marked manner in*

<sup>61</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 23. Emphasis added.

<sup>62</sup> Ross, *David Livingstone*, 44.

<sup>63</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 96.

*which we both felt drawn to each other.* As this remarkable man has not only embraced Christianity, but expounds its doctrines to his people, I will here give a brief sketch of his career.<sup>64</sup>

Livingstone recognised the agency of the African people. He states,

*In our relations with this people we were simply strangers exercising no authority or control whatever. Our influence depended entirely on persuasion; and having taught them by kind conversation as well as by public instruction, I expected them to do what their own sense of right and wrong dictated. We never wished them to do right merely because it would be pleasing to us, nor thought ourselves to blame when they did wrong, although we were quite aware of the absurd idea to that effect. We saw that our teaching did good to the general mind of the people by bringing new and better motives into play. Five instances are positively known to me in which, by our influence on public opinion, war was prevented; and where, in individual cases, we failed, the people did no worse than they did before we came into the country.*<sup>65</sup>

Despite the obvious respect that Livingstone shows towards the Africans, we find a tension in his language. He can speak positively of the Batswana while also using language which we would, I imagine, find inappropriate as a way of describing a particular ethnic community.

*They might be called stupid in matters which had not come within the sphere of their observation, but in other things they showed more intelligence than is to be met with in our own uneducated peasantry.* They are remarkably accurate in their knowledge of cattle, sheep, and goats, knowing exactly the kind of pasturage suited to each; and they select with great judgment the varieties of soil best suited to different kinds of grain. They are also familiar with the habits of wild animals, and in general are well up in the maxims which embody their ideas of political wisdom.<sup>66</sup>

This suggests that Livingstone did not feel the discomfort with his use of language that we feel today. The fact that he can describe a group of his own compatriots as ‘our own uneducated peasantry’ shows that he does not intend to be discriminatory towards the Africans on account of their being Africans.

Livingstone’s confidence in the African people is shown in another section of his book where he states,

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<sup>64</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 26. Emphasis added.

<sup>65</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 29–30. Emphasis added.

<sup>66</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 30. Emphasis added.

Our chief hopes rest with the natives themselves; and if the point to which I have given prominence, of healthy inland commercial stations, be realized, where all the produce raised may be collected, there is little doubt but that slavery among our kinsmen across the Atlantic will, in the course of some years, cease to assume the form of a necessity to even the slaveholders themselves. Natives alone can collect produce from the more distant hamlets, and bring it to the stations contemplated.<sup>67</sup>

Livingstone is confident that indigenous Christian witness and labour can transform local circumstances. He comments,

In Madagascar, a few Christians were left with nothing but the Bible in their hands; and though exposed to persecution, and even death itself, as the penalty of adherence to their profession, they increased ten-fold in numbers, and are, if possible, more decided believers now than they were when, by an edict of the queen of that island, the missionaries ceased their teaching.<sup>68</sup>

#### HOW DID LIVINGSTONE RELATE TO HIS FAMILY?

Did Livingstone subject his family to unwarranted suffering? There is no doubt that Livingstone's family life was far from typical. Livingstone's wife, Mary, was the daughter of missionaries Robert and Mary Moffat. She had lived in Africa for many years and the wedding was in Africa.

The family experienced significant trials and tragedies. Some of these appear to a modern observer to be at least partly exacerbated by a lack of thought on the part of Livingstone. For example, Andrew Ross recounts the experience of the family crossing the Kalahari while Mary is on the verge of giving birth:

The children were unwell and Mary's pregnancy was advanced. They returned to Kolobeng after an appallingly difficult crossing of the Kalahari in the middle of August 1850. A week later Mary gave birth to a little girl. All the children caught a bronchial infection prevalent among the Kwena at that time and the baby, Elizabeth, died of it. ...

Mary was also ill, indeed she suffered paralysis of some of the facial muscles, and Mrs Moffat insisted that Mary, David and the children go to Kuruman in order to recuperate. They stayed there from November 1850 to February 1851.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 480.

<sup>68</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 96.

<sup>69</sup> Ross, *David Livingstone*, 60.

