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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# Postcolonial and Contrapuntal Reading of Revelation 22:1-5: Part 2

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## A Model of Contrapuntal Reading

We can now formulate our model of contrapuntal reading. This model will involve a listening, a conversation—in our case, a conversation between Revelation 22:1-5 and a Kikuyu myth of creation. This passage will be read within its historical context, with an appreciation of its cultural contribution, but in intimate connection with an understanding and critique of the social world which it propounds and legitimates in postcolonial Africa. This way a better understanding can emerge, altogether more rewarding than the denunciations of the Bible as part of colonialism. We shall be able to get a new meaning when we read the Bible on a one to one basis with Kikuyu culture.

Draper (1997a:3) argues that the Bible has constantly emerged in surprising and refreshing indigenous forms and traditions, with symbols, images and narratives, a rich vein for creative reformation. This is especially so in the emergence of African literature even when such scholars are stridently opposed to the Bible. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, whom we have discussed and whose standing as one of the two or three most important and influential writers of African fiction remains unchallenged, is a case in point. His use of the imagery and symbolism of Christianity; his early attitude towards the church and its ministers, and the thematic centrality accorded to religion in his work of fiction *The River Between* (1965) is a testimony to this. Further, although Ngugi's attitude in recent writings has changed substantially, the Bible still serves as a determining frame of reference (Brown, 1997:30).

A contrapuntal theory offers a balanced conversation to the Apocalypse particularly in postcolonial Africa.<sup>1</sup> The Apocalypse has been a favourite book of our popular communities—they find the encouragement they need in their struggle and a criterion for the reading of the official oppression in our society. The communities delve the depths of the book that is revelation, witness and prophecy (Rev. 1:1-6), a book whose purpose is to encourage, challenge and

maintain the prophetic praxis of the new people. This text is suited to the African context (Draper, 2004:251), not only because it emerged at a time in Israel's history when she had lost her sovereignty, but because this is 'where culture and traditions are taken seriously, it has a powerful appeal, which may tell us more about the original rhetoric of the text than modern historical, narrative or rhetorical analyses' (2004:251). The approach here is that of counter point, where two or more texts are read together and in the light of each other. Such texts may not be of the same origin but of the same nature having two or more independent strands which may be brought into 'conversation' with each other. If a biblical text is to be interpreted or read in contrapuntal mode, it then means reflecting on that passage through the eyes of a similar traditional or modern text. The Apocalypse has its uniqueness—it offers hope and utopia in a colonised world which makes it an attractive field for analysis in conjunction with an African story. If myths are used to challenge and create a hope for an African community then the Apocalypse, as an apocalyptic writing, also envisages a total social and political discontinuity and a reversal of roles rather than piecemeal changes.

According to Draper (1997a:2) the Bible has played an ambivalent but key role in both the construction and deconstruction of modern western empires. It was also used for the construction of Africa as benighted heathendom in need of the gospel; as such it underpinned and legitimated the imperial assumption of control and the colonial occupation of native lands. Comaroff & Comaroff (1991:12-13) argue that the encounter 'was to have profound unanticipated effects on both colonizer and the colonized' and 'was enmeshed, from first to last, in a complex dialectic of challenge and riposte, domination and defiance'. To reclaim such lands a myth culture (which was already there to maintain the status quo about to be disturbed by invading powers) was invoked by Kikuyu people not only to create a utopia, but also to challenge the people for resistance.<sup>2</sup>

Those of us from the Majority World who have been subjected to imperialism are now struggling to present biblical scholarship in our own context. Here I propose to use a model of contrapuntal reading as a means of biblical research in order to enhance what has already been there and reclaim that which is lost. It is important to recognise that the Bible as a colonial text cannot be read in isolation from its context, because the colonial reading constructs a world of

those who brought it to us. It is no accident that the emergence of independence in Africa has often been accompanied by another kind of context that allows the Bible to interact with indigenous culture in order to construct a counter world to what the Bible has been, a 'master narrative' to civilise the colonised, since Christian nations started to colonise.

A model of contrapuntal reading, therefore, may enable us to listen to a biblical text and an African culture at the same time. Such a reading will allow us to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and space of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others and this makes a contrapuntal approach similar to a comparative approach which also aims at the common elements of different texts. It enriches the inculturation model by letting those elements play off each other on a one to one basis. In juxtaposing the views of both the passage of Revelation 22:1-5 and a Kikuyu myth of creation with each other, in letting them play off each other, it is our interpretive theological aim to make concurrent those views and experiences that are ideologically and culturally closed to each other and that attempt to distance or suppress other views and experiences. "Far from seeking to reduce the significance of ideology, the exposure and dramatisation of discrepancy highlights its cultural importance; this enables us to appreciate its power and understand its continuing influence" (Said, 1993:33).

Therefore a model of contrapuntal reading will allow the message of the Apocalypse to interact with an African message, rendering its kerygma effective for the situation of those in similar circumstances to the apocalyptic community. Such a reading of the Apocalypse clearly espouses an ideology that promotes and legitimates freedom. Again the Apocalypse is very much to the point on the passage of the new garden as a climax for such a utopia, which becomes very relevant to our African situation. Reading together means letting the Apocalypse and the new circumstances play each other to convey the spirit of harmony rather than being pre-occupied with the plethora of details.

A contrapuntal<sup>3</sup> approach is, therefore, a heterogeneous discourse, which is listening to two musical instruments playing their own tunes at the same time. This provides new ground for biblical scholarship in Africa that allows the

Bible to be articulated and researched in our context. As far as I am aware, this method or approach has not been used specifically in the interpretation of the Bible in postcolonial Africa. However, the paradox here is that both pre-colonial and postcolonial which are being reflected in terms of the overlapping periods of socio-economic and cultural history, have been and remain formative influences on the way biblical studies are practiced in Africa, where the Bible has been used to legitimize domination.

