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A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-02.php

Practical or Theological Considerations?

The first article, *Byang Kato: A Theological Reappraisal* by Tim Palmer, observes that although Kato has been criticized variously as a rejectionist in respect to culture, primary sources would place him as a conversionist like Niebuhr calling for the transformation of culture. He served as a prophetic voice, challenging the prevailing doctrines of his time. His greatest fear for the church were the threats of universalism and syncretism, which would penetrate and destroy the young African Church. If Kato is to be judged, should be based on the historical context in terms of theology and language and ecclesiastical scene in the early 1970's.

The second article, *The Image of God in Leadership: A Contextual Exploration in Theology of Leadership* by Gregg Okesson, seeks to briefly establish the need for a livable theology of leadership within the African context. The author notes that an authentic leader receives his identity from God and his followers. He emphasizes that the image of God is both the intrinsic locus of leadership as well as its goal. He defines leadership in terms of "influence" which emanates from God's image and is directed again to the restoration of that same image of God in humanity.

The third article, *Diffusing Apparent Biblical Contradictions: A logical demonstration* by Joseph B. O. Okello, is an argument that there is no inconsistency in scripture. Differences between biblical statements such as "You shall not commit murder" (Ex. 20:13) and "there is a time to kill" (Eccl. 3: 3) do not contradict "because of the special case of a sub-contrary relation that sentences about "murder" bears to sentences about "kill"(p.50). The author relies quite heavily on logic to determine whether or not the action of murdering is identical to the act of killing. His interpretation of the "two verbs presupposes a use of the historical-grammatical method. He states that "the advantage of this approach is that one can be involved in a meaningful dialogue with a person subscribing to other methods of interpretation without having to be caught up with debates on the correct method of interpretation" (p.55).

The fourth article, *Should curses continue? An Argument for Imprecatory Psalms in Biblical Theology* by Jace Richardson Broadhurst attempts to “wrestle with the issue of the Psalms and especially the imprecatory psalms and their placement in Biblical Theology.”(p.63) The author cites “imprecation” as an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one’s enemies, or the enemies of God.”(p.66) He lists five possible solutions of how imprecatory Psalms have been interpreted. The most popular one is that these curses are simply David’s sentiments—the anger and hurt of a human author—and not those of the Holy Spirit. Although many scholars do not accept the poetic genre as fitting readily into their Biblical theology, Psalms must be seen as a part of revelation. He concludes that the singing of imprecations should continue in a desire for the vindication of God’s name.

The fifth article, *Contextualized Readings and Translations of the New Testament in Africa* by Ernst R. Wendland notes that valid interpretation of the N.T. must be founded upon and grow out of a thorough, perceptive prior—understanding of the OT canon and related documents. The author raises a number of important interpretive and communication—based issues that need to be raised when investigating the nature, extent, and results of the various formal acts of contextualising the Bible—and/or specific Christian sub—community. The activity of Bible translation itself generates significant indigenous church growth and at the same time greatly encourages various creative, contextualised readings of Scripture. This inevitably leads in turn to the development of African—based theological conceptualization and creative religious verbalization in the vernacular, where it really counts.

The author raises questions as to what can be done “to more actively and successfully encourage valid, contextualised readings and linguistically “domesticated” translations of the NT in Africa”? He gives seven brief and interrelated suggestions vital to this concern. He concludes by giving the challenge that “It is certainly time for the dynamic voice of African Christianity to be heard more loudly and clearly within its own setting—and also in the world at large” (p.111).

Byang Kato: A Theological Reappraisal

Timothy Palmer

The late Byang Kato is a Nigerian theologian who died at a young age about 30 years ago. In the past two or three decades, he has been praised by some and castigated by others. This paper attempts a reappraisal of his theology.

Often Kato is stereotyped as an extremist in terms of African theology. Prof. Kwame Bediako is one who devoted much attention to Kato in his writings. In 1983 he submitted a useful Ph.D. dissertation which compares the thought of a few early North African theologians with a few 20th century African theologians. This thesis was published in 1992 under the title of "Theology and Identity." There Bediako says:

Byang Henry Kato came to embody the very antithesis of the basic positions enunciated by the African theologians we have studied so far. Virtually everything he wrote was intended as a reaction to, and a rebuttal of, much that went to constitute the 'African theology' of the last two decades.¹

Bediako calls Kato the "dissenting voice in modern African theology" because of his postulate of "radical discontinuity between African tradition and Christian faith." Thus Kato's legacy to African theological thought is "problematic."²

In an article originally published in 1994, Bediako surveys a few representative African theologians and puts Kato "at the other extreme of the spectrum" because of the "radical discontinuity" which he "stoutly

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¹ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 386.

² *Ibid.*, 391, 415.

championed.” Kato is thus excluded from the “middle ground” between Idowu’s radical continuity and Kato’s own supposed “radical discontinuity.”³ But is this “radical discontinuity” a disjunction between Christianity and African traditional religion, or between Christianity and culture? Bediako suggests that it is both.

In his thesis, Prof. Bediako compares Kato with Tertullian. Using categories from H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*,⁴ the impression is given that Kato is a rejectionist in respect to culture in the same way as Tertullian is alleged to be. Niebuhr gives Tertullian the “Christ against Culture” label, and so one assumes from Bediako that Kato too is rejectionistic in his view of culture. But this is open to question.

Mercy Oduyoye is another person who stereotypes Kato as one who rejects the African worldview. She writes: “This rejection of the African worldview by an African shows how successful the Christian missions were in alienating Africans from their ‘Africanness.’”⁵ For Oduyoye, Kato is rejectionistic toward culture.

It is frequently assumed that Kato opposed contextualization. In a recent paper, Kato was criticized for holding to “only one theology” and thus opposing contextualization. Adrian Helleman writes: “contextualization of theology is happening, and it will continue to happen, whether we like it or not. We can pretend, ostrich-like, that it is not; or we can hinder it, as Kato does, because of theological blinders . . .”⁶ Again, Kato is perceived as hindering contextualization.

A superficial glance at the table of contents of Kato’s doctoral thesis would seem to confirm this view. The title of the fifth chapter boldly proclaims: “‘African Theology’: Described and Rejected.”⁷ What more can

³ Kwame Bediako, “Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century,” in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, ed. S. Ngewa et al. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998), 62.

⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

⁵ Mercy Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 62.

⁶ Adrian Helleman, “The Fourth Self: Self-Theologizing or the Contextualization of Theology,” presented at the Jos-Bukuru Theological Society, 5th May 2003, 13, 15.

⁷ Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 3rd printing (Nairobi:

one say? Is Kato not a rejectionist in respect to culture and contextualization?

It is our belief that Kato has been misunderstood by many students of African theology. Byang Kato died almost thirty years ago, in a period when African theology was just beginning. It is unfortunate that Kato is too often treated anachronistically. Too often his statements are compared with those of theologians writing twenty or thirty years later. This paper attempts a reassessment of Kato's theology within the historical context in which he lived. We believe that such a study will place Kato in the mainstream of evangelical African theology.

Historical Setting

On December 19, 1975, Byang Kato died tragically off the coast of Kenya at the age of 39. Only two years earlier, in 1973, he completed his doctorate with the submission of his thesis, published two years later as *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. In the last two years of his life, Kato was General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar (AEAM, now AEA), during which he produced a number of occasional lectures and writings.⁸

Kato's main period of theological activity is thus restricted to the first five years of the 1970s. It is thus essential that he be placed in this brief historical time period and that he be evaluated according to that time frame.

The early 1970s in Africa were a time of enormous cultural and theological ferment. Most African countries had recently become independent, and thus there was a great cultural reawakening. A cultural revolution was happening.

According to Adrian Hastings, this cultural revolution was a reaction to the lack of understanding and appreciation of the African culture by the

Evangel Publishing House, 1987), 9.

⁸ See Christina Breman, *The Association of Evangelicals in Africa* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1996), pp. 532-43, for a comprehensive bibliography of Kato's works. See Sophie de la Haye, *Byang Kato: Ambassador for Christ* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1986) for a popular biography of Kato.

European colonial officials and missionaries. Hastings, who is Roman Catholic, claims that the church was “the most subtle and the most powerful source of cultural alienation.”⁹ Thus there was a call to reject European influence and to return to African cultural roots.

President Mobutu’s policy of authenticity in Zaire was the boldest attempt to assert African cultural values. The height of this policy occurred from 1971 to 1973, precisely when Kato was writing his doctoral dissertation. Christian first names were banned throughout the country; Cardinal Malula was expelled from his residence and went into temporary exile; confessional organizations and newspapers were banned; and some major seminaries were closed.¹⁰ In these early years, the cultural revolution was taking a decidedly anti-Christian appearance.

Kato reports that in Chad traditional initiation ceremonies were revived. Part of the initiation process involved renouncing one’s Christian faith. Some Christians who refused to cooperate were tortured and even martyred.¹¹

The now almost forgotten name of Okot p’Bitek was prominent in those days. He called for a return to traditional African religions.¹²

This cultural revolution impacted theology. A renewed interest in the African traditional religions took place. The relationship between Christianity and the African traditional religions was examined. People began talking of African Christian theology, but the term in those days was open to different interpretations.

A search for an African Christianity was initiated especially by the

⁹ Adrian Hastings, *African Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), 42; cf. chapter 3.

¹⁰ Ngindu Mushete, “Authenticity and Christianity in Zaire,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. E. Fashole Luke et al. (London: Rex Collings, 1978), 228-41.

¹¹ Kato, *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith* (Jos: Challenge, 1976), 21-23.

¹² Kato, “Contextualization and Religious Syncretism,” *Biblical Christianity in Africa* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1985), 26-27.

and spiritual activities is not only possible, it is even favoured by the church. The liturgical renewal is a living example of this. And in this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity.¹³

In the 1960s and 1970s, people began to talk of African Theology or African Christian Theology. But there was a lack of unanimity on the term. For many it was suspect. In 1971, the venerable *Journal of Religion in Africa* advised against the usage of the term "African theology." Philip Turner wrote:

It does not seem to help much to speak of 'African Theology.' The term is viewed with suspicion because the interest in traditional religion associated with it calls up in the mind of many a return to paganism.¹⁴

Kwesi Dickson reports that one year later J.K. Agbeti also was "questioning the suitability of the expression 'African theology' as used of Christian theology in Africa: in his opinion, the expression 'African theology' is misleading in the Christian context."¹⁵ These years (1971 and 1972) were the very years when Kato rejected the term "African theology" in his doctoral thesis.

The 1960s and early 1970s saw a number of attempts to contextualize the Gospel into the African context. Some of these efforts were clearly syncretistic. In 1973, Bolaji Idowu published his *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*.¹⁶ This book glorifies the traditional religion as being truly African. Idowu concludes the book by praising a "faithful remnant" whose loyalty to the religion of their forbears will continue steadfast."¹⁷ After Kato's death, Gabriel Setiloane, Samuel Kibico and Christian Gaba published papers that advocated radical continuity between

¹³ Cited in Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology—Adaptation or Incarnation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977), 20.

¹⁴ Philip Turner, "The Wisdom of the Fathers and the Gospel of Christ," in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 4 (1971):64-65; cited by Kwesi Dickson in *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 122.

¹⁵ Dickson, 121.

¹⁶ Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 208.

Christianity and the traditional religion.¹⁸ Bediako rightly observes that if everything is continuity, wherein lies the newness of the Christian gospel?¹⁹

One of the issues being discussed during this period was the question as to whether there is only one theology or many. Although today it is common to speak of many theologies, in those days it was often assumed that there is just one Christian theology. Two examples will suffice.

In 1970 Harry Sawyerr presented a significant paper entitled "What Is African Theology?" There he quotes approvingly Tom Beecham's suggestion that "there is only one 'eternal Word of God, unchangeable' and therefore there 'can be only one theology' which has to be made incarnate in the African situation."²⁰ These are very evangelical sentiments from an "ecumenical" and a father of African theology!

A year after Kato's death, a Roman Catholic professor in Kinshasa presented a paper in Dar es Salaam with the pregnant title, "Unity of Faith and Pluralism in Theology." In this essay, Ngindu Mushete quotes with approval a French theologian who wrote: "Knowledge is one . . . Philosophy is one . . . Thus theology is primarily one." Thus there is both unity and plurality in theology.²¹ It was thus common in the 1970s to speak of one Christian theology.

During this early period, there was no complete agreement on the theological method for doing contextualization. Some people talked of adaptation, others of translation. Sawyerr referred to the many advocates "for the adaptation of Christian theology to worship." For him it was important to establish "bridgeheads" or points of contact "by which the Christian Gospel could be effectively transmitted to the African peoples."²²

¹⁸ Bediako, "Understanding African Theology in the 20th century," 61-62.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁰ Harry Sawyerr, "What is African Theology?," *The Practice of Presence*, ed. J. Parratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 94; cf. 87.

²¹ Ngindu Mushete, "Unity of Faith and Pluralism in Theology," *The Emergent Gospel*, ed. S. Torres and V. Fabella (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1978), 54, fn. 3.

²² Sawyerr, "What is African Theology?," 87, 96.

The popular term “incarnation” was only beginning to become popular. The year before Kato died, the Roman Catholic bishops of Africa rejected the theology of adaptation as being “completely out-of-date” and called for “a theology of incarnation.”²³ But Protestants did not follow the Catholics instantly or universally.

On the global front in the early 1970s, there was also considerable political, social and theological ferment. The Vietnam War engaged the attention of the world. The Civil Rights movement led to the Black Power movement. Black theology and liberation theology were born at this time.

The publication of James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969 marked the formal beginning of Black Theology. Cone’s ideas were rapidly accepted in parts of South Africa. A collection of essays entitled *Black Theology: The South African Voice* was first published in 1972 but was banned by the South African government and then published in London in 1973.²⁴ One should immediately say that the unjust racial situation in America and South Africa demanded a theological response. These writers wrote out of a situation of discrimination and oppression. But their writings were reactionary. In 1974 the notable African theologian John Mbiti criticized Black Theology’s “excessive preoccupation with liberation,” and he said that this theology was not really relevant for the rest of Africa.²⁵ Salvation, or liberation, in early Black Theology was seen almost exclusively in terms of social or racial redemption. In the thirty years since these beginnings, there have been more responsible attempts at Black Theology. The works of Desmond Tutu especially come to mind. But these happened after Kato’s death.

The early 1970s also saw the emergence of Latin American liberation theology. Gustavo Gutierrez’s seminal *A Theology of Liberation* appeared in Spanish in 1971 and in English in 1973. For him, as in Black Theology,

²³ Shorter, p. 150.

²⁴ *Black Theology: The South African Voice*, ed. Basil Moore (London: C. Hurst, 1973).

²⁵ John Mbiti, “An African Views American Black Theology,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*. Vol. 1: 1966-1979, eds. J. Cone and G. Wilmore (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), pp. 381-83.

salvation is primarily a political and social liberation. Gutierrez teaches a universal salvation: "salvation embraces all men and the whole man; the liberating action of Christ . . . is at the heart of the historical current of humanity."²⁶

The same universalism was becoming the official doctrine of the World Council of Churches. In the year that Kato finished his Th.D. thesis (1973), the World Council of Churches held their Commission for World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) in Bangkok. The theme of the conference was "Salvation Today." According to David Bosch, salvation was defined "exclusively in this-worldly terms."²⁷

John Stott reports that a Roman Catholic observer at Bangkok was amazed that theologians could discuss salvation for a whole conference without any mention of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith or the New Testament teaching on everlasting life.²⁸

If salvation has only social dimensions, then "mission" will be redefined. In preparation for the 1968 World Council of Churches meeting in Uppsala, the goal of mission was defined as humanization and shalom. Mission was seen primarily as social development. Bosch observes that for the World Council of Churches, the "distinction between church and world [had], for all intents and purposes, been dropped completely."²⁹ In this case, mission as evangelism becomes meaningless. This was the "ecumenical theology" to which Kato was reacting.

The early 1970s were thus a period of enormous theological experimentation and ferment. Not everything was bad. There was a greater awareness of the non-Western world and of the church's responsibilities to the world. But in the process a number of central theological concepts were being redefined. Biblical truths were being questioned. There was a need

²⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. C. Inda and J. Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973), p. 168.

²⁷ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), pp. 396-97.

²⁸ John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p. 96.

²⁹ Bosch, pp. 382-83.

for a prophetic voice.

Byang Kato: A Prophetic Voice

Abraham Heschel describes a prophet thus:

The prophet is a watchman, a servant, a messenger of God . . . The words of the prophet are stern, sour, stinging. But behind his austerity is love and compassion for mankind . . . The task of the prophet is to convey the word of God.³⁰

Byang Kato could be called a prophet. He challenged the prevailing doctrines of his time. He brought the word of God into his situation. He used stern and stinging language.

This is not to say that he made no mistakes. But because he felt passionately about Christ's church, he was bold enough to speak out on vital issues.

The first chapter of his doctoral thesis is prophetic. Kato writes:

The primary purpose of this book is to sound an alarm and warn Christians on both sides of the argument concerning the dangers of universalism. These dangers are theological pitfalls indeed. To forewarn is to forearm.³¹

This is clearly prophetic language.

Kato's primary fear for the church was the threats of universalism and syncretism. He was afraid that the uniqueness of the Gospel would be lost. He was concerned lest the universalistic theology of the "ecumenical movement" would penetrate and destroy the young African church. Consequently Kato often used strong language against theologians and theological movements that he felt were harmful to the African church.

In his doctoral thesis, Kato attacked the theologies of two prominent African theologians: Prof. Bolaji Idowu and Prof. John Mbiti. His primary concern was the implicit universalism and syncretism of their theologies.

³⁰ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper, 1962), I:20, 12, 26.

³¹ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 16.

In respect to Idowu, we want to suggest that Kato was on target. An objective reading of Idowu's works suggests that for him Christianity and African traditional religion were both acceptable ways of approaching God. As a matter of fact, the traditional religion is in some respects preferable because it was more indigenous. Bediako rightly labels Idowu's approach that of "radical continuity," and, as observed above, Bediako is critical of such a radical approach.³² Kato's concern about Idowu's theology has been echoed by others since him.

Kato's treatment of John Mbiti is more problematic. In his thesis, Kato alleges that Mbiti holds to a "universalism that poses a threat to Biblical Christianity in Africa"; and that Mbiti rejects the future second coming of Christ and the reality of future eschatological events, including heaven, hell and the individual resurrection.³³

In respect to universalism, Mbiti possibly accepts Karl Barth's view that in the end God's grace will prevail and that everyone will ultimately be saved.³⁴ But a charge of universalism cannot exhaust Mbiti's thinking. A reading of his work on New Testament eschatology impresses upon one the deep christological orientation of his theology. This work opens with a significant christological statement: "The Gospel is a revolution in which Jesus Christ is at the centre as the Lord of Faith."³⁵ Later he writes:

The life that Jesus Christ brings to the sinner both now and hereafter is the heart of N.T. salvation. To reject Him is to remain in a state so terrible that the symbol of Gehenna and its associations is the most effective manner of warning that the Bible can use . . . Thus, Gehenna is a christological symbol, the negation of incorporation into Christ.³⁶

C.S. Lewis would agree with Mbiti that some of the Bible's eschatological language is symbolic. Think of Lewis' picture of hell as being a very cold and lonely place. The essence of hell, according

³² Bediako, "Understanding African Theology," 61-62.

³³ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 57, 83, 85-86.

³⁴ John Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 179-81.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

to Mbiti and Lewis, would be the separation from Christ.

Mbiti is in line with much of twentieth-century New Testament theology when he emphasizes both present and future eschatology. George E. Ladd says that the meaning of the presence of the Kingdom is a new era of salvation. "The age of fulfillment is present, but the time of consummation still awaits the Age to Come."³⁷ This is essentially Mbiti's view.

Although Mbiti's final eschatological perspective may be universalistic, Mbiti's theology is strongly Christological. Universalism and syncretism are not the best descriptions of Mbiti's theology.

Mbiti's studies on African traditional religion are very learned. His *Concepts of God in Africa*,³⁸ although not without mistakes as Kato observes, is a very impressive work. But to say that "the Bible becomes superfluous in the face of such a comprehensive work"³⁹ is not fair to Mbiti's christocentric theology. In his work on eschatology, Mbiti insists that "Biblical Theology must be the basis of any theological reflection."⁴⁰ Mbiti's methodology would be what he calls "Contact theology, a Theology built upon areas of apparent similarities and contact between Christianity and traditional African concepts and practices."⁴¹

It is significant, according to Mbiti's testimony, that only ten days before his death, Kato apologized to Prof. Mbiti "for having unjustifiably attacked [him] and promised to rewrite and change the relevant parts of his book." Mbiti says that Kato's death "was certainly a major loss for African theology."⁴²

Despite an apparent misreading of parts of Mbiti, Kato's wider concerns were still valid. A few months before his death, Kato delivered an

³⁷ G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 80.

³⁸ John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970).

³⁹ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 69.

⁴⁰ Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology*, 189.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴² J. Mbiti, "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends," in *African Theology en Route*, eds. K. Appiah-Kubi and S. Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 85.

important lecture criticizing African theology, ecumenical theology, black theology and liberation theology.⁴³ This lecture, first delivered as a public lecture at the University of Nairobi, can be criticized for its generalizations. However, it contains important concerns.

Kato's rejection of the term African theology was not isolated. As we have seen above, notable "ecumenical" theologians warned against the term. Kato's fear of syncretism was justified by Prof. Idowu's writings. But as we will see later, Kato did not reject contextualization.

As for ecumenical, black and liberation theologies, the historical survey above shows some of the alarming trends of the early 1970s. Generally, salvation was redefined as a social and political event. "Ecumenical" theologians often no longer spoke of the need for a personal conversion to Jesus Christ. Evangelism and missions were redefined to exclude the necessity of conversion to Christ. Justification by faith became irrelevant. These were very disturbing trends, and Kato was absolutely right to challenge them. Kato's voice was a prophetic voice.

Kato was concerned that the church would be destroyed by these theological directions. In respect to Europe and parts of North America, Kato's fears were justified. The Department of Theology at the Free University in Amsterdam can serve as an example of European trends. This university was founded in 1880 by Abraham Kuyper and it boasted professors like G.C. Berkouwer and Johannes Verkuyl. But today two of their theological professors are no longer Christian. The professor emeritus of ethics, Harry Kuitert, is no longer a Christian and according to recent reports not even a theist. Prof. Verkuyl's successor in missiology, Anton Wessels, is a universalist, and does not believe in missions.⁴⁴ This is precisely the theology that Byang Kato was so fearful of. This universalism is still very prevalent in Europe and North America.

