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# Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology

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## STILL IN THE RACE!

### *An AJET Editorial*

Like a runner recovering from a disastrous fall in a long distance race, AJET 2009 still trails the pack. The remarkable thing is not that we are so far behind in our publication schedule, but that AJET is still in the race at all!

We are off to a good re-start with this issue of AJET. In the lead article, Paul Bowers, in the first of two 2008 Byang Kato Memorial Lectures at the ECWA Theological Seminary in Jos, Nigeria, (JETS), offers his perspectives on Kato's life and contributions, especially the unrecognized ones and the contributions that have been distorted. He also urges Christians in Africa to build upon Kato's commitment to the continued growth and maturity of an evangelical Christianity that is both biblical faithful and contextually sensitive. Bowers sees the need for expanding "Kato Studies", but also believes Christians in Africa should go beyond Kato (in a sense) in a number of ways. Any of the six ways he lists as examples could serve as the basis for future AJET articles.

In the second article, *Divine Providence or Good Luck?*, Dr. Matthew Michael continues the interest shown by other Africa Christian scholars in comparing Greco-Roman worldviews and African traditional thinking with biblical Christianity, in this case contrasting fate, luck, chance and coincidence with the Christian doctrine of God's providence. Michael notes that it is not by chance that President Goodluck Johnathan of Nigeria was named "Goodluck"! From Michael's foundation, others could build on the many ways that divine providence needs to be better integrated into modern African Christian thinking. There also is plenty of room for more research and writing on other popular misconceptions in the worldviews of modern African Christians.

Prosperity theology is more than a misconception and Judith Hill's article, *Theology of Prosperity: A New Testament Perspective*, presents some biblical principles to help give us a better perspective on this wide-spread phenomenon. AJET has tackled aspects of this issue before, including Hill's previous AJET article on *Health, Sickness and Healing in the New Testament: A Brief Theology* (26.2, 2007). Also useful in this area are James Ndyabahika's *The Attitude of the Historical Churches to Poverty and Wealth: A Challenge for African Christianity*, in AJET 23.2, 2004, and Peter R. Young's *Prosperity Teaching in an African Context*, AJET 15.1, 1996. We invite future submissions that, like these articles, could shed more light on how to help Christians in modern Africa deal with these real life issues at the

worldview level. This could include extensive field research on how African Christians in local churches understand (and perhaps misunderstand) Biblical concepts of poverty and suffering, wealth and health. The “Health and Wealth Gospel” will not go away overnight, and neither will the problems it claims to solve.

There are direct links between prosperity and poverty, between health and sickness, between life and death and the last article in this issue, C. O. Ogunkunle’s *An African Perspective on the Concept of Salvation in the Psalter*. He contends that there is a difference in the definition of salvation between the Old and New Testaments, and that the Psalms paint the concept with a broader brush than Western Christians usually use. There certainly is a difference in emphasis, and clearly the suffering in Africa demands and requires more than a truncated spiritual salvation that fails to touch the huge problems facing the continent. How can the people of God using the Word of God and empowered by the Spirit of God bring the Good News of salvation to their neighbours in a way that is both biblically faithful to the whole counsel of God and truly relevant to the entire African context?

Please note that we have added a new section to AJET, Books Received. Though we can’t review every book received from publishers, we do want you to know some of the resources being produced for ministry. Whenever we have books received but not reviewed, they will appear in this section.

In future issues we will be doing our best to run the race the Lord has laid out for us, and to catch up as quickly as we can. We would be greatly helped by your submissions - articles and book reviews that are truly ready for publication because you have laboured over them, checked and re-checked the sources, the spelling and the grammar. You have done your research, honed your arguments and displayed your passion for God’s truth in the kind of writing that honours God and edifies His people.

# BYANG KATO AND BEYOND

*The 2008 Byang Kato Memorial Lectures, 1*

Jos, Nigeria, March 2008

Paul Bowers<sup>1</sup>

## A. Preliminaries

It is an honour to have been invited by ECWA Theological Seminary Jos (JETS) to give these *2008 Byang Kato Memorial Lectures*. My own personal links with Nigeria and with the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) go back to 1968, forty years ago, when my wife and I first arrived in Nigeria, under the international mission SIM, to serve at ECWA Theological Seminary Igbaja. The seminary at Igbaja was at that time one of the premier evangelical theological schools in Africa. Byang Kato had graduated from the Bible College at Igbaja, and later taught at the Seminary. It was there at Igbaja that Byang Kato first sought me out, and began a personal friendship that lasted until his untimely death.

We have come together here once again to honour the memory of Dr Byang Kato. It is now more than three decades since his tragic death in 1975. Why should we still be memorialising him? How should we still memorialise him?

Let me ponder these questions briefly. Why should our evangelical communities in Africa still call Byang Kato to mind? Certainly we are encouraged by Scripture to honour those who have gone before us, who have been heroes of the faith. If we memorialise Byang Kato, we mean to do no

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Bowers has taught in theological education in Africa since 1968, in Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Ethiopia. He has also been involved with the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA) since its inception in 1976, with the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) since its inception in 1980, with the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* (AJET) since its inception in 1982, and with the specialist review journal *BookNotes for Africa* since its inception in 1996. He presently serves as ICETE's Deputy International Director, and is a member of the World Evangelical Alliance's International Leadership Team. Bowers holds a PhD in biblical studies from the University of Cambridge in England.

more than obey the injunction of the writer of Hebrews, who said: “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7). Paul also instructs believers to: “Respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord ... hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

Is there a risk of over-estimating Kato? Might evangelicals in Africa be in danger, as some suppose, of excess in this respect? One recognises that not everyone in Africa holds Kato in honour. Indeed there is an established tendency in learned academic literature to the contrary; I will speak to this later. Nevertheless it is the case today, more than three decades after Byang Kato’s death, that African evangelicalism does still remember him with esteem. If we were to visit the campus of the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST) in Kenya today, we would find the academic community gathering there in the Kato Memorial Chapel. Today in the Central African Republic, at the Faculté de Théologie Évangélique de Bangui (FATEB), we would find students hard at their studies in their beautiful Kato Memorial Library. Here in Nigeria at the Jos ECWA Theological Seminary you have the ongoing *Byang Kato Memorial Lectureship*. And just last year the vice-chancellor of NEGST, Dr Douglas Carew, travelled to England to visit that evangelical statesman and good friend of Africa, Dr John Stott, now in retirement, in order to confer on him the *Byang Kato Award*, given annually by NEGST to those who, as the award states, “best champion the vision of the founder of NEGST, Dr Byang Kato.”

So, regardless of other competing perceptions, African evangelicalism does still today sustain Kato’s memory. As we do here, willingly, once again this week. How should we do so? How shall we best estimate the man and his contribution in his own time, his own generation? And how best might we assess his possible relevance for our times, our quite different era in modern Africa, now in these opening decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. How do we appropriately move beyond Kato? It is on this set of questions that I wish to meditate with you in these *2008 Byang Kato Memorial Lectures*.

## **B. Theme**

I have taken as my theme for this lecture the phrase: *Byang Kato and Beyond*. In doing so I have not wanted merely to provide another set of personal recollections about Kato, nor one more review of his accomplishments and perspectives. These memorial lectures rightly include the expectation that something might be added to the store of reminiscences



about Kato by those who may have known him personally. And certainly each lecturer is meant to contribute further perspective on Kato's achievements and significance. I will in measure attempt to comply with both these expectations.

But I wish also to explore beyond those roles. It is also in the nature of lecture series such as this that one should attempt to be venturesome, to quest somewhat into new territory. If I try in part to live up to that criterion, it means that I cannot hope always to be exactly right, nor perhaps always persuasive. I would suppose, nevertheless, that we can enjoy thinking together, enjoy the opportunity to stimulate one another in our reflection about Kato. If we achieve that, then I would suppose we will have appropriately honoured Kato once again, in ways that would have pleased him, in ways fitting the biblical exhortations of Paul and of Hebrews, and in ways that will have achieved the purposes of a lecture series such as this.

On the other hand, in taking "Byang Kato and Beyond" as my theme, I do not wish to propose a way of going *beyond Kato* in the sense of displacing him, setting him to one side as it were in order now to move on to better things. Rather I want to recollect the measure of the man and of his contributions in his own time, in such a way that we can then assess his potential significance for our own time, his continuing relevance today. Looking backward in order to look forward. In this way we may go *beyond him* by building upon his commitments and his vision wherever appropriate, and thereby may strengthen our own footing, and enlarge our horizons, for fulfilling our calling before our Lord now in our present 21<sup>st</sup> Century modern Africa.

### **C. Kato the Man**

In its major points the life of Byang Kato is already familiar to many. Nevertheless it is just as well to remind ourselves about salient aspects both of the man's life and of his achievements. Not only because there are now new generations "that knew not Joseph", not only because of persistent misrepresentation of Kato in parts of the academic world, not only because memories of those among us who knew him begin to fade, but not least because, as I wish to suggest, not everything of significance about Kato has yet been fully surfaced and attended. Surprising as it may seem now more than 30 years since his death, there are yet important aspects of his life and vision not entirely brought to light and explored.

Byang Kato was born in Kwoi, Nigeria, in 1936. Raised by his parents in traditional religion, Kato made a personal decision for Christ at age 12. He

finished primary schooling at age 18. From that point Kato's educational trajectory intermingled increasingly with various ministry roles. He became involved with Boys Brigade, with Youth for Christ, he went off to Bible college, he joined the staff of the magazine *African Challenge*, he passed his A levels. And in 1957 he got married, to Jummai, with whom he enjoyed God's blessing of three children, Deborah, Jonathan, and Paul.

It was at Igbaja that I first met Kato nearly forty years ago. Kato was about six years older than I. As best I can remember now so many years later, it happened just about the time I was to leave for doctoral studies in Cambridge, England. Kato had already studied in England, at what is now the London School of Theology, and had earned a BD degree from London University. On returning to Nigeria he had been elected General Secretary of ECWA, the first from the northern part of Nigeria to assume that post. At the time of our meeting he had been awarded a scholarship for doctoral studies in the States, and was about to leave for that. He was visiting Igbaja, and in the process of his visit he went looking for me, found me at home, and took time to get acquainted, to make friends.

I pause to remember the occasion because, as many who knew him would testify, he was an exceptionally friendly person. I suppose some may at times have found him too earnest, or perhaps too clear in his certainties. But I did not. I found him to be, as did so many others, an unusually winsome person. An impressive person yes, but also easy to like, easy to feel comfortable with, someone who routinely showed warm personal interest in whichever individual he might be with. I think this quality of personal warmth and easy friendliness has not been adequately surfaced in subsequent representations of the man. But just this factor goes a long way toward accounting not only for his achievements in life, but especially for his sustained influence in the years after his death. It helps explain the formative impact he had on so many of those in the first generation of African evangelical leaders that succeeded him. Certainly I myself cannot remember Kato without first and foremost that sense of personal warmth, of Kato as a friend.

It was again here in Nigeria, at Igbaja, when I got back from my overseas doctoral studies, that my contact with Byang Kato resumed. In the interim he had finished his doctoral work, had been elected as the first African to head the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA), had addressed the historic global assembly at Lausanne in plenary session, and was involved with highly energised engagements not only all over Africa, but also internationally.

When we met at Igbaja at that time, it was Kato who again took the initiative in making contact, and made the contact very agreeably personal, as was his custom. At Igbaja in 1975 he sought me out on two different occasions to ask me to take on an assignment from AEA to form what has since become ACTEA, the association of evangelical theological schools in Africa. I easily recollect one of those occasions as though it were yesterday. Kato was making a quick overnight visit to the campus, and had spoken to the students and faculty in a special evening session. Afterward in the moonlight he walked with me down the roadway from the seminary chapel. I can still feel his friendly grip on my elbow, as he pressed his request that I accept a task to launch a continental association for evangelical theological schools.

We met again several times at the Nigeria Congress on Evangelism held at the University of Ife that same year. I remember visiting across the lunch table, as he discussed the possibilities of post-graduate theological schools for francophone and anglophone Africa—something that at that time seemed to me an incredibly venturesome notion. But that was characteristic of the man. I particularly remember at that Ife conference hearing him give his so memorable, stirring address, on “Christianity as an African Traditional Religion”, which ended with the ringing words: “Let African Christians be Christian *Africans!*” At which point the entire audience of some 800 Christian leaders from throughout Nigeria rose spontaneously to their feet to applaud. Some minutes later, in the midst of the crowded hubbub, I felt again his grip on my elbow, and he was asking what I thought of the address.

It was at Igbaja in December that same year 1975 that I heard the so shocking news of my friend’s death. The word came by SIM’s radio connection early that morning. I was still getting washed up for the day when my wife came to tell me. To both of us it seemed entirely unbelievable - as it did of course to so many others hearing the news that day and in the days immediately thereafter, right round the world.

But by God’s design that proved *not* to be the end of Kato’s role in Africa, nor the end of his role in my own life. In those months after my return to Africa from Cambridge, Kato had asked me repeatedly to undertake an assignment to organise a continental association for evangelical theological schools. Each time I had gently turned him down. Kato was not to be so easily dissuaded. It turned out that, knowing as he did how SIM functioned, in the weeks before his death he had gone over my head without my knowledge, to my superiors in SIM, and had arranged to have me assigned to the task. And so, when several months later the AEA Executive formalised the appointment,

I could do nothing but accept. After all, as the Lord seemed to be reminding me at that time, I had returned to Africa thinking above all that I was meant to assist in the emergence of African Christian leadership. It seemed that the Lord was saying to me, so now, if African leaders have begun to lead, are you prepared to follow? So I followed, as best I could. I continue to try to do so.

It is appropriate therefore in this context for me to confess freely that my own sense of vocation was, and continues to be, fundamentally shaped by the influence of Byang Kato on my life, and by his vision, for an evangelical Christianity on this great continent that can be at once both truly biblical and truly African. He impacted so many others in the same way. And in my own case, that manoeuvre of Kato's just before he died, commandeering me to the task of starting up ACTEA, has directly affected my ministry career over all the years since his death. First this was so for me within Africa, from 1976 onward, in the founding and development of ACTEA, as he had envisioned. But then it proved also so for me, secondly, beyond his own vision and beyond Africa, but nevertheless directly derivative from his vision, that from 1979 onward I became tasked by the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) with forming a global alliance among evangelical theological schools, linking ACTEA with similar continental associations around the world, the body that has come to be known as ICETE, the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education, an entity with which I have been associated ever since, and for which I presently serve as Deputy International Director. In just such ways Kato's vision has continued a role *beyond Kato*.

#### **D. Kato's Achievements**

Taking a comprehensive measure of Kato and his achievements must be left to other occasions. I would like here, nevertheless, to review with you something of the uncommon *scope* of Kato's achievements. In many circles his memory has blurred over the years, reduced to awareness almost solely of his part in the debate over African Theology, as represented by his single book-length publication, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. If Kato is judged solely by *Pitfalls*, then in my estimation he will be *misjudged*. I wish to highlight briefly how much more there was to Kato the man in actual experience, some of this well known to many at the time but not as well recollected today. We will not have a responsible sense of this man without awareness that the man's achievements were in point of fact of an exceptional nature.

For example, earning a London University BD was exceptional. In those still early years of post-colonial Africa, in the 1960s, it was unusual for

anyone from his context to achieve that coveted distinction. He was also later the first African doctoral student at Dallas Theological Seminary in the States. Evangelical Africans achieving professional doctorates now seems so commonplace, that we might forget how extraordinary it was in that day. In the literature he is credited with being the first African evangelical to attain that distinction. Whether that is so, certainly in the years immediately following Kato's death I know that I myself could count on the fingers of one hand the number of evangelical Africans with earned doctorates. It has been often noted of course that he was the first African elected to head the Association of Evangelicals in Africa. In addition to his book *Pitfalls*, it is perhaps this AEA role for which he is still most widely remembered. Not so often noted is that at that same event in 1973 Kato was also appointed executive secretary of AEA's new Theological Commission, which was the actual base within the AEA structures from which he launched most of those visionary projects of his that still endure today.

In 1974 Kato was selected to give one of the plenary addresses at the historic Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation, an altogether exceptional role to be accorded. Also at Lausanne he presented a major study paper which, as best I have been able to discover, represents the first time that the word 'contextualisation' was publicly introduced within global evangelical discourse. That paper was presented for detailed discussion to a special study unit at the Congress, populated by many luminaries of the evangelical academic world of the day. So far as I can trace it out, that particular discussion at Lausanne became the seed event leading to the 1978 *Willowbank Report*, still a foundational evangelical statement on contextualisation. Following the Lausanne Congress, Kato was appointed to the Lausanne Continuation Committee. Meanwhile the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the formal structure for global evangelical collaboration and identity, had appointed Kato as its Vice President. And when WEA then formed its Theological Commission, it was Kato who was selected to be its first chair. In short, Kato was no obscure, second-rate individual operating at the fringes of world Christianity. In evangelical structures of the time he was a well-regarded member of its inner global leadership circles.

I realised an entirely different side of Kato's ministry some years later. It was in 1995, some twenty years after Kato's death, in Harare, Zimbabwe. I was with a group of eight or ten of the principal leaders at that time in evangelical theological education in Africa. We were having tea together before a meeting, and engaging in light conversation. Somehow Kato's name came up, and I mentioned my surprise to have discovered recently that one of

those present had been visited by Kato during that person's student days overseas. Kato had travelled to his school, searched him out, gone to his dorm room, taken time to get acquainted, encouraged and challenged him, and prayed with him, leaving a lasting impression. Someone else in our gathering then commented that that had happened to him too, that Kato had visited him in the same way during his overseas student days. A third and a fourth person spoke up, all from different parts of Africa, all by then senior figures themselves twenty years after Kato's death, all visited in different parts of Europe and North America in their student days. My memory is that virtually everyone in the room had been visited by Kato in this way. No wonder his influence remains to this day.

Time fails me for calling adequately to our attention two other essential categories of Kato's exceptional achievements. Both I have already alluded to. One of these would be Kato's amazing achievement in a range of visionary implementations that have endured. It is one thing to have vision, and entirely something else to achieve parts of that vision. In Kato's case we live amidst major examples of vision achieved, ongoing powerful blessings to evangelicalism across the continent still in our own day, deriving directly from Kato's personal vision. I speak of NEGST, FATEB/BEST, and ACTEA. One must not fail to note as well in this respect his foundational contribution which underlies the vitality that AEA has continued to represent, not to mention his parallel contribution to WEA, and to the WEA Theological Commission, all still significant movements for good among us; and as well the global movement for which I presently work, ICETE, a direct derivative of Kato's energetic vision. By no means can the significance of Kato in our own day be reliably assessed without taking these exceptional, enduring contributions into account.

The other remaining category of Kato's unique achievement I have also already alluded to, namely that he was the first African evangelical to attempt to engage with the African intellectual world, to participate in the principal intellectual project of African Christianity in his day. And the first to provide a published contribution in that effort. For this alone he deserves exceptional credit, for this alone to be highly honoured amongst us. Indeed it is just this particular contribution, his challenge to intellectual engagement, that I want to single out and elaborate in a separate presentation. I want to ask what we can and should be doing in carrying forward this part of his vision, embracing our own Christian intellectual responsibilities in modern Africa. For, from a

certain perspective, we have hardly begun to get *beyond Kato* in this particular component of his vision. In this respect there is still much land to possess.

