

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO AFRICAN-EWE PROVERBIAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This article is an invitation to scholarship to take another look at the function of ancient Israelite Wisdom Literature; not only as it encroaches on the Pentateuch and Prophetic literature, but also as it relates to African-Ewe (and other) theologies and vice versa. In particular, the pervasiveness of proverbs and wise sayings among Ewe people makes proverbs the most fertile ground upon which the message of the Bible can be planted, nurtured and brought to fruition. In other words, because proverbs and wise sayings are a kind of theological backdrop of the life of the Ewe people, Christianity needs to approach the Ewe people with the wisdom of Proverbs in order to bring the people to understand, accept, imbibe and put to effective use the message of the Bible since Ghanaian-Ewe proverbs and wise sayings can be a very effective way of transmitting the Judeo-Christian message to the peoples of Africa in general, and to the Ewe people of Ghana in particular.

Introduction

From the late seventeenth to the twenty-first century, various themes and how they impinge on biblical issues have surged in the minds of biblical scholars all over the surface of the globe. The question continues to be whether the traditional historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible is still able to do the job? In the face of the shaking foundation of Protestant Theology (and other theologies) that was initiated by the Enlightenment, there has come to the fore a variety of ways for interpreting the Bible. These various theologies, which include

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liberationist, feminist, womanist, *minjung* and many others, take into account not only the history of the biblical text, but also its contemporary interpretations and applications, a task described by Krister Stendahl as involving “what it [i.e., the text] meant” and “what it means” (1962:418).² The rootedness of texts in various contexts, including political, theological, socio-cultural, class, race and gender contexts has given rise to their interpretation in the light of those contexts. Most of these contexts address issues of exclusivism and marginalization. As such the contribution of all human societies in one way or another has resulted in the multi-vocal and cacophonous voices that now characterize the postmodern biblical interpretative scene.

My intention in this article is to contribute to this enterprise by espousing the importance of proverbs in African Tradition, with a focus on the proverbs among the Ewe peoples of South Eastern Ghana, as they relate to biblical issues. It must be said upfront that among the Ewe peoples and also other African peoples, proverbs are a crucial part of everyday conversation and are regarded as indispensable wisdom utterances. In the conclusion of the article, we will show how an understanding of African cultures helps to elucidate the biblical text.

Context of Interpretation of the Ewe and Hebrew Proverbs

The culture of the Ewe peoples, like that of other African peoples, is one that cherishes communality or sociability. Nothing is actually regarded as belonging to or owned by an individual. In other words, everything is owned by the entire community or society. This philosophy is captured by John Mbiti, who after critically observing the essence of the African corporate personality system, draws the conclusion that to the

² Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary.” Pages 418–432 in vol. 1 of *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. (ed. George Arthur Buttrick; Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1962). According to Stendahl, this is an element of the descriptive task of Biblical Theology. See also Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: the Politics of Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999). Here Schüssler-Fiorenza argues for a re-conceptualization of biblical interpretation as a “theoretical and institutional change that would foster a biblical rhetoric and ethics of justice and well-being.” This change for her involves “a shift from the scientific-positivist center to rhetorical-ethical paradigm in the methodological and theoretical self-understanding of the discipline” (14).

African no one is independent of the other members of the family, clan, or tribe and sums up their basic philosophy of life in the assertion that “I am because we are, and because we are, therefore, I am” (1979: 108-109).³ Thus the Ewe tradition upholds social ethics in its existential contexts by attempting to uphold the good of the community. A popular Ewe proverb says, *Amea deke menye fukpo o*, “No one is an island.” Thus interdependency is a watchword in Ewe society. This is captured in another proverb, which says, *Lo fe nukpe la, ve han fe nukpe ye*, which literally means, “The shame of the crocodile is also that of the alligator.” Put in another way, these proverbs imply that an evildoer brings the consequences of his/her shameful actions upon all the other people in the community. The importance of community is thus mirrored in the value attached to Ghanaian Ewe proverbs, which are considered as indispensable to life and are, therefore, passed down orally as part of the society’s wisdom preserve.

The major aim of proverbs and wise-sayings in the socio-traditional-cultural context of the Ewe people involves character formation, transformation, and/or reformation. The *griots* (storytellers or sages) of the Ewe community employ profound truthful wisdom sayings, which are generally believed to concisely express principles or rules of conduct.

