

BIBLICAL PROSPERITY: ABELAM CHRISTIANS IN THE EAST SEPIK PROVINCE

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Rodney recently graduated with a Bachelor of Theology degree from the Christian Leaders' Training College in Papua New Guinea. This was his Bachelor thesis.

[In the printed edition of this article, on page 69, starting with the third last line of the second paragraph (in this online edition, the last three lines of text on page 69), the words “against the idea” were omitted from before “that being poor means living in sin, and being rich indicates no sin”. This then conveyed a meaning opposite to that which was intended. The three missing words have now been reinserted for this edition. – Revising ed.]

INTRODUCTION

Prosperity theology has been, and continues to be, a hot topic of preaching and teaching within many Assemblies of God (AOG) churches in Papua New Guinea (PNG), including the other Pentecostal denominations. Sadly, this teaching has had tremendous negative consequences among AOG Christians throughout PNG. The prosperity message is an issue debated in many churches today because of its impact on believers.¹

This article will give a proper biblical perspective of prosperity to the AOG church within the Abelam² societies of Maprik District in East Sepik Province (ESP). It will seek to show that Abelam Christians must come to

¹ The churches include the wider Bible-believing churches of both the evangelical and the mainline denominations.

² The Abelam are a people group in the Maprik district of East Sepik Province. They make up three local-level governments (LLGs), namely: Maprik-Wora, parts of Albiges-Mambleip, that is Mambleip and Yamil-Tamaui. The Abelam also make up about three-quarters of the total population in the Maprik electorate, and speak the Ambulas vernacular. The Ambulas languages they speak are samu, mamu, and kamu dialects.

understand that biblical prosperity has a broader application, including quality relationships, spiritual growth, and social health.

1. THE CHANGING BELIEFS OF ABELAM CHRISTIANS CONCERNING PROSPERITY

The cultures and beliefs of the Abelam have changed dramatically from its traditional practices to the contemporary ways, in a similar manner to the various changes being experienced throughout PNG. This section will explain the changes that have occurred.

PAST ABELAM CULTURAL PATTERNS OF PROSPERITY

The Abelam established patterns of experiencing prosperity within their cultural setting that were linked to their traditional lifestyles. They followed their traditions, and experienced prosperity, spiritually and socially.

Spiritual Aspects

The Abelam prospered spiritually, as they pledged allegiance to, and interacted with, their forefathers' spirits.³ Forbes rightly states, "The people of Papua New Guinea were strong in their animistic ways of life. They believed in spirits and ceremonies to appease them."⁴ Forbes further says, "He [speaking of those, such as an Abelam] strongly believes in the power of the spirits of his ancestors to give him success with hunting, growing yams, and keeping good health."⁵ Consequently the ancestral spirits controlled the Abelam way of life.

³ These spirits lived in rivers, mountains, trees, and within each different clan's territories, whether up in the mountains, down in the valleys, deep within the jungles, or beside the rivers and creeks.

⁴ George Forbes, *A Church on Fire: The Story of the Assemblies of God of Papua New Guinea*, Mitcham Vic: Mission Mobilisers International Inc, 2001, p. 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Harmony with the Spiritual World

Traditionally, the Abelam people were disciplined, and observed the laws of the land, as they devoted themselves to the deities, to experience successful living. They paid homage, and were loyal, to the spirits, thus experiencing harmony with the spirit world. They trusted⁶ in the spirits, through their allegiance and devotion. Everything that manifested physically was directed by its spiritual realm. Hence, relating harmoniously with the spirit world involved pleasing the spirits in various ways: firstly, by right belief in the spirits and rituals; secondly, by fasting and abstinence from certain foods and sexual intercourse; and thirdly, by following restrictions on entering forbidden areas and strict observance of certain taboos.⁷ Failure to observe those laws resulted in the spirits' punishment of the offenders.⁸ Thus, the Abelam won the approval of the spirits, when these laws were closely observed. On the other hand, they believed the land "feels angry, upset, and dissatisfied", whenever any misconduct was easily sensed, because it had a special connection with the people.⁹ Therefore, as Melanesians, total well-being of wealth, health, and prestige was regraded as the fruit of a right relationship with the spirits.¹⁰

The Abelam observed strict rules of separation between men and women. According to Nikulak men lived in separate houses, abstained from sex, and refrained from getting close to menstruating women and menstrual houses.¹¹ Contact with women defiled the men, angered spirits, land, and

⁶ The faith the Abelam had in the ancestral spirits was not mere mental assent. They did not just believe, but knew things would come to pass. Their faith was a reality.

⁷ Paura Nikulak, of Kinbangua. Interview by author, January 27, 2009.

⁸ Barbara Huber-Greub, "Land in the Abelam Village of Kimbangua", in *Sepik Heritage: Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea*, Nancy Lutkehaus, ed., Bathurst NSW: Crawford Press, 1990, p. 282.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ David Vincent, "Can We Be Both Rich and Christian?", in *Catalyst* 19-4 (1989), p. 353.

¹¹ Paura Nikulak, of Kinbangua. Interview by author, January 27, 2009. Other special sites include ceremonial houses, central plazas, in special times of the year: ceremonial yam gardens [for men], or domains that are open to both sexes, but in which increased attentiveness is demanded (e.g., burial places, sleeping places, "pathways of the ceremonial yam", waters, stones, tabooed bush, and hunting grounds).

the ceremonial yams.¹² Consequently, Abelam men became strong, powerful, and skilled in cultivating ceremonial yams. They became brave warriors and lived long lives. Furthermore, blessings¹³ were imparted to those who faithfully observed these laws. Moreover, the Abelam were guaranteed the spirits' protection, through magic and spells.

Social Aspects

Social prosperity was seen in living harmoniously with others, and with the land, which were interwoven together. Cooperation was an essential part of living within Abelam societies. "Cooperation makes it possible to give help to others, strengthens relationships between friends and relatives, gives pleasure, and allows people to know other cultivators nearby."¹⁴ Hence, cooperation includes relationships between men and women within and among other neighbouring villagers.

Raising children, gardening, and traditional ceremonies were the focus of the relationships between men and women. Although the men regarded women as inferior, they were, nevertheless, superior in some aspects. Both men and women made gardens,¹⁵ but the women were mostly responsible for household crops.¹⁶ They also reared pigs, did housework, and wove *bilums*.¹⁷ The men hunted, built, and carved, but were heavily involved in cultivating ceremonial yams. They were also dominant in the rites of

¹² These were not ordinary yams, but like spirits, who were thought to have feelings. The yams sensed their planters' lives.

¹³ Michael Wama, of Kinbangwa. Interview by author, January 29, 2009. The blessings were released to the sons by their fathers, uncles, or the elders. These blessings constituted words of prosperity and success in gardening, hunting, fighting, and leadership. In addition, these blessings were also given to others who were obedient to their fathers, and followed their instructions.

¹⁴ Huber-Greub, "Land in the Abelam Village of Kimbangwa", p. 277.

¹⁵ Gardening included clearing of the bush and making fences.

¹⁶ Household crops are those for daily consumption, like sago, banana, taro, and potato. The women have nothing to do with growing of yams and *mami*. The latter food crops belong to men, and it was their responsibility.

¹⁷ String bags for carrying food, firewood, and little children, including babies. The *bilums* vary in size, depending on what is to be carried.

initiation, building ceremonial houses, and “industrial arts”.¹⁸ The women were highly esteemed, because they reared pigs and cooked for the yam cultivation and ceremonies. Huber-Greub asserts:

The whole complex of ceremonial yam cultivation, for the villagers of Kimbangwa, involves men and women in a way typical of the Abelam, occupying a sort of middle ground in the contradiction between considering women worth nothing at all and considering them worth much more than men.¹⁹

Relationships between immediate family members and relatives were also evident among the same age group, or within the different genders.²⁰

Relationships between villages were very strong among the Abelam, and made it possible for the yam ceremonies,²¹ which were the climax of tireless work and sacrifice by the men in planting ceremonial yams.²² “Dissension is believed to anger the *tambaran*, and yam spirits, and affect the growth of yams”,²³ because yams were wealth themselves, and the commodity of the Abelam economy. Thus, the Abelam’s prosperity²⁴ was all connected to the ceremonial yams.

¹⁸ All art objects, such as elaborately patterned plaits for the ceremonial house, carvings, and paintings, as well as decorated pots and bone daggers, are made by men for their ceremonial life. <http://www.everyculture.com/Oceania/Abelam.html>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

¹⁹ Huber-Greub, “Land in the Abelam Village of Kimbangwa”, p. 279.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

²¹ In the yam ceremonies, the Abelam assemble all the yams they have harvested for display at the *ame*, or hamlet, for others to see. These ceremonial yams are neatly dressed with coloured paints, and tied onto poles.

²² Jeremiah Wama, of Kimbangwa. Interview by author, January 29, 2009. Hard work goes together with fasting, and applying special fertilisers to the yams, so they grow longer and bigger in size. The longest yams grow between two and three metres long.

²³ Kayberry M. Phyllis, “Political Organisation among the Northern Abelam: Anthropological”, in *Anthropological Forum* (Vertical File, CLTC Banz Library, 1965-1966), p. 352.

²⁴ Both the spiritual and social prosperity of the Abelam people centred around the ceremonial yams.

Trading pigs and yams is the culmination, as “long yams, together with pigs and shell rings, constitute wealth: the acquisition of a fine harvest brings prestige to the owners of yams, and enables them to play their part in ceremonial activities, which involves wealth distribution”.²⁵ The hosts²⁶ challenge²⁷ the *kawas*²⁸ to repay the yams and pigs when distributing wealth. These ceremonies strengthened relationships, through ceremonial exchanges of pigs and yams, commendation,²⁹ and verbal encouragement, to inspire the harvesting of ceremonial yams.³⁰

A successful harvest of ceremonial yams brought their grower fame, power, and authority over others, who failed in planting them. The *singsing* added flavour to the yam ceremonies, and the *kawas* returned feeling satisfied.³¹ Phyllis comments on the Abelam, “on the whole, they are a good-tempered people, and a premium is placed on kindness and courtesy”.³²

²⁵ Phyllis, “Political Organisation among the Northern Abelam”, p. 339.

²⁶ The hosts are the owners of the yams, and the village that hosts the yam ceremony.

²⁷ The challenges cause an Abelam man to think seriously about hard work, being innovative and creative, and to carefully observe the rules and rituals, so he can also harvest huge ceremonial yams to make repayment during the next harvest season. The Abelam’s hard-working ability was activated through this challenge, and that is one of the reasons why they are strong, working people.