### **E. Expanding Kato Studies**

In appropriately honouring the memory of Byang Kato, it is important that I should also mention how much study still remains to be done for a proper understanding of the man, and for a reliable assessment of his achievements. One might think that all there is to know about Kato has already been well rehearsed over the years. But not so. The fact is that not everything relevant about Kato has yet been adequately surfaced or sufficiently pursued. There is still room for further fruitful inquiry, rich opportunity for further professional research and exposition.

This situation has been particularly highlighted by the distribution, in these opening months of 2008, of the extraordinary collection of Kato's writings, published and unpublished, now presented on the CD titled: *Perspectives of an African Theologian: The Writings of Byang H. Kato*. Here on a single CD we have essentially everything that was gathered on Kato by Christina Breman, the gifted scholar from the Netherlands, who wrote a comprehensive history of AEA, and died soon afterward. Now as a labour of love over several years, her collection of materials by and about Byang Kato has been carefully scanned and made accessible by that good man, a beloved colleague of many of us, George Foxall, long serving in Nigeria and now retired in Canada. If you have explored the content of this CD, this vast new resource, you will realize how little most of us were aware of Kato's considerable output, even in the few years that God allowed him for ministry. If some believe, as some do, that he died of sheer exhaustion, that he burned himself out, here in his astonishing productivity might be some supporting confirmation. Browsing through the materials, one finds numerous new angles deserving follow-up research in getting the fuller measure of the man.

But even so, this CD does not have everything. In preparing for these lectures I searched out my own thick file folder of Kato materials. There was a Kato prayer letter designated #25, and dated April 1974. Where, I wonder, would one find copies of letters #1 through #24? Last month by chance I came across reference to a book just published, memoirs of an expatriate missionary who worked in Nairobi many years ago as Kato's administrative assistant. I found that the text includes information relating to those days immediately preceding and following Kato's death, providing details that I have never seen anywhere else previously. Let me ask: is this the only person who worked

directly with Kato and is likely to still have unique memories? Or am I the only one from Kato's era likely to still have unique Kato materials buried in a file folder somewhere?

Long ago my wife and I had occasion to drive that notable African Christian leader, Gottfried Osei-Mensah, from Kisumu to Nairobi in Kenya, an all-day drive. We visited as we went, and among other things I discovered that Gottfried and his family had been good friends of the Kato family in Nairobi, and that the two families had been on holiday together on the Mombasa coast that December 1975. Gottfried had been part of the search party for Byang. During that day-long drive Gottfried talked at length about his friendship and about the event. Who has ever interviewed him properly, and other such persons, on matters that still puzzle and trouble many of us?

What important oral memories may still be available? What of all those eminent leaders visiting over tea in Harare in 1995? I have never seen anyone allude to, much less write up, this till then still hidden, unknown and yet important dimension of Kato - a dimension that I myself only stumbled on, by accident as it were, namely his deliberate resourceful effort to locate, encourage, and challenge young evangelical Africans preparing for leadership roles, one by one in different locations across the world. Who is going to interview these people before we all pass on?

Who has properly investigated Kato's *ECWA phase* as we might call it, the period in the late 1960s when he was ECWA General Secretary, indeed the first person to hold that post from the northern part of Nigeria? I have not seen that important phase of Kato's life dealt with properly anywhere. Is it possible that relevant archives are right here in Jos? Kato was reportedly the first African student at the London School of Theology to achieve the coveted London University BD. But nowhere have I seen a proper treatment of what we might call Kato's *London phase*. Indeed in the academic literature it is usually assumed that his overseas educational experience was limited to North America, a quite misleading assumption. I have just outlined Kato's singular role and status at the centre of global evangelicalism before his death. I have never seen either his Lausanne or his WEA roles anywhere properly attended. Who should search out the minutes of those leadership meetings of Lausanne or WEA for relevant details on Kato's role? Who will fill in these important gaps in the Kato portrait?

In preparing for these lectures, as I was scanning through the new Kato CD, I discovered there a typescript relating to Lausanne 1974, one that is not



present in the official compendium of Lausanne 1974. The published compendium has Kato's Lausanne study paper on contextualisation, and it has a summary report of the discussions that followed within the study unit concerned. But here on the CD is not that summary report, but apparently a copy of the actual secretarial transcript of those discussions, verbatim, three days worth, with many of the leading academic personalities of evangelicalism engaging each other over the ramifications of this new word 'contextualization'. Here is a priceless bit of history, of Kato history, just emerging to the light. I have no doubt that there is much more yet to be found. Somewhere perhaps there are those who will feel a challenge, a call perhaps, to benefit us all by undertaking some of the further Kato research that yet awaits attention.

In saying all this I must not in any way give the impression that there have not already been major contributions in the study of Byang Kato. Very much to the contrary. There is not only the present contribution of Foxall to celebrate, and with that the weighty contribution made by Breman beforehand. Long ago in 1978 Professor Tite Tiénou gave lectures at Igbaja, which were later published as *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa*, still widely used today. Discussing the role of Kato, Tiénou says that Kato's vision "still provides the basic framework" for evangelical theological strategy in Africa. Later in 1986-87 Kato's successor at AEA, Dr Tokunboh Adeyemo, gave a series of lectures on Kato under ACTEA auspices, the text for which remains regrettably to this day unpublished, but which helped much in taking a fuller measure of the man, from the unique perspective of his immediate successor.

Then of course there was the distinguished commemorative lecture given in 2000 here at JETS in Jos, on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kato's death, by Dr Yusufu Turaki, titled "The Theological Legacy of the Reverend Doctor Byang Henry Kato." That lecture was later published in the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* (AJET 20.2 [2001] 157-75). Also appearing more recently in that journal was the valuable contribution by Dr Timothy Palmer, from the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN) here in Bukuru, an article titled "Byang Kato: A Theological Reappraisal" (AJET 23.1 [2004] 3-20). More recently appearing in AJET was a major article by Dr Keith Ferdinando, titled "The Legacy of Byang Kato" (AJET 26.1 [2007] 3-16), reprinted from the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, an article which is likely to become a fundamental point of reference for all future Kato studies.

Is there possibly a sort of renaissance in Kato studies emerging among us? I am sure I have missed several other significant contributions. But I may be allowed to mention my own contributions, which have been two. First was a review of Kato's *Pitfalls* which appeared in 1980 in the journal *Themelios* (5.3 [1980] 33-34), and was then reprinted in the *Evangelical Review of Theology* (5 [1981] 35-39). Then also is my comprehensive treatment of African Theology, which appeared originally in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, and has subsequently been published in AJET ("African Theology: Its History, Dynamics, Scope and Future" AJET 21.2 [2002] 109-25), which includes express focus on Kato's role within the African evangelical heritage. Finally, just a few months ago Professor Tite Tiénou's treatment of African evangelical theology appeared in a learned collection of essays devoted to evangelical theology globally. In that article Tiénou presents a judiciously favourable estimation of Kato's particular contribution to evangelical theology in Africa ("Evangelical Theology in African Contexts", in T. Larson and D. J. Treier, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* [Cambridge: CUP, 2007] 213-24).

### **F. Reinterpreting Kato**

I am suggesting that in important respects our discussion about Kato needs to be reformulated, by setting him within the larger framework of his agenda and accomplishments. Much of the conventional treatment of Kato has repeatedly taken his measure almost exclusively in terms of his distinctive input to the African Theology debate. Kato is then interpreted either by critiquing or by defending that input. To the extent that this has become a common framing of the entire Kato discussion, it can prove reductionist and hence misleading.

I am suggesting two things in remedy. I am suggesting, first, that Kato's involvement in the African Theology discussion needs very much to be assessed within the context of Kato's wider visions and accomplishments. We need to work from a larger picture, a more holistic framing. Kato was nothing if not a visionary, and his lasting contributions were firmly rooted in that characteristic of the man. But Kato was more than a visionary; he was to an extraordinary degree an innovative implementer of fresh vision. That is what he was most about, that is what was so tragically cut off by his death. It is this larger perspective on Kato that I believe we need to reenergise. And in doing so, his fledgling theological interventions, his opening steps in intellectual engagement with the theological trends of his day on the continent, can then

be evaluated in rightful context, as part of a much larger agenda, and a more encompassing set of achievements.

Then, secondly, as to Kato's particular input to the African Theology debate, I am saying that it is not enough to fix on what he *said*. We need to focus as well on what Kato was *doing*, what he was attempting by that intervention. Conventional interpretation of Kato needs to be reformulated in that specific respect. The content of Kato's book, *Theological Pitfalls*, was shaped as a word of warning for evangelical Africa. But what bears particular notice is that he worked out that warning by means of academic engagement. What Kato was *doing* was attempting to engage the theological issues of modern Africa's intellectual life. So I am saying that in interpreting Kato more holistically, we need to recognise that Kato's intervention in the African Theology discussion was meant not just to provide a warning, but was also meant as a positive demonstration. *Pitfalls* was Kato's attempt to make his own personal contribution within his larger challenge to the African evangelical community, to embrace its Christian *intellectual* responsibilities in Africa.

## G. Assessing Kato

### 1. Kato's Commitments

At this point I want to recall something of Kato's essential commitments. In taking a fresh measure of the man, it is prudent to recollect what he most cared about. For example, it mattered to Kato to be evangelical. He devoted his life and ministry to the cultivation of a biblically-defined evangelical identity on this continent. Within that evangelical commitment, Kato's concern for Christian theological engagement in Africa kept in balance two crucial components.

On the one hand was Kato's profound commitment to the vision of African Christianity being truly *African*. He affirmed the richness and beauty of African culture, and his grateful pride in being an African structured his entire vision. He emphasized with the need for African Christianity to be not only truly biblical but also truly African. Only in this way could it attain a stable, fruitful maturity. On the other hand was Kato's profound commitment to the vision of African Christianity being truly *Christian*. He believed in contextualisation. But he also knew that if, in pursuing that goal, one were to *over*-contextualise, if one were to *over*-adjust the proclamation in order to suit the context, then what takes root may very well *not* be true Christian faith. What takes root can all too easily prove to be indigenous weeds, rather than

gospel wheat—as has happened again and again in the history of the Christian faith elsewhere, and is so evident in western lands today. So it was that in pursuing theological engagement Kato kept in critical balance an emphasis on appropriate cultural contextualisation and an emphasis on sound biblical grounding.

If we want to understand the impact of Kato's vision, and its continuing relevance today, we may wish to tease out these core strands, reflect on them, and reanimate them in our own commitments as we go forward in our generation, our new century, for God's good purpose in and for and through Africa, namely: a commitment to an evangelical Christian identity in Africa characterised both by biblical faithfulness and by contextual sensitivity.

## **2. Critiquing Kato**

Kato's particular set of commitments may seem sound enough. But it was just these commitments that left him out of step with much of the larger movement of African theological reflection in his day. Elsewhere I have explored the degree to which the African Theology movement has been determined at its core by the ideological commitments of African intellectual modernity. It framed its entire agenda as a sub-set of the larger intellectual endeavour of its context, namely the quest to establish an authentic African identity over against western intellectual pretensions.

African Theology set itself to work out just this set of commitments within a Christian idiom, to articulate and advocate an authentic African Christian identity, by means of a more positive valuation of Africa's distinctive traditional heritage. With extraordinary effectiveness, African Theology's basic project has been to find appropriate ways to affirm Africa's traditional heritage within a Christian framing, and thereby to accommodate African Christian thinking to Africa's prevailing intellectual demands.

In this sense African Theology developed in deliberate step with the drumbeat of African intellectual ideology. It has been part of the same celebration, an attempted Christianisation if you will of the same dance. And Kato was found to be out of step. He was not dancing to the prevailing drumbeat. He was taking his own way; his core commitments led him in a different direction. He wanted a theology that was suitably African, but also a theology in Africa that was soundly biblical. He affirmed Africa's cultural heritage wherever appropriate, but also critiqued it wherever necessary. He was prepared to censure the west and western Christianity wherever that was deserved, but he was also prepared to affirm and encourage fruitful

cooperation where appropriate. For just this seemingly grounded, realistic, and balanced approach he attracted, and continues to attract, almost inevitable criticism.

Scholarly African theological literature, from Kato's own time and continuous to the present, has largely treated Kato dismissively, or even disdainfully, as representing a deviant anomaly in the history of African theology. Possibly many of us are not entirely aware of this assessment, which has nevertheless become the dominant interpretation in major sectors of African theological discourse. Kato was no more than a man, with inevitable limitations.

But it is not excessive to say that these common representations of the man in the literature of African Theology are demonstrably flawed and misleading. At advanced academic levels of evangelical theological engagement in Africa, I suggest that we cannot afford merely to ignore or sidestep such representations of Kato, because they unavoidably impinge upon us too.

I asked earlier if there might be a risk of over-estimating Kato? Have evangelicals in Africa at times been in danger of making him into something of a heroic icon? No, I think not. It would of course be a disservice to the man to do so, a disservice to his memory, and to his Lord, if we began to honour his memory by treating him as an ideal type, of canonising him. For he was indeed a man among us, uncommon indeed, but still a man, seeking amidst the limitations and vicissitudes of his life to serve his Lord in faithfulness. Only as we continue to remember him, and honour him, as such a man, enabled by his Lord, can he be a truly effective model of goodness and godliness amongst us.

As it happens, the most extensive assessment and critique of Kato occurs in the writings of the Ghanaian scholar Kwame Bediako. Bediako is uniformly elegant, sophisticated, and nuanced in all his contributions, if not always reliable. His magisterial first book *Theology and Identity* devotes an entire chapter to Kato. There he states, quite wrongly as it happens, that to Kato's mind "no cultural factors had any part in the shaping of one's understanding of the Christian Faith." And in subsequent publications Bediako has not hesitated to characterise Kato expressly by the word "extremist", because of what he terms the "radical discontinuity" that Kato stoutly championed between Christianity and Africa's religious heritage. He also charges Kato with what he terms "radical Biblicism" (in David Ford, ed. *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford:

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Blackwell, 1997] pp 431-32). Similar assessments have followed in other literature. For example John Parratt, in his influential book, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today*, labels Kato a fundamentalist, one who has “swallowed uncritically” the opinions of a particular brand of western Christianity, and in doing so has not made “any specifically African contribution to theology” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, pp 62-63).

Examples of this customary interpretation of Kato could be multiplied. It has now even entered into some evangelical presentations. Thus William Dyrness, in a summary survey of African Theology, has written that Kato presented African culture “in a negative light”, that he “could see no positive value in the study of traditional faiths”, and that he did not believe that “one’s understanding of the Gospel could be made any clearer by a dialogue” with traditional religion (*Learning about Theology from the Third World* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], p 6). Kato would in fact have denied each of these statements. Likewise Diane Stinton, in a major scholarly presentation on African Theology, speaks of Kato as taking an extreme position, at the far end of the spectrum, in stressing “the radical discontinuity between the Bible and African religions”, and in believing that “Biblical revelation alone can point out the way the Christian should go” (in John Parratt, ed. *An Introduction to Third World Theologies* [Cambridge: CUP, 2004], p 118).

### **3. Correcting Kato’s Critics**

In recent times Kato has been increasingly defended against such mischaracterisations, for example in the noteworthy articles on Kato that I have already referenced, namely those by Timothy Palmer and by Keith Ferdinando. And now Tite Tiénou, in his summary article on African evangelical theology last year, has expressly challenged Bediako’s representation of Kato. Let me confine myself therefore to addressing only two central aspects of these conventional allegations, the issue of extremism and the issue of radical discontinuity.

As for extremism, Kato was an extremist, at the far end of the spectrum, only if all ordinary evangelical Christianity is extremist. Kato actually functioned not at the edge but at the centre of both African and global evangelical Christianity, as a well-regarded member of its central leadership groups. One did not get selected to be the first chair of the World Evangelical Alliance’s influential Theological Commission by being other than a centrist. Kato was extremist only in the sense that he was extremely centrist within evangelical Christianity.

And as for radical discontinuity, one can only charge Kato with holding to this position if one does not read him with responsible care, since Kato can be and has been easily quoted explicitly to the contrary. He certainly saw no salvific capacity in traditional religion, but that is a standard, fixed perspective of African evangelical Christianity. If that is radical, it is the radicalism of Scripture. But Kato certainly did not believe in an utter discontinuity between traditional religion and Christianity in the absolutist degree attributed to him by Bediako. Kato spoke of traditional religion as representing the cry of the African heart for which the Gospel is the answer. And in his understanding of traditional religion he held to a theological position of long and honourable history, which (grounding itself in Romans 1) takes all non-Christian religions to have had access to God's general revelation, although not to His special revelation. That may not be Bediako's brand of continuity, but it is also not radical discontinuity. Whatever Kato's limitations, in these core respects the standard criticisms of Kato have been irresponsible and wrong.

### **H. Going Beyond Kato**

Recalibrating our own estimations of Kato is a worthy project, taking proper note of those who have already enhanced our understanding of Kato is a worthy enterprise, sensing the need for expanding our research on Kato is a worthy challenge, and correcting misrepresentations merits our attention. But the title of this paper is *Byang Kato and Beyond*. I want in conclusion to probe how we might properly go beyond Kato, how to appropriate the values of Kato for our own day in order to go forward beyond him, still faithful to his commitments and his Lord.

For indeed we must not become entrapped in a backward vision, fixated on an era now past. We serve in different times, within a new era of modern Africa. Let me mention briefly at least six ways in which we may wisely seek to go beyond Kato, confident there are others as well.

- *Expanding reflection.* Kato died young. His life was seemingly cut off in mid-step. He did not get to develop his thoughts nor fulfil his dreams. He was rapidly growing in his thinking, but he did not get to elaborate that thinking to fullest refinement and potential. He was only just beginning. So we must be prepared to go beyond him in filling out those dreams, extending that vision, pursuing further implications of his commitments and thinking.
- *Multiplying initiatives.* Kato only managed barely to get launched certain key projects for sustaining theological life in African Christianity. I think for example of ACTEA, NEGST, and FATEB. We need to go well beyond Kato

by resolutely initiating a range of additional innovative projects for evangelical theological vitality and engagement in Africa. Thus the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, the Ethiopia Graduate School of Theology, the *Africa Bible Commentary*, and JETS itself here in Jos are all important post-Kato infrastructures for encouraging theological life in Africa. What other pragmatic initiatives for this larger purpose do we yet need to implement together?

