

A CRITIQUE OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY
IN JOHN MBITI'S THEOLOGY

BY J. M. ONORIODE ROGHO

JULY 1993

NAIROBI EVANGELICAL GRADUATE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

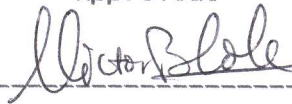
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J. M. ONORIODE ROGHO

A Thesis submitted to the Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Theology

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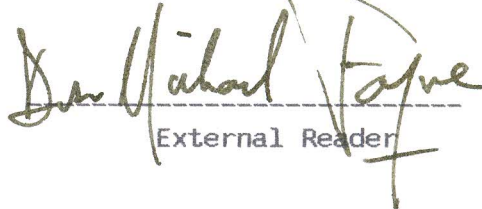


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ABSTRACT

This study brings to the limelight the nature of Biblical authority in John Mbiti's theology, in the light of the Bible's own witness to its authority. This is done in affirmation of the position of the Evangelicals that the Bible, as the word of God, be given its primary place and function in the course of African theology. Mbiti has not involved himself much with issues of inerrancy, infallibility and inspiration through which many prefer to consider Biblical authority. As such, the category of revelation and the proposition that one's idea of Biblical authority ultimately depends on one's view of Biblical revelation are used as tools to work out the nature of Biblical authority that results from Mbiti's concept of revelation.

For an adequate treatment of this subject, this study has been carefully divided into six chapters with chapter one dealing with introductory issues. Chapter two looks at Biblical concept of revelation. This establishes the working proposition that Biblical authority and Biblical revelation are correlates. Chapter three analyses relevant works of Mbiti, identifying his concept of revelation and the place he gives to Biblical revelation. Chapter four examines the nature of Biblical authority that emanates from Mbiti's concept of revelation by considering his view of the relationship that exists between

African Traditional Religion, the Old and the New Testaments. Chapter five is an attempt to correct Mbiti's concept of revelation and Biblical authority by showing the proper relationship that exists (in light of Biblical concept of revelation and the Bible's testimony) between African Traditional Religion, the Old and the New Testaments. Chapter six gives a concluding summary of the whole study.

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The late Chief Rogho Amrakporere

and Mrs. Ayoronme Rogho

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

There is a consensus among African theologians concerning the main sources of African Christian theology: the Bible together with Christian traditions and African traditions, history and cultural heritage. Moreover there is an awakening that the Bible and Biblical teaching be given a prime position in the formation of African theology. Most African theologians would wholeheartedly subscribe to this as 'worthy of all acceptance'. Nevertheless, Tokunboh Adeyemo has rightly described the theological situation in Africa as a theological battle that may be lost or won!¹ Battles are not things that would win encouragement. But within a theological dimension K. S. Kantzer in his 'Forward' to J.D. Woodbridge's book, Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/Mckim Proposal, which itself is a response in a theological battle, says, "...the battle over the Bible and its authority is worth fighting" and that such "worth-while battles need be fought wisely."² This battle, being fought with every theological weapon is mainly between two streams of theologians. On one side are the 'Liberals',³ and on

¹T. Adeyemo, "The African Church Struggles into Her Third Century." Christianity Today 23 (July. 1979): 16.

²K. S. Kantzer, "Foreword", in J. D. Woodbridge, Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/Mckim Proposal, (Michigan: Zondervan, 1982), 7.

³This term is used mainly by Evangelicals, and it is defined later in this chapter.

the other side are the 'Evangelicals.'⁴ In the former camp are men like the late Byang Kato, Tokunboh Adeyemo, Tite Tienou and others. In the opposite camp are men like John Mbiti, Kwesi Dickson, E. Bolaji Idowu and others.

Mbiti has described Kato's attack on him and others as most bitter.⁵ According to Mbiti, Kato subsequently apologized for his characterization of Mbiti and promised to rewrite and correct relevant parts of his book. This Kato was never able to accomplish due to his untimely death in 1975. Mbiti was also sure that Kato "would have made personal apologies for those others whom he had attacked."⁶ So far, there has been no authenticating proof for these claims of Mbiti.

In Richard Gehman's opinion, the battle between these theologians of both perspectives is over their different and often contradictory positions on the issue of the authority of the Bible. According to Gehman, how we use the Bible will depend on our understanding of the nature of the authority of the Bible. After all, one's theological structures are built

4. Also defined later.

5. J. S. Mbiti, Bible and Theology in African Christianity, (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 48. See also "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology", African Theology Journal 7 (1978): 75. The same article appears in African Theology en Route, ed. K. Appiah-Kubi and S. Terres, (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 85. For the alleged attack by Kato, see his Theological Pitfalls in Africa, (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 55ff.

6. J. S. Mbiti, "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology", 85.

squarely on the foundation of the Bible.⁷

The necessity and importance of taking the right position on the authority of the Bible in resolving the theological confusion in Africa has also been highlighted by Adeyemo. According to him, the theological battle in Africa will be won or lost in the areas of the truths concerning inspiration, infallibility, inerrancy and absolute authority of Scripture.⁸ But exactly what is the nature of Biblical authority according to Mbiti? How do we analyze his position in depth and how Biblically informed is his position? This is the task of this work.

Significance of the Problem

The significance of the problem is directly reflected in the significance of Biblical authority itself. C. H. Pinnock has rightly pointed out that, "the authority of scripture is the watershed of theological conviction and its importance to a sound methodology is incalculable."⁹ Pointing further to the crux of the problem he says, "the principal cause of modern

7. R. Gehman, Doing African Christian Theology: An Evangelical Perspective (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1987), 20, 37.

8. T. Adeyemo, "The African Church Struggles", 16-17.

9. C. H. Pinnock, Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology, (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 11. C. f. H. Henry uses the same words, "the authority of scripture is the watershed of theological conviction", in his Preface to his edited book Revelation and the Bible. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1958), 7.

theological sickness is a crisis in valid authority."¹⁰ The attack on Biblical authority intensified especially from the time of the Enlightenment, loosening the grips on the doctrine and putting it on shaky grounds. The effect of this was "a spiritual vacuum that existed throughout every branch of the church."¹¹ Though Pinnock's observation has the western church, in particular as its immediate reference, its application to the present African Church (as evident in theologies being produced) cannot be denied. Little wonder that Byang Kato has become known as an alarmist; warning the African church and especially African theologians of the dangers of universalism, syncretism, pluralism and ecuminism. All of these have to do with Biblical authority. It was noted earlier (as Mbiti claims) that Kato planned to apologize to Mbiti for falsely characterizing Mbiti's theology. How does this affect our understanding of Mbiti as far as his orthodoxy is concerned? Are the concerns of Gehman and Adeyemo equally questionable?

According to Adrian Hastings, Mbiti has gained an international reputation as the leading African theologian.¹² This is evidenced by the fact that Mbiti authored nearly 60 entries in the Oxford African Encyclopedia. His works cover a wide range of topics including theology, African Traditional

10. C. H. Pinnock, Biblical Revelation, 10.

11. *Ibid.*, 12.

12. Adrian Hastings, A History of African Christianity 1950-1975, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 232.

Religion, and Biblical Theology. This makes Mbiti a profitable subject to explore in order to understand not only his position but the broader movement he represents in African thought.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to bring to the limelight the nature of Biblical authority in John S. Mbiti's theology, in the light of the Bible's own witness to its authority. This is done in affirmation of the position of the Evangelicals that the Bible, as the word of God, be given its primary position and function in the course of African theology.

Mbiti claims to affirm the finality of the authority of the Bible on religious matters.¹³ In the western context where life has been split into sacred and secular halves, the limiting of the finality of the authority of the Bible to only religious matters has generated heated arguments, even among the Evangelicals. This is not so in the African context from and in which Mbiti makes his claim. For the African, life is sacred, life is religious, and there is no place for the secular. Therefore, maintaining the finality of the authority of the Bible on religious matters in the African context is the same as affirming the finality of the authority of the Bible in all of life and practice. Yet Mbiti's claim connotes the western understanding of split life. This is understandable from the various attempts of Mbiti to bring African culture in

13. J. S. Mbiti, "some African Concepts of Christology", in G. F. Vicedom, Christ and the Younger Churches: Theological Contributions from Asia, Africa and Latin America ed. (London: SPCK, 1972), 51.

confrontation with Christianity, and almost always leaving them at the same level.

This study will also increase the awareness of the African theologian and the African church leader to the truth of the fact that much more is needed than merely consenting passively to the general cry for the unique position of the Bible in the course of African theology.

A good example of such passive consent is evidenced in the final report of a consultation of African theologians held in Ibadan, Nigeria, in January 1966. It was attended by participants from a number of universities in Africa and representatives from the World Council of Churches (WCC) and All Africa Council of Churches (AACC). The main theme of the consultation was "Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs". The aim included finding "Biblical answers to the spiritual yearnings of the hearts of Africans, what Christianity offers as the satisfaction to the urge in them towards true personal maturity and selfhood, and a corporate personality". Further, the aim included "what ways the Christian faith could best be presented, interpreted, and inculcated in Africa so that Africans will hear God in Jesus Christ addressing Himself immediately to them in their own native situation and particular circumstances."¹⁴ What an excellent aim for a consultation of African theologians.

But it is saddening to note that of all the eight "principal

14, E. B. Idowu, "Introduction", in K.A. Dickson and P. Elingworth, eds. Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1969), 16.

papers" presented at the consultation, (some of which were again revised in the light of discussion that followed each one according to the testimony of S. H. Amisshah,¹⁵ the then General Secretary of A.A.C.C,) only one of the papers has adequate interaction with the Bible. Even Mbiti also voices out disappointment.¹⁶ Thus, it is one thing to consent passively to the Bible's unique position and it is quite another to contribute actively towards the realization of what is consented to -- the Bible's prime place in African theology.

Definitions

Evangelicalism

This term is used to refer to a largely Protestant movement that attests to the truth of and acts upon three major theological principles: (a) the full supremacy and authority of Scripture in matters of faith and practice: (b) the necessity of personal faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord; and (c) the urgency of seeking the conversion of sinful men and women to Christ.¹⁷

Liberalism

This term refers to a movement which started during the period of the Enlightenment, having its roots in naturalism and

15. S. H. Amisshah, "Forward", Ibid., VII.

16. J.S. Mbiti, "Some Current Concerns of African Theology", in African and Asian Contributions to Contemporary Theology, ed. J. S. Mbiti, (Geneva: WCC, 1976), 8.

17. Richard Quebedeaux, The Worldly Evangelicals (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 7.

emphasizing that religion is primarily the experience of man and his religious potential. In the spirit of the Enlightenment every inheritance from the past was subjected to searching criticism. Liberalism asked whether the opinions of the authors of the Bible (relativized by their cultural and linguistic environments) should be normative for men of the present day.

Liberalism thus seeks "to rescue certain of the general principles of religion (eg. Christianity) of which the particularities -- the doctrines of the Person of Christ and of redemption through his death and resurrection -- are thought to be mere temporary symbols and therefore these general principles regarded as the essence of Christianity."¹⁸

Neo-Orthodoxy

This term refers to a theological movement that began after the first world war as a reaction against evangelical theology. The reaction was more of towing the middle-line between the Evangelicals and the Liberals. To the side of liberalism neo-orthodoxy respects the scientific method of investigating the natural world and adopts the historical-critical posture toward the Bible. While to the side of the Evangelicals, transcendence and otherness of God is emphasized at the expense of God's immanence, divine revelation at the expense of human religious experience, Christ of faith at the expense of Jesus of History, and sin as caused by abuse of human freedom rather than a result of human ignorance of his

18. G. Machen, Christianity and Liberalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1923), 4.

impulses.¹⁹

African Theology

The term "African Theology" can be ambiguous when tied to ramifications like who an African is, who should do African theology, where African theology should be done, and whether theology refers to the field of African Traditional Religion, Islam, or Christianity. For the purpose of this study, these ramifications are put aside and African theology is understood as the understanding and interpretation of the Gospel of Christ in the terms and categories of thought of Africans that would facilitate the incarnation of the Son of God in the total life of the African.