²⁸ *Kawas* are the exchange partners from other neighbouring villages, who challenge each other by giving them pigs and yams. The *kawas*, who receive the pigs and yams, must repay the exact worth of pigs and the size of yams when their turn comes. Otherwise, they will be regarded as unfit, and shamed by other yam planters.

²⁹ Praise and approval were given to those who harvested the huge ceremonial yams.

³⁰ Paura Nikulak and John Tika, of Kinbangua. Interview by author, January 27, 2009. They also stated that ceremonial yams bring wealth into the village that is expert in its cultivation. The yam cultivators of different villages go with pigs, and shell money, as fees for the training they will receive from the experts. Therefore, they build up the wealth of the clan and community.

³¹ The *kawas* will not go back empty-handed, but will return with food and meat, betel nuts and *brus* (smoke/cigarettes), inspirations and challenges for harvesting big ceremonial yams.

³² Kayberry M. Phyllis, “The Abelam, Sepik District, New Guinea: A Preliminary Report”, in *Oceania* 11 (Vertical File, CLTC Banz Library), p. 238.

Hence yams are significant to the Abelam, because: firstly, they are the king of all the garden foods; secondly, they bring wealth into the community; thirdly, they cause people to live rightly; and fourthly, they are used for resolving conflicts, in providing hospitality, and, finally, to bring fame and prominence.³³ Therefore, yams were the source of Abelam prosperity.

Harmony with the Land

The Abelam survive by cultivating gardens. Hence, they have high regard for their land.³⁴ “The soils in the area yielded considerable harvests of different species of yam and taro.”³⁵ As horticulturists, the Abelam know the practice of garden cultivation³⁶ and management. For the Abelam, it is good soil, combined with correct cultivation techniques, and knowledge of magic, that leads to a successful harvest.³⁷ The elderly people recall the olden days when there was plenty of food for everyone, because every man cultivated his gardens, as established by the ancestors, by using spells and magical ritual.³⁸

However, the land refused to produce food if the “laws of the ground were not followed”.³⁹ It was known in Abelam that “land itself has ears to hear and eyes to see”.⁴⁰ Therefore, an Abelam, who planted crops on another’s plot of land, harvested nothing. The owners’ ancestral spirits “smell” when someone has no right to plant on the land, and consequently harm him, or

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ W. R. Stent, *The Development of a Market Economy in the Abelam* (Boroko PNG: Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research, 1984), p. 129.

³⁵ <http://www.everyculture.com/Oceania/Abelam.html>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abelam>, Internet; accessed July 12, 2009.

³⁶ The right season for making gardens, the choosing of sites, and various seasons for planting different food crops, were all known by the Abelam.

³⁷ Huber-Greub, “Land in the Abelam Village of Kimbangwa,” p. 278.

³⁸ J Whiteman, “Change and Tradition in an Abelam Village”, in *Oceania* 36-2 (1965), p. 105.

³⁹ Huber-Greub, “Land in the Abelam Village of Kimbangwa”, p. 280.

⁴⁰ The land in Abelam was like a man who knew its owners. Any person who tried to remove his neighbour’s boundaries, or made gardens on another person’s or clan’s piece of land, harvested nothing but thorns and thistles.

his family, or his harvest.⁴¹ Breaking other taboos also affected the land. A common taboo includes illegal trespassing on the land and river.⁴² Nevertheless, the Abelam cultural patterns of prosperity have greatly changed, due to outside influences.⁴³

THE MISSIONARIES' GOSPEL AND ITS IMPACT

The coming of AOG missionaries to Maprik had a great influence upon the Abelam⁴⁴. Although they experienced prosperity, within their traditional concepts, spiritually and socially, the Christian gospel, brought by the missionaries, affected the Abelam's traditions and cultural worldview, transforming them in many areas. However, the most significant included ancestral spirit worship, sorcery, and tribal fights.

Spiritual Transformation

Ancestral Spirit Worship. Indeed, the Abelam people experienced breakthrough and deliverance from the bondage of ancestral spirit worship, as a result of the gospel. Forbes mentions some of the prominent men among those who broke the bondage of strong taboos associated with ancestral spirit worship.⁴⁵ God used them as pioneers of the AOG movement throughout ESP. The allegiance and devotion these men had with the ancestral spirits for success came to an end. They were freed from all the lies, deceptions, and fear imposed on them, through their cultural belief. They now had a transformed worldview about the different deities

⁴¹ Huber-Greub, "Land in the Abelam Village of Kimbangwa", p. 276. The land knew its owners, and they must be consulted prior to gardening on another's piece of land. The ancestors, and the important spirits, knew the primary users of the clan's land.

⁴² It was believed the Abelam women destroy the ground or expose it to danger. If a man slept with a woman at the wrong time, came into contact with her menstrual blood, came into contact with the blood of a younger person of either sex, and crossed the land or river, then the ground and the spirit beings "on the other side", withheld their cooperation from the guilty person, because, as the Abelam believe, they feel angry, disappointed, and discontented.

⁴³ These influences came as the result of the civilisation brought in by the explorers, government officials, and missionaries.

⁴⁴ Forbes, *A Church on Fire*, tells the story of how the gospel transformed the Abelam, East Sepik Province, and PNG as whole. This Pentecostal church started within the land of the Abelam in 1948, and then spread out to the nation.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

that controlled the environment in which they lived. Hence, their allegiance shifted from the ancestral spirits to the worship of the true living God. However, it took time for the Abelam to sever connections from ancestral worship.

Sorcery. Killing among the Abelam was evident and common, through witchcraft and sorcery. This unethical behavioural lifestyle started to change slowly, as the light of the gospel penetrated their land. The sorcerers and magicians began to respond to the gospel message, by neglecting those evil practices, and surrendering their lives to Christ. They also destroyed the things used for committing sorcery and witchcraft, and started to abandon the rituals they followed.

Tribal Fights. Fighting between enemy villages also lost its grip on the Abelam, by the power of the gospel. The villages in Abelam had warring tribes, with whom they did battle. They also had alliances with other villages to fight their enemies.⁴⁶ Consequently, the gospel brought two enemies together, and diminished clashes between rival villages. Nevertheless, “cultures are not sealed off in containers from time and change. They emerge from and into history.”⁴⁷ This is true in Abelam, as important principles and laws of the forefathers are evident today. Yet, the transformation of traditions and cultures are undeniable, according to the changes that have happened, and are even escalating in this contemporary world. Therefore, “the culture you see in an Abelam village today is a composite of the history of the Abelam people, and their contact with neighbouring villages and foreigners.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Phyllis, “Political Organisation among the Northern Abelam”, pp. 362-363. Phyllis noted that Kalabu had its friends and enemies in tribal fights. The enemies of Kalabu were Kinbangua, Waikakum, Malba, and Makutukum, and its friends were Jame, Lonem, and Bainyik. This was similar to other Abelam villages that had their own friendly alliances and enemy tribes.

⁴⁷ Diane Losche, *The Abelam: A People of Papua New Guinea*, Sydney NSW: Australian Museum, 1982, p. 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Social Transformation

This section will discuss the social transformation, experienced by the Abelam through the gospel. The social changes that took place, with the coming of the gospel, include health, education, business, and relationships.

Health. Aid posts were established, along with the preaching of the gospel. This resulted in transformation in the physical lives of the Abelam people. Prior to the advanced medical assistance, brought by the missionaries and the government, only the strongest survived. Previously, many people died of sicknesses and diseases, such as malaria, pneumonia, dysentery, and diarrhoea.⁴⁹ Many babies died, and the infant mortality rate was high,⁵⁰ but, with the commencement of immunisation programmes, it was greatly reduced.⁵¹ Consequently, the Abelam improved in their health, grew stronger physically, and lived long lives.

Education. Teaching literacy was vital to the Abelam so they might be able to read God's word.⁵² Hence, the missionaries set up adult literacy schools. They also built vocational schools. Those who completed primary education, through the government-established schools, went on to the vocational centre⁵³ for training in basic farming, husbandry, poultry, sawmilling, mechanical repairs, carpentry, and woodwork.⁵⁴ Consequently, some Abelam people have achieved higher education through both mission and government schools.

Economic Activities. Business and economic activities bloomed as the Abelam were transformed mentally by the gospel, and through educational programmes established both by the mission and the government. The Abelam were the first to introduce coffee into Maprik. Kundimbui states, coffee was first introduced to the Abelam people of Maprik District in the

⁴⁹ Forbes, *A Church on Fire*, p. 61.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵³ Hayfield was a second major mission centre, stationed 5 km south of Maprik town.

⁵⁴ Forbes, *A Church on Fire*, p. 209.

early 1950s as a pioneer cash crop, and the first seedling garden was established in Kinbangua village, for seed production and distribution to the farmers for cultivation.⁵⁵ Rice⁵⁶ and peanuts⁵⁷ were other crops introduced into Maprik, but gold panning started in 1937.⁵⁸ “By the mid-1970s, an enormous increase in Abelam income from cash cropping and market goods was found throughout the area.”⁵⁹ Hence, business activities flourished, and expanded into transportation and retail shops.

Relationships between different villages and people improved, through the inception of health and education, and with the blooming of economic activities. Although the former traditional ties among the various villages remained, the changes coming into Abelam societies transformed their relationships.

The Cargo Movement. Although the social and economic transitions were evident, how Western goods came to be was a mystery among the traditional Abelam people. Their existence was unexplained by the Westerners.⁶⁰ Therefore, with the traditional belief of a better life that would be ushered in by the ancestors, some Abelam people advocated cult

⁵⁵ Cornelius Kundimbui, Service Provider for Coffee Industry Corporation. Interview by author, July 8, 2009.

⁵⁶ Stent, *The Development of a Market Economy in the Abelam*, pp. 122-123. “In 1950, under the influence of the Department of Agriculture, and the wartime leader Simogun, a few villages established small ‘experimental’ plantings of hill rice in communal gardens. . . . The establishment of a central rice mill at Bainyik in 1957, together with the reorganisation of RPSs in 1956 and 1957, led to a marked improvement in the marketing of rice.”

⁵⁷ Stent, *The Development of a Market Economy in the Abelam*, p. 125. “At the beginning of 1956, the prospect of a market for peanuts opening up in Australia led the Department of Agriculture to encourage growing of peanuts for cash in the Sepik District.”

⁵⁸ Losche, *The Abelam*, p. 14. Gold was discovered in the 1930s. “In 1937, the township of Maprik was built for the Australian administration to accommodate the influx of gold seekers, and it became the centre from which the Australians governed the surrounding area.”

⁵⁹ Stent, *The Development of a Market Economy in the Abelam*, p. 142.