- *Constructive theologising.* One might say that Kato's own actual theological contribution hardly got beyond a warning of dangers. His only book was in the most part only a polemic, a preliminary ground-clearing. That doubtless needed to be done. But following through within his larger framework of evangelical contextual commitment, there is so much yet to be accomplished in elaborating a positive, constructive African evangelical theology, faithful to Scripture and suitably tuned to the African context. Beginnings have been made, but very much still awaits achievement.
- *Bridge-building.* Kato expended much energy in building bridges, cultivating community, creating networks, organising and energising body-life, both within the African evangelical community and beyond. That was a principal component of his ministry. It also remains an unfinished task, an ongoing calling fully worthy of our commitments and energies. There are other bridges needing to be built, more networks needing to be nourished, more synergy to be cultivated, in support of healthy vibrant theological life and community in Africa and beyond.
- *Reassessing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.* Kato was a man of his time, and the times have changed. He served his generation in Africa. We need to serve ours. We cannot merely repeat Kato. We live in a new era, patterns have changed, which call for fresh understanding and for taking up new challenges and opportunities. As he did in terms of the context of his day, so we must newly assess our different context and respond to its needs and opportunities accordingly.
- *Engaging African intellectual modernity.* Perhaps the most pressing challenge in going beyond Kato relates to the intellectual challenge that he represents. Kato was the first African evangelical to attempt engagement with Africa's intellectual life, the first African evangelical to take up a participant role in African Christianity's principal intellectual project, and the first to call for evangelicals in Africa to address their intellectual responsibilities on the continent. We have since his time done much intellectual work; evangelical



reflection has thrived. But we have yet to engage effectively with the dominant intellectual trends of our context.

### **E. Conclusion**

In going beyond Kato in such ways as we have just reviewed, we may also find great wisdom in reanimating and building upon his core commitments and vision. In this respect how timely Kato may seem to be for us as Africa enters its new era. In key respects Byang Kato, with all his limitations, offers African evangelical Christianity some sure and balanced grounding for the day now dawning. For indeed in this new 21<sup>st</sup> Century of modern Africa, if what we need in part is a more balanced, responsibly realistic assessment of Africa, if it is commitment both to African authenticity and to biblical faithfulness, if it is critical engagement with African intellectual modernity rather than a largely unrecognised complicity, and if it is looking outwards towards African Christianity's identity and responsibilities in our now global world, in such respects we will find Kato already standing with us, and pointing forward.

*keeping up with contemporary Africa . . .*

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# THEOLOGY OF PROSPERITY

A New Testament Perspective

Judith L. Hill, PhD

## Abstract

*The article begins with an examination of the first-century understanding of prosperity, first in the Jewish culture and then in the Greco-Roman context. Next, it examines Jesus and Paul with respect to their personal example and their advice to others concerning wealth. Finally, it proposes a few questions to help us determine our perspective today, as evangelicals, with respect to the subject of prosperity. Thus, instead of being a continuous “film” of what the NT says about prosperity, the article presents a few discrete “photos,” snapshots that are somewhat disparate but nevertheless revelatory.<sup>1</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION

I will leave the study of the so-called “Health-and-Wealth Gospel” as a theological trend to other disciplines. My intention here is rather to present some NT principles which can help us evaluate that theological trend. As a general evaluation, one evangelical theologian has suggested that the approach taken by those supporting the Health-and-Wealth Gospel (or, the Prosperity Gospel) “is not so much an aberrant theological system as a complete neglect of theology altogether.”

In addition, it is important to note that those who follow the Prosperity Gospel are often rather weak or unconcerned regarding the rules of hermeneutics and their use of the insights of Greek and Hebrew syntax. These insufficiencies lead to inadequate interpretations of passages and even to taking passages out of their linguistic and historical contexts. We offer here two examples of key verses drawn from the NT, verses that are keys for the Health-and-Wealth Gospel proponents but are wrongly interpreted and thus

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<sup>1</sup> See Ken Sarles, “A Theological Evaluation of the Prosperity Gospel,” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (Oct-Dec 1986), p. 350. In this article, biblical quotations have been taken from the New American Standard Bible (1977), whereas the verses from the Apocrypha come from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (1952).

lead to errors in their theology.

The first of these verses is John 10.10b: "... I came that they might have life, and might have *it* abundantly." Here Jesus mentions the goal of having an abundance of life. In order to understand this concept correctly, one must first make a distinction between animal life (βίος), that is, the fact to be a living and breathing creature, and the life (ζωή) as all that one experiences as a human being. It is this latter term, ζωή, which is found in this verse. And this word in John's Gospel has already been linked to the Word, that is, to Jesus (cf. John 1.4) and indicates, effectively, the concept of life eternal (cf. John 20.31). Thus this verse (John 10.10b) does not speak of abundance of material wealth but rather of the marvelous quality of eternal life that Jesus gives to believers.

The second verse is also from the apostle John and is found in his third canonical letter, 3 John 2: "Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers." First of all, the interpreter must recognize that this wish for prosperity falls directly in the part of a Hellenistic letter where one always anticipates a wish or a prayer. This element of Hellenistic letter-writing was true for any and all letters in the first century AD. Secondly, the Greek verb (here translated into English as "prosper") actually means, rather literally: "to be on the good road" (εὐοδοῦσθαι). The term does not relate primarily to the idea of material prosperity. This latter interpretation, which is generally the one proposed by the Health-and-Wealth Gospel, goes beyond the meaning of the verb and thus beyond the implication of this verse.

### THE JEWISH CONTEXT

We begin with the Jewish context, in order to discern their concept of "prosperity." According to the Old Testament (OT), prosperity was understood especially in terms of the familial and agricultural blessings of God. For example, Psalm 128:1-6 says,

"How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, Who walks in His ways. When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, You will be happy and it will be well with you. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine, Within your house, Your children like olive plants Around your table. Behold, for thus shall the man be blessed Who fears the LORD. The LORD bless you from Zion, And may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life. Indeed, may you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!"

In the NT, it is possible to see the same concept of prosperity in the

exchange that took place between Jesus and the apostle Peter in Mark 10:28-30.

“Peter began to say to Him, ‘Behold, we have left everything and followed You.’ Jesus said, ‘Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life’”

Jesus said these words after having noted that wealth here below could not help one to achieve eternal life: “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23)

Since the level of prosperity varied from person to person, God ordained that the entire Jewish community take responsibility for the poor. For example, those who harvested grains always left the edges of their fields and the corners unharvested, so that the poor could glean there. Leviticus 19.9-10 says:

“Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God.”

In this way, God himself sustained the poor through the implementation of these commandments and rebuked Israel when she did not abide by them, as Isaiah 58:6-7 indicates,

“Is this not the fast which I choose, To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free, And break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry, And bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ... And if you give yourself to the hungry, And satisfy the desire of the afflicted, Then your light will rise in darkness, And your gloom *will become* like midday.”

Poverty, therefore, was not considered a major cause for shame in Jewish society but rather as something that could happen to anyone at a given time. Malina states that “poor” indicates someone who can no longer maintain the social status he/she inherited, due to unfortunate circumstances. Those around him/her did not see that situation of poverty as being the person’s permanent

state.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to such a situation, the Jews attributed shame to those who enriched themselves in an illegitimate manner. One notorious example would be the tax-collectors, who worked for the (pagan) government of Rome. The rabbis said that such men could never attain the Kingdom of heaven. The reason for such a statement was that they considered the tax-collectors incapable of recalling every single person they had wronged. Thus they could neither make a complete repentance nor the necessary restitution.<sup>3</sup>

During the Intertestamental Period, there were two developments that concerned the Jewish idea of prosperity. First of all, some Jews began living together in sectarian communities, where all goods were held in common.<sup>4</sup> The Qumran community was an example of such a group, as was the community of “Therapeuts” in Egypt. In these Jewish sects, it was believed that prosperity ought to be shared in an egalitarian manner among all the members. In addition, all the members were expected to work, especially in the community’s agricultural pursuits, in order to meet the needs of the entire community. Material prosperity as such was not sought after in these Jewish sects. Instead, their interest lay in developing piety.

During this same epoch, it is possible to note in the Apocrypha and in pseudepigraphical writings an increasing emphasis being laid on the danger associated with material wealth. According to the Jewish writers of the time, the quest for prosperity represented a temptation and could even become an idol in a person’s heart. It was better to seek after wisdom than prosperity. Otherwise, one might find himself/herself a slave of wealth instead of being its owner and master. Some examples of these warnings are the following:

Testament of Judah 19.1: “My children, the love of money leadeth to idolatry; because, when led astray through money, men name as gods those who are not gods, and it causeth him who hath it to fall into madness.”

Wisdom of Solomon 8.5: “If riches are a desirable possession in life, what is richer than wisdom who effects all things?”

Sirach 31.1-2, 5-7: “Wakefulness over wealth wastes away one’s flesh, and anxiety about it removes sleep. Wakeful anxiety prevents slumber, and a

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce J. Malina, “Wealth and Poverty in the NT and Its World,” in *Interpretation* 41/4 (1987), p. 356.

<sup>3</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, in the chapter on despised trades.

<sup>4</sup> The situation of the early church in Jerusalem, as depicted in Acts 2-6, was different, for their sharing was voluntary. Cf. especially Acts 2.44-45; 4.32-37; 5.1-11; 6.1-7.

severe illness carries off sleep. ... He who loves gold will not be justified, and he who pursues money will be led astray by it. Many have come to ruin because of gold, and their destruction has met them face to face. It is a stumbling block to those who are devoted to it, and every fool will be taken captive by it.”<sup>5</sup>

### THE GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

In the Greco-Roman context in the ancient Mediterranean world, the basic economic concept has been described by socio-cultural anthropologists as that of a “limited-goods society.” According to this way of thinking, in the entire world there was only a fixed quantity of goods or wealth. This quantity would never increase nor decrease. Thus, if one person became richer, another person (or group) must necessarily become poorer in order to maintain the same amount of wealth in the world. The only way to advance in the society was, in effect, to impoverish someone else. The modern concept of wealth creation was unknown. Instead, it was thought that all possible riches were already present in the world. The only question was: Who would control that wealth?

In contrast to Jewish society, the Greeks and Romans considered that poverty was actually a matter of shame. The person who was not prosperous had no great value in his/her society. In addition, the gods themselves had little interest in the poor; they were, instead, primarily interested in the wealthy members of society who could construct beautiful temples for them and offer impressive sacrifices there. To the already-rich members of society, the Greek and Roman gods gave prosperity in abundance, which of course was understood to impoverish the less fortunate even more.

But what was it that, in the Greco-Roman culture, actually constituted wealth? Once again, we can see a difference between two cultures. The Jews saw the blessings of prosperity as being at the familial and agricultural levels. For the Greco-Roman society, however, money and lands were not considered wealth in and of themselves. Rather, these things represented the necessary means for “purchasing” a place for oneself in the society, in order to receive public renown, glory, and praise. It was in that public acclamation that the non-Jews of the Mediterranean cultures defined the true nature of prosperity.

In reality, the wealthy had no reason to accumulate their money in a bank somewhere. They needed, rather, to spend that money liberally – first of all, in

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<sup>5</sup> This quotation is drawn from Charles, *OT Pseudepigrapha*. These passages were suggested by Craig Blomberg, *Give Me Neither Poverty nor Riches*, which has a good section on the Intertestamental Period.



order to purchase sumptuous luxuries for themselves (so that others would know that they were rich) and, next, to give help to individuals (that is, to their “clients” in the lower social ranks) and also to benefit the city where they lived. In response, in recognition of these acts of kindness offered to them, the clients and the city were expected to make a public declaration (through inscriptions or monuments) of the great and good works of their patron.<sup>6</sup> This public honour was the true prosperity according to their culture. Money was only a simple tool used to obtain that honour. Paul thus reminded Timothy that the Christians must have a good attitude concerning their wealth: “Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited...” (1Timothy 6.17). This advice was particularly apt, given the fact that the majority of those to whom Paul and Timothy ministered were from a Greco-Roman cultural background.

### **THE NEW TESTAMENT CONTEXT: JESUS**

We can now look at the Synoptic Gospels, in order to see what Jesus did and what he said about prosperity. Although we need not study all of his teachings,<sup>7</sup> we will take a few “snapshots” to establish Jesus’ attitude towards prosperity.

First of all, let us look at the personal example Jesus presented to his disciples. As a young man, Jesus was known as a carpenter, undoubtedly a trade that Joseph had taught him. During the years when Jesus was practicing this trade, he likely had a sufficient amount of work, for the city of Sepphoris, the Galilean headquarters for Herod Antipas, was only 5 kilometers from Nazareth and was a growing city. Thus the city undoubtedly needed a large number of carpenters for the construction projects. Even if the family of Jesus did not have a surplus, they most likely had the minimum necessary for life in the village. According to Luke 2.24, Mary and Joseph offered, at the time of his presentation at the Temple, the offering reserved for the poor instead of that which was required for a richer family.

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<sup>6</sup> In Romans 16.23, the name Erastus, treasurer of the city of Ephesus, appears. During the archeological investigations at Ephesus, archeologists discovered his name inscribed on one of the bricks used to construct the road. Erastus was honoured for his gift of paving one of the main streets of the city. Cf. John McRay, *Archeology of the New Testament*, for a photo of this brick.

<sup>7</sup> The subject of money was frequently touched upon by Jesus: “The danger and proper use of wealth is far and away the most common ethical subject in the synoptic Gospels.” Thomas E. Schmidt, “Burden, Barrier, Blasphemy: Wealth in Matt 6:33, Luke 14:33, and Luke 16.15,” in *Trinity Journal* 9/2 (Fall 1988), p. 171.

When Jesus stopped his carpentry work in order to enter into his ministry of training the twelve disciples, he undertook this change of direction not because he was seeking a more lucrative job, one with financial and material prosperity in view. It is true that Jesus in his new role was helped out financially by some individuals, as Luke 8.1-3 indicates:

“And it came about soon afterwards, that He *began* going about from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God; and the twelve were with Him, and *also* some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means.”

But in Luke 9:58 Jesus himself admitted that he did not even have a place to call his own. “And Jesus said to him, ‘The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air *have* nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.’” The apostle Paul described Jesus as someone who underwent voluntary impoverishment, for our good. This expression reflects well the concept of a society of limited goods. 2 Corinthians 8.9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.” He accepted the difficult conditions of his ministry, just as he accepted the good things that people offered him. When the occasion was offered, he ate, with pleasure, at the homes of the wealthy, such as Zaccheus and Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7.36 ff.; 19.1-10), even to the point where some accused Jesus of being a glutton (Luke 7.34).

Such was Jesus' personal example. He demonstrated, at all times and in all situations, his satisfaction with that which God provided, never complaining about what he lacked. His attitude was one of thankfulness. But what advice did Jesus have to pass on to others concerning prosperity? Two passages can trace for us the major axes of his reflection: Matthew 6 and Luke 12. First of all, we will look at what Jesus had to say in Matthew chapter 6.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. . . . No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to

what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing? ... For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you. (Matthew 6.19-21, 24-25, 32-33)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus highlighted what must be every believer's priority in life: his/her personal and intimate relationship with God himself. According to Jesus, that intimacy is the true prosperity. If it were to be the number one priority in the Christian's life, at that moment, he or she would experience peace of heart instead of worrying uselessly. When Jesus spoke in these verses of receiving "all these things," it was not a matter of receiving material riches but rather of having the assurance that God would supply all that was necessary for life, just as he continually does for the flowers and birds. In recognizing that God himself controls the situation, a calm spirit follows automatically. Otherwise, the Christian could be tempted to make the search for wealth his/her priority. But Jesus already emphasized that such a person could not expect a response from God: "No one can serve two masters.... You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6.24). On whom will the Christian depend? The choice is a clear either/or: Either, a dependence on "mammon," that is, on money or material prosperity; or, a dependence on God himself. A choice is necessary, for it is impossible to serve both.

The second passage to be considered comes from Luke chapter 12, where a man wants part of an inheritance to be given to him. To this man, Jesus first gives a warning (v. 15) and then recounts a parable (vv. 16-21):

And He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not *even* when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a certain rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' And he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years *to come*; take your ease, eat, drink *and* be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This *very* night your soul is required of you; and *now* who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12.15-21)

Jesus was giving some strong warnings in this passage: "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." And he further accentuated

the contrast between “the man who lays up treasure for himself” and the one who is “rich toward God.” The desire to have an abundance of wealth could lead a person to compromise his or her priorities.<sup>8</sup> The result for the man in Jesus’ parable of Luke 12, a man who was rich but not wise, was that his material prosperity did him no good in the end, since he was foolish and did not identify the most important form of wealth: intimacy with God. The use of his surplus to meet the needs of others would have been a good solution to his “problem.”

### NEW TESTAMENT CONTEXT: PAUL

Finally, we come to the apostle Paul, particularly to his personal example and his written record. Paul had experiences similar to those of Jesus. He worked in his trade of tentmaker in order to earn a living. Acts 18.1-3 mentions Paul’s trade:

“After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working; for by trade they were tent-makers.”

And Paul accepted, from time to time, gifts from others in order to support him in his ministry.

“And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a *gift* more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.” (Philippians 4.15-18)

It is possible that Paul came from a rich family. It would be surprising if his family could have supported Paul’s studies under the rabbi Gamaliel without having sufficient financial resources. This information concerning Gamaliel comes from Acts 22.3, where Paul proclaims: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, just as you all are

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<sup>8</sup> The parallel with the warnings given by Jews during the Intertestamental Period, as quoted above, is striking.

today.” But Paul did not seek to further enrich himself. In fact, he said to the Ephesian elders that he did not covet anyone’s silver or gold but, instead, had worked to provide for his own needs and to help others. The farewell discourse to the Ephesian elders includes this affirmation by Paul:

“I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my *own* needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20.33-35).

As to the churches Paul founded, they did not seek to have a congregation that was drawn from just one social grouping. In point of fact, the entire range of social levels was represented in the early church.<sup>9</sup> Paul did not attempt to entice non-Christians to come to Christ by promising them an easy life nor an abundance of material goods. Rather, Paul accepted all the converts as being members of the same family, the family of God, believing that the reality of socio-economic differences would forever characterize the composition of the earthly church. For example, see the remarks made by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7.17-22, expressing the idea that, in light of the limited time before the Parousia, everyone should remain in his or her current social position: “Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called” (1 Corinthians 7.20).

That circumstance did not mean that the rich could separate themselves from the less well-to-do. The apostle’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 11 concerning the celebration of the Lord’s Supper clearly underscored the necessity of unity among the believers.

“But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you. Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you. ... So then, my brethren, when you

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<sup>9</sup> The very highest level in the society as well as the very lowest are perhaps excluded from this affirmation. Cf. Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 72-73.

come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you may not come together for judgment. And the remaining matters I shall arrange when I come” (1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 33-34).

In another letter, Paul declared that everyone should have a grateful heart toward God for his good gifts.

1 Timothy 4.3b-5: “... who ... *advocate* abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.”

And, in addition to providing a house where the believer could meet and providing food for the meals in common, Paul stipulated that the prosperous Christians should use their material and financial prosperity to help those in need. However, they were to do so without seeking public glory; in this way, they would not imitate the Greco-Roman society all around them. Their priority should be God himself, not public honour and praise:

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. *Instruct them* to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed. (1 Timothy 6.17-19)

## CONCLUSION

On the basis of this study, we may reflect on a few questions to help us determine how we, as evangelicals, line up with these principles.