Kato was afraid that this theology would also sweep through Africa and destroy Africa's young churches. His Th.D. thesis opens with this

⁴³ Kato, "Theological Issues in Africa," in *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 40-52.

⁴⁴ See Timothy Palmer, "The Denial of Missions in the Missiology of Anton Wessels," in *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (1997): 140-44.

sentence: "The stage is well set for universalism in Africa."⁴⁵ Kato was particularly worried that the money and influence of the World Council of Churches through the All Africa Council of Churches (AACC) would destroy Africa's Christianity. As the European and American experience shows, his concern is a valid one.

Remarkably, though, in Africa Kato's fears were for the most part not realized. The last couple of decades in this continent have turned out differently. The evangelical-ecumenical divide of which Kato writes still has some validity in Europe and North America, but such language is less appropriate in 21st century Africa.

Philip Jenkins in his recent *The Next Christendom* uses language borrowed from Andrew Walls and Kwame Bediako when he says that the center of gravity of the Christian church has shifted from the north to the south. There are now more non-western than western Christians in the world. This shift is significant, Jenkins argues, because non-western Christianity tends to be more conservative. This is the case in all churches: Roman Catholic, mainline and evangelical.⁴⁶

The classic illustration of this development is the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion of 1998. Traditionally the Anglican church has been considered "ecumenical." But the "evangelical-ecumenical divide" was found inside the Anglican church with the evangelicals coming especially from Africa and the "ecumenicals" coming primarily from North America. The Nigerian Anglican bishops in particular insisted on traditional Biblical values over against those of the liberal North American bishops.

The current row over homosexuality is another example. The position of the Anglican primate of Nigeria, the Most Rev. Peter Akinola, again illustrates the evangelical posture of the Nigerian Anglican communion.

From my perspective in Nigeria, which is the country in Africa with

⁴⁵ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

the most Christians, the evangelical-ecumenical divide is not prominent here. The mainline churches are increasingly evangelical in their worldview. The Nigerian picture confirms the truth of Jenkins' thesis.

If there is a theological divide in Africa, it may be between the "ivory-tower" university departments of religion on the one hand and the African grassroots Christianity on the other. But even this divide is less pronounced now that there are more evangelical lecturers in the African universities.

Byang Kato was a prophet in the early 1970s. He called attention to dangerous trends in Africa and worldwide. Although he was not without mistakes, his basic message was and still holds true.

Christ and Culture

In light of the above, what is Kato's view of culture and the traditional African religion? When Bediako calls Kato a representative of radical discontinuity, what precisely is meant? Is this a radical discontinuity between Christ and the traditional African religion or between Christ and the African culture?

As to the former, it should be said that radical discontinuity with the traditional religion is not always bad. The Old Testament prophets insisted on a clean break with the pagan religion. Idols and temples were destroyed and pagan priests were killed. Elijah's words on Mt. Carmel are still relevant: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" (1 Kings 18:21). And, according to the book of Acts, Paul was often rejectionistic towards paganism.

While Idowu and Mbiti emphasized the positive aspects of traditional religion, often glorifying the past, Kato spoke from an experience of bondage to the traditional religion. In his own traditional culture, "the life of a Jaba person is dominated by fear. . . . The spirits are always associated with 'Kumo,' Satan. . . . The dominating fears and superstitions concerning the spirit world are so dreadful that an instantaneous and complete cure is what Jaba people need."⁴⁷ Radical discontinuity in this context is not bad

⁴⁷ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 36-38.

but rather liberating.

But in terms of the worldviews of African traditional religion and Christianity, Kato recognizes that there is continuity as well as discontinuity. Frequently he insists that the traditional African had a knowledge of God: the “Jaba believe in the existence of a Supreme Being”; Africans “have the vestiges of Imago Dei”; “it has been firmly established that the traditional worshippers have an awareness of the Supreme Being who is none other than God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”; “non-Christian religions prove man has a concept of God.”⁴⁸ Surely there is continuity here. But in line with theologians like Luther and Calvin, Kato teaches that this knowledge of God is incomplete.

There are other points of contact between the traditional religion and Christianity. Kato observes that the “Jaba believe in a future life;” also the “Jaba can and do conceive of a Supreme Being and the spirit world.”⁴⁹ Here too there is continuity coupled with discontinuity.

Although he does not share Bediako’s use of the Latin term, it is obvious that the traditional religion for Kato was a *praeparatio evangelica*. Kato’s recognition of these points of contact is parallel to Sawyer’s “bridgeheads by which the Christian Gospel could be effectively transmitted to the African peoples.”⁵⁰

In respect to traditional religion, then, Kato stands on the middle ground holding to both continuity and discontinuity between the Gospel and the traditional religion. In respect to culture, too, Kato also assumes the middle ground.

In his *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith*, Kato states that originally culture was God-given. It is God who placed us in the world and in our culture. “Every people are a creation of God, and God has given every people a life-style.” However from the Fall, sin corrupted culture. “Idolatry and immorality have characterized every culture.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 29, 75, 110, 181.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 41, 44.

⁵⁰ Sawyer, “What is African Theology?” 96.

⁵¹ Kato, *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith*, 34-35.

Yet Kato asserts that “every culture has both good things and bad things.” This is because man is made in the image of God. It is wrong, for example, for missionaries to condemn all of African culture.⁵²

Kato was obviously an African who loved his African culture. He was not a rejectionist, like H. Richard Niebuhr’s Tertullian; instead he was conversionist like Niebuhr’s Augustine calling for the transformation of culture. Repeatedly in his *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith* Kato proclaims: “The Bible becomes the final judge of their culture . . . *The Bible is the final judge of every culture . . . THE BIBLE MUST BE FINAL JUDGE OF EVERY CULTURE.*”⁵³ He compares the Word of God to a surgical knife that must be used on every culture.⁵⁴ This is the language of transformation, not rejectionism.

Elsewhere Kato states:

It is God’s will that Africans, on accepting Christ as their Saviour, become Christian Africans. Africans who become Christians should, therefore, remain Africans wherever their culture does not conflict with the Bible. It is the Bible that must judge culture. Wherever a conflict results, the cultural element must give way.⁵⁵

Augustine could not have said it better!

Finally, if culture is not all bad, then contextualization is possible. To assert that Kato did not believe in contextualization is to disregard the primary sources.

As boldly as Kato rejected the term “African theology” in the early 1970s, so boldly did he insist on contextualization. In 1974, using language similar to that of Pope Paul VI, Kato said: “Since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary.”⁵⁶ A year later he insisted:

⁵² Ibid., 34-36.

⁵³ Ibid., 12, 31, 56 (italics and capitals are Kato’s).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁵ Kato, “Theological Issues in Africa,” 42.

⁵⁶ Kato, “Contextualization and Religious Syncretism in Africa,” 23.

Contextualize without compromise. Let Christianity truly find its home in Africa, by adopting local hymnology, using native language, idioms and concepts to express the unchanging faith.⁵⁷

Again, in his doctoral thesis, Kato wrote: "Express Christianity in a truly African context, allowing it to judge the African culture and never allow the culture to take precedence over Christianity." This should be done by "expressing theological concepts in terms of the African situation." Significantly, "the squabbles of the West do not have to be the pattern for the younger churches. The final word has not yet been said in expressing Christianity."⁵⁸ With clear language like that, it is baffling how one can suggest that Kato opposes contextualization.

One scholar writing in 1986 suggested that as of then there were three different levels of contextualization: translation, adaptation and incarnation.⁵⁹ We have already seen that in 1975 incarnation was not popular among Protestants. An evaluation of Kato's writings suggests that he would be somewhere in between the translation and adaptation methods of contextualization.

We noted Pope Paul's address in 1969 advocating adaptation as a method of contextualization. Five years later, Byang Kato also advocated adaptation: "The New Testament has given us the pattern for cultural adaptations. . . . Contextualization can take place in liturgy, dress, language, church service and any other form of expression of the Gospel truth."⁶⁰

But in the same speech, Kato said: "Not only should the message be preached in the language best understood by the congregation, but the terminology of theology should be expressed the way common people can understand."⁶¹ This suggests the translation approach.

⁵⁷ Kato, "Christianity as an African Religion," in *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 38.

⁵⁸ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 182.

⁵⁹ Phillip Baker, "Transplant or Transpose," *TCNN Research Bulletin* 16 (1986): 4-26; reprinted in *TCNN Research Bulletin* 27 (1994): 13-26.

⁶⁰ Kato, "Contextualization and Religious Syncretism in Africa," 24.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

(Kato's refusal to substitute a different grain for the mustard seed⁶² should not be held against him. The new Hausa Bible translation of Matthew 13:31, like the old version, speaks of a "kwayar mastad.")

Like Prof. Osadolor Imasogie in his *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa*,⁶³ Kato says that contextualized theology should address those concerns that affect African Christians. He says that we should scratch where it itches. "The African problems of polygamy, family structure, spirit world, liturgy, to mention a few, need to be tackled by evangelical African theologians."⁶⁴ For Kato a contextual theology should address issues existential to the African Christian.

Kato defines contextualization as "making concepts or ideas relevant in a given situation."⁶⁵ As a theologian concerned about bringing the Gospel of Christ to his own situation, Kato certainly believed in contextualization.

Conclusion

One can silence a prophet by painting him as a radical or an extremist. This is not only unfortunate but also unfair. Byang Kato is not a representative of "radical discontinuity"; instead he is a mainline evangelical who sought to defend the faith and to contextualize it in the African culture. Kato wrote thirty years ago and should be judged by that historical context. Theological terminology and language were different then; and the ecclesiastical scene was not the same then. An evaluation of the African church today would put Kato solidly in the mainstream of African Christianity.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Osadolor Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* (Ibadan: University Press, 1983).

⁶⁴ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 182.

⁶⁵ Kato, "Contextualization and Religious Syncretism in Africa," in *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 23.

The Image of God in Leadership: A Contextual Exploration in Theology of Leadership

Gregg A. Okesson

Our world is full of leaders, yet we are rarely satisfied with them. We speak about leadership, write books and articles, and sponsor conferences and workshops on the topic. If we could measure success purely on the basis of the wealth of material on a given subject, then leadership would be humanity's crown achievement. Yet, sadly, such is not the case. Within the past two weeks, merely in Africa, a new President, Paul Kagame, has been elected into office in Rwanda with a 95% majority; Charles Taylor, the President of Liberia was forced into exile by his people; and the former Ugandan dictator, Idi Amin, died while also in exile. In few continents, as in Africa, have leaders offered greater hope, while simultaneously providing greater collective disappointment. The world hangs its highest hopes on the shoulder of its giant leaders, and reserves its bitterest resentment for the same.

If one clear voice, unaffected by the well meaning hagiography of writers, could emerge from the pages of history, she would tell us that humans are mildly obsessed with leaders and are willing to overlook many faults and abuses if we may momentarily gain a hero, a deliverer, or even an idol.

What is the cause of our obsession? As humans, we are intrinsically followers, to the core of our being. As such, in figurative terms, we are all like money strewn across the landscape, with many leaders seeking to 'cash in' on the wealth. The problem

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is not that we are followers (although it is related to what kind of followers we are, or to whom); rather, it lies in how leaders view their

followers, and ultimately, even themselves. Therefore, the fundamental issue in leadership revolves around identity.

My intention in writing this article is to take the first step toward developing a contextualized theology of leadership. While the author acknowledges and is indebted to the cacophony of voices on Christian leadership, these voices often do not go deep enough into the human condition and the character and intentions of our God-leader. Furthermore, as such, they often give rise to a bewildered response by the honest reader, resulting in questions such as, 'Even if I can believe in servant leadership, how is it really possible within Africa?' Our theology must be livable, or it is irrelevant. It must be applied to the core identity of a culture, or it should be discarded.

Therefore, I would like to suggest that the first place to begin in developing a theology of leadership is with the Image of God. This article seeks to briefly establish the need for a theology of leadership within the African context so as to develop some fundamental characteristics in a theology of leadership, which can be livable back into that context.¹ My thesis is simply to prove that the Image of God is both the intrinsic locus of leadership as well as the goal toward which true, godly leadership must be directed. Therefore, for the purposes of this article I will be defining leadership in terms of 'influence' which emanates from God's image and is directed again to the restoration of that same image of God in humanity.

African Conceptions of Leadership, Identity, and Authority

In order to contextualize a much-needed theology of leadership, one must have a deepening understanding of the world view and needs within that culture; these can be expressed in terms of myths, traditions, rituals, and sayings within a culture which carry cultural information. Obviously, the deeper one can probe the worldview, the deeper one can contextualize the theological truths.

¹ As a Western theologian in Africa, I readily acknowledge my limitations in terms of contextualization within the African culture. My purpose has never been to propose the answers, but rather to be a catalyst and facilitator for (and with) my African brothers and sisters.

Within the traditional African worldview, leadership, religion, and the community were² all intertwined within a collective whole. One could not separate the religious from the 'secular' as Western culture is known for doing, for the religious affects all of life, and was therefore fundamental to the identity, authority, and responsibilities of the leaders. As such, in the past, there were different levels of leadership: kings/queens, chiefs, prophets, medicine men and women, diviners, priests, elders, and finally, leaders of family groups. In all of these, however, the spiritual dimension was incorporated into the identity and responsibilities of the leader.

Identity of the African Leader

One of the most comprehensive features of African society is the collective identity of the community. John Mbiti's often repeated saying, "I am, because we are," captures the essence of this identity. In terms of leadership, the collective identity is only reinforced and strengthened by the corresponding identity of the leader. Laurenti Magesa says,

Leaders at the higher social levels of the lineage, clan, sodality or ethnic group represent and personify the life-force of the entire people more intensively than the family heads. They also personify the order of the world and the harmony that enables its life to continue for the benefit of humanity. This implies that the vital force of these leaders -- or the lack of it -- signifies the actual conditions and environment of the entire society.³

Likewise, E. Evans Pritchard, in his study on the Shilluk of Sudan, says that "a king symbolizes a whole society,"⁴ while Mbiti further

² My intention in using the past tense is signify that the traditional African world is changing as a result of global influences (i.e. secularism). There are still places where the traditional elements are highly instrumental in the lives of the people, but that global influences are more significant with respect to leadership. For a good treatment on this subject, see Victor Cole, "Concepts of Pastoral Leadership in Africa: A Case Study," in *AJET* 9:2 (1990).

³ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications, 1997), 217.

⁴ E. Evans-Pritchard, "The Divine Kingship of the Shilluk of the Nilotic Sudan," in *Social Anthropology and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press of Glenscoe, 1962), 210.

promotes this concept by saying that such leaders are the “divine symbol of their people’s health and welfare.”⁵ Therefore, the identity of the leader is the responsibility of the entire community because the prosperity and identity of the community is directly related to that leader’s identity.

I was living in Tanzania at the time when the first President of the country, Julius Nyerere, died. Nyerere, or Baba wa Taifa (Father of the Nation) as he was affectionately called, carried the collective identity of the Tanzanian people on his shoulders. It would not be an understatement to say that the entire country lost something of its identity with the death of their great President. His leadership transcended tribal barriers and his influence continued to grow even after he left office. Despite the relative failure of his economic policies, Julius Nyerere embodied the hopes and dreams of his people, which could readily be observed in the days of mourning following his death. This reality of collective leadership identity carries powerful spiritual truths and necessitates that we next examine authority for its relevance and relationship to identity.

Authority of the African Leader

If the identity of the people proceeds from the leader’s identity, where might the authority of the leader come from? There are two answers to this: first, the leader’s authority comes from God. Mbiti says, “It may be said that the first ruler was sent down from the sky by God, or was called or chosen by God to become king, . . . For that reason the ruler has names of praise like, ‘child of God,’ ‘son of God,’ and ‘the chosen of God.’”⁶ In so far as the leader arises from the authority of God, he likewise represents to the people some knowledge or words from God. In this context, Mbiti says that kings are “divine or sacral rulers, the shadow or reflection of God’s rule in the universe.”⁷

Secondly, the leader’s authority is reinforced by the submission, obedience, and perpetual loyalty from the community. This authority,

⁵ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Press, 1969), 181.

⁶ John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1975), 162.

⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 181.

and the rights and privileges entailed to it, were usually for the life of the leader, until his death. The reason for this was because of the leader-follower identity. Therefore, among the Luo community of Western Kenya, the king (or, ruoth), "derived his authority from his clan or sub tribe He was a semi-sacred person, because he represented not only the tribesmen that were alive, but also those who were buried in the tribal land."⁸ If the leader derived his authority from God, he also received it from the people. This enabled the community to function around the identity of the leader. Hence, we witness the movement from identity to authority, and then back to identity again.

Responsibilities of the African Leader

In as much as traditional African leadership arose out of identity and authority, it also came with various responsibilities. By virtue of the leader's proximity to God (in terms of authority and knowledge), the leader was compelled to use that authority and knowledge to preserve the community and reinforce its collective identity. Therefore, such responsibilities included: "to pass on tradition,"⁹ "the security and safety of their people,"¹⁰ and "to see to it that things are right between the visible and the invisible world and in the visible world itself."¹¹

There was no dichotomy between the spiritual needs of the people and those which might be termed 'secular.' As such, while there were spiritual specialists within the ranks of leaders (i.e. mediums, diviners, medicine men/women), the traditional leader also occupied significant spiritual power. This power, which arose from his rights as leader, was to be used for the fundamental needs of the people--whether seen or unseen. Magesa focuses upon this particular facet by stating, "In practical terms, the most significant purpose of existence of these

⁸ William R. Ochieng', "Colonial African Chiefs - Were They Primarily Self-seeking Scoundrels?" in *Politics and Nationalism in Colonial Kenya*, ed. Bethwell A. Ogot (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972), 49. Inherent within this picture is also the involvement of the ancestors. For the purposes of this paper, I will not deal with that particular issue, yet it deserves attention in constructing an authentic, traditional understanding of African leadership.

⁹ Magesa, 70.

¹⁰ Mbiti, 163.

¹¹ Magesa, 71.

leaders is to guard the power of life in the community.”¹²

Inherent within this picture one witnesses a very fascinating cycle of leader-follower identity: God gives the leader authority, which the people embrace. The people therefore believe it is for their identity (benefit) that they preserve, maintain, and develop the leader, who, for his part, has various responsibilities to perform for the benefit of the common good. Having performed these, he is further blessed by God, esteemed as a leader by the people, and continues with his responsibilities to the people.

Of course, what has been developed here is a representation of the highest leader within the given society, but elements of this identity-authority-responsibility cycle would continue down the structure of society and would be represented even (and especially) at the lower levels of leadership (i.e. family leadership). Furthermore, the reader will note that what has been developed is the ideal for that community. More often, the ideal was not attained and the leader took the privileges of his position to benefit and serve himself, rather than the people.

While the focus in the preceding section has primarily centred on the traditional past, the intrinsic elements of identity, authority, and responsibility are present and essential to understanding contemporary African leadership. The task for the remainder of this article is to develop the fundamentals of a theology whereby the strengths of the traditional past can be further developed, while, at the same time, critiquing and correcting the abuses.

Fundamentals in Developing a Theology of Leadership: The Image of God¹³

There are few topics as profoundly theological as leadership.

¹² *Ibid.*, 217.

¹³ A proper Theology of Leadership is basically Trinitarian in nature: it begins with the Image of God the Father within us, it continues by the providence of the Son and his nature and work to restore fallen humanity, which is further strengthened by the gifting and equipping of the Holy Spirit to “build the Body” and “glorify the Head.” This article is primarily concerned with the first of these, but cannot be understood apart from the other two ‘movements’ of leadership.

While the word 'leader' (or its derivatives) only occurs 290 times in the Bible, other titles and/or verbs (expressive of influence or authority) account for another 491 uses.¹⁴ God's intention as Creator was also to be our theocratic King (cf. Gn 1 Sam 8:7). Therefore, if God is the ideal King, than fundamental to any notion of true leadership must be the character of God and humanity's relationship with God, as expressed in Leviticus: 'I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people' (26:11,12 NIV)¹⁵ Further-more, when the fullness of salvation history arrived, God did indeed become our King, yet through a path which was foolishness to the world (1 Cor 1:18). God's leadership is not a distant, coercive reign; rather, it is near, and intimate. God describes the intent of his leadership in a prophecy of Jeremiah:

Their leader will be one of their own; their ruler will arise from among them. I will bring him near and he will come close to me, for who is he who will devote himself to be close to me? Declares the LORD. 'So you will be my people, and I will be your God.' (Jer 30: 21-22)

Such passages form the basis of God's intent for His leadership, as well as for human leadership. Jesus Christ becomes the personification for all the ideals of identity, authority and responsibility in leadership.

How is any of this relevant to us? The answer to that question comes as we look at the Image of God in humanity. It is my belief that the Image of God affirms and defines humanity, especially in terms of its leadership, in regard to true biblical influence. The Image of God forms the basis for our identity in two complimentary roles: First, as followers, reflectors,¹⁶ and worshippers of God; and second, by providing us with the essence of leadership, influence, power, and authority. These twin roles arise out of the fundamental constitution of

¹⁴ The following are an assortment of leadership words and their usage's in the Scriptures: leader: 79x; leadership: 122x; lead(s): 207x; influence: 1x; rule: 87x; govern: 17x; power:276x; authority: 88x; and guide: 22x.

¹⁵ All quotations of the Bible are from the New International Version.

¹⁶ Or, in the words of Jonathan Edwards, as "re-emenators" of His glory. See "A Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. vol. 1. Rev. by Edward Hickman (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974).

humanity and must exist together in order to establish true and real humanness. In the person of Jesus Christ we witness the perfect confluence of these roles to bring us the true representation of humanness, as well as the ideal of leadership.

The obvious retort to this statement is, 'How can I be compared with Jesus Christ? He, of course, is divine and I am not.' This demonstrates the need for a proper Christology within our development of a theology of leadership. If we elevate Christ's deity at the expense of his humanity (and so, become practical docetists; or more commonly, monophysites) then we will inevitably create a standard which is far from the reach of human aspiration, and, specifically, that of Christian leadership. Yet, if we seek to hold in tension the tenants of the hypostatic union (that Christ is fully God and fully man), then we see a human identity that is near, accessible (although in this day not perfectly), and incarnationally livable.