In order to project the traditional African (i.e., Ewe) proverbs as they relate to biblical issues, the discussion will now give the proverbs, their contexts or explanation, background and the custom surrounding them. It will then be shown how such Ghanaian proverbs, which are simply indispensable, are perpetuated in the society. The proverbs will be presented in the original Ewe language with their literal English translations, followed by their explanations and corresponding biblical

³ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi, Kenya: Hienemann, 1979), 108-109. This idea of communality/interdependency/sociability in African thought is very difficult to comprehend in Western society. However, it is a very important part of the philosophical thought system of African peoples (here the Ewe peoples) to such an extent that whatever happens in the society affects everyone even if it is the doing of one person. Moreover, both the living and “living-dead” (i.e., the ancestors) are indispensable participants in the activities and whatever happens in the society on daily basis. See also Thomas G. Christensen, *An African Tree of Life* (Maryknoll, New York: 1990). In his missionary work among the Gbaya peoples of the Cameroon in Central Africa, Christensen discovers that life is an interaction between the community of the living and living-dead, which includes also animate and inanimate things.

proverbs. It might be noteworthy to acknowledge that some of the proverbs used by the Ewe people are similar to the proverbs of other African peoples in general. Occasional references to African proverbs can, therefore, be taken as references to proverbs of Ghanaian Ewe people as well in this article. Just as the canonical Proverbs comprise a collection of proverbs that can be traced to the peoples of other ancient Near Eastern cultures, so it can be demonstrated that Ewe proverbs have much in common with those of the people who surround them.

Ewe proverbs are not attributed to specific composers since they are used as part of the Ewe vocabulary and anyone can and should utter a proverb depending on the occasion and discussion that calls for it. Musimbi Kanyoro makes a very revealing statement in her article, "When Women Rise, the Earth Trembles" in *Claiming the Promise: African Churches Speak*.⁴ Referring to proverbs in the African traditional context, she reported an encounter with her grandmother who had used the same proverb in two different contexts on two separate occasions. When she questioned her on this use, her grandmother sat her down to explain that

...proverbs are sayings that are pregnant with meaning. The context of a proverb determines its meaning. Proverbs are like shadows. You have to move with them and they have to move with you (1994:63).

Kanyoro's grandmother had used this explanation for proverbs in a Kenyan context, but I would submit that it equally applies to my own Ghanaian-Ewe context and to the African context in general. Among the Ewe peoples, proverbs and wise sayings are a way of everyday life and constitute the agency for transmitting African traditional religions, morality and culture. They are very deeply ingrained in the existential cultural context to such an extent that it can be concluded that proverbs and wise sayings function in the same way as the biblical *Shema*⁵ (Deut 6:4-5) works for the Hebrew people.

⁴ Musimbi Kanyoro. "When women Rise, the Earth Trembles," in *Claiming the Promise: African Churches Speak*. Edited by Margaret S. Laron (New York: Friendship Press, 1994).

⁵ I am aware that the comparison of Ewe proverbs and wise sayings to the *Shema*' may seem problematic since the canonical Proverbs and the *Shema*' come from different

J. Coert Rylaarsdam observes the similar function regarding Hebrew proverbs when he asserts that “Proverbs constitute the earliest documentary deposit of Israel’s Wisdom Movement now extant” (1997:444-45).⁶ Rylaarsdam adds that “the sages of Israel who composed Proverbs worked with a sense of responsibility and purpose, for they felt that their ‘words’ were an indispensable means for the fulfillment of human life” (444).⁷ These descriptions of Proverbs can equally apply to African proverbs particularly those of the Ewe peoples, which are records of great ideas and serious reflections. Rylaarsdam’s point is similar to a point made by Mbiti, who apart from proposing the earlier idea about the importance of communality among African peoples, also posits that when African philosophical systems come to be formulated, proverbs will be an indispensable part of them. By this Mbiti shows that African proverbs are very important. Furthermore, for Mbiti, “It is in proverbs that we find the remains of the oldest forms of African religious and philosophical wisdom (Mbiti, 1979:2, 66-67).”⁸ Gwinyai Muzorewa agrees with Mbiti in this latter regard by seeing African proverbs as constituting a preservation of knowledge, which contains and conveys African wisdom and theology (Muzorewa, 1987:80).⁹

The Function of Ewe and Hebrew Bible Proverbs

The function of the proverbs employed in this section cut across religious, moral and ethical boundaries, while at the same time they speak to the totality of Ghanaian Ewe traditional life. In African tradition, sacred and secular are not dichotomized. Both are integral to the African holistic attitude to life. Because the Ewe people employ proverbs in their everyday

sections of the tripartite Hebrew canon. However, I would like to caution readers to understand that my reference is to Ewe proverbs and not canonical proverbs. Moreover, the power and authority assigned to Ewe proverbs makes them comparable in the way I have presented them in this article.

⁶ J.C. Coert Rylaarsdam, “Proverbs.” Pages 444-457 in *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible*. Edited by Matthew Black (Nairobi, Kenya: Thomas Nelson and Sons LTD, 1977).

⁷ Rylaarsdam, “Proverbs”, 444.

⁸ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1979, 1990), 2, 67.

