

Hebrew without whining: Teaching biblical languages in Sudan

by [Ellen F. Davis](#) in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue

A few years ago, when I asked the head of Renk Theological College in Southern Sudan to name his top priority for the school's faculty and curriculum, he said without hesitation: "We need biblical language teachers."

This was not the answer I expected. Just a few days before, on June 6, 2004, the government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army had initialed the Navaisha Draft Peace Agreement, arresting the genocidal war that had raged for 21 years and left more than 2 million dead in the South and millions more displaced.

Renk Town is the northern gateway to Southern Sudan, and in 2004 the physical conditions at the college were extremely rudimentary if not desperate. In April, the government had destroyed the classrooms and dormitories, ostensibly because they had to build the "Peace Highway" connecting Khartoum with the South through the very center of the small lot belonging to the college. Most of the students had no choice but to disperse until new accommodations could be provided. This was yet another exile, a small repetition of the experience that had dominated their lives since childhood.

With a peace agreement in place, however, church leaders were planning the future of the college, one of five small seminaries belonging to the Episcopal Church of Sudan. The ECS grew rapidly during two decades of intense persecution, to an estimated 5 million members—more than twice the size of the Episcopal Church in the U.S. Most clergy in the region have little or no formal education; the few whom the bishops send to a theological college have been selected because of their exceptional potential.

I had promised to supplement the work of the college's several indigenous faculty members by sending teams of visiting teachers to lead short intensive courses on the subjects deemed most crucial by the Sudanese. I work at persuading American students just to give Hebrew a try, so I was surprised to hear that it was the

seminary's first choice. Moreover, crossing the ocean to teach Hebrew in short spurts seemed like a pedagogical stretch.

The leaders of the college held firm, however, and they were unanimous in their reasoning: "We live in the Old Testament. Ours is a tribal culture, like Israel's. We are pastoralists and farmers, like the Israelites. And like them, we have suffered terribly in war and exile, and from oppressive imperial regimes. The Bible is our story, and our people must have it in their own languages. Why should we read it in English and Arabic, the languages of colonialism? Why should we translate it from those languages and not from the original? We all speak several languages; we know how much difference a translation makes."

So Hebrew instruction at Renk Theological College began in January 2005, and twice each year since then a team of two or three teachers has traveled to Renk, 250 miles up the White Nile from Khartoum. Classes are held all day each day for two weeks. The goal of the Visiting Teachers Program, jointly sponsored by Duke Divinity School and Virginia Theological Seminary, is to certify one or more teachers for each language; they will be the "seed stock" from which indigenous study and teaching of biblical languages will grow and spread to other theological schools and universities.

That goal began to be achieved this past July. Father Abraham Noon Jiel was certified in Hebrew; he is the only such teacher for hundreds of miles in any direction. The Greek course at Renk is well under way with a class of 16. The more advanced students tutor the others, and thus prepare themselves to be teachers. Two or three students should be ready for certification in Greek early in 2010.

The students are proud that theirs is the only school in Sudan where both biblical languages are taught on a regular basis, and the pride shows in their attitude toward study. As one visiting teacher observed: "Hebrew without whining—this is a revelation!"

It should be admitted that many Sudanese find Hebrew easier than do their American counterparts because they are already fluent in Arabic. But their level of dedication seems to stem from a deep excitement, a passion for this study that even their Western teachers may not fully understand.

One morning Mama Grace, a middle-aged priest, spent her breakfast break drawing with a stick on the ground outside the classroom. When her classmates returned, they saw the emblem of their common labors: the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet,

writ large in the gritty reddish earth. There the letters remained for an hour or two until they were erased by the wind and by the feet of the goats, cattle, students and teachers who share the college grounds.

Several years later, I realize that it was not incidental that Mama Grace was moved to write in the earth. The comment of another student this past summer illumines her action: "Now that we can study Hebrew and Greek, we are able to grow deep roots." Father Sapana's long fingers dug through the air toward the ground. "That is what the biblical languages mean to us."

Probably the best thing that can happen for any student of Hebrew and Greek is to discover the rich complexity of the Bible through wrestling with the ambiguities and nuances of its language. Seeing that complexity is the essence of critical appreciation of the Bible. Therefore, while language study forms the core of the Visiting Teachers Program, it has from the outset been supplemented by lectures and intensive courses in biblical theology and hermeneutics, as well as in the history of Anglicanism and of the church in Sudan.

The language study has also had indirect benefits: it provides a new kind of intellectual challenge and discipline to men and women ranging in age from 20-something to 50 and older. All of them have survived because of their genius for improvisation. As exiles, they cultivated a remarkable ability to live, learn and even do creative work under conditions that were utterly unpredictable: in flight through the bush and in refugee camps in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. In a way that none of us could have predicted, the discipline of language study has become a vehicle whereby the students are learning, or relearning, the organizational skills of settled life.

