

THE LAND AND THE AFRICAN CONTEXT FOR THEOLOGY

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There is a big conceptual difference between African traditional culture and Western civilization. African² culture and religion are intrinsically one and the same thing. An African cannot live or experience life outside of religion. Life is guided by one's religion, and religion is how one interacts with all nature.³ The Western world, on the other hand, regards Christian theology/religion as an abstract philosophy of life to which one can either choose to belong or not. In a word, the main difference between African theological philosophy of life and Western theology is simply this: Western theology is based on abstract thinking while African theology *is* the experience of life on the land that God entrusted to them. This article is basically introducing a topic that warrants continuing research. An appreciation of the African worldview will answer many questions that western biblical scholars and ecclesiastical leaders have not adequately understood or explained. Some of the questions being asked relate to church growth. Why is the Christian church growing faster on the African continent today? Why was it not growing as fast during the missionary and colonial era? Can a study of African tradition and myth⁴ help clarify the biblical text?

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² Although the term "African" may be misleading because Africa is a vast continent with various ethnic groups with different traditions; nonetheless, there are certain elements that are universal. This article is discussing common African traditions that are practiced by the majority of tribes on the African continent.

³ Africans, like the Israelites, did not make a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Everything that God made, be it a rock, a tree, a mountain, or an animal was sacred. Human life could only be enjoyed if it was lived in complete harmony with other creatures, natural phenomena and God's providence.

⁴ M.N. Canonici, *Zulu Oral Traditions* (Durban, University of Natal, 1996, p. 77) explains myth this way: "...myth has been used to communicate often deeply felt human, or high spiritual values attained through many generations. Myth has its own truth, often a very deep one. No culture is absolutely without myths." H. and H.A. Frankfort, *The*

In this short article, I will try to achieve two objectives. First, I will argue that the missionary church made a great mistake by identifying itself with the colonizers who forcibly took African land. Second, I will show how understanding African myth reveals a close similarity that exists between the Israelite myths and African religio-tradition. This similarity helps clarify some hidden meanings of the Hebrew text that are generally missed by western scholars.

We will begin with a brief overview of the early missionary activities in Africa and show why the missionary effort achieved limited success. When missionaries arrived in Africa, they introduced the Christian faith that Africans could not fully embrace because it was based on an abstract philosophy concocted in the mind. Secondly, when missionaries arrived on the continent of Africa, they condemned African traditional beliefs as superstition that was to be expunged by any means possible. This prejudiced perception of African tradition caused missionaries to completely ignore African culture and spirituality in their zeal to spread the Christian gospel, a gospel that was wrapped up in Western culture. They did not take time to study African traditional worldview and understand its function in the fabric of society. They simply condemned it based on Africans' hygiene standards: their "poor" clothing, "unsanitary" food cooking and eating customs as well as the grass-thatched, smoke-filled huts in which they lived. As is their traditional custom toward strangers, Africans looked naïve, slavish and uncritical toward the missionaries. They gave the impression that they could be easily manipulated and transformed from their so-called superstitious life style to Western "civilized" standards. But deep down in their minds, Africans had a philosophy of life that was acutely critical and analytical. They had a culture that was based on a strong foundation of tested values that were able to withstand the cultural and religious transformation that the missionaries attempted to introduce.

In their effort to replace African tradition with western civilization, missionaries inadvertently made Christianity complicated and

Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 19946, p. 8), define myth as follows: "Myth is a form of poetry which transcends poetry in that it proclaims a truth; a form of reasoning which transcends reasoning in that it wants to bring about the truth it proclaims; a form of action, of ritual behavior which does not find its fulfillment in the act but must proclaim and elaborate a poetic form of truth."

unacceptable to Africans. Africans could not understand why they could not be culturally African and spiritually Christian. The missionaries, on the other hand, assumed that it was impossible for African traditional believers to become Christian unless they were first purged of their “heathen” cultural and religious superstition. Therefore, in an attempt to eradicate this so-called African superstition quickly, missionaries placed heavy stress on education under the notion that an educated person could not be superstitious at the same time. Faced with adult African resistance to convert to Christianity, missionaries stepped up their acculturation of African children who attended mission schools. They viewed the future generation of educated Africans who would be superstition-free and totally Christian. As a second generation Christian, I personally experienced the forced acculturation as a student in mission schools. Before classes began, all school children were required to attend an assembly at which Bible reading, preaching and praying were done. Attending church and Sunday school on Sunday was compulsory. The emphasis in these religious events was on Jesus being the only way to heaven (John 14:6). People who did not accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior would go to hell where the Devil would roast them day and night, but they would not die. Initially, many people “loved” God because they were afraid of hell. But once they figured out that there might be no hell after all and no one knew exactly where heaven was, they abandoned the Christian faith and dug deeper into their traditional religion. As a matter of fact, they had not converted to the Christian faith in the first place; they had been compelled to appear Christian. This theology of intimidation made a negative impact on the church.⁵