⁹ Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *Origins and Development of African Theology* (New York: Maryknoll, 1987), 80.

conversations, the Book of Proverbs constitutes a very important part of the liturgical life of both mainline and African independent instituted Ghanaian churches (AICs). Furthermore, proverbs are an indispensable part of the entirety of Ghanaian life as they address spiritual as well as secular matters that relate to real life situations of Ghanaian peoples. This is so due to the communality, inclusiveness, religious notoriety¹⁰ of the people, as well as the non-dichotomization of sacred and secular. In addition to the canonical Proverbs, Ghanaian people have their own proverbs and wise sayings, situated in their peculiar socio-traditio-cultural context and experiences. The literacy rate among Ghanaian people is not high; but their proverbs and wise sayings, which do not require any specialized training to learn, to acquire or to use, function as the agency for transmitting African traditional religious wisdom. They also help in the transmission of the Judeo-Christian religion and other religions as they train in morality and culture as a whole. Thus Ewe proverbs and wise sayings, which take the form of single-liner utterances and short stories with deep moral lessons, are handy both in secular and sacred matters since they possess the ability to teach truths that transcend time and space without indoctrinating.

In Ghana and among the Ewe people in particular, religion permeates all aspects of life, from the miry-watery pre-birth to birth, through youth, young adulthood, adulthood, to death and the after life, world of the “living-dead,” which constitute various stages of the life cycle. These stages account for what is in the unknown (pre-birth/underworld), what was (past), what is (present), and what will be (in the future). Each of these stages is encapsulated in proverbs and wise sayings, which seek to mediate morality with the aim of producing the good and successful life consequent upon accepted cultural norms. In this light, one can construe Ghanaian proverbs and wise-sayings as functioning like the Hebrew *Shema*’ (Deut. 6:4-5, with a preamble, v. 3, and an elaboration in vv. 6--9) with its demands on the Hebrew people. Just as the *Shema*’ functioned holistically for the covenant people of Israel and involved hearing, doing and passing on the knowledge of and advocating total commitment to *YHWH* alone, throughout their generations so that all might go well with them, so do proverbs and wise sayings function among the Ghanaian people. In the daily life context of the Ewe people, proverbs

¹⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions*, 1. Mbiti here refers to Africans as “notoriously religious.”

and wise sayings are pedagogical as well as didactic. They have the ability to train in wisdom, cultural, moral and religious knowledge and practice.

As a form of contrast, the canonical Proverbs constitute the earliest documented forms of Israel's Wisdom Movement while Ghanaian proverbs constitute oral preserves of wisdom. However, both aim at the fulfillment of human life and there seems to be some comparison between the two sets of proverbs. As suggested by Henry Flanders, Robert W. Crapps and David A. Smith, Israelite wisdom is postexilic but can be traced to oral preservation (1996:483).¹¹ Unlike Proverbs, however, Ghanaian-Ewe proverbs and wise sayings are mostly, undocumented. In spite of this nature of Ghanaian-Ewe proverbs, they constitute the oral preserves of knowledge, which encompass great ideas and serious reflections containing and conveying African theoretical and theological wisdom. Among the Ghanaian people as well as other African peoples, proverbs are the oldest forms of religious and philosophical wisdom and can be rightly said to act "like shadows" (Kanyoro, 1994:63) with which people move as the proverbs in turn move with the people.

In light of the foregoing, Ghanaian proverbs and wise sayings are an indispensable part of normal conversation as they are inextricably bound to every form of communication. Their importance or indispensability shows in the indelible imprints they make on the minds of hearers in the process of every meaningful conversation. Furthermore, the lack of means of documentation, until quite recently, and the laconic nature of African languages, which necessitate the oral transmission of proverbs and wise sayings, makes room for them to serve, not only as didactical utterances, but also as the library of native wisdom and philosophy. In other words, African languages are rich in proverbs and wise sayings due to the paucity of their vocabulary to express certain ideas, meaningfully. One proverb can be used on a variety of occasions to mean different things and several proverbs can also be used to mean the same thing. As such proverbs and wise sayings serve as the means of filling in the gaps in the communication of familiar truths or in commenting comprehensively on life. They are drawn from human

¹¹ Henry J. Flanders, David A. Smith and Robert W. Crapps, *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (USA: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 483. In this book, the authors provide a very detailed discussion of Israelite wisdom as a widespread Canaanite wisdom movement, which was carried over to Israel during the Confederacy.

experiences, capped in easily remembered language and they teach much through the use of very few words. It is worthy of notice that Jesus used a similar philosophy in his teaching by saying much in very few words through parables.¹²