First, what is our concept of prosperity? Who would be that person whom we would label as “prosperous?” Does prosperity mean having an abundance of goods? Perhaps in an academic setting, that concept would mean: having an abundance of books and a good computer. Or is prosperity to be measured in familial terms? Or does it exist in the amount of respect others give us? In our view as evangelicals, what is prosperity? And where do we ourselves fall on that scale of values? Are we satisfied to have “enough,” or do we always want more? Do we think that that word “enough” means: “A bit more than what we have at present,” indicating that we classify ourselves as being neither “prosperous” nor content with our current situation.

Secondly, where does our personal idea of prosperity or perhaps even our desire to be wealthy lead us in our daily living? Are we led toward arrogance

or a desire for public recognition? Are we moving toward coveting what others have? Does selfishness characterize us? Or are we instead led toward an increasing concern for the well-being of others? Do we express our satisfaction with what God has already supplied, even if it is less than what others have? Are we led to an expression of gratitude toward God, who gives us those things we truly need?

Consider the example of the apostle Paul, the faithful servant of the Lord. He was a theologian. According to his letters, Paul owned some books, and they were precious to him (2 Timothy 4.13). But had he had too many books, his freedom to itinerate wherever God sent him would have been impeded. Thus Paul never built himself a library somewhere and filled it with books. He kept his liberty of spirit and did not tie himself to material goods. One could imagine that a horse would have been useful in Paul's itinerant ministry, but he did not have one. Is that because God did not take good care of Paul, making him walk those distances? Paul himself admitted that his life had not always been luxurious and that he had even experienced nudity and hunger.

A good while before his Roman imprisonment, Paul described his ministry experiences as follows: "*I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Corinthians 11:27). But his conclusion, at the end of this litany of sufferings and of the experience of the "thorn" in his flesh was indeed positive: "... And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12.9-10).

But even in all of these circumstances, the apostle remained satisfied:

Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4.11-13)

Prosperity is an attitude: an assurance that God himself will provide for one's needs, a satisfaction with that provision, and a constant pursuit of intimacy with the Creator.

To end this study, I would like to quote the wisdom of the apostle Paul one last time:

But godliness *actually* is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang. But flee from these things, you man of God; and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance *and* gentleness. (1 Timothy 6.6-11)





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## AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE OF THE CONCEPT OF SALVATION IN THE PSALTER

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This article is the author's adaptation and re-direction of an article ("A Comparative Study of Salvation in the Psalter and African Indigenous Churches") by him that appeared in the journal, *The Living Word* May-June 2009, Vol. 115, No.3 (pp.137-153).

### Introduction:

There is little doubt that "salvation is the central theme of the whole Bible."<sup>1</sup> However, there is a fundamental difference between the concept of salvation in the Old and New Testaments. For the latter salvation primarily means deliverance from the bondage of sin. This salvation is through the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:21; Act 2:21; I Tim 1:15; etc.). In other words, each person must come to him personally. It is this understanding that Christians have today whenever the word salvation is mentioned. The Old Testament concept of salvation on the other hand is generally understood as deliverance from physical calamities such as oppression, sickness, fear, death, etc. This concept is applicable to individuals as well as a nation. It is twofold in nature, as rightly described by Otto J. Baab, as "national victory" and "long life and prosperity" of an individual.<sup>2</sup>

One important thing that strikes the mind of the readers of the Bible, particularly the Psalter, is the predominant occurrence of the word *יִשְׁעָה* (usually *salvation* or *deliverance*) and its cognates. The word appears 78 times in the Old Testament, predominantly in the book of Psalms where it occurs 45 times and in Isaiah where it appears 19 times.<sup>3</sup> One wonders why the concept of salvation is so pronounced in the Psalter. Is it because the Psalter is a liturgical document dealing with the private and public worship of the people of Israel? What is the real concept of salvation which the Psalmists advocated? Is it spiritual salvation as understood by the writers of the New Testament or physical salvation from problems such as threats, war, evil, enemies, etc.? This paper seeks to find solutions to the questions raised above. The paper is divided into four major parts namely: the meaning of salvation; salvation in the Psalter; the Psalmists' understanding of the saviour; and the application of the work to the present political and economic situation in Africa. The words *salvation* and *deliverance* are used interchangeably in this work.

## 1. The Meaning of Salvation

The three Hebrew words that are used for salvation are יְשׁוּעָה, תְּשׁוּעָה, and יִשְׁעַ . Incidentally each of the three words has connection with the verb יָשַׁע (*to deliver*) and its derivatives that are used some 353 times in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> The words connote freedom from distress and the ability to pursue one's own objectives. There are four different meanings given to the feminine noun יְשׁוּעָה in the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> Firstly, יְשׁוּעָה means *welfare* and *prosperity*. This is the usage in Job 30:15 when he says that "... his prosperity has passed way like a cloud." Secondly, it means *deliverance* from battle. This salvation is connected with assistance rendered at a critical time of war as in 2 Samuel 10:11 and I Chronicles 19:12 where Joab and Abishai his brother plan to assist one another against the Arameans. Thirdly, it refers to *salvation* from external evils. This salvation, to which some spiritual ideas are added, is best illustrated in the statement of Jacob in Genesis 49:18: "I look for your deliverance, O LORD." Also, a similar idea is expressed by the Psalmists in Psalms 3:3, 9; 14:7; 53:7; 22:2; 35:3; 62:2; 69:30; 70:5; 78:22; 80:3; 91:16; 96:2; 106:4; 140:8; etc. Finally, it means *victory*. This aspect of salvation is linked with victory won in battle, as seen in the victory won for Israel in I Samuel 14:45. There are many other occasions where the LORD Himself wrought victory for His people, (cf. Exod. 15:2; Isaiah 12:2; Hab. 3:8; Psalms 20:6, 21:2, 6; 44:5; 68: 20, etc).

The second Hebrew word for salvation is the feminine noun תְּשׁוּעָה which occurs about 34 times in the Old Testament and it means *deliverance* or *salvation*.<sup>6</sup> It can be used to describe salvation by God through human agency. This salvation is from oppression (I Sam. 11:9) and battle (I Chron.19:12; Psalms 60:13; 108:13). At times, it is deliverance from personal trouble (Psalm 37:39). It can also be spiritual salvation as expressed by David in Psalm 51:16 cf. Psalms 119: 41; 132: 16; 2 Chron. 8:41.

The third Hebrew word for salvation is the masculine noun יִשְׁעַ which appears 36 times in the Old Testament. It means *deliverance, rescue, salvation, safety* and *welfare* as illustrated in 2 Samuel 23:5; Psalm 12:6 and Job 5:4, 11.<sup>7</sup>

It is indicative from various meanings given to יְשׁוּעָה that salvation usually comes from somewhere outside the oppressed party. In other words, it is hardly possible that deliverance can come from the person being oppressed. Also, from the above meanings, the emphasis in the Old Testament is on physical salvation. Very little is said on spiritual salvation in the Old Testament. But there is a general consensus among the students of the Old

Testament that elements of spiritual salvation are found. Two of the passages are Psalms 130:8 which says, “And he will save Israel from all his iniquities” and Ezekiel 37:23 which says, “I will save them from all the backsliding in which they have sinned.”

The actual word for *salvation* in the New Testament is σωτηρία, which also has the following meanings: *deliverance*, *preservation*, and *safety*. There are three different meanings given to the word σωτηρία in the New Testament.<sup>8</sup> Firstly, means *salvation through Jesus Christ* as preached by the Apostles. For instance, Peter says that “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). It is this salvation that is even extended to the Gentiles cf. Act 13:47; Rom 11:11 etc. Secondly, it means *salvation as the present possession* of all true Christians. For instance, the Apostle Paul says “If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation” (2 Cor. 1:6). Finally, it refers to *future salvation* that is the sum of the benefits and blessings that Christians will enjoy after the visible return of Christ from heaven in the consummated and eternal kingdom of God. Examples include the Apostle Paul who speaks of a salvation which is nearer to us now than when we first believed in Romans 13:11. Hebrews 9:28 says, “So Christ having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”

Obviously σωτηρία, unlike תְּשׁוּבָה, has its emphasis on spiritual salvation. σωτηρία is the salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ that every Christian possesses and it connotes the blessings to be enjoyed now and at the return of Jesus Christ.

A brief look at how some theologians use the term shows that *salvation* means different things to different people. John L. McKenzie understands salvation as the Israelites’ freedom from their bondage. In his argument for the physical aspect of salvation, he says, “the meaning of salvation is best seen in the paradigmatic saving act, the exodus from Egypt.”<sup>9</sup> Wilbur O’Donovan argues that salvation in the African context includes “deliverance or protection from witchcraft and evil spirits and the possession of life force”.<sup>10</sup> But it is not possible for man to save himself. God makes it possible through Jesus Christ. O’Donovan contends that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation for God’s plan of salvation.<sup>11</sup>

Byang H. Kato, an African biblical scholar, argues that “man’s fundamental problem is sin against God and that salvation is only through Jesus Christ.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, he takes seriously the statement of Peter in Act

4:12, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Another African view of salvation is that of John Mbiti who argues that:

God rescues people when all other help is exhausted, and that this rescue is primarily from material and physical dilemmas. God does not save because he is Saviour; rather, he becomes Saviour when he does save.<sup>13</sup>

It is particularly very interesting to note how liberation theologians define salvation. They believe that liberation is salvation. This view is well represented and summarized by Hartmut Schonherr:

Liberation is salvation. It is for Here and Now, and has to take place in any human situation which is characterised by a fundamental corruption of the social-political context of man. The Church has for too long concentrated on the 'soul' of the individual believer. It did not see that the plight of man is rooted in the perversion of his social and political structures. They enslave him, deprive him of his dignity, and violate his rights. Because of this structural perversion there is poverty, hunger, neo-colonial domination, racial discrimination, economic exploitation, and social injustice in many variations. This structural perversion reveals the evidence of sin and causes the fundamental alienation of man.<sup>14</sup>

From the above views on salvation, I would like to submit that the need for salvation arises from the state of depression in man. The depression can be spiritual or physical. Spiritually, an individual, who yields to the temptation of the wicked one, will certainly find himself in the bondage of sin. He will be depressed until he is delivered and finds peace with God. Physically, an individual or nation may be depressed because of the distressful situation he finds himself in - possibly sickness, hunger etc. The depression will continue until there is help from somewhere. Therefore, salvation is bringing assistance into any distressful situation. It is an experience of relief to the person involved or victory to the nation concerned.

## **II. Salvation in the Psalter**

Having discussed the meaning of salvation, it is pertinent to consider various aspects of salvation in the Psalter. The word Psalter originally referred to a stringed instrument but later it came to mean a 'collection of songs', and it was used in the Codex Alexandrinus as the title the book of Psalms.<sup>15</sup> The Psalter is like a hymnbook, comprising of 150 canonical Psalms, written by different people like David, Moses, Asaph, Solomon and others over a period about 1000 years. Psalm 1 serves the purpose of introducing the whole Psalter while Psalm 150 forms a conclusion to the Psalter. The Psalter is divided into

five major books, namely: Book I (Psalm 1 – 41), Book II (Psalms 42 – 72), Book III (Psalms 73 – 89), Book IV (Psalms 90 – 106) and Book V (107 – 150). Each book concludes with a doxology (Psalm 41:13; 17:18-20; 89:52; 106:48; 150). The Psalter belongs to the third division of the Hebrew Canon and it occupies a unique position in that section, shown when Jesus Christ refers to it as representing the section while affirming the canonicity of the Old Testament (Luke 24:44). The Psalter is primarily a book of prayers that are used in worship in which the Psalmists expressed their adoration, confession, faith and confidence in Yahweh whom they believed was able to deliver them from all their problems, fears and threats.<sup>16</sup>

Hermann Gunkel who championed form critical research on the Psalter “perceived that the Psalms did not originate as literary works, but arose in worship; they were spoken or sung in various ways and on various occasions of worship and were transmitted orally before they acquired written form in small collections.”<sup>17</sup> Gunkel saw five major types of psalms in the Psalter: hymns, community laments, thanksgiving songs of the individual, spiritual laments of the individual and mixed types.<sup>18</sup>

It is interesting to note that more than one-third of the Psalms in the Psalter are lamentations or petitions. These Psalms, used either by individuals or the community, had their origin in the troubles and dangers to which the Psalmists were exposed. The chief misfortune that caused the Psalmists to lament and turn to God for salvation was the threat of death.<sup>19</sup> The Psalmists went through various kinds of oppression as seen in the texts. It is not an exaggeration that nearly half of the Psalms contain one or more occurrence of *ישע* which is the root form of *יָשַׁע* (*deliver*) and *יְשׁוּעָה* (*salvation*).<sup>20</sup> This explains why there are many themes on salvation in the Psalter. Some of the themes include salvation from wicked ones (Ps.37:40; 43:1; 71:4; 140:1-2); from foes (Psalms 7:1; 25:19-20; 44:7; 78:42); from oppression (Psalms 72:4; 13; 76:9; 109:31; 119:134; 142:6); from enemies (Psalms 3:7; 18:16-19; 28;56;59:1-2; 9:14 43:9); from death (Psalm 6:4-5; 30;49:15;56:13; 86:13; 116:8,) from transgressions (Psa. 39:8), from battle (Psalm 33:16-19;44;4-8;55:18); from blood guiltiness (Psalms 51:14;59:2) from affliction (Psa. 119:153); from liars (Psalms 144:7,11); from fears (Psa. 34:4,7); from trouble (Psalms 32:7; 34:6;19; 41:1; 50:51; 54:7; 81:7); from distress (Psalms 107:6,19-20; 118:5); from loneliness and abandonment (Psalms 31:11; 38:11); from shame and humiliation (Psalms 4:2;22:6-7;69:19); and from sickness (Psalms 6 and 31). Our space is too limited to do a thorough study on each of the themes enumerated. However, emphasis will be placed on salvation from

oppression, trouble, enemies and death as each form a threat to the life of the Psalmist.

**Salvation from oppression:** The Hebrew word for *oppression* is עָנָה which is a piel verb. The idea is to frustrate or do violence to another person. It is to mishandle or afflict an individual. A very good example is recorded in Exodus 1 when the Israelites were afflicted and oppressed with heavy burdens (Exod. 1:11-12). *The Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines *oppression* in two ways: as “unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power especially by imposition of burdens” and “a sense of heaviness or obstruction in the body or mind.”

The Psalmists seem to have the first definition in mind in their understanding of oppression. The fact that oppression is a threat is illustrated in Psalm 94:5 where the Psalmist complains to God that the evildoers crush and afflict the people of God. The theme of oppression is equally portrayed in Psalm 72 which is a prayer for the righteous king. The Psalmist believes that it is this righteous king who shall defend the cause of the poor, deliver the needy and crush the oppressors (Ps. 72:12-14). The Psalmist has confidence in God that He will establish judgement and save all the oppressed of the earth (Ps. 76:9). He prays to God to redeem him from man's oppression that he may keep His precepts (Ps. 119:34). He also prays to God to deliver him from his persecutors who are too strong for him.

**Salvation from trouble or distress:** This is another threat to the life of the Psalmists as seen in some of the Psalms. The Hebrew word for *trouble* is צָרָה and it means to be *in straits* or *distress*. צָרָה is an intense inner turmoil (Ps. 25:17). Generally the person in trouble is disturbed physically and mentally. The fact that the day of trouble is certain is seen in the promise given to the one who considers the poor. The LORD will deliver him in the day of trouble (Ps. 41:1). The Psalmist in 120:1-2 cries to God in his distress because of the people with lying lips and deceitful tongues that surround him. It was at the time of trouble that the Israelites usually called upon God who on every occasion delivered them out of their trouble (Ps. 107:69). It is only Yahweh who preserves people from troubles (Ps. 32:7). He saves the poor people from all their problems especially when they call on him.

**Salvation from enemies:** The basic meaning for the Hebrew verb אָוֵן is *to be hostile* to a person or to treat a person as an enemy. This meaning is obvious in Exodus 23:22 where God becomes an enemy to Israel's enemies. Obviously the Psalmist seeks salvation from various enemies as rightly put by John Mbiti:

The enemies in the traditional life are innumerable and include: sickness, witchcraft, sorcery, magic, barrenness, failure, troublesome spirits, danger, misfortune, calamity, and death, as far as the individual is concerned; and drought, war, oppression, foreign domination, slavery, locust invasion, epidemics flood, and so on, as far as the wider community is concerned.<sup>21</sup>

Sigmund Mowinckel has equally considered these enemies as “supernatural beings, demons, or evil spirits.”<sup>22</sup> The fact that these enemies are hostile to man and are sources of threat to him, we may regard them as godless ones who have no fear of God in them. Consequently, they are enemies of both God and man. In Psalm 59, which is a lament,<sup>23</sup> the Psalmist called his enemies “workers of evil” and “bloodthirsty men” (59:2). Verses 1-5 are a prayer of David for salvation from a desperate situation. The wicked men in the Psalm lie in wait for his life. In 59:6-7, David compared them to snarling dogs that prowl about at night. They even uttered terrible words at him. Hence David called upon the LORD of hosts who is also his strength and fortress to come to his help (59:8-10). The Psalmist then prayed that God should punish the wicked in a way that people would learn that He is sovereign. These enemies or wicked ones should not simply perish, because they would be forgotten; rather they should be made to wander in humiliation as outcasts and fugitives (59:11). It is encouraging to note that in spite of the presence of the enemies again and again (59:14-15), the Psalmist vowed to sing praises to God for his strength, love, fortress and refuge (59:16-17). In other words the enemies may be many but with confidence in God, the Psalmist would continue to rejoice. He knows that God is in control.

**Salvation from death:** Death constitutes the greatest danger from which the Psalmists seek deliverance. To the Psalmists, all other calamities such as persecution, hatred by enemies, sickness, sin, suffering of all kinds, if not prevented by God, will in the final analysis terminate in death.<sup>24</sup> The Hebrew word *מָוֶת* means *death* which is the opposite of life (Deut. 30:15,19; II Sam. 15:21; Isa. 53:9).<sup>25</sup> According to Desmond Alexander, the word *מָוֶת* has three basic connotations in the Old Testament. Biologically, the word indicates the end of historical life (Gen. 21:16). in mythological terms, the word is used as a power, agent or principle (Job 18:13; Jer. 9:21). Symbolically, the word is used as the loss of rich joyous existence as willed by God (Deut. 30:15; Ps. 13:3-4).<sup>26</sup>

As far as salvation from death in the Psalter is concerned, we need to see the Psalmists as committed men of God. In their commitment they desire to serve God but they recognise they cannot serve Him when they are no longer



in His presence. In other words, nothing alarmed them more than the thought of an early and untimely death. Their idea was to live, to live long and to achieve the full number of their days.<sup>27</sup> The dead can neither serve nor praise God. This certainly calls for the kind of pleading we see in Psalm 6:4-5:

Turn, O LORD, save my life;  
 Deliver me for the sake of thy steadfast love.  
 For in death there is no remembrance of thee:  
 In Sheol who can give thee praise?