The missionary’s evangelical effort was also negatively impacted by political events because the missionary activity happened simultaneously with the colonization of the African land by the white settlers. The scramble for African land by the Portuguese, French,

⁵ The modern day “missionary” movement in Africa has introduced the prosperity gospel. Sermons are primarily on the loving God who is eager to prosper worshipers only if they first give to the church/pastor all that they have. The prosperity gospel is, in my opinion, worse than the earlier missionary gospel of intimidation. The early missionaries built schools, hospitals and churches; they educated the Africans for free. Prosperity ministry does not help the poor. They help the institutional church and the pastor to become filthy rich.

Germans, Italians, Belgians and Dutch raised African suspicion of the missionary's intentions. Was Christianity a liberating gospel or was it intended to soften the Africans so that they might accept white supremacy? That question stained the introduction of Christianity in Africa and, a century later, black nationalists rallied African sentiment against the white minority governments all over the African continent. The church's future was uncertain when blacks reclaimed their ancestral land by appealing to their ancestral leaders like Nehanda Nyakasikana⁶ and Kagubi, her husband, and not to God of the Bible.

The major issue, therefore, that alienated the whites—regardless of whether they were missionaries or colonialists—from the Africans, was the seizure of African land.⁷ The colonialists seized the best land and turned it into white farming areas. The missionaries, likewise, negotiated with colonialists for big pieces of good land to build schools, churches and hospitals; and to establish mission stations. Africans who remained on what was turned into mission land were compelled to work for the privilege to live there as tenants. Their children were forced to attend mission schools and confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Mission stations were, in retrospect, “islands” of Western civilization where missionaries lived in four-cornered houses with electric lighting, water faucets, a hospital or clinic and a school. The mission land was the place for demonstrating to Africans what good Christian life looked like.

The colonialists forcibly moved Africans to arid land that was not conducive to productive farming. Those Africans who remained on the “European”⁸ farms were regarded as squatters who paid for the privilege

⁶ Nehanda Nyakasikana, respectfully called Mbuya Nehanda after independence, was a spirit medium with heroic history. During the war for the liberation of Zimbabwe, her name was sung in many war chants that rallied the guerilla fighters to rare display of heroism in the 1960s and 1970s leading to independence in 1980.

⁷ Africans owned land by family and families eventually grew into tribes. But because the white colonizers referred to “tribal land” as the arid places where the “poor” Africans were forced to live, the term “tribal” was used to negatively impact Africans as uncivilized “natives.”

⁸ The whites did not want to be associated with Africa and Africans. Therefore, they called themselves Europeans. To denigrate the Africans even further, they did not call them Africans; instead, they called them “natives,” a word that they turned to mean uncivilized people. In South Africa they called them *kaffirs*, a word that carried the connotation of Nigger in the United States. The missionaries educated more Africans in mission schools than the government did, and it is that education that is credited for the

to live there by working on the farms as cheap labor.⁹ The violation of African land became a permanent cleavage between the white people as a whole and Africans.

The Africans regarded the land as a trust that God gave to their ancestors. The Westerners saw the land as something they could exploit to make a profit. If one thing could be singled out as the greatest mistake that the whites made in Africa, it was the seizure of African land. The establishment of the white minority government, a racist administration that did not desire to educate Africans, compounded that mistake. The little education that the so-called government schools offered to Africans was intended to permanently keep Africans as efficient cheap farm and industrial laborers.¹⁰

Moreover, Africans regarded land as a sacred heritage that could neither be sold nor purchased. Land was inherited and passed on from generation to generation. Therefore, although the aims of the missionaries and of the colonialists were different, they were perceived as the same based on the missionary and colonialist's seizure of African land.

Traditional Africans, like the Israelites, viewed God as the sole owner of land, of all living things and everything that is in it (cf. Ps 24). Africans had no problem understanding the Priestly story of creation in Genesis chapter one. As its owner, God gave the land to the people, whom God created in the divine image, for their use (Gen 1:29); but they were

liberation of Africa. The African leadership or nationalists were educated in mission schools.