⁶⁰ Includes the missionaries, government workers, and business people.

thinking. They joined the famous Peli cult movement, which emerged in the Sepik around 1969.⁶¹

For some, the gospel was the secret, hidden from them by the missionaries, for experiencing a better life of wealth and prosperity.⁶² Other factors also greatly influenced cargo mentality: firstly, the fluctuations of the coffee price; and secondly, the exploitation by outsiders in the coffee industry.⁶³ The failure of rice was another factor.⁶⁴ Hence, the simplest way to experience the millenarian⁶⁵ life was through the cult. Hueter asserts, “The Europeans are deceiving us that they are getting their wealth through hard work.”⁶⁶ Consequently, they abandoned cultural practices and initiation, in preparation for the advent of cargo, as prophesied by some prominent men.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, some Abelam people retained their initiation ceremonies into the 1970s, in order to resist the temptations of the cargo cults.⁶⁸ Therefore, either abandoning the cult movement, or retaining initiations, was all geared towards future prosperity.

⁶¹ R. J. May, “Political and Social Change in the East Sepik: A Research Agenda”, in *Sepik Heritage: Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea*, Nancy Lutkehaus, ed., Bathurst NSW: Crawford Press, 1990, p. 178.

⁶² Vincent, “Can We Be Both Rich and Christian?”, p. 354. Vincent stated this about Melanesians generally, which also includes the Abelam.

⁶³ Bryant Allen, “The Importance of Being Equal: The Colonial and Postcolonial Experience in the Torricelli Foothills”, in *Sepik Heritage*, p. 194. “The people claimed (were suspicious) that outsiders; SPCA coffee buyers, Port Moresby bureaucrats, and Chinese businessmen, were exploiting them, and was widespread and deep-rooted among the people.”

⁶⁴ May, “Political and Social Change in the East Sepik: A Research Agenda”, p. 178.

⁶⁵ “Millenarian” or “millenarianism” were terms used by writers who addressed the problems of cargo cults. Millenarianism is the doctrine, or belief, in a future 1,000-year age of blessedness, beginning with the second coming of Christ. However, the Abelam believed that a better life of blessedness would come.

⁶⁶ D Hueter, “The Battle for Abundant Life in The church and the Adjustments Movements”, in *Point 1* (1974), p. 129.

⁶⁷ Paul Roscoe and Richard Scaglione, “Male Initiation and European Intrusion in the Sepik: A Preliminary Analysis”, in *Sepik Heritage*, p. 417, quoting M. S. Dewdney, “The Maprik Open Electorate”, in *Papua New Guinea Elections 1964*, D. G. Bettison, C. A. Hughes, and P. S. van der Veur, eds, Canberra ACT: Australian National University Press, 1965, p. 184.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

WESTERN PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Mombi asserts, “The prosperity gospel became popular in the mid-1990s, after the collapse of the PNG economy in 1996.”⁶⁹ This gospel turned the Abalam Christians away from the previous prosperity they had enjoyed, especially the spiritual fellowship with the Lord. The prosperity gospel stressed material wealth and riches, and that has shipwrecked the Abalam believers’ faith. Therefore, prosperity, as defined by its proponents, will be addressed here.

Health-Wealth Prosperity

“Prosperity gospel, or prosperity theology, is a theological current that states, if certain principles are followed, the expiatory work of Christ guarantees to all who believe, divine healing, the riches of this world, and happiness without suffering.”⁷⁰ Its proponents teach that “by virtue of Christ’s death, the believer is entitled not only to salvation, and the sanctifying indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but also to the material benefits of health and prosperity.”⁷¹ Success in relationships and good health are also emphasised.⁷² Thus, the health-wealth blessings come as different aspects of Christian living.

⁶⁹ George Mombi, “The Impact of the prosperity gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 25-1 (2009), p. 39. Mombi further mentions that world-renowned evangelists from the West (Benny Hinn, Morris Cerulo, Creflo Dollar, and Tim Hall from Australia) were invited to preach in PNG. During their visits, the prosperity gospel was introduced. It then took a foothold in the churches in Port Moresby, and spread through the church networks across the country.

⁷⁰ J. N. Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, in John Corrie, ed., *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, Nottingham UK: IVP, 2007, p. 322.

⁷¹ Andrew Perriman, ed., *Faith, Health and Prosperity: A Report on “Word Faith” and “Positive Confession”*: Theologies by The Evangelical Alliance (UK) Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals, Carlisle UK: Paternoster Press, 2003, p. 19.

⁷² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Health_and_Wealth_Gospel#Health, Internet, accessed; July 24, 2009.

Financial Prosperity

Prosperity theology teaches that the blessings of material wealth come with salvation, and they should be experienced by any born-again person. Preachers of prosperity theology promote the idea that God wants Christians to be “abundantly” successful in every way, with special emphasis on financial success.⁷³ It is God’s desire that financial blessing take precedence over other aspects. Believers should have a lot of money in their pockets and in their bank accounts.

Some advocates argue that Jesus and the apostles were also financially wealthy,⁷⁴ owning homes, having monetary resources, and businesses. Their arguments are based on: (1) Jesus’ ability to travel without working to earn a living for three years; (2) and the apostles’ references to owning homes;⁷⁵ (3) Jesus had a treasurer;⁷⁶ (4) Jesus consorted with the upper echelons of society; and (5) the businesses that the apostles owned.⁷⁷ This contradicts the traditional view of Jesus, who is often viewed as being a poor, wandering teacher.⁷⁸

Material Prosperity

The blessings of a spiritual life must also be seen in wealth that consists of good houses and expensive cars. Tilton said, “Being poor is a sin, when God promises prosperity. New house? New car?”⁷⁹ Accumulating material wealth, in the form of expensive houses and cars, is what God

⁷³ David van Biema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want You to Be Rich”, in *Time Magazine*, September 18, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448-1,00.html>, Internet; accessed 24 July, 2009.

⁷⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_Faith. *Atlanta Journal Constitution* 10/22/2006; <http://www.ajc.com/living/content/living/faithandvalues/stories/2006/10/18/1022SLJESUS.html>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁷⁵ www.harvestchurch.org/Jesus%20was%20not%20poor.htm, Internet; accessed 24 July, 2009.

⁷⁶ <http://www.letusreason.org/wf15.htm>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁷⁷ http://rawstory.com/news/2007/Nightline_The_Gospel_of_bling_0118.html, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁷⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_Faith, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁷⁹ Gary Giley, <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/char/more/w-f.htm>. Giley, quoting Robert Tilton, in “Charismatic Chaos”, p. 285, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

desires of believers. Thus, proponents say, nothing creates more joy in the average believer than the promise to make them wealthy, as evidenced by opulence, luxury, and riches.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, financial and material prosperity alone cannot make a believer joyful, without being healthy.

Health Prosperity

Firstly, the proponents of the prosperity gospel believe that being prosperous includes good physical health. They want to feel well enough to enjoy their financial and material prosperity.⁸¹ Therefore, sickness is not supposed to be experienced by believers. Christ has provided for physical healing at the cross. Consequently, not only are Christians saved from sin, but they are promised a life of health and healing, as God's children and joint heirs with Christ.⁸² As Hinn asks, "If healing is part of the atonement, why do Christians get sick?" He further explains, "The Bible declares that the work was done 2,000 years ago. God is not going to heal you now – He healed you 2,000 years ago."⁸³ Thus, good health is prosperity in your body.

Secondly, prosperity involves healthy relationships. Success in relationships, and good health, should also be expected.⁸⁴ A good marriage is a prosperous relationship between spouses. It also involves living harmoniously within the family, and among one's neighbours.

PRINCIPLES OF EXPERIENCING PROSPERITY

Prosperity gospel teaches and assures that the health-wealth blessing can be enjoyed by its adherents, if only they apply certain principles.⁸⁵ The principle of faith is the key to bringing forth the financial, material, and health blessings. Faith opens the hidden blessings within the spiritual

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., Giley, quoting Kenneth Copeland, in "Healed . . . to Be or not to Be:", p. 25, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁸³ Ibid., Giley, quoting Benny Hinn, in "Rise and be Healed", p. 44, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁸⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_Theology, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁸⁵ Gary Giley, <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/char/more/w-f.htm>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

realm for them to materialise. They say faith is a force applied to bring forth the desired results. It is believed that faith works like a mighty power or force, through which anything wanted – health, wealth, success, whatever, is obtained.⁸⁶ However, this force is only released through the spoken word. The power discharged to accomplish the desires of faith is released orally.⁸⁷ Hagin states that this principle operates by this simple formula: “Say it, do it, receive it, and tell it.”⁸⁸ Faith operates through “positive confession”.⁸⁹ Positive confession releases power, and activates the force of faith to work towards bringing the desired thing that was “named and claimed”.⁹⁰ It is believed words can be used to manipulate the faith-force, and, therefore, create what scripture promises (health and wealth).⁹¹

The proponents of prosperity theology founded their teachings on spiritual “principles” or “laws” that function according to the principles or laws, which operate through faith in God.⁹² Saracco states that these spiritual “principles” or “laws” lay down the grounds for the five main doctrines about prosperity theology. Firstly, there is the law of blessing. Prosperity theologians say the main reason for the covenant God made with Abraham was to bless him materially. Hence, Christians, as spiritual sons of Abraham, are heirs of the covenant blessing.⁹³ Secondly, the law of sowing and reaping states that whatever is put into God’s hands will be

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Rom%2010:&;version=9.htm>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁸⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_Faith. A favourite term in the Word of Faith movement is “positive confession”. It refers to the teaching that words have creative power. What you say, Word of Faith teachers claim, determines everything that happens to you. Your confessions, especially the favours you demand of God, must all be stated positively, and without wavering, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁹⁰ <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/posit.htm>. “Name it” and “claim it” is another term used with positive confession by the proponents of the prosperity gospel, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, p. 323.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 323.

reaped 100 times, as interpreting Mark 10:29-30.⁹⁴ Thirdly, the law of faith is translated as having the faith of God. Instead of having faith in God, Mark 11:22 is translated as having the faith of God. God created everything out of nothing, by activating His faith.⁹⁵ Thus, everything wanted will be achieved through the act of faith. The fourth is the law of the proclaimed word. The formula is “proclaim to have”. Mark 11:23-24 is used to support this idea. It is interpreted as “the force of faith is released by words”.⁹⁶ Confession is made, based on the word before possession. Finally, there is the law, based on the expiatory work of Christ. In His redemptive work on the cross, Christ provided both divine healing and material wealth.⁹⁷

2. A CHANGING ATTITUDE TOWARDS PROSPERITY IN BIBLICAL TIMES

This section will discuss how prosperity was understood within the biblical cultures. It begins with the Old Testament (OT) attitude towards prosperity, and how it progressed to New Testament (NT) times.

PROSPERITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Prosperous living was God’s plan for mankind before the creation. God demonstrated His desire to bless humanity with the abundance of the material world, from the beginning of creation (Gen 1:28-31).⁹⁸ It originated in Eden, when God created man in His own image and likeness, and blessed him with the ability to have dominion over His creation. However, what was the Creator’s intent in prospering the first human beings?

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 324.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ <http://yuling.wordpress.com/2007/02/07/wealth-and-poverty-in-the-bible-part-1/htm>,

Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

ORIGINAL MEANING

The word “blessed” first appeared in Gen 1:22,⁹⁹ and was later used 1:28¹⁰⁰ when God blessed both the animals and the couple He created. Its Hebrew root is בָּרַךְ = *bārak*,¹⁰¹ meaning “to bless” or “pronounce a blessing”. בְּרָכָה = *b’rākā*¹⁰² is the blessing that “generally denotes a bestowal of good, often in contrast to the curse and . . . used of the formula of words, which constitutes a blessing”.¹⁰³ Thus God blessed them and commanded them to increase in number. God blessed them to prosper. The word prosperity has its origin in Middle English from Old French *prosperer*, from Latin *prosperare*, meaning “doing well”.¹⁰⁴ It means to succeed in material terms, but, within the context of Gen 1:22, 28, prosperity would mean doing well in fruitfulness and dominion.

PURPOSE

Firstly, God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful, and increase in number, and, secondly, He authorised them to have dominion over all creation.¹⁰⁵ God blessed them to prosper in fruitfulness and dominion: fruitfulness in producing likeness after their own kind, and dominion in being good stewards of creation. Blomberg states, God fashioned humans, uniquely, and gave them dominion, or stewardship, over all the earth.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, fellowship was an essential blessing they were to enjoy with

⁹⁹ God blessed them, and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” All scripture quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰⁰ God blessed them, and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

¹⁰¹ Spiros, Zodiates, ed., *The Hebrew-Greek Study Bible*, Chattanooga TN: AMG Publishers, 1996, p. 1918.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ J. D. Douglas, N. Hillyer, F. F. Bruce, D. Guthrie, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, D. J. Wiseman, eds, *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd edn, Wheaton IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1982, p. 144.

¹⁰⁴ *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, p. 1489.

¹⁰⁵ Creation includes the animal kingdom, the birds, the living creatures of the aquatic world, and the entire material world.

¹⁰⁶ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, Leicester UK: Apollos, 1999, p. 34.

one another and with God. Humans, as image bearers of God, rule over the material world, and have a qualitatively-unique capacity for interpersonal relationships among themselves and with the Godhead.¹⁰⁷ The Garden of Eden functioned as the meeting place between the Lord and the first human couple.¹⁰⁸ Fruitfulness and stewardship became evident in this fellowship. Hence, they were empowered to prosper in fruitfulness; stewardship, and fellowship.

Patriarchal Times

With the calling of Abraham, the definition of prosperity changed from thriving in fruitfulness, dominion, and fellowship.¹⁰⁹ God promised to bless Abraham for a purpose. These promises, with some variation in wording, are repeated throughout Genesis, not only to Abraham, but to Isaac and Jacob.¹¹⁰ However, God called Abraham, to bring blessing, rather than curse, upon the nations of the earth, as it was His desire.¹¹¹ Thus God blessed Abraham so he would prosper. God blessed him with land, animals, and material blessings. He was a wealthy man.¹¹² Most importantly, Abraham was promised the blessing of descendents.¹¹³ After Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were also blessed with livestock and material substance.¹¹⁴ God blessed the patriarchs in many ways,¹¹⁵ including

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, Carlisle UK: Paternoster Press, 1995, p. 21.

¹⁰⁹ The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you. 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."

¹¹⁰ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, pp. 35-36.

¹¹¹ Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, p. 21.

¹¹² "So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife, and everything he had, and Lot went with him. Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold."

¹¹³ Gen 15:5.

¹¹⁴ Gen 30:43; 32:9, 12; 39:2.

¹¹⁵ Even though spiritual prosperity is not stated, it should be noted that Abraham was called God's friend (James 2:23). Abraham, through his faith in God's mercy, had a relationship with God, and thus thrived spiritually through obedience. This is clear throughout the OT, with the people God called.

wealth. However, “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all take turns sojourning in Canaan, but none are allowed to remain there permanently.”¹¹⁶

Although the patriarchs prospered materially, it should be noted that Abraham, through faith, was called God’s friend.¹¹⁷ He had a relationship with God, and thus prospered spiritually, as he is called “the father of faith”. This is clear throughout the OT, with the people whom God called. Therefore, “Bergmann says blessing [and prosperity] is concerned with the sphere of growth, well-being, success, and permanence”,¹¹⁸ which includes all aspects of life.

Possession and Use of Wealth

All wealth and material possessions, in the patriarchal times, came from God, and were viewed as part of His covenant blessing with Israel, as covenanted through Abraham. However, He gave them laws to observe, in order to prosper and regulate wealth. Faith and obedience were prerequisites for blessings and wealth. But wealth was created through work.

The patriarchs’ wealth was a group wealth. Smith asserts, “Patriarchal wealth, for the most part, could be called either ‘private’ or ‘communal’, for the patriarch owned it, in the sense that he controlled it, but his family [also owned it], in the sense that every member had a right to its use.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 36.

¹¹⁷ James 2:23.

¹¹⁸ Ulrich Bergmann, “Old Testament Concept of Blessing”, in *Point 1* (1974), p. 177.

¹¹⁹ Charles Ryder Smith, *The Bible Doctrine of Wealth and Work in its Historical Evolution*, London UK: Epworth Press, 1924, p. 28.

Exodus

Israel prospered abundantly in Egypt, especially in population growth, despite the slavery they suffered.¹²⁰ They multiplied and spread as oppression increased.¹²¹ Consequently, God used Moses to deliver Israel from slavery and take them into Canaan – the Promised Land, abundantly flowing with milk and honey.¹²² However, Israel plundered Egypt of all its wealth before going into the land of Canaan. The Egyptians willingly gave the Israelites everything they asked for: articles of gold and silver, clothing, herds, and flocks.¹²³ They plundered Egypt “as if they had conquered them in battle”.¹²⁴ Blomberg says, “Plundering the Egyptians shows that God wants His people to go into their land with a measure of wealth.”¹²⁵ Nevertheless, Israel was going to a new place to settle, which had no gardens and homes. This wealth helped them all the way through, before they finally settled in Canaan as God’s covenant people. Therefore, it was according to God’s covenant with Abraham.¹²⁶

Laws on Wealth

The Ten Commandments were given to Israel, after they had plundered Egypt and left. They “stressed the immorality of theft and covetousness, and these prohibitions were considerably expanded elsewhere in the law”.¹²⁷ Given with the commandments, were various laws on wealth. They included management ethics, the right use of riches, and the giving of tithes and offerings of all their silver and gold, animals, and produce from the land. “Lev 25:20 reminded the Israelites that all their possessions ultimately belonged to the Lord, and were merely leased to them, so they might be good stewards.”¹²⁸ They were reminded to remember the Lord,

¹²⁰ “Now Joseph, and all his brothers, and all that generation died, but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly, and became exceeding numerous, so that the land was filled with them.” Ex 1:6-7.

¹²¹ Ex 1:12.

¹²² Deut 11:9.

¹²³ Ex 12:35-36.

¹²⁴ Kenneth L. Barker, ed., *NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2008, p. 93.

¹²⁵ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 38.

¹²⁶ Gen 15:14.

¹²⁷ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 40.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

who brought them out of Egypt, and empowered them to prosper. Hence, Israel was cautioned to use honest scales in weighing,¹²⁹ and was warned against accepting bribes,¹³⁰ and against stealing from the poor.¹³¹

Conquest, Settlement, and Monarchy

Israel's prosperity and success in Canaan centred on the principles of obedience and disobedience,¹³² yet God's covenant still remained. Although His sovereignty was evident, Israel had the possibility to experience success and prosperity continually. Israel was responsible for farming the land to either graze animals, or plant gardens, and obey the commandments. Israel conquered other heathen nations,¹³³ and was successful in military strength and intelligence. They prospered in military weaponry, chariots, and horses. Once the people of Israel were settled in Palestine, leaving the nomadic way life for an agricultural life, their ideas of wealth changed.¹³⁴ Hence the Israelites demanded a king rule over them instead of judges. King David, Solomon, and other successive kings of Israel, also became enormously wealthy, partly due to their covenant faithfulness.

The monarchy would also co-opt the best of the fields, vineyards, and groves of land, and demand a tenth of the produce and flocks, so, in essence, God's people became slaves of the kings.¹³⁵ With the establishment of economic ties with other nations, tax was imposed on Israel. Redford states, "By the time of Solomon, policies of taxation and servitude closely paralleled Egyptian practices."¹³⁶ Hence, those who

¹²⁹ Lev 19:35-36.

¹³⁰ Ex 23:8; Deut 16:19.

¹³¹ Deut 15:7-8.

¹³² Deut 28 gives detailed instructions about the blessings for obedience (1-14), and curses for disobedience (15-68).

¹³³ Hittites, Jebusites, Canaanites, Perrizites.

¹³⁴ John C. Crawford, *Your Money and God: From an African Perspective*, Dodoma Tanzania: Central Tanganyika Press, 1974, p. 24.

¹³⁵ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 54.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, Blomberg, quoting D. B. Redford, "Studies in Relation between Palestine and Egypt During the First Millennium BC: The Taxation System of Solomon", J. W. Wevers and D. B. Wevers, eds, *Studies on the Ancient Palestinian World*, Toronto Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1972, pp. 141-156.

could afford little became poor, while others grew rich. Their disobedience led to poverty, pain, and struggle. But the faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God to the people, who were frequently faithless, overshadows any concerns with merely socio-economic issues.¹³⁷

Job, Psalms, and Proverbs

The “wisdom literature”¹³⁸ has much to say about prosperity. Some prominent wealthy men’s attitudes towards wealth here are very interesting. “Job was man of great wealth and high social position.”¹³⁹ He was also blameless and upright, feared God, and shunned evil.¹⁴⁰ However, with divine permission from God, Satan came, in a single day, and attacked his oxen and donkeys, destroyed all his flocks, herds, and camels, and struck down all his children, including the servants.¹⁴¹ Job himself was the last person Satan afflicted.¹⁴²

He was stripped of his wealth, children, and health. Nevertheless, he fell to the ground and worshipped God, acknowledging Him as the giver of wealth, blessing, and life. Job acknowledged the sovereignty and goodness of the Lord at a time when all his wealth and riches were gone. Consequently, Job viewed wealth and riches as: firstly, blessings from God; secondly, temporal things; and thirdly, valueless, compared to God.