Biblical Authority

The term Biblical authority refers to the authority of God Himself vested on the written Word of God -- the Scripture or the Bible, as the final or supreme and trustworthy guide for faith and practice. This basic understanding, simple and straightforward as it seems, is usually accompanied by other commitments. On the one hand are those who compatibly marry Biblical authority with inerrancy and infallibility of scripture while on the other, both inerrancy and infallibility of scripture are not only considered unnecessary but actually as sources of disrepute to Biblical authority when there is an association of these.²⁰ These commitments are not considered in

19. The Encyclopedia of Religion Vol. 10 S.V. "Neo-orthodoxy", by J. D. Godsen.

20. 20. K. S. Kantzer, "Foreword", in J.D. Woodbridge, Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Roger/Mckim Proposal, (Michigan: Zondervan, 1982), 8.

this study.

'Continuity' and "Discontinuity'

These terms are used to express the relationship that exists between the Testaments of the Bible. 'Continuity' refers to the aspects of the Old Testament injunction that are validly complied with in Christianity according to the teachings of the New Testament. Discontinuity refers to aspects of the Old Testament injunctions that need not be complied with either because such injunctions were given in anticipation of their fulfillment in Christ, or they culturally and particularly pertained to the Jews for the purpose of separatedness unto God as a nation. Such were not necessarily fulfilled by Christ nor were they carried over to the New Testament.

The terms are also used to describe the relationship between 'General' and 'Special' revelations. They are used, as well, in the examination of the relationship between the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion and between the New Testament and African Traditional Religion.

Assumptions

The following are assumed in this study:

1. That the terms "Bible", "Scriptures," and "Word of God" are synonymous and are therefore used interchangeably.
2. That African Traditional Religion is fully represented by the non Judaeo-Christian Religions referred to in the Bible. Gehman has rightly said, "The truth and error in African Traditional Religion is representative in all non-Christian Religions

throughout the world."²¹ Thus the religions of the nations surrounding Israel would be looked into in considering the relationship between African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion and the New Testament.

3. That, as Mbiti would want it, the Gospel or the Christian faith is different from Christianity (whether African or European) which is culture bound. Mbiti uses this distinction to posit a positive evaluation of the connection between the Christian Gospel and African culture. Only, it becomes odd that Mbiti does not carry out such a divorce between the Gospel and the New Testament cultural world. In any case, the assumption is made for a common ground of argument. This assumption carries along with it the differences between the terms New Testament Christianity and African Christianity.

Method of Approach

J. S. Mbiti has not written any systematic treatise on or that specifically includes the authority of the Bible. But in the attempt to systematise the interaction between African religious and culture on the one hand, and the Biblical faith on the other to produce African theology, Mbiti makes known his concept of revelation.

It is traditional to use the pathway of the doctrines of inerrancy, infallibility, and inspiration in establishing

21. R. J. Gehman, African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective (Kijabe, Kenya: Kesho Publications, 1989), 12.

Biblical authority. This procedure is not followed here. Instead the pathway of revelation is used. This is for two reasons. The first is the foundational position revelation takes in the doctrine of Biblical authority. Having said that the principal cause of the modern theological sickness is a crisis in valid authority, C. H. Pinnock continues to say, "...at the heart of the matter", that is, the modern theological sickness, "is the question as to what constitutes revelation data.... The sheer weight of this crucial question (of revelation) has kept, and will continue to keep, the debate over Biblical authority at the centre of the theological arena in our era."²² The second is, as mentioned earlier, Mbiti has not involved himself much in issues of inerrancy, infallibility, and inspiration. His only statement that delves into these areas is, "As far as theology is concerned, let the Bible be our human adviser, and the Holy Spirit our divine adviser."²³ If Mbiti sees the Bible only from its human aspect, then infallibility and inerrancy are ruled out.

Therefore, picking on the category of revelation, with the proposition that one's idea of Biblical authority, to a greater extent, depends on the place given to Biblical revelation, the nature of Biblical authority that results from Mbiti's concept of revelation has been examined. This examination has been done

22. C. H. Pinnock, Biblical Revelation, 10-11. Words in brackets are mine.

23. J. S. Mbiti, Bible and Theology in African Christianity, 61. See also his article, "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology", 91.

in the light of Biblical concept of revelation and the Bible's own attestation to its authority.

Apart from the introductory and concluding chapters, this work is divided into four main chapters. Chapter two which looks at Biblical concept of Revelation is aimed at establishing the truth of the proposition that Biblical authority ultimately depends on the place given to Biblical revelation. In chapter three, an analysis of relevant works of Mbiti is done with the purpose of identifying his concept of revelation and the place he consequently gives to Biblical revelation. Building on the truth of the proposition in chapter two and Mbiti's concept of revelation as shown in chapter three, chapter four seeks to examine the nature of Biblical authority that emanates from Mbiti's concept of revelation. This is mainly a consideration from his own works, of the relationship he sees to exist between African Traditional Religions and the Old Testament; the New Testament and African Traditional Religion. Finally, chapter five is a correction of Mbiti's concept of revelation and Biblical authority by showing the proper relationship that exists, in the light of the Biblical concept of revelation, between African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament; African Traditional Religion and the New Testament; and between the Old and New Testaments.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF REVELATION

Biblical Terms For Revelation

The understanding from the consideration of the Biblical terms for revelation is that the category 'revelation' expresses two similar but different ideas. These are revelation in the non-religious sense (involving no deity) and revelation in the religious sense (involving deity).

The chief word used for revelation in the O.T. is the verb *galah* meaning 'to remove', 'to uncover.' Used in the Qal form with the organs of sense as the object, *galah* may have either man or God as the subject, conveying the idea of communicating a secret. The word *galah* and its various Hebrew forms for expressing the verb occur at least 114 times in the Old Testament. Of these, 32 occurrences have God as the subject while man is the subject in the rest. As such *galah* "cannot be thought of only as a technical term for God's revelation",¹

The verb *yada* which means 'to know' is used especially in its passive and reflexive (Niphal) and causative (Hiphil) forms to express the idea of revelation or of making known. When used with God as the subject, as is the case mostly,² it has the sense of revealing effectively. The verb *raah* that is, 'to

1. B.K. Waltke, Theological Wordbook of the O.T. Vol. 1, ed. R.L. Harris (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), S.V. "*galah*".

2. The 24 occurrences in the O.T. have God as the subject of the verb.

see', is also used especially in the Niphal form to express revelation, but meaning 'be seen' or 'appear' especially with God as subject. The noun *dabar* that is 'word' or 'matter', is another expression for the idea of revelation in the Old Testament. It is commonly expressed in the phrase *d^ebar Yahweh* or *d^ebar ^elohim* meaning the word of the Lord or the word of God respectively. According to W. H. Schmidt, almost everywhere it occurs, the phrase is a technical term for the prophetic word of revelation,³ and its frequent occurrence in the Old Testament has earned it the description, "the simplest and most colourless designation of the Divine communication".⁴

The New Testament is almost exclusively religious in its use of the terms for 'reveal' and 'revelation.' Two key words carry the main sense of the concept of revelation. These are the verb *apokalupto* meaning 'to uncover', 'to reveal', 'to disclose', and the noun *apokalupsis* meaning 'revelation', 'disclosure', 'uncovering', or 'unveiling.' The verb *apokalupto* and its various Greek forms occur about 26 times in the New Testament. Of these, 18 are in the passive voice implying God as the subject, while 8 are in the active voice, with God as the subject in 5, Jesus as the subject in 2, and 'flesh and blood' as the subject in the remaining 1 occurrence. Four other words

3. W.H. Schmidt, Theological Dictionary of the O.T. Vol. 3, eds. G.J. Botterweek and H. Ringgren (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1978), s.v. "*dabhar*".

4. B.B. Warfield, The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, ed. S.G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 100.

used to describe divine manifestations in the New Testament are *gnorizein, deloun, phaneroo and apokaluptein*. Others are *epiphaneia* and *aletheia*.

Essentials of Revelation

In essence every revelation implies four essentials. These are; the revealer, the receiver, the process, and the content of revelation. Each of these shall be considered briefly in arriving at the Biblical idea of revelation.

The revealer of Revelation

The Bible in its monotheistic motif and drive teaches that God is the source of revelation. He is the revealer. This is reiterated in many Bible passages. Job declares that God is the one that opens the ears of men *yigleh ozen ^elohim* (Job 33:16). In another passage, and using a form of the word *galah* he says that God is the one that uncovers deep things out of darkness *m^egalleh ^amuqoth mini hoshek* (Job 12:22). The Bible testifies that secret things belong to the Lord our God and only the things which He decides to reveal are known by His children... *w^ehanigloth lanu*. Deut. 29:29 (English) but Deut. 29:28 (Biblica Hebraica). Secret things would mean the facts about reality both in the physical and spiritual realms whether past, present or future, that are unknown and unknowable to the receiver of revelation unless made known by God, the revealer.

Daniel, in the Bible, knew God from experience as the source of revelation, (Dan. 2:28, 29). This knowledge also becomes Nebuchadnezzar's as well as his wise-men's. After the latter had realized their inability to say and interpret the

former's earlier dream, they rightly confessed that the source of such a revelation must be external to the world of the receivers of revelation, (Dan. 2:11). The source is later declared by Nebuchadnezzar after Daniel's success, as the God of Daniel, the God of gods and Lord of kings, the Revealer of secrets, (Dan. 2:47).

The New Testament shares the same testimony in ascribing the source of revelation to none other but God. Matthew, Luke and John in the Gospels employ the word *apekalupsas* in identifying God as the source of revelation, (Matt. 11:25; Lk. 10:21; John 12:38). Paul in 1 Cor. 2:10; Phil. 3:5, and Gal. 1:16 employs the words *apekalupsen*, *apokalupsei* and *apokalupsai* with God as the subject to maintain the fact of God being the source of revelation, while Peter uses the word *apekaluphthe* (1 Peter 1:12). This is why H.H. Farmer could say,

Even the activity of exploring and discovering the truth about atoms are rooted in, and for their success, presuppose an ultimate reality of a personal kind, that the effort to retain truth in any sphere would not be successful unless the one source of truth were willing to reward it.⁵

The Receiver of Revelation

The nature of revelation in the religious sense, like every other established communication, presupposes person to person communication as in the case of the non-religious sense of revelation.

5. H.H. Farmer, The World and God: A study of Prayer, Providence and Miracle in Christian Experience (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1935), 81-82.

The various words used to convey the idea of revelation in the Old Testament and the New Testament all have persons as the object whether or not the subject is man or God. The subject, in some cases, is implied especially where the verb of the sentence is in the passive voice.

Thus, God reveals (*galithah*) to David that he (David) will build a house for Him, (2 Sam. 7:27). God makes a revelation of Himself *niglu* to Jacob, (Gen. 35:7). God makes Himself known *noda'thi* to the people of Mount Seir, (Ezek. 35:11). The revelatory work of God is often expressed by the phrase "the word of the Lord came" to or upon a person, mostly His prophets. Prophets Nathan and Jeremiah are good examples, (1 Chron. 17:3; Jer. 7:1, 11:1).

In the New Testament Jesus makes known (*egnorisa*) to His disciples all He had heard of His father, (John 15:15, cf. John 17:26). In Rom. 1:19 God has shown (*ephanerosen*) to man all that should be known of Him. Therefore man alone is the receiver of revelation whether from God or his fellow man. It is in this light that B. Idowu has rightly said,

It would appear that man is a necessity in this situation; for without a personal mind to appreciate and apprehend revelation, the whole process would be futile.⁶

And A. L. Liley says,

God may create a universe ex-nihilo, but he cannot reveal himself ad-nihilum, ... apart from some

6. B. Idowu, African Traditional Religion: A Definition (London: SCM Press, 1983), 55.

incipient degree of personality there would be nothing for God to communicate with.⁷

One can therefore say that though revelation ultimately depends upon the will of God as the revealer, its effectiveness somehow does not depend upon God's will alone. Man has his part to play in seeking after it, in preparing himself for it. Such a proper response to revelation by man H.H. Farmer calls, 'faith.'⁸

The Process of Revelation

The process of revelation is the way by which God made His revelation known to man. This is a two-fold process commonly known, especially among the Evangelicals, as General revelation and Special revelation.

General Revelation. General revelation comes through nature, general history and God's providential care over all of His creation. Nature here might need further explanation. It is understood as the whole universe and every created thing, man inclusive. In this sense, nature alone becomes a combination of two streams -- 'nature within' and 'nature without'. The former refers to the inner sense of man through which he has both religious, and moral consciousness -- an innate knowledge of God. According to Damarest, "the human mind intuitively grasps the existence of a power, a perfection.... who is primal,

7. A.L. Liley, Religion and Revelation (1932) 108 and 111. Cited by J. Baillie, Our knowledge of God (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 26.

