

DIVINE PROVIDENCE OR GOOD LUCK?

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

Matthew Michael¹

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.² 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.³ For the ancient Greeks, fate was the inescapable companion of every person with the power to control everyone. No mortal or even the gods

¹ Dr. Matthew Michael received his PhD at ECWA Theological Seminary Jos (JETS) in Nigeria, and is academic dean at ECWA Theological Seminary Kagoro in northern Nigeria.

² 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.

³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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

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

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ 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.¹¹

However, the Bible provides rich illustrations of divine providence.¹² 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.¹³

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

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

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

¹³ 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”¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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

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

¹⁸ 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).

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

²⁰ 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.²¹

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.²² The latter term, 'good fortune', is actually an archaic term for good luck.²³ 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..."²⁴ He observed that Pompey "thought himself extremely lucky."²⁵ 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."²⁶ For the Roman military dictator Sulla, Plutarch observed, "his good fortune never left him and indeed actually took part in his funeral."²⁷ 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."²⁸ 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.²⁹ Plutarch also notes that Sulla "...joined with others in emphasizing the part played by

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

²² 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.

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

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

providence...and accepted his dependence on Fortune.”³⁰ 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.”³¹ 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.³²

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.³³

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

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

³² *Ibid.*, 305.

³³ *Ibid.*, 308.

disappeared; and also the dimming of the sun.”³⁴ 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.³⁵ Many African societies recognize the governing presence of a divine being in guarding, protecting, and controlling creation and salvation.³⁶ God is also conceived as a Governor, King, Lord and Judge of the world.³⁷ 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.”³⁸ 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

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 309.

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 63-70.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 71-79.

³⁸ *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.³⁹

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."⁴⁰ 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.'⁴¹

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."⁴² 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."⁴³

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

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

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴³ *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.”⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵ 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.”⁴⁶ 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.”⁴⁷ 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”.⁴⁸

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,

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

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁸ *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.⁴⁹

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.

⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

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.”⁵² The Psalmist believed that the wild animals look to God for their meals,⁵³ and that Yahweh is responsible for feeding the cattle.⁵⁴ The book of Job declares that God directs the stars in their courses and is responsible for dawn breaking.⁵⁵ According to

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

⁵¹ Job 37:6-13. New International Version, International Bible Society, 1984.

⁵² Matthew 5:45.

⁵³ Psalms 104:27-29.

⁵⁴ Psalms 104:14.

⁵⁵ Job 38: 32, 12.

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

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

⁵⁶ 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."⁵⁷ Chrysostom recognized the providence of God is "everywhere directing all things according to its own wisdom!"⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ 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 (accessed May 31, 2007).

⁵⁸ 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 (accessed May 31, 2007).

⁵⁹ 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.”⁶⁰ 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 ...⁶¹

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.⁶²

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,

⁶⁰ 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 (accessed May 31, 2007).

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

⁶² James Arminius, “Divine Providence,” *Works of James Arminius*, 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.⁶³

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.”⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵

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

⁶³ John Calvin, “Institutes of Christian Religion,” www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iv.i.xviii.html (accessed May 31, 2007).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

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

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.”⁶⁷ 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.”⁶⁸ Similarly, Millard Erickson states that divine providence is moving creation to its expected end.⁶⁹ 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.”⁷⁰ 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.”⁷¹

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

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

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

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

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

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 388.

⁷¹ *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.⁷²

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.

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