It can be said that Ghanaian proverbs, like the canonical Proverbs, tow the line of the ancient Near Eastern proverbs in a substantial way, although they differ also from the latter immensely. The moral lessons taught in Proverbs under the opening formula, “My child, listen ...” found in Proverbs 1-9; e.g. 1:8; 2:1; 3:1, *passim*, provide a suitable base for this article to show that Ewe proverbs can be compared to the Hebrew *Shema*’. By invoking the power of proverbs and wise sayings in Ghanaian (African) Ewe tradition as they relate to biblical issues, this article fosters a unique relationship between the former and the latter. In the former, which encompass the totality of the Ghanaian cultural context, people are called upon to hear, imbibe and transmit the proverbs just as in the latter, the Hebrew *Shema*’, children are called upon to listen and do accordingly. With this unique relationship as a backdrop, it can be concluded that proverbs and wise sayings function in a similar vein for the Ghanaian Ewe people as did the *Shema*’ for the Hebrews. In other words, Ghanaian proverbs and wise sayings also call upon the people to hear, obey and transmit the moral lessons in them from one generation to the other in order that all might be well with them just as is the case with the *Shema*’ among the Hebrew people.

Parallels between Ewte and Hebrew Bible Proverbs

Several African (here Ghanaian-Ewe) proverbs have diverse interpretations depending on their social contexts as will become apparent in the discussion of the proverbs selected for this article.

¹² Matthew 25:1-30. Here Jesus teaches in a couple of parables, one about ten virgins, five of whom were wise and five who were foolish and also about the talents given to three servants according to their abilities, to illustrate how people should be on their guard always. See also Luke 15:1-32. Here Jesus gives three parables about the lost and found, coin, sheep and prodigal (lost) son, to illustrate how heaven rejoices when one sinner repents rather than over many people who need no repentance.

The proverb *Me dome fie ame tae, wodoa fe do*, means, “One grows fingernails in order to scratch one’s back when it itches.” A similar proverb is *Ahloe be fu nku nam tae yewo ame eve le ave me*. This proverb, supposedly uttered by the antelope says, “It is for the sake of brushing the dust from each other’s eyes that they (antelopes) walk in pairs in the forest.” A third proverb, similar to the above two is, *Ta deka medea adanu o*, which means, “One head does not take/offer counsel or go into consultation.” The intention of these three proverbs is to promote social cohesion. They explain why people need each other since no single individual person can provide all his/her own needs or the needs of all other people. These proverbs can be likened to the English proverb, “Make hay while the sun shines.” They also point towards the need to be always prepared for any kind of eventuality in which people might find themselves in the future.

There are several proverbs in the book of Proverbs that convey similar ideas of wisdom as the foregoing Ghanaian/Ewe proverbs. Three such axioms in Proverbs say, “Wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her” (Prov 8:11). “A slack hand causes poverty but the hand of the diligent makes rich” (Prov. 10:4), and “A child who gathers in summer is prudent, but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame” (Prov 10:5). These proverbs employ common, natural, universal imagery that conveys some deep truths about life. In the first of these proverbs, wisdom is contrasted with jewels. Its indispensability is underscored by its value, which is above everything that is desirable since it is second to none. Just as the Ghanaian proverbs admonish and encourage, the Hebrew proverbs also function in a similar way. These proverbs can also be seen as admonitions toward diligence, hard work and prudence rather than laziness and slothfulness; the former brings riches while the latter brings poverty and disgrace.

*Ne adavator tsor wo godoe*¹³ *ne kploe do la, woe amewo akpor abe adavator ene*. This proverb literally means, “If an insane person grabs and runs away with your waistcloth/brief, and you chase after him/her naked (to recover your waistcloth), onlookers might mistake you for the insane one.” There is a possibility of mistaken identity here because insane

¹³ A long strip/piece of red cloth, that is worn by women between their legs, and which is held in place by waist beads, that are worn like a belt around the bare waist. It can be likened to panty liners.

persons normally go about naked on the streets. Thus, if onlookers see a naked person (i.e. the one whose brief has been grabbed by the insane person), chasing after the insane person with the waistcloth, they could regard the chaser as the one who is insane. This proverb is used to caution people against indulging in petty arguments (or acts that are demeaning) with people who most likely are at a lower level of understanding than they. Should the former argue with the latter, people listening to the argument might not know the difference between the two to be able to distinguish between the ignorant and the wise one. In other words, those of higher understanding must refrain from attempting to convince those who are ignorant with logical arguments lest onlookers consider both of them as ignorant. This proverb can also mean that one need not provide explanation for everything one does to everybody who demands an explanation since some people may never comprehend the philosophical explanation offered. A similar idea is seen in Proverbs 26:4, “Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself,” and Proverbs 9:7, “Whoever corrects a scoffer wins abuse; whoever rebukes the wicked gets hurt.” Accordingly, there is the need to be conscious of what action one takes. A person’s presentation may be sound and logical before the wise but an argument with or a presentation before a fool might not be worthy.