8. H.H. Farmer, 88.

uncaused, and infinite...."⁹ This fact removes the need for God to be introduced to man. The latter is God's creation in general outside of man, general history and God's providence inclusive. The knowledge of God from creation in general rests on the innate knowledge, though, both are complementary. G. Vos puts it this way,

If there were no antecedent innate knowledge of God, no amount of nature observation would lead to an adequate conception of God. ...On the other hand, the knowledge from inner nature is not complete in itself apart from the filling-out it receives through the discovery of God in nature (without).¹⁰

Affirming the same Damarest says, "There can be no acquired knowledge of God unless the fundamental idea of God be settled in the soul as a first truth; otherwise the term God would lack all signification."¹¹

Scriptures' attestation to general revelation as discussed above is mainly found from the Nature Psalms, for example, Psalms 8, 29, 93 and 104. Fully representing a summary of the subject matter of these Psalms is Psalm 19:1-6. A caution to be borne in mind is the fact that these psalms attest to general revelation from the perspective of faith, i.e. of the believer, and not from the perspective of the unregenerate. G.W. Bromiley makes this very clear when he says,

9. B.A. Damarest, General Revelation: Historical views and Contemporary Issues (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 228.

10. G. Vos, Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments (Edinburg: Barner of Truth, 1975), 19. Word in brackets is mine.

11. Damarest, 233.

The Old Testament does not draw any particular conclusions from the Nature-Psalms references to God's manifestation in nature. It does not argue that, by reason of this revelation, all peoples have some knowledge of God, or that many gentile religions contain relics of an original knowledge of God from nature, or even, that all human beings ought to know God because He shows Himself so plainly in the wonders of creation.... Nor does the Old Testament specifically try to intergrate this aspect of revelation with its primary motif, the special revelation of God as the covenant God of Israel.... Instead, it very simply accepts as obvious and incontestable the fact that the work of creation and providence bears witness to the creator God whom Israel comes to know by His special revelation. It thus finds in natural revelation, not so much the starting point for an argument in proof of God, but rather an occasion for the praise of God....¹²

The New Testament passages - (Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31; Romans 2:14ff) which are usually traditionally used to refer to general revelation, actually refer to something more than general revelation.

In its form, general revelation did not (neither does it) give a direct knowledge of God. Instead, as Kantzer rightly says, it is only adequate to establish the existence of deity.¹³ Being indirect, it was impersonal, showing nothing about God's attitude toward mankind. Thus, general revelation is often designated as insufficient, that is, with regard to leading man to a true and pure knowledge of God.¹⁴ Gipsen speaks of it as

12. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Vol. 4, s.v. "Reveal; Revelation", by G.W. Bromiley.

13. K.S. Kantzer, "Communication of Revelation", in The Bible: the Living Word of Revelation, ed. M. C. Tenney, (Michigan: Zondervan, 1968), 168.

14. H. Bavinck, Gereformeerde Dogmatiek I, 284. Cited by G. C. Berkhouwer, General Revelation, (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1955), 312.

"insufficient for salvation and sufficient to remove all innocence."¹⁵ Van Til's line of argument is a bit different from the above. He asserts the sufficiency of general revelation in the sense of how and with what purpose this revelation comes to man. According to him, general revelation was meant to serve as the play ground (presupposition) for the process of differentiation that was to take place in the course of time: "a differentiation between those who would and those who would not serve God."¹⁶ Further, he says, "Natural revelation is sufficient for such as have in Adam brought the curse of God upon nature. It is sufficient to render them without excuse.... It was from the beginning insufficient without its supernatural concomitant."¹⁷ Van Til's advice that general revelation be judged sufficient or insufficient based on the purpose it was meant to serve, is worthwhile and helpful. But he sees only a post 'fall-of-Adam' purpose, that is, to render fallen man guilty and without excuse. Even if for now it is assumed that van Til is right in pointing to guilt and lack of excuse as the purpose of general revelation, the question still remains as to whether general revelation was totally purposeless before the fall. My supposition is in the negative. General revelation through nature, in its impersonal form, was meant to prepare

15. W.H. Gipsen, De Geloofsbelijdeni der Ned. Gel. Bel. 1932, P.17. Cited by Berkhouwer, 312.

16. C. van Til, "Nature and Scripture", in The infallible Word, Members of Faulty, Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Reformed Publishing Co. 1946), 267. purpose of general revelation, the question still remains as to

17. C. van Til "Nature and Scripture", 275.

Adam for a greater revelation that was personal and direct, a revelation that would not end at the level of a mere knowledge of God's existence, but one that would lead to a communal fellowship between man and God. Adam experienced such special revelation before his fall. G. Vos too says,

There existed a form of special revelation before the fall transcending the natural knowledge of God. The possibility and necessity of this flow from the nature of religion. Religion means personal intercourse between God and man. Hence it might be a priori expected that God would not be satisfied, and would not allow man to be satisfied with an acquaintance based on indirection, but would crown the process of religion with the establishment of face to face communion as friend holds fellowship with friend.¹⁸

This pre-fall special revelation together with its background general revelation brought Adam into the full knowledge of God. Yet this knowledge was not full in the absolute sense for God has not at any time revealed Himself in totality else He would cease to be God. This special revelation explains the intimate relationship and fellowship that existed between God and Adam before his fall. The visits of God to Adam at the cool of the day, Adam's consciousness of being commanded by God to dominate and rule the earth, to name the animals of the world, and what fruit to eat and not to eat, with the repercussion of disobedience, could not have come to Adam through general revelation in nature.

The fact that general revelation in nature successfully brought Adam into special revelation eliminates the issue of insufficiency and establishes sufficiency instead, since "God's

18. G. Vos, Biblical Theology, 22.

design for natural revelation (was) to be only a pointer to the Creator rather than soteriological",¹⁹ or to victimize man when and if he fell.

If as it has been argued, general revelation through nature successfully achieved its purpose, what then is its present relationship with the pre-redemption special revelation received by Adam? The 'Fall' of Adam brought about a turn of things and events. The effect of general revelation through nature was disturbed and put in need of correction by the entering of sin. Sinful man's religious and moral sense of God (through nature within) became blunted and blinded; man was morally depraved. Also, man's knowledge of God (from nature without) was made subject to error, distortion and deformation; man's knowledge of God was marred. According to G. Vos, "man's innate sense of God was more seriously affected by the 'fall' than his outward observation of the writing of God in nature."²⁰

The full and pure knowledge of God that Adam received through special revelation did not escape being marred by the 'fall'. Thus Adam passed unto all humankind the marred form of the knowledge of God that brought him unto fellowship with God. This marred form of God's knowledge acquired a general status as the general revelation through nature. From the 'fall' then, general revelation through nature and pre-redemptive special

19. B.H. Kato, Theological Pitfalls in Africa (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 123. Word in bracket is mine.

20. G. Vos, Biblical Theology, 20.

revelation (both as affected by man's depravity) flow together as one general revelation. H. Bavinck says,

The distinction between what has come to be called general and special revelation does not begin until the call of Abraham; before that the two intermingle and so far have become the property of all peoples and nations.²¹

Expressing the same idea A. Fernando says, "that original revelation given to Adam was not entirely lost by the human race. In man there remained what has been called reminiscent knowledge."²²

This is the general revelation attested to in the New Testament passages of Romans 1:18-32, Acts 14:15-17; Acts 17:22-31, and John 1:1-14.²³ This is the revelation through which man had adequate knowledge of God that could generate a positive response toward God, "because what may be known of God is manifest in them for God has shown it to them" [Romans 1:19]. Rather than responding positively, they chose to suppress the truth of the revelation. It is quite tempting to assume that the revelation Paul discusses in the context of Romans 1 is in the form of the general revelation in nature as referred to earlier, that is, revelation through nature observation. The temptation comes from the reference to 'the misunderstanding of God's invisible attributes through creation.' Revelation, through nature observation is not all that the verse implies. C. Hodge

21. H. Bavinck, The Philosophy of Revelation (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 188.

22. A. Fernando, "Truth in other Religions", Evangelical Review of Theology 11 No 4 (Oct. 1987): 292.

23. John 1:1-14 is included if one favours the interpretation of the prologue of John as soteriological rather than cosmological. See Berkhouwer, General Revelation, 237-261.

commenting on the same verse says,

It is not a mere external revelation of which the apostle is speaking, but of that evidence of the being and perfections of God which every man has in the constitution of his own nature, and in virtue of which he is competent to apprehend the manifestations of God in His works.²⁴

Hodge only arrived at the combination of revelation through the 'inner nature' and revelation through the 'external nature'. But in addition to these are the relics of the pre-redemptive special revelation granted Adam before the 'fall.'

Many²⁵ have conveniently arrived at the conclusion that the purpose of general revelation is to present men guilty and without excuse before God. This conclusion is drawn from the clause that ends verse 20 of Romans 1, "so that they are without excuse." Such a conclusion is presumptuous because *eis plus* infinitive found in the verse can stand for 'purpose' as well as 'result.'²⁶ In line with this fact Berkhouwer says,

In Romans 1:20, it is not clear whether Paul means to say that guilt is a result ('so that they are without excuse') of the revelation or whether he means that the revelation is purposed ('that they might be without excuse') to leave them guilty. Both ideas probably lie in Paul's mind.²⁷

That Paul did not have both ideas in mind is no speculation. That he meant 'result' rather than purpose is clearly understood from the explanatory clause at the beginning of verse 21,

24. C. Hodge, Epistle to the Romans (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1950), 36.

25. These include J. Murray, C.H. Pinnock and C. Van Til.

26. The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol 3 (Appendix), 1187.

27. G.C. Berkhouwer, General Revelation, 151.

"...because although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful,..." This explains the reason why they are without excuse and can therefore be conveniently related to 'result' than to 'purpose.' Whether the result was by design as J. Murray would want to suggest, is an open speculation. He says that in the all-inclusive ordination and providence of God designed purpose could be presupposed in the actual result.²⁸ Thus a clear understanding of the passage does not suggest the 'rendering of men guilty' as the purpose of general revelation. The perspecuity of general revelation is not meant to make men guilty but that they might have the knowledge necessary to lead them to God in positive response or worship.

It should also be made clear that men's negative response to God, regardless of the perspecuity of general revelation, does not render general revelation insufficient. The purpose of general revelation was to make men know God; and they did. The purpose of knowing God was that men would worship Him; this they didn't, because they chose not to. General revelation successfully led Adam to a knowledge of God resulting in fellowship with God but it has not led men to the same end. Herein is manifest, not so much the weakness of general revelation, but the extent and seriousness of men's depravity effective from the 'fall' of Adam. If in any way general revelation would be considered insufficient, Berkhouwer describes such insufficiency as "not a deficiency which is

28. J. Murray, Epistle to the Romans (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1968), 40.

historically determined, that is, in connection with the fall of man."²⁹

Special Revelation. God's self-disclosure by special revelation has come through the instrumentality of the redemptive acts, coupled with their definite God-given interpretation to specially chosen men of His, in the history of a particular people, starting from Abraham to the nation of Israel. Special revelation also came through various modalities ranging from the casting of lot, the use of the urim and thumin, dreams, visions, angelic appearances, theophany, prophetic utterances, to events like the call of Abraham, the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the law, the conquest of Palestine, the birth, life, death, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the outpouring of the Spirit of pentecost and the subsequent establishment of the church. These redemptive events did not happen as accidents but each of them is related to the others as a definite link in a chain of progressive events all amounting to the entire message of the Gospel of salvation or the Gospel story. The plot of this story is the Incarnation, the point at which the Word of God became flesh [John 1:14]. God revealed Himself personally to man.

The significance of this Incarnational form of revelation is glaring from the argument of William Temple. According to him, "we who are ourselves persons can fully understand only what is personal. And God who is a personal being, cannot

29. G.C. Berkhouwer, 312.

adequately reveal Himself in any thing other than personality."³⁰ Hence the Incarnation is the most adequate revelation of God to man. It is therefore understandable why the Incarnation explains the finality as well as the uniqueness of special revelation in Jesus Christ. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews attests to the former that "God spoke in the past, to our fore fathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but he has spoken to us in these last days by His Son..." [Hebrews 1:1-2].