Psalms and Proverbs hold material well-being in tension with justice for the poor.¹⁴³ They ask God for blessings (Ps 128; Prov 13:21),¹⁴⁴ yet are concerned about justice for the poor (Ps 82:3-4; Prov 29:7). Proverbs also warns of the danger of accumulating wealth, as a goal in itself (Prov 8:10-

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 56.

¹³⁸ The author will discuss some vital truths about prosperity, and the important principles that are linked to it, only within the three books of Job, Psalms, and Proverbs in the wisdom literature.

¹³⁹ I. H. Marshall, et al, eds, *New Bible Dictionary*, Leicester UK: IVP, 2003, p. 589.

¹⁴⁰ Job 1:1.

¹⁴¹ Job 1:13-19.

¹⁴² Job 2:7.

¹⁴³ <http://yuling.wordpress.com/2007/02/07/wealth-and-poverty-in-the-bible-part-1/>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

¹⁴⁴ Including material blessings.

11; 15:16-17; 23:4-5).¹⁴⁵ Proverbs continuously exhorted hard work if Israel was to experience material prosperity. Laziness was strongly condemned and discouraged.¹⁴⁶

Proverbs regarded wisdom as more precious than gold and silver, needed by all men, whether rich or poor. Wisdom shows that life, in fellowship with God, ultimately makes sense.¹⁴⁷ Solomon realised that the missing commodity in those days was wisdom, and he asked God for it. Hence, his God-given wisdom attracted wealthy and prominent people to Israel. Therefore, right application of wisdom can create wealth and prosperous living. Without wisdom, wealth can become useless, and bring misery. The wise and wealthy king, after enjoying all the riches, determined that it is all vanity of vanities. Solomon's conclusion of all matters is to "fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of men".¹⁴⁸ Therefore, the person who lives wisely, who bases his life on the principles of life, which he has from God, of which he has been able to test the value, is going to live a prosperous life.¹⁴⁹

Prophets

The prophets ministered during the time when material wealth corrupted the monarchy. The expansion and prosperity of Israel led to unfaithfulness to Yahweh, godlessness, and abuse of power and privilege.¹⁵⁰ The kings exercised their power to cheat the poor, and used their wealth in sacrificial cult worship, which brought some blessing, but mostly ruin.¹⁵¹ Hence, the prophets condemned the monarchy, who lived luxuriously, without

¹⁴⁵ <http://yuling.wordpress.com/2007/02/07/wealth-and-poverty-in-the-bible-part-1/>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

¹⁴⁶ A hard-working person will be satisfied with the fruit of his labour, but a lazy person will lack any good thing. The hard-working person will enjoy prosperity, while the lazy will have nothing to enjoy (Prov 10:4; 19:15; 24:33-34).

¹⁴⁷ G. Goldsworthy, "Proverbs", in T. D. Alexander, and Brian S. Rosner, eds, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Leicester UK: IVP, 2000, p. 210.

¹⁴⁸ Eccl 12:13.

¹⁴⁹ Crawford, *Your Money and God*, p. 24.

¹⁵⁰ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Leicester UK: Apollos, 1995, p. 355.

¹⁵¹ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 52.

concern for the poor who toiled for them.¹⁵² The prophets spoke against the injustice done to the poor, and reproved the kings for profaning God's name for their own selfish indulgence. They called for social justice and equality, to restore relationships among the people, and with God. Therefore, the prophets spoke against the sins of materialism that hindered the worship of Yahweh.¹⁵³ Blomberg outlines five major categories of Israel's sins, with respect to material possessions.¹⁵⁴ These are: worshipping idols made of costly materials; trusting in rituals rather than in repentance; extorting, robbing, and oppressing, to gain more land; boasting in wealth; and being motivated by wealth.

PROSPERITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The NT definition of wealth and prosperity is different to the OT. This section will address the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Jesus' Teachings on Wealth

Jesus mainly taught about the riches that the gospel would give to both the wealthy and the poor. He never condemned material possessions, but, rather, defined their proper use, for lasting value. He understood the importance of wealth for supporting the gospel, as He repeatedly encouraged its use for the kingdom. Blomberg states, "The good news of the gospel is consistently holistic, according to the teaching of Jesus."¹⁵⁵ Jesus' teachings centred on spiritual blessings, the stewardship of wealth, and the dangers of riches.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 56. Blomberg, quoting N. W. Porteous, "The Care of the Poor in the Old Testament", in James I. McCord and T. H. L. Parker, eds, *Service in Christ*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans; 1966, p. 34.

¹⁵³ Hosea prophesied against the sin of idolatry, as Israel turned to cult prostitution, as they thought the fertility gods gave them fertility in agricultural prosperity (Hos 2:5-14). Amos spoke about social justice, relationships, and social health (Amos 3-6).

¹⁵⁴ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, pp. 71-75.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 145.

An Emphasis on Spiritual Blessings. Jesus taught the blessedness of the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the seekers of righteousness, the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart, and the persecuted.¹⁵⁶ The Greek word translated “blessed” is μακάριος = *makarios*, which means to be “fully satisfied”.¹⁵⁷ In the NT, *makarios* is used of the joy that comes from salvation, which is received at conversion. Boerman said, “They enjoy spiritual blessings, which often stand in stark contrast to their present physical situations, experience His love, joy, and forgiveness, rooted in a spiritual reality that transcends their present circumstances.”¹⁵⁸

Jesus brought peace to broken lives. The Greek word for peace is εἰρήνη = *eirēnē*, which means “peace, tranquillity, repose, calm, harmony, accord; well-being, prosperity.”¹⁵⁹ The Hebrew equivalent of *eirēnē* is שָׁלוֹם = *shālom*.¹⁶⁰ *Shālom* denotes “a satisfied condition, a state of peacefulness, a sense of well-being, both externally and internally”.¹⁶¹ However, only spiritual blessings were promised in the NT, as taught by Christ.¹⁶² He emphasised the blessings of love, kindness, mercy, grace, joy, and forgiveness and reconciliation. The churches of Smyrna and Laodicea, in Revelation, are good examples. Smyrna is poor and suffering, yet spiritually rich.¹⁶³ Laodicea, by contrast, has much wealth, but is actually wretched and poor spiritually.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, Christ stressed spiritual

¹⁵⁶ Matt 5:3-10.

¹⁵⁷ Spiros, Zodhiates Sr, ed., *The Hebrew-Greek Study Bible*, Chattanooga TN: AMG Publishers, 1996, p. 1129.

¹⁵⁸ Daniel Boerman, “The Banner: Is Prosperity a Blessing?” http://www.thebanner.org/#magazine/article.cfm?article_id=1825., Internet, accessed; July 24, 2009.

¹⁵⁹ Zodhiates, *The Hebrew-Greek Study Bible*, p. 1615.

¹⁶⁰ *Shalom* speaks of health, security, tranquillity, welfare, success, comfort, peace, salvation, and greetings. *Ibid.*, p. 1557. Consequently, Christ and the apostles continuously used peace; Jesus, when He rebuked the storms, and gave assurance to the people of His healing and His abiding presence, and the apostles used it in their letters in greetings and exhortations (Mark 4:39; John 14:27; Rom 1:7; 2 Cor 13:11; 1 Thess 5:13).

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² See the beatitudes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5:3-12.

¹⁶³ Rev 2:9.

¹⁶⁴ Rev 3:17.

growth and fruitfulness.¹⁶⁵ Believers should grow into maturity, and manifest the fruit of the Spirit, as evidence of prosperous Christian living. The NT never describes blessing in terms of material prosperity.¹⁶⁶ Jesus focused on spiritual blessings.

The Stewardship of Material Possessions

Care for the Poor and Orphans. Jesus embraced people from different socio-economic backgrounds:¹⁶⁷ the outcasts, orphans, and the poor, including the blind, deaf, mute, and the paralytics. He invited them to come to Him, and, throughout the NT, He blessed them.¹⁶⁸ He went beyond meeting their spiritual needs, however, and stressed their need for physical and social welfare. He appealed strongly to the rich to help the poor.¹⁶⁹ He also emphasised throughout the gospels that wealth is to be generally shared with the poor.¹⁷⁰ Christ encouraged lending to the poor, without expecting anything in return, as He would reward those who give generously.¹⁷¹ Consequently, Christians in Acts generously sold any spare possessions they had, such as land or houses, and gave to their needy brothers and sisters, especially widows and orphans.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁵ Jesus talked a lot about growth and fruitfulness throughout His teachings (Matt 3: 3-23; Luke 8:15; and John 15:1-16). The apostles also emphasised maturity and fruitfulness (1 Cor 2:6; Eph 4:13-15; Gal 5:22-23; James 1:4; Heb 6:1).

¹⁶⁶ Boerman, "The Banner: Is Prosperity a Blessing?", Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Matt 11:28

¹⁶⁹ Matt 19:21

¹⁷⁰ Kenneth L. Barker, ed., Zondervan *NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2008, p. 1592.

¹⁷¹ Luke 6:35. However, the rewards will not be material but spiritual.

¹⁷² Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-37. Andrew Strom, "Lie# 5: Prosperity and 'Seed Faith' ", <http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~revival/lie-5.html>.

Using Wealth for God's Purposes. Jesus taught many parables that had practical applications for the stewardship of material possessions.¹⁷³ A common parable is the one on the talents.¹⁷⁴ Jesus stressed the outcome of the good stewardship of talents that results in fruitfulness. A good disciple is seen as a steward who manages God-given talents, including wealth, so God's kingdom can grow. It demands the kind of devoted servant in Christ's kingdom that produces results.¹⁷⁵ Blomberg affirms that all our time, talents, and treasures are to be used for kingdom purposes.¹⁷⁶

Wealth as a Potential Obstacle to Faith. Jesus met many rich people in the NT, who desired eternal life, yet struggled to experience it. Christ identified that their wealth hindered them. Not only had their accumulated riches become an obstacle, but also their craving for more. The rich coveted wealth and material possessions more than eternal life. Hence, covetousness of wealth prevented the rich young ruler from having eternal life.¹⁷⁷ The other rich man, in Luke's gospel, ended up in hell, because he failed to pay attention to scripture and its teachings.¹⁷⁸ They were fully committed to accumulating wealth, and had no time for Christ. Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and money."¹⁷⁹ "What will it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?"¹⁸⁰ Wealth and riches are hindrances to eternal life. The wealthy were warned about materialism, and not to trust in them.

The craving for wealth also led to profaning the temple. Jesus strongly condemned trading in the temple, when He turned the tables over, and drove out the people who were buying and selling, with their animals and

¹⁷³ <http://yuling.wordpress.com/2007/02/07/wealth-and-poverty-in-the-bible-part-1/>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

¹⁷⁴ Matt 25:14-30. The talents here include the use of spiritual gifts and material possessions.