Perhaps we might say, 'Well that was what was considered reasonable in those days.' It was not, however, considered reasonable by Livingstone's mother-in-law. Mary Moffat, Livingstone's mother-in-law and the distraught grandmother of his children, wrote to Livingstone,

Was it not enough that you lost one lovely babe and scarcely saved the others, while the mother came home threatened with Paralysis? And will you again expose her and them in those sickly regions in an exploring expedition? All the world will condemn the cruelty of the thing, to say nothing of the indecorousness of it.<sup>70</sup>

Ross is correct to point out that Livingstone wrote with great tenderness about his family, and particularly of the loss of the baby, and also that his wife, Mary, chose to accompany him on his travels.<sup>71</sup> Yet, I do not think it is unreasonable to ask whether it was wise to choose to travel with his pregnant wife and three children under five years of age when the journey was fraught with danger. Ross explains,

This was a very drastic decision since this trip would entail crossing a stretch of the Kalahari, then entering an area where there were patches of tsetse fly which might wipe out their oxen and leave them stranded. Beyond the Kalahari the travellers would be exposed to malaria in a way they were not in Kolobeng.<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, we may question the wisdom of sending his wife and children to Britain to stay for years in a place and with people they did not know while he travelled, even as we recognize that this was approved by the LMS. Livingstone wrote,

Having placed my family on board a homeward-bound ship, and promised to rejoin them in two years, we parted, for, as it subsequently proved, nearly five years. The Directors of the London Missionary Society signified their cordial approval of my project by leaving the matter entirely to my own discretion; and I have much pleasure in acknowledging my obligations to the gentlemen composing that body for always acting in an enlightened spirit, and with as much liberality as their constitution would allow.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ross, *David Livingstone*, 60.

<sup>71</sup> Ross, *David Livingstone*, 60.

<sup>72</sup> Ross, *David Livingstone*, 58.

<sup>73</sup> Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 80.

## HOW MAY WE LEARN FROM THE LIFE AND WORK OF DAVID LIVINGSTONE?

We may learn from an individual in all kinds of ways. We may learn from a person's words but also from their actions. We may learn from what we consider admirable and also from what we consider questionable or simply deplorable. We do not have to engage in hagiography in order to learn from an individual in a respectful manner.

Recent biographies offering significantly different perspectives on Livingstone suggest that, 'a truly "definitive" biography can never be written. Established portraits always provoke response . . .'<sup>74</sup> Yet Justin Livingstone is surely correct to assert, 'Some versions of history will clearly have greater credibility than others.'<sup>75</sup>

Edward Smither summarises Livingstone's impact on mission as follows:

Though he parted ways with the LMS in [1857], he remained committed to evangelism. A passion to get to new villages and communities that had not been exposed to the gospel actually drove his exploration. Relatedly, Livingstone labored to bring about transformation in Africa specifically through ending the slave trade. Striving to open Africa to Christianity and commerce, he was convinced that if Europe and the West did business with Africa, then Africans would cease trafficking other Africans in the global slave trade. Finally, due to his fame as an explorer and his speaking tours in Britain, he mobilized many more missionaries for Africa. The Anglican Universities' Mission to Central Africa was founded in 1857 as a direct result of Livingstone's pleas for more laborers for the harvest in Africa.<sup>76</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Those of us who take seriously the full extent of biblical theology will recognise in David Livingstone a faithful, yet flawed, Christian man. He was a man of great gifts and motivation and in many ways demonstrated the characteristics of a faithful servant of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, we also see signs of a determination bordering on wilfulness and, perhaps, obsessive determination.

As we look back on Livingstone's life and work, we must acknowledge that Livingstone was a person of his time—as are we all—with all that this entails. We may admire certain aspects of his life and work without

<sup>74</sup> Livingstone, *Livingstone's Lives*, 284.

<sup>75</sup> Livingstone, *Livingstone's Lives*, 7.

<sup>76</sup> Edward L. Smither, *Christian Mission: A Concise Global History* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 131.

treating him uncritically. The harshest modern judgments of Livingstone are almost certainly unfair. Far from being an agent of colonialism, Livingstone generally stood with Africans against oppressive powers, yet we do see tendencies towards paternalism in some of his comments. There is also clear evidence that Livingstone loved his family and that they loved him, although he put great strain on his family by some of his decisions.

Some of those who came after Livingstone may be criticised for not recognising the contribution of his African fellow-travellers but Livingstone can hardly be blamed for the attitudes of others.

Ultimately, I believe that Livingstone is worthy of respect and careful attention. Nonetheless, he need not be our ‘hero’.

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