The word 'final' in reference to special revelation does not necessarily mean the last, that is, with regard to time. The fact that the church eagerly awaits the *parousia* -- the glorious revelation of Jesus Christ -- attests to this. Rather, 'last' in this context would mean "the decisive, fulfilling, unsurpassable revelation; that which is the criterion of all the others."³¹

Acknowledging the uniqueness of the incarnational revelation in Jesus Christ, Temple again observes, "unlike special revelation, the revelation which constitutes other great religions consists of precepts and the requirement is of obedience to a law rather than of loyalty and love to a person."³² Temple's observation stands out clearly especially in the field of comparative

30. W. Temple, Nature, Man and God (New York: AMS Press, 1979), 319.

31. P. Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol 1 (London: SCM Press, 1978), 133.

32. W. Temple, "Revelation", in Revelation, eds. J. Baillie and H. Martin (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1937), 117.

religion.

It has been established above that God created man in His image and maintained a personal relationship with man. This relationship demanded true, and pure knowledge of God on the side of man; a knowledge that involves reverence, faith, submission and fidelity. Such a knowledge is of a higher order than general revelation is capable of providing. Hence it is also established that general revelation in its limitation could not lead sinful man beyond mere knowledge to an existential salvific knowledge that involves submissive obedience to God. According to Arthur Holmes, "there is a difference between theism as a theoretical conclusion and knowing God as the proper object of one's ultimate faith and devotion."³³ The latter general revelation could not do. In addition, general revelation could not disclose to man God's plan for the world, God's will for man's redemption nor God's love and mercy toward mankind.

Thus special revelation is purposed and designed to bring fallen man to his original relationship with God; a relationship that is described as "an intimate I-Thou relation of love in which the personal center of man's being is directly introduced to the personal reality of God."³⁴ The speciality of this purpose in special revelation stands out in its understanding.

33. A. Holmes, Faith Seeking Understanding (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1971), 134.

34. B.A. Damarest, General Revelation, 247.

The Bible as Special Revelation. It is apparent that the Bible does not have general revelation as its main subject. Instead it only alludes to it. The reason for this, most probably, is that general revelation has already been written on the whole of creation and read by every man born into the world. The writing was done by God Himself on His own creation, such that writing it in a book would have been irrelevant. Writing would not have added to the perspicuity of general revelation neither would it have added to its relative effectiveness. This is not the case with special revelation which stands out as the main subject of the Bible. In fact, C.H. Pinnock sees the Bible and special revelation to be so close that he could say, "the purpose of Scripture is identical with the purpose of (special) revelation: to witness to Jesus as the Christ, [2. Tim. 3:15]."³⁵ If special revelation is the self-disclosure of God to man through the instrumentality of special redemptive activities and the God-given interpretation of the same using men chosen and guided by Him, Scripture or the Bible is nothing less than the revelatory record of this special revelation in written form.

The connection between special revelation and the Bible is well brought out by Ramm. This he does by an examination of the verbs which express the revealing action of God, (e.g. *apokalupto*, *gnorizo*, *chrematizo*, *phaneroo* etc.), using the New Testament as

35. C.H. Pinnock, Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology (Phillipsburg, N.J. Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), 36.

an example, and the nouns which indicate a deposit created by the revealing action of God (e.g. *apokalupsis*, *epignosis euaggelion*, *didaskalia*, *diadache*, etc). Lastly, he ingeniously brings in the connection that the deposit as indicated by the noun form of the various verbs is both the presupposition of and the substance of special revelation cast into written form.³⁶ Most, if not all neo-orthodox theologians would not concede to such a connection. For them the Bible is connected to special revelation only as the human record, or human witness or human interpretation of redemptive events.

The Bible does not teach that inscripturation of the Word of God, as revealed to and written by the prophets and apostles, reduces the dynamic force, effectiveness and authority of the revealed Word, which the neo-orthodox and existentialists would claim in their attempt to dismiss the truth of propositional revelation. A good example is the case of prophet Jeremiah. In chapter 36, Jeremiah was instructed by God to write in a scroll all that He had spoken to him from the day He spoke to him [36:2]. The inscripturated form of the revealed word of God is expected to lead the readers to supplication and repentance [36:3,7]; the same expectation of the revealed word. Furthermore, this very written form of the word is adduced as "the words of the Lord" [36:11]. Therefore, the despising distinction that is being drawn between the word as revealed, the word as spoken and the word as written is not called for.

36. B. Ramm, Special Revelation and the Word of God (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1961), 161-164.

Inter-relatedness of General and Special Revelation.

General and special revelation do not stand opposite each other as a duality or in competing rivalry. As such the confession of the former does not demean the latter nor make it of less importance. Instead, general revelation points toward special revelation in its saving character amid human estrangement. It can thus be said that the relationship between general and special revelation is that of inter-relatedness of continuity and discontinuity.

Van Til argues that general revelation was never meant to function alone, instead it was meant to function in conjunction with special revelation,³⁷ because "before the 'fall' says C.F.H. Henry, Adam indeed had a better grasp of general revelation, but he was vouchsafed special revelation as well in the Garden of Eden."³⁸ General revelation is not limited simply to the Adamic era. As such, the inter-relatedness is not just in the past but also in the present, continuing into the future. By the nature of general revelation and especially in its perspicuity, fallen man in his every day life is never completely severed nor isolated from the revelation of God. Man's continuous revolt against the light of general revelation puts him in continuous remembrance of his guilt which in turn puts him in awareness of his need of special revelation; an awareness he struggles to suppress.

37. C. Van Til, "Nature and Scripture", 275.

38. C.F.H. Henry, God, Revelation and Authority. Vol 2 (Waco, Texas: Word, 1976), 86.

In handling the continuity and discontinuity of general and special revelation, the caution should be borne in mind that neither should be over-emphasized at the expense of the other. For example, emphasizing the discontinuity, Berkhouwer says, "God does not correct general revelation in special revelation, nor must special revelation be regarded as supplementing general revelation. But special revelation is God's coming to a world which has fallen from a non-problematic communion with God,..."³⁹ This is more of an over-emphasis. Berkhouwer might be right in saying that special revelation should not be regarded as supplementing general revelation. This can be so if special revelation is not considered an after-thought to the 'fall'; for special revelation had been before the fall. In this sense, special revelation is complementary to general revelation rather than supplementary. In its complementary role special revelation restores to fallen man the normalcy and efficiency of his cognition of God in the sphere of nature, by opening his eyes and understanding to the greatness and wonder of God's creation. Special revelation presupposes general revelation while special revelation is presupposed in general revelation. G. Vos puts it this way, "God does not create the world of redemption without regard to the antecedent world of nature nor does He begin His redemptive revelation *de novo*, as though nothing had preceded. The knowledge from nature, even though corrupted, is presupposed."⁴⁰ The point of emphasis is the need to maintain a wholesome balance between continuity and discontinuity.

39. G.C. Berkhouwer, 311.

40. G. Vos, 21.

"Any differentiation", says C.F. Henry, "between general and special revelation should not be to the threatening of the unity of divine disclosure by presumptuously imposing speculative categories upon the reality of revelation. Special revelation does not annul general revelation. But rather replenishes, vivifies,...it."⁴¹ This is nothing short of unity in continuity and discontinuity.

The Content of Revelation

General Revelation. If general revelation is the self disclosure of God to man, especially through nature, then the content of general revelation is God Himself. But to be very exact the quest for the content of general revelation has to do with what God discloses about Himself through nature. Reference to two nature psalms, psalms 19:1-2 and 104:1-30 would be of help. Psalm 19:1-6 is generally believed to be the best Biblical summary of God's revelation through nature. The first two verses read thus: "The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech; And night unto night reveals knowledge."

The psalmist by these lines expresses the fact that man in looking at the heavens or skies does not see God but the glory of God (*k^ēbcd'e1*). The word *kabcd* expresses the idea of honour, splendour and beauty, especially of external condition and circumstances. Thus man's reflection on creation opens up an

41. C.F.H. Henry, God, Revelation and Authority, 71.

awareness of the splendour which fills the arch, the beauty which attracts the eyes and the everlasting order by which day and night follow in succession. In this awareness creation is not ascribed to chance or some evil forces but to the God of creation whose wonderful wisdom is revealed in night succession.

The language of Psalm 104 is not different from what Psalm 19 is saying. Psalm 104, in its entirety, is an illustration of the psalmist expression of the greatness of God. Right in verse 1 he says, "Oh Lord my God, You are very great,..." An analysis of the psalm shows that two blocks of verses 3 to 9, and 10 to 20 express the might of God in creation while another two blocks of verses 10 to 18, and 21 to 30 express the wisdom of God in creativity as manifested in His provisions for the sustenance of His creation. Nature (that is nature without) in this psalm brings forth to the awareness of man the greatness of God as manifested in His might and wisdom to create and sustain His creation.

What then is the content of general revelation? The answer can not be more appropriate than that the heavens (and all of creation) reveal the glory of God in His greatness, wisdom, power, goodness and beauty in the created order. Any deeper knowledge than this concerning the person of God would go beyond the realm of general revelation.

Special Revelation. To get a better picture of what the Bible considers as the content of revelation demands an examination of some Bible passages where the various terms, as mentioned earlier, are used for the idea of revelation. Four areas are easily identified.

First, in Exodus 6:3 God gives a summary of His dealings with the three Hebrew patriarchs since the time He set Abraham apart for special revelation. God says that He revealed particularly Himself to Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:7; 17:1; 18:1), to Isaac (cf. Gen. 26:2), and to Jacob (cf. Gen. 3:9) as God Almighty. The modes of this revelation are not explicitly mentioned but most probably they were in dreams, visions and theophany; for these were the common modes of revelation at this time of Israel's religion.

Second, the psalmist testifies to the fact that God reveals Himself, and not anything nor any other person, by the judgement He executes (Ps. 9:16, cf. Eze. 35:11). The totality of what makes up the great deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt was God making Himself known to His people (Eze. 20:9). God makes Himself known in historical demonstration of His mighty power (Ps. 106:8), in making known His hand (Isa. 66:14), in making His name known (Isa. 64:21). See also Ps. 76:2; Isa. 64:2ff; Jer. 16:21; and Eze. 39:7. God reveals Himself in His salvation and righteousness (Ps. 98:2); and in His glory (Isa. 40:5).

Third, God reveals Himself through His word that He gives to His prophets. This is sometimes expressed as "the word of the Lord which came" to the particular prophet (Jer. 7:1; 11:1; 18:1; Eze. 1:3; 6:1; 17:1; 20:2; Isa. 2:1). Some other times the word is introduced with the prophetic formula 'thus says the Lord' (Exd. 4:22; 5:1; 7:17; 1 Sam. 2:27; 2 Sam. 12:11; 24:12), or 'thus says the Lord God of Israel' (Josh. 7:13; 24:2; Judg.

6:8; 2 Sam. 12:17); or 'thus says the Lord of hosts' (1 Sam. 15:2; 2 Sam. 7:8; 1 Chr. 17:7; Jer. 6:9; 7:3, 21). Prophet Isaiah describes it as 'the burden' against the particular nations concerned (13:1; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1; 22:1; 23:1). God's revelation through His word culminated at the incarnation of His word when "the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Fourth, God reveals facts, truths, secrets or mysteries. The New Testament uses the word 'mystery' (*mysterion*) over twenty times in place of the word 'secret'. God revealed the new king, David, to Samuel (1 Sam. 16:3). He revealed the duration of the Davidic dynasty to Nathan the prophet (2 Sam. 7:21, cf. 1 Chr. 17:19). God reveals secret things to his prophets (Deut. 29:29; Amos 3:7). He reveals mysteries about the church -- the mystery of 'Christ in the believer' as the hope of glory (Col. 1:27), and the mystery "that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel" (Eph. 3:6). The book of 'Revelation' is revealed secrets by God concerning the end of the age and of history.

The question that remains to be answered is not whether God reveals Himself, but whether He reveals Himself personally or propositionally or existentially. The ultimate purpose and goal of special revelation is that man, fallen and lost in sin, in enmity with God, might be reconciled to God to have and perpetually live in a personal communal fellowship with God.

Thus "revelation could not attain its true end if it did no more than convey facts or truths about God as the basis of

Corresponding beliefs, if it did not bring its recipients into a relationship with God Himself in person."⁴² In other words, a personal knowledge of God is necessary. This in no way means that revelation of facts and truths is ingenuine. Bromiley argues, "The facts and truths and related beliefs are all important. They undoubtedly come within the sphere of revelation. God would not be known at all did we not also know things about Him."⁴³ Definitely, what Bromiley has in mind is the 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' relationships.