⁹ Cheap labor was the term used to refer to Africans who worked so hard for very meager wages, supervised harshly by the poor whites referred to by the title "boss". Every adult African was called "boy" and a woman was "nanny".

¹⁰ The white government formula for suppressing Africans was to deny them adequate education. As long as they could read and write, they could be of great service to the whites. Therefore, there were many "native" schools for Grades 1-6. After Grade 6 only a minute number of students could qualify for admission to the very few secondary schools available for *natives*. For example, when I completed Grade 6, there were only about 6 high schools for six million Africans and over twenty for 250,000 whites living in Rhodesia (as Zimbabwe was called then). When I went to the University of London in Rhodesia in 1966, the only educational institution that was multiracial because it operated under the Royal Charter, there were only about 200 Blacks (from a population of 6 million) Africans against 800 whites from a population of 250,000 whites. Restricting African education was done by an educational system of bottlenecking; it allowed only the very best among the Africans to attain university education.

not free to use it in any way that they might wish, but in accordance with the providence of God (Gen 2:15). The traditional African and ancient Israelite people's relationship to their land—and the ways they used and distributed it—was governed by this divine obligation to God and to all generations, past, present and future, who shared the land's largess.

In both the Priestly and Yahwistic accounts of creation, after God had created everything on the earth, God entrusted the land to human beings to use and enjoy. In Gen 1:28 God said, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue (*kabash*¹¹) it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." In the Yahwistic version of the creation the LORD God said, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge (of) good and evil you shall not eat..." (Gen 2:16–17). These verses make it clear that human beings were to take care of the land they had been given by the deity as a trust. The land was a divine gift given to a particular people to treasure it. To Africans and to the ancient Israelites, land was regarded as a woman who was like a mother.¹²

Traditional Africans and ancient Israelites' creation myths depict primordial events in which land first appeared and on it and with it God created life. An African myth makes God's union with the land much clear.¹³ The Dogons of Mali have a myth that says that when God began to populate the earth with creatures, he did it by sexual union with the land.

At the beginning of time, Amma (a supreme God who lived in the celestial regions and was the origin of all creation) created the Earth and immediately joined with it. But the Earth's clitoris [termite hill] opposed the male penis. Amma destroyed it,

¹¹ The Hebrew word *kabash* was not intended to refer to abusively subjugate the land; to have dominion means to be king. In Africa and the ancient Near East, kings were desired because they were responsible for the welfare of their subjects.

¹² In Hebrew land (*'erets*) is feminine both in the Priestly source and in the Yahwistic source where it is called *'adamah*.

¹³ The Canaanites regarded the seasons as depicting a cosmic struggle in which Baal, Yamm and Mot were fighting for supremacy upon the land. A drought signified that Mot was reigning and Baal had been defeated. In spring and summer, green vegetation that was followed by harvest, meant that Baal was reigning again. But to effect fertility of animals and the fields, Baal had union with Asherah. Temple "prostitution" between the priest and the priestess was a ritual that was done to induce Baal to make love with his consort in order to end the drought and ensure the harvest.

circumcising his wife, and they had a child, Ogo, and the twins, the Nommo.¹⁴

In this Dogon myth, Amma (God) was at first prevented from union with Earth by the termite hill. Amma was only able to unite with Earth after forcibly removing the obstacle, just as Elohim did by separating *tehom* from being upon the land. In the Dogon myth, the creation of all living things and of the gods followed the excision of the termite hill (clitoris) that was upon the Earth/Land.¹⁵ The study of these myths elucidates some of the most obscure biblical texts like the Priestly story of creation in Genesis chapter one.

It is interesting that in the first chapter of Genesis, the spirit (Heb. *ruach*) of God could not make contact with Earth because of another opposing force called (Heb. *tehom* (the Deep)). God overcame this obstacle by moving the *tehom* away from the Earth. In other words, God uncovered Earth to expose it to his spirit. God did not destroy *tehom*; rather, he assigned it a separate space in the universe¹⁶ and called it (Heb. *mayim*), "Seas" (Gen 1:10). It was following the removal of *tehom* from the face of the Earth that God (being male) was then able to have union with Earth/Land (female) to begin the production all living things.