Devi mase tonu, anorkae kua to ne. “If a child does not heed counsel, his or her ears will be entangled in thorns/thistles.”¹⁴ A parallel biblical proverb is “One who is often reproved, yet remains stubborn, will suddenly be broken beyond healing” (Prov 29:1). These proverbs are used when a person is perpetually admonished to desist from the way of life that can bring about evil consequences upon him/her but refuses to heed the advice. The Ewe proverb, like the corresponding biblical proverb, becomes handy when evil strikes a hardheaded person. The aim of these proverbs is to instill the sense of responsibility in people so that they will uphold ethical, moral, and social standards. Anyone who shuns doing right, and persists in wrongdoing, will be destroyed.

¹⁴ The thorns and thistles used in this proverb may be a reference to what happened to Absalom as a result of disrespecting his father, attempting to usurp his father’s throne and even kill his father. As a consequence, his hair gets caught up in the oak till he is killed (2 Sam 18:9-17).

Nukpe tae gbolo alo nuvor worla toa nuxa/kporxa. “Shame causes the immoral to walk behind the fence wall (i.e., in hidden places).” Prostitution, stealing or other evil deeds are frowned upon in society. Hence anyone who does such evil deeds normally does them under cover of darkness or in secret. The biblical equivalent to this proverb is “The wicked flee when no one pursues,” (Prov. 28:1). In the Ewe community, as elsewhere, those who perpetuate crimes and acts of immorality, carry out their deeds in secret so that their deeds will not be seen. The perpetrators are disgraced when such deeds come to light. This proverb is, therefore, used with reference to evildoers and their wicked deeds. It warns people to avoid indulging in evil even clandestinely so that they would not be disgraced when their shameful acts are discovered.

Dze me kafua edokui o. This proverb means, “A flute or salt does not praise itself.” A couple of comparable biblical proverbs are “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth – a stranger, and not your own lips,” (Prov 27:2). The flute, a musical instrument blown by the mouth, produces good music; but it does not praise itself for making beautiful melodies. Similarly, salt savors food and makes it tasty; but it does not praise itself for its great function. These Ewe proverbs are used for people who are fond of boasting about their own achievements. It is a piece of advice to them to avoid projecting themselves or blowing their own horns so much. This advice is offered because a person might be boasting about something that is extraordinary only to himself. It would, therefore, be far better if someone else who sees how great the achievement is praises the achiever. The same proverb can be used in praise of someone who has achieved something great but is quiet and very humble about it. In this case, the proverb becomes a cue for others to emulate such a humble spirit and strive to achieve great things like the one who is being praised.

Wo mekpoa tsidodo, troa zor me tor fua gbe o. “One should not see the clouds gathering and pour out all the old water already in the pot.” Another Ewe proverb, which is similar to the above is *Dadi menoa kevi me wodoa asi de enu o.* “You do not price a cat while it is in a sack.” In Proverbs 27:1 we read, “Do not boast about tomorrow for you do not know what a day may bring.” Normally, when the clouds begin to gather, it is a foreboding that there will be rain. In communities that depend mainly on rain for their water supply needs, the temptation to pour out the

(old) water one has in the pot in order to collect fresh rainwater is great. In reality though, the clouds may gather but the wind can blow them away and there would be no rain. As such, if the water in the pot had been thrown away, one loses even what one already had. This proverb can be used in various circumstances. For instance, a promise must not be taken as its fulfillment; or one must not do away with an old friend (or thing) by anticipating a new one, who or which may not prove to be as reliable. An English rendering of this proverb would be “Do not count your chicks before they are hatched.”

Loame le nkume, dorme tor le vovo. This proverb means, “The face can show an expression of love but the inside of the bowels or heart may be different.” *Adu konu, dor vme le vovo.* “The teeth may be seen smiling but the feeling in the stomach is different.” The proverbs: *Amegbetor enye torgoglo loo* and *Amegbetor enye gododo* are a couple of proverbs that mean, “A human being is a very deep river” and “A human being is a gourd.” The final proverb in this cluster of five proverbs, *Ame adeke matenu anya amegbetor fe dorme o* means “Nobody can know what is inside another human being’s heart (literally, stomach),” since what is in a deep river or a gourd (e.g., like a water melon) cannot be known or seen with the naked eye. All the five Ewe proverbs can be considered as equivalent to the second part (in italics) of the canonical proverb, “Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but *profuse are the kisses of an enemy.*” (Prov. 27:6). These proverbs are used for people who are opportunistic. Such people can pretend to be very nice or helpful when they stand to gain; but the feelings they have deep down in their hearts could be as bitter as the back-stab of a dagger. The proverbs refer to hypocritical behavior, which portrays hypocrites as people of good will while in their hearts or minds they do not have the least good. These proverbs are normally used when a person’s true evil nature or insincerity comes out before those he/she pretend to love. The latter can then conclude that what appeared as love was after all only a facial or an outward show with hatred hidden deep down in the bowels. Just as what is hidden in the bottom of a deep river cannot be seen from the outside, so the feelings or evil plans of people will always remain hidden. They sound a note of warning to all to be wary of those who may seem very friendly yet the same people could be very harmful.