Simon Lewis, a representative of the archbishop of Canterbury in Malakal, the capital city of Upper Nile State, admitted that he had argued over some months with a colleague who had traveled the several days downriver to Renk in order to study Hebrew and had returned filled with enthusiasm. "I told him it was a waste of his precious time," Lewis commented, "but now I am not so sure. His administrative skills are the best in the office. He knows how to organize a problem and think his way through it. He says studying Hebrew taught him that."

In 2007, courses in public health education were added to the Visiting Teachers Program under the direction of Peter J. Morris of Raleigh, who holds graduate

degrees in both theology and public health. Physical well-being and knowledge of God are not separate concerns, as the Bible attests in countless places, including accounts of the ministry of Jesus. Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul of the Episcopal Church of Sudan, who founded Renk Theological College in 1998, recognizes that its graduates will in most cases be the best-educated people in their communities. Therefore it is crucial that they be able to teach practices for preventing the insect- and water-borne illnesses that have claimed more lives in Southern Sudan than even the war itself.

In a region that will probably remain underserved by medical practitioners for years to come, informed church leaders can model sound practices and disseminate information that could significantly reduce what are now among the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world. The aim is not to Westernize Sudan but to introduce appropriate and economically feasible innovations, such as mosquito nets for pregnant women and for children under the age of five. At the same time, the best traditional practices of care must be encouraged or reestablished in communities that were nearly destroyed, leaving many without the support of family, neighbors and elders.

The educational model that is evolving is a new one, and it appears to be sustainable over the long term. It is not a continuation of colonial models: Sudanese educators set the agenda for instruction and faculty development, while North Americans serve as specialized consultants and short-term guest instructors.

The collaborative character of the program has special importance for Anglicans at a time when the worldwide Anglican Communion threatens to break up under the burden of mutual distrust and misunderstanding between global North and South, a burden that Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams identifies as the legacy of colonialism. This model for collaborative theological education is also easily replicable. Because the visiting teachers—most of them master's and doctoral students—raise their own travel funds, and because all administrative and teaching time is donated, no large grants or start-up funds are required.

The political situation in Sudan remains highly unstable. A renewal of the war could wipe out buildings and lives in a matter of days and weeks; the college could go into exile. Visiting teachers and Sudanese hosts know this, yet find the shared work compelling, for the most part encouraging and often enough exhilarating. Their experience suggests how the comparatively rich church in the West can share the

dreams of the African church and participate in their realization.

One key is to make a long-term commitment rather than a mere emergency response, as is often characteristic of the North American church. Enduring commitment is a hedge against compassion exhaustion for North Americans, for it is the context in which mutual trust grows, reconciling friendships are formed and giving can be fully reciprocal.

Vocational confirmation and direction is a gift that several visiting teachers have received. One of them, a doctoral student in Hebrew Bible, now plans a teaching career on two continents and hopes to do scholarly work that links African and American biblical interpretation. Another found confirmation of her own desire to begin doctoral work through seeing the Sudanese students' "craving" for the study of Greek. "I had been worrying that it was self-indulgent for me to study what I love, when it seemed so irrelevant to the church's urgent needs. The Renk students encouraged me to believe that I have been given this passion and skill for a purpose." A third visiting teacher is writing a doctoral dissertation on Paul's understanding of suffering as a constituent element of the church's life; the church in Sudan provides an immediate context for his theological and exegetical work.

Grassroots support for the Visiting Teachers Program has proved to be a second important factor in our sharing a common dream. At first I hoped to find a major donor to endow the program, and I would still welcome a stable funding base for student scholarships. But I now see how much we have benefited from the steady, decentralized work of raising funds through many small gifts, and thus having multiple partners with a stake in our work. Doubtless each visiting teacher travels with more prayers as a result.

Our dreams for the program continue to grow, and they are becoming more focused on young Sudanese scholars. More than 40 years ago, many intellectuals were massacred by the Khartoum government in an attempt to break resistance in the South. Thirty-year-old Gabriel represents the new generation: he came to Renk Theological College following years of exile; his mud-spotted academic transcript is from Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. Gabriel has a pronounced talent for theological study and hopes to teach. This past summer we reviewed the application form for an American seminary that has offered him a tuition scholarship if he can qualify for admission to the master's program. His living expenses still have to be raised.

Sitting with Gabriel, I voiced my anxiety for him, fearing that this young man will suffer another bitter loss if we cannot fund his further education. “We have a long way to go, Gabriel, and we may not make it.” He returned me a calm, even compassionate, look and spoke words that were wiser than my own: “God is very great. We will do our best, and if we fail, then we will not blame ourselves.” Gabriel, along with his fellow students and his regular teachers, is showing me how to share a dream faithfully and without anxiety. We do it by entrusting the dream, and ourselves, to God.

Go to www.divinity.duke.edu/programs/initiatives/renk for more information on the *Visiting Teachers Program at Renk Theological College*.