¹⁷⁵ Barker, *Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, p. 1506.

¹⁷⁶ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 125.

¹⁷⁷ *NIV Study Bible*, p. 1495.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Luke 16:19-31.

¹⁷⁹ Matt 6:24.

¹⁸⁰ Mark 8:36.

possessions.¹⁸¹ Instead of being a house of prayer for all nations, God's temple had become a den of thieves. The pursuit of wealth had led to the neglect of the temple's significance and purpose.

The Apostles' Teachings on Wealth¹⁸²

The apostles also viewed wealth as gifts from God. Hence this section focuses on what they taught, as portrayed in the NT.

Generosity. The apostles encouraged generosity. All Christians should practise generosity, without the expectation of reciprocity.¹⁸³ The stewardship of wealth, through generous giving to the genuinely needy, should remain a priority. James says the practise of true religion expresses itself through showing generosity to orphans and widows.¹⁸⁴ Paul, throughout his letters, appealed to and encouraged Christians to be generous to the poor and the widows.¹⁸⁵ He further exhorted the practice of providing hospitality,¹⁸⁶ supporting ministers of the gospel,¹⁸⁷ and missions.¹⁸⁸

Warning Against the Love of Money. The apostles, throughout their letters, strongly warned Christians about the dangers of loving money. Paul taught Timothy not to be driven by the love of money, but to handle wealth in a godly manner.¹⁸⁹ He cautioned that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸¹ Matt 21:12-13.

¹⁸² The Apostles includes the disciples of Jesus, Paul, and other NT writers. This section incorporates their teachings on wealth, as seen in their writings, and its use, as discussed in all NT writings and letters.

¹⁸³ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 175.

¹⁸⁴ James 1:27.

¹⁸⁵ 1 Tim 5:3.

¹⁸⁶ 1 Tim 5:10; 6:18; and Rom 12:13.

¹⁸⁷ 1 Tim 5:17-18.

¹⁸⁸ 2 Cor 9:6-13.

¹⁸⁹ Alison Weymouth, "Pastoral Epistles" (Class Notes, Banz PNG: Christian Leaders' Training College, 2009), p. 25.

¹⁹⁰ 1 Tim 6:10.

Greed is evil, and a form of idolatry.¹⁹¹ Therefore, Christians must not be greedy for money, but eager to serve.¹⁹² In their pursuit of money, committed Christians go astray to gain more. Consequently, they open doors for greed and idolatry that eventually leads to their advocating false doctrines. Hence, for them, godliness becomes the means for gain.¹⁹³ Peter further warned that false teachers are experts in greed,¹⁹⁴ and, in their greed, they will exploit the church.¹⁹⁵ The love of money, through greed, leads them away from the truth, and sound doctrine.¹⁹⁶ This pursuit of wealth results in them teaching doctrines that sound godly, but were for personal gain. Thus, money has now become an idol for most people, and many Christians are looking for a means of easy gain.¹⁹⁷

Paul warned Timothy that the love of money has caused some people to wander from the faith, and have pierced themselves with much grief.¹⁹⁸ Faith is something lasting and valuable, yet it can be destroyed through pursuing money. James says the rich person must humble himself, and glory in his humiliation, because, like a flower of the field, he will pass away.¹⁹⁹ In his pride in riches, he must recognise his state of spiritual dependence on God.²⁰⁰ In other words, the wealthy should have a sense of contentment with what they have. Paul says godliness with contentment is great gain.²⁰¹ Thus, being content with what one has, together with the purity of God, is great blessing and spiritual wealth.

¹⁹¹ Col 3:5.

¹⁹² 1 Pet 5:2.

¹⁹³ 1 Tim 6:5.

¹⁹⁴ 1 Pet 2:14.

¹⁹⁵ 1 Pet 2:3.

¹⁹⁶ 2 Tim 3:2.

¹⁹⁷ Philip Kagl, "Pastoral Epistles Class Presentation on Wealth and Poverty", CLTC Banz, Term 2, 2009.

¹⁹⁸ 1 Tim 6:10.

¹⁹⁹ James 1:10.

²⁰⁰ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 149.

²⁰¹ 1 Tim 6:5; Phil 4:10-12.

3. EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE

IMPACT OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Prosperity gospel teachings have greatly affected Abelam Christians. The believers, who accepted the prosperity gospel message without properly evaluating it, have ruined their spiritual lives. Some have left church ministries and gone into entrepreneurial work. Others, in their pursuit of material blessings, have messed up their faith, testimony, and ministry. Furthermore, others, in their pursuit of material prosperity, have advocated false teachings.²⁰² Vincent asserts, “Western theology has grown away from the biblical attitude to wealth.”²⁰³ “On a positive note, the prosperity gospel helps the adherents to break free from emotional bondage, impart a positive self-image, and a new worldview.”²⁰⁴ Subsequently, Abelam Christians have transformed their communities, socially, and economically.

CRITIQUE

The critique will focus on the five major doctrines of prosperity, the Abelam, biblical and Western cultures, and the commonalities between them.

Problems of Biblical Interpretation

Since prosperity gospel teaching is said to be founded upon the scriptures, scrutinising its interpretation is crucial. The misinterpretation of biblical

²⁰² “Life in the Spirit Ministry” is the current one in Maprik now. David Dii is the founder of this ministry in PNG. Dii, through his network with some Christians, finds out about wealthy men’s background prior to preaching in their church. He asks bank tellers how much money the wealthy men have in their accounts, and asks fellow villagers about the number of coffee trees, or pigs Christians have. Then Dii goes to that particular church, and, based on the information he got, will prophecy, saying, you have K10,000, and God wants you to give Him K5,000. Selecting the scriptures on prosperity, he preaches out of context, emphasising that if Christians give, God will prosper them materially. However, he wants to gain wealth and riches, and accumulate more for himself. Gideon Karl, student at Christian Leaders’ Training College. Interview by author, May 17, 2009.

²⁰³ David Vincent, “Can We Be Both Rich and Christian?”, in *Catalyst* 19-4 (1989), p. 353.

²⁰⁴ Mombi, “The Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea”, p. 50.

prosperity is due to a lack of proper hermeneutical skills.²⁰⁵ Hence, the five laws of prosperity, as advocated by prosperity gospel proponents, will be critiqued in this section.

Law of Blessing. The proponents of the prosperity gospel state that God primarily covenanted with Abraham to bless him materially. Therefore, Christians, as spiritual sons of Abraham, have the right of access to that covenant blessing. However, it would be incorrect to equate the Abrahamic covenant with that of the NT era, which is more spiritual. God's covenant with Abraham and the patriarchs is a physical one. In the patriarchal covenant, the promises were made for the multiplying of their offspring and the inheritance of the Promised Land.²⁰⁶ Blomberg states, "The wealth of the patriarchs must, therefore, be understood within its clear covenantal context."²⁰⁷ "Abraham needed the material blessing, because God promised to build a nation out of Abraham's own seed, and [riches were] important for this purpose."²⁰⁸ Hence, it is related to the promises of descendants, and the land of Canaan.²⁰⁹ Therefore, "God's covenant with Abraham was partly material blessing."²¹⁰ God's blessing of Israel with material wealth does not necessarily mean the same for Christians today, "because it was a national covenant, and not universal".²¹¹ "The land and its blessings were promised gifts to those whom the Lord had chosen to be His people."²¹² Consequently, in the Christian era, believers do not have a unique promise of a land, and it is not

²⁰⁵ Andrew Perriman, ed., *Faith, Health and Prosperity: A Report on "Word Faith" and "Positive Confession": Theologies by The Evangelical Alliance (UK) Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals*, p. 81.

²⁰⁶ D. R. W. Wood, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd edn, Leicester UK: IVP, 2003, p. 235.

²⁰⁷ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 36.

²⁰⁸ Mombi, "The Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea", p. 50.

²⁰⁹ In Gen 15, God made a covenant to bless Abraham with offspring, and the promise of the land is made in Gen 17. Both of these promises stem from Gen 12:1-3, with the calling and blessing of Abraham.

²¹⁰ Gen 12:7; 15:18; 17:8; 22:17. Mombi, "The Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea", p. 39.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²¹² David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995, p. 91.

necessary to assume that wealth necessarily represents God's blessings.²¹³ Nevertheless, NT Christians enjoyed spiritual blessings in Christ, through the spiritual covenant.

Although the NT blessing is mainly salvation, God also blesses NT believers in their work and businesses. There are Christian businessmen, whom God has blessed, so they can support His work financially. These faithful men, through time and progress, have known God's blessings. Bergmann states, "Many people know from experience what it means to be blessed, or to have God's blessings withheld."²¹⁴ Their relationship with God brings His blessings to create wealth.²¹⁵ Prov 10:22 states "The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and He adds no trouble to it." God is the source of wealth, and gives the wisdom needed for creating it. Therefore, one cannot argue against the individual's prospering financially and materially. Yet, Pitoi insists their reason for being prosperous should be the measure.²¹⁶ He further argues against the idea that being poor means living in sin, and being rich indicates no sin.²¹⁷ However, success in life is not always a sign of God's blessings, and misfortune does not imply curse.²¹⁸

²¹³ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, p. 36.

²¹⁴ Bergmann, "Old Testament Concept of Blessing".

²¹⁵ The opponents of the prosperity gospel should consider the practical application of faith to believe God for blessing His people. God is a miracle-working God, and His miraculous power should not be limited.

²¹⁶ Seik Pitoi, student at CLTC, "Thesis Writing and Research Method" class, CLTC Banz, August 27, 2009.

²¹⁷ This thinking is seen throughout the teachings of prosperity gospel advocates.

²¹⁸ Wisdom literature, and the prophets, on the one hand, talk a lot about the unrighteous prospering throughout, while the righteous suffer (Ps 73:3-5; Prov 29:16; Eccl 8:14; Jer 12:1). The story of Job, on the other hand, clearly portrays the righteous suffering, yet not because of sin and curse. More than that, God still blesses the righteous, and not only materially.

Law of Sowing and Reaping. By interpreting Mark 10:29-30, proponents of prosperity theology say that whatever is put into God's hands will be reaped 100 times. However, Mark 10:29-30 refers to reaping a hundredfold, through suffering as disciples of Christ, rather than sowing and reaping material wealth. There are various biblical meanings concerning sowing and reaping. Firstly, it means harvesting the produce from the land;²¹⁹ secondly, it implies the reaping of the consequences of sin and righteousness;²²⁰ thirdly, the rewards of faithfulness, as disciples of Christ;²²¹ and fourthly, the reaping of souls.²²² Sowing and reaping can also be used as a general principle for investing in God's kingdom, and is often referred to as receiving crowns in eternity.²²³ Hence sowing and reaping is less applied to financial provision.