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ proclaims to us that God is still involved in humanity and jealous for His glory; that glory exists within humanity in the Image of God. Unless we understand the profound nature of such a concept, our leadership patterns will be merely 'patch work' philosophies and skills concerned with the appearance of the leader rather than his¹⁷ identity (or, the identities of his followers). Authentic leadership begins with derived identity, proceeds to derived authority, and completes itself with obedience and responsibility to the people of God; specifically, to the corporate image of God.

Theological Considerations of Identity

In as much as God gives His image to humanity, that image comes with His identity; likewise, fundamental to the character of leadership is a character of identity. As leaders, where do we derive our identity? From skills? From positions or titles? From our followers? Each of these has its value, but unless the Christian leader understands himself rightly before the Lord, true identity is not possible. This must be the starting point for any theology of leadership.

¹⁷ I am using the masculine for the same of convenience in writing. I do not mean to imply that only men can be leaders; infact, the very thesis of this article argue against that.

Jean Calvin begins his *Institutes* with the presupposition of two kinds of knowledge: (1) Knowledge of God, and (2) Knowledge of Self. These two kinds of knowledge are interrelated. My knowledge of God will inform my knowledge of self, and therefore, my subsequent knowledge of self will inevitably lead to an increased desire to know God and to worship Him as God.¹⁸ Another way of stating this is to say that there is the object of glory (God) and the image of glory (humanity): the object informs the image, while the image constitutes itself as authentic when it rightly reflects the image back to the object without distortion. This process is the basis of authentic Christian identity.

Unfortunately, the image of God has been marred by the consequences of sin. True human identity has been damaged and adulterated so that the image does not reflect the object, but reflects a distorted concept of the object, or a projection of itself.¹⁹ Hence, Calvin says that fallen humanity is a factory of idols. Christian leadership is dependent upon redemption in order to obtain its true and ever-developing identity.

The Biblical text is full of examples of God reaffirming His identity into the identity of the leader. Abraham is one of the most beautiful examples of such:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Gen 12:2-3)

God chooses Abraham, gives him a great name (character or identity), and commissions him to leadership. Again, we see the same within the prophet Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." (Jer. 1:5) God is reiterating the interrelationship between

¹⁸ See *Institutes*, I,1,1,2.

¹⁹ A theology of leadership must inevitably consider the extent of sin and sin's effect on the fallen Image of God. Differing theological perspectives will affect one's optimism in regard to the influence of the non-Christian leader as well as the need for redemption within the Image of God.

identity and leadership, especially in light of the huge responsibility, which lays before the prophet. Finally, we might even consider Jesus Himself. In the waters of the Jordan, Jesus is baptized and hears the words from His Father: 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased.' (Mt 3:17). Identity involves knowledge, character, love, intimacy, authority, and subsequently, responsibility. None of this is possible unless there is a fundamental agreement between the identity of God and the identity of humanity.

If Christian leadership is to be authentic in terms of its identity, then it must above all else see the Image of God restored. This, I believe, is the internal locus of leadership, as well as the purpose and intent toward which all leadership is directed. Identity is a thirst and a hunger which can only be satisfied by the One who created us. The Psalmist rightly speaks of this: "And I -- in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness" (Ps 17:15). Rather than this being some external and remote projection of identity and self, it is internal, near, and beautifully intimate. We are a temple, and the glory of God has taken its eternal residence within us (1 Cor 6:19-20). Therefore, nothing can be more basic to the posture of leadership than that which most directly relates to God's glory: the renewal of humanity as glory-bearers (2 Cor 3:18).

Hence, one might say that the fundamental identity of the Christian leader is his own character. One's character rightly follows from the image to which it corresponds. This does not mean that leadership is a possession, but a gift; hence, it is derived identity, and the derivational aspect keeps the true Christian leader humble and receptive to the object of the image. Furthermore, this image is not some abstract and nebulous fantasy of the projected self, but is real and concrete as demonstrated by Jesus Christ, who is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." (Heb 1:3)²⁰ Jesus Christ forms the basis for the character of the leader incarnated within humanity, as He is the 'image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15; cf. Rom 8:29; Eph 2:8-10).

²⁰ Therefore, the Image of God compels us to consider the doctrines of God's Providence, the Incarnation, and the Work of the Holy Spirit. See Gregg A. Okesson, "The Incarnation of Jesus Christ as a Hermeneutic for Understanding the Providence of God in an African Perspective" in *AJET* 22:1 (2003), 51-71.

For this reason one can say that servant leadership is the fundamental character of the Christian leader: Jesus Christ is the image of the true human; or, one can say, of the image of the true leader. To simply skip the theological basis and espouse the requirement of servant leadership leads to great confusion and even helplessness: 'How can I possibly meet the standard established by Christ?' 'How can I do something that is so contrary to my culture?' 'How is it possible for me to serve, when my sinful self tells me to be served?' Unless true identity is established within the Christian leader, servant leadership will be a process of futility. Likewise, unless character is the foundation for identity, one's leadership will be a process of continually hiding one's sinfulness, or else blaming it on others. Neither of these is real human identity and leads to the inevitable manipulations of self and others.

Theological Considerations of Authority

In as much as identity is derived, the same could be said for the nature of authority. There is no real leadership apart from authority. In addition to this, one can rightly say that identity and authority are dependent upon each other. It is difficult to imagine real identity apart from real authority, even as it is ill advised to consider authority in the absence of identity. Unfortunately, our world is replete with examples of such dehumanized and partitioned examples of 'leadership': those who simply assume leadership without the identity or authority arising from the redeemed Image of God.

Where does authority come from? There might be three answers to this question, but each is dependent upon the others: (1) From God, as the creator of our Personhood; (2) From the Holy Spirit as a gift to the Body of Christ; and finally (3) From the community (or Church) as it reciprocates and authenticates the leader's authority and power over her. For the purposes of this article, I will focus primarily upon the first and third aspects. A theology of leadership calls us to consider the true identity of the leader as emanating from his derived authority, even as we contemplate one's authority as arising out of his identity. The Image of God is once again the basis for such a discussion.

In the book of Genesis, the description of the Image of God is immediately followed by commands that imply inherent (yet God-

given) authority. God creates humanity in His image (1:26a) and humanity 'rules' over the creation (1:26b). The following verses continue this parallel and expand humanity's scope of influence: 'be fruitful,' 'fill the earth and subdue it,' 'rule over . . . every living creature' (v. 28). In addition, God later says, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. *They will be yours* for food' [emphasis mine] (v. 29). In these few verses, we see identity, authority, and responsibility as inherently connected to God's image.

A brief biblical study of the term 'authority' continues to reinforce the relationship between the giver of authority (and His identity) and that of the recipient. In the Old Testament, the word *mashal* (to rule, have dominion, and reign) is used in many different societal ways, but ultimately, "It originates in God. Man has no authority at all as man but simply as God's vice-regent."²¹ God establishes human authority in continuity with heavenly authority. If it is His to give, then it is likewise His to remove; hence, the words of Samuel to Saul: 'because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king. (1 Samuel 15:23b).' This is why the concept of the image is so important: an image reflects the object; it does not stand on its own, but is intrinsically and completely dependent in nature. In the New Testament, *exousia* (authority) "denotes the absolute possibility of action that is proper to God alone as the source of power and legality."²² Jesus demonstrates that authority has been given to Him (Mt 9:6-8; 28:18) as evidenced by forgiving sins (Mk 2:10), having power over nature (Mk 4:39ff), sickness (Lk 8:46-48), death (Mk 5:41ff), demons (Mk 3:15), and demonstrating influence in his teaching (Mt 7:29; Mk 11:28).

In fact, the truest expression of derived authority is found in the act of giving it to others: "Freely you have received, freely give. (Mt 10:8b)"²³ The essence of Jesus' authority is found in the way that he

²¹ R. Laid Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Walke. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 534.

²² *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Kittel, abridged in one volume by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 239.

²³ Calvin, in his commentary on Matthew, comments regarding this verse: "Consider whence you derived this power. As it flowed without an y merit of

gives it to his disciples (cf. Mt 10:1; 28: 18ff; Jn 20:21-23). This is evidenced by the way he speaks of 'being sent by the Father' as well as 'sending the disciples' (Jn 17:18). A comprehensive study of the biblical texts (not possible in the context of this article) reveals that (1) authority is derivative in nature; (2) true authority comes from God;²⁴ (3) authority is not permanent, except in the case of the Son of God; and (4) the ultimate expression of authority is found in the act of giving it to others.

This brief study forms the foundation for considering human authority in the context of leadership. All humans do not have the gift of leadership; rather, all have the intrinsic capacity for leadership as emanating from the image of God. On a broader scale, all gifts of the Holy Spirit arise out of the 'natural' constitution of humanity,²⁵ yet with an influence determined by the Spirit Himself. This is not to de-supernaturalize Christian leadership, for the image of God is amazingly supernatural. The manner in which the gifting of the Holy Spirit works in accordance with the Image of God expresses a continuity of God's faithfulness to His image that resides within humanity: a faithfulness which is constantly governed by the work of the Son in providence.²⁶

Finally, a study on authority and the image of God causes one to consider the practical manifestations of God's glory because, I believe, authority is a representation of glory, especially as it emanates from the

yours from the purse grace of God, it is proper that, through your agency, it should flow freely to others." *Harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke*, vol. 1, trans by Rev. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: eerdmans, 1956), 442.

²⁴ This concept does raise some interesting questions: "Will we possess authority in the future Kingdom of God?" "Will human (yet glorified) authority be eternal in nature?" "Will there be any continuity between earthly and heavenly authority?" (cf. Mt 19:28; I Cor 6:2,3; Rev 5:10; 22:5).

²⁵ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Volf, likewise, seems to affirm this when he supports an "interactional model" of the bestowal of the charismata. He says, "I acquire the charismata from the Spirit of God through interaction with myself, that is, with that which I am by nature and that which I have become in society on the basis of my disposition and abilities, and through interaction with the church and the world in which I find myself." (p.233)

²⁶ For an excellent study on the practical out workings of the doctrine of Providence in the development of a leader's life, see Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988).

character of God. When we consider glory, we are likely to imagine a picture similar to Isaiah's vision: apocalyptic imagery, seraphs, smoke, and the holiness of the LORD. This is most certainly a representation of God's being, but is not humanity itself a wonderful attestation of His glory? This is not to deify humanity, but to express the profound nature of humanity as glory-bearing. The question lies before us: will our authority arise from God's glory and work to achieve the same; or, will it seek to steal and corrupt God's glory, using it for its own interests? The answer to this question largely determines the extent to which authority can be given. This is the second facet of derivational authority -- not only is it given by God, but it can be given to one another. A leader receives a trust: from God, and also from his followers. This trust can be developed and can actually grow in power and in influence, yet it can also be compromised. Part of the responsibility of leadership is to exert its authority and power in such a way that the follower actually reciprocates and gives to the leader greater authority and power. This will be developed to a greater extent later.

Theological Considerations of Responsibility

Human responsibility follows identity and authority as the third and final consideration in terms of the Image of God and leadership, and fundamentally, where the former aspects are evidenced, livable, and even tested for their validity. This topic is the basis for many fine books on Christian leadership, yet unless the theological foundations for leadership are fully developed, much of our musing can amount to merely 'self-help' techniques and external improvements. My overall purpose has been to demonstrate that the Image of God is the internal locus of Christian leadership as well as the purpose toward which leadership must be directed. Therefore, having presented the foundations for the identity and authority of the leader, we must now address this final aspect: the purpose toward which leadership exists.

a. The Restoration of the Image of God

Leadership must begin and end with God's glory because the essential character of humanity is that of a glory-bearer. God reveals this within the account of the creation story and further reinforces it throughout the pages of salvation history. In Isaiah, God says, "Bring

my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth -- everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." (43:6b-7) This verse expresses the interrelationship between creation, purpose, identity, and authority, yet in reverse order: (1) creation: 'whom I formed and made;' (2) purpose: 'whom I created for my glory;' (3) identity: 'everyone who is called by my name;' and finally, (4) authority: 'Bring my sons . . . my daughters.' Therefore, all of the fundamental facets of leadership arise out of the human constitution as the Image of God.

If such is the case, and if the leader acknowledges that this is his identity, then the next step is to affirm that it is likewise the identity of all people. There are no 'ordinary' people. All of humanity carries this image within themselves and are likewise glory-bearers; as such, all are moving either steadily toward God's glory, or toward corrupting God's glory.²⁷ What does this mean for the purposes of leadership?

We must conclude that if the leader is dependent upon God's glory for his ability to influence, and all of humanity bears the Image of God, then the basic responsibility of the leader is to see God's glory within humanity "being transformed with ever-increasing glory." (2 Cor 3:18) In other words, that humanity would be restored (qualitatively) to the original purposes of God in creation. This is the intent behind all of God's efforts within the world; therefore, as "vice-regents" of God's Kingdom, the leader must assume the identity, authority, and also, the responsibility of cooperating with God in restoring the corporate Image of His glory within the world. This is not to say that humanity is solely responsible for such a task. Such an idea would not only be idolatrous, but foolish as well; rather, humans have the privilege of participating in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). Paul understood his authority in this same manner: 'For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it.' (2 Cor 10:8; cf 13:10) Leadership has many functions, yet unless all revolve around the glory of God within humanity, we are prone to become irrelevant to the purposes of God by focusing upon skills rather than identity.

²⁷ See C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1949).

This responsibility toward redeeming the individual and corporate image of God has many facets and cannot be limited to any specific, 'spiritual' task. It must involve a true holistic picture of the human constitution: including, but not limited to, the mind, body, emotions, will, conscience, and relationships. Edmund Clowney says, "The renewal of God's image restores us as heirs of physical life, called to guard the structures of family, sexuality, personality and society that defend life. Yet even that task cannot be attempted apart from the nurture of spiritual life in the church as a heavenly society."²⁸ Therefore, in order to influence and transform life, the Body of Christ must first understand her identity as the People of God. This cannot be accomplished without a corresponding understanding of the implications of God's glory, and God's faithfulness to that glory. This knowledge of self transcends mere self-esteem as we have often grown to interpret it as 'feeling good about oneself,' but calls us to delve into the deeper meanings of why we can feel good about ourselves; it encourages us beyond individual competency, but rather leads us to the very basis for such skills and aptitudes; and finally, such an insight causes us to think of our human relationships as something much more powerful and beautiful than networking and name-dropping, but as interdependent identities which coexist with creational properties, thus mirroring the God-Head. Therefore, we need a holistic picture of the Image of God in order to find the very basis for which leadership exists. It is now necessary for me to develop these concepts in more detail.

b. Power from the Image of God

Humans are created in the image of God, which necessitates that we understand, as best we can through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:10-14), that we mirror God in His essential character without compromising the fundamental Creator-Creation distinction. This involves, but is not limited to, characteristics intrinsic within humanity, such as love, communication, relationship, inter-dependency, character, reason, governance, and even creativity. In as much as these characteristics are fundamental to the image of God, they are likewise fundamental to the nature and task of leadership.

²⁸ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 140. This, likewise, is the theological basis for mentoring.

To demonstrate the intrinsic power of the Image of God, let us look at one such example: love. It is difficult to imagine any characteristic of God which has greater creative properties. God was not externally bound to create; rather, we see the beauty of his love by means of His creative act. Furthermore, as we go beyond this fact, God's creative act was for the very purposes of love: to establish a people who are called by His Name (Eph 1:4ff). He did not create to demonstrate that He had the power to do so, but His purpose behind creation was to have intimate and covenantal relationship with His creation. Likewise, God's love is never stagnant, but is continuously creational: not as new, original acts of creation, but as continuous and faithful actions to His original purposes (providence). As such, God's love is directive (Ps 42:8); protective (Isa 38:17); self-giving (Jn 3:16); self-revelational (Jn 14:21); sacrificial (Rom 5:8). It calls to us (Hos 11:1); comes and abides with us (Jn 14:23; 2 Cor 13:11); unifies us (Jn 17:23); and finally, it is creational/restorative (Eph 2:4-5). If we have been loved by God, we are to reflect that love back to God by loving one another (1 Jn 4:7-12).

Therefore, as love is creational and emanates from the character and glory of God, so also humanity is endowed with such Godlike influence which proceeds from the image of God within us. As God's 'vice-regents,' who have been loved by God, we are able to participate in the work of His kingdom as we reflect that love back to God by loving one another (1 Jn 4:7-12). This power, when rightly used, carries the authority of God for the purposes of changing lives (2 Pet 1:3). Helmut Thielicke expresses the beauty of the creational properties of love by telling a simple story:

I once knew a very old married couple who radiated a tremendous happiness. The wife especially, who was almost unable to move because of old age and illness and in whose kind old face the joys and sufferings of many years had etched a hundred runes, was filled with such gratitude for life that I was touched to the quick. Involuntarily I asked myself what could possibly be the source of this kindly old person's radiance? Otherwise they were very common people and their room indicated only the most modest comfort. But suddenly I knew where it all came from, for I saw these two speaking to each other and their eyes hanging upon each other. All at once it became clear to me that this woman was dearly loved. And it was as if she were like a stone that has been lying in the sun for years and years, absorbing all its

radiant warmth, and now was reflecting back cheerfulness and warmth and serenity.

Let me express it this way. It was not because she was this kind of a cheerful and pleasant person that she was loved by her husband all these years. It was probably the other way around. Because she was so loved, she became the person I now saw before me.

And it is exactly the same with our relation to God . . . One who does not love makes the other person wither and dry up. And one who does not allow himself to be loved dries up too. For love is a creative thing.²⁹

There is a profound truth within this story that carries enormous implications for leadership: intrinsic to influence is the Image of God which is itself dependent upon the object which it mirrors. In as much as God is love and governs the world by His love, so also the leaders of the world are called to influence (and create) the world by His love. This does not mean that humanity has the very same capacity to create as does the Creator, but rather, we are given the responsibility of partnering with God's sustaining work of creation as it relates to the restoration of the Image of God within humanity. In a like manner, we could also speak of other "seats of power" within the human constitution; for example, the power of communication (Ja 3:9-12), character (2 Cor 3:3), and our minds (Eph 4:20-24) as they directly relate to the work of restoring the Image of God within humanity.

c. The Priesthood of all Believers

It is one thing to state that the purpose of leadership is the restoration of the Image of God within humanity, but quite another to describe how this might take place. To develop this, we must again return to the nature of the God-Head. The Trinity is a self-unified, self-communicative, self-giving, and self-dependent community of the one God, which is perfect and complete in all ways, yet still dynamic.³⁰ Likewise, as the corporate picture of the Image of God, the Church expresses fundamental truths of the God-Head, yet in a finite and

²⁹ Helmut Thielicke, *How the World Began* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 99-101.

³⁰ A deeper study of the Trinity is beyond the scope of this article, yet for a good treatment n the subject, see Volf, *After Our Likeness*.

limited form. Volf says,

The symmetrical reciprocity of the relations of the Trinitarian persons finds its correspondence in the image of the church in which all members serve one another with their specific gifts of the Spirit in imitation of the Lord and through the power of the Father. Like the divine persons, they all stand in a relation of mutual giving and receiving.³¹

Therefore, the leader who bears the Image of God, who acknowledges the Image of God within humanity, and who seeks to restore the Image of God (corporately) within the Church, must utilize and depend upon the multifaceted strengths of the corporate body: her gifts, her interdependency, her self-communication, and her self-service. For the leader, this means not only a responsibility to the Church to see her blossom and flourish as all members serve and give to one another, but it also requires a responsibility from the community that they would hold the leader accountable to the tasks intrinsic to this goal.

The Priesthood of all Believers reminds the leader of the difference between status and function.³² The former arises out of the image of God and is equally bestowed upon all humanity, while the latter also arises fundamentally out of the image of God, but which also comes through the gifting of the Spirit. Status tells us that all Christians are all of a spiritual state, while function tells us that there are different responsibilities within the Body.³³ Function does not make a leader more important, but more accountable to the Body. In fact, function arises from within the Church even as it seeks the good of the Church.

Finally, the Priesthood of all Believers encourages the leader to remember that he is not alone, and is not self-dependent. One of the greatest temptations of leadership is to worship the work of his own hands. We witness this failure in the accounts of Samson, Saul, David, Nebuchadnezzar, Herod the Great and many others throughout the annals of history. Leadership is a gift -- from God and from others.

³¹ Ibid., 219.

³² See Martin Luther, *Appeal to the German Nobility* (1520) for his distinction of status and function.

³³ I am indebted to Alister McGrath for these insights as recorded from his lectures at Regent College on the topic of "Theology of Leadership," 1993.

Volf expresses this twofold reality by saying, "ordination is to be understood as a public reception of a charisma given by God and focused on the local church as a whole."³⁴ It is never a possession, but is a function, a character, and a responsibility. The leader needs the Body of Christ just as the Church needs the leader.

To summarize, the responsibility of the leader must arise from his own identity before God, beginning with the wondrous and humbling realization of the profound nature of the Image of God. Self-identity arises from the springs of God-given authority, which in itself begins with character and relationship and only then proceeds to function. Authority has many faces, but must primarily be understood as emanating from the Person and character of the GodHead. Finally, such authority carries with it daily responsibility back to the People of God: so that the corporate Image of God can be built up and renewed in the nature of Jesus Christ.

Issues for an African Theology of Leadership

What does this mean for the African Church? How should such issues affect the identity, authority, and responsibilities of leadership within the African context? These are the fundamental questions that must test the validity and strength of the theology. Again, my purpose in this article is not to attempt a contextualized theology of leadership, but only to pave the way for such to be accomplished. Therefore, the points that follow are, I believe, the crucial ones in order to launch this task.

Identity of the African Leader

There is no subject more central to the task of leadership than identity. In few places is this as strong as in Africa. In a recent article within the Kenyan Daily Nation, the writer says, "As a country, we are far too leader-centred. If the leader does not speak for a week, we get terribly nervous: we begin to believe that the country is falling apart!"³⁵ This reinforces what we noted earlier: the African community is built

³⁴ Volf, 249.