The Bible was the book of the colonisers and their readings were oppressive and hence the Bible would be seen as oppressive of the colonised, but reading it in a different method can make it liberatory, hence resolving the ambiguity of its being shared by both the coloniser and the colonised. This approach attempts to explain how such ambiguity can be dealt with by interpreting biblical themes or texts alongside African culture, religion and life experience, offering fresh insights into the meaning of these biblical materials. The insights are able to counteract the assumptions about the Bible as a colonial text and allow the Bible and African cultures to interact with each other to produce a better and newer understanding as a counter world in their own context of myths.

Through this method the passage of the new garden and the Kikuyu myth will be interpreted as texts that both articulate an ideology of hope and resistance. Mbiti (2002:3) argues that the Bible had a greater authority than that of those who brought it. The Bible had a different role once in the hands of the Africans, as we may detect from Mbiti's argument—

Africans could find anthropological refuge and protection within the pages of the Bible and nowhere else. Furthermore, it was and is the word of God, the very God they knew through traditional religion before missionaries arrived. The Bible accepted and described the same God, which was something that had been denied them by foreign presence. In the pages of the Bible, the people saw themselves together with God the creator of all things; about whom they knew something and to whom they addressed their prayers (2002:3).

A contrapuntal method seeks to overturn assumptions that the Bible's culture is supreme over other cultures. As Mbiti (2003:3) explains the Bible was used by the missionaries to form their societies within the colonial territory; hence it is no accident that the emergence of resistance to land occupation in Kenya

was accompanied by the emergence of myths (Kenyatta 1938; cf. Ngugi 1965) as indigenous texts. In such circumstances ideological struggles are often clothed in the rhetoric of cultural differences (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:28). Such a text (myths about land) attempted to position itself with the Bible and particularly the biblical passages on land (Gen. 1-3; Rev 22:1-5). Like the passage of Revelation, the myths which were reclaimed from the oral traditions refused to accept that the colonial power was the ultimate point of reference, and offered hope and challenge, but also stimulated resistance.

So approaching the Bible and African myths contrapuntally becomes a way of establishing a new area of inquiry, which brings upfront issues of our own culture and the Bible's culture on a basis of equality. It brings another dimension of critical analysis which is completely different from the more familiar critical theories mentioned earlier. Said (1993:336) puts it this way, 'Imperialism has consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale' in such a way that 'no one today is purely one thing'. So the world views of the Bible, mediated through vision culture, interacts 'contrapuntally' with Kikuyu myth culture and produces something new, in that relationship. Said's (1993:335) point is that we can welcome the new garden in 'conversation' rather than simply raging against the 'colonial Bible' of imperialism after comparing it with our own African culture.

There are both similarities and differences between a comparative approach and a contrapuntal approach. While both are means of interpretations of the Bible in Africa, they differ in the way they are applied. A comparative approach compares to make sure the other is felt to be different, but a contrapuntal approach synthesises the two for a new meaning. A contrapuntal approach allows two different but competing rhythms to play at the same time bringing a new meaning. But a comparative approach will compare one thing with the other in order to seek a common ground, while inculturation approach will seek to make one context relevant to the other.

One interesting thing with a contrapuntal approach is that one can enjoy reading two different texts, even if they have nothing common or even if they are relevant to each other and yet letting a new meaning to emerge. The Bible came with the colonialists but in its origin had nothing to do with the British colonial power. It was neither produced by them or us, but we can let it be

what it was in its context but let it speak to us creatively in its difference. Our approach is based on the above discussion of contrapuntal reading method. The function of this approach is to bring to the fore the overlapping issues of our culture, which in this case would be the Kikuyu myth and the passage of Revelation 22:1-5. The contrapuntal reading will enable us to interrogate the pre-critical reading practices of Christians and help us to interpret the Apocalypse in our own African culture and read it from our specific location of the Kikuyu concept of land. This can be done by extending our reading of the biblical texts in the light of our own contexts. In this case land and economics is a case in point, in order for us to be able to locate John's idea of land.

### **Land and Economics**

In the entire socioeconomic history of ancient Israel and also of the Kikuyu land was a fundamental means of production. This being so, ownership or non-ownership of land formed the basis of the wealth or poverty of both the modern Kikuyu as well as ancient Jews. Norman Gottwald has given a well researched analysis of the role of land in the enrichment or impoverishment of social classes in ancient Israel. The story of the exodus was more or less based on the struggle for land as well as ownership and the right to cultivate the land. Land is the key to every biblical reference to garden or vineyard (cf. Gen. 2; Isaiah 5; 1 Kings 21; Rev. 22:1-5). For the Kikuyu no other issue qualifies better than ownership of land to represent the presence of the kingdom of God on earth.

The significance of land as economic power bases defining the freedom or no freedom of the people of the Bible appears clearly in Micah 4:3-4. The struggle to free oneself from oppression caused by landlessness is an act of culture. This is so because the wealth of the coloniser, both in the Bible and in Africa was also a product of cultural domination (cf. Gottwald, 1983:308f). This basic understanding of land is here seen as undeniably the bottom-line of John's vision of the new heaven and the new earth to replace that which has been taken not only by the Romans but also by the old Babylonian power. It is from this background that John writes his Apocalypse and particularly Revelation 22:1-5.

### **Revelation 22:1-5**

The Apocalypse has been a favourite book of our popular communities, it is suited to the African context, not only because it emerged at a time in Israel's

history when she had lost her sovereignty, but because this is where land as part of new creation is taken seriously, it has a powerful appeal, which may tell us more about the original rhetoric of the text than modern historical, narrative or rhetorical analyses (Draper, 2004:251).