### III. The Psalmists' Understanding of the Saviour

The Psalmists, like other men of God in Israel, have a very high conception and a deep knowledge of God who has made Himself known to them as the all-powerful, all-knowing and ever present God. They know Him as the God of history who guides everything towards the final goal which He has purposed to fulfil. They equally know Him as "the Vindicator of all who are oppressed."<sup>28</sup> The word *salvation* has a strong religious meaning in the Old Testament and particularly in the Psalter. It has even been said that the Israelites' encounter with Yahweh revolves around two poles, namely salvation and judgement.<sup>29</sup> Incidentally, this concept of salvation is as early as at the time of the flood when God saved Noah (Gen. 8). David J. Clines notes:

God tells Noah how he can escape the flood, God commands him to make an ark, God sends him into the ark, God shuts him in, God remembers him and God tells him to leave the ark when the waters have subsided. In short, God saves Noah (and with him, humanity) from the flood.<sup>30</sup>

The understanding of Yahweh as the Saviour of the Israelites is equally highlighted by Gerhard Von Rad who found the core of the Hexateuch in the confessional statement in Deuteronomy 26:5-9 which deals with the salvation history of the Israelites from the time of the patriarch to the conquest.<sup>31</sup> Even in the prophetic literature, Yahweh is seen as the Saviour, Healer, Comforter and Redeemer.<sup>32</sup>

An inductive study of the Psalter shows that the Psalmists recognize God as their Saviour and Deliverer (Psalms 18:46;24:5; 25:5; 27:9; 38:22; 42:5,11;43:5;65:5; 68:19; 79:9; 85:4; 89:26). This God has saved different individuals. He saved the humble and brought low those whose eyes are haughty (Psalm 18:2). He saved His people (Ps. 28:9) and His servant (Ps. 31:16). He saved the Psalmist from trouble and danger (Ps. 71:2; 91:3). He saved weak and the needy (Ps. 72:13; 109:31). He saved the poor (Ps. 34:6) and the simple hearted (Ps. 116:6).

In all the above mentioned cases and references on the one hand, it seems that a personal or individual salvation is emphasized in the Psalter. To buttress the fact of personal or individual salvation in the Psalter, the pronoun “my” is often used with the word salvation or other related words such as “Saviour” and “Deliverer.” Hence, such phrases like “my salvation” and “my deliverer” are generally used (Psalms 18:2; 25:5; 27:1; 38:22; 62:1; 2, 7; 91:16; 148:14, 21 and 140:7).

On the other hand, a collective concept of salvation is equally emphasized in the Psalter. The people of Israel were collectively saved by God from their bondage in Egypt (Ps. 106:21). Also, there are Psalms (65:5; 68:19-20; 79:9; 85:4 and 95:1) where the pronoun “our” is used with the word salvation. To stress this point further, we can also take those Psalms that have elements of an individual concept to be a collective or corporate concept of salvation. This is because most of the Psalms that have “my salvation or Saviour” are ascribed to David who is believed to be the representative of God before the people. Thus inasmuch as he represented the people God, his “I” or “me” in the Psalms referred to the community.

Also looking at the point from an African perspective, one would strongly argue for the collective concept of salvation in the Psalter. There are two points that are obvious from the collective concept of salvation in the Psalter which are closely related to the African culture. First, as far as African society is concerned, things are usually done collectively and corporately. Second, the chief or king of a particular community or town has the freedom to represent his people anywhere and at anytime. He makes decisions for the people and usually they abide by such decisions.<sup>33</sup> This is the reason why the salvation of a community chief or king usually leads to the salvation of the whole community. However, when a king resists the gospel it is usually difficult for a missionary to make converts in such a place. Furthermore, the physical salvation the people of Africa seek cannot be applied only to an individual but must also be applied to the whole continent.

#### **IV. Salvation from the Present Political-Economic Situation in Africa**

Africa, which consists of 53 different countries, is the second largest of the earth’s seven continents, covering 23 percent of the world’s total land area and containing 13 percent of the world’s population. It is a land of great diversity. Africa hosts diverse peoples with a wide range of cultures and backgrounds who speak hundreds of different languages. Most nations in Africa won independence in the 1950s and 1960s through slow reform or by violent struggle. Unfortunately, many African nations are still struggling politically

and economically. Several nations are confronted with various problems which have made life difficult for many helpless citizens who no doubt are looking forward to a physical salvation from the hands of their oppressors. Three of these nations include Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Sudan.

**Somalia:** Somalia, on the “horn of Africa”, is located at the Eastern part of Ethiopia and Kenya. The nation has been without a stable central government since a dictator Mohammed Siad Barre fled the country in 1991. Subsequently, there has been fighting among rival faction leaders which have led to the killing, dislocation and starvation of thousands of Somalis. It has been estimated that the political violence has led to the death of 350,000 to 1,000,000 Somalis since 1991.<sup>34</sup> Indeed the population is traumatized by suffering, death, famine and savagery of the fighting. About 3.5 million of Somalis live in surrounding nations like Ethiopia, Kenya, etc. Therefore, the Somalis are desperate for peace and restoration of civil order.<sup>35</sup>

**The Democratic Republic of Congo:** This nation was formerly called Zaire. It is another nation in Africa confronted with a serious political crisis. The current war, which is known as the second Congo war or Africa’s world war or even the Great War of Africa, started in August 1998. It involved eight African nations as well as about twenty-five armed groups. By 2008 the war and its aftermath had killed 5.4 million people, mostly from disease and starvation. Also, millions of people have become internally displaced and have sought asylum in neighbouring countries.<sup>36</sup>

**The Republic of Sudan:** This is the largest country in the African continent. The country’s north and south stand in stark contrast to one another. The dry, desert north is populated largely by Arab Muslims, while the wet, swampy south is populated by black African and animists. Sudan’s Civil war started in 2003 when rebel groups attacked government garrisons in the Darfur region. The rebels complained of being neglected by Khartoum and thus demanded greater autonomy for Darfur and the settlement of many local grievances, especially over land rights.<sup>37</sup> The government responded to the garrison attacks with a ferocious counter insurgency campaign involving an Arab militia known as the Junjaweed as well as government troops. In the process, entire villages were destroyed and many civilians were brutally tortured, raped and killed. The United Nations estimated that as a result of the conflict in Darfur, more than 200,000 people, mostly civilians, died from violence, starvation, or disease. In addition, more than 2 million people crowded refugee camps in Darfur and neighbouring border areas in Chad.<sup>38</sup> In

addition to the suffering and disruption of lives of common people, the government seems to have sanctioned the re-institution of slavery. Many people especially in the southern part have suffered from slave raiders. An estimated of 60,000-200,000 are now chattel slaves.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

The concept of salvation discussed in the Psalter is more applicable to us in Africa than to any other continent of the world. The political and economic crises have brought fear and insecurity to many lives as hunger, poverty, sickness and death are rampant. The current situation is very similar to those of the Psalmists who prayed to God for salvation from trouble, oppression, enemies, death, etc. So in Africa, Christians should spend more time using the Psalms in prayer, asking God to deliver them from their political oppressors. Even though African Christians do not ignore the spiritual aspect of salvation, yet they place much emphasis on physical salvation. Like the Psalmists, African Christians want to be saved from various enemies confronting them.

African Christians cannot be expected to have the same understanding of the word *salvation* as is found among Christians in North America or other developed nations. This is because the things that are creating problems for us in Africa are comparatively non-existent in North America. The majority of Westerners do not know that poverty is all about. They do not experience what it means to be oppressed politically as demonstrated in the just concluded U.S. election in which Obama was elected. Speaking of sickness and death, they have an excellent medical system and their life span is longer than that of the Africans. Therefore one should not be surprised to know that their basic understanding of salvation is usually limited to the New Testament view - deliverance from the bondage of sin.

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<sup>10</sup> Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), p. 126.

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<sup>12</sup> Byang H. Kato "The Theology of Eternal Salvation" in *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addresses*. (Achimota, Ghana: African Christian Press, 1985), p. 22. Byang H. Kato was the general secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA).

<sup>13</sup> John Mbiti, "Ο σωτηρη ἡμῶν as an African Experience" in *Christ and Spirit in The New Testament: Studies in Honour of Charles Francis Digby Moule*. Edited by Barnabas Lindars and S. Smalley, (Cambridge: University Press, (1973), p. 400.

<sup>14</sup> Hartmut Schonher, "Concept of Salvation in Christianity." *Africa Theological Journal* Vol. 12 Nov. 3 (1983); 160-1. The idea of liberation as salvation started in the Catholic Church in Latin America. It has since spread to many denominations of the world particularly in the Third World countries. Cf. *Ibid.* p. 160.

<sup>15</sup> The words 'Psalms' and 'Psalter' are anglicized forms of the Latin *Psalmi* and *Psalterium*, which in turn are derived from the Greek *Psalmoi* and *Psalterion*. Cf. A.A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms, Volume 1, New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co. 1972), p. 23; and C.O. Ogunkunle, "The Psalter and its Hermeneutics in the African context" *African Journal of Biblical Studies* Volume XVI, Number 1, (April 2001), p. 36.

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<sup>21</sup> Mbiti, “Ο σωτηρ ἡμων as an Africa Experience” p. 406.

<sup>22</sup> As quoted by F.M. Mbon. “Deliverance in the Complaint Psalms: Religious Claim or Religious Experience.” *Orita* 14/2 (December 1982), p. 124.

<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to say whether Psalm 59 is an individual or community lament. The Psalm shows the characteristics of both types. Its historical setting is identified as Saul’s siege of David’s house (I Sam. 19:8-11) but Michal helped David to escape through the window (I Sam. 19:12-14).

<sup>24</sup> Mbon, “Deliverance in the Complaint Psalms”, p. 120. Cf. Pius Drijvers, *The Psalms: Their Structure and Meaning*, p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> *BDB*, p. 560.

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<sup>29</sup> McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 150.

<sup>30</sup> David J.A. Clines, “Images of Yahweh in the Pentateuch” in *Studies in Old Testament Theology: Historical and Contemporary Images of God and God’s People*. Edited by Robert L. Hubbard, Robert K. Johnson, Robert P. Meye (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992), p. 84.

<sup>31</sup> Clines, “Images of Yahweh in the Pentateuch” in *Studies in Old Testament Theology*, p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> Carl E. Armerding, “Images for Today: Word from the Prophets” In *Studies in Old Testament Theology: Historical and Contemporary Images of God and God’s People*, pp 177-179.

<sup>33</sup> For details see Rotimi Omotoye, “An Examination of the Attitudes of Traditional Rulers in the Introduction of Christianity in the Pre-Colonial Era in Yorubaland”, *Centrepoin*t, Volume II, No. 1, (2002/2003), pp. 1-12.

<sup>34</sup> See “Somalia” Microsoft® Encarta® 2008. © 1993-2007 Microsoft Corporation.

<sup>35</sup> Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: 21st Century Edition*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001), p. 575.

<sup>36</sup> See “Democratic Republic of Congo” Microsoft® Encarta® 2008. © 1993-2007 Microsoft Corporation.

<sup>37</sup> Two main rebel groups are the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).

<sup>38</sup> See “Sudan” Microsoft® Encarta® 2008. © 1993-2007 Microsoft Corporation.

<sup>39</sup> Johnstone and Mandryk, *Operation World: 21st Century Edition*. p. 597.

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Steffan Grenstedt**

**Ambaricho and Shonkolla:  
From Local Independent Church  
to the Evangelical Mainstream:  
The Origins of the Mekane Yesus Church in Kambata Hadiya**

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Reviewed by Steve Bryan  
Ethiopia Graduate School of Theology, Addis Ababa

Submitted to the Faculty of Theology of Uppsala University in 2000, this PhD thesis evaluates the origin of the Kambata Synod of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) in southern Ethiopia. The result is a fascinating, moving and sometimes heartbreaking story of religious change in what has become a part of the Evangelical heartland of Ethiopia. The evangelical movement in the Kambata-Hadiya region, which includes the two significant mountains *Ambaricho* and *Shonkolla*, had its origins in the pioneer work of missionaries from the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) who entered the area in 1929. The Kambata Evangelical Church (KEC) which emerged from this work grew rapidly during the Italian occupation (1936-1941) when the SIM missionaries were absent. But it then underwent a split in 1951 that proved resistant to numerous efforts on several fronts to bring reconciliation.

The chief reason for the split was that from around 1949 SIM leadership, principally Guy Playfair, the SIM General Director and Gordon Beacham, the SIM Ethiopia Field Director, insisted that the KEC enforce a ban on the consumption of all alcohol, including the mildly alcoholic cultural drink, *borde*. Prior to this, the drinking of *borde* was such an integral part of the culture that it was even served at meetings of church elders. Those who refused to stop drinking alcohol in any form and to end other “worldly



practices” (including use of tobacco, polygamy, dancing, and adult circumcision) were refused communion and baptism and denied access to the SIM schools and Bible school. From Grenstedt’s point of view, the ban represented a departure from SIM’s strong adherence to indigenous principles which, among other things, were reflected in the adaptation of a culturally traditional elder-led system of governance, locally supported church workers, and the formation of congregations marked by freedom from central control.

The split within the KEC would prove to have broader ramifications. Through the 1940s and 1950s there was little evidence of the denominationalism that now characterizes the Ethiopian evangelical movement. Despite the presence of various foreign mission societies involved in church planting, the early hope of many was that there would be a single united evangelical Church in Ethiopia – a hope embodied in the formation of the Conferences of Ethiopian Evangelical Churches (CEEC), which met annually from 1944 to 1963. Initially, the CEEC was an all-Ethiopia affair, though later missionaries from various societies also attended. Though participation was broad, the attendance of SIM-related churches and SIM missionaries was much more sporadic than that of other groups. The leadership of the CEEC primarily came from churches related to the Lutheran and Presbyterian missions. Grenstedt cites evidence from the 1950s indicating that even SIM missionaries referred to the CEEC as the “Ethiopian Evangelical Church” as though it were the sole evangelical ecclesiastical body, though he does not indicate whether members of SIM-related churches consistently viewed themselves as part of this wider body. When the group of churches that had broken away from the SIM-related KEC applied to the CEEC for membership in 1955, the division within the Kambata-Hadiya churches burst onto the national stage.

Neither of the Kambatta groups was accepted for membership at the CEEC of 1955, but it was here for the first time that the issue of baptism was brought to the fore. Grenstedt indicates that baptismal practices were diffuse within the breakaway churches at this time. The two key SIM missionaries who influenced the KEC prior to the Italian occupation were the SIMers Clarence Duff (a Presbyterian) and Norman Cousar (a Baptist). Though it does not appear that Duff ever baptized infants in the area, the believers in the area were aware that Duff regarded his own baptism as an infant as valid. This, along with the influence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church practice of infant baptism, may have contributed to the acceptance of the practice. It is a bit surprising that Grenstedt does not evaluate baptismal practices in Kambata

during the Italian occupation. In the absence of foreign missionaries, the handful of converts grew to 10,000 in approximately 100 churches, not least because the neighboring Wollamo (Wolaytta) churches were sending Ethiopian missionaries into the area. Whatever the influence of the Wollamo missionaries on baptismal practices (Grendstedt does not say), it does not seem that the early converts received univocal direction on the practice of baptism from the SIM missionaries prior to their departure.

As an interdenominational mission, SIM could accommodate a variety of baptismal views, though it seems to have decided in 1932 that it would support the practice of believer's baptism in the churches it planted. At the same time, it also seems that Duff did not require rebaptism of converts in Kambata Hadiya who had been baptized as infants within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). Following the Italian occupation, however, Duff decided not to return despite the fact that he and Cousar had gained fluency in the Hadiya language. (No other missionary would do so following the occupation because of the imperial decree of 1944 which dictated that the missionaries would only learn and speak Amharic.) Duff's decision to go instead to Eritrea with the Orthodox Presbyterian Mission seems to have been determined in part by his Presbyterian views on baptism. Cousar did return and his influence on baptismal practices in the area seems to have followed a broader trend within SIM toward stronger baptistic views after the occupation, including an insistence on the rebaptism of those who had been baptized as infants within the EOC.

Nevertheless, baptismal practices were not consolidated in the churches prior to the split in 1951, and these do not seem to have been an issue in the split. However, after the split, the baptism of infants – in practice, the baptism of toddlers old enough to walk down to the river! – seems to have continued in the breakaway churches even while the influence of SIM meant that it was dying out within the KEC. Still, baptismal practices did not become an issue between the two Kambata groups until representatives of the breakaway churches realized that an affirmation of infant baptism, including the acceptance of infant baptisms performed by the EOC, would be viewed positively by the Lutheran and Presbyterian leadership of the CEEC. The apparent opportunism of the breakaway churches notwithstanding, there was clearly a growing sense of affinity with the key participants in the CEEC. The 1957 declaration of the SIM-related KEC that they would no longer participate in the CEEC because of the CEEC acceptance of the breakaway Kambata churches signaled the end of the CEEC as the embodiment of a single, unified

evangelical Ethiopian Church. Very likely the demise of the CEEC would have been precipitated by other events including the formation in 1956 of a fellowship of SIM-related churches in Ethiopia and the growing interest among some of the Lutheran missions to establish a confessional church along Lutheran lines.

Despite the events of 1956-7, the CEEC did not rush to incorporate the breakaway Kambata faction as a member. Indeed efforts to effect reconciliation continued, culminating in a final failed attempt in 1960. Though the initial signs were positive and baptism scarcely an issue, the meeting fell apart when a member of the breakaway group asked if it were really true that they would be barred from fellowship were they found to take even a small glass of alcohol. Shortly before, in 1959, the CEEC had become the basis for the new Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). With the growing acceptance by the CEEC and then EECMY, the breakaway group was looking for help. However, a key factor inhibiting outside assistance was the comity agreement established by the various foreign missions under the oversight of a joint committee. The purpose of the agreement was to avoid overlap and duplication in missionary outreach by delimiting territories. Despite the efforts at cooperation, relations between the missions were not free from competition and tension. Some of the missions, including SIM, believed that the agreement should apply to the mission-related churches as well, and there is evidence that the CEEC felt the weight of the comity agreement at least for some time. Grenstedt illustrates the strength of this view by referring to an incident in 1955 when the CEEC sent a government minister and the former Ethiopian ambassador to Italy to speak to SIM leadership about the split in the Kambatta Church. They were rebuffed with Mr. Playfair's admonition that these senior Ethiopian leaders were not to intrude into an SIM area! Though the EECMY eventually rejected the idea that they were subject to the comity agreement, the agreement effectively precluded any direct support for the breakaway churches from the foreign missions until the late 1960s. The comity agreement also inhibited support from the EECMY until 1961 when it notified SIM of its intent to provide support for the breakaway churches.

Grenstedt indicates that steps toward integration of the breakaway churches into the EECMY began in 1963, but it wasn't until 1969 that these churches became a fully integrated synod of the EECMY. Prior to integration, the EECMY was looking for ways to come alongside these breakaway churches and the churches were looking for assistance. For Grenstedt, this is evidence

of an underlying impulse toward “Ethiopian evangelical solidarity,” which forms the major thesis of the book. However, it is also clear that the breakaway churches saw themselves at a disadvantage in comparison to those of the SIM-related KEC, who were enjoying such benefits as schools and training provided by the connection with SIM. But the assistance could only take place if a way around the comity agreement could be found. This took the form of EECMY’s Kambatta Home Mission Program (KHMP). Although this did not initially allow any involvement by foreign missionaries associated with the EECMY, it did provide a source of outside funding as the KHMP drew much of its budget from the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). It was from this budget that salaries of Kambatta church workers were paid. The KHMP also paved the way for the entrance of the Finnish Mission Society (FMS) into Kambatta in 1968, as the EECMY moved to incorporate the work of the various foreign missions with which it was connected into its own work. With the FMS working as part of the KHMP, it could be argued that they were not a foreign mission in breach of the comity agreement but rather part of the EECMY home mission to Kambatta.