"It is important to determine its interpretation from the context, not from one's theological, cultural, or personal preference."²²⁴ McQuilkin says, "Context must control."²²⁵ Therefore, this law of sowing and reaping is incorrectly interpreted, by the prosperity gospel proponents, as receiving an abundance of riches and wealth. Nevertheless, the practicality of sowing and reaping, within some churches, cannot be denied. Abelam Christians have applied the principles of sowing and reaping through monetary terms, and have reaped, in various measures.²²⁶ Some Christians argue theology, but do not prove it in practical applications.²²⁷ Thus, both sides need to have a balance. But this principle cannot become a universal principle for

²¹⁹ Lev 19:9; Deut 16:5.

²²⁰ Job 4:8; Prov 22:8; Hos 10:12; Rom 6:22; Gal 6:7.

²²¹ Matt 25:21, 23; 1 Cor 9:25; 2 Tim 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4.

²²² John 4:37.

²²³ 1 Cor 9:25; 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Tim 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4.

²²⁴ Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1992, p. 280.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²²⁶ The Abelam AOG churches and Christians have experienced God's provisions and blessings through the application of the principles of sowing and reaping. The church has survived through tithes and offerings. The Christians have reaped in abundance, as they have tithed, and given their offerings. God, indeed, has blessed their businesses, vocations, cash cropping activities, and gardening.

²²⁷ The author, in doing his research, read through numerous critiques against Christians who embrace the principle of sowing and reaping.

all, because experiences vary, and are not authoritative. Moreover, the law of sowing and reaping is seen as manipulating God, so He gives Christians what they want.²²⁸

Law of Faith. Prosperity gospel proponents interpret faith in Mark 11:22 as God having faith to create, and speak into existence, everything out of nothing.²²⁹ That faith was activated in God when He spoke things into existence. Hence, “faith is a force that both God and man can use”.²³⁰ However, the common interpretation of Mark 11:22 is contradictory to the supporters of the prosperity gospel. This text simply means having faith in God to answer prayers. “Jesus used the withering of the fig tree as an example of the results of believing prayer.”²³¹ Within that context, Israel was like the fig tree, with leaves, yet without fruit, when it was the season for fruit. However, the implication is about Jesus praying to God in faith for His will to be done.²³² Hence, Christians should pray with faith in God, to see “seemingly impossible difficulties”²³³ removed, according to God’s will.

Prosperity theology also teaches that faith is a matter of what we say, more than whom we trust, or what truths we embrace and affirm in our hearts.²³⁴ Hence, it is implied that faith is blind, and can be built upon foundations other than God’s word. However, “faith is no blind groping in the dark, but the certain conviction, born of love and experimental relationship, that God’s revealed word is true.”²³⁵ Duffield and van Cleave outline three

²²⁸ Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, p. 325.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

²³⁰ <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/posit.htm>, Positive Confession/PMA – Prosperity Gospel & The New Age, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²³¹ Alan Cole, “Mark”, in D. A. Carson, R. T. France, F. A. Motyer, G. F. Wenham, eds, *New Bible Commentary*, 21st century edn, Leicester UK: IVP, 1994, p. 968.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ Positive Confession/PMA – Prosperity Gospel & The New Age, <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/posit.htm>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²³⁵ Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. van Cleave, “*Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*”, Manila: OMF Literature, 1990, p. 217.

elements of faith: the intellectual, the emotional, and the voluntary.²³⁶ Hence, faith is based on knowledge. Faith is emotional, as it affects the feelings, as evidenced by joy and tears. Faith reaches out and appropriates what is provided, because it is active and not passive. For some Christians, faith is not just mere belief. It is a confident knowing, based on scripture, that something will happen as believed. Hueter states, “He knows that it is there.”²³⁷ The belief leads the believer to knowing. Also, if faith is an applied force, then it is not the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen, as founded upon the scriptures.²³⁸ It is confidently trusting God’s promises of faithfulness and provision, especially on the spiritual aspects of Christian living.

Law of the Proclaimed Word. In prosperity theology, this law simply states confession is made before possession. Faith is released by speaking words of confession, in order to possess what is desired, and we should never make a negative confession.²³⁹ “It emphasises speaking, stating, or confessing verses found in the Bible, called the Word of God. The belief is that, if one believes the Word of God, and confesses it, then the believer shall receive what they confessed.”²⁴⁰ Power is discharged to accomplish the desires, as faith is spoken.²⁴¹ The scriptures applied to support this belief are Mark 11:22-23, as described by Jesus.²⁴²

²³⁶ Ibid., pp. 217-218.

²³⁷ D. Hueter, “The Battle for Abundant Life”, in *The Church and the Adjustments Movements, Point 1* (1974), p. 131. Hueter discussed believing in ancestral spirits, witchcraft, and sorcery, and gives a classical example about faith in sorcery. Hence, having faith in God and His word are similar to the traditional faith.

²³⁸ Heb 11:1.

²³⁹ Positive Confession/PMA – Prosperity Gospel & The New Age, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²⁴⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_Faith, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²⁴¹ Gary Giley, <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/char/more/w-f.htm>, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²⁴² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_of_Faith, Internet; accessed 24 July, 2009.

Positive confession is not wrong, as Christians can speak well of others, as a way of exhortation, and building good self-esteem. Nevertheless, positive confession limits God and His word as the object of faith. God must be understood as the omniscient, omnipotent, and the omnipresent One. Therefore, Mark 11:23-23 speaks about faith in this all-knowing, all-powerful, and ever-present God, who is all-sufficient. The law of the proclaimed word makes God as not sufficient in Himself.²⁴³ A simple faith in Him, on the trustworthiness of His word, can answer prayers.

However, it should be noted that, since faith is active, it speaks. Faith that is established on the scriptures expresses itself through confession. What is believed is affirmed. In receiving salvation, confession is made, based on the belief.²⁴⁴ Likewise, Christians should proclaim their faith for blessing, healing, and protection in God, who is the object of faith, because those who diligently seek Him will be rewarded.²⁴⁵ But God answers in His unlimited ways, sometimes according to one's desires, and, at other instances, differently. Most importantly, God will never be manipulated by mankind.

Expiatory Work of Christ. Prosperity gospel proponents believe Christ, through His redemptive work on the cross, has provided both divine healing and material wealth. Nevertheless, the redemption offered by Christ was for the sins of the world. It must be understood that forgiveness of sins was the primary purpose for Christ's death on the cross. Jesus took upon Himself the sins of the world. Healing is also included within that redemption package, yet the "real life's experience is quite the opposite".²⁴⁶ Righteous people like Job and Paul suffered, but God did not heal them quickly. Nevertheless, He made known to them His all-sufficient grace. Hence, the expiatory work of Christ does not mean sickness and pain are forever removed. These proponents have a wrong

²⁴³ Positive Confession/PMA – Prosperity Gospel & The New Age, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²⁴⁴ Rom 10:9-10.

²⁴⁵ Heb 6:11.

²⁴⁶ Mombi, "The Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea", p. 51.

view of redemption and the cross of Christ.²⁴⁷ However, true prosperity, which Jesus and the apostles taught, is spiritual, and begins at the foot of the cross, and sometimes includes suffering.²⁴⁸ Yet divine healing should not be overlooked. Those who are advanced in medical science tend to deny divine healing. God's healing power is evident today, as it was in the days of Jesus. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.²⁴⁹ Divine healing displays God's power, which leads to people's salvation.

Mombi observes the five laws of prosperity, when not diagnosed scripturally, would lead to cult practices, as experienced by Melanesians previously.²⁵⁰ Another false teaching in Maprik has that nature, but in a different form.²⁵¹

Various Cultures

Knowing different cultures, and how they have changed, is crucial to understanding prosperity in contemporary Abelam.

Abelam Culture. To the Abelam, prosperity was a communal and group thing, since they were tribally-oriented, like other Melanesians. Consequently, the successes or failures in any endeavour²⁵² belonged to the family, clan, and the village. Paura affirms the harvesting of huge ceremonial yams by the Abelam brought joy and pride to his people.²⁵³ Trompf asserts, "Wealth, in a primal society, is a group-wealth."²⁵⁴ For

²⁴⁷ "Positive Confession/PMA – Prosperity Gospel & The New Age", Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²⁴⁸ Rom 5: 3; 8:17-18; Heb 2:10.

²⁴⁹ Heb 13:8.

²⁵⁰ Mombi, "The Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea", pp. 48-49.

²⁵¹ Apart from being finance-oriented, the Life in the Spirit Ministry in Maprik teaches that its members can remarry as the Spirit leads. Being led by the Spirit is the emphasis of this group. Hence a spouse can leave his or her married partner and be married to another man or woman, if the Spirit allows.

²⁵² Gardening, economics, and fighting, to mention a few.

²⁵³ Paura Nikulak of Kinbangua. Interview by author, January 27, 2009.

²⁵⁴ G. W. Trompf, "God as the Source of Wealth", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, 3-1 (1987), p. 74.

example, the wealth,²⁵⁵ made through cultivating yams, is enjoyed by all. The community releases their blessing as they enjoy the wealth so that the ceremonial yam planters continue to increase in productivity and abundance. The Abelam used their wealth and riches, not only to compete with other neighbouring villages, as was common in those days; they also helped those in debt, and cared for the poor. This custom is inherent and practised among contemporary Abelam Christians. Consequently, the churches are supported by the Christians' wealth and finances.

Biblical Cultures. Israel was people-oriented, and lived in groups. "Extended family groups were housed in multiple family compounds"²⁵⁶ This implies that the sharing of wealth and blessings, and helping the needy, were common occurrences. The social organisation of the Israelites, from the time of the exodus through to settlement, was based on the extended family.²⁵⁷ Village life centred on agricultural pursuits, and maintenance of small flocks of sheep and goats.²⁵⁸ "The patriarchal period narrative gives the overwhelming impression of a time when the Hebrews were new to the land, and still depended on the tribe, not the nation, for their identity."²⁵⁹ However, many things have changed since then. With the drifting towards civilisation and urbanisation, people may have neglected living together as clans and families.

Western Cultures. Western culture includes two ways of living. Firstly, it is individualistic. It is not group-oriented like the Abelam and Israel. Therefore, the sharing of wealth and other things is uncommon among it. Christians do share with others, yet the means of sharing varies. They greatly encourage hard work, and assume responsibility for their living.

²⁵⁵ Harvests of huge ceremonial yams brought in wealth to the Abelam. Wealth came in the form of pigs, shell money, or rings, and food. Wealth was also made by the Abelam villages, who taught others the secrets; the rituals to observe, and rules to follow, in order to produce huge, healthy, and good looking ceremonial yams. Paura Nikulak and John Tika of Kinbangua. Interview by author, January 27, 2009.