After the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE Jews were throughout subject of dispossession and oppression by successive empires, which readily gave rise to a perception of ongoing persecution from the dominant rulers who had taken over from the Jewish rulers. This in turn fostered the prophetic apocalyptic desire for a definitive manifestation of God's justice on the sinful nature of the pagan and a new garden for the Jews as utopia (Richard 1995:6). The vision of the new garden plays a significant and dominant role in the whole of the Apocalypse. Moreover, a cosmic finality for the new garden is also the symbol of deliverance and fulfilment. This is well reflected in Isaiah 35, where freedom and joy for the ransomed of the Lord are promised. The new garden as the reign of God is not in heaven but it descends to earth, for the faithful and the martyrs to enter and enjoy a holy fellowship with God forever. The passage of the new garden is therefore chosen here as representative of the many illustrations of John's conviction that at last the justice of God and his grace will prevail against all odds. The positioning and the importance of this passage in the Apocalypse have attracted the researcher to the critical analysis of the passage.

The Apocalypse closes its visions with a significant vision of the final state of things. All things will be new for the old is gone and the new has come, a new earth and a new heaven. The writer portrays the new garden as an earthly city. The number already sealed to enter the garden, the 144,000 and the multitude from all over, gives evidence of the importance of the garden to the readers. The passage of Revelation 22:1-5 has been represented as a phenomenon that can be interpreted in terms of a myth. For Morris (1969:242), there is need to understand the passage in symbolic terms.<sup>4</sup> He explains that it is John's way of passing the information to us that the ultimate state of affairs will finally be of great value to those who will remain faithful, for his concern was the future life of his community.

Throughout the Apocalypse the prophetic formula of 'thus says the Lord' has been replaced with a new formula of 'he showed me'. The use of the Jewish



traditions with respect to images and symbols becomes more marked. According to Caird (1984:264), Revelation 22:1-5 is the most important passage in the whole of the Apocalypse. The vision of the new garden is the real source of John's prophetic certainty, for only in comparison with the new garden can the beautiful Babylon be recognised as that destructive power which is 'an old and raddled whore'. The picture of the garden offered hope to the community more than any other promise that was made to them.

Therefore, we see the ideal garden set by John as a means of hope to a community that was threatened by oppression and persecution. Hence the garden has inspired the believers' efforts for the betterment of humankind. The garden in this passage actually is the ideal set before Christians purposely for their inspiration to be more faithful to God and to work for him, because the reward is entry into the new earth. Richard (1995:165) says that John utilizes the passage of Revelation 22:1-5 as a model of reconstruction of a earth as a tool for constructing hope, utopia, God's transcendent and eschatological design for all people. The new garden is fundamentally a re-construction of the collective consciousness of the Christians who are reading and hearing Revelation. A reading of Revelation would leave the reader with an awareness of how deeply one is mired in Babylon (life in this world), but it would also leave the reader more keenly seeking the new garden.

The vision of the new garden in this passage goes beyond the rest of the visions of the Apocalypse and deals with precipitating conditions and overt activity associated with the reign of God at the end (Caird, 1984:264). The idea of the garden restores the original plan of God for the human race (people will be back in God's origin plan Gen. 2:8); a new Eden is what the marginalized community dreams of. The new garden offers a contrasting political economy, a vision of another; better world that shows God's liberating purpose (Rossing, 1999:161). The reader must take a step to move from the evil colonial situation to new lands which are to be desired as opposed to neo-colonialism and imperialism, the destructive and arrogant ideologies. This fits our postcolonial objective which is to understand how the two colonial powers contrast each other. Keener (2000:508-509), argues that the new garden represents God's creation and what a reader needs to do in the midst of the dominant and the powerful coloniser is to adorn oneself with righteous acts:

The time for adorning ourselves with righteous acts (Rev.9:8) is now. Even

though Revelation emphasises the New Jerusalem as a future city; it is being built in the present. If the character of Babylon is evident in the world around us, the glory of God's presence among us should be revealed at least in the way we live (2000:508).

The new garden here is interpreted as that, which we all need to achieve in this world of today, where the present experience of righteousness anticipates the future. The new garden of Revelation 22:1-5 is in the form of a myth from the beginning to the end. Here lies a potential dialogue which is concealed in myths. Hemer (1986:11) says that the importance of this passage is more in the sense that the Apocalypse was addressed to people who lived in Asia Minor a land of many cities. The important thing with John in the new heavens and the new earth is precisely its setting for the new garden of God. There will be no thirst, for in the middle of the city will be a tree of life straddling the river which flows from the throne of God, bearing fruit throughout the year to feed the 144,000, while its leaves will feed the multitude from the Gentiles and there will be no diseases, for these leaves have curative substances (Rev. 22:7) and reading this passage in Africa would open up an encounter between the biblical vision and an African culture of myths.

In 22:1 the angel now shows John the river of the water of life. John now recalls several Old Testament scriptures. The presence of the river and the tree of life makes us think that the author has the Garden of Eden in mind. John draws his material from Genesis and Ezekiel. According to Genesis, the river starts from Eden and divides into four branches, while Ezekiel's stream comes from the temple rock and runs to the Dead Sea. This concept is both in biblical and extra biblical literature. The Jewish teachers more often circulated stories about Eden; for example the Jubilees 3:12 mentions that there will be holy trees in Eden, others claimed to have dreamt of a river of fire (1 Enoch 17:5), while many also claimed to have seen the river of water of life (1 Enoch 17:14). Such rivers became rivers of joy and love flowing from the God's throne. God was believed to be making the last things as the first. Beasley-Murray (1978:330) argues that this does not mean that the end is thought in terms of a relation to the first things, but the first things are viewed as prophetic of the nature of God's purpose in history. However the last things supersede the beginning of all things. This river, which becomes the source of life, is more in agreement with other Old Testament visions of it. Zechariah in his vision saw the 'living waters'

flowing out from Jerusalem (Zech. 14:8). Ezekiel had a similar vision, although his river flowed out from the temple pouring into the Dead Sea, becoming deeper as it went and giving life to all things everywhere (Ezek. 48).