Neo-orthodox theologians like E. Brunner and existential theologians like Bultmann have grounded their claims on the assumption that 'I-Thou' knowledge, which is personal, is the paradigm of religious knowledge or revelation as opposed to the 'I-It' knowledge which is propositional. R.H. Nash does not find it difficult to dismiss the dichotomy wedged between 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' knowledge. He says, "It is impossible for two human beings to have a meaningful interpersonal relationship without some prior knowledge about each other."⁴⁴ In the case of revelation, God already knows everything about man. As such man has to know, at least, some things about God before the 'I-Thou' relationship is established and maintained. Yet it must be emphasized that whatever 'I-It' knowledge about God that comes to man it must be appropriated for its truth to be experienced.

42. G. Bromiley et.al.eds. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1988), s.v "Reveal/Revelation", by G. Bromiley.

43. Ibid.

44. R.H. Nash, Christian Faith and Historical Understanding (Michigan: Zondervan, 1984), 184.

This is existential part of revelation.

In the light of this, it can be reasonably maintained that God's revelation of Himself, is events and word. God, therefore, has revealed Himself personally by revealing Himself propositionally.

Revelation and Biblical Authority

Biblical authority means different things to different people. Apart from the reason of varieties of Biblical interpretation pointed out by C.T. Craig,⁴⁵ there is also the reason of the various understanding of the word, 'authority'. "There appears to be a general crisis of authority at the present time, or at least the notion of authority is different", says J. Barr in a report of the WCC preliminary study on Biblical authority. He continues to say, "Authority is no longer conceded a priori, but is accepted only where it actually proves itself as such. Accordingly, it becomes increasingly difficult to assert Biblical authority in a general way."⁴⁶ A common ground to start off the discussion on Biblical authority would be to adopt a definition. Ramm's is a good one. According to him, "authority itself means that right or power to command action or compliance, or to determine belief or custom, expecting obedience from those under authority, and in turn giving

45. C.T. Craig, "The Authority of the Bible: A Methodist contribution", in Biblical for Today: A WCC Symposium on "The Biblical Authority for the Churches' Social and Political Message Today, ed. A. Richardson and W. Schweitzer, (London: SCM Press, 1951), 31.

46. J. Barr, "The Authority of the Bible: A Study Outline", The Ecclesiastical Review 21 (1969): 138.

responsible account for the claim to right or power."⁴⁷ By this definition that which possesses authority may be personal or impersonal, like the authority of tradition, or custom, or the authority of truth or veracity, or of a book. Applying this to the Bible, Biblical authority would be the right or power of the Bible to command action or compliance, expecting obedience from those under authority.

Before we keep to this understanding of Biblical authority an objection is worth noting. Apart from the above proposed definition, Ramm quickly points out that "in a very real sense all authority (with the exception of the metaphorical manner of speaking of data or evidence as authoritative) is at root personal."⁴⁸ This is, of course, not the issue of personal recognition of authority, for proper authority exists independent of personal recognition. Rather, authority is at root personal in the sense that it is vested on persons. Hence authority now is "the right or power of a person or persons to compel action, thoughts or custom."⁴⁹ In this sense the application of authority to a book will be an improper application, even to the Bible. In any case, the connection between the Bible and authority in terms of persons becomes clear when the area of concentration is narrowed to the realm of religion. Here, there is the general concensus that the final

47. B. Ramm, The Pattern of Religious Authority (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1959), 10.

48. Ibid., 14.

49. B. Ramm, 14.

authority is vested on the person of God,⁵⁰ if at all the expression, 'the authority of God' would mean anything specific. It would only be meaningful when authority is used of that which is under God but over men. God expresses His authority, according to Ramm, "by divine self revelation."⁵¹

Cunnliffe-Jones, because of the existing relationship between divine revelation and the Bible, has convincingly argued that the Bible is finally authoritative in so far as it shares in the authority of God.⁵² The authority of the Bible therefore, is divine.

With this clarification we can conveniently return to Ramm's initial definition which was applied to the Bible. The debate on the scope of Biblical authority, that is, whether it is limited to faith and practice or beyond, will not be engaged in here; but it should be noted as K. Kantzer points out that the Bible itself knows no such distinction as that between faith and practice on one hand, and history and science on the other. "In fact, the Biblical teaching is that the Bible is trustworthy of all that it really teaches, including its facts... that is, all it affirms."⁵³

Revelation and authority correlate with each other. The

50. J.A. Witmer, "Biblical Authority in Contemporary Theology", Bibliotheca Sacra 118 (Jan. 1961): 61, See also Ramm, *Ibid.* 19.

51. B. Ramm, The Pattern of Religious Authority, 19.

52. H. Cunnliffe-Jones, The Authority of Biblical Revelation, (London: James Clark and Co. Ltd., 1945), 142.

53. K. Kantzer, "Biblical Authority: Where both Fundamentals and Neo-evangelicals Are Right", Christianity Today 27 (Oct. 7 1983): 12.

correlation is beautifully brought out by V.E. Devadutt in the following statements. "The Bible as the record of revelation possesses the same authority as revelation in so far as that revelation is concerned." Further he says, "And if we take revelation seriously we have to accept its authority; and if we accept its authority we have to accept the authority of that which witnesses to it and makes a reward of it."⁵⁴ Earlier it was established that the relationship between special revelation and the Bible is more than that of the latter being a mere witness to or record of the former. The second idea in Devadutt's statements introduces the point that the correlation between revelation and Biblical authority is such that one's view of revelation correspondingly affects or determines one's view of Biblical authority. This point will be demonstrated briefly here using the example of the neo-orthodox view of revelation which is just one among many.⁵⁵

The neo-orthodox identify as revelation the revelatory, redemptive events of the Bible divorced of the word aspect that brings explanation of the events. To such thinkers the Bible is neither the Word of God nor a trustworthy witness to the word of God. To be more specific we shall briefly consider James Barr as an example of neo-orthodox theologians.

54. V.E. Devadutt, "The Authority of the Bible: A Baptist Contribution", in Biblical Authority for Today, 70 and 71.

55. A. Dulles, Models of Revelation (N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1983). Dulles critiques five models of revelation, preferring his symbolic model. See also C.F.H. Henry, "The Priority of Divine Revelation," JETS 27 No.1 (March 1984): 80-81, and S.G. Kibicho, African Theology Journal 10 No. 3 (1981): 31-32, 36.

James Barr can be easily misunderstood for one who acknowledges that revelation can be both propositional as well as in divine acts in history. Such a misunderstanding could come from statements of his earlier on referred to, where he admits the inescapability of the fact of direct divine communication between God and particular men on particular occasions and that such specific communication must not be subsumed under revelation through events in history. Moreover, he says, "if we permit ourselves to ask questions in the alternative form, as when we say that revelation is either in propositions or in acts done in history, we only close the matter up altogether."⁵⁶ A proper understanding of Barr reveals that he does not identify divine self-communication as revelation. What it is he does not say. Rather he says, "It is doubtful whether the common theological use of revelation for the Divine self-communication is appropriate in the light of Biblical usage."⁵⁷ He therefore suggests that such use of 'revelation' for divine self-communication be criticized whenever it has gone too far away from the Biblical usage.⁵⁸ By the time he comes out with his position he says, "We do not think that revelation can consist in 'propositions'.... The pressure of the revelation concepts is towards the self-revelation of God, and this means an event

56. J. Barr, Old and New in Interpretation: A study of the Two Testaments (London: SCM Press, 1982), 83.

57. Ibid.

58. J. Barr, "Revelation", in Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible, 2nd ed.

or act of self-disclosure."⁵⁹

For Barr, the redemptive events are the milieu of revelation; but the events are not exactly as they are depicted in the Bible. The Biblical reporting of events is never mere objective. Rather it is testimony in faith, a record of events as seen through the screen of faith which these same events generated.⁶⁰ He convincingly feels that quite a lot of the Bible material may be like the Gospel record of the temptation of Jesus which are a legendary description of real events of some kind. In his opinion, some of the Biblical accounts, if not all, are not completely accurate in their depiction of the event. "They show that motives other than the simple accurate reporting of the facts have entered into the composition of them."⁶¹ Barr sees the Bible not as revelation, but a record of revelatory acts, a testimony to them, a commentary to them. Thus the Bible is human, inaccurate and fallible. It is amazing that, viewed from such perspective, the Bible is still considered to be authoritative; for he says, "the Bible has authority and should rightly govern our lives and thoughts...."⁶² But this authority does not depend on what is in the Bible itself but on the events of salvation of which it is the written expression, or to use another expression,

59. J. Barr, Old and New in Interpretation, 84.

60. J. Barr, The Bible in the Modern World (London: Harper and Row, 1973), 76.

61. J. Barr, Escaping from Fundamentalism (London: SCM Press, 1984), 78.

62. J. Barr. The Bible in the Modern World (London: harper and Row, 1973), 24.

"the saving contents of these events."⁶³

How Barr arrived at this conclusion is worthy of examination. Barr fully agrees with E. Jungel's distinction between 'authoritarian' and 'authoritative.' According to Jungel the former applies to "those authorities which impose their demands by force, or attempt to do so, without making the necessity of their claim so evident to those on whom they make it that persons can freely accept it."⁶⁴ And the latter applies to "authorities which enforce their demands by making the rightfulness of those demands so evident to those on whom the demands are made that (while realizing the possibility of objection) those persons admit the rightfulness of the demands."⁶⁵ Biblical authority in these terms, says Barr, should be authoritative. So far, Barr does not sound unacceptable. But he continues with a differentiation between 'hard authority' and 'soft authority.' The former is "authority antecedent to its interpretation and general in its application."⁶⁶ By this the reader should expect that Biblical passages would be authoritative and therefore illuminating. While the latter which Barr recommends, is "posterior to interpretation and application and limited to the passages where

63. J. Barr, The Bible in the Modern World, 24-25.

64. E. Jungel et.al., "Four Preliminary Considerations on the Concept of Authority", Ecumenical Review 21 (1969): 150.

65. Ibid.

66. J. Barr, The Bible in the modern World, 27.

authoritative effect had been found."⁶⁷

One of the implications of Barr's recommendation of 'soft authority' is that the Bible, in all its parts, is not authoritative. Some parts may be and some parts may not be, depending on the interpretation and application. Dependence on interpretation and application makes accuracy immaterial to authority. One wonders whether such view of Biblical authority that stems from a corresponding view of revelation, is authority at all. Guthrie says, "But if as widely held, the Bible is a human book without any divine origin, we have a right to ask what notions of Biblical authority is still possible."⁶⁸ The point we have been trying to establish is that one's view of revelation correspondingly affects or determines one's view of Biblical authority.

67. Ibid.

68. D. Guthrie, "Biblical Authority and N.T. Scholarship", Vox Evangelica 16 (1986): 17.

CHAPTER THREE

MBITI'S CONCEPTION OF REVELATION

Mbiti's Theological Track

Mbiti -- Before Bossey

John S. Mbiti was born on the 30th of November, 1931 at Kitui town to Samuel M. Ngaangi and Velesi Mbandi who are from among the Akamba people of central Kenya. By religious background, J. S. Mbiti's parents were members of the African Inland Church (AIC). In addition to having Christian parents, Mbiti had the privilege of being influenced by Christians from the early days of his life. Asked about his conversion experience in an interview Mbiti replied,

"I can not talk about that because in a way, I never saw it. In the sense that....I have no dramatic experience of it. I would only say it was a process in my life. The earliest memories I have are memories of being in church, and surrounded at an early age by a large extended family members."¹

This Christian influence extended beyond the environs of family life to that of his education. Both the Christian headmaster in secondary school (Larry Francis) and the chaplain at Makerere University (Fred Welbourn) contributed to the Christian direction in Mbiti's life. After his undergraduate studies in 1953 he trained as a theologian and in preparation for the Christian ministry at Barington College, Rhode Island from 1954 to 1957, obtaining his Th. B. In 1963 he obtained his Ph. D from Cambridge University in New Testament studies.

1. Interview by B.W. Burleson on August 9 1985. Cited in B.W. Burleson, "John Mbiti: The Dialogue of and African Theologian with African Traditional Religion." (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 1986), 47-48.