³⁵ Mutahi Ngunyi, *Daily Nation* (Nairobi, Kenya), Sunday, 26, October 2003.

around the identity of their leaders -- this is both an enormous strength (demonstrating the potential possibilities for influence), as well as a grave weakness (in such cases where the leader fails in his responsibilities).

The image of God calls the leader to remember and understand the fundamental constitution of humanity as interdependent and glory-bearing. Where this is not understood, or neglected, the leader is prone to use the 'glory' emanating from the God-Head to his own advantage, and as a tool of manipulation against the people. Yet, in cases when the leader embraces this identity, he is then free to love, serve, give, and even discipline the people so as to develop the purposes of God within them.

Paul expresses this concept in 1 Peter 2:16: 'Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.' If we understand that our identity emanates from the Image of God within us, then we are released to live and express that identity in a manner intended by God before all creation. This is captured in perfect form in the person of Jesus Christ, the very 'image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15). Therefore, the identity of the leader must be realized in conformity to the image of the Son; thus, the theological rationale for servant leadership.

Likewise, the issue of identity arises as African leaders view themselves within a global, changing world. In such instances where the African leader does not understand his theological basis for identity, he may be tempted to turn to the Western world for authenticity and self-validity. This is a dangerous game. Why are we to believe that the Western world can validate African leadership? Are we not assuming too much when we state that Western leadership is itself built around the proper foundation? Yes, in fact we make hazardous corollaries of identity as based upon money, status, position, title, and global recognition. These bases of identity will only disappoint, and will often be used to oppress and manipulate the people, rather than to serve them.

There is a desperate need within the African Church today for servant leaders: not leaders who occasionally carry the mantle of servant hood so as to impress the followers with a sense of humility; but rather real servant leaders, whose identities arise from the very creation

act and is developed by a growing awareness of conformity to the Image of the Son. Jesus said, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good . . . , for a tree is recognized by its fruit." (Mt 12:33) God has already provided humanity with all that it needs in order to be authentic, real, and impacting in the world. Leadership in the African context will seek to develop that as servant leaders in the image of His son.

Authority within African Leadership

In as much as one's identity forms the bedrock for leadership, identity tends to mirror authority. Likewise, we may say that authority validates identity. Therefore, what is the authority of the African leader? Where does it come from? To whom is it given? As we have seen earlier, within traditional African culture, the leader receives his identity from God and from his followers. There is much to commend about this from a theological perspective.

In fact, if we return to the image of God and understand the intrinsic authority that comes from being a glory-bearer, we must in fact acknowledge its origin as coming from God. Then, to the extent that the leader uses that authority for the benefit of the people, they, in turn, give it back to the leader with increasing measure. Thus we see the twofold nature of authority.

Yet, for the purposes of the African context, we must likewise critique the erroneous conceptions of authority, especially those associated with external criteria; namely, position, titles, degrees, and status. In and of themselves, these bases of authority have their legitimacy, yet not as the sole seats of power and authority. The insecure leader, who does not understand his identity as arising from the image of God, will inevitably rely upon such external validations, yet with minimal long-term influence. Rather, true spiritual influence arises from within: from one's character, from relationship, and from identity. In God's economy of things, he has provided humanity with supernatural influence on this earth, but emanating from His own glory, and rightly returning to the same. If we fail to understand and embrace such concepts, we become idolaters of His glory and our influence becomes antithetical to the Kingdom of God.

God has given to humanity a gift of eternal and cataclysmic

proportions. Christian leadership and authority are not safe, domesticated concepts with which humanity can experiment for its own use. We are dealing with God's glory: within ourselves and within those whom we lead; therefore, we must be cautioned regarding God's jealousy for His glory (read, 'authority'). If God is the giver of leadership, and it is authenticated through the community of faith, then God can likewise take such influence away from the leader (as can the community of God). Thus, we can find no theological rationale for African leadership which exists for the life of the individual.

Responsibilities of the African Leader

In as much as the African leader understands that his identity comes from the image of God, and reinforced by the corporate image of the community of God; and in as much as the African leader embraces his own authority as coming from the same, then the task and responsibilities of the leader continue likewise: to the restoration of the image of God within the African community. This task involves, but is not limited to: identity, service, utilization of the Priesthood of all Believers, sacrifice, and the imitation of Christ.

Perhaps one of the models of leadership, which most clearly communicates the essence of this, is spiritual mentoring. Mentoring places the leader and the follower in a close, intimate relationship. It is active, intentional, and receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, while there are many differing types of mentoring, it has its origin from the human constitution and seeks to develop the same; meaning, to develop a person as God had intended that they should be. Therefore, it is highly personal and seeks beauty (God's beauty) within that person for the glory of God. One might say that goodness is the foundation for mentoring (Gal 6:9-10), yet we need a higher definition of 'good' than merely a solitary act of service: goodness is creational to the image of God (cf. Tit 2:14; 3:8) and mentoring is central to that purpose.

There is a sense in which African leadership believes that it must be distant and removed from the people. I believe that this position has no theological basis, and is actually antithetical to the purposes of leadership. Spiritual mentoring, when rightly understood, is a corrective to this misunderstanding for it places the leader and the

follower in a close, intimate, and reciprocal relationship: fostering, trust, love, service, and giving -- all qualities which lead to the growth of the image of God.

Conclusion

This article has not attempted to establish a complete theology of leadership, just the initial step. One issue, which is central to this discussion, is the connection between the Image of God, the Providence of God, and finally, the gifting of the Holy Spirit. The author believes that while the gifting of the Holy Spirit is foundational to spiritual leadership, it arises out of the Image of God, and is usually developed by the providence of God.³⁶ Therefore, gifting should not be looked at in isolation. This article has attempted to establish the fundamental identity of leadership as arising from the image of God: which, the author believes, is both the internal locus of leadership as well as the ultimate purpose toward which leadership must be directed.

Africa is a rich landscape for the development of a theology of leadership, yet the needs are urgent and arise out of the frequent abuses of power and position. As is most often the case, theology does not have the privilege of leisure. The theologian's task arises out of concrete issues, which are affecting the lives and faith of the people of God. Leadership is no luxury, but is a function intimately related to the glory of God. As leaders, we must grow to understand, appreciate, and ultimately embrace the glory of God in leadership; it guards us from idolatry and sends us into intimate participation in the Kingdom of God.

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³⁶ This does not mean to limit the work of the Holy Spirit, as he "gives them to each one, just as he determines (1 Cor 12:11)," but to acknowledge that the development of a leader is inherently Trinitarian in nature.

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Diffusing Apparent Biblical Contradictions: A Logical Demonstration

Joseph B. O. Okello

A few years back, I had a conversation with a Muslim friend. In our discussion of religious matters, he insisted that Christianity could not be justified epistemically because of its numerous contradictions. He contended that a major instance of apparent inconsistency can be found between the sixth commandment and King Solomon's explication of time: "You shall not commit murder"¹ and "there is a time to kill"² are Biblical sentences that contradict each other. It would be self-contradictory for the Bible to issue commands, on the one hand, against a specific course of action x ; and on the other hand, allow one to do x . Thus, when God says, " x is wrong," he would be contradicting himself when he creates instances permitting x .

I intend to argue that there is no inconsistency here. The apparent tension between these two statements can be neutralized in one way: by considering the different situations in which "kill" is not identical to "murder." We begin such a consideration by stipulating the following frameworks: First, when the Bible says you shall not commit murder, we stipulate the structure of that command as "you shall not do x ." Second, when it says there is a time to kill, we stipulate the structure of that claim as "there is a time to do y ." My task is to show how these two differ from each other. If x is different from y in our findings, we will additionally discover that when one enumerates the set of properties of x , and the set of properties of y , x and y bear a sub-contrary relation to each other. A sub-contrary relation between two sets of properties of un-identical entities is such that some members of one set x are identical to members of another set y , and some members of x are not identical to y . And following George

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¹ Exodus 20:13

² Ecclesiastes 3:3

Boulos and Richard Jeffrey,³ the sets may be finite or infinite. But irrespective of whether they are finite or infinite, what is crucial is that we know enough about members of x and members of y to enumerate them. Such enumeration should allow us to make the following claims:

1. Some members of y are members of x .
2. Some members of y are not members of x .

If our observations of the members of both sets allow us to make these two claims successfully, then we will be able to show that x is different from y .

It is possible to apply this operation to the relationship between the terms “murder” and “kill.” But before applying this operation, we must consult a lexicon in order to discover the etymological significance of “murder” and “kill,” especially as used in the books of Exodus and Ecclesiastes. Thus, Moses quotes God as using the term “murder” in the Decalogue, while Solomon is quoted as using the term “kill.” The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon (henceforth referred to as the BDB) lists the following actions as falling properly under the act of murder: to break, to bruise, to crush, to slay with premeditation (with regard to a human being), to assassinate, and so on.⁴ The same lexicon lists the following actions as falling under the act of killing: to slay, to slaughter, to destroy, to ruin and so on.⁵ In order to see the difference between both terms, it will be helpful to list the actions falling under each term, as a property of that term. In other words, actions like “bruise,” “crush,” and “slay” should all be taken as properties of “murder” in the Hebraic sense of the word. And the set of properties of murder can be listed as follows:

Murder = {to break, to bruise, to crush, to slay with premeditation, ...}

Similarly, actions like “to slay,” “to slaughter,” “to destroy,” “to ruin” and so on should be taken as properties of the verb “to kill.” And the set of properties of the verb “to kill” can also be enumerated as:

Kill = {to slay, to slaughter, to destroy, to ruin, ...}

³ George S. Boulos and Richard C. Jeffrey, *Computability and Logic 3rd Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 1

⁴ Francis Brown, ed. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996) p. 953.

⁵ Brown, p. 246-7

Both terms have at least one identical member in their set, namely, “to slay.” This allows us to make the following claim:

1. Some acts of killing are acts of murder.

Note, however, that both terms also have un-identical properties functioning as members of their different sets. For instance, whereas the premeditation motif appears in our understanding of murder, it does not appear in our understanding of “kill.” Also, from this explication, murder seems to be talked of in relation to human beings, while killing has a wider scope: namely, it is applicable to human beings as well animals. This allows us to make the following claim:

2. Some acts of killing are not acts of murder.

In both (1) and (2) above, the claims we have made about “killing” and “murder” bear a sub-contrary relation to each other. This shows that it is not the case that all acts of killing are acts of murder.

According to Leibniz’s law, an entity x is identical to an entity y if and only if every property of x is a property of y , and every property of y is a property of x . Let us, for example, arbitrarily assume that there is a set w whose members are a, b, c, d and e . Let us also assume that there is a set z , whose members are a, b, c, d , and e . We discover at once that all the members of w are members of z . If the members of both sets are a list of properties of sets w and z , we conclude that w is identical to z . But if we have an additional set v , whose members are a, b, c, d and k , we discover that at least one member of v is not a member of w , namely k . Thus by Leibniz’s law, we conclude that v is not identical to w , and also that v is not identical to z . But v bears a sub-contrary relation to w and z , since the claim “some w are v ” and “some w are not v ” are both true of the relationship between v and w . But that is not to say that v *always* contradicts w . It only enables us to conclude that v is not identical to w and z . Thus an imperative like “you shall not do w ” is necessarily violated, and contradicted by the claim “there is a time to do z ,” since both refer to identical actions.

Take an everyday example: Assume I have a house with no back door, but only one front door. Above the door-frame, you see two sentences: The first sentence reads: “You must never walk through this door” and another,

right below it, reads: "You must always walk through this door." You will wonder whether I mean that you should follow only one of them and disregard the other, or whether I am serious at all that you should obey both imperatives. And you will be convinced, by considering the very nature of the rules, that I will not want you to keep both of them, for to keep one is to break the other.

But perhaps this is overstating the issue. Perhaps we need to change the second rule to read, "there is a time to walk through this door." This still does not help, for the very inclusion of the word "never" in the first rule introduces the notion of time, such that the rule can be correctly re-stated as "at no time should you walk through this door." Thus, however we look at these two rules, it appears that keeping any one of them necessarily violates the other rule. If this seems to be the case with the two instances regarding "murder" and "kill," then we clearly have a contradiction.

But this does not seem to be the case at all. The relationship between murder and kill is not an identical relation. Rather, it seems to be a sub-contrary relation. One can make two claims bearing sub-contrary relations to each other without necessarily contradicting oneself. Some sub-contrary relations contradict each other. Others do not.⁶ And when God says, "you shall not commit murder" and Solomon says, "there is a time to kill," both are not contradicting each other in the sense I have stipulated above. This is because of the special case of a sub-contrary relation that sentences about "murder" bear to sentences about "kill."

Let us take another example from the very words themselves. It appears it would be more correct to state that all acts of murder are acts of killing, for murder necessarily involves killing. But it would be incorrect to stipulate the converse, namely, that all acts of killing are acts of murder. The intuitiveness of this emerges when we make a substitution instance of this claim. Let us substitute *M* for murder and *K* for killing such that we have a sentence of the structure "all *M* are *K*." Just because "all *M* are *K*" does not mean that "all *K* are *M*." Now, let us retain the structure of both

⁶ For instance, "some animals are cats" is a claim bearing a sub-contrary relation to "some animals are not cats." These two claims do not contradict each other. But the following sub-contrary-related claims contradict each other: "some cats are animals" and "some cats are not animals."

statements, but substitute the letters with familiar names. In other words, if instead of “all M are K ,” let us have “all women are humans.” We know that the claim “all women are humans is true.” But we also know that the converse claim “all humans are women” is absurd. Similarly, when we claim that “all murder is killing”, we would commit the fallacy of illicit conversion when we conclude that all killing is murder. We might as well argue that since all women are humans, it follows that all humans are women!

But an identical relation permits just such a move, precisely because an identical relation is not really a comparison between two entities; rather, it is a consideration of a *single* entity. Thus, if murder and killing were exactly identical, bearing the same properties in every way, then claiming that all murder is killing and all killing is murder would not be fallacious at all. Consider the claim, “all bachelors are unmarried single adult males.” One would not be committing the fallacy of illicit conversion by conversely inferring that “all unmarried single adult males are bachelors.” This is because “bachelors” and “single adult males” both refer to the same thing. Here, we are considering a single entity rather than comparing two entities. It is therefore not fallacious to make a claim of this sort along with its converse. But we cannot perform the same operation with the claim “all acts of murder are acts of killing.”

Perhaps another illustration will make it clear. Suppose I make the claim all M are M and call it θ . Suppose I make a second claim thus, “all M are M ” and call it δ . Suppose, further, that I tell you that in claim δ , the first M of θ switched positions in a converse operation with the second M in θ . How would you know the difference between any of the M s? You would not know the difference because M is always identical to M , whichever way we look at it. One might as well say any person called President George Bush, is that person called President George Bush, which is a true statement. Once again, the upshot of all this is that if M is a identical to M (and we know it is), then we can validly make a conversion operation between M and M , without the fear of committing the fallacy of illicit conversion. But when we are dealing with two different entities, such as “murder” and “killing”, we at once run into a fallacy of illicit conversion when we switch the terms in a conversion operation. Once again, this helps to underscore the fact that murder is not identical to killing; for if murder is killing, then we could easily state “all murder is killing” and its converse, namely that “all killing is murder.” But we have seen that we cannot do this

without running into a fallacy. Therefore, murder is not identical to killing. Now, if murder is not identical to killing, then “you shall not murder” does not contradict “there is a time to kill.”

As you have probably realized, I have relied quite heavily on logic to determine whether or not the action of murdering is identical to the act of killing. To be sure, logic is a crucial tool here, for without it, this whole treatment would not make sense. I understand, however, that one may object to this sort of interpretation of the passages I cited above. The objection may arise out of one’s suspicions about logic’s ability to preserve truth, leave alone arriving at the truth. It is to these objections that I now turn.

Before examining particular objections, I will classify possible objections into two possible categories: The first category is what I will call a hard-objection. Here, I define a hard objection as the kind of objection that expresses complete agnosticism about my treatment of the apparent contradiction between the two actions above. This poses a greater challenge to my treatment, and will be discussed below. The second category of objections is what I will call a soft-objection. Such an objection agrees with my treatment of the two verbs, “murder” and “kill,” but insists that I need to give a more comprehensive treatment of my tension-diffusing goal. Thus, they will insist that besides logic, I need to add other exegetical considerations like context, language and so on. Since this is in general agreement to my thesis above, I will only outline its thesis and provide an abbreviated response.

Let me begin with the soft-objection. It has been suggested that in considerations of Biblical words and phrases, one should pay undivided attention to the geographical, cultural, historical and linguistic contexts of the words or phrases in question. One must do this if one aims to be true to the historical-grammatical method of interpretations. This treatment of the tension between the ‘command not to murder’ and the ‘permission to kill at certain times’ ignores context considerations. Thus, even though it is successful, it is not a good example of correct Biblical hermeneutics.

I respond to this charge by agreeing with the objection. It is almost impossible to be true to the grammatical-historical method of Biblical interpretation if one does not take issues of context seriously. But this does

not mean that I ignored this issue. In fact, it was at the very heart of my interpretation of the terms, considering my dependence on the BDB lexicon for the understanding of the terms involved. My use of the BDB here was quite purposeful and intentional – it was an attempt to arrive at the intended meaning of both words in their different cultural contexts.

But there is a larger issue here. My interpretation of the two verbs presupposes a use of the historical-grammatical method, and my logical frameworks operate within this presupposition. Within such a presupposition, one can use logic without having to expose one's hermeneutic persuasions. In other words, whereas the question of hermeneutics is important in considering the meaning of words, one is able to use logical tools without exposing one's hermeneutic method. The advantage of this approach is that one can be involved in a meaningful dialogue with a person subscribing to other methods of interpretation without having to be caught up with debates on the correct method of interpretation – which I think are motifs for later debates.

A hard-objection may be stated on another front: namely, this treatment of the contradiction does not absolve the Bible from contradictions. Even if it succeeds, we still have other areas where the Bible seems to clearly contradict itself. Take the case of proverbs 26: 4 and 5. It reads: *Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.* Clearly, the objector would argue, there is a flat-out contradiction here. Thus, even though I might have succeeded in showing that the contradiction on the laws between “murder” and “kill” are really no contradictions at all, I still have not defended the Bible convincingly from other numerous contradictions.

My first response to this objection is simply this: I am sure one can cite many Biblical passages that seem to contradict each other. In *Does the Bible Contradict Itself?* W. Arndt cites passages that appear contradictory. He then juxtaposes conflicting passages of a historical and doctrinal nature, both from the Old Testament and the New Testament, and proceeds to harmonize what appears contradictory in them. But prior to dealing with these alleged contradictions, he reminds us of several things. I point two of them. First, he reminds us that:

It is of the utmost importance to remember that two propositions may differ from each other without being contradictory. In most cases, people who charge the Bible with containing discrepancies have become victims of confused thinking. They fail to distinguish between difference and contradictions.⁷

Second, he reminds us of Dr. Pieper's comments appearing in *Christian Dogmatics*. Here, Dr. Pieper writes:

In explaining a difficulty, it is always to be remembered that even a possible explanation is sufficient to meet the objector. If several possible explanations are suggested, it becomes all the more unreasonable for one to contend that the discrepancy is irreconcilable . . . The harmonist has done his duty if he can show a reasonable explanation of the problem before him."⁸ [Sic]

In both instances above, Arndt reminds us that we must be willing to dig deeper into the text to determine what it really says, rather than make quick and rash judgments about what we think is the case when the reality is, in fact, different.

My second response to the objection cited above is that a deeper look into the book of Proverbs shows that there really is no contradiction, as initially thought. Before I explain that there is no contradiction, perhaps we need to revisit our definition of what a contradiction is. We contradict each other when we make a claim (call it *p*) and at the same time deny that claim (by claiming *not-p*). That is to say, to claim "it is the case that *p* and *not-p*," is a contradiction. For instance, one would be contradicting oneself if one were to assert that "John is a human being and John is not a human being." In the first conjunct, we assert that John is a human being. In the second conjunct, we deny this assertion. Both claims contradict each other. This arises from the principle of non-contradiction defined by Aristotle in the following way: "That the same thing should at the same time both be and not be for the same person and in the same respect is impossible."⁹

⁷ W. Arndt, *Does the Bible Contradict Itself: A Discussion of Alleged Contradictions in the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955) p. xiv

⁸ Arndt, p. xviii

⁹ Arndt, x

The question we ought to ask ourselves, then, is this: does Proverbs 26: 4–5 violate this principle? One may think it does. But a deeper look suggests that it does not. It would be contradictory if verse 4 had the form p , and verse 5 had the form $not-p$. Let us look at the verses themselves. Verse 4 reads: “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself.” What verse 4 really implies is that if you answer a fool according to his folly, you will be like him yourself.” Also, verse 5 reads: “Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.” This implies that if you do not answer a fool according to his folly, he will be wise in his own eyes. In other words, both passages tell us of the conditions that follow when one chooses to do one thing rather than another. Here, I have somehow changed the sentences from Imperative Sentences to Propositions. The former term deals with the right-ness or wrong-ness of actions. The latter term, however, deals with truth or falsity of statements. Whether or not one is able to change a proposition to an imperative is questionable, and may plunge one into the naturalistic fallacy. But to infer a proposition from an imperative, as I have done with Proverbs 26: 4 and 5, does not appear fallacious here. At any rate, it seems to be an interpretive move, namely, stating what is the case by looking at what ought or ought not to be done.