Therefore what Zechariah and Ezekiel left unclear in their visions, John makes it clear in his, the crystal clear river in the city, confirms the idea of brilliance. John's river is flowing from the throne, which signifies that God is the source of life. But it is flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb; now for the third time in this passage John adds *kai tou arniou* (and of the Lamb) while referring to God. John does not want his Christians to miss the point of the Lamb's involvement in the final order of things. It is, therefore, important to note that the river is flowing from both God and the Lamb, which was based on Ezekiel 47: 'If any one thirst let them come to me, and let them who believe in me drink'. He wants us to understand that it is Christ who has taken the place of the temple in the New Jerusalem and who is now the source of the river.

In 22:2 the river now flows in the middle of the broad street, for it flows through in the middle of it. The river in the vision of the prophet Ezekiel flowed from the temple outwards (Ezek. 47:12). The river may be circular since it does not flow out of the city but through it giving all the supply. The river is not only for the purposes of satisfying God's people, but also watering trees of life which were growing on both sides of the river. We have here to take singular for plural since one tree cannot be on both sides of the same river. These trees would signify that mankind has been allowed back into the Garden of Eden where trees of life are lining the river's bank. There could also be another way of interpreting this phrase. Beasley-Murray (1978:331) says—

In the middle of the city's street stands a single tree, the tree of life, situated between either sides of the river. Such would then imply that the river has in its own course split into two watering the whole garden.<sup>5</sup>

John wants to say that at last God in his mercy has brought all peoples to their original place, to enjoy that which they had long desired and waited for in the Garden. In this verse, one of the interesting exegetical observations is that, although both the tree and the river are said to be giving life, John does not portray them as life-givers. For John it is God who is the source of life through this river and the tree of life. The tree produces its fruits every month, and the words 'twelve manner of fruits', do not imply different kinds of fruit but rather signifies that every month

a fruit was produced. The tree of life will bear the fruits throughout the year. Jewish visions of the future involved supernatural agricultural abundance without any labour (Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13). In such an agricultural view rivers and trees occupied an important place (1 Enoch 24:4–25:7; 4 Ezra 8:52). Ezekiel 47:12 gives the best of this view—

And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing.

John talks of a single tree of life, but with twelve fruits each a month to comply with the original tree in Eden, which symbolically will imply that there is only one source of life, Jesus the Lamb that was slain.

The apocalyptic language is at work here, and John is speaking symbolically to imply through this mention of the month, without sun and moon, that the fruits were in abundance continually: ‘the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations’. To make us understand the abundance of life in the land, the leaves of the tree will bring healing to the peoples of the world. This was the traditional way of treating people in Kikuyu land; various trees were used for healing. For the Apocalypse the leaves would only be interpreted to mean stimulation. They aroused peoples’ emotions to maximum joy in their hearts. These leaves would be promoting the happiness of the nations in the land. Therefore the tree of life with its fruit and leaves like the manna (2:17) symbolises life in full capacity and delight. The river equally signifies a complete supply of all that is needed in an inexhaustible manner. Both the water of life and the tree of life are for the healing of the nations (21:6; 22:1–2), but Babylon’s wine makes the nations drunk (14:8; 17:2; 18:3). The healing implies that the nations will be completely healed in the full sense of the word (Bauckham, 1995:316; cf. Lee, 2001:291).

In 22:3 the first section is actually a citation from Zechariah 14:11. From the point of view of intertextuality, we should also note especially the reference of Genesis 3:14–19. God’s purposes concerning Babylon are to destroy it. He has both planned and done what he spoke concerning the inhabitants of Babylon. The absence of a curse must be seen here as a total reversal of the fall of man. Zechariah says that God’s people will become a blessing instead of a curse

(8:13). The Greek word *katathema* (accursed) would mean that there is no longer ‘anything cursed’, it does not imply an act of cursing. John wants us to understand that, where the throne of God and of the Lamb is, there can be nothing ‘accursed’. This is possible because where God is there can be no cause for a curse. God’s original plan for mankind has been restored; therefore, it is possible for the holy God to dwell in their midst: ‘the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it’. Due to the presence of God and the Lamb, their glory will be everywhere and only blessings will be known in this land. The presence of the throne in the midst of the land reminded John’s community about the forum and theatre at the centre of typical Roman towns (see Keener, 2000:501).

It is the servants of God who will be giving service. The service is no doubt implied by the verb *latreuousin* which RSV translates as ‘his servants shall worship him’.

In 22:4 the people of God will receive even what Moses was denied. To see the face of God, was something that mankind was not allowed to do (Exod. 33:20, 23). Now, ‘they shall see his face’. This will be the privilege of all the faithful servants of God in that land; they will see him face to face. Their joy shall be made complete by the bliss of God’s presence. In similar vein, Jesus’ beatitude declared that those who are pure in heart ‘shall see God’ (Matt. 5:8). This will be an emotional experience and the saints shall now be free to see their redeemer without shame, while those who persecuted them will be denied the presence of God in wrath because of their sins.

In 22:5 we are now assured again that the people of God will not need lamps, for there shall be no night any more: ‘God will be their light and they shall reign forever and ever’. This is a great assurance to all who suffered under the power of evil.<sup>6</sup> This kind of reigning is a special one in that there are no subjects to be ruled; rather it means that they will always experience exaltation in the presence of God (cf. Zech. 14). Therefore, they will all enjoy the royalty of the Almighty, because they are now face to face with his reality (Rossing 1999: 59). This is a realisation of the awaited promise made in Rev. 3:21. They shall now reign with Christ and God together. This brings to a close John’s idea of a new land of God and the Lamb, leaving the readers overwhelmed by the glory that awaits them in future. The hope created by this mythical story of

creation is similar that created by the African myths of creation.

### **An African story of a Garden similar to that of Revelation 22:1-5**

My thinking and the subsequent investigation on the subject of African culture and the Apocalypse has led me to conclude that African spirituality is antecedent to, and the corollary of biblical mythology. The supporting argument is based on the historical factors which point to the experience of the African people as believers in myths. We will here take the Kikuyu story of a garden of origin as a representative of other African myths. In the Kikuyu story of origin we have a garden that provides all that people need, such a garden is the basis of importance of land in African narratives. Therefore, land belonged to all the members of the community and also to individuals but not as a commodity that could be owned or sold. It was an inheritance from the ancestors to be kept and respected.