In the same 1963 Mbiti was ordained an Anglican priest having left the church where he was brought up. According to Mbiti, he left his former church because of "its lack of adequate rootage in a wider Christian history, a defective Christian fellowship and an absence of a 'concrete theology' to deal with vital questions thrown up by the Christian presence in the African context. In a world-wide communion of Anglicanism he found catholicity, historicity and apostolicity."² In 1964 Mbiti joined the teaching faculty of the religious department of Makerere University as the first African. He taught theology, New Testament and African Traditional Religion which was a new course altogether for Mbiti.³ From 1968 Mbiti became the Head of Department and Professor of Theology and Comparative Religion till 1974 when he moved to be director of the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Institute at Celigny, Switzerland.

By this time Mbiti had made his impact felt in the world of theology. He had gained an international reputation as the leading, best known and the most prolific African theologian.⁴

2. K. Bediako, "Identity and Integration: An Enquiry into the Nature and Problems of Theological Indigenization in Selected Early Hellenistic and Modern African Christian Writers", (Ph.D diss., University of Aberdeen, 1983), 839.

3. J.S. Mbiti, "The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion," The Christian Century 97 (Aug/Sept 1980): 817.

4. E. W. Fashole-Luke, "Footpaths and Signposts to African Christian Theologies" Scottish Journal of Theology 34 (1981): 387; J. S. Ukpon, "Current Theology. The Emergence of African Theologies, Theological Studies 45 (1984):518; J. Bowden, who is who in Theology, (London: SCM Press, 1990), 85; and J.W. Kinney, "The Theology of John Mbiti: his sources, norms and method" Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Review 3 (Ap. 1979), 65.

He is known by some as the father of African theology.⁵ Kwame Bediako suggests that Mbiti's appointment to the Directorship of the World Council of Churches' (W.C.C.'S) Ecumenical Institute was perhaps a measure of his stature as a theologian in the wider Christian world.⁶ In 1980 Mbiti left the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey to parish ministry with the state church in the Evangelical Reformed Church of the Canton of Bern, Switzerland, and taught part time at the University of Bern. Mbiti's writings cover a wide range. Most important of these are books written and published while he was at Makerere, and numerous articles on the encounter between Christianity and African culture.⁷ Mbiti surfaced in the discipline of theology at a time when Africans in general reacted, in condemnation, to Western colonization and imperialism. Like-wise, his theology was reactionary to the despise and condemnation of African religion and religiosity by the Western writers of that time.

For example, in African Religions and Philosophy Mbiti tries to work out into coherence a framework to guide the history of African religion and African religious experience. In Concepts of God in Africa Mbiti comes out to establish the fact that African peoples are not religiously illiterate, that African concepts of God especially as presented in the book,

5. B.H. Kato, Theological Pitfalls in Africa (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 56.

6. K. Bediako, "Identity and Integration", 375.

7. See the list of some of his publications in the bibliography.

have sprung independently out of African reflection on God, as influenced by geographical, historical, cultural and socio-political factors.⁸ As such, African worldview should be put into consideration in the course of making the Gospel relevant to the African situation. As a demonstration of this Mbiti uses the African concept of time and the New Testament teaching on Eschatology to arrive at a relevant doctrine on eschatology for the African Christian. This, of course, fits in with one of his intentions -- "to raise the question regarding Christian theology in Africa,"⁹ in his book New Testament Eschatology in an African Background. To illustrate the richness of African traditional religiosity is the purpose of his The Prayers of African Traditional Religion. The richness of African religiosity is such that its inevitability as a preparation for the Gospel of Christ, "preparation evangelica" is quite apparent.

That African traditional religiosity be considered as 'praeparatio evangelica' can be said to be the thesis in Mbiti theology, and as K. Bediako puts it, "it is this thesis and its outworking that may perhaps be his (Mbiti's) most enduring contribution to the theology of the church in twentieth century Africa."¹⁰ Mbiti would want to hold tenaciously to this thesis even though he is unable to say specifically how far one is to

8. J. S. Mbiti, Concepts of God in Africa (London: SPCK, 1970), XIII.

9. J. S. Mbiti, New Testament Eschatology in an African Background (Oxford: University Press, 1972), 175.

10. K. Bediako, Identity and Integration, 407.

regard African religiosity as a 'preparatio evangelica'. The most he could say is that the study of African Traditional Religion is a background which cannot be ignored.¹¹ For any one to fully accept Mbiti's proposition that African traditional religiosity is a 'praeparatio evangelica' is to fall into a big temptation Mbiti finds himself, as he advances in his theological horizon. The temptation is the question of how African Traditional Religion relates to the Biblical faith. Mbiti's answer to this question becomes clear as his theological involvement during and after Bossey is considered.

Mbiti -- Bossey and After

Any discussion that will have as its subject, Mbiti's theological track, would be incomplete without the mention of the place, Bossey where the W.C.C's Ecumenical Institute is located. For six years (1974-1980) Mbiti worked with the W.C.C. in Geneva but was the director of the Ecumenical Institute for four years (1976-1980). In each year as the director of Bossey, Mbiti organized theological consultations involving theologians from different parts of the world, but mostly from the two-third world. In each of these consultations, according to Mbiti, "serious attention was given to the question of inter-religious dialogue with followers of other faiths in the southern regions of the world, where other religions are dominant or significant."¹² The significance of Bossey would be seen in the

11. A. Shorter, African Christian Theology (Maryknol, N.Y: Orbis Books), 1977.

12. J. S. Mbiti, "In Search of Dialogue in Community", Ecumenical Review 39 No. 2 (Apr. 1987): 193.

way it has led to the shapening of the theological stands of theologians. This, of course, is the purpose for its establishment, as Mbiti states,

Inter-religious dialogue...takes us out of our traditional theological cocoons. It challenges us to look a new at our understanding and use of the Scriptures, at our understanding of God, revelation, Jesus Christ, church, as the community of Christ, the meaning of salvation, the practice of our spirituality, and the hope we hold as the Christian hope... It raises questions like; Has God revealed himself to people in other ways outside the Biblical revelation? Is the so called 'history of salvation' to be understood only within the boundaries of the Judaeo-Christian tradition? Is the God of the Bible the same God who is worshipped through the oral cultures of traditional religions?¹³

The direction of thought can be understood from these questions. It is the thought of the elimination of the uniqueness of the Biblical faith, Biblical revelation, Christ and Christianity. Lesslie Newbigin confirms that at two general meetings, the W.C.C. has managed to resist, when asked, to accept statements that seemed to call in question the uniqueness, decisiveness, and centrality of Jesus Christ.¹⁴

Most directors of Bossey, during or after their directorship, have tilted towards a denial of the uniqueness of the Biblical faith subtly or unequivocally; or they are expected to make a change of mind towards that if they had not before their directorship. For example, a former director of the unit on Dialogue, S. J. Samartha, in his Courage for Dialogue says,

13. J.S. Mbiti, "In Search of Dialogue in Community", Ecumenical Review 39 No. 2 (Ap. 1987): 193.

14. L. Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ", IBMR 13 (Aug. 1989): 54.

"...we should recognize God alone as absolute and all religions as relative."¹⁵ Further he says, "There is no reason to claim that the religion developed in the Sinai is superior to that developed on the banks of the Ganga."¹⁶ Henry Kraemer was the first director of Bossey and he had sternly maintained the uniqueness of the Biblical faith and of Christ in his book The Christian Message in a non-Christian world, before his directorship. The expectation was there that he would not continue with such conviction after his directorship. Mbiti writes,

Kraemer...saw practically no value in other religions. His conviction continued to dominate the theological stance of European and American theologians and church leaders for at least a decade.... I do not know to what extent Hendrick Kraemer modified his conviction after becoming director of the Ecumenical Institute.¹⁷

That is Bossey and what it can do. Mbiti himself was not able to pass through Bossey without its reshaping influence. Mbiti says that the time he worked with the W.C.C. left a lasting mark on him and sensitized his thinking in many areas.¹⁸ The lasting mark on him was enough for him to reflect on how his mind had changed within a decade past, on the demand of the editor of the Christian Century. In his reflection, Mbiti applies 'change of mind' "to mean theological growth, and not necessarily a

15. S. J. Samartha, Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Inter-Religious Relationships (Maryknoll: N.Y., Orbis Books, 1981), 97.

16. S. J. Samartha, Courage for Dialogue, '99.

17. J.S. Mbiti, "In Search of Dialogue in Community" The Ecumenical Review 39 No.2 (Ap. 1987): 193.

18. J.S. Mbiti, "The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion" The Christian Century 97 (Aug. 1980: 819.

rejection of or turning around from ideas that I may have held ten year ago."¹⁹ Some of the things Mbiti discusses in his 'change of mind' centre on the uniqueness of Biblical revelation as will be seen later.

About seven years after his directorship Mbiti could not still free himself from the effect and influence of Bossey on his theology. Writing on inter-religious dialogue Mbiti says,

Not only has the Bible now to be read within the contexts of these religions (i.e Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, tribal religions, etc), but is one among many other sacred scriptures (some of which are not written down but are transmitted orally).... It (the Bible) should be approached as one among many sacred writings of the world. Such an approach says nothing about the authority and interpretation of the Bible as such, not about the question of inspiration.... The Bible has no monopoly of religious concerns and problems.²⁰

The latter part of the statement above makes apparent that Mbiti is quite aware of his theological drift and his struggle in the drift. As he drifts on, he tries to let go his former theological position, but it does not let him go. The possible way out to him to free himself from the grips of his theological drift is to try to convince himself that his present theological position does not negate the former, the truth of which still lingers in him. It would seem that Mbiti, in his statement, has not even been able to convince himself against his former theological position.

19. J. S. Mbiti, "The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion", 817.

20. J.S. Mbiti, "An Ecumenical Approach to Teaching the Bible" The Ecumenical Review 39 No. 4 (Oct. 1987): 409.

From the beginning of his theological career Mbiti's theological objective was to salvage African Traditional Religion from the misrepresentations and underestimations it had suffered in the hands of early missionaries who brought the Gospel to Africa; a misrepresentation that caused a shallow penetration of the mission of Christianity into African religiosity.²¹ This objective successfully led him to the thesis of African Traditional Religion being a *praeparatio evangelica*. Further than this, through the influence of Bossey, Mbiti's theological goal has broadened. Under the guise of religious dialogue he considers the Bible as one among sacred scriptures, written or oral.

Mbiti's Objection to Traditional Salvation History

Traditional View of the Term 'Salvation History'

In about the middle of the 19th century a group of protestant theologians represented by J. T. Beck (1804-1878) and J.C.K. Hofman (1810-1877) vigorously opposed the historical positivism of the 'history of religion' school. This school had given attention to non-Christian religions questioning the absolute character of Christianity. The question asked was whether all religions do not contain elements with hidden indications of a revelation of God, and whether it was still possible to accept the specific of God's revelation in Israel and in Jesus Christ. To these questions Beck and Hofman responded bringing out the idea of 'salvation history'.

21. J.S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 233.

According to C.T. Fritsch, the most important idea of the 'salvation history' school is the conception of history as revelation. That is, that the Bible is a record of successive revelatory acts.²² The school emphasized the fact that God makes Himself known in and through the historical process in historical acts. It maintained that 'salvation history' is the line of God's action in the events of world history, but especially Jewish history, which leads to the achievement of His purpose in the salvation of mankind.

From this idea of 'salvation history' came the German terms *Geschichte*, meaning the history that has assumed existential significance; '*Historie*' meaning something that is merely actual or historical; and *Heilsgeschichte*, meaning the ongoing story of God's redemptive activity in history. The English equivalents for *Heilsgeschichte* include redemption or redemptive history, sacred history, holy history, and salvation history.

The term 'history' can be used to refer to actual events that happened in time and space, or the records of such events, or the study of such events. Moving a bit into the technicalities of the term, it can be noted that not every event falls into the significant category. For example, among the events that happen in the life of a man is 'sneezing'. Yet sneezing will hardly be recorded as part of the events of his life in any historical narrative, unless the act of sneezing

22. C. T. Fritsch, "The Bible as Redemptive History" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 103 No. 412 (1946):422.

resulted in a significant event like the felling of a tree.