However, my concern here is not how to interpret this passage. I leave that to the Biblical exegete. My concern is to show that the passages are not contradictory, for imperatives, like propositions, are capable of contradicting each other. As stated earlier, a contradictory statement is one that makes a claim and denies it at the same time. Also, imperatives contradict each other when they issue a command both to do something and not to do the same thing. The law of non-contradiction is therefore applicable to both cases. I have suggested that Proverbs 26: 4, 5 is not contradictory and is therefore not guilty of violating the law of non-contradiction. Let us revisit verse 4. We note that it has two atomic sentences, namely, “do not answer a fool according to his folly,” and “you will be like him yourself.” Nevertheless, a closer look at this verse suggests that it is really a compound sentence because it is a combination of two atomic sentences.¹⁰ Let us label the first atomic sentence “ $not-F$,” and the second atomic sentence Y . F will contradict $not-F$ if we suggest or

¹⁰ I define an atomic sentence as a clause, that is, a group of words that contains a subject and a verb. I then define a compound sentence as consisting of two or more atomic sentences.

command one to do F and $not-F$. A compound sentence that has F and $not-F$ as its atomic sentences necessarily contradicts itself. Similarly Y will contradict $not-Y$ if we suggest or command one to do both Y and $not-Y$. A compound sentence that has Y and $not-Y$ as its atomic sentences necessarily contradicts itself. But commanding one to do “either $not-F$ or Y ” will not be contradictory. In fact, “either $not-F$ or Y ” is a contingent compound sentence. Let us label this compound sentence R . Thus, the compound sentence R tells us this: “either $not-F$ or Y ”. And this is really the structure of verse 4, which reads as follows: “Do not answer a fool according to his folly (i.e., $not-F$) or you will be like him yourself (i.e., Y). Thus, R is identical to “either $not-F$ or Y .”

Let us now consider verse 5. It reads, “Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.” Once again, we are looking at a compound sentence. Its two atomic components are: “Answer a fool according to his folly” and “A fool will be wise in his own eyes.” Since the first atomic sentence of R is a negation (i.e., $not-F$) of the first atomic statement of verse 5, let us designate the first atomic sentence of verse 5 with the letter F . We will then designate the second atomic sentence of verse 5 with the letter W . Thus, the compound sentence in verse 5 has the following structure: “either F or W .” Let us designate this compound sentence with the letter S . Thus the set of atomic sentences that make up the compound sentences R and S as found in verse 4 could be represented as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} R &= \text{Verse 4} = \{not-F, Y\} \\ S &= \text{Verse 5} = \{F, W\} \end{aligned}$$

Under what conditions would R contradict S ? R would contradict S if and only if all the atomic statements of R contradicted at least one of the atomic statements of S . To put it differently, if R would have “ $not-F$ ” and “ Y ” as its atomic statements, then S should have F and “ $not-Y$ ” as its atomic statements. Thus, if R were to contradict S , the set of R 's atomic sentences would be as follows:

$$R = \{not-F, Y\}$$

And the set of all atomic sentences belonging to S , which I will call S^{*11} owing to its distinction from verse 5, would be as follows:

$$S^* = \{F, \text{not-}Y\}.$$

In R , the first member of the set is *not-F*. In S^* , the first member is F . Therefore, the first members of both sets contradict each other. And in R , the second member of the set is Y , while in S^* , the second member is *not-Y*. Therefore, the second members of both sets also contradict each other. If both members of the set contradict each other, it is likely that we are faced with an overall contradiction between R and S^* . In other words, since every member of R contradicts at least another member of S^* , we conclude that R contradicts S^* . And if R contradicts S^* , then S^* should be identical to *not-R*, precisely because the suggestions of all the members of one set directly contradict the suggestions of the members of the other set.

But a look at the relationship between S and R (i.e., verse 4 and 5) shows that there is at least one member of S , namely, W , that does not contradict any member of R . W is different from any of the members of R . Also, there is at least one member of R , namely Y that does not contradict any member of S . This member, Y , is simply different from any member of S . But just because W is different does not mean that W contradicts any member of R . W is just that – different. Similarly, just because Y is different from any member of S does not mean that R contradicts S . Y is just that – different. And this places us in a position to show that verse 4 (R) is not a contradiction of verse 5 (S). The set of all members of verse 4 is:

$R = \text{Verse 4} = \{\text{do not answer a fool according to his folly, you will be like him yourself}\}.$

Verse 4 would have contradicted verse 5 if and only if every atomic sentence of verse 4 contradicted at least one atomic sentence of verse 5. I will call this verse “verse 5-contradictory.” In other words, if “verse 5-contradictory” contradicted verse 4, then the set of all atomic sentences of verse 5-contradictory (S^*) would have been:

¹¹ I use the asterisk symbol * to show that the S -set here is different from what we find in verse 5.

S^* = Verse 5 contradictory = {answer a fool according to his folly, you will not be like a fool yourself}.

In other words, “do not answer a fool according to his folly” would be contradicted by “answer a fool according to his folly.” And “you will be like a fool yourself” would be contradicted by “you will not be like a fool yourself.” But we know that the second member of this set is different from the second atomic sentence in verse 4. In other words, we know that verse 5 (I will call it “verse 5-correct”) has the following atomic sentences as its members:

S = Verse 5 correct = {answer a fool according to his folly, he will be wise in his own eyes}.

That is to say, given our understanding of what it would be for a compound sentence to directly contradict another compound sentence, we are led to conclude that Proverbs 26: 4 does not contradict Proverbs 26: 5.

In this understanding, the first hard-objection loses its force. Besides, the reason the skeptic sees Proverbs 26:4 as contradicting Proverbs 26:5 is because the skeptic looks only at the atomic sentences in isolation. The skeptic needs to consider the compound sentence as a whole, which is what I have done above.

A second hard objection may run as follows. Immanuel Kant has shown that it is possible to encounter sophisticated theorems that cannot be defined by logic. This is especially so when we apply the principles of logic beyond the boundaries of experience. When we encounter this situation, our dilemma is made more severe by the fact that each theory will not only be contradicted by another theory, but also that both contradictory theories can be validly justified on logical grounds.¹² Thus, the objector may argue that my attempt to use logic to demonstrate that apparent Biblical contradictions can be diffused is a utopia of sorts; for it is possible to think of a case where logic will show that these contradictions are really there, and not merely apparent.¹³

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Translated and Edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 467.

¹³ Ibid.

I note here that Kant did not dismiss the importance of logic altogether. He held that logic could be applied to objects of experience. But he also held that the tools of logic could fail us when we begin to apply logic beyond the boundaries of experience.¹⁴ Therefore, our task will be to show that the act of murder, or killing, or answering a fool according to his folly, are classified as empirical acts, that is, as something one can experience. Of course we know that such is possible in our day-to-day lives. We hear, time and again, of incidents of murder and killing. People get mugged on our city streets. Goats get slaughtered as delicacies for the barbeques marking our festive seasons. We clearly can show that murder and killing are empirical acts. And if we can do this, then it means we can apply the principles of logic to these situations without worrying about the possibility of encountering successful refutations of our theses by other counter-arguments.

The upshot of all this is clear – the alleged contradictions are really not contradictions as initially thought. Moreover, logic seems to be a valuable tool in helping to clarify the issues involved, and helping to solve the tensions we encounter while reading the Biblical text. What appears as a contradiction may not really be a contradiction at all. Our hermeneutical method will help us arrive at the background of these apparent contradictions. But logic will also play the role of formulating proper frameworks for diffusing the tensions in question.

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Should Cursing Continue? An Argument for Imprecatory Psalms in Biblical Theology

Jace Broadhurst

I. Introduction

Cursing was prevalent in ancient Israel and those who issued such curses strongly believed in the effectiveness. This understanding is not a relic from a bygone era but continues today in many societies in Africa. Still, while many Africans continue to pronounce curses or imprecations, the advent of Christianity has caused many to question this idea. The idea of cursing someone, despite the abundance of curses in the OT, seems quite foreign to the Christian ethic. Today, African Christians in both academia and in the church in general continue to struggle over this issue. In 1998, when several Kenyans were killed in the American Embassy bombing, thoughts drifted towards imprecations. A few years later, in March 2001, arsonists killed over 60 children at Kyanguli Secondary School just outside of Machakos town resulting in the “biggest case of mass murder ever brought against Kenyans”¹

While the bombing caused more international grief, both of these events devastated the nation of Kenya and certainly caused many good Christians to revert to imprecatory thoughts, if not words and deeds.²

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¹ Bob Odalo, “Two Pupils Face 67 Murder Counts,” *Daily Nation* (Nairobi), 7 April 2001, 1.

² In a survey done by Dr. C. O. Ogunkunle of University of Ilorin, it is noted that out of 494 Evangelical participants in Nigeria, 355 responded that they do indeed think of imprecations when they are oppressed, cheated, maltreated, etc. That is 71.9% of the people answered that they sometimes or always think of imprecations when oppressed. C. O. Ogunkunle, “Imprecations as a Weapon of the

While African Christians readily admit their imprecatory thoughts, Christians in the West dismiss the potency of curses, regarding them as nothing more than fantasy. One may tend to expect that when tragedy and the obvious existence of biblical curses combine, even western Christians would pronounce curses on their enemies. Strangely, this seldom seems to be the case. I remember vividly where I was on September 11 when the second World Trade Center tower crumbled. I was gathered with at least a hundred other men and women in corporate prayer. We prayed for the survivors that were trapped under tons of rubble. We prayed for the families of those lost in the tragedy. We prayed for the government officials who were responsible for repairing so much lost real estate. We prayed for the church community who was needed now more than ever to mend people's lives and preach an undiluted gospel. We prayed intensely. We prayed with passion. When we finished praying, I realized what we had not done. We had prayed *for* people, but we never prayed *against* anyone. Never did we openly express our desire that the people in charge of this atrocity pay for their deeds. Never since these tragedies have taken place have I heard anyone repeat this prayer to God:

Appoint a wicked man over him; And let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is judged, let him come forth guilty; And let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few; Let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, And his wife a widow. Let his children wander about and beg; And let them seek *sustenance* far from their ruined homes. Let the creditor seize all that he has; And let strangers plunder the product of his labor. Let there be none to extend lovingkindness to him, Nor any to be gracious to his fatherless children. Let his posterity be cut off; In a following generation let their name be blotted out (Ps 109:6-13 NASB).

Most Christians in the west apparently do not even consider cursing when acted against, while many Africans have thoughts of cursing even when not personally affected by the atrocity.³ But truthfully we are not all that different. Both have ill feelings towards the oppressors and both desire justice to be done. We are also similar in that most Christians, from both

Oppressed: A Comparative Study of Selected Individuals in Israel and Churches in Nigeria" (Unpublished Paper, University of Ilorin), 12.

³ Ogunkunle in another survey suggests that even when bad things are happening to others and not to themselves, 69.9% continued to think of imprecations. Ogunkunle, 13.

Africa and the West, refuse to pray or sing the cursing passages of the Bible. We have all but done away with the *psalms*.⁴ A New Testament Christian simply would not use the Bible to pronounce a curse, regardless of who speaks or acts against them. The task before us is not simple. Our intention here is to consider the ethical inclusion of curses in the current dispensation. The tensions between one Testament and the other and even within each Testament is so great that to reach a definite conclusion might be the work of arrogance. Despite the difficulties, it is nevertheless important to wrestle with the issue of the Psalms and especially the imprecatory psalms and their placement in Biblical Theology. With this understanding firmly in mind, I intend to put forward an apologetic for the relevancy of present day biblical cursing by showing their appropriateness in the redemptive historical plan of God.

II. The Psalms and Biblical Theology

A. Problem

The definition of Biblical theology can be very difficult to pin down. Open any biblical theology book and you will find differing ideas as to what it entails. Perhaps von Rad is most popular for interpreting Biblical Theology as *Heilsgeschichte*. His idea is to see the Bible through the lens of salvation history. Today, most biblical theologians would agree that Biblical Theology seeks to deal with the entire canon as a redemptive and historical story. Unfortunately, there are difficulties with this system (like any system), and one of these difficulties directly impacts this discussion. If it is true that Biblical Theology deals with the entire canon, then each book about biblical theology should include chapters at least skimming each book of the Bible. This is not the case, however. In fact, most Biblical Theologies ignore the poetic genre altogether and if they do not, the time spent on it is insignificant in comparison to the prose histories. This means that Psalms, Proverbs, and many other entire books are not mentioned a single time in the Theology. This makes sense since Biblical Theology traces the redemptive historical plan of God throughout the ages. Psalms are not understood to “give a history of God’s people or God’s ways with them, nor is it the inculcation of positive doctrines or duties, nor the formal

⁴ There are certainly distinctions between types of curses and this will be explained briefly below.

prophetic announcements of coming events.”⁵ Roland Murphy observes concerning OT theology:

The usual approach in Old Testament theology is by way of the biblical record of God’s revelation to the people by prophets and deeds—the rigid axis of history—which leaves little room for wisdom literature.⁶

While Murphy is speaking specifically of wisdom literature, the same could easily be said for the Psalter; “little room is left for the Psalms in OT Theology.” James Barr insists, quite adamantly, that much of the OT does not see revelation as through history. He says that von Rad’s *Heilsgeschichte* is not the only thing of value in Biblical Theology and cites as examples wisdom material, psalms, and even Israel’s understanding of creation.⁷ This problem regarding the definition of Biblical theology remains a very important one for all biblical theologians.

B. Psalms as Revelation of the Old Testament God

Biblical Theology is about the revelation of God in history. It is true that the psalms are not historical in the sense that they are not stories or narratives. However, psalms do fit into history and they do reveal God as a redemptive deity in history. In fact, von Rad, in his *Old Testament Theology*, included the Psalter as “Israel’s answer to the saving acts of God.”⁸ Regarding this, he says:

This answer of Israel’s, which we gather for the most part from the Psalter, is theologically a subject in itself. It shows us how these acts affected Israel and how Israel on her side accepted and understood this existence in immediacy with Yahweh and in proximity to him, that is, the steps which, in this proximity to Jahweh, she took to justify or to be ashamed of herself in her

⁵ Raymond F. Surburg, “The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms,” *The Springfielder* 39 (December 1975): 88.

⁶ Roland Murphy, *Tree of Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 112.

⁷ J. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London, 1966), 72. For a very helpful and readable look at Barr’s response to von Rad see D. G. Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologies* (Naperville, Alec R. Allenson, Inc. 1974).

⁸ Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology I* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 356.

own eyes and before Jahweh In the courses of her converse with Jahweh Israel did make further striking statements about herself over and above those general concepts of man which theologically do not amount to much. The way in which she saw herself before God, and pictured herself before him, is worth the highest attention theologically.⁹

This placement of Psalms is far from universally agreed upon.¹⁰ C. Barth, for one, is very hesitant to treat Psalms as Israel's response.¹¹ Although some believe that von Rad was unsatisfied with his own view later in life,¹² I believe he continued to understand Psalms in basically the same way. He continues to place Psalms as an important part of God's action even in his later work, *Wisdom in Israel*. Although specifically referring to Wisdom, von Rad in clarifying his view on poetry in history says, "The wisdom practiced in Israel was a response made by a Yahwism confronted with specific experiences of the world."¹³ Roland Murphy agrees when he comments, "God was as much at work here [in the little areas 'of life] as in the heady experiences of Israel's history and liturgical worship."¹⁴ Von Rad and Murphy were placing the book of Psalms and the books of Wisdom as equal to history in that God works experientially in both of them.

Despite the difficulty of the psalms and wisdom literature, I believe that Biblical Theology can still umbrella this poetic genre. My own way of dealing with this is to clarify the definition of Biblical Theology. Biblical Theology is not just the actions of God in history; rather, it includes the reactions as well. It is not just God's actions, but it is also the acts of the people in history, which are both based on his acts and are the cause of his acts. Therefore, a better definition of Biblical Theology might be the action

⁹ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 355-356.

¹⁰ It might be good to remember that von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* in its whole was a very debated work.

¹¹ C. Barth, "Grundprobleme einer Theologie des Alten Testaments," *EvTh* 23 (1963): 368f. cited in D. G. Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologies* (Naperville, Alec R. Allenson, Inc. 1974), 41.

¹² Murphy, *The Tree Of Life*, 112.

¹³ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1972), 307.

¹⁴ Murphy, *The Tree Of Life*, 124.

of (history), and the reaction to (response) God's revelation. Psalms help make history a dialogue and not a one sided show. Even more specifically, we see in the psalms the feelings behind the actions of man. H. Wheeler Robinson says about the psalms,

They can be described in general as responses of varying kinds to the revelation of divine grace along the lines of Nature, Man and History and in the temple ritual as ordained of God. The Hebrew name of the book *tehillim*, i.e. 'praises', may not comprehend all of them, but it does fitly suggest the praise of God as a response to the manifestation of His grace.¹⁵

We have seen that there is a problem in Biblical Theology, but that this problem is not without resolution. However, this solution needs some specification, especially in regards to the imprecatory psalms. Even if we grant the psalms entrance into Biblical Theology, it is very difficult to commend them all as intimately connected to the revelation of God. We will first present the ethical difficulties of these psalms and conclude with the reason for their acceptable placement in Biblical Theology.

III. Definitions

Psalms have been divided into a host of different categories including, but not limited to, royal psalms, thanksgiving psalms, enthronement psalms, wisdom psalms, and lament psalms. It is this last category that holds the most relevance for our topic. Sheila Carney helps to explain the lament psalm in a popular article:

The lament form was used by the Israelites in the times of personal and national distress. Its purpose was not only to complain to God, to make him aware of the problem at hand, but also to express trust in his intervention and praise for his constant care.¹⁶

Psalms of lament can be further subdivided and contain a small group of psalms we refer to as "imprecatory psalms." Carl Laney defines an "imprecation" as an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered

¹⁵ H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 262.

¹⁶ Sheila Carney, "God Damn God: A Reflection on Expressing Anger in Prayer," *Biblical and Theological Bulletin* 13 (1983): 116.

against one's enemies, or the enemies of God.¹⁷ As many as 33 psalms can be labeled as imprecatory, but not one of these is completely devoted to curses. Out of these 33 psalms, 18 are universally agreed to be imprecatory psalms. Even this is difficult to concede, considering that out of the 368 verses in these psalms, only 65 can be called imprecations or curses. Furthermore, even referring to these few as "curses" may be inadequate. Anderson and Ringgren both agree that curses in the ancient Near East were believed to go instantly and automatically against the recipient and not to "go through" God.¹⁸ Africans also often seem to prefer a direct connection between the words spoken and the effect.¹⁹ While this may be true of some African belief and some ANE beliefs, I cannot bring myself to agree with this automatic retribution theory in the Hebrew culture; rather, I maintain that the retribution of the Bible is intrinsic retribution.²⁰ The

¹⁷ J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms, *BS* 138 (Jan 1981): 40.

¹⁸ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 65. Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of the Psalmist* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 31.

¹⁹ John Mbiti says, "There is mystical power in words, especially those of a senior person to a junior one, in terms of age, social status or office position. The words of parents, for example, carry 'power' when spoken to children: they 'cause' good fortune, curse, success, peace sorrows of blessings, especially when spoken in moments of crisis. The words of the medicine man work through the medicine he gives and it is this, perhaps more than the actual herb, which is thought to cause the cure or prevent misfortunes. Therefore formal 'curses' and 'blessings' are extremely potent; and people may travel long distances to receive formal blessings, and all are extra careful to avoid formal curses." It appears that God is not necessarily involved. John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1967), 197. Of course, many Africans also attribute the potency of curses to spirits or living dead.

²⁰ For a beginning to this argument of automatic retribution read Klaus Koch's classic thesis "Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?" in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Edited by James Crenshaw; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 57-87. Intrinsic retribution is God, the righteous judge, punishing or rewarding people based on their actions. It is not simply automatic consequences based on actions. Yahweh himself actively bestows what comes to pass as the result of human action. Just as in other ancient Near Eastern texts, the gods are concerned with keeping a cosmic order that they themselves have usually initiated. Although many texts can be interpreted to intimately link the results with the action, it would be better understood as Yahweh himself making this close connection. He

Israelites believed that God's intervention was necessary. Therefore, instead of cultic curses, the Hebrew Bible records Yahwistic prayers.²¹ We will return to these issues in the final section of the paper, but for now it should be understood that Hebrews believed that God brought rewards and punishments on people because of their deeds and that their prayers were considered a part of that process. Despite the non precision and possible connotations involved in the terms "imprecation" and "imprecatory psalm," I believe these terms are adequate and useful and a change in terminology would just add confusion to the issue. For this reason, I will continue to conform to this established terminology.

IV. Ethical Difficulties

It should be readily admitted that imprecatory psalms are difficult. They do not make most people feel good about their Bible. Both lay and scholarly Christians have trouble explaining these sections, in spite of their usual willingness to adhere to the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture. Christians simply do not like curses. Even in African tradition, curses are generally understood to be relegated primarily, if not exclusively, to familial situations. Curses are seldom placed on those outside of the family²² and to do so would certainly require the formality of a witch-doctor/medicine-man. While curses from father to son are still considered potent, Christians have largely rejected the idea of praying to God in order to get their curses enacted. This is simply a different kind of curse and one that has been dismissed or never even considered by Christians. C. S. Lewis actually went so far as to claim that the OT is not in its entirety the Word of God.²³ The Church of England's *Alternative Service Book* shows that the vast majority of imprecations within the Psalms is placed in square

is the one who rewards and the one who punishes human action. See Jace R. Broadhurst, "Material Intrinsic Retribution in Proverbs," Unpublished, 2002.

²¹ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 202-203.

²² On this subject see Richard Gehman, "Ancestor Relations Among three African Societies in the Biblical Perspective" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1985), 82.

²³ Surberg, 90.

brackets and may, therefore, be omitted.²⁴ It would be possible, therefore, to cycle through the entire Psalter and never pray these psalms. "The Catholic Church, both in the missal and in the Liturgy of the Hours, has removed the psalms and sections of psalms that call for vengeance and retribution."²⁵ Walter Kaiser speaks the heart of many Christians when he says,

Perhaps there is no other part of the Bible that gives more perplexity and pain to its readers than this; perhaps nothing that constitutes a more plausible objection to the belief that the Psalms are the productions of inspired men than the spirit of revenge which they sometimes seem to breathe and the spirit of cherished malice and implacableness which the writer seems to manifest.²⁶

There is no doubt that imprecatory psalms stretch our general thoughts about ethics and living a Christ-centered life. It is not the case, however, that there are no suggested answers. In fact, there are a host of proposed answers intended to minimize or even eliminate this dilemma. Anyone who is serious about the inspiration of the canon must at some time deal with the apparent problem of these cursing songs. Many theologians have attempted answers and this section is a summary of the most popular solutions. There is tremendous overlap among each solution, but I have tried to draw out the distinctions of each. We will now look at five basic suggestions for dealing with our apparent ethical difficulty.

A. David is Not the Author

The first solution is to take the psalms out of the mouth of David. This idea takes two different turns. First, scholars desire to show that the Psalms are not Davidic at all. They suggest that if David is not the author, then these may not be inspired and therefore, can be ignored.²⁷ The ascription at

²⁴ John Shepherd, "The Place of Imprecatory Psalms in the Canon of Scripture," *Churchmen* 111, no 1 (1997): 27.