The Kikuyu religion, like Judaism, has various myths of origins, one of the most common myths and that which is known by the people, tells that one day, when mankind was increasing on earth, Ngai (God) called the man *Gikuyu*<sup>7</sup> the founder of the tribe and gave him a vast land with ravines, the rivers, the forests and the animals. The land was naturally fertile lacking nothing that mankind desired on earth. This land was for the man and the woman to rule and till and for their posterity (Ngugi, 1965:2).<sup>8</sup> The most important feature of this land was the big mountain, which God called *Kiri-Nyaga* (Mount Kenya), this mountain would be God's resting place when he came to visit his people. *Gikuyu* was taken to the top of this mountain of mystery so that he could see the beauty of the land that God had given him, similar to the Jewish myth of creation, where God gave Adam the Garden of Eden, with all that the human race would desire (Gen. 1-3). So when God was dividing the world into territories and giving them to the various races and nations that populate the globe, he gave the Kikuyu people a Garden full of good things of nature (Kenyatta, 1938: 23; cf. Ngugi, 1965:2).

At the heart of the land was a forest of fig trees, and *Gikuyu* was then commanded to go down and establish his homestead on the selected forest spot, which he named *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga* (first home—cf. Ngugi, 1965:21), the trees would provide fruits to satisfy the people. The Kikuyu social organisation within the land is a strong bond of communal relations governed by a family system of clans named after the mother of the family and age-set affiliations. The land must be reclaimed from those who came and

occupied it (colonialists or African elites) either by force or by pretence. The average rainfall in this land ranges between 40-110 inches. This rainwater drains into a considerable number of streams that irrigate the whole land. It is correct to state that there is no valley, which is not watered by a river or a stream in Kikuyu land. The sources of these rivers and reservoirs are Mt. Kenya and the Aberdare Ranges: the former with its glacial-snows, and the later with its forests and steppes, which like an enormous sponge keep the moisture through the whole year. The vegetation is most luxuriant and often gigantic, of a standard only found within the Equator. Although the correlating pattern between the Bible and our culture seems to be everywhere. It is certainly evident in the stories of creation and particularly on promises of land.

### A Contrapuntal reading of Revelation 22.1-5 with a Kikuyu Story of a Garden

We have here a possibility of a conversation between Revelation 22.1-5 and the Kikuyu story of a Garden which has the aim of creating hope and challenge, in order to motivate people to work towards future life, or to open themselves to the possibilities of the new world which emerges as a result of utopias created by these Gardens. It is quite pertinent to analyse the passage (Rev. 22:1-5) and the Kikuyu story contrapuntally in order to expose the dynamic encounter between the two; here we listen to the two texts for their harmony.

The blessedness of the Garden city (22:1-5), two important factors surface in this section: the throne of God and the Lamb, not mentioned in the preceding chapters, now dominates the scene. This is comparable to the Kikuyu Mountain, which is the throne of God among the people. The paradise of Eden equally is brought in for the first time, with the intention of joining the end of human history with its origin; in other words back to that original Garden of Eden. This is echoed in the Kikuyu belief that God gave the Kikuyu a good land with ravines, rivers, forests, game and all the gifts (cf. Kenyatta 1938:3). This is a blessed garden to the faithful people of God. In the Apocalypse of John as well as in the Kikuyu story, the garden belongs to *andu a Ngai* (God's people), through the blood of the Lamb they will be inheriting the salvation as is expressed in Revelation 22:1-5.

At the centre of the gardens are the trees of life being watered throughout the year by a river. In the letters, however, it is clear that those who will not remain

faithful will be judged, the whole of the Apocalypse is a challenge to make sure that the believers make right decisions, otherwise their lamp stand will be removed (2:5). In the Apocalypse the judgement takes place in the future as well as does the entry into the blessed garden city, but it has finality for us because it determines the quality, the mood and seriousness of our present time, that is to say, it transforms the present moment into a particular kind of *kaïros* (Nolan, 1987:64). Unbelievers or those who compromise themselves with Babylon (oppressors of any kind)<sup>9</sup> will automatically be excluded both from the blessed Garden city and the Kikuyu lands on the basis of compromise.

To the Kikuyu people the land creates an expression of the need for an attitude concerning the urgency of regaining *Ngai's* blessedness in the present time. They will have to reclaim land which has been taken from them by the rich, when the right time comes; otherwise fighting at the wrong time would mean a total annihilation of the whole tribe (Kenyatta, 1938:43). The Apocalypse community was equally unable to fight back (the Roman rulers were beyond their power); deliverance is through Christ who has overcome death. To the Kikuyu deliverance comes equally from *Ngai* (even though they will have to fight for it) and domination will be no more in their lands. Then there will be plenty of land, including the cities that are now in those lands for the people. Both John's community and the Kikuyu community will first have to co-exist and yet not to compromise with the oppressors, they have to treat 'them with courtesy mingled with suspicion' (1938:43; cf. Rev. 2–3). Both the Garden city and the Kikuyu story express the urgency of the present moment as one is faced with the present reality—hence the need to respond to it urgently. This discovery makes the Kikuyu reader of the Apocalypse more open to see the Garden city as that good life expected and that which must be achieved.

The remembering and significance of the Garden city and the Kikuyu story are climaxed in the blessedness of John's city in the garden. In both stories fruit production is highlighted and communities will not lack anything in those gardens. To the Kikuyu/African Christians the blessedness of John's Garden city becomes a symbol of that good life expected, when good governance is available in Africa, but when that fails the risen and glorified Christ becomes an alternative (an inspiration to work for it and wait for it, that means 'to work patiently') to the Christians where they partially experience and also wait



for the final fulfilment of that blessedness (cf. Mbiti, 1971:60).