²⁵⁶ Victor H. Matthews, *Manners and Customs of the Bible*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1991, p. 41.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Interdependence is not common, and most believe in personal success and achievement, through education and business.

Secondly, Western culture is more materialistic. Since Western society has developed and advanced in many aspects, the living standard is luxurious. However, that does not mean everyone lives in the same manner. Yet, compared with the developing world, generally the Western world is rich. Therefore, Saracco rightly affirms,

Though born in the USA, and containing elements of American culture (individualism, achievements through personal effort, the idea of success linked to economic prosperity), what happens in different countries is not a copy of this model.²⁶⁰

Consequently, they need new cars, houses, and wealth. Their advancement in modernisation has allowed that kind of living to be acceptable.

The Abelan, who are still growing socially and economically, cannot afford that Western standard of living, yet they try to possess the material things the prosperity gospel proponents preach. They can prosper within the development that PNG, as a third-world nation, is experiencing. However, prospering materially by Western standards of living is not what biblical prosperity is all about.

Relationships

Relationships are another important aspect of prosperity that the prosperity gospel proponents advocate, yet they confine it to marriage only.

The sole purpose of God blessing Israel was so they could know Him personally, not only as a nation. The NT believers, through Jesus Christ, have access to that same God. Hence, having been called to that relationship with God, Abelan Christians need to grow spiritually, and, thereby, become mature. Jesus and the apostles consistently taught this. Boerman says, “God’s blessing included the spiritual realities of

²⁶⁰ Saracco, “Prosperity Theology”, p. 325.

forgiveness and fellowship with God.”²⁶¹ This relationship brings blessings that bear characteristics that God considers desirable. They enjoy spiritual blessings in Christ, as they put their faith in Him, experience His love and forgiveness, and work faithfully for the coming of His kingdom. Even though Christians may be poor, destitute, and persecuted, they experience joy, rooted in a spiritual reality that transcends their present circumstances.²⁶²

Consequently, Christians must feel content with what God blesses them. They must become satisfied with whatever God provides through others. In this relationship, faith and trust in God grow progressively, and Christians become mature and strong. John prayed that Gaius would enjoy good health, and that all might go well with him, as his soul was getting along well.²⁶³ True prosperity, then, is walking in the truth, and making progress in it.²⁶⁴

Even though Christians can accumulate much material wealth and riches, the absence of good relationships with immediate family, the extended family, and fellow members of the church and community, proves that they are not prospering at all. Love, care, and concern should be reflected, and extended, to others. Proverbs talks about the absence of love during a meal, making the good food is not enjoyable.²⁶⁵ Where contentions are, blessings are not properly enjoyed.

Therefore, if the prosperity gospel proponents, and their adherents, emphasise healthy marriage and family relationships, as evidences of prosperous living, and yet do not experience their reality, then they are not prospering as God intended them to be.

²⁶¹ Boerman, “The Banner: Is Prosperity a Blessing?”, Internet; accessed July 24, 2009.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ 3 John 2. Some translations use the word “prosper”. However, in this context, John did not mean prosperity in material wealth and riches.

²⁶⁴ Leon Morris, “Commentary 1, 2 & 3 John”, in D. A. Carson, R. T. France, F. A. Motyer, G. F. Wenham, eds, *New Bible Commentary*, 21st century edn, Leicester UK: IVP, 1994, p. 1412.

²⁶⁵ Prov 15:16-17; 17:1.

Commonalities

People of the Abelam, biblical, and Western cultures all work, in order to survive. Every culture emphasises hard work, either through agriculture, entrepreneurship, or formal employment. Abelam Christians are so privileged, unlike the rest of the world, to own their land. They derive their wealth from the land. However, the land needs to be tilled in order to produce the wealth Abelam Christians are trying to acquire.

God blessed Israel with land, and they prospered through cultivating it. Westerners, on the other hand, thrive on education, enterprise industry, and employment opportunities. However, like Israel, God has indeed blessed the land of Abelam Christians for them to prosper. Yet the spiritual well-being of Abelam Christians is the emphasis here. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, as far as their spiritual life is concerned, and what the Lord requires of them. The NT stresses the essentiality of spiritual prosperity as the primary and social well-being for Christians. With that in mind, the world economy must be considered seriously. Currently, the Western world is leading the globe economy, and third-world nations are yet to reach that stage. This affects the entrepreneurship of Abelam Christians.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section will offer theological and practical recommendations for Abelam Christians.

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

A common cause of misunderstanding, which lies within the clergy and the Christians of the AOG church in Abelam, is a lack of sound knowledge of biblical interpretation. Consequently, without properly scrutinising the preaching of the prosperity gospel teachers, Abelam Christians have taken it as truth, and have felt the effects. Therefore, how can the AOG clergy, and the Christians in Abelam, correctly interpret the scriptures?

Although the NT is linked to the OT, the generally-accepted rules of interpretation need to be applied. McQuilkin has outlined some key principles for correct interpretation of the Bible. The major one to be

noted is “identifying the audience God intended”.²⁶⁶ This means knowing the immediate context of any passage of the Bible, the audience designated by the author, and the historical significance.²⁶⁷ However, in every interpretation, context is the key factor, and guiding principle. Therefore, the clergy of Abelam AOG churches especially need further training in hermeneutics,²⁶⁸ and also incorporation of these courses into their Bible College curriculum.

CONTEXTUALISATION

“Contextualisation is an issue that every generation will wrestle with. Whenever and wherever we deal with the Word of God, contextualisation is unavoidable.”²⁶⁹ Without proper understanding of the Western context, Abelam Christians have accepted everything presented to them as final and authoritative. Hence, the style of interpretation and preaching that seems “superior and attractive, has been copied in the churches”.²⁷⁰ Since God’s Word is relevant to every given culture, the Bible needs to be applied relevantly within the Abelam context.

All cultures have both strengths and weaknesses; hence, no one is superior. Since Abelam culture has its unique way of experiencing prosperity, Abelam AOG clergy need training in contextualisation, because many do not have that knowledge. Although it is a difficult task, “contextualised theology will minimise transplanting of the message from a foreign culture, and will pave the way for Melanesian theology to bloom”.²⁷¹ “There exists a real and helpful relationship between ancestral spirits and the gospel,

²⁶⁶ McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, p. 279.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 279-280.

²⁶⁸ Hermeneutics is the art of biblical interpretation.

²⁶⁹ Mombi, “The Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God churches of Papua New Guinea”, p. 53.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

which allows Melanesians to move from faith in the spirits of their ancestors to faith in Jesus, with cultural integrity and continuity.”²⁷²

WORK

Abelam Christians have many opportunities to experience prosperity, as Westerners do, however, within their own context. The priceless commodity they possess is their land. It is their God-given inheritance, which neither the government nor any person can control. Like Israel, Abelam prosperity is tied to the land. As horticulturists, Abelam Christians must cultivate their land. More cash cropping activities should be encouraged, and time and commitment given to it. Kapris affirms, “I’d like people to look at improving agriculture, and consider alternate cash crops besides vanilla, cocoa, and coffee.”²⁷³ Kamanambi also points out that government backing is needed for the Maprik district to realise its potential in agriculture, and should focus on revitalising it.²⁷⁴ Apart from working the land, Christians should improvise methods of wealth-creation by encouraging economic activities through investments.²⁷⁵

However, the Abelam people must shift their mindset away from the Westerners’ influence of experiencing prosperity, and focus on farming their land. Christians should be encouraged to work, because God will

²⁷² Joshua Kurung Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage from an Indigenous Evangelical Perspective” (Ph.D. diss., University of Sydney, 2004), p. v.

²⁷³ Damaris Minikula, “A New Wind Blowing in PNG’s Forgotten Maprik”, April 20, 2005, *The National*, www.thenational.com.pg/, <http://archives.pireport.org/archive/2005/April/04-28-ft.htm>, Internet; accessed July 12, 2009.

²⁷⁴ Raymond Kamanambi, a community leader, and former finance and planning deputy secretary, and People’s Progress Party candidate for Maprik Open Electorate in 2007 PNG National Elections. <http://www.postcourier.com.pg/20070412/momase01.htm>. *Momase Post*, March 12, 2007. Internet; accessed July 12, 2009.

²⁷⁵ Kofi Anane-Fenin, “Leadership Seminar on Wealth Creation”, CLTC Banz, February 7, 2009. Kofi Anane-Fenin outlined nine lessons of wealth creation in his wealth-creation seminar that the Abelam can apply to create wealth. These include take personal responsibility of your life, put away poverty mentality, wealth is not income, wealth creation is not taught in school, learn to pay yourself first after your tithe, learn to buy assets and not liabilities, we reap more than we sow, money invested multiplies in compound interest, avoid the debt trap.

bless their efforts, and make them prosperous. “Encouraging people to work creates dignity and sustainability. We must not create dependence. As a general rule, people should support themselves by working.”²⁷⁶

HUMAN RESOURCES

Upon realising the current changes in living standards, the Abelam need innovative primary industry. Hence, training skilled personnel is a prerequisite for improvising primary industry, managing economic activities, and doing good administration and accounting. Millions of kina have been committed for Maprik, which includes funds for upgrading the Bainyik Sepik Agriculture College to university status.²⁷⁷ Abelam people should take this opportunity to train their human resources, to improve their economic activities. Therefore, a holistic approach is needed for setting the pace towards prosperous living among Abelam Christians.

CONCLUSION

The traditional Abelam experienced prosperity: spiritually and socially, through their allegiance to ancestral spirits, and they centred on farming the land, through cultivating ceremonial yams. However, the gospel brought them spiritual prosperity that greatly changed their social and economic life. Yet the Western prosperity gospel, which is more materialistically-oriented, has caused some major problems for Abelam Christians.

Consequently, by evaluating the changing beliefs of Abelam Christians concerning prosperity, and how the attitude towards prosperity changed in biblical cultures, we understand that prosperity includes the whole of human living. Prosperity comprises both the spiritual and social well-being of Christians. Therefore, Abelam Christians should understand that prosperity is not confined only to the Western standard of living, but,

²⁷⁶ Rianto and Ratna, “Millionaire Missionaries’ Principles for Giving”, in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 41-4 (2005), p. 468.

²⁷⁷ “Maprik gets projects worth K12 mil.”, in *The National* (Papua New Guinea), July 6, 2009. Member for Maprik, the Hon Gabriel Kapris, “has delivered K12 million worth of impact projects, and signed two memoranda of understanding with University of Vudal and UPNG for the start of two universities in Maprik, East Sepik Province.”

rather, includes broader-quality relationships, spiritual growth, and social health. Prosperous living belongs to Abelam Christians, too, through Christ, but it includes all aspects of living.

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