With the entrance of the FMS there came not only a move toward doctrinal regularity but also a move away from some of the indigenous church structures and practices. As late as 1972, baptismal practices within the Kambatta synod remained diffuse and the congregation-centered, elder-led church structures continued. The Finnish missionaries, however, placed great emphasis on ordained ministry and the “right” administration of the sacraments. For Grenstedt, the need for a 1972 discussion on whether to baptize in a river or a church “shows that Baptist influences were lingering on among the pastors of the [Kambatta Synod] still in 1972” (221). The Finnish missionaries also proposed rules and punishment for such misbehavior as “false teaching, lying, drinking, and committing adultery” (222).

There are several question-creating ironies which emerge from Grenstedt’s work. First, Grenstedt seeks to show how the EECMY sought to encourage what had become an African Independent Church in Kambata, and in doing so helped this church both to maintain their cultural independence in the face of outside pressure and to become a synod of the EECMY. For Grenstedt, the primary motivation for doing so was a commitment to “Ethiopian Evangelical Solidarity”. Grenstedt offers up a wealth of evidence for the remarkable unity which obtained among Ethiopian evangelicals up to 1955. There is irony, however, in the fact that the sense of solidarity with the breakaway churches became part of a dynamic which led to the unraveling of the broader solidarity

which had existed among Ethiopian evangelicals up to that time. Grenstedt notes that the sense of solidarity with the breakaway churches emerged most strongly when the breakaway churches affirmed infant baptism, however opportunistically. But why did a limited solidarity based on baptismal practices prove more important than the broader solidarity that had until that time kept denominationalism at bay?

Second, Grenstedt rightly stresses the cultural inflexibility of SIM leadership, though he does not note that the SIM leaders involved would not have regarded abstention from alcohol as a cultural preference but as part of a doctrine of separation from the world that was strongly held by many SIM missionaries at that time. There is irony in the fact that the Finnish Mission Society promulgated its own alcohol-related rules and that the EECMY framework proved just as unfriendly toward the indigenous polity which the breakaway churches had taken from their KEC/SIM origins as the KEC/SIM had been toward specific cultural practices. Why did proscriptions against alcohol create a rift in 1955 but not in the 1970s? Why did outside pressure on indigenous practices provoke resistance in some cases but not in others?

Third, Grenstedt is critical of the comity agreement worked out among the missions. When applied to the Ethiopian churches, Grenstedt is doubtless correct to detect an incipient colonialism. However, it is ironic that the comity agreement gave structure to what might also be understood as an enlightened ecumenism that doubtless helped nurture the broad Ethiopian evangelical solidarity that Grenstedt praises. But if in the early days the foreign missions could lay aside various differences over baptism and look past denominational distinctives for the sake of the gospel, why did this prove impossible to sustain? Doubtless there was plenty of blame to share on all sides for the break that eventually occurred, but would not the cause of unity have been well served by an agreement on core doctrinal commitments?

Finally, the decision by the EECMY to integrate the work of the foreign missions into the EECMY was based on indigenous principles whereby the institutions and projects of the foreign missions had full Ethiopian ownership from the very beginning. While this structure created an opportunity to assist an indigenous “independent Church”, it also led this Church to become “financially much more dependent” than it ever had been and to abandon much of its indigenous character (225). The integration of foreign missions within the EECMY formed a striking contrast to the “parallel structure” adopted by SIM in which the mission and the Church remained “two separate self-governing entities” (224). In practice, this latter structure meant that

outside funding flowed into capital-intensive SIM-owned projects such as schools and hospitals but not directly to churches or the salaries of its workers. Ironically, both forms of relationships between local churches and foreign missions were based on indigenous principles. Both forms continue to be a significant feature of current Church-mission relations in Ethiopia and Africa. Grenstedt's work is thus an important case study for those wrestling with appropriate ways to structure fruitful partnerships between Church and mission.

Grenstedt's work is an important case study for those wrestling with appropriate ways to structure fruitful partnerships between Church and mission. While Grenstedt's study does not point to the perfect model for these partnerships, like all good history it does impart wisdom. Both for good and for ill the missions have been a key source of contact between emerging churches in Africa and historic evangelical traditions. In Ethiopia, when the missions placed little emphasis on the differences between these traditions, the Ethiopian evangelical churches remained remarkably unified. However, as differences between the traditions emerged, the churches formed denominations on the basis of commitments regarding secondary issues which largely mirrored commitments held by the missions. Too often, issues related to funds accessed through the missions seemed to fuel the fragmentation. Still, the early history of the evangelical churches in Ethiopia provides some hope that the fundamental impulse to unity provided by the gospel will enable African churches to find fresh ways to transcend the differences which have too often defined the evangelical movement in the West.

**Barbara M. Cooper**

***Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel***

Indiana University Press, 2006

ISBN 0-253-34739-4 \$24.95 (pb)

Reviewed by Phyllis Ndoro,  
Christian-Muslim Lecturer,  
St Paul's University, Limuru – till May 2010.

The Sahel region under consideration is predominantly a Hausa Muslim area on the southern fringe of Niger. Cooper explains in great detail the setting of the book and her reasons for researching this topic. She is a historian and raises issues like the 'family resemblance' between two movements - evangelical Christians and Islamic reformists. This might not be comfortable comparison for Christians, but she uses a scholarly approach, and therefore readers are encouraged to form their own opinions. Both Christianity and Islam are missionary religions. Cooper addresses some of the issues encountered in such interactions.

Her focus is on the protestant, evangelical Serving In Mission (SIM) – which she traces through the different stages of its metamorphosis. It started off in 1893 as Sudan Interior Mission, later it flirted with "Sudan Industrial Mission". Wherever SIM set up a mission, they tended to isolate themselves as much as possible from the work of liberal or ecumenical institutions as the century progressed. That is the main reason for the author treating them separately when discussing the other more charismatic or Pentecostal variations – which are mainly American and speak English. Today there seemed to be some tensions among the Christians, but the main bone of contention was not simply theology but its delivery. SIM describes the Vie Abondante church's evangelisation as aggressive.

When the Protestants came out to the Sahel, the mainly French speaking Catholics, were already present. The other major players in the region were the colonizers – who were mainly the French and the British. The focus of her research is on the American missions as opposed to the British

Church Missionary Society (CMS) – which was headed by Bishop Samuel Crowther, before tensions arose within the CMS and he was rejected as the leader of that mission. Many changes took place as the missions engaged with Africans within the context of their traditional, colonial and religious interactions.

In the opening chapter, she used a violent religious riot that took place in Maradi, Niger, on November, 2000, to show the intricacies of Christian-Muslim relations. To the casual observer the riot would have been dismissed as an attack on the Christians by Muslim fundamentalists – but Cooper tackled the underlying issues by investigating the history and traditions of the different groups of people. A great deal of research was done giving detailed accounts to support the author's findings. Most of the observations were very well balanced as she tackled the different 'variations' of Evangelical Christians as they were viewed by the locals. The work shows depth and also her analytical skills which help to unearth the real issues – or the stories behind the stories.

For example, in the riot the single women, whether Muslim or Christian, were shown to be the real targets. In the press it was reported that a group of angry Muslim youths rioted because of the proposed International Festival of African Fashion (FIMA) in the capital, Niamey. Even though the festival was going to benefit the local communities, the men highlighted the other issues. One of the highlights was the fact that one of the leading leather products used in the fashion world was Moroccan leather. Yet the spotlight was on the women – who are the models, the sort of lifestyle they lead, and the image of female independence which is seen in the eyes of the local communities as evidence of loose morals.

An analysis of where the attacks were made included the SIM mission compounds. The rioters attacked the mission grain stores – in a year of famine! Women had been the main beneficiaries of this grain supply. These were mainly widowed, divorced and abandoned women who lived in the surrounding villages and who would come to the mission in times of stress to seek food for themselves and their children. This did not augur well in an Islamic setting where the image of the ideal woman is only in the setting of marriage. The Muslims needed to set limits on the women's movements and visibility and perhaps even enforce some limitations on the form of women's spirituality. Cooper raises the gender issues quite boldly. The youth also targeted the bars, which according to the Muslim, promoted a nightlife culture that included prostitution as well as alcohol. The FIMA festival portrayed this kind of lifestyle as attractive.



Attacks were also made on the compound and grain stores of the charismatic Vie Abondante church, also founded by Americans. Cooper records the history of how the missions used their public address systems and other media like radio in a way that to the Muslims was a form of encroachment. The Muslim reaction during the riot was a response to their religion being described as false, without saving power and their prophet as false by the recent charismatic broadcasting of the Vie Abondante church. Perhaps one of the worst insults for the Muslims was the presentation of Jesus as God! They know only one God - Allah.

The Muslim women who were attacked belonged to the *bori* cult. Followers of this cult acknowledged the existence of Allah, but had other practices that included spirit possession and controlling the spirits in the period before *Ramadhan* – the holy month for the Muslims. They attacked the female leader of the *bori* and her legs and arms were severely burnt. Her followers moved to a neighbouring village because of the persecution.

The evangelical missions were also involved in the medical field which yielded much fruit. The author affirmed that SIM's success in medical work, especially by women missionaries, had continued even to date. But earlier neglect in the area of education to the local African communities had negative effects much later.

The relationship of the missions with Islam seems to have gone full cycle. In the beginning, Islam was viewed as "Satan's masterpiece." Later missionaries referred to Muslims as "slaves to empty ritual", and later still, Islam became a social problem. As the African mission fields moved closer to decolonisation, Islam came to be viewed as one of a number of threats, one of the "isms" which included nationalism, Marxism etc. The attitude to Islam came full cycle on September 11, 2001 when the World Trade Centre was bombed in the United States.

The book is very well illustrated with maps and photographs. The way the author deals with the themes makes it an excellent resource and an accessible read.

**Ajith Fernando**

***The Call to Joy and Pain:  
Embracing Suffering in Your Ministry***

Crossway Books, 2007

ISBN 978-1-58134-888-0 (tpb) \$11.24 US

Reviewed by Eunice Wambui Njenga, Nakuru.

*The Call to Joy and Pain* is a useful and helpful devotional book. It explains why every Christian experiences joy and pain as part of the Christian's walk and calling. From the Bible Christ lived a life of sacrifice, and He made it clear that whoever wants to emulate Him must expect to go through pain and joy, which are important components in Christianity.

*The Call to Joy and Pain* has been divided into four sections. In section one, Fernando has focused on the fact that both suffering and joy are basic to Christianity. The eight chapters in this section are listed as: two basic aspects of Christianity, a forgotten treasure, bursts of pleasure, lament, faith and endurance, surrender, not gluttons for punishments and a theological blind spot. Suffering is an essential part of the Christian life, however today many people feel and teach that Christians should not suffer: when one suffers they must examine themselves, since it is not God's will for one to go through suffering.

Fernando has focused on how joy and suffering are two important aspects that are part and parcel of Christianity. He emphasizes the fact that Christians have forgotten the treasure of serving Christ through the pains of life, and that even in the time of suffering one should rejoice. Many are the times when people don't wait to experience complete joy; they are quickly satisfied with the fake satisfaction that worldly things bring. Fernando challenges us that our joy should be based on our relationship with God. He argues that the joy of the Lord is deeper, more reliable and more fulfilling than pleasures people are looking for without God. Fernando has also explained that people derive happiness from different experiences that can provide good pleasures or harmful pleasures. God wants us to experience pleasures and mountain top

experiences. He also remains with us and gives us peace and joy, and He is willing to fulfill the deep yearnings of our hearts.

In section two, the main theme is, “suffering brings us nearer to Christ”. Here focus is on five topics: the fellowship of suffering, becoming like Christ, motives purified, shame and honor, and solidarity with Christ. The author says Christians should not deny pain, but when faced with discouragements, sorrow and anger there is a place to lament, mourn or express our pain to the Lord. Fernando states that when we lament, we open ourselves to God’s comfort and to healing from bitterness. The second necessity for joy amidst pain is faith. The Lord allows our faith to be tested so that we may develop endurance. The Christian must walk by faith hoping in God in the midst of trials. We not only need faith to maintain our joy, we need to daily surrender to the Lord. We need to stop clinging to material possessions and instead give our idols to the Lord constantly, so we may experience the Lord’s freedom. Surrendering is not an easy task, but we are called to surrender. Christians should not seek suffering, but when suffering comes to us we should realize that God will turn it into a blessing for us. According to Fernando, every culture has a theological blind spot in its explanation of suffering. This leads to people not seeing suffering from a positive perspective. Many people try to teach ways we should avoid suffering, thus when faced with suffering many are in danger of turning away from the faith.

Section three’s main theme is, “our suffering helps the Church”. Here the eight chapters discuss the following topics: suffering and church growth, demonstrating the gospel, identifying with people, deepening our impact, suffering and credibility, commitment begets commitment, avoid commitment and avert suffering, and commitment and the joyous life. There is fellowship with Christ when we accept to suffer for His sake. The author says there is oneness with Christ that we experience only through suffering (p. 54). Suffering brings us closer to Christ. The Lord needs to purify our motives so that we may do everything for His honor and glory. According to the author, one of the hardest aspects of the suffering of Christians is enduring shame. Just as Christ had to endure shame to earn our salvation, those who serve Him will also face shame. When Christians undergo suffering for the sake of Christ, they are reminded that their sufferings are only momentarily afflictions preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17). The author clearly explains that our ‘solidarity with Christ not only gives us strength to face the blows we receive – it also gives us an experience of His love that banishes our bitterness’ (p. 71).

In part four the main theme is, “servants of the church”. This theme is discussed in eight chapters entitled: ministers and stewards, how servanthood springs from grace, we are rich, the hope for glory, Jesus: our message, disciples are made not born, toil in disciple-making, and He gives strength. Fernando concludes the book with the challenge of a paradox in the Christian life. Fernando says that through Christian suffering the church experiences growth because suffering provides opportunity for the gospel to be proclaimed. Through persecution people are scattered to various destinations and as they move, they move with the gospel witnessing. The Christian through acts of mercy and a willingness to suffer for the gospel demonstrate salvation to the world. For one to effectively evangelize, there is a need to identify with the people, learn about them and take time to understand them. Suffering makes Christian grow deeper in the faith, this suffering shapes them and enabling them to have a significant impact in the lives of other people. God uses our suffering to give leaders credibility inside and outside the church. The church today suffers a crisis of commitment where many people do not want to commit themselves to the ministry. Leaders must be committed to greatly influence their flocks. The author points out that some stress is unnecessary, that we must learn the discipline of maintaining our joy in the Lord even when things get difficult, and we might decide to leave some situations where stress is occurring to avert pain. This shows that commitment can lead to pain in the life of a servant. Commitment can also result in joy when we look back at the results of the pain one has gone through.

Christians are called to a life of servanthood and stewardship that is possible only through grace. Servanthood is threatened by a lack of happiness caused by an attitude of resentment because of feeling used and exploited. Servants may also feel that people are not kind to them and are insensitive.

Fernando has been used powerfully by the Lord to bring out the message of accepting suffering as Christians and always rejoicing with or without suffering. Fernando says that our suffering draws us closer to the Lord and makes us effective in ministry since we learn to depend on the Lord. Fernando based the teachings of his book on Colossians 1: 24 – 29 where he brings out suffering for Christ and how we should respond to suffering when we experience challenges in our lives. God uses suffering to bless our lives and that of the church. Fernando shared many personal experiences that most people can relate to. This makes it possible for people to apply the message of his book to their own lives.

This book finds its strength in the teachings of scripture, and the author did not hesitate to quote and expound on many passages from both the Old and New Testament. This gives readers a way of understanding the scriptures better as they reflect on how God is allowing suffering in their lives and those of other people. Fernando emphasized the need to develop a practical theology of suffering and not just a therapy of suffering. He shows the importance of Christians having an adequate theology of suffering so that when faced with suffering, they do not become unnecessarily unhappy about the suffering. The book has been arranged so the reader can use it as a devotional tool. This is a helpful personal tool for any Christian who wants to grow in wisdom and knowledge of the scriptures. Fernando has also chosen topics that flow into each other making the book readable and interesting.

Although the author has tried to do some exposition of different passages of scripture, he failed to do a thorough exposition of texts that he used in the book. He probably did not intend to make it a classroom text or a book that could be used by theological institutions as a textbook to teach a complete theology of suffering.

I highly recommend this book to be read by all Christians. This book was a blessing to me. As I read through it I began to see why God allows suffering in my life. God uses this suffering to draw me close to Him and to depend upon Him more. This book is essential for all pastors so that they may understand that the Lord allows suffering even in the church for it to grow. The author shares personal experiences and practical examples that demonstrate the overwhelming blessing that comes with facing life challenges with joy. He shows that Christians can witness through their words and deeds and by living consistent lives in the Lord.

Herman J. Selderhuis

*John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*

Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009 \$17.50 US

ISBN 9781844743759

Reviewed by Jack Mitchell, Scott Theological College

One might ask what another biography of John Calvin could contribute that has not already been said? Prof. Selderhuis, however, offers a fresh and intimate portrait of one of history's most controversial figures, based almost entirely on the Reformer's voluminous personal correspondence. The author is a professor of church history and church polity at the Theological University Apeldoorn (Netherlands) and a foremost Reformation scholar. His efforts have resulted in the revelation of a person hidden through the years behind notorious caricatures on one hand, and near idol worship on the other. The book is an insightful and thoroughly integrated story of one of the Reformation's most prolific writers and influential leaders. This biography, however, is not simply another objective historical record of the events of Calvin's life. Rather, Selderhuis has sought to capture Calvin through a series of ten individual portraits that form a collage of the pilgrimage of this many-sided man. In his own words, the author has "tried to tell the story of his life to discover what he was like as a person" (p. 8).

In seeking to achieve this goal, the author has sought to concurrently uncover the genuine humanity of Calvin, objectively and thoroughly debunk numbers of historical caricatures, and finally set Calvin's vision, contributions, and struggles within the contexts of both his extensive network of personal relationships and a turbulent Europe. The result is a revelation of Calvin as much more than an unfeeling and tyrannical pastor and academician. Selderhuis pictures Calvin more as a sensitive and zealous prophet called of God to pastor the church in Geneva while also touching nearly all the rest of the world through his writings.

Selderhuis clearly exposes Calvin's humanity as Calvin sought to deal with personal issues, his struggles with Genevan politics, and his own health. Informing all of these arenas was his ongoing wrestling match with an absolutely sovereign God whom he surrendered to but often did not understand. Calvin's correspondence reveals him as a man who struggled with guilt and grace. He was sensitive to criticism and misunderstanding, but also a man who bravely endured it all so that God's people and everyone else might hear the truth of the Holy Scriptures. Calvin's tendency to be melancholic and subject to fits of temper is part of the man Selderhuis has discovered. In the end, the author paints a picture of a man keenly aware of his own limitations, but always seeking to move beyond them.