²⁵ Otto Knoch, "Altbundlicher Psalter. Wie kann, darf and soll ein Christ ihn beten?" *Erneuerung in Kirche und Gesellschaft* 4 (1989): 45-47, quoted in Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 16.

²⁶ Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 293.

²⁷ This end result is similar to Lewis' as mentioned above.

the head of some of the psalms reads לְמִנְצַח לְדָוִד מְזִמֵּר which is most commonly translated “a Psalm of David,” signifying that David was the author. We must remember, however, that this is not necessarily the case. לְדָוִד can just as easily be translated as “for David” or “to David” in the sense of being written to him or being dedicated to him. There are also other ideas this preposition could be signifying and, therefore, not proof of David’s authorship. Admitting this, it must be said that most scholars hold to at least the Davidic authorship of some of the psalms. He was known as the singer of songs,²⁸ and several psalms were attributed to him in the historical narratives.²⁹ Probably the best evidence is found in the NT. Both Paul and Peter attribute Psalms to David and more specifically the imprecatory Psalm 69.³⁰ Having said this, there is still not certain evidence that the Psalms are written by David, since the NT authors may have been relying on the same ascriptions that we modern readers do. They may not have been attributing the Psalms to David, but more generally referring to the editor or representative for the Psalms. This does, of course, beg the question of why he was known as the representative for the Psalms, but at least it does not guarantee his authorship. Even without this guarantee, it is generally assumed that David is the author of many of the psalms and this proposal in no way harmonizes these texts for us. Furthermore, the problem is not as much with David as it is with the inspirer of these words—the Holy Spirit. This entire argument betrays a lack of understanding of the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture. For evangelicals who hold to the inspiration of the entire Word, this does not seem to be a worthwhile solution.

A second path that some scholars propose in regard to these words not being David’s is to suggest that David is simply recording the words of his enemies against him.³¹ In order to make this suggestion work, some manipulation of the text is necessary. For instance, in Psalm 109 it is suggested that the word *lemor* (saying) is missing from the text at the end of verse 5. If we were to emend the text in this way, it would read:

²⁸ See 1 Sam 23:1.

²⁹ See Neh 12:24 and 1 Chr 15:16-24.

³⁰ See Rom 11:9-10.

³¹ J. W. Beardslee, “The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms,” *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 8 (1897): 491-492. Beardslee is simply suggesting this and will go on to reject this theory.

And they have rewarded me evil for good,
And hatred for my love, 'saying'
Set thou a wicked man over him;
And let an adversary stand at his right hand. (ASV)

If this were the case then this solution would work beautifully. However, even if this were true, it would only work in a handful of the psalms and it would still leave many imprecations unaccounted for. The only way to handle each of the psalms would be considerable additions and subtractions from the texts that we have. This does not seem to be an appropriate solution unless there were much more evidence to build the case.

B. Inferior Dispensation

The second major solution advanced by Christian theologians has to do with the progress of revelation. It is argued that David, living in a different dispensation, was not expected to understand the idea of loving his enemy. It is further argued that there is a direct contradiction between the OT and the NT upon this subject. Robert Dabney has this to say concerning those who argue for this solution; "They thereupon imagine a discrepancy, if not a contradiction, between them, and adopt the mischievous conclusion that the two Testaments contain different codes of Christian ethics."³² Dr. Alexander Maclaren wrote, "it is far better to recognize the discordance between the temper of the psalmist and that enjoined by Christ, than to cover it over."³³ This recognition of the tension is important and something that most people would agree with. He continues, however, concerning the inferiority of David's time:

Our Lord has signalized the difference between his teaching and that addressed to "them of old time" and we are but following His guidance when we recognize that the psalmist's mood is distinctly inferior to that which has now become the law for devout men . . . The form of these maledictions belongs to a lower stage of revelation, the substance of them

³² Robert L. Dabney, "The Christian's Duty Towards His Enemies," *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, vol. 1 (London: Banner of Truth, 1967): 706.

³⁰ Alexander Maclaren, *The Psalms*, Vol. 3 (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1901), 174.

considered as a passionate desire for the destruction of evil, burning zeal for the triumph of the truth, which is God's cause and unquenchable faith that he is just, is a part of Christian perfection.³⁴

Although it is true that David lived at a different time and may not have understood as much as the NT believer about love for an enemy, it is not fair to say that he did not at all understand this idea. Recall his dealings with Saul on several occasions as well as his understanding of the law. Exodus 23:4-5 says: "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it." (NIV)

Even other wisdom literature speaks of giving bread to a hungry enemy and giving water to an enemy that is thirsty (Pro. 25:21). The OT dispensation is not inferior to the New, at least not in a negative sense. It is not that it is defective or in error, while the NT, divergently, is pure truth. Gleason Archer says that progressive revelation is "not to be thought of as a progress from error to truth, but rather as a progress from the partial and obscure to the complete and clear."³⁵ Robert Dabney agrees that there is a difference in the degrees of fullness, but says there can be no contrariety.³⁶

C. Prophetic, Not Desires of the Psalmist

A third possible solution is that these psalms are more predictive in nature than an actual wish of the psalmist. Calvin, Augustine and Spurgeon all held to this opinion to some regard.³⁷ In fact, for some psalms, this solution may be considered feasible. Barnes writes:

Several of the passages of this kind which may properly be applied to the Messiah, are undoubtedly of this nature, and those passages are to be interpreted, when the laws of language will admit of such an interpretation

³⁵ Gleason Archer, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1963), 437.

³⁶ Robert L. Dabney, "The Christian's Duty towards His Enemies," 707.

³⁷ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1950 reprint), I, xxx.

as expressive of what sinners deserve, and of what will come, and not as indicating any desire on the part of the author that it should be so.³⁸

While this solution is possible for some Psalms, there are many others where the Hebrew grammar would not allow for this understanding.³⁹ As an example, consider Psalm 69:24-25 (Heb 25-26):

Pour out thy indignation upon them,
and let thy burning anger overtake
them.

May their camp be a desolation,
Let no one dwell in their tents. (RSV)

שָׁפַךְ־עַל־יָהֵם זַעֲמַךְ
וַחֲרֹו אַפְךָ יִשְׁגַּם:
תַּהֲי־טִירְחָם נִשְׁמָה
בְּאַהֲלֵיהֶם אֲלֵי־הֵם יִשָּׁב:

These two sentences begin with an imperative verb (שָׁפַךְ) and are followed by three imperfect verbs (נִשְׁגַּם, הִיָּה, and הִיָּה again). This syntactical relationship (imperative-imperfect) usually results in the imperfects being translated as jussives. A jussive is generally translated as a want or desire. Therefore, the imprecation in these verses is not simply a statement of fact; rather, it is a wish or desire of the Psalmist. This makes this particular solution improbable.

D. Enemies are Spiritual

A fourth possibility is that the enemies the Psalmist is cursing are spiritual enemies; and therefore, there is no possibility of sin against a brother. The law is not to be applied towards demons. Mowinckel is a popular proponent of this. He suggests that the imprecations are curses uttered under the power of God against the powers of darkness in order to overthrow the armies of evil who are torturing the Psalmist.⁴⁰ Laney argues against Mowinckel saying that to do this lends to a subjective hermeneutic, allowing the reader to simply take his pick of the text as a literal statement or a spiritual one. He asks "How is one to determine when to make the

³⁸ Ibid., Cited in Surburg, 94.

³⁹ Surburg, 94.

⁴⁰ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*. Trans. By D. R. Ap-Thomas (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:44-52.

transition from a literal to a spiritual interpretation of a particular passage?"⁴¹ Laney's argument is far from fair and certainly not scholarly. It is true that there are many times when literal interpretations are not suited for proper understanding, and there is no reason to ignore this possibility here. At the same time, just because it is a possible hermeneutical move, does not mean that it is the best move in all the imprecatory psalms. For example in Psalm 109, the enemy's families are mentioned. It is possible that this is metaphorical, but considering the great number of physical enemies that David had, it seems more probable that the curses are aimed at actual individuals or groups. This leaves the difficulty of at least some of the imprecatory psalms still to be resolved.

E. Psalmist's own Sentiments

A fifth solution and by far the most popular, is that these curses are simply David's sentiments—the anger and hurt of a human author—and not those of the Holy Spirit. Laney shows that in Psalm 137, the imprecation involves the third person in such a way as to show that the speaker is expressing his own feeling as a man.⁴² The psalms are legitimized by saying that, although they cannot be emulated, they are still valid in that at least they are honest. This may be a common African understanding as prayers in general are to be honest reflections of one's feelings. Laurenti Magesa, a well-known African Theologian says:

Prayer is the time to express oneself in an uninhibited way; it is the time to let go of one's whole being, to be more forthright and honest than usual Not to express oneself completely in prayer is dangerous, moreover, because it implies a further breach of trust between the visible and the invisible worlds.⁴³

⁴¹ J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *BS* 138 (Jan 1981): 40.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 178. He further says, "Prayer is the time to express oneself in an uninhibited way; it is the time to let go of one's whole being, to be more forthright and honest than usual."

C. S. Lewis would not be a proponent of this view. He says the imprecations are poems written by ‘ferocious, self-pitying, barbaric men.’⁴⁴ These are the rantings of a man in a dangerous position calling out to God, but were not good in any way. J. H. Webster, in similar fashion to Lewis says, “were these Imprecatory Psalms the language of more personal animosity to his foes, they would mark David as one of the most savage, profane and cruel among men.”⁴⁵ The Psalmist, being seen as such, goes against the idea given to us from Scripture of David as a man after God’s own heart. This argument may be a good counter to the solution proposed, but I wonder if it is even true. Personal animosity, even to the point of cursing people, does not necessarily make one savage, profane, or cruel. We will come back to this thought in the final section.

The second argument against the “Psalmist’s own Sentiments” view is that to see David as yelling out to God to destroy someone may be understandable if it is done in the heat of the moment, but one dare not forget that these psalms were carefully written or refined in times that were much less stressed. Furthermore, these psalms were sung or prayed in later times as the church’s hymnbook. Tremper Longman has this to say:

The Psalms, though they may have been written with a specific historical event in mind, have left that event unnamed in the body of the poem so the psalm could be reused and reapplied to similar, though not identical, later events. One person’s enemy is not another person’s but the psalm can serve both.⁴⁶

Furthermore, if these psalms are only the desire of David and not of the Holy Spirit, then they may not be the authoritative word of God and this implies a suspiciously low view of Scriptural inspiration.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections of the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bliss, 1958), 26.

⁴⁵ J. H. Webster, “The Imprecatory Psalms,” in John McNaugher, editor, *The Psalms in Worship* (Pittsburgh, PA: The United Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1907), 300.

⁴⁶ Tremper Longman, III, “Lament,” in *Cracking Old Testament Codes* (ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr.; Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 202.

⁴⁷ I recognize that all of Scripture does not of necessity include God’s true statements. Sometimes people in Scripture or Satan himself may speak against God or utter false statements. For this reason, I do not mean to imply that these can in no

An offshoot of this view is that David was not a proponent of his own words; he was simply writing what would be the common sentiment of the people. Barnes says that there is nothing in the Psalms that requires the reader to assume that the author of the psalm would approve of such barbaric treatment. The writer was giving an accurate account of feelings that existed at that time; he does not subscribe to such cruelty.⁴⁸ This still does not account for the inspiration problem, but even more simply, it is not persuasive to change such a plain reading of the text to a more difficult one. Anyone reading the Psalms would have to admit that it appears that David or the Psalmist is passionately desirous that such "cruel" behavior will be enacted against his enemies.

These five basic arguments designed to solve the difficulty brought about by the imprecatory psalms have certainly not yielded fully convincing solutions. Each argument has been countered by another argument that would at least cause the contemplative reader to rethink the proposal. At the same time, while not one of these proposals is the final savior, each of them can be regarded as helpful and, in certain of the psalms, can indeed be seen as possible solutions. The final section will seek to harmonize Biblical Theology and the imprecatory psalms and therefore solve the ethical dilemma as well.

V. Biblical Theology and The Imprecatory Psalms

We have already seen that Psalms should be included in Biblical Theology because in their reply to God, they condition further acts of God. They are not stories, but they do convey history; that is they are communication between the people and their God. The people of God replied most often by way of thanksgiving and praise. But these hymns of the people also included vindication themes and curses. How are these curses to be seen as a revelation of God in salvation history? To many

way be just David's words, but only that that is a possible implication. The argument here would rest on the idea that the Holy Spirit guided the congregation to continue singing these psalms long past the time of their authorship.

⁴⁸ Mentioned without citation in Albertus Pieters, *The Psalms in Human Experience* (New York: The Half Moon Press, 1942), 97.

Christians, as we have already seen, texts which seek to reveal a loving God cannot include in them songs desiring war and violence.

A. The Word of God in Human Words

It is necessary first to remember that the Bible is not revelation in the sense of an immediate, verbal communication from God but is "the word of God in human words."⁴⁹ This doctrine, known as organic inspiration, may shed some light on the problem. With this in mind, and before moving into the meat of this section, let us look at three assumptions that evangelicals generally hold.

1. Progressive Revelation. Evolutionary revelation cannot be accepted. The OT is not an imperfect stage of revelation that has been superceded (in a negative way) by the NT. Progressive revelation is not a move from error to truth but from incomplete truth to more complete truth.⁵⁰
2. Writer / Document / Audience. Interpreters must try to discover what the texts intended to say to the readers and hearers at the time. The texts are not universally true and timeless; rather, they fit very specifically into a social, religious and historical context. They will naturally emphasize different truths depending on the time and place that they are read and written.
3. Canon. Individual texts do not exist in a vacuum and cannot be absolutized. They exist and therefore must be heard canonically. They are always communicating with other texts of similar themes. The Bible is not a collection of revelations and eternal truths descended from heaven. Only the Bible as a whole is revelation from God.⁵¹

⁴⁹ This comes from the new document from the Papal Biblical Commission (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993).

⁵⁰ We do not consider those in the OT to have been in error in their worship of God, despite the fact that the whole truth had not yet been revealed. They were working with the knowledge they had. The book of Hebrews does refer to the OT being superceded, but in fulfillment terms not cancellation ones.

⁵¹ These three points are very dependant on chapter three of Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 63-86.

These three truths will help us as we strive to find the right place for these Psalms.

B. Tensions within the Testaments

Organic inspiration is the first step towards clarity, but an important second step is recognizing the tension that exists not only in the ancient world but in ours as well. The church today lives in a different world—one after the cross. How is the church to understand Israel as hating their enemy, when Jesus says to love enemies? This tension is not foreign to the OT either. We have already rejected the view that the OT time is an inferior dispensation and have mentioned verses that show the Old Testament's view of loving enemies. In addition to these, consider Job's statement: "Have I rejoiced at the extinction of my enemy, Or exulted when evil befell him? "No, I have not allowed my mouth to sin By asking for his life in a curse (Job 31:29-30 NASB). Even David may have had in mind God's words, "To me belongs vengeance and recompense," as a rule for him when he found himself an enemy of Saul.⁵²

The NT is not only in tension with certain OT texts but with other NT texts as well. Jesus does declare that we are to love our enemies, but at the same time he curses many cities for their lack of repentance (Matt 11:20-24) as well as announcing a long diatribe against hypocrites and other enemies of the truth (Matt 23). Not only Jesus, but also most of the authors of the NT call curses on people. Paul denounces a chief priest and asks God to smite him (Acts 23:3); he also prays for retribution against Alexander the coppersmith (2 Tim 4:14). Peter denounces Simon Magus saying "May your money perish with you" (Acts 8:20 NIV). These "discrepancies" within the Testaments make it impossible to put the OT against the New in any discussion concerning imprecations. With these first two steps in mind, it now necessary to look at the covenant of God in the OT and its continuance into the New.

C. The Covenant

Possible solutions to the problem may be more easily ascertained with a proper view of covenant. It is this relationship that makes the

⁵² Dt 32:35; 1 Sam 24.

imprecatory psalms not only bearable, but also necessary and even pleasurable.⁵³ H. Ridderbos and P. Craigie say that “there is more to the harsh language of the psalmists than at first appears on the surface; the background is to be found in the context of covenant or treaty.”⁵⁴ The relationship between God and his people began at a specific point in history with a covenant. By the time of the Mosaic covenant, there was a relatively full revelation of God as not only a loving and faithful God but also as an angry, jealous, and cursing God.⁵⁵ In this Mosaic covenant, which is intimately connected to the Abrahamic covenant, Yahweh promised to bless his people as they obeyed him and to curse those who rejected his covenant. This retributive understanding of the covenant was pervasive in Israelite society and retribution in general was a part of many other cultures as well.

Since the Psalms are generally attributed to David, let us look at this man as an example of a covenant relationship. David was a righteous man and was chosen specifically by God to be his representative on earth. With the promise of this plan and the later working out of this plan, David was still forced to spend many years in hiding while his enemies prospered and spent much time trying to kill him. This went against everything he understood about the character of God. The agreement was that if David obeyed God, then he would be blessed, specifically with a sure house, but

⁵³ Pleasurable may be too emotional a word, but considering the direction that covenant allows us to go, I feel that this may be a worthwhile choice if we end up agreeing with anything proposed in this section.

⁵⁴ N. H. Ridderbos and P. C. Craigie, “Psalms”, *ISBE* rev. ed. 3: 1037.

⁵⁵ I hold this to be obvious from the curses promised upon Israel if they were disobedient. However, not all agree. A popular youth magazine in Kenya insists that people invoking deity in their curses cannot be expecting God the creator to bring ill on someone. “Scripture tells us that all good things come from God. He therefore cannot be the deity referred to in the definition of curses. Our God consigns people to life, not destruction.” See Atieno Okudo, “Curses,” *Step Africa* vol. 1 no. 10, (1994): 6. Laurenti Magesa confirms this more academically, “The relationship between God and creation—specifically, humanity is one of solicitude on the part of God. To associate god with anything that is not good, pure, just and honorable is ridiculous.” Magesa, 46. I think most Christian scholars would agree, however, that God does indeed curse.

in general as well.⁵⁶ David was living righteously, and it appeared that God was not keeping his end of the bargain. These imprecations involved the longing of a man for righteous vindication. David fully expected that God would crush his enemies because they threatened the covenant ideal. This belief is called retribution and there was no diffidence in believing this. Von Rad says:

Israel saw this idea [retribution] of the indissoluble connexion [*sic.*] between it and outcome as confirmed in daily experience. It was anything but a theological theory—it only became so in the later reflexions [*sic.*] of the Wisdom literature; rather it was substantiated by countless observations in daily life.⁵⁷

In OT times, there was an underdeveloped understanding of final vindication. It was not understood as something that happened after death. God could not allow the righteous to suffer or the wicked to prosper here on earth. They simply must be blessed or punished in the present time. Delitzsch says concerning this:

Theodicy, or the vindication of God's ways, does not yet rise from the indication of the retribution in the present time which the ungodly do not escape to a future solution of all the contradiction of this present world ...⁵⁸

Man fully expected God's promises to materialize on earth and would not have considered retribution as eschatological.

David believed God would vindicate him, but even more than his own vindication, David's plea for the cursing of his enemies centered rightly on the vindication of God's righteousness. God in his righteousness has set up a specific order in the world that must be followed. When people purposefully go against this order, they deserve to be punished, so that God's reputation will not be impugned. Psalm 58:6 says: "Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth." (ASV) But the imprecation is followed with

⁵⁶ The sure house is the Davidic Covenant, but it is intimately connected to the earlier covenants and general blessing had been promised to the righteous under the Mosaic covenant.

⁵⁷ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 386.

⁵⁸ Quoted from Chalmers Martin, "The Imprecations in the Psalms," *PTR 1* (1903), 545. No citation is given.

the purpose clause: "So that men shall say, Verily there is a reward for the righteous, Verily there is a God that judgeth in the earth." (ASV)

Psalm 59:13 says: "Consume them in wrath, consume them till they are no more, that men may know that God rules over Jacob to the ends of the earth." (NASB)

As a representative of the monarchy, David saw his own enemies as enemies of God. They were not simply guilty of treason to Israel but also of blasphemy of God. The curses uttered against these men were done with a zeal for God and his kingdom. These were bold utterances of a man who was as disgusted at sin as God was. These enemies were embodiments of sin. Psalm 5 shows David's desire that the enemies of God be dealt with:

For thou art not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not sojourn with thee.

The boastful may not stand before thy eyes; thou hatest all evildoers.

Thou destroyest those who speak lies; the LORD abhors bloodthirsty and deceitful men.

.....

For there is no truth in their mouth; their heart is destruction, their throat is an open sepulchre, they flatter with their tongue.

Make them bear their guilt, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; because of their many transgressions cast them out, for they have rebelled against thee. (Psalm 5:3-10 NRSV)

The reason for the curse is the sin of his enemies. Even David, who was the king and therefore, a warrior, recognized that he was, in a very real sense, the sword of God. He called on God to curse his enemies and to make the order right. Erich Zenger comments concerning this:

These psalms are realized theodicy: They affirm God by surrendering the last word *to God*. They give *to God* not only their lament about their desperate situation, but also the right to judge the originators of that situation. They leave *everything* in God's hands, even feelings of hatred and aggression.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 79.

While I agree with most of this statement, the last line seems to go against the entire concept of the Psalm. He does not leave *everything* in God's hands. His hatred of his enemies continues. He must hate what his king hates. But the action is left to God. David curses and in so doing is asking God to continue to keep His promises.

These promises were important to the entire nation of Israel, not only to the monarch. Every person in the community was part of the covenant and every person expected God to keep his promises. A good example of a community understanding of what these promises meant can be found in the pre-monarchical story of Achan. The people of Israel cannot defeat their enemies, and it comes to Joshua's attention that the reason is an enemy within the camp. Achan is discovered to have taken spoils from a past war and hid them under his tent. When he and his whole family are brought out before the people, we find that even Achan understands the importance of the promises of God. Joshua confronts him and asks him to give glory and praise to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Achan then does this, confessing his sin. The fact that Achan is then stoned by the people convinces the reader that the agreement between God and the people is even more important than human life. The judgment on one family was for the betterment of the community. This is true whether judgment is against enemies outside the community or insiders among the community. These historical examples show the importance of an historical covenant—promises made between God and man. Every member of the community would desire and expect God to uphold his covenant promises and would ask God to judge their enemies based on this expectation—an expectation spelled out in the law itself.