There is a relationship between history and revelation. God reveals Himself in history as He does in nature. To what extent is history revelatory? Is it the whole of history with all the events which it contains that should be regarded as in some degree revelatory in character? There are divergent positions in the revelation and history debate. These range from on the one hand, the claim that all history directly unveils God's inner experience, to the contrary assertion on the other hand, that no historical event whatever has or can have any revelatory value. For example, W. Temple strongly affirms,

Unless all existence is a medium of revelation, no particular revelation is possible.... Either all occurrences are in some degree revelation of God or else there is no such revelation at all; for the conditions of the possibility of any revelation require that there should be nothing which is not revelation.²³

Following the same thought Paul Tillich says,

There is no reality, thing or event which cannot become a bearer of the mystery of being and enter into a revelatory correlation. Nothing is excluded from revelation in principle because nothing is included in it on the basis of special qualities. No person and nothing is worthy in itself to represent our ultimate concern.²⁴

There is something subtly lurking in the response of both Temple and Tillich. That is, it turns attention from the special events that salvation history has usually denoted to the regular events that constitute universal history.

If 'universal history' is revelatory where then is the place of

23. W. Temple, Nature, man and God (New York: AMS Press 1979), 306.

24. P. Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol 1 (London: SCM Press, 1978), 118.

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salvation history, most especially where there exists the opinion that all history is sacred because it is under God and at the same time all history is secular because it deals with the world of men?²⁵ The terms 'sacred' and 'secular' have been used respectively in the place of 'salvation' and 'universal.' Two suggestions emerge from the move to salvage 'salvation history' from being swallowed up by 'universal history'. The first proposes a neutral ground. The positivist historian argues that there is no way the objective reality of God at work in history can be sufficiently demonstrated to the satisfaction of the empiricist, maintaining the distinction between sacred and secular or ordinary history. The issue therefore becomes that of the perspective from which one views history. The perspective of Hebrew-Christian faith is just one of such perspectives.²⁶ The historian, the positivist and the empiricist can arrive at such conclusion and get away with it comfortably. Can the theologian? He cannot be comfortable with such neutrality that puts him in the realm of non-commitment. The second suggestion thus comes from the concerned theologian. To him there must be a kind of distinction between sacred (salvation) history and secular (universal) history. For example, J. Baillie maintains that though revelation is always given through events, yet it is only through such events as appear as God's mighty works.²⁷ In

25. H. Grimes, The Christian Views History (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 52.

26. Ibid., 75.

27. J. Baillie, The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 78.

a more elaborate expression S. M. Ogden and G. Kaufman say,

There are certain events which particularly manifest God's characteristic concerns as creator and redeemer and which are thus 'the acts of God' in a special sense -- as certain activities may be especially characteristic of a man and may be seen as his acts in a way that other aspects of his activity are not.²⁸

The point maintained by Baille, Ogden and Kaufman to a reasonable extent concretizes their demand.

One question still calls for attention. The skeptic may want to know why he should believe that God is revealed in the vicissitudes of Jewish history more than in the histories of other races and peoples. It is needful that the skeptic considers three things. First, not everything that happens in a nation constitute the history of that nation just as not every thing that happened in the land of Isreal makes 'salvation history.' This is where relevance and signficance of events come in. Second, in no history and religion of any of the other nations is there a parallel to Hebrew prophecy especially in the succession of prophets. It is true that God worked and works through other nations. Even the Hebrew prophets attest to the fact that God is in all history and uses other nations as instruments of his universal and sovereign purpose, (Amos 9:7; Isa. 10:5, 45:1; and Heb. 1:6). The unmistakable difference is that these nations produced no prophets of

28. S. M. Ogden, Journal of Religion 43 (1963); G. Kaufman, Havard Theology Review 61 (1968). Cited by J. Goldingay, Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, (1981), 80.

the Biblical type to interpret to them what God was doing in their historical events. B. Ramm rightly maintains, "The difference between secular history and Biblical history seems a shallow one. It is found in the fact that Biblical history is divinely interpreted history."²⁹ Third, while it is true that 'universal history' as well as 'salvation history' is revelatory, it is also true that it is not every revelation that is salvific. It had been maintained earlier that general revelation lacks the capacity for salvation while special revelation is salvific. Salvation history brings forth special revelation while universal history leads only to general revelation.

Mbiti's view of the term 'salvation history'

Mbiti does not hide his discomfort with the traditional understanding of the term 'salvation history' with regard to limiting it to the history of a particular people. This is quite clear from his statement, "In this case, so called 'salvation history' must widen its outreach in order to embrace the horizons of other peoples' histories."³⁰ But why would Mbiti want to see 'salvation history' embrace the horizons of other peoples' histories?

He says,

29. B. Ramm, "Biblical Faith and History" Christianity Today (March 1 1963): Also see A. Richardson, Christian Apologetics (London: SCM Press, 1947), 139-144.

30. J. S. Mbiti, "The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion" Christian Century 97 (August/September 1980): 819.

When we identify the God of the Bible as the same God who is known through African religion (whatever its limitations), we must also take it that God has had a historical relationship with African peoples. God is not insensitive to the history of the peoples other than Israel. Their history has a theological meaning. My interpretation of Israel's history demands a new look at the history of African peoples among whom this same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has indeed been at work.... I am not a historian, and I have not done careful thinking in this direction. But I feel that the issue of looking at African history in the light of Biblical understanding is clearly called for.³¹

Mbiti has written much in general terms, but his statement above is the most elaborate on the matter of 'salvation history.' Certain issues are worth examining in his statement to get the fuller implication of what he is saying.

Mbiti had earlier identified the God of the Bible as being the same God known through African religion. "The God described in the Bible is none other than the God who is already known in the frame work of our traditional African religiosity."³² After this identification he delves into the realm of logic as can be easily imagined, and the following could easily result from such reasoning:

1. The God of the Bible is the same as the God known in African religion.
2. The God of the Bible worked in the history of the Jews resulting in holy or salvation history.
3. The God of the Bible worked and works in the history of the Africans and should result in holy or salvation history.

31. J. S. Mbiti, "The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion", 818.

32. Ibid., 818.

4. Since the same God works in universal history, universal history should be salvation history.

5. Therefore, "so called 'salvation history' should extend to embrace the horizons of other peoples' histories.

Thus Mbiti sees and prefers the oneness of universal history which should also be salvation history, most especially since this is logical. While the God, both of the Bible and of African religion, is not anti-logic, He, at the same time, is not bound by the laws of logic. If not, what Mbiti is advocating would have been done even before his generation came to be. In response to such preference as Mbiti's C. F. H. Henry says,

That the living God is truly active in secular affairs is evident from the scriptural designation of Cyrus as the Lord's anointed to accomplish certain divine purposes (Isa. 45:1-7, cf. Ezra 1:1). But to assimilate this principle to a universal salvation history equated with socio-political structural changes... is quite another matter.³³

One cannot see why the selection of Jewish history as salvation history seems arbitrary and irrational to Mbiti when he seems to understand and admit the fact that Israel occupies a unique place in the plans of God. Talking about the ecumenical nature of Christ and the Biblical faith Mbiti writes,

In many passages of the Bible reference is made to the God 'of Israel', 'of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac.' But I do not see these passages as putting a monopoly on God. Rather, they are passages to emphasize the 'covenant' relationship between God and humankind, with Israel as a representative of the oikoumene....³⁴

If, as Mbiti admits in the above statement, God is using Israel as a representative in His dealing with humankind, why wouldn't

33. C. F. H. Henry, God, Revelation and Authority Vol. 2 (Waco, Texas: Word Books Publishers, 1976), 279.

34. J. S. Mbiti, "An Ecumenical Approach to Teaching the Bible", The Ecumenical Review 39 No. 4 (Oct. 1987): 407.

the history of Israel be unique and representative of the histories of other peoples?

Finally, Mbiti claims that the history of the African peoples has a theological meaning and that his interpretation of Israel's history demands a new look at the history of African peoples among whom God has been at work. Yet the same Mbiti shows skepticism about the possibility of knowing African history.³⁵ African history constitutes African religions and these have not been completely known as to be able to get their history which would also be the history of Africans.³⁶ How then will Mbiti fit into salvation history', the history of the African peoples the theological meaning of which cannot be known. Salvation history must be interpreted and that with divine guidance. The proposed oneness of universal history as salvation history is nothing but an undesired illusion.

Mbiti's Objection to Traditional View of Revelation

Oneness of All Revelation

Mbiti does with revelation what he does with salvation history. Having merged universal history with salvation history, Mbiti also assumes and proclaims the oneness of all revelation whether natural or Biblical. Mbiti argues, "I find the traditional western distinction between 'special revelation' and 'general revelation' to be in-adequate and un freeing. This is not a Biblical distinction."³⁷ With such a notion of the

35. J. S. Mbiti, African Religious and Philosophy, 5.

36. Ibid.

37. J. S. Mbiti, "The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion", 817-818.

oneness of divine revelation, Mbiti wonders whether God did reveal Himself only in the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samuel and other personalities of the Bible.³⁸ Expressing his amazement further Mbiti says, "Then was he not there in other times and in such places as Mount Fuji and Mount Kenya, as well as Mount Sinai?"³⁹ With this in his mind Mbiti finds liberation in the word 'also' and not in the word 'only'. God did not 'only' reveal Himself to a people, He also revealed Himself to all peoples.

The issues at stake in Mbiti's view of revelation is not much of whether God also revealed Himself to all peoples in one form or the other; for this was already maintained under general revelation. Rather, the issue is that he lumps all revelation together and maintains the sameness of all of God's revelation. "One important task then," writes Mbiti, "is to see the nature, the method and the implications of God's revelation among African peoples, in the light of the Biblical record of the same revelation."⁴⁰

All Revelation as Salvific

Another issue is the fact that Mbiti considers all revelation of equal value and significance. To him God's revelation on Mount Kenya that resulted in the traditional religion of the Kikuyu people of Central Kenya before the

38. J. S. Mbiti, *The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion*, 817.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 818.

coming of white missionaries is of equal value with and as theologically significant as God's revelation on Mount Fuji resulting in the traditional religion of the Japanese, as well as the revelation of God on Mount Sinai which is significant in Judaism in the Old Testament. This same revelation of the same God but at different places and times is equally salvific to their respective recipients.

The implication of Mbiti's view of revelation is demonstrated in part in his answer to a question put to him during an interview. Mbiti was asked, "If one admits the possibility of divine revelation apart from Christ, must not one also admit the possibility of salvation apart from Christ?"⁴¹

Answering, Mbiti says,

I think that question would need to be looked at in two ways -- what is and what we think ought to be (or ought not to be). Mainly, "what is" in terms of the fact that many people following other directions of religious experience have found real faith. It is called communion with God, fulfillment in life, hope.... That we cannot deny. And for them if that is what salvation is then they have received salvation without coming under the umbrella of the church. Now that is what is. What ought to be is another thing. The Christians say salvation ought to be through Jesus Christ and I don't feel entitled personally to say that I don't think we should universalize our understanding of salvation because salvation does not come from us, it is a gift of God... In other words, I am open to accept (the possibility that God does bring about salvation in other peoples who may not have had the chance to know about Jesus Christ as we know and name him.⁴²

41. B. W. Burleson, *John Mbiti: the Dialogue of an African Theologian with African Traditional Religion*. Ph. D. Diss., Baylor University, 1986), 95-96.

42. Interview by B. W. Burleson on Aug. 9 1985, in *Ibid.*

If for Mbiti, salvation has become whatever one thinks salvation is, and if anything claimed to be revelation that leads to any idea or ideology called by the name salvation is salvific then, what is the relevance of the Bible, the relevance of Christ's work of salvation and the point of mission work?

Some years before the time Mbiti made the above statement, he had somehow confessed the uniqueness of Christ of the Bible and of Christianity. Mbiti said then,

"He (Jesus Christ) is the stumbling block of all ideologies and religious systems; and even if some of His teaching may overlap with what they teach and proclaim, His own person is greater than can be contained in a religion or ideology. He is the man for others' and yet beyond them. It is He, therefore, and only He who deserves to be the goal and standard for individuals and mankind,... But only Christianity has the terrible responsibility of pointing to the way that ultimate Identity, Foundation and Source of security."⁴³

It is amazing how Mbiti affirms the exclusiveness of Jesus Christ and Christianity and at the same time upholds God's universal salvific revelation. Yet this 'change of mind' only means 'theological growth.'