The author also appears to take delight in clearly and objectively unmasking numbers of historical misperceptions of Calvin. As examples, Selderhuis informs us that Calvin loved music and was not enemy of the arts (p. 135); he was no emotionless stoic (p. 187); he cannot be seriously considered to be the father of capitalism (p. 219), he did not oversee the church of Geneva as a king in a theocracy (p. 243), and finally and most notoriously, he was not the designer of Michael Servetus' trial and execution (p. 203-206). All in all, the author believes Calvin has been the victim of theological and personal misconceptions.

Throughout the book, the political and religious conflicts form the backdrop for Calvin's life. The author carefully integrates factors like Calvin's refugee status (from France), the strivings of the Church of Rome, the politics of Geneva and Switzerland, the struggles within the Reformed Church, and the devastating effects of the Plague, to name a few, with the particulars of Calvin's pilgrimage. He was man of his times. As a spiritual and ecclesiastical revolutionary, he was foremost a servant of the God who had captivated his heart, intellect, and will.

All of this and more is delightfully paged in 259 pages of wonderful prose. The story is full of anecdotes, and keen historical insights that speak loudly of the author's prodigious scholarship.

Finally, this volume's importance for African church leaders is essentially 3-fold. First, the book is a stirring and instructive model of pastoral ministry. Calvin was serious about God's word, God's mission, and his role as a pastor of God's people. As a result, what the author has uncovered is the chronicle of an increasingly skillful, wise, and courageous shepherd. Today's Africa is also a land of political and religious turmoil that will require men like Calvin to

lead Christ's Church. The book would serve well as a secondary textbook for a course on pastoral theology.

Secondly, the book offers some keen insights into the life of a visionary. Calvin saw much further than Geneva and Europe. As the author reveals, Calvin understood the dynamic interchanges between history, the world, and God's kingdom. African church leaders can profit greatly by grasping how Calvin viewed himself in the midst of God's eternal mission in Christ Jesus.

Finally, this biography pictures a man who thoughtfully and courageously sought to engage a rigorous life of faith in a rapidly changing world full of dangers, yes, but also full of opportunities for God's mission. This may perhaps, be the most significant contribution Selderhuis' work. And considering the vision and character of John Calvin it is entirely appropriate that it should be so.



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# Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology

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# DIVINE PROVIDENCE OR GOOD LUCK?

## A Biblical Theology of Providence Compared with 'Chance' and 'Good Luck' in Greco-Roman and African Traditions

Matthew Michael<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*The paper presents a biblical theology of providence by exploring the theological tensions between divine determinism and the beliefs in 'chance' and 'good luck' in Greco-Roman and traditional African worldviews.<sup>2</sup> It also situates the discourse in the template of biblical theology and other defining theological works. Finally, the paper explores the distinctive character of providence in biblical thought and its possible use to affirm the sovereignty, care and love of God in the face of despair, misery and lostness that have characterized modern African societies.*

### 1. Introduction

Every human society has assumptions concerning the powers at work in existence that are presumed to determine and ultimately shape everything to some desired ends. The popular Greek belief was that *fate* is such a power at work in the world. Fate determines the course of history and of human conduct.<sup>3</sup> For the ancient Greeks, fate was the inescapable companion of every person with the power to control everyone. No mortal or even the gods

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<sup>2</sup> As our subsequent discussion will show, the belief in 'good luck' is traditionally expressed in the African worldview. However, the recent resurgence of this belief in Nigeria is particularly associated with the ascension into office of the new Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan. Many Nigerian Christians believe he came into office because of the "good luck" in his name. This superstition has led to an increase in children named 'Goodluck' and the expectation by parents that such children will have successful lives like Goodluck Johnathan, who rose from obscurity to the Nigerian presidency. It is this situation in Nigeria that partly informed the present study.

<sup>3</sup> See William C. Greene, "Fate, Good, and Evil in Early Greek Poetry," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 46 (1935), 1-36.

themselves could by any means, resist or repel fate's determined course of events.<sup>4</sup> For African peoples, though human destiny invariably has its source in God, nevertheless there are popular beliefs about the ability of malevolent spiritual forces or their human agents to mar or change the course of divinely ordained destiny.

In Islamic thought, the causation and sustenance of existence is placed within the divine discretion of Allah. He is the one who arbitrarily shapes everything and determines the inescapable course of human existence or destiny.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the modern resurgence of astrological societies and horoscope-related concerns reveals the ancient belief that the positions of the stars are the primary forces in the universe shaping human existence and ultimately the course of human history.<sup>6</sup> In Hinduism it is Karma that determines the course of human existence and duly sets the order, limits and nature of human experiences. This divine justice is perceived as working actively through every possible means to see that every human being receives the just rewards of his former existence or incarnation.<sup>7</sup> Thus, through the processes of reincarnation or karma, it is expected that such justice will be duly attained.

Contrary to these religious understandings, Karl Marx's social-economic theory assumed that human destiny is basically the product of the unhealthy interaction between the social classes of the rich and poor. Thus, within this Marxist framework, the power at work in history is essentially economic, and

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<sup>4</sup> See Everett Ferguson, *Background of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 222-227.

<sup>5</sup> N. Anderson, "Islam," in *The World's Religions*, ed. N. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 115; Imad N. Shehadeh, "Do Muslims and Christians Believe in the Same God?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161, no. 641 (2004): 14-26; A. A. Shorosh, *Islam Revealed: A Christian Arab's View of Islam* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988); Samuel B. Schlorff, "Theological and Apologetical Dimensions to Muslim Evangelization," *Westminster Theological Seminary* 42, no. 2 (1980), 335-366.

<sup>6</sup> See Joseph Bayly, *What about Horoscopes?* (Elgin, Ill.: David C. Cook Publishing Company, 1970). See also Christine McCall Probes, "Calvin on Astrology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 1 (1974), 24-33.

<sup>7</sup> Alexandra David-Neel, *Buddhism: Its Doctrines and Its Methods* (New York: Avon Books, 1977); See also Richard Kennedy, *The International Dictionary of Religion* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1984).

it is such power that determines the course of human existence.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to such a purely economic proposition, Carl Jung advocated psychological forces as the powerful psychical dimension shaping human existence. Jung underscored the thesis that behind human actions are primarily collective psychical phenomena that he termed “archetypes.” He believed that it is these archetypes that control human actions and hence ultimately chart the course of human history.<sup>9</sup> According to Sigmund Freud, human actions are a product of sexual repression and it is this sexual tension in relationship to societal moral restrictions that is primarily responsible for the shape of human society.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to these religious, philosophical and psychological considerations, Judeo-Christian religious thought placed the governance or supervision of human activity, and hence the course of history, at the direction and discretion of the divine being. It presupposed that the divine being, through the instrumentality of providence, is working, preserving, controlling and directing everything in the world to its desired end in accordance with his divine purposes and plans. In his work, *Who Trusts In God: Musings on the Meaning of Providence*, Albert Outler rejected the particular mistake often made in discussions on providence in depicting God as a cosmic magician who is eternally working or manipulating everything to conform to his desired divine ends. Outler postulates theological propositions that seek to remedy these deficiencies evident in much traditional discourse on divine providence. Unfortunately, his remedy also becomes problematic since it fails to agree with a biblical understanding of providence, especially in his ambiguity

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1959); Albrecht Castell, *An Introduction to Modern Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1944), 474.

<sup>9</sup> See C. G. Jung, *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1949); Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, trans. W.S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (New York: A Harvest Book, 1933); Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffe, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Pantheon, 1963); Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* (New York: A Mentor Book, 1958).

<sup>10</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962); Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans and ed. James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1967); Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans, and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1961); Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. W. D. Robson-Scott (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1955).

towards divine intervention in human and natural history and his inability to clearly recognize divine activity via divine and natural means.<sup>11</sup>

However, the Bible provides rich illustrations of divine providence.<sup>12</sup> It encourages the understanding that the divine being is working actively, though often indirectly, to move everything in the world to a clearly defined goal. This is not a magical manipulation of events to engender the self-realization of divine purposes, but the mysterious outworking of divine purposes and plans using the media of creation, history, nature and everything possible. Objections are often raised against the possibility of human free will in a world divinely programmed by God in order to achieve or accomplish certain divine goals. Many have reasoned that such understanding of divine providence is incompatible with the Christian doctrine of human free will. However, with varying degrees of theological emphases, classic Christian thinking has generally underscored the harmony of divine providence and free expression of human will.<sup>13</sup>

Given this background, the present study evaluates the concept of “chance” and “good luck” both in ancient Greco-Roman thought and in popular African religious thought, since the idea of “chance” and “good luck” precludes or negates divine providence. The paper then underscores that the biblical concept of divine providence should be used as a “corrective framework” in order to engage this popular assumption of “chance” and

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<sup>11</sup> Albert C. Outler, *Who Trusts In God: Musings on The Meaning of Providence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>12</sup> See Alexander Carson, *The History of Providence as Explained in the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977).

<sup>13</sup> For examples of classical reflection on such subjects as divine providence or divine sovereignty and human free will see Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. E. Gordon Rupp in collaboration with A. N. Marlow, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969); John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defence of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius*, ed. A. N. S. Lane, trans. G. I. Davies (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); and Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957).

“luck”<sup>14</sup> that is evident in both ancient Greco-Roman thought and contemporary African religious thinking.

## 2. ‘Chance’ and ‘Good luck’ in Greco-Roman Thought

The concept of chance or good luck is a direct affront or attack on the theology of divine providence since by chance or good luck we often mean the haphazard happenings of events and the general presupposition that such events are unplanned, uncoordinated, fortuitous and thus the results of coincidence.<sup>15</sup> This assumption thrives on the inability to see a divine hand steering events towards a defined divine goal or objective. It recognizes events as merely evolving in themselves and hence it represents a human denial of divine rule over creation. In support of this persuasion, Nicholas Rescher, a modern advocate of luck, observed in his presidential address that,

There is no getting around the fact that much of what happens to us in life - much of what we do or fail to achieve or become - is a matter not of inexorable necessity or of deliberate contrivance, but one of luck, of accident or fortune...our very lives are a gamble...[we must] think about the big issue of life in this world and the next in the manner of a gambler.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The conception of events in life in the dimension of good or bad luck is not only a preoccupation of the Greco-Roman and the African minds; the modern European world also thinks in this category. Karl Halvor Tiegen in his study of this phenomenon in Poland and Norway reveals the modern European description of events in the category of this definition. For this study of what constitutes good or bad luck in modern European society see Karl Halvor Tiegen, “How Good is Good Luck? The Role of Counterfactual Thinking in the Perception of Lucky and Unlucky Events,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 25, no. 3 (1995), 281-302; Tiegen *et al*, “Good and Bad Luck: How to Tell the Difference,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 29, no. 8 (1999), 981-1010.

<sup>15</sup> The assumption of luck is readily entrenched in everyday expression, describing the popularity of the term “luck” in various human expressions. Charlie P. Johnston noted, “The word luck is also commonly used among teachers and professors, doctors and lawyers, authors and intellectuals, media commentators and journalists. The use of the word luck has become so commonplace and acceptable that people rarely think seriously about its meaning.” See C. P. Johnston, Jr., *No Such Thing as Luck: A Biblical Perspective* (Greenwood, Florida: Johnston Publications, 2005), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Rescher, “Luck,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 64, no. 3 (1990), 5. Delivered at the Eight-fifth Annual Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association.

He also added, “we are inevitably at the mercy of luck” because “our choices and decisions propose, but the ultimate disposition is at the mercy of the force beyond the limits of our cognitive and practical control.”<sup>17</sup> The problem with such a mindset is that it reduces events merely to separate unrelated occurrences or happenings and thus refuses to see divine intention in life’s events. It also fails to interpret rightly the significance of life’s events and often assumes wrongly that they lack divine ordination, supervision and coordination. Such kinds of fortuitous thinking can significantly diminish divine presence and control of life’s events and subject the world’s events or happenings to some kind of chance or meaningless existence.

This particular orientation towards events was deeply entrenched in the Greek mindset.<sup>18</sup> The Greek presumed that events were the product of chance and thus it was necessary to seek the gods to engender good luck. There was also the conflicting understanding of divine determinism presupposing that events are determined or designed by the acts of fate, which even the gods themselves could not escape. In his plays, Aeschylus conveyed portraits of the power of fate or divine determinism.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in the works of Sophocles there is the dominance of the unchanging paths of fate or divine ordination. This divine determinism is underscored in the popular story of Oedipus and his determined destiny to kill his father and marry his mother.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, there is also a strand of Greek thought that believed in good luck. For example, Herodotus captured this worldview in his narration of the encounter between Croesus and Solon. Concerning this, Herodotus reported,

For assuredly he who possesses great riches is no nearer happiness than he who has what suffices for his daily needs, unless it so hap that luck attend upon him, and so he continue in the enjoyment of all his good things to the

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<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Luck: the Brilliant Randomness of Everyday Life* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>18</sup> For a description of issues surrounding the ethics of luck in Greek thought see Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Aeschylus, “Eumenides,” *Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes*, trans. G.M. Cookson (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 81-91.

<sup>20</sup> Sophocles, “Oedipus the King,” trans. Richard C. Jebb in *Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 99-113; Sophocles, “Oedipus at Colonus,” trans. Richard C. Jebb in *Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 114-130.



end of life. For many of the wealthiest men have been unfavoured of fortune, and many whose means were moderate have had excellent luck.<sup>21</sup>

The Romans inherited this Greek worldview defined by chance and the quest to have the good luck of the gods through acts of sacrifice or piety. In his historical treatise on the lives of Rome's great military leaders, Plutarch revealed the dominance of this understanding that chance and good luck determine the outcome of events as seen in his use of chance or 'good fortune' to describe historical events.<sup>22</sup> The latter term, 'good fortune', is actually an archaic term for good luck.<sup>23</sup> Even though as a moralizing historian Plutarch understands the influence of upbringing, schooling and ambitions in the rise and fall of great Roman leaders, yet he also greatly underscores that events are the product of "chance" and "good luck." Concerning Pompey, Plutarch noted in reference to his military campaign that, "The venture turned out successfully and he killed 12,300 of the enemy. Even in this success, however, fortune somehow...managed to give Pompey a share..."<sup>24</sup> He observed that Pompey "thought himself extremely lucky."<sup>25</sup> Concerning the ill-fated battle of Carrhae between the Partians and a Roman army led by Crassus, which led to Crassus' death, Plutarch noted, "fortune had designed for the destruction of the Romans."<sup>26</sup> For the Roman military dictator Sulla, Plutarch observed, "his good fortune never left him and indeed actually took part in his funeral."<sup>27</sup> Plutarch also explains that "...the fact that Sulla was the first Roman ever to be approached by the Parthians with offers of alliance and friendship seems to be another example of his extraordinary good luck."<sup>28</sup> For Plutarch, luck, fortune and providence are used as synonyms. He says that Sulla was conceived as "one of the luckiest" person by even his enemies.<sup>29</sup> Plutarch also notes that Sulla "...joined with others in emphasizing the part played by

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<sup>21</sup> Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 7.

<sup>22</sup> For a study of the interconnection between chance, providence and history in Plutarch see Simon Swain, "Plutarch: Chance, Providence and History," *The American Journal of Philology* 110, no. 2 (1989), 271-302.

<sup>23</sup> Plutarch, *Fall of the Roman Republic* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), 214, 236.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

providence...and accepted his dependence on Fortune.”<sup>30</sup> Thus according to Plutarch “...he attributes more to Fortune than to his own superior ability. Indeed he makes himself a pawn in the hand of providence.”<sup>31</sup> In this way, Plutarch treated luck, fortune and providence as expressions of a single phenomenon or presupposed a connection between these concepts. Significantly, he also believed in divine determinism in some way as seen in his understanding that unusual events or phenomenon could be omens or signs by the gods in their quest to reveal to human beings the course of future events. Describing the events that culminate in the death of Caesar, Plutarch explained:

It may be said that all these things could have happened as it were by chance. But the place where the senate was meeting that day and which was to be the scene of the final struggle and of the assassination made it perfectly clear that some heavenly power was at work, guiding the action and directing that it should take place just here.<sup>32</sup>

After the assassination of Caesar, Plutarch proceeded to describe the supernatural events surrounding his death, presuming that his life as well as his death was divinely guided by some kind of supernatural power. The source of this power or supernatural intelligence that Plutarch conceived of as guiding Caesar’s life and death was definitely the power of the gods. In this understanding, the gods were actively involved in the events of the life of Caesar. Concerning Caesar’s death, Plutarch observed,

But that great divine power or genius, which had watched over him and helped him in his life, even after his death remained active as an avenger of his murder, pursuing and tracking down the murderers over every land and sea until not one of them was left and visiting with retribution all, without exception, who were in any way concerned either with the death itself or with the planning of it.<sup>33</sup>

Plutarch also observed the heavenly manifestations or signs that presupposed the divine presence or power surrounding the life of Caesar. Thus, he noted, “And of supernatural events there was, the great comet, which shone very brightly for seven nights after Caesar’s murder and then

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

disappeared; and also the dimming of the sun.”<sup>34</sup> Despite some emphases on chance and good luck, it seems the dominance of divine determinism prevailed as one of the theological legacies of Greco-Roman civilization.

### **3. ‘Chance’ and ‘Good luck’ in African Traditional Thought**

From this investigation of Greco-Roman religious thought, it seems that belief in chance, good luck, and predetermined destiny were not merely the product of primitive civilizations, but rather the normal human response to the dilemma of divine causation versus human responsibility. In Africa, a similar response is clearly seen. There is a glaring paradox in African religious thought concerning the causation or source of events. Often African traditional worldviews express a fundamental belief in divine determinism which presupposes that events have their ultimate causation and origin in the divine being. Consequently there is an understanding of divine providence controlling all ramifications of life and also an underscoring that the divine being is the one who causes phenomena such as sunshine, rain, fertility, health and plentiful harvest.<sup>35</sup> Many African societies recognize the governing presence of a divine being in guarding, protecting, and controlling creation and salvation.<sup>36</sup> God is also conceived as a Governor, King, Lord and Judge of the world.<sup>37</sup> This theological recognition and understanding presupposes that African people generally work with a theology of divine providence. It was such considerations that warranted John Mbiti’s conclusion that “African peoples are aware of God’s providence, and many of them acknowledge it.”<sup>38</sup> Concerning the understanding of divine providence within the Yoruba traditional and contemporary religious thought, Benjamin C. Ray observed,

...the Yoruba commonly refer to Olorun’s providential character in their everyday greetings: ‘Thanks to Olorun,’ ‘Praise Olorun.’ Similar expressions

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>35</sup> In his discussion on the African conception of the divine being, John Mbiti observed that, “God provides for what he has created. This activity of God is commonly called Providence. It shows the goodness of God towards the whole universe. He provides life, sunshine, rain, water, good health, the fertility of people and animals and plants, food and protection. For that reason, African peoples call him the Giver of things, Water Giver, Healer, Helper, Guard, Source. They believe that God only gives good things.” See Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 46; See also John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), 56-62.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-70.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-79.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

are prominently displayed on buses and trucks, with the added meaning that only Olorun can ensure protection against the dangers of motorized travel. Evening greetings also make reference to Olorun's providence: 'Until morning, may Olorun wake us well.' As these expressions indicate, Olorun's relation to man is not limited to the confines of ritual space and time or by the usual inducements of offerings. He is essentially beyond the ritual mechanism of the gods, and deals with men in a uniquely providential way.<sup>39</sup>

In comparing the understanding of divine providence in Greek and the African religious persuasion, Geoffrey Parrinder observed, "It has been said that God might be banished from Greek thought without damaging its logical architecture, but this cannot be said of African thought, as God is both the creator and the principle of unity that holds everything together." This is because "He is the source and essence of force...which inspires the whole vital organism."<sup>40</sup> For Parrinder, the African understanding of divine providence is rooted in the attributes of God. Thus he noted,

The character of God appears not just in abstract attributes, but in more humane and moral qualities. Although he is supremely great, mysterious and irresistible, yet he is also kindly disposed towards men and his providence is mentioned not infrequently. He is the God of destinies but also of comfort, the kindly-disposed and 'the providence which watches over all like the sun'; he can be angry but is also 'full of pity', the father of babies and the great friend. In the enigmatic *Akan* title he is 'the one on whom men lean and do not fall.'<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, Parrinder continued, "Creation is not only in the past; the divine work is continued in sustaining the universe, and men turn to God if things go wrong today, complaining if they have been treated unjustly." Thus, "God is the giver of destinies, and may appear harsh or inscrutable, but that does not make people fatalistic or console them if justice is perverted."<sup>42</sup> In Africa, as rightly suggested by Parrinder, "Although the ways of God are beyond man and can never be fully known, yet numerous titles speak of his sustaining and cherishing work. He gives rain and sun, health and fertility. He is also the deliverer and Saviour, moulder and providence."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 57.