### **Similarities in our Contrapuntal Reading**

The significant transformation brought by the new garden is that God's new world excludes the oppressor, as Satan's present socio-political manifestation (imperialism). While for John's story Rome must be excluded, to the Kikuyu it is the exclusion of the colonial forces from the Kikuyu land that matters. This exclusion is evident in virtually every detail of the Kikuyu understanding of land as well as in the story of a new garden. It unfolds into a new vision for Africa (see the discussion below of issues emanating from our contrapuntal reading). The new vision of a garden is what we require in order to persist in the struggle for justice and prosperity in our poor Africa. The sources of the rivers and trees in both gardens is God, they are also the source of the needs of people who will live in the land. The water and the vegetation make the land habitable. The land is also a gift to God's people. The new life is emphasised by the description of the vegetation of life (cf. Gen. 2:9; 3:21-22; Rev. 22:2).

The above similarities attract the Kikuyu people to read the Apocalypse afresh as a result of the light thrown on the Apocalypse by the Kikuyu experience of land. Kenyatta and Ngugi among others recall ancient material just as John recalls the material of the Old Testament to formulate the vision of a Garden city. The Kikuyu people were either suffering persecution or living in fear of it. Kenyatta, (1938:47) argues that they were put under the ruthless domination of European imperialism through the insidious trickery of hypocritical treaties. The descending of the Garden city becomes the real comfort to John's community as well as to the Kikuyu who now read it to create their own utopias.

Revelation 22:1-5 offers new insights in place of the present spiritualised explanations of this Garden city, which at times have proved to be more frightening to the people than offering them the genuine salvation of land which is here and now. Since biblical interpretation and preaching must strive to make sense of the present life situations within the individual's context, contrapuntal reading may be used for the propagation of the gospel among our African people. Such a reading then becomes the pillar of imparting cultural norms and values derived from the Apocalypse of John or any other biblical texts to the African people.

### **Discordant Voices in our Contrapuntal Reading**

The apocalyptic vision of the Garden city differs from the Kikuyu story of land

in that it anticipated a total destruction of the present, while the Kikuyu story of land anticipates a radical transformation of the present, characterised by transposing some future events into the present. They expected the present to endure and, therefore, expected no spectacular change in future. This would then imply that the deliverance expected at the end of the colonial domination of the African lands is a near future, which is not radically different from the present in the sense of what the ruling powers will leave behind.<sup>10</sup> So while the Kikuyu expectation is for the present world to remain, the Apocalypse's vision of a Garden city is at home with 'apocalyptic eschatology',<sup>11</sup> where a total destruction of the world we live today as Babylon is imminent. Such a concept is non-existent within the Kikuyu eschatology and this makes the two stories radically different from each other. This radical difference between the two is also expressed in the view of the dead. While in Apocalyptic the dead are brought back to life to enter the garden city, in the Kikuyu view life continues with the present generation while the dead move into past.

### Issues Emanating from our Contrapuntal Reading

The two kinds of stories have one thing in common: a theology of land. The search for a theology of land for Africans takes place in the context of the historical struggle of our brothers and sisters to wrestle back their land from the hands of their colonial guests. We have experienced and even seen tears flowing uncontrolled down the cheeks of our grandparents when they remember the blood of our people that was shed in the defence of ancestral land. So the story of land is a pillar for imparting cultural norms and values both to the Apocalypse and to the Kikuyu. Such a transmission aims at ensuring cultural cohesiveness within the two communities. This is a theme, which is highlighted in both stories. Our analysis reveals that both are coherent revelations and offer theological expressions of their own worldviews through the various symbols and metaphors that have been employed in creating the stories. The power of symbols and images in these stories are both a challenge and a hope to their communities.

They contain insights, which bear much significance both to the churches in Asia Minor and to the African community settings in which stories of land are narrated respectively. They are both capable of providing means for human behaviour and praxis. The commonality, therefore, in these stories provides the opportunities to unlock the Apocalypse to the African Christians in general. In this concluding section, I wish to show how both narratives could function and

how they could bear in the social contexts to which they are addressed. They are equally open to different interpretations. As we said earlier interpretation is an ideological, theological and a philosophical activity determined by the interests, concerns, presuppositions and the traditions of the interpreter. The way John, Kenyatta and Ngugi reconfigured the stories of land gives a clear-cut direction of what they wanted their people to do. They saw the present as the time of God's intervention. Also they regarded the future in these stories as a visible state of affairs. For them the stories refer to the life of their communities in general or to those whose lives need liberation. This is why we can reclaim the stories in a new dimension following John, Kenyatta and Ngugi as a response to the oppressive experience in the perspective of active resistance. Reconfiguring both the stories of land will allow different meanings to emerge. A conversation between Revelation 22:1-5 and the Kikuyu story of creation brings out various issues. Such issues show clearly, that stories are rich with insights calling for a biblical theological reflection.

### Inspiration as a Way Forward

It is clear from our contrapuntal reading that both narratives are instructions with inspirations that are able to create a desire for people to acquire the land they need for their sustainability. The new idea of land that emerges here is to inspire the people to move forward in our postcolonial African societies, just as John's and the Kikuyu communities required an inspiration to survive the challenges of their times. So while the Kenyan society today cannot escape the influence of the present political system around it, the community must be inspired to fight for their rights, or made aware of the contradiction inherent in that political system. I say contradiction because the uhuru (independence) utopia, whose basic doctrine of love and equality inspired people, originally has never been achieved. Hence they need to be encouraged and challenged to move forward. In other words, the present political system in Kenya is still a child of colonisation that needs to be challenged.