There is most likely a historical background behind the each of the psalms, but at the same time, they are the hymns of Israel. When Israel sang many of these songs, the psalms did not always remind them of a historical event; rather, the songs ambiguously kept them involved in the text itself and its new application to the singers. The psalm is designed for application purposes and although it may have a historical foundation, it is purposely kept ambiguous concerning details so that it may fit into the reader's situation. The enemies may have originated as historical adversaries but have become godless types and models of evil. "The enemies thus become representatives of all the power of chaos threatening

the order which the Creator continues to uphold.”⁶⁰ This implies, I believe, that the original historical event that prompted the psalm was not relevant to the singers; rather their own history with God and his response to their song is what kept these songs important. For this reason the new singers continued to claim the covenant blessings for themselves and expect the covenant cursings for their enemies.

Finally, a connection to the first section of the paper is needed. It was proposed there that the Psalms were a response to God, but it was left undetermined as to how imprecations can be a response. This has been alluded to in this section already, but it needs to be stated explicitly. The imprecations are a response to a covenantal God. God said he would curse those who cursed Abraham’s children; that is his statement. The people sing with the desire of vindication in the hearts of the singers—a desire for God’s justice to prevail; that is their response to his statement. In this, they respond in agreement to the Suzerain (God) involved in the treaty. M. G. Kline says: “The Psalter’s function in covenantal confession suggests that it may be regarded as an extension of the vassal’s ratifications response, which is found in certain biblical as well as extra-biblical covenants as part of the treaty text.”⁶¹

The imprecations are covenantal confessions and serve as the vassal’s ratification response. In this way they fit into a Biblical Theology. Kline also says:

The imprecations in the Psalms confront us unexpectedly with a pattern of conduct which conforms to the ethics of the consummation. Since it is intruded by inspiration, it constitutes a divine abrogation, within a limited sphere, of the ethical requirements normally in force during the course of common grace. What is required is that we cease stumbling over this as though it were a problem and recognize it as a feature of the divine administration of the Covenant of Redemption in the

⁶⁰ Anderson, 63.

⁶¹ M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 63. A king who conquers another king and forces him to pay tribute and allegiance is known as the Suzerain. The conquered king, although still a king, is the vassal of the Suzerain; and therefore, under his authority.

Old Testament, a feature that displays the sovereign authority of the covenant God.⁶²

Allan Harman helps explain Kline when he says, “the imprecations in the Psalter, given under divine inspiration, are calls for consummation judgment to be intruded into the present time frame.”⁶³ Kline is correct in this, although he may be inferring that this idea applies to the OT use of the imprecations alone. However, the consummation is still not complete. With this in mind, we turn to whether there is a continuance of these psalms.

D. Psalms as Revelation of the New Testament God (Thy Kingdom Come)

God’s response to the Psalms still continues, and the church’s reaction to his response continues as well. The key to the church’s understanding is remembering that we are still part of the same covenant that existed in the OT—a progressively revealed one, but with the same underlying agreement. Although inaugurated in Christ, the consummation of the kingdom is “not yet.” I think that most would agree that when the kingdom comes in its fullness (consummation) there will be no need for the people of God to ask for retribution; the Day of the Lord entails judgment and it will have arrived. But what should the saints do in the meantime?

The martyred saints continue to cry before God’s throne, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev 6:10 NASB) Do we not ask for the same thing? Many churches announce implicit curses on the enemies of God every Sunday in the unison statement of the Lord’s Prayer. In quoting the words of Christ, “Thy kingdom come,” we are asking for the consummation of an era. This consummation brings about the destruction of our enemies and God’s enemies. This petition involves the complete overthrow of Satan’s kingdom and all his followers. There is really no difference in praying this then there is in praying an imprecatory psalm and

⁶² Kline, 162.

⁶³ Allan M. Harman, “Continuity of the Covenant Curses in the Imprecations,” *RTV* 45 (1995): 72.

so I suggest we should continue singing these psalms with all the fervor of the martyred saints.

We must sing these imprecatory psalms, but we must always keep in mind the inherent danger. An enemy is not one with whom we cannot get along, and they may not be as blatant as Goliath was for David. However, in continuing to pray “Thy kingdom come,” we recognize that the enemies have not been totally defeated and therefore it is appropriate, even necessary to continue our plea for the vindication of God’s righteousness. “The church that does not learn to hate—in a covenantal way—what its King hates is on the wrong path.”⁶⁴ We are required to hate our enemies and to love our enemies. We are required to hate the “representatives of all the power of chaos” but to act in fashion that brings about the removal of enmity, which in some cases might be the reconciliation between the enemy and their Creator. For this reason, we continue to pray the psalms, but we do it reservedly. Only Christ can pronounce these psalms in an absolute sense since he knows who the enemies ultimately are and knows of their “imminent” destruction. For us, this tension must remain as long as the kingdom is in a continuation phase.

VI. Conclusion

We have seen that, although many scholars do not accept the poetic genre as fitting readily into their view of Biblical Theology, it should not be avoided. Biblical theology is the revelation of God in history. This includes the action of God, the response of the people, and the reaction of God to the people’s response. H. Wheeler Robinson says, “It was said at the outset that the Psalms though strictly a response to revelation, have become for us a part of it.”⁶⁵ We now must see the Psalms as a part of revelation. We have seen the alleged difficulty with these imprecations and shown that the usual task of harmonization falls short of comfortable. We have further shown that harmonization is not necessarily the goal and while comfort is nice, it should not be the goal either. A blatant tension existed in ancient times and still exists today and this tension should not be harmonized but

⁶⁴ Cornelius Vanderwaal, *Search the Scriptures 4 Job-Song of Songs* (Ontario: le at Paideia Press, 1979), 53.

⁶⁵ H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 265.

accepted. While there is much room for further dialogue on this uncomfortable subject (and I truly hope there is some), it has been shown that by properly understanding the covenant, we must conclude that the singing of imprecations should continue in a desire for the vindication of God's name.

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CONTEXTUALISED READINGS AND TRANSLATIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT IN AFRICA¹

Ernst R. Wendland

Introduction

It is interesting to observe at conferences that focus on such broad topics as African theology, contextualisation, and hermeneutics how very little is said about the fundamental basis for all such scholarly activity, namely, *Bible translation* and the different versions that we must use in order to do all our theologising, interpreting, inculturating, and the like. It would appear that this foundational enterprise is either taken for granted or assumed to be rather straightforward in actual practice: Translators simply transform or convert the words of God as recorded in the OT and NT Scriptures from the original Hebrew and Greek into the words of African language X, Y, or Z.

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¹ The original form of this essay was presented (in part) as a response to a panel on Bible translation at the Post-Conference Meeting of the Society of New Testament Scholars (SNTS), which was held on August 9, 1999 at the Hammanskraal Campus of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. It was later revised and published in *The Bible Translator* (52:1, January 2001, 132-144). The current article, slightly renamed, is a further revision of the latter publication, but I have retained the original focus upon the New Testament because certain translation projects still end when that portion of the Bible is done.

It is not quite so easy as that, however, and certain prominent controversies that have arisen in the West concerning the composition, transmission, interpretation, translation, and application of the Bible have inevitably found their way to this continent where they have complicated matters considerably. In short, given the obvious fact that any Bible translation inevitably involves both “interpretation” and “contextualisation,” how *far* can we go or how *free* may we be in this crucial operation?² In this article I would like to draw attention to several of the key hermeneutical issues involved as a stimulus to further thought and future interaction on a subject that has not always been given the scholarly consideration that it deserves in relation to its overall importance to the Christian community concerned, whether in Africa or anywhere else.

My remarks pertain to two closely related sets of observations. The first concerns a number of matters that arise in connection with the content and implications of the general theme given in the title above. Secondly, as a follow-up, I will offer a few suggestions regarding the challenge of how we might encourage a greater number of *doubly-contextualised* “African translations and readings” of the NT—that is, directing this process of culturally sensitive and sensitized hermeneutics to both the *source* language and culture as well as that of a particular *receptor* or user group. These comments would seem to apply then not only within the scholarly community or guild of biblical experts, but also where it really counts, namely, in the context of the various local communities where many of us live and work. My thoughts may be grouped into four general categories, which will be considered in reverse order of their occurrence in the introductory title, namely: Africa, New Testament, Reading & Translation, Contextualised.

² Take the Hebrew divine Tetragrammaton, for example, where we have a continuum of translational possibilities in most Bantu languages, ranging from the most literal transliteration, through various circumlocutions, to the use of a local cultural equivalent, e.g., Chichewa: *Yahve* or *Yehova* (“Yahweh” or “Jehovah”)—*Ambuye* or *Mfumu* (“[respected] Elder” or “Chief”)—*Ambuye Mulungu* (“Elder-God”)—*Chauta* (“Great-God-of-the-Bow,” an ancient title/name for the Supreme Chewa Deity).

Africa

Why do we really need to specify “in Africa” at all? The obvious answer is that this continent (more specifically, the sub-Saharan region) is the distinct *locus* and hence also the *focus* of our hermeneutical activity of “contextualising”—that is, to situate some topic or issue in an appropriate, comprehensive communication setting, whether verbal or non-verbal. Thus the different types of religious “food” that we are preparing for a spiritually and physically “hungry” (sometimes “starving”) community of diverse groups and individuals must be “cooked in an African pot,” as one recent anthology on contextualisation has aptly put it.³ Furthermore, this “cooking” process needs to be carried out using familiar African “seasoning,” that is, done from a decidedly local perspective and an indigenous background of experience.

Africa and its rich ethnic, cultural, and spiritual diversity has a vital contribution to blend in with the mass chorus of world Christianity, from minuscule Bubi on the west coast to the mega-lingua Swahili on the east.⁴ Has her hermeneutical voice (or better, a resonant choir of mixed-voices) been sufficiently heard or seriously listened to? I think not, for one reason or another, not the least of these hindrances being linguistic: Some of Africa’s leading theologians and communicators, especially those who prefer to convey their messages orally, do not speak (or write) the “right” language, i.e., some major European (but also a former colonial!) lingua franca—English, French, or Portuguese. So how can her dynamic religious

³ This helpful metaphor is taken from a special journal edition that deals with the subject of local contextualisation: *Theology Cooked in an African Pot* (ATISCA Bulletin no 5/6, 1996-97), K. Fiedler, P. Gundani & H. Mijoga (eds.), Zomba, Malawi: Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa, 1998.

⁴ “Contact with other cultures enlarges our understanding of the [biblical] text. It enables us to see facets of the truth to which we are blind because of our cultural limitations. It does not give us a different meaning to the text, but a fuller meaning”—M. J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation: Perspectives on Hermeneutical Issues*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1993, 96.

heritage, both ancient and modern, be made more audible, then amplified and transmitted, not only abroad but also within the continent itself? We are all aware of some of the formidable barriers that are being faced in this regard, such as: globalisation, multi- [or mono-]lingualism, regionalism, foreign cultural accommodation, factionalism, in certain areas oppressive militarism, and nowadays also the devastating, resource-depleting AIDS pandemic.

But a rather controversial question arises in this connection:⁵ Can only an ethnic “African” exegete, contextualise, theologise, or translate in and for Africa? Or to put it another way, just exactly *who* constitutes an “African” in the subject under consideration here? Are we talking about criteria such as pure racial heritage, residency, mind-set, value system, or something else? May someone of “European” descent be considered an “African” if s/he was born and bred somewhere on the continent? How about an Egyptian (Copt), an Ethiopian, or a mulatto? Is it possible that a culturally-sympathetic “Africanised European” might be able to offer a more “African” understanding or contextualisation of the Scriptures than a “Westernised African”?⁶ The Chewa people have a proverb that may be relevant here: *Mlendo amayenda ndi lumo lakuthwa* “A traveler moves about with sharp razor.”⁷ That is to say, the alien outsider may at times be in a better position to provide a more discerning, balanced, impartial, or novel viewpoint on a particular issue than a cultural insider simply because s/he is looking at things either analytically or experientially with a completely different set of cognitive and emotive spectacles. But perhaps, speaking as an “African alien” myself (since 1962), I best leave the answer to this issue for national biblical scholars and critics to decide.

Secondly, we need to consider the significant diversity among the various black peoples of Africa. In addition to language (some 2000 in all, and not just “dialects”!), there are certain rather great differences in history, outlook, and custom, for example, between the matrilineal-matrilocal and

⁵ Certain aspects of this controversy are debated with reference to South African biblical scholarship in a recent edition of *BOTSA (Bulletin for Old Testament Studies in Africa)*, 12 (2002).

⁶ This subject provoked quite a controversy in a recent edition of *Missionalia* (27/1, April 1999): “Theological Forum: A Debate on Attitudes to African Religion” (115-137).

⁷ A Chinese (I think) proverb puts it more bluntly: “If you want to know what water is like, don’t ask a fish!”

the patrilineal-patrilocal societies of south-central Africa where I live. The same would hold true I suspect between the San peoples, whose traditional home is the Kalahari Desert, and the Pygmies of equatorial Africa. Socioculturally quite different then, do representatives of either of these ethnic groups provide us with a genuine “African reading” or translation merely because they happen to reside on this continent? What about those intellectuals living and working abroad “in the diaspora”—are their voices still current, accurate, and relevant?⁸ Some scholars have been severely criticised in the past for presuming to write on the subject of “African traditional religion” or “African Christianity” when such references would include so many culturally disparate nationalities or so many distinct religious beliefs and rituals.

So what is “Africa”—one or many, a unity or diversity, a harmony or cacophony—and how does one defend one’s position on the matter? I think that a more helpful way perhaps to consider potentially contentious issues like this is in terms of *both-and* rather than *either-or*. We do not wish to focus overly much on either the “unity” aspect (thus blurring some significant distinctions) or on “diversity” (thus missing the great African forest because of all the different species of trees), but instead upon “unity in diversity.” The variegated readings and (back-) translations that emanate from Africa need to be collected, analyzed, published, and widely distributed in order to make its essential contribution, as a composite whole now, to the larger hermeneutical enterprise of world Christianity (“the big picture”). Will the results be complementary in nature—or supplementary, distinctive, exclusive, or “any of the above”? May we expect a uniquely “African” contextualised perspective on the New Testament and related studies to emerge with regard to theory and/or practice, that is, exegetically, homiletically, translationally, or in any other way? I do not think that we are as yet in a position to make such a judgment. Much more African-originated research on the subject first needs to be initiated, studied, assessed, and disseminated.

⁸ Surprisingly, this issue did not really come up for discussion during the recent 28th Annual Conference of the African Literature Association (April 3-7, 2002, University of California at San Diego), whose theme was “African Diasporas: Ancestors, Migrations and Boundaries.”

In recent years some great strides have been made in the area of popularising African scholars and African theology (whether Christian or indigenous), e.g., though major regional publishing houses like Africa Christian Press (Ghana), Kachere (Malawi), Mambo Press (Zimbabwe), Acton (Kenya), and Cluster Publications (South Africa). But clearly a great deal yet needs to be done to fill in the large communication blanks and research gaps that remain, also on a continental basis. Such a dual effort is particularly critical with regard to all the contextualising of the Word—whether well or poorly done—that is being carried out *orally* in rural areas, on the popular level, in the local vernaculars (including so-called “minority” languages), and by the oft unrecognised and unheralded corps of *lay* Christians (preachers, teachers, catechists, composers), including representatives also of the widespread and influential African Independent/Initiated Churches (AICs).⁹

New Testament

With regard to this second area of focus, I would first like to reinforce the hermeneutical principle that we all are well aware of, namely, that any valid interpretation of the New Testament must be founded upon and grow out of a thorough, perceptive *prior*-understanding of the *Old Testament* canon and related documents. I mention this simply because it seems to me that some scholars and commentators nowadays have a tendency to over-*Greco-Romanise* the NT writers and their respective situations (or rhetorical “exigencies”). Indeed, we should be grateful to Social-Scientific critics and members of the school of neo-Greco-Roman rhetoricians who have pointed out many features of the ancient, turn-of-the-millennium Mediterranean world and its verbal or symbolic art forms that may have influenced the biblical authors as they wrote, along with their addressees and other reader-hearers. But we ought not push this important insight too far, that is, at the expense of a biblical viewpoint that must have been profoundly shaped also by Semitic, specifically Old Testament, literature,

⁹ For some recent information regarding the last two groups mentioned, see E. Wendland, *Preaching That “Grabs the Heart”: A Rhetorical-Stylistic Study of the Chichewa Revival Sermons of Shadrack Wame*, (Kachere Monograph Series No. 11), Blantyre, Malawi: CLAIM, 2000; also J. N. Amanze, “Theology Already Cooked in an African Pot,” in Fiedler, et.al. (eds.), q.v., 61-80.

culture, ethos, and religiosity—whether conveyed in the original Hebrew or more likely, via its translation into Greek (LXX).

Here too the issue noted above must have arisen: Just *who* constitutes a true “Jew”? How “Hellenised,” secularised, or displaced spatially did one have to become to fall outside the recognised orbit of Judaism? In any case, the point is that any valid reading of a New Testament book (Hebrews in particular), pericope, or passage should be holistic in nature. In other words, it must presuppose an accurately contextualised interpretation of any and all OT texts—both oral and written, textual as well as *extratextual* (situational)—that may have influenced it *intertextually* in a semantically significant way. The pertinent Greco-Roman background must then be carefully used to conceptually situate a given NT text within its proper historical setting, ecological environment, and sociocultural milieu.

Secondly, when we talk about “readings” of the NT, we need to ask ourselves: *Which text* are we reading? Is it the original Greek text or its translation into another language? If we are dealing with a vernacular version (as is normally the case in Africa), can this be considered a *valid* reading? Most would agree that the various interpretations that inevitably go into the production of any translation are indeed legitimate (if the translator/s is/are competent and all other factors being equal; e.g., no overt mechanical errors being present in the printed text). But the matter of *Scripture* translation raises some additional issues that concern our possible understanding of the biblical text. These are not often considered in discussions about African readings and the like, but certainly it would seem they deserve a greater measure of investigation in the form of directed market research and audience testing:

1. What effect does: (a) the *language* of translation—or (b) a particular *type* of translation have upon an individual or on communal Bible reading/understanding/interpretation/explanation?
 - a) What is the specific communicative outcome when a person or group must hear/read the NT in a language that is not his/her/their mother-tongue? How much conceptual skewing occurs? How much mis-information is conveyed? On the other hand, do some

people perhaps *choose* to access the biblical text in a different language due to its prestige value in the community or for some other sociolinguistic reason?

- b) There are different types of translation or degrees of contextualisation involved with this activity that diverge with respect to their relative intelligibility, informativity, interest, and impact according to such variables as:

i—the *style/method* of rendition where we have another continuum of possibilities, e.g., literal (NASB, NRSV), “middle-of-the-road” (NIV), idiomatic (GNB, CEV), paraphrase (LB, The Message), literary (REB, JB), and liturgical (Tanakh).

ii—the intended *receptor constituency*, whether the general population or some sub-domain, such as “new readers,” the youth, second-language speakers, specific minority interest or denominational groups.

iii—the amount (and kind) of *textual contextualisation* that is included in the form of explanatory footnotes, introductions, cross-references, maps, charts, sectional headings, a glossary, topical index, and so forth.

2. To what extent can: (a) the *language* of translation—or (b) a particular *type* of translation either hinder (stifle) or encourage (stimulate) a less/more *African* reading of the NT? How and why does this happen? What effect does the presence of an older, church-sponsored “missionary” version have on the interpretation as well as the production of a contemporary, meaning-based translation (e.g., with regard to style, key terms, etc—the venerable “KJV factor”)?
3. How is interpretation affected, both in general and with reference to specific NT passages, in cases where a translation of the *Old Testament* is not (yet) available or complete—or when a translation of the Bible (and its publication in a smaller “portion” form) begins with the OT rather than the NT—or when only selected books or texts are made available (e.g., the so-called “Jesus tradition” or a “shorter Bible”)?

4. How does the overall *extratextual* situation—the sociocultural context, indigenous tradition of religion, ecclesiastical history (possibly including current inter-denominational friction), ongoing alien religious, philosophical, and hermeneutical influence on the local church(es), etc.—have on contemporary African Christian communication (e.g., the outright condemnation by some mission agencies of the TEV and all TEV-related translations)?
5. What effect does the lack of functional *literacy* have on one's understanding of the Scriptures in relation to specific texts or books of the Bible? What is the communicative effect of providing at least some texts in a more audience-sensitive *medium* of message transmission, such as audio or video cassettes? Are such productions regarded by lay-people or church policy-makers as authentic "Scripture"?
6. What happens to a *new Bible translation* after it is published—how much/little is it used, in which socio-religious settings, for which purposes, and for what reasons? How does the new version relate to previously existing ones (e.g., complementation, supplementation, competition, or replacement), either in the same language or in the main *lingua franca*? To what extent have audience expectations been met? If not, what can be done about the situation (e.g., more promotion and accompanying instruction or a complete revision)?
7. What are the wider implications of this complex *interlingual factor* with respect to our concern for stimulating and promoting hermeneutically valid and viable African translations and readings along with subsequent applications of the New Testament? What then can be done by way of developing more effective follow-up communication strategies to remedy the outstanding lacks, limitations, obstacles, and deficiencies with regard to Scripture understanding and use?

These questions are merely suggestive of some of the important interpretive and communication-based issues that need to be raised when investigating the nature, extent, and results of the various formal and informal acts of

contextualising the Bible—the Old as well as New Testament—in a given African setting, society, and/or specific Christian sub-community.

Reading & Translation

This double area of concern follows closely from the preceding discussion, and here is where I have my greatest problem in relation to the subject of hermeneutics and the contemporary practice of contextualisation in particular. I might begin by suggesting that the term “reading,” despite its popularity in some scholarly circles, is less than satisfactory. I assume that it is employed metaphorically in popular usage with respect to our diverse acts of textual engagement—interpretation—in one form or another, either oral or written. If so, then why not “*hearing*,” which would seem to be a much more appropriate analogy for the primary channel of message transmission on the African scene (and in many other world settings)?¹⁰ Or perhaps we should just state more precisely what we mean—that is, African “interpretation,” “exegesis,” “understanding,” “commentary,” or “application.”