Miasie kloa dusi eye dusi han kloa mia. “The left hand washes the right hand and the right hand also washes the left.” The Book of Proverbs puts it this way, “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another” (Prov 27:17). This proverb is similar to the English saying, “One good turn deserves another.” When a person does a good thing to a neighbor, that neighbor will in turn return a good deed or gift to the giver. This proverb is meant to encourage persons to be helpful, kind, well meaning, and to be always good to others without counting the cost. This is because in doing good things to others, one is rewarded with goodness in return. Another proverb, which is also similar to the foregoing is, *Gae dia ga.* This literally, means, “Money searches for money.” In the economic world, we would say, investments are made in order to make profit. Since a big investment brings big profit, good deeds are investments and their outcomes are the pay-offs for how much was put in the investment. This proverb is used by elders to teach the youth to make wise investments of time, energy and talents but it can apply to several different things and people in life.

Te ka xoxo nu wogbia yeyea doe. “New yam creepers are woven in the same style as the old.” The proverb, which is similar to this is Proverbs 22:6: “Train children in the right way, and when they are old, they will not stray.” This proverb employs agricultural imagery using yam creepers, which cannot be left to chance but must be carefully woven in a particular way to ensure the proper development of the yam tubers. Here, whether the climbers are for old yams or new, the style of weaving is the same. The proverb is used to refer to customs or traditional practices that are passed down from generation to generation. In order for the custom not to be contaminated or lost, the transmission must be done meticulously. The proverb can refer to several things especially, the good things that the community would love to pass on. It can refer to character traits that can be emulated. Children can be told this proverb to urge them to follow in their parents’ footsteps (probably in their career and family life).

Nugbedodo sor kple fenyinyi. “A promise is similar to a debt.” The biblical parallel to this proverb can be “Do not be one of those who give pledges, who becomes surety for debts” (Prov. 22:26). A person who makes a rash promise or decision or takes a rash oath must be ready to face the consequences of that action. Speaking literally, making a promise to someone is like owing that person a debt, which must be paid off

through the fulfillment of that promise. Thus if a person incurs a debt with his or her mouth by making a “big” promise, which is probably just a bluff, when the time for fulfillment comes, the person who made the pledge is obliged to fulfill it. This proverb calls on people to be patient and let their “yes” be “yes” and their “no” be “no.”

Akpa gbordor la, mesea akpa dzena o. “A person who shares a bed with a person suffering from skin rashes does not take long to catch that disease.” This proverb is similar to “Do not befriend a violent person lest you learn his ways” (Prov. 22:24-25). A positive interpretation or rendering of this proverb will be: “My son, ‘if sinners entice you do not go with them’” (Prov. 1: 10). In Ewe community, this proverb is used to describe the change in the behavior of a person, who begins to act differently or negatively from how he or she is known to act previously. It is especially employed when that person is seen keeping company with another person whose moral character is questionable. The proverb acts in a dualistic capacity of warning persons against associating with evil people as well as for describing persons who have already acquired the evil traits of their associates. It is an admonition to be careful not to get into bad company in order to avoid being entangled in the evil deeds of that bad company.

Dze ava di ava mesi ne o. “One who is prepared for battle is not devastated by or does not lose the battle.” *Nkume goboo tor de wòdzea avifafa gorme kaba.* “A person with a deep face (i.e., whose eyes are deeper in their sockets than normal) must start weeping earlier than those with normal faces.” These proverbs are used to alert people about the importance of being fully equipped for future events so that when the time comes, they would not be found wanting. In Ewe community, anything done in advance to promote some good cause in future, is capped in these proverbs. They apply to all areas of life, which include ample preparation for childbirth, growing, old age/retirement, schooling, farming, etc., to prevent the undesirable, which goes along with ill-preparedness. A biblical parallel to this proverb will be:

Go to the ant, you lazy bones, consider its ways and be wise ... A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber and want, like an armed warrior (Prov 6:6-11).

Though the word of Qohelet in Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, to “remember the Creator in youthful days, before the days of trouble come ... and the breath return to God who gave it”, do not come from Proverbs, they can be taken as a summary of what preparing prior to war or initiating crying early entails.

Detsi vivie hea zi(kpui) ve. “Delicious soup always draws a chair to it.” *Tagbatsu mevorna le xondron nuti o.* “An ulcer (a sore that never heals) is never free of (house) flies.” A proverb that compares in one part and in the other part contrasts with the couple of Ewe proverbs above can be, “When the righteous triumph, there is great elation; but when the wicked rise to power, men go into hiding” (Prov 29:12). These proverbs can be used in a variety of situations. They are normally, employed to show that everything that is inviting always has invitees to it. A good or friendly person, good delicious food, a good deed, anything desirable will always have people flocking to it. This proverb invites persons to be well behaved and to live in such a way as to draw others to themselves. Good character is to be cultivated in order to be emulated by all. Conversely, evil character drives people away.