Several themes emerge from these creation stories: (1) Water and earth (matter) were already in existence when God created. Thus creation of the universe was, in actual fact, a rearrangement of components of the universe. It was not completely a creation out of nothing.¹⁷ (2) A union between God and Earth resulted in the production of all living things: animals, creeping things, marine creatures and swarming birds of the air.

¹⁴ The quotation is taken from L. V. Thomas, R. Luneau and J. Doneux, *Les Religions de L'Afrique Noire* (Paris: Fayard-Denoël, 1969).

¹⁵ In the Hebrew language there is no distinction between land and earth. Both are referred to as '*erets*'. Therefore, the translation of '*erets*' should always depend on the context in which it is used.

¹⁶ I am using universe here to make a distinction between land and seas. Land is the dry ground whereas seas refers to the watery chaos that God pushed to the other side so that dry land could appear.

¹⁷ When one closely reads the story of creation in Genesis chapter one, and compares it with other myths like the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* or the Egyptian and other African myths, one realizes that God did not create water and in some cases, dry land. Therefore, the belief in *creatio ex nihilo* needs to be revised.

Therefore, God's creation of land creatures, trees and shrubs depicts Earth giving birth following its union with God's *ruach* (spirit).

It seems to me that most land traditions converge on one central point: the land was given to humans to keep (*shamar*) and share with all the other fellow creatures that God made to pass before the human (Gen 2:19). God distributed different parts of the land to different peoples. Therefore, for a different nation to claim another people's land was totally unacceptable. The seizure of the African land was, as has already been said, the primary issue that marginalized the missionary church and antagonized the relationship between the blacks and the whites. This issue was the major cause of *Hondo yeChimurenga*¹⁸ (The War of Liberation) of Zimbabwe. It is the same cause of many wars that were fought between the whites and the blacks all over Africa for the restoration of the ancestral land.¹⁹

The foregoing attests that the African context of theology is the land and the traditions that are observed by the people to whom the land was entrusted. The original owners feel anchored on the ancestral land for many reasons. It is the land they inherited from their progenitors. Moreover, the original owners feel entitled to a particular piece of land because it is the place where their ancestors are buried.²⁰ As will be elaborated in subsequent essays, the theology of the Israelites also related to the land of their ancestors. Basically, the Israelites argued that Yahweh gave the land to Abraham (Gen 12:1) and to his progeny after him (Gen 15:18). It is for this reason that the Israelites' oldest creed (Deut 26:5b-9) in part reads:

¹⁸ *Chimurenga* means "insurrection," and is used here to refer to the African struggle against the white minority government. Several times, Africans tried to drive the white colonizers from their land; but failed because the whites used guns and Africans used spears, bows and arrows.

¹⁹ The Mau Mau is a rebellion that Jomo Kenyatta, who was educated in mission schools, and became a doctor in anthropology, led to liberate Kenya.

²⁰ The Israelites' claim on Bethlehem is because that is traditionally the place where Rachel's grave is said to be located. The same applies to Hebron which is in Palestinian land; but the Israelites claim it as their land because there is believed to be Abraham's tomb.

...and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Yahweh, have given me. (Deut 26:9-10)

In conclusion, I would like to highlight the importance of studying the African worldview for advancing scholarship and evangelism. First, we note that African people were very attached to the original place where they were born. Even in modern day, Africans who have purchased homes in the city with all modern amenities, will always speak of going home in the country. There they may sleep on a mat, oftentimes on the cold floor, in a hut lit with oil lamps. These are homes with no running tap water and one has to squat over a pit hole for a toilet. But being in ancestral land among members of the extended family; and looking at holy mountains or hills, sacred trees and fountains, gave the city dwellers such a satisfying and reassuring feeling. Attachment to the ancestral land was not unique to Africans. The Israelites were also attached to the land. Although Joseph had become a great person in Egypt, he still begged his brothers, i.e., the future generation of the Israelites, to carry his bones from Egypt to Canaan, the land of his ancestors (Gen 30:24-26).²¹

The study of traditional Africa should be a lesson to African Americans who are undergoing family disintegration. Traditional Africans might not have had material possessions; but one thing they did not lack was family. Wealth or educational status did not divide the African people into a class system. The rich were rich for the whole family, and the educated were educated for the whole family. This is the reason why Africans living in the city left their new homes to go “home” at Easter weekends, Christmas holidays and at other times to celebrate the gift of family at “home” with relatives. They spent time together sharing stories of city life, work experience, country life, and also just to be.