It may be that the term “reading” was chosen in order to better reflect the current in-vogue method of interpretation, namely, “reader-response” or “reception” theory. This critical school certainly does seem to be very popular in current hermeneutical literature. It is encouraging, at least for me, to note that most African biblical scholars and critics have not allowed this methodological preference to deteriorate into its subjectivistic, self-imploding cross-cousin, namely, the so-called “deconstructionist” school of postmodern criticism. This sub-midrashic approach leads to what Thistleton aptly terms “hermeneutical anarchy” and Vanhoozer, a “method for *undoing* interpretation.”¹¹ I would call it simply “Humpty-Dumpty

¹⁰ In some Bantu languages, e.g., Chichewa, the word for “hear” (-*mva*) may also mean “understand,” whereas if someone does “not hear,” s/he does not understand what is being said. “Reading” (-*werenga*) on the other hand refers to a purely mechanical activity; it implies nothing at all about the relative degree of comprehension that is involved.

¹¹ Unfortunately, I have lost the textual references for these two citations. However, Anthony Thistleton’s trenchant critique of unbounded reader-response and deconstructionist interpretation in relation to biblical hermeneutics may be found in the volume *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1992, 84-141, 471-

hermeneutics,” after the words of the Egghead himself: “When I use [read] a word... it means what I choose it to mean—neither more, nor less.”¹² Thus meaning becomes completely moot, and assumed hermeneutical “freedom” becomes so great that it collapses under its own weight—hence also the possibility of erecting any sort of a collective or distinctive perspective such as an “African reading” (or “readings”) disappears.

There is another, related problem with many current approaches to biblical interpretation. A preoccupation with the present receptor community and its (or their individual) concerns may lead one to lose sight of the *source* (the presumed authorial “speaker”—whether “real,” “implied,” or “postulated”)¹³ and also the original compositional or historical setting, including the political, ideological, sociological, economic, and ecological context. Any one or even all of these contextual facets may manifest certain significant differences from the corresponding field of a contemporary African society, e.g., with respect to geography, flora and fauna, family relationships, or beliefs about the after-life. In other words, a hermeneutical over-emphasis upon “reading” *in front of* the text will inevitably divert one’s attention away from the initial act of “writing” (or “speaking,” i.e., *reading behind the text*), and sometimes even from

555. Even more detailed criticisms of these approaches are available in Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s recent study, appropriately entitled *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1998, *passim*.

¹² Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, Philadelphia PA: Winston, 1923 [reprint 1957], 213. Personally, I would respond to such a claim, along with Alice: “The question is... whether you *can* [legitimately] make words mean so many different things” (*loc. cit.*)—that is, totally disregarding the accepted senses or intentions which they have in the public lexical domain.

¹³ I submit that there must be *someone*, a real human being (even if we do not know exactly *whom*) posited as the “author” (and crafter) of any text that is being analyzed, especially from a pragmatic, functional, or communicative perspective. Thus to me it is counterintuitive to claim that a literary composition simply “speaks” by, of, and for itself, as many contemporary critics would have it. This is just as naïve as to assert from a relativistic position that the reader (hearer) “creates” textual meaning—to each his/her own. Why do we even require or refer to an “original text” in such a case?

what has been actually written, namely, *within the text* of Scripture itself. Thus we may be so busy contextualising or applying its message to the urgent theological, spiritual, and moral concerns of the here-and-now that we have little or no time to make sure that we are validly pressing and proclaiming such issues—that is, on the basis of the right biblical texts or a reasonably correct exegesis of them.

This sort of a subjective, existential, de-historicised, and/or overly-relativised reading—if offered as a full exegesis or interpretation of the original message—is just as invalid, or we might say, dishonest, as one that significantly distorts or misconstrues the meaning of the source document. This is because it is incomplete and poorly founded, namely, with reference to relevant readings both “behind the text” and “within the text.”¹⁴ Furthermore, such a reductive approach lacks the critical *controls* necessary (based on the original text and context) for a credible evaluation to be made of the particular interpretation that is being set forth as well as its analytical methodology.¹⁵ On the other hand, it severely limits the *potential* for hermeneutical growth and development, that is, the opportunity to enrich or enlarge upon our understanding of the biblical text by means of a distinctively African perspective and insight (e.g., with regard to tribal and familial genealogies found in Genesis and 1 Chronicles, the sacrificial, priestly outlook of the book of Hebrews, or the prophetic, visionary symbolism of Revelation).

As an older, more conservative, yet still viable, alternative, I would propose a return to or a re-emphasis upon the “two-horizon” concept in hermeneutics and a distinction between what may be termed “signification” and “significance.”¹⁶ The practice of interpreting intended “meaning” according to such a scheme is a twofold and ordered exercise:

¹⁴ Cf. Gerald West, *Contextual Bible Study*, Pietermaritzburg, RSA: Cluster Publications, 1993.

¹⁵ Hence virtually “anything goes”—more or less, or as one title states it: *To Each Its Own Meaning* (S. L. McKenzie & S. R. Haynes, eds., Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation*, 31; cf. A. C. Thistleton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Descriptions*, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1980. This perspective is a modification of E. D. Hirsh, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation*, Chicago IL: U of Chicago Press, 1976, 2. See the incisive critical development of these notions by K. Vanhoozer in J. Green (ed.),

- (1) *Exegesis*—to accurately determine (as best we can on the basis of current linguistic and extralinguistic evidence) the manifold, overall *signification* (or text-signified cognitive and affective meaning, including the literary genre, artistry, rhetoric, implicatures, and interpersonal pragmatics, i.e., the encoded intentional “speech/text acts”) of a given biblical document. This dynamic, interactive (text context) procedure is carried out with reference to the work’s original setting and on the basis of the (implied) author’s distinctive goal-directed, textually-shaped selection and arrangement of both form and content throughout the discourse as a hierarchically-structured whole; and
- (2) *Application*—to draw out and develop the primary functional *significance*, relevance, or utility of that particular text/message (derived in step 1) in interaction with a specific target language community, environment, and situation—past, present, or future. Such a relational, practical application of meaning, either as a whole or with reference only to certain aspects of this, constitutes an essential element of the communicative exercise that we are calling “contextualisation” (usually termed “inculturation” by Catholic scholars). Such a process is often governed by a perception or actual expression of the “felt needs” of a given sociocultural community; however, one must not overlook their additional “actual needs,” determined in relation to their entire circumstantial setting and on the basis of “the whole [biblical] will of God” (Acts 20:27, NIV).

Hearing the New Testament, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995, 315; also Vanhoozer 1998, 74-81. Hirsch’s basic notions have been frequently criticised but in my opinion not convincingly refuted by modern literary analysts. The [implied] author’s communicative *intention* (important also in “Speech-Act” and more recent “Relevance Theory,” e.g., D. Sperber & D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1986, 49-54) is manifested *in* both the form and content of the original text and also *by* its extratextual, situational context. It therefore ought to be respected as the *virtual* point of view, from which all subsequent interpretation of his/her message must proceed and be evaluated.

An added problem in the past with regard to this endeavor, especially in relation to Bible translation, has often been the imposed influence of a *third* “horizon” or hermeneutical framework and context—namely, an intermediate alien, Western one. Thus, instead of:

$$[S1 \Rightarrow M1 \Leftarrow R1] \quad \{S2 \Rightarrow M2 \Leftarrow R2\}$$

where (1) represents the original biblical setting of communication and (2) the current African setting (also: S = source/author, M = message, R = receptor/respondent (an individual or a group), \Rightarrow = significant hermeneutical activity with regard to, and \Leftarrow = a shift in the overall communicative situation), we have the following scenario:¹⁷

$$[S1 \Rightarrow M1 \Leftarrow R1] \quad // \quad S2 \Rightarrow M2 \Leftarrow R2 // \quad \{S3 \Rightarrow M3 \Leftarrow R3\}$$

In this case (2) represents a Western-shaped setting, including language/text, interpreter, or transmitter, and (3) the African circumstances, in which the mother tongue translators (S3) cannot access the original Hebrew or Greek text. They thus become indirect “respondents” (R2) to the message of Scripture (M2) as it has been expressed and transmitted in English, French, Portuguese, or whatever.

Obviously, there is a need to eliminate, limit, or compensate somehow for the “foreignising” influence this intrusive number (2) stage in the

¹⁷ This is a condensed and somewhat revised version of the discussion found in E. Wendland, *Buku Loyera: An Introduction to the New Chichewa Bible Translation* [Kachere Monograph No. 6], Blantyre, Malawi: CLAIM, 1998, 60-67. In this very simplified representation of the complex process of communication, notice that *both* of the (\Rightarrow) arrows on either side of each Message symbol point towards it. This signifies that the “receptors” (readers/hearers) as well as the “source” play an active role in the overall procedure. Furthermore, any Message consists of a “text” composed of both linguistic form and content that is cognitive as well as affective in nature. The problem here is that the Message intended by the Source, especially one that involves an ancient written text, is never exactly the same as that which is apprehended by the Receptors due to differences in their physical environment, psychological setting, and/or social situation. In the practice of Scripture interpretation then, it is the communicative perspective and intentions of the original author (S1) that are taken to be preeminent and thus also authoritative.

overall communication process.¹⁸ This can only be done by devoting extra attention to the context number (1), the original biblical dimension (language-history-culture-religion). Such a careful concern for understanding this SL setting must not be ignored, downplayed, or done away with simply because it is too difficult or time-consuming to master—or because we face certain areas of doubt and hence debate with regard to a number of important hermeneutical issues, e.g., the date of composition and authorship, or the intended audience, of several NT books.

Another potential danger in this regard is to facilely assume that the African setting (#2/3) is more or less equivalent (or at least “very similar” to) the biblical milieu (#1, especially in terms of the OT), as it is often claimed. Many significant correspondences certainly exist, but so do some equally important differences, e.g., with respect to a people’s conception of the “spirit world” and the degree of its impingement upon this present life; their perception of the “immanence” versus the “transcendence” of God; the ultimate source of “evil” in the world; the nature of “incarnation”; or the operation and purpose of religious “sacrifices.”¹⁹

The following example involving an important NT key term presents a serious intercultural translation problem in the Chichewa language of Malawi, one that has no single, clear-cut solution: Should πνευμα ακαθαρτον/δαιμονιον (ε.γ., Mk 1:27,34) be rendered as *chiwanda* “malevolent [ancestral] spirit” (a hyper-contextualised term), or *demoni* “demon” (loanword, under-contextualised), or *mzimu woipa* “evil [ancestral] spirit” (a partially-contextualised expression), or *wampweya woononga* “someone having/with a destructive breath” (neologism), or even *badi sipiriti* “bad spirit” (mere English transliteration)? Is there any other option, e.g., a combined descriptive phrase, such as *demoni yodwalitsa [munthu]* “the ‘demon’ that makes [a person] sick”? This and related

¹⁸ I am using the term “foreignise” here in a rather different sense than L. Venuti does in his cultural-political approach to translation history and styles, i.e., what usually turns out to be a relatively *literal* technique (for a cogent critique, see D. Robinson, *What Is Translation? Centrifugal Theories, Critical Interventions*, Kent OH: Kent State UP, 1997, 97-112).

¹⁹ See also “Ruth in Central Africa,” in E. Wendland, *The Cultural Factor in Bible Translation* [UBS Monograph Series #2], New York NY: United Bible Societies, 1987, ch. 7.

conceptual difficulties that pertain to the process of contextualisation continually confront translators in any central African Bantu language.

In conclusion, I think that in order to avoid confusion the term “reading” is better employed with reference to the derivative task of *applied* interpretation (or “hermeneutics” in the narrow sense)—that is, ascertaining in a given RL the contextualised contemporary significance or relevance of some biblical concept. “Exegesis” then is *analytical* interpretation—in other words, discovering the text/context-based signified meaning of the original SL message. Accordingly, in terms of primacy and temporal priority, first comes the foundational practice of exegesis and its exercise, for example in Bible translation; then out of this source-text directed operation arise various acts of applied localised “reading.” In this connection it is also important to note, as Lamin Sanneh and others have pointed out,²⁰ that the activity of Bible translation itself generates significant indigenous church growth and at the same time greatly encourages various creative, contextualised readings of Scripture. This inevitably leads in turn to the development of African-based theological conceptualisation and creative religious verbalisation in the vernacular, where it really counts.

Contextualised

This is the central concept of the theme that has guided our discussion, and I assume that its meaning is relatively familiar. In brief, to “contextualise” a biblical message is to communicate it via translation (+/- supplementary extra-textual helps), paraphrase, adaptation, or recreation in such a way that it is clear, meaningful, and relevant to a specific, intended audience (readership) in their current sociocultural setting and immediate religious circumstances. In this case, as was already observed, a “double contextualisation” is, or should be, involved—*first* (not to be ignored or downplayed) in terms of the SL message so that its sense, significance, and implications may be adequately understood in terms of the original situation; *secondly*, with similar scholarly respect and regard for the RL language and culture. Whether or not we agree on the details of this rather

²⁰ For example, L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1989 (cf. also Wendland, *Buku Loyer*, ch. 7).

broad definition, we undoubtedly all affirm its overall importance to the worldwide mission of the Church, with particular reference to ecclesiastical development in Africa.

How then can we facilitate the next crucial step, that is, actually doing something tangible about the less-than-satisfactory situation that presently pertains on the continent with regard to both the immediate and also the long-term implementation of this essential exercise? In other words, what can we do to more actively and successfully encourage valid, contextualised readings and linguistically “domesticated” translations of the NT in Africa? I will conclude with seven brief and interrelated suggestions that occurred to me as I thought about this vital concern:

- 1) Support the production of twice “contextualised” *study Bibles* in all major African languages, that is, doubly analysed and described—initially in terms of the source/biblical language and culture, and then thoroughly also with regard to a particular receptor/African language-culture. The principal aim of such generously annotated versions is to bring situationally relevant, indigenously expressed biblical knowledge to many more members of the currently deprived grass roots of Christianity, their key communicators (local pastors, catechists, etc.) in particular. For example, it seems clear that it is necessary to adopt a “*narrative*” approach to the text, that is, by viewing and presenting the Scriptures as “*story*”—or better, as God’s *salvation history*. This would not only unify the various historical portions of the Bible, but it would also provide a “canonical” framework for and a facilitation of a contextualised explanation of other types of discourse too (hence incorporating the entire corpus from Genesis to Revelation). A related aim is to stimulate a healthy appreciation for the original context—namely, the biblical “horizon”—one that results in an acceptable “*transculturation*” (but not a distortion, depreciation, or denial) of the Scripture message, as evaluated by the African church in any local setting. Such a study Bible, subsidized so as to make it affordable, will not replace good commentaries, but it can serve as the next-best thing to meet current hermeneutical needs.

- 2) Produce similar, receptor-orientated *commentaries and other Scripture study aids*, such as, a basic Bible introduction (e.g., “What is the Bible?”), dictionary, concordance, cultural background encyclopedia, and the like in the principal African vernaculars—not only in printed form, but also via the more important *audio* medium, e.g., tape cassettes, radio broadcasts. These texts should ideally be written or recorded on at least three (and probably several more) educational levels, namely, that of: i– urban pastors, teachers, and theologians who have been trained, are competent, and minister in English (French);²¹ ii- rural pastors and lay preachers who study and minister primarily in the local language; and iii- average (“ordinary”) lay people who wish to delve more deeply into the Scriptures. For best results, capable and influential representatives of the intended target constituencies need to be involved from the very beginning of the planning, production, and evaluation process.

- 3) Make it financially feasible (e.g., through scholarship grants) for deprived African students—women in particular—including Bible translators, to receive sufficient intermediate as well as *advanced* (including university) *training* with regard to the full range of biblical and related studies (languages, literature, setting, society, culture, etc.). Encourage such empowered individuals then to make use of their training in some concrete way in an actual Bible translation project (e.g., as an exegete or technical reviewer). One might go on to promote their authorship and publishing of contextualised Christian hermeneutical, homiletical, liturgical, catechetical, and meditational materials, both as individuals and in joint research projects, e.g., a set of NT commentaries or study guides written at a “basic” level to cater for the needs of targeted reader-groups living in a *specific region* and from their particular point of view. Involve as many experienced

²¹ Even extensively educated pastors and teachers need to read and study in their mother-tongue so that they can fluently render complex theological concepts intelligibly when communicating with people in the vernacular. Just because a concept is well understood in one language does not necessarily mean that it can be conveyed equally well in another language, especially one that belongs to a different linguistic family and is normally spoken in a different sociocultural milieu. Such communication skills are not often taught in theological schools and seminaries, certainly not in those attended overseas.

African educators and communicators as are available in order to indigenise these different training and text-production programs.

- 4) Similarly, offer sufficient instruction in the *technical skills* of effective writing, mass-media methods, and the use of modern computerised text-processing tools (if desirable) to African scholars, communicators, and technicians. Would such an exercise weaken or even destroy their essential “African-ness” and competence in traditional verbal arts and via indigenous media (e.g., drama, folk narrative, praise poetry, choral composition)? This is a potential danger, but one that may have to be risked it seems in order to educate local theological experts and their collaborators with respect to the intricacies of modern communication technology and new media formats. Otherwise, the messages that they produce will still have to be “mediated” by a third party (whether African or some foreign “facilitator”) in order for it to be effectively and widely transmitted both at home and abroad. Ideally—for the good of the African church—the training required for the various activities outlined in #3-4 ought to be done in the communicators’ home countries using resident staff if possible.²²

- 5) Such expanded research and development efforts should be carried out also at the *lay, communal level* of participation (e.g., in Zambia: the so-called “common man” or *bantunsi* “people of the soil”—Chitonga) as strongly encouraged (but not always so clearly delineated) in the “Reading With” volume of *Semeia* (73, 1996). The goal here is to stimulate non-professional, but no less profound, African theological reflection, religious experience and expression, as well as practical application in familiar settings (cf. also West, *Contextual Bible Study*). This would be done in the primary vernacular language(s) that will actually be used in personal and group ministry. To what extent has a *biblically* Christian “oral tradition” (or distinct “traditions”) of theology developed (e.g., as manifested in the popular public preaching of NT texts) that needs to be recorded, analyzed, evaluated, and encouraged? Which specific hermeneutical problems, controversies, or

²² For some helpful thoughts on this important subject, see K. Fiedler, “Cook First, Then Publish,” in Fiedler, Gundani, & Mijoga (eds.), q.v., 165-180.

even (perish the term!) heresies have arisen in this regard (how, why, and with what outcome and/or possible resolution)?

- 6) Disseminate mature, well-conceived, received, and recognised *African examples* of skillfully contextualised communication (e.g., by preachers, teachers, writers, poets, painters, carvers, musicians) to a wider audience through appropriate and affordable mass-media methods (e.g., radio [again—I wish to emphasise its importance, especially FM], cassette tapes, but also in the form of inexpensive, “reader/listener-friendly” literature).²³ More fully utilise indigenous communication techniques/tools (genres and styles) as primary or secondary modes of transmission in this procedure (e.g., stories, riddles, panegyric poetry, proverbs, dramatic plays, traditional instruction, artwork, various familiar song types, drumming and other forms of musical accompaniment).

- 7) Sponsor the translation and comparative study of locally produced *Bible translations* (complete Bibles, testaments, and portions) in as many African language communities as possible. The ideal is to make available several Scripture versions for various situational *uses* (e.g., idiomatic/liturgical/literary) and personal *users* (e.g., versions for women, comics for youth, selections for the socio-economically deprived, physically disadvantaged, etc.). This would include as a priority the production of reliable (i.e., exegetically faithful [SL-focus]), reader-formatted and hearer-attuned (i.e., maximally legible and aurally intelligible), functionally-equivalent,²⁴ meaning-oriented

²³ A good example of such expert vernacular communication is documented in *Preaching That Grabs the Heart*. Other gifted popular preachers abound in Africa. How can such individuals be brought together to interact for mutual encouragement and instruction among themselves? Furthermore, how can their distinctive homiletical style and theological insights be conveyed to those who do not speak their language—or how can they in turn be given a credible forum for communicating with the “outside world”?

²⁴ On this translation method, see Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating*, Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1986. The notion of functional equivalence has been redefined and extended to include relevant correspondence also in a literary (or oratorical) sense (see T. Wilt, ed., *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*, Manchester: St. Jerome, 2002, ch. 2, 6-7).

(i.e., stylistically clear and natural [RL-focus]) translations in all the major vernaculars of Africa. Such versions in turn could well serve as *models* (translation base texts) in related languages—that is, rather than, or in addition to, the standard European Bibles. Such “African prototype” versions would be especially helpful as translation guides in situations where the local projects concerned do not have the required level of staff expertise or financial support to do the job alone.²⁵

There are undoubtedly other—perhaps quite different—approaches that need to be investigated and tried out in order to foster a more situation-specific, *African* processed and promoted manner of communicating the many diverse messages of the Scriptures to a correspondingly wide range of target communities in every geographical region. There are currently a number of media and methods available, that is, via translation, adaptation, and even text-creation, i.e., local Bible-based fictional literary composition, including popular musical renditions. The main thing is to get started with some concrete action, sooner rather than later, perhaps in the seminaries and theological colleges that are present in virtually every country. Otherwise, suggestions such as those expressed above (limited though they may be by a single perspective) will soon be forgotten or swallowed up in the pressing demands and urgent responsibilities of the present-day church. The preceding list merely outlines some of the many possible options and opportunities that concern what is undoubtedly a very challenging, but at the same time most exciting and rewarding, exercise in the ongoing, continent-wide transformation and transmission of the living, life-giving Word. It is certainly time for the dynamic voice of African Christianity to be heard more loudly and clearly within its own setting—and also in the world at large.

²⁵ The identification and interlingual utilization of such African “model” versions is one of the primary aims of the jointly sponsored SIL-UBS “Bantu Initiative,” which is being developed as a wide-ranging strategy for combining financial and human resources in the cause of a more efficient and productive overall translation program. Another crucial component in this cooperative venture is the implementation of more effective translator-training techniques (cf. “Interim Report on the Bantu Initiative—Working Draft,” by Roger Van Otterloo [December 22, 1999]).