Hlo fiwulae sea kpododo, literally this proverbs means, “It is the person stealing mushrooms that hears the beating of the gong-gong.”¹⁵ The gong-gong is a kind of metal talking instrument, which is beaten with another piece of a metal rod or stick. This is done to inform the community that the chief is summoning all members to converge at a centralized point used as a judgment court. There a wronged individual registers a complaint to the entire community or an evil doer is brought into judgment for his/her deeds. Whenever the gong-gong is beaten, therefore, everyone becomes very anxious and curious to know or hear its message. However, since it is used for emergencies due to some evil having been perpetrated in the community, the evildoers of any kind are particularly more fearful for its message even when it is not beaten for their evil deed. For instance, thieves will be on edge when they hear the gong-gong reporting a theft case. In Proverbs, “The wicked flee when no

¹⁵ The gong-gong is also a kind of musical instrument, which has the onomatopoeic sound of its name. It is a kind of siren, which can be likened to a fire alarm and when it is beaten all the towns' people converge at a central point in the town to listen to what the emergency is all about.

one pursues” (Prov 28:1). These proverbs warn people to desist from evil so they can live at ease. It also teaches people they must not do evil in order not to dwell in fear, that is, so that they may remain on edge for fear that their evil deeds will find them out.

The Contribution of This Article to Scholarship

The article makes several contributions to biblical scholarship especially in the face of the numerous hermeneutical winds that have been blowing over the field of biblical scholarship. The topic for this article demonstrates that it is not easy or expedient to assign Wisdom Literature exclusively to Israelite or ancient Near Eastern contexts since wisdom can be found among other peoples, including the Ewe people of Ghana as well. Another value of this study is its attempt to address the question of whether Wisdom Literature (proverbial language), which is predominantly anthropocentric, concerning itself with creation imagery and the human situation, but not much about Israel’s history and cult, should be seen as a bona fide possession of sages in Israel or not. Scholars like Gerhard von Rad, Walter Eichrodt and several others, began to look at the question of anthropocentrism and lack of cultic language in Wisdom Literature seriously from the 1960s when their books on Old Testament Theology appeared on the scene of Biblical Studies and Biblical Theology.¹⁶ The question was how to connect Wisdom Literature to the other two parts of the canon, the Torah and the Prophets.¹⁷ Their attempt to resolve the dichotomy brought a barrage of scholarly attacks on their conclusions.

¹⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* 2 vols. (translated by D.M.G. Stalker; HarperSanFrancisco: Harper Collins Pubs., 1962/1965). Walther Eichrodt, *The Theology of the Old Testament* 2 vols. (translated by John Baker from the German *Theologie de Alten Testament*; Philadelphia:PA: Westminster Press, 1967). See also the dated German work of Otto Eissfeldt, *Die Marschal im Alten Testament. Ein wortgeschichtliche Untersuchung nebst einer literargeschichtlichen Untersuchung der im genannten Gattungen “Volksspruchwort” und “Spottlied” im Alten Testament* (Berlin de Gruyter, 1913). Though this work specifically focuses on the proverb *marshal* in the folk sayings in Old Testament, it is a valuable resource for providing how folk wisdom (particularly Ghanaian-Ewe folk wisdom sayings) impinge on biblical issues.

¹⁷ Gerhard von Rad, *Israelite Wisdom* (London: SCM Press, 1972). See also Claus Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995). See Friedemann W. Golka, *The Leopard’s Spots: Biblical and African Wisdom in Proverbs* (T & T Clark, 1993).

In the ongoing research, however, scholars have begun to find traces of wisdom not only in the other two parts of the Hebrew Bible, but in the wisdom sayings from other cultural contexts like Mesopotamia, Arabia and Egypt. Of particular note is Proverbs 22:17-24:22, which compares with the *Instruction of Amenemope*.¹⁸ It is worthy of mention that in the many studies done on proverbs, scholars have not intentionally attempted to link the usage and power of proverbs in African tradition to its effect on biblical issues nor attempted to show how that may strongly suggest the use of Wisdom Literature in Israel. Scholars like Westermann, Golka and Laurent Naré¹⁹ have done some work that can be seen as close to the comparison between Proverbs from the Hebrew canon and African proverbs; but these have been mostly literal comparisons without the force of how the proverbs from other cultures impinge on biblical issues. The similarities discovered between these sets of proverbs probably suggest that the Israelites may have borrowed some of their proverbs from the continent of Africa (Egypt is a case in point) and vice versa. The proverbs employed in this article have been selected to demonstrate that Ghanaian Ewe proverbs do impinge on biblical issues powerfully.