“Home” was a place for exhaling especially since Africans were living under all forms of discriminatory humiliation. “Home” was the place where elders shared didactic proverbs with the young and taught them axioms that applied to various situations in life. For example, if your job was not a good paying job and you would like to quit, an elder would say, *Chidoko ndimarera muiiri; chikuru chinouya wakora*. “Small things

²¹ See also Gen 47:29-31 in which Jacob asked his children to swear that they would bury him in Canaan in the same land where his ancestors were buried.

preserve the body; the bounty comes when you have already prospered.” This adage and many others like it helped young people who had low paying jobs to persevere. By excelling in a small paying job, one would ultimately be recommended for a better paying job. “Home” was, therefore, a place for relaxation, for receiving encouragement, for being accepted as you are and for enjoying fellowship with loving kinsfolk.

African tradition is also very important in elucidating many biblical texts that are elusive to western biblical scholarship that primarily depends on the ancient Near Eastern texts and myths. Africa played a great role in the ancient Israelite history. The Bible does not always explain everything; but the Bible gives hints on many things that require exegesis to reveal the hidden truth. The question should be asked: What is the Bible really saying by showing every significant leader of Israel staying in Africa (Egypt) at some point in his life? Although the list may not be exhaustive, we notice that Israel’s significant leadership visited Africa: Abraham, Isaac, Joseph and Jacob. Moreover, the Israelites became a nation in Africa. As a result, Israelites’ migration into Canaan may be regarded as an African-Israelite invasion of Canaan and expansion of territorial hegemony. For the New Testament, Jesus also stayed in Africa to escape King Herod.²² If the formative process of people is during their early stages in life, would it be unreasonable to argue that the Africans must have influenced Jesus in his developmental stages in life? At any rate, the Israelites must have learned so many traditions and theological worldview from the Africans. It is for this reason that a growing number of African biblical scholars are unveiling many parallels between the Hebrew Bible and African tradition.²³

The parallels between the Israelites and the Africans are also reinforced by the Black presence in the Bible, which is quiet apparent as one studies the Hebrew word *Cush* or *Ethiopia* in Greek, a word which means “black.” The Israelites were not a homogenous people; they were made up of various ethnic groups and Africans seem to have been one of the most influential group, based on the close parallels that exist between the Israelite and African traditio-religious perspectives.

²² The story of Herod’s attempt to kill Jesus is a myth used to explain how Jesus ended up in Egypt.

²³ I am referring to articles by Charles B. Copher, Randall C. Bailey, Kwesi Dickson, Dorthy Akoto and many others.

Finally, this study is important in showing how Africans and Israelites were ecologically sensitive toward the land. They protected the land and venerated similar places that were sacred, sites where they encountered a theophany. These places included rivers,²⁴ trees,²⁵ mountains²⁶ or hills.²⁷ It is for this reason that both the Israelites and Africans preserved some places in their pristine state. This study leads to the conclusion that a more serious study of the African religio-culture may contribute to the restoration of the world to its natural state for the good of all humanity and of all the creatures of the land.

Now that the Africans have inherited the land of their ancestors, they are able to see the relevance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is this gospel that liberated them from white, discriminatory and oppressive regimes. It is the same gospel that will liberate them from black neo-oppressors who are, in some respects, worse than the white racists. Therefore, the fast church growth in Africa may be attributed to two reasons. First, Africans are praising God for liberating them from white oppressors. Secondly, they are filling the churches to entreat Jesus to liberate them from greedy black oppressors. Africans are waiting for the day when the church in Africa will be teeming with people praising God for peace, prosperity and justice for all! Today they are still singing in various tongues of Africa:

*Nkosi sikelela iAfrica,
Maluphakanyisw' uphondo lwayo,
Yizwa imithandazo yethu,
Nkosi sikelela, thina lusapho lwayo.*²⁸
God bless Africa
Let your name be praised
Listen to our prayers
God, bless us, its (Africa's) children.

²⁴ Cf. Jacob at wrestling with a deity at the Peniel by the Jabbok River (Gen 32:22).

²⁵ In Gen 21:33, Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba and there called on the name of a god called El 'Olam translated, "Everlasting God."

²⁶ Gen 22:2 reads that God told Abraham to go and sacrifice Isaac on one of the mountains in the land of Moriah.

²⁷ In Gen 35:7, Jacob built an altar at Luz but renamed it Beth-el because there he saw the god El.

²⁸ <http://www.southafrica.info/about/history/anthem.htm#ixzz1xrrwjxSU>

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