### God as the Ultimate

In these two stories of land is the fact that God is the ultimate point of reference in them. We realised that in the Kikuyu way of life as well as the Apocalypse community, stories abound in references to *Ngai* as the Almighty being. The Kikuyu concept of God is that *Ngai* is one and provides the needs of the people through the creation of land. Here the Apocalypse acquires a new

positioning, it is now approached in openness and its meaning is embraced within the Kikuyu concept of God and the Kikuyu people see it as speaking to them. The same God, who was the ultimate point of reference in Revelation 22.1-5 and in the Kikuyu narrative, must now also remain our point of reference even as we work out our second liberation which is a new African ideology. In short we conclude that the African community or the Kenyan community for that matter will continue to rely on *Ngai* to intervene in situations that are still oppressive in their life.

### Eschatology as a Concept

We may start by stating that the issue of eschatology is a complex one,<sup>12</sup> and we cannot deal with it elaborately in such a short section. We will, therefore, only reflect on it as an issue that has emanated from our contrapuntal reading. Although the Kikuyu people expected an end to the present situation, their concept of eschatology is rather different to that of the Apocalypse community. Their eschatology is concerned with issues of here and now in particular situations. This implies that the Kikuyu has no concept of universal eschatology. This calls for a paradigm shift<sup>13</sup> from Western thinking of eschatology (in terms of *chronos*) to African thinking of eschatology (*kairos*). In fact the word eschaton in Kikuyu is *muico*, which does not refer to time as *chronos* but as *kairos* (cf. Nolan 1987:61-69). According to Mbiti (1969: 159) African eschatology in terms of time is a composition of events which have been realised or actualised or about to be realised in the immediate future, within a generation or two. Mbiti's argument then means that African eschatology conceives time as qualitative rather than quantitative. Nolan agrees with this African eschatological understanding of time, when he states that 'the eschaton is a future act of God that has finality for us because it determines the quality, the mood and seriousness of our present time, that is to say, it transforms the present moment into a particular kind of *kairos*' (1987:64).

So to the Kikuyu *muico* (eschaton) is indeed one of the constitutive elements of their divine time (*ihinda rîrîa rîamure*), because you cannot have *ihinda rîrîa rîamure* without an eschaton. The Kikuyu world for the departed is not different, therefore, from the present material world. That world is not better than the present Kikuyu *bururi*. They conceive it as the same as the present world with the same day to day activities. For that reason there are no desires and wishes in Kikuyu culture to leave this world and go to the next world to

enjoy a better life as in ‘apocalyptic eschatology’. This makes the Kikuyu understanding of *escaton* (*muico*) radically different from that embodied in the vision of the new garden, where the destruction of anything that opposes God’s plan for creation takes place in order (burned into ashes ‘in the lake of fire’ cf. Rev. 21:8) for the new world to descend from heaven. For Mbiti (1969:160) ‘if the future becomes remote, for example, some years, then it is hardly thought of or spoken of and has little or no impact upon the people’. This justifies the Kikuyu concept of *muico* of the world as *kairos* other than *chronos*.

However, Decock (1990:76) argues that the main obstacle with regard to eschatology lies in the fact that the *escaton* is understood in a chronological sense as last, coming at the very end of history. The question is who understands it this way, it is of course people whose concept of time is chronological, but African concept of time is not, so Africans do not have terms like ‘the very end of history’. There is no time when African history will come to the very end.

For the Kikuyu it is the individual who comes to an end through physical death, while their land remains. They have no concept of ‘new heaven and new earth’. The Kikuyu world must continue with its days, months, years and festivals uninterrupted. Equally there is no concept of final judgment, since the Kikuyu cannot loose contact with *Ngai* at anytime, where such a thing would result to judgement. In the vision of the new garden such judgement is key and comes upon the unrepentant at the end of human history, when this world is brought to finality by God and the Lamb (Rev. 21:1-8). In Kikuyu traditions the judgment or condemnation comes in the present life to those who will compromise with the oppressor. It is said that Kikuyu liberation fighters killed more of their own, who were thought to have compromised than they did to those whom they were fighting.

On the other hand if resurrection refers to the state of blessedness and life of bliss that God shall dispense to the faithful Christians in the hereafter of the Apocalypse (Rev. 22:1-5), then such a notion is not found in the Kikuyu eschatology. The Kikuyu have no element of spiritual redemption or a close contact with *Ngai* in the next world, other than that of being an intermediary. So the idea of another physical life in resurrection is not only unknown to the Kikuyu but also unintelligible (cf. Mbiti, 1969: 166). Decock (1990:79) who seems to advocate a universal eschatology argues that rejecting a chronological

sense of eschaton brings with it the danger of absolutising particular eschata and the particular struggles that go with it. He does not think that seeing the day of liberation either from our sins or other circumstances as final and ultimate is a true way of understanding eschatology.<sup>14</sup> But this is the way eschatology can make sense to Africans. So since the Kikuyu myths strive to make sense of life in the present context, eschatologies that stress the ‘present’ may be proper weapons to use in the propagation of the development of a garden that emerges from contrapuntal fashion of John’s desire for a new garden and the Kikuyu desire for land. Kikuyu eschatology qualifies to be eschatology because it deals mainly with things taking place at the end of the present domination, giving birth to a realised eschatology. The hereafter is of no hope and promise, quite contrary to ‘apocalyptic eschatology’ where a new better world and better social status are promised.

Though different, therefore, both the new garden of Revelation and the Kikuyu myth espouse a kind of eschatology. While John’s community anticipates ‘apocalyptic eschatology’, that when embraced by the Africans causes them to interpret the new garden in a literal sense, and expect it to happen in the near, near future in line with the time perspective of African eschatology, the Kikuyu has a different kind of eschatology; that which is actualised or experienced in the ‘here and now’. That means the end of things happening at present, prophesied in the ancient past (myths) will become fulfilled in the present. This also ought to be the Christian understanding of the risen Christ, through whom we have experienced salvation (cf. Mbiti, 1971:42). The Kikuyu people saw themselves as the fulfilment of their myths (cf. Lonsdale, 2003:58). They were in the *muico* period and they had to resist domination and then acquire and continue to develop that which is theirs ‘here and now’.