<sup>40</sup> G. Parrinder, *Africa's Three Religions* (London: Sheldon Press, 1976), 41.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

In most African societies, such an overarching understanding of divine providence extends even to the theological spheres of divine predestination and destiny. For example, in the Igbo religious setting according to Metuh, “God creates the individual, and gives him a *Chi* and *Eke*. The *Chi* chooses the child’s destiny from the many parcels of fortune put before it by *Chukwu*. *Eke* lets the child out into the world ... giving him at the same time his personality.”<sup>44</sup> For Metuh, “The functions of *Chi* and *Eke* do not end with their creative roles. *Chi*, like a guardian angel, accompanies and watches over a person all through his life. With paternal care, it judiciously dispenses the contents of the parcel of fortune for the overall welfare of the child.”<sup>45</sup> As a rule, Metuh noted, “The Igbo believe that *Chi* is good and guards a person on to good conduct by admonitions, rewards and punishment.”<sup>46</sup> Noting the theological implication for such emphases, Metuh says, “there is no doubt that for the Igbo, the transcendent God, who lives in *ezi Chukwu*, God’s compound, far away in the sky becomes immanent through his emanations *Chi* and *Eke* which are in men.”<sup>47</sup> Concerning the irrevocability of this predetermined destiny and the possibility of change, Metuh further noted,

In fact, it is believed that once *Chi* and *Eke* make their choices, they are indelibly and immutably imprinted by the creator on the palms of the person’s hands, the *Akala Aka* or *Akala Chi*, the sign on the palm, or the signs of *Chi*. ... However, on a very special request from *Chi*, the Creator may change one or two details of his allotted fortunes. The Igbo say: ... “if you are persistent, your *Chi* will go along with you”.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, even with the dominant recognition of divine providence as conceived in the subject of divine predestination and destiny, there is allowance made for the activity of other spiritual agencies or mystical forces, who are also conceived of as powerful enough to cause, or to affect, human events and other phenomena in the world. Accordingly, African traditional society recognizes the spiritual origin of all physical events in God; nonetheless they also affirm a theological fluidity or flexibility that allows the activity of spiritual forces in addition to the Supreme Deity. In this way, many African societies attribute the causation of some events or phenomena in life,

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<sup>44</sup> Emeffie Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion: A Case of the Igbo of Nigeria* (Enugu: SNAAP Press Ltd., 1999), 97.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

particularly those of negative character, to the nefarious activities of these evil spirits or forces. The activities of these spirit beings are presumed to directly affect all human activities, thus suggesting that events in the physical world are merely the product of spiritual causation. Within this understanding the physical world is subjected to the world of the spirits because it is in the spirit world that decisions are made and then imposed on the physical world. As rightly suggested by Mbiti, the “two worlds” of physical and spiritual are one and the same for African people.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, this semi-deterministic worldview allows the influence of the physical world through human magic and sorcery to change the divine or cosmic configurations through cultic means. Consequently, there is a symbiotic influence between the realm of the spirit and the physical world, thus allowing for causation within the spheres of divine, human and spirit activities. It is this fluidity in African worldview, which presupposes multiple causation for physical events, that encourages the belief in chance and good luck. Accordingly, the African societal emphasis on chance and good luck is often seen in the form of charms or amulets hung around the neck, or tied on the wrist. Some good luck potions are rubbed on the skin or used as a lotion to be rubbed on one’s face, while others are tied around the waist or worn on the finger as a ring. Some concoctions are rubbed into marks made on the skin or onto good luck chewing sticks and are believed to have the power to procure one’s good wishes and desires.

This understanding of chance or good luck is so entrenched in African religious thought that vocabularies underscoring this basic worldview have now become popular. For example in Hausa thought, there is consistent reference to “*rabo*,” “*farin jinni*,” “*sa’a*” and “*dachewa*.” These Hausa terms presuppose the conviction that life’s events are the product of chance and good luck, yet there is also the domineering and fatalistic conviction that life’s events are controlled by one’s inescapable destiny or “*kadara*.” The contradiction of these two emphases is obvious, since things cannot be both destined and the product of chance. However, for most African people these ambiguities are never considered; instead, events are merely conceived of as either the product of chance or divine decree.

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<sup>49</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 199.

#### 4. Divine Providence in Biblical Thought

Contrary to Greco-Roman and African traditional concepts of luck or providence that see events are both determined and also products of chance, biblical revelation stresses that events have their ultimate source or causation in God, but without becoming deterministic in approach. The biblical idea of concurrence asserts that God, in relationship with every created thing, directs their distinctive characteristics to cause them to act the way they do.<sup>50</sup> Such divine superintendence, control and direction of the world include the animate world, the inanimate world and human persons. Even though there may be scientific explanations for the production of rain, snow, grass, and the formation of the sun and other stars, from the standpoint of biblical revelation their creation, continuous existence and sustenance are all sourced in the divine being. Concerning the falling of the snow, the writer of the book of Job says,

He says to the snow, 'Fall on the earth,' and to the rain shower, 'Be a mighty downpour.' So that all men he has made may know his work, he stops every man from his labor. The animals take cover; they remain in their dens. The tempest comes out from its chamber, the cold from the driving winds. The breath of God produces ice, and the broad waters become frozen. He loads the clouds with moisture; he scatters his lightning through them. At his direction they swirl around over the face of the whole earth to do whatever he commands them. He brings the clouds to punish men, or to water his earth and show his love.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, Jesus said it was his heavenly Father who feeds the birds of the air. He also believed that it is God who “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”<sup>52</sup> The Psalmist believed that the wild animals look to God for their meals,<sup>53</sup> and that Yahweh is responsible for feeding the cattle.<sup>54</sup> The book of Job declares that God directs the stars in their courses and is responsible for dawn breaking.<sup>55</sup> According to

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<sup>50</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 317.

<sup>51</sup> Job 37:6-13. New International Version, International Bible Society, 1984.

<sup>52</sup> Matthew 5:45.

<sup>53</sup> Psalms 104:27-29.

<sup>54</sup> Psalms 104:14.

<sup>55</sup> Job 38: 32, 12.

Jesus, no sparrow will fall to the ground without the knowledge or approval of God.<sup>56</sup>

This overarching biblical consideration of divine origin does not mean that the biblical writers were naïve or would be unable to discern natural explanations for these events. But behind and beyond physical and natural explanations for the causation and existence of such things as rain, snow, grass, wild life and domestic animals, they saw divine power and presence at work. For the biblical writers there is no place for chance, coincidence, accidents or luck, since the pervading presence of God works through humans and through non-human objects in creation in order to bring about the revelation of his purpose or will.

Despite this overarching vision of God's providence over his creation, the Bible also in a mysterious way depicts the autonomous expression or articulation of the will of the creation. The Bible constantly portrays men and women making decisions that, from the human point of view, were the product of their own initiative and free from external divine interference or control. However within such human initiatives or voluntary expressions lies divine intelligence working out divine purposes in subtle, secret and humanly unpredictable ways.

Naturally, worldviews that assume that events are the product of mere chance - thus making room for good luck - do not see events as having a higher divine purpose beyond the stated events and experiences. Rather, every event, occurrence and phenomenon is treated as ordinary and common. Thus such attitudes or mindsets miss the divine leading by a failure to recognize indicators or instruments of divine higher purposes. This inability to recognize higher divine purposes in events people consider accidental or outcomes of luck, usually reduces life to boring human routines, thus making living inevitably meaningless. Similarly, theological positions that emphasize divine origin as the sole causal element lurking behind every human event generally treat humans as puppets in divine hands, thus robbing people of any sense of responsibility or initiative.

However, the biblical revelation presupposes a dominant, divine control or sovereignty over all the ramifications of human or non-human existence, without making humans or creation itself a pawn in divine hands. The biblical revelation displays the autonomy of creation and of humans as they make

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<sup>56</sup> Matthew 10:29.



decisions or judgments that they consider to be primarily the product of their own initiative. Thus, the biblical revelation does not sanction the Greek concept of overarching fate nor the African religious thought that places humanity at the mercy of the caprice and whims of African spirits. We must reject any theological persuasions that seem to attribute events in life to arbitrary forces and powers that cause human events and shape human destiny. We must also recognize that beyond human events and daily experiences of human contacts, there are divine higher purposes, which should lead us to an understanding of our place in God's plan and program for all humanity.

### **5. Divine Providence in Dominant Christian Thought**

Divine providence has been one of the subjects in the forefront of theological discussion in church history. In the writings of the church fathers there is often reference to the concept of divine providence in relation to creation and redemption. Athanasius noted that the divine providence of God is "revealed in the Universe," so that those who "failed to perceive His Godhead shewn in creation," might, at any rate, infer "from particular cases His providence over the whole."<sup>57</sup> Chrysostom recognized the providence of God is "everywhere directing all things according to its own wisdom!"<sup>58</sup> Augustine argued for divine providence in the sphere of creation on account of the harmony of the world. Thus Augustine noted that God:

in addition to these, has given intelligence and will; who has not left, not to speak of heaven and earth, angels and men, but not even the entrails of the smallest and most contemptible animal, or the feather of a bird, or the little flower of a plant, or the leaf of a tree, without an harmony, and, as it were, a mutual peace among all its parts; - that God can never be believed to have left the kingdoms of men, their dominations and servitudes, outside of the laws of His providence.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Athanasius, "Athanasius: Selected Works and Letters," in *A Select library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, nd), [www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.vii.ii.xix.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.vii.ii.xix.html) (accessed May 31, 2007).

<sup>58</sup> Chrysostom, "St. Chrysostom: On the Priesthood; The Ascetic Treatises; Select Homilies and Letters; Homilies on Statues," in *A Select library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, nd), [www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf109.xix.viii.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf109.xix.viii.html) (accessed May 31, 2007).

<sup>59</sup> Augustine, "St. Augustine's City of God and Christian Doctrine," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, nd), [www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102 .iv.V.11.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.V.11.html) (accessed May 31, 2007).

Thomas Aquinas said, “But we are bound to say that all things are under divine providence, individually as well as collectively...” because “every agent acts for the sake of an end.” Thus, “the effects of a first agent will therefore serve his end to the extent to which his causality extends. This means that the works of an agent may contain something which results from some cause other than his own intention, and which does not serve his end.” From this understanding, “...God’s causality extends to all being, since God is the first of all agents. It extends to the principles of individuals as well as of species ... . Everything which has any kind of being is therefore bound to be ordained by God to some end.”<sup>60</sup> This end significantly consists of a higher purpose, thus Aquinas further observed that human deeds,

... are reducible to higher causes, and do not proceed by chance. For choices and motives of wills are arranged immediately by God: human intellectual knowledge is directed by God through the intermediate agency of angels: corporeal events, whether interior (to the human body) or exterior, that serve the need of man ...<sup>61</sup>

During the Reformation, Arminius underscored a high view of providence, for he observed that divine providence is evasive and includes the origin and divine remedy for sin. Thus he noted that providence ...

... is present with, and presides over, all things; and all things, according to their essences, quantities, qualities, relations, actions, passions, places, times, stations and habits, are subject to its governance, conservation, and direction. I except neither particular, sublunary, vile, nor contingent things, not even the free wills of men or of angels, either good or evil: And, what is still more, I do not take away from the government of the divine providence even sins themselves, whether we take into our consideration their commencement, their progress, or their termination.<sup>62</sup>

In his discourse on divine providence, Calvin observed that there is the temptation to conceive of divine providence as a product of chance. Calvin noted,

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas Aquinas, “Nature and Grace: Selection from Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas,” *Library of Christian Classics* vol. 11, trans and ed. A.M. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1954),

[www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/nature\\_grace.vi.vii.ii.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/nature_grace.vi.vii.ii.html) (accessed May 31, 2007).

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Of God and His Creation*, trans. Joseph Ricaby, [www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/gentiles.vi.lxx.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/gentiles.vi.lxx.html) (accessed May 31, 2007).

<sup>62</sup> James Arminius, “Divine Providence,” *Works of James Arminius*, [www.ccel.org/ccel/arminius/works2.ix.iv.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/arminius/works2.ix.iv.html) (accessed May 31, 2007).

...occasionally as the causes of events are concealed, the thought is apt to rise, that human affairs are whirled about by the blind impulse of Fortune, or our carnal nature inclines us to speak as if God were amusing himself by tossing men up and down like balls.<sup>63</sup>

Contrary to such attitudes towards divine providence, Calvin argued that a proper understanding of divine providence would note that for the “sedate and quiet minds” there is a “highest reason,” which always is targeted at the spiritual developments of his people. Such spiritual developments include a divine desire “to train his people to patience, correct their depraved affections, tame their wantonness, inure them to self-denial, and arouse them from torpor; or, on the other hand, to cast down the proud, defeat the craftiness of the ungodly, and frustrate all their schemes.”<sup>64</sup> However, Calvin observed that even when such higher divine purposes elude us we should be confident that divine providence is always predicated on some loving purposes for our lives. Calvin summarized his thought on divine providence thusly,

...all things are divinely ordained. And it is to be observed, first, that the Providence of God is to be considered with reference both to the past and the future; and, secondly, that in overruling all things, it works at one time with means, at another without means, and at another against means. Lastly, the design of God is to show that He takes care of the whole human race, but is especially vigilant in governing the Church, which he favours with a closer inspection.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, from classical Christian theological discourse there is a consistent emphasis on divine providence particularly on the understanding that there are divine higher purposes behind the coordination, supervision and the control of human affairs. It is from these Christian traditions that contemporary theological discussion received its stimulus. Consequently, Louis Berkhof, Wayne Grudem, James Oliver Buswell and Millard Erickson have underscored the fundamental nature of divine providence in Christian theology. For example, in his treatment of divine providence, Grudem affirmed the concept of preservation, concurrences of human and divine actions and the pervading recognition of divine government. With these

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<sup>63</sup> John Calvin, “Institutes of Christian Religion,” [www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iv.i.xviii.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iv.i.xviii.html) (accessed May 31, 2007).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

theological designations Grudem argued for the actualization of divine purposes as central to the understanding of divine providence.<sup>66</sup>

According to Buswell, in discussing divine providence we must avoid the erroneous conclusion of deism “which makes God the Creator of the universe ... a mere spectator of natural processes in which He never takes a hand.” Similarly, Buswell noted that we must also avoid the extremes of pantheism that “identified” God “with the sum total of all cosmic forces.”<sup>67</sup> He maintains that divine providence includes divine government over the nations and God’s ability to actualize his divine purpose through miraculous and natural causes. For Buswell, divine providence “includes the reactions of human minds.”<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Millard Erickson states that divine providence is moving creation to its expected end.<sup>69</sup> He also suggests that divine providence presupposes divine “protection of his creation against harm and destruction, and his provision for the needs of the elements or members of the creation.”<sup>70</sup> While Erickson relates the divine preservation of creation and of God’s people, he also discusses divine providence as reflected in divine government. This latter emphasis stresses the “... purposive directing of the whole reality and the course of history to the ends that God has in mind, ... the actual execution, within time, of his plans devised in eternity.”<sup>71</sup>

In such an understanding, divine providence enforces or executes the divine purposes for creation and humanity. However, as the preceding discussion has shown, there is always the tendency to speak broadly about such divine cosmic purposes without adequate reflection on the expression of these divine purposes in the lives of each member of human society. Thus, while underscoring the emphases on divine cosmic and universal purposes for the world, equal attention should be given to divine purposes and plans in the life of individual persons. Thus, beyond God’s cosmic plans, is his love for each member of his human creation and his great interest in the events of their lives. This emphasis on divine plans or divine providence in the life of each

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<sup>66</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 315-354.

<sup>67</sup> James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1962), 171.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>69</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 387.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 388.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 394.

individual reveals the necessity to seek the discovery of such divine plans and purposes for our lives.

## **6. Conclusion**

In Africa, as well as the world over, there is a dire need to understand the working of divine providence particularly in the midst of the increasing meaninglessness, despair and frustration of our world. This paper has argued that life is generally controlled by the care, love and purposes of God over everything, even things we consider as ordinary and unimportant. Underscoring the providential hand of God in ordinary things, Peter Lewis has rightly observed,

There is an unhealthy preoccupation with the supernatural and the miraculous that has no theology of the normal, and misses the glory of God in the regular and the predictable. Today, between an unbelieving secularism and a credulous supernaturalism, we hear less and less about the doctrine of the divine providence.<sup>72</sup>

This often-neglected biblical doctrine of divine providence addresses a significant flaw in Greco-Roman and popular African religious thought. This flaw is the concept of chance and good luck, which is directly opposed to the idea of divine providence. Thus this paper suggests that such erroneous understanding can only be corrected by an appropriate emphasis on the biblical concept of divine providence.

Similarly, the theology of divine providence should be emphasized because behind the despair, neuroses, emotional turmoil, depression, stress and other forms of psychological distress lies the failure of our world to discern the invisible hand of divine providence, working and directing everything towards some ultimate divine purpose and plan. Without a biblical doctrine of divine providence as a cardinal theological persuasion in modern Christian teaching, the world and every form of human activity becomes pointless, boring and meaningless in the long run. It is within an appropriate understanding and rediscovery of divine providence, particularly in the ordinary activities of our lives, that African peoples will find, once again, purpose and meaning in the seemingly meaningless conditions of pain and suffering which have generally characterized their lives.

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<sup>72</sup> Peter Lewis, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of the Living God*, ed. Derek Tidball (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 96.

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