As attempts are made to show how African tradition (shown through Ewe proverbs) impinge on biblical issues, it is worthy of mention also that biblical scholarship has continued to ask questions regarding the

¹⁸ E. Willis Budge, *Second Series of Facsimiles of Egyptian Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1923). Budge's work actually initiated vigorous comparative study between Proverbs 22:17—24:27 and the *Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope*. See also Budge, *The Teaching of Amen-em-ope, Son of Kanakht* (London: 1924). See Glendon E. Bryce, *A Legacy of Wisdom: The Egyptian Contribution to the Wisdom of Israel* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1979). See also Harold C. Washington, *Wealth and Poverty in the Instruction of Amenemope and the Hebrew Proverbs*. Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 142 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994).

¹⁹ Westermann, *Roots*. Here Westermann tries to study proverbs from pre-literate cultures and to compare them with the canonical proverbs. However, Westermann tries to downplay the proverbs of these other culture by subordinating them to the canonical. Golka, in *The Leopard's Spots*, attempts to draw a comparison between Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible and proverbs from various African cultures. Laurent Naré, *Proverbes salomoniens et Proverbes massi: Étude comparative à partir d'une nouvelle analyse de Pr 25—29* (Publications Universitaires Européennes. Serie 23, Theologié v. 283. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1986). In his comparison of his native African-Masai proverbs with Prov. 25—29, Naré attempts to foster a relationship between the two, which can only be seen as superficial.

meaning of “theology” as to whether it means the relationship of God, to humans and to the ecology, that is, to the human environment holistically, and vice versa. To be able to respond to these questions, thought must be given to all sectors of human society and the environment, as to how the word of God impinges on them. The Latin Americans have filled this gap with their liberation theology; the Asians with their *minjung* theology; South Africans with *Ubuntu*, a different form of black liberation theology from that of the African-American liberation theology. Women have also come up with feminists and womanist theologies in order to meet the demands of their own theological quest. Perhaps, the intention of this article, which has been a quest to show how African-Ewe tradition impinges on biblical issues, can be seen as a kind of theology fostered through the use and relationship of African-Ewe proverbs and wise sayings to biblical issues. If a people’s interaction with God (their theology) springs from the entirety of their cultural context (as was the case in ancient Israel), then Ghanaian, that is Ewe proverbs and wise sayings, which spring from and function in the totality of the Ghanaian-Ewe cultural and religious context, and which are inextricably bound to the life of the Ghanaian peoples, must also be construed as a kind of theology. The Ewe people believe in the existence of proverbs in antiquity. They were present before the birth of people; they live with people throughout their lives, and follow them to the after-life world of the living-dead community.

In light of the foregoing, I would like to submit that this article is an invitation to scholarship to take another look at the function of ancient Israelite Wisdom Literature; not only as it encroaches on the Pentateuch and Prophetic literature, but also as it relates to African-Ewe (and other socio-cultural) theologies and vice versa. In particular, the pervasiveness of proverbs and wise sayings among Ewe people makes proverbs the most fertile grounds upon which the message of the Bible can be planted, nurtured and brought to fruition. In other words, because proverbs and wise sayings are a kind of theological backdrop of the life of the Ewe people, Christianity needs to approach the Ewe people with the wisdom of Proverbs in order to bring the people to understand, accept, imbibe and put to effective use the message of the Bible since Ghanaian-Ewe proverbs and wise sayings can be a very effective way of transmitting the Judeo-Christian message to the peoples of Africa (including the Ewe people).

In addition to the foregoing, it is worthwhile to note that the Ewe proverbs, like those of the biblical tradition and elsewhere, are pithy sayings, which portray truths capped in language that makes them indelible on the minds of hearers. Since their intention is to hold together the moral fabric of Ewe society, they are passed down orally and can be deployed for multiple purposes. Additionally, since they are not intentionally sexist or gender sensitive, classicist, or racially biased; but aim at teaching some valuable lessons to all and sundry depending on the occasion, proverbs seem to be one of the most agreeable means of communication that can catch the attention of all. In this light, they may be considered as situational ethics, based on the *Sitz imLeben*, “situation in life” that demands their use. Their non-dichotomization between secular or sacred matters and their not being limited by time or space portrays the universality of these proverbs.

To conclude, I would like to say that there are several other Ewe proverbs that have biblical parallels but the constraints of this article would not allow room to accommodate them. Therefore, this Ewe proverb sums it all, *Vivi mevorna le agorku/mangoku nuti hafi wotsorne fuagbe o*. “One does not suck all the sweetness from the date palm fruit before throwing away the seed.” Literally, if people keep sucking the sweetness from the fruit, the closer they get to the seed the taste begins to become sour. It is better, therefore, not to keep going; but to stop when just enough has been sucked. I use this proverb to say that even though there are still many Ewe proverbs that can be added to those cited above, this article must end to avoid monotony that may cause serious boredom to readers.

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* All Bible Quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version (N.R.S.V.) New York, AmericanBible Society (ABS).