This kind of Kikuyu eschatology calls us to a new vision that emerges. We must relate the eschaton (*muico*) to our present situation here and now, so we need to advocate change as a way forward not only for Kenya but also for Africa in general. This brings the desire to conquer evil, poverty and corruption that are now dominant in Africa as a way of achieving the new garden.

### Theological Conclusion

We have engaged in a contrapuntal reading to demonstrate that although we can study the Bible in the light of the African concept of narratives, there are

similarities and dissimilarities between the two. Having brought Revelation 22:1-5 into a conversation with a Kikuyu story that is similar to those found among most Africans, we can conclude that a new understanding of a garden/city has emerged. Both Revelation 22:1-5 and the Kikuyu story can be seen as an effort to demand that, in spite of the oppression against Kikuyu/Christians, they need to remain faithful to their *Ngai* and must not be overcome by Babylon's seduction. In the light of such insights, its implications for modern Christians especially among the Kenyan community can be better appreciated by African Church leaders and, faithful, contemporary preachers. The Apocalypse through African stories then gains new meaning to the African community/church of faith. It unfolds as the expected achievement of the new garden where farming and working will be improved and sustainable development implemented and those who will remain persistent both in work and faith will finally be ushered into those new lands (cf. 22:1-5).

We have observed that both texts uphold a belief in one God. It also became clear that the Kenyan people rediscovered the notion of a land easily from their familiar point of lands, once they had an encounter of the garden city introduced by the arrival of the Bible in Kenya. We also noted that since the two stories are different both in space and time, reading them together needs care. Such differences could feature in the sense that, while destruction is a major theme before the new garden of John descends, to the Kikuyu story destruction of the colonial development is their aim, but their departure. We equally noted that though there are discordant voices between the two, such couldn't nullify the fact that John's garden/city makes sense to and appeals to African religiosity. So while the two cannot be the same, the Kikuyu story helps land-minded Kenyan communities to understand the Apocalypse and vice versa. This means that the African narratives could be a basis for African biblical scholarship in the context of preaching and explaining the book of Revelation among the Kikuyu and the Africans in general. The ultimate conclusion of this kind of contrapuntal reading lies in the view that the Apocalypse and the African narratives, refer to the expectation of all time that may only be partially realised in the risen Christ, offering hope that keep people going.

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ENDNOTES

1. A contrapuntal approach is taken here as a method in postcolonial criticism.
2. Through books (e.g. *Facing Mount Kenya*) songs and vernacular pamphlets, the Kikuyu freedom fighters were able to reconfigure traditional myths to encourage and challenge their people to join in the struggle for freedom (Pugliese, 2003: 97-120).
3. A contrapuntal perspective suggests that the Bible as a cultural text shares certain qualities and experiences with other texts (oral or written) in our culture and so we can reread both in harmony and in opposition to them.
4. cf. Kovacs and Rowland 2004:222. They argue that much writing inspired by this passage is oriented towards the future.
5. For more information see Rossing (1999:160) and Kraybill (1996: 209-12). They argue that the river had a major cause of watering the whole Garden to keep it productive throughout the year.
6. The eschatology of the vision of the garden both in Revelation and in Kikuyu myth is a revelation of the direction of the present history by means of future realities. The present concerns itself with the direction of all situations and circumstances towards that expected future. Therefore the final end of the vision/story as a utopia is that it is able to give meaning and direction to the present situations of life. The whole question about the utopia of this garden is not whether it can or cannot occur in history but rather its ability to offer hope in the present environment and as a result redirect out thinking and action.
7. Gikuyu is the name of the founder of the tribe and it will only be used here to mean that, while the Kikuyu will mean the tribe itself unless otherwise stated.
8. The Kikuyu myth of origin is one of the most recurring icons in Ngugi's novels, it seems to be the cornerstone of his works and it features in virtually all his novels, even though it is most prominent in his earlier novels (1964, 1965). This and the biblical allusions that had become part of the contemporary culture of the Kikuyu remain the chief characteristic of Ngugi's works.
9. The image of Babylon as super empire was cultivated in the prophetic writings, particularly those of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. By invoking the archetypal great city, John made an incisive and far-reaching claim, Rome had become the current embodiment of Babylon.
10. The catastrophe will not be on the existing land and buildings as in John's story where the present must be replaced with the new. This, however, does not mean that the liberation is smooth: it is equally catastrophic in the sense that many people would die fighting for liberation.



11. For more information, see Robinson (1960:94) who defines eschatology as a science of the end, this definition is in line with the semantics of the word *eschaton*, which means 'the last' that, is of time. So eschatology means the last things at the end of this physical world and all life in it. Such a meaning connects eschatology with 'apocalypse'. A connection between 'eschatology' and 'apocalypse' justifies or allows us to talk of 'apocalyptic eschatology'. Rowland (1982:26) defines 'apocalyptic eschatology' as the 'doctrine of the two ages, a pessimistic attitude towards the present, supernatural intervention as the only basis for redemption and an urgent expectation of a dawn of a new age'.
12. We will not engage into the scholarly debate of either the realised or the absent eschatology in both the Apocalypse of John and the Kikuyu myth. Ours is only to highlight it as a concept that has emanated from our contrapuntal fashion. There is, however, fertile ground for research on the eschatology of myths, which could be researched in future.
13. African thinkers in a postcolonial era are reflecting upon the new modes or paradigms that are developing or need to be developed in almost every discipline, particularly in theological studies in Africa. A common way of referring to this change is to speak of a 'paradigm shift'. A paradigm shift can be described differently, it can be said to be a new model for trying to conceive what we are actually doing when we try to do theology (cf. Nolan 1990:97).
14. While this may not be the correct scholarly understanding of eschatology from a western point of view, it makes more sense to Africans, who do not in their traditions spiritualise the future to an extent of avoiding being involved in the improvement of the present social world (they struggled hard for liberation cf. Lonsdale, 2003: 55-75). For the Kikuyu *bururi* (land) belongs to them and they have no concept of going to heaven and avoiding hell because their eschatology is not particularly utopian.