43. J. S. Mbiti, African Religion and Philosophy, 277.

CHAPTER FOUR
BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AS REFLECTED BY
MBITI'S CONCEPTION OF REVELATION
African Tradition Religion in Relation
to the Old Testament

Parity by Similarity of Beliefs and Practices

Mbiti sees a lot of similarities in both the religious heritage of the Old Testament and that of the Africans, such that he could place them at par. He expresses this when he says,

We can find a great deal of interesting religious and cultural material in the Old Testament which parallels or matches the traditional background of African peoples.... In the area of the Old Testament a certain amount of give-and-take or mutual enlightenment can be carried out.¹

The similarities in both religious systems centre most in the areas of the concept of God and religiosity. There is similarity of monotheistic belief. After using Deut. 6:4 as the reference for the monotheistic demand of the Old Testament religion, Mbiti refers to African Traditional Religion and says,

When we turn to African religion, the notion of God is similarly basic. But monotheism is not raised as an issue. It is taken for granted that God can only be One, and His position as such is unquestionable.²

Mbiti is aware of, and notes that individuals may worship God in a private way, but may also show respect to other

1. J. S. Mbiti, "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa", The International Review of Missions 59 (Oct. 1970), 436.

2. -----"The concept of God in Jewish and African Traditions", in F. Von. Hammerstein, ed. Christian-Jewish Relations in Ecumenical Perspective (Ibadan: Daystar Press, (1978), 54.

religious beings and objects without incurring the wrath of God and without feeling that they are unfaithful to Him in any way.³ In addition to the above is the similarity of the difficulty posed by the question of divine duality in both religions. For example, God is the giver of life and the source of death at the same time. The belief in angelic spirits in Old Testament religion is similar to the belief in variety of spirits in African Traditional Religions.⁴

The worship of God in the Old Testament religion involves most of the practices Mbiti mentions and there is similarity in the various forms -- sacrifices, offerings, prayers, dedications, festivals, singing, dancing, ritual and ceremony. Each of these religious practices could be looked into to establish the similarity that exists in both religions. For example, Mbiti explains the worship of God in African Tradition Religion and says that sacrifices and offerings are directed to either God and or spirits and or the living-dead, and that because the spirits and the living-dead are regarded as intermediaries, God is the ultimate Recipient of the sacrifices and offerings whether or not the worshippers are aware of that.⁵ It seems Mbiti has left the realm of the sacrifices and offerings to that of intentions. More than this, the similarity he sees is more in form than essence, the strength of which cannot stand the test of argument.

3. J. S. Mbiti, "The Concept of God in Jewish and African Traditions", 55.

4. Ibid.

5. J. S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1969), 58.

Parity by Identical Preparatory Purpose

Mbiti considers African Traditional Religion at par with the Old Testament religion because they have the same purpose of preparing their adherents for the coming of Christianity.

Referring to such role served by African Traditional Religion, Mbiti says, "In a sense Christianity finds in Africa its Old Testament,..."⁶ This is further expressed in his statement, "I consider African Traditional Religion, Islam, and the other religious systems to be preparatory and even essential ground in the search for the ultimate. But only Christianity has the terrible responsibility of pointing the way to the ultimate Identity, Foundation and Source of security."⁷ These other religious systems Mbiti refers to include Judaism, Hinduism and the Baha'i Faith.⁸ And by Judaism Mbiti means Old Testament religiosity.

In Mbiti's analysis, he sees all religions falling under two categories: Christianity on the one side and the rest of religions on the other. These other religions are preparatory to Christianity, looking forward in expectancy to Christianity which alone bears the full and final revelation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ. So he says "...beyond the common points

6. J. S. Mbiti, "The Growing Respectability of African Traditional Religion" Lutheran World 19 (1972), 54. This is quite reminiscent of the ideas of E. W. Smith who talking about the close parallels between the religious heritage of the Africans and the Old Testament says, "They (Africans) have a heritage from God which we can only compare with the heritage that God gave the Jews in preparing them for Christ." The Christian Mission in Africa (London: IMC, 1926), 41.

7. J. s. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 277.

8. Ibid., 254-258.

of reference with Jewish religious life, there is something which alone bears the full and final revelation of God in the more, namely Jesus Christ, who comes out of Jewish religiosity, and who fulfills an element of African religious thirst which neither African religiosity nor Old Testament religiosity can satisfy."⁹ To Mbiti, the yet-fully-salvational capacity of the Old Testament religion as portrayed by the Bible is also the case with African Traditional Religion. Both remain incomplete without Jesus Christ of the New Testament.

Further, Mbiti brings out this parity in his explanation of the purpose of African religion as a preparation for the Gospel--'preparatio evangelica'. In his explanation he uses expressions very similar to those used by Paul when explaining the purpose of the law (the Old Testament) to the Galatians.

African religion, he says,

has created a spiritual yearning, spiritual insights and sensitivities, which receive their ultimate satisfaction in the Gospel scheme.... African Religion could not produce that which the Gospel now offers to African peoples. Yet, it tutored them so that they could find genuine fulfillment in the Gospel.¹⁰

But the Bible had recorded Paul saying,

what purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made;... But before faith came we were kept

9. J. S. Mbiti, "African Christians and Jewish Religions Heritage", in F. Von Hammerstein, ed. Christian-Jewish Relations in Ecumenical Perspective, 19. Also as "African Christians and the Jewish Religion", Christian Attitudes on Jews and Judaism No. 56 (Oct. 1977), 4.

10. J. S. Mbiti, "Christianity and African Religion", in M. Cassidy and L. Verlinden, eds. Facing the New Challenges: The Message of PACLA (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1978), 311.

under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.¹¹

In this way, Mbiti is saying that what Paul said was God's purpose for giving the Old Testament law before Christ, was exactly the same purpose for African Traditional Religion. What the Old Testament law could not do was exactly what African Traditional Religion also could not do until the coming of Christ. Thus the Old Testament Biblical revelation is not different from the revelation from which African Traditional Religion arose. Concerning his use of Pauline ideas to express the identical purpose of African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament religion, Benjamin Ray has rightly accused Mbiti of "casting African ideas and symbols too hastily in Christian theological terms, producing, perhaps, more distortion than illumination."¹²

The use of the term 'preparatio evangelica' goes back to E. W. Smith in 1926 when he said,

If we really believe that the Divine Logos, who lighteth every man, has shone in souls of Africans, we shall endeavor to trace that working and find there-in the preparatio evangelica, and the conviction will regulate all our dealing with the people.¹³

The term was then used to give the impression that the distinction between African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament religion as far as revelation is concerned, is one of degree and not of kind. According to Mcveigh, Smith identified

11. Galatians 3:19^b, 23 and 24 (NKJV).

12. B. Ray, "Recent Studies of African Religion", History of Religions 12 (1972-1973), 86.

13. E. W. Smith, The Christian Mission in Africa (London: International Missionary Council, 1926), 43.

both religions as general revelation with the term 'special revelation' confined to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ This is exactly what Mbiti has taken over whole sale.

Mbiti finds it a difficult one the question of what exactly is valuable in African Traditional Religion as preparation for the Gospel. While he leaves the details to the churches and the theological institutions, he suggests three areas to be looked into : the area "which clearly overlaps with Christianity", "that which clearly falls outside of Christian teaching and practice", and "the area of uncertainty which does not seriously injure the presence of Christianity or interfere with the profession of the Faith."¹⁵ These areas are to be considered in the beliefs, practices, personnel and religious objects of African Traditional Religion.¹⁶

Is Mbiti justified in pushing his 'preparatio evangelica' hypothesis? These non-Biblical religions for one, are not preparatory because they are not pre-Christianity, except African Traditional Religion. Neither has God testified to His purposeful establishment of these religions as preparatory to the Gospel, for the Bible in which Mbiti believes that 'we encounter the most complete record of God's revelation and God's

14. M. J. McVeigh, God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity (Massachusetts: Claude Stark, 1974), 83.

15. J. S. Mbiti, "Christianity and Traditional Religious in Africa", 433.

16. Ibid.

message',¹⁷ nowhere commends the non Judaeo-Christian religions. Rather they are condemned. The adherents of these religions do not see them as preparatory to the Gospel, neither do the Christians converted from them. Therefore, Mbiti's 'preparatio evangelica' hypothesis is nothing but a reading-in or projection of his theological intentionalities upon the religion of the Africans.¹⁸

As earlier established, God's special revelation builds upon His general revelation. Every known people from the different parts of the world has attempted a response in various ways to God's general revelation of Himself. The outcome of this attempt is the various non-Judaeo-Christian religions. God's general revelation stands out as the common denominator in these religions. It is therefore, not the religion per se e.g. African Traditional Religion, that is preparatory to the Gospel but that which led to the founding of the religions -- God's general revelation of Himself. Because of this common denominator, there exists some degree of similarity, first between these non Judaeo-Christian religions, and second, between them and the Judaeo-Christian religions. This similarity only establishes avenues for communicating the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the

17. J. S. Mbiti, Bible and Theology in African Christianity (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 202.

18. D. R. Bengston, "The Issue of 'Meaning' and 'Function' in the study at African Traditional Religions: Illustrated by a Religio-Historical Inquiry into the Phenomenon of the 'Founder'". (Ph. D. diss. The Hartford Seminary Foundation, Hartford, Connecticut, 1971), 56.

nations.¹⁹

If this were what Mbiti meant by 'preparatio evangelica' his hypothesis would have been acceptable. But he meant more than this having picked on similarity of beliefs and practices, and the non-finality as grounds for parity. He took 'similarity' for 'same'. The warning of Newbigin is quite appropriate for people like minded. He says,

The other religions are not to be understood and measured by their proximity to or remoteness from Christianity. They are not beginnings which are completed in the Gospels. They face in different directions, ask fundamentally different questions and look for other kinds of fulfillment than that which is given in the Gospels.²⁰

Mbiti's argument for the parity of African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament reveals the nature of Biblical authority implicit in his idea of revelation. If African Traditional Religion is at par with the Old Testament, especially because they have similar beliefs and practices, and both have the equal role of preparing adherents for the coming of Christ and Christianity, then it should be safely maintained that African Traditional Religion could conveniently replace the Old Testament as the Indian believers once claimed for their traditional religion.

Mbiti would claim not to be in support of this since he has warned,

19. K. E. Eitel, "The Way': Christ's Uniqueness and its Bearing on Modern Mission", Criswell Theological Review 4 No. 2 (1990), 288.

20. L. Newbigin, The Finality of Christ (London: SCM Press, 1969), 38.

Nothing can substitute for the Bible. However much African cultural-religious background may be close to the Biblical world, we have to guard against references like the hitherto unwritten 'African Old Testament.'²¹

But he does not seem to mean what he said in his warning. One would understand it as an attempt to sustain the pedagogical role of the Old Testament -- the only role the liberal theologians ascribe to the Old Testament²² in its relationship with the New, and the only thing the Old Testament does not share with other non Biblical religions. If Mbiti means more than this, then it is his inconsistency that is on display. He has not kept to his own warning and cannot be convincing that he holds a high view of the Old Testament, nor of the Bible as a whole. Rather, by arguing for the parity between African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament because of identical preparatory purpose, Mbiti betrays his low view of Biblical authority. The Old Testament therefore cannot be accorded primacy of authority from Mbiti's approach.

African Traditional Religion in Relation
to the New Testament

Continuity by Compatibility

For Mbiti, African Traditional Religion in its preparatory role,

has made African peoples disposed by nature toward things religious, since it has permeated all areas of human life activities and understanding of the world. It has acquired its own system of beliefs and practices, its values and

21. J. S. Mbiti, The Bible and Theology in African Christianity, 59.

22. A. Richardson, "Is the Old Testament the Propaedeutic to Christian Faith?" in ed. B. W. Anderson, The Old Testament and Christian Faith: A Theological Discussion (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1963), 37.

institutions, its interpretation of the universe in terms of creation, the place of man, human destiny and man's relationship with nature, all of which are largely compatible with Christianity itself.²³

Because of its somewhat undefinable nature, Mbiti recommends that this compatibility be determined carefully with the aid of academic understanding, the grace of God and the sympathies of the human heart.²⁴ Never-the-less Mbiti still refers to the three areas that result from the interaction of African Traditional Religion and Christianity: the area of overlap, the area that falls without, and the area of uncertainty. The areas of overlap, especially, and of uncertainty form Mbiti's 'continuity.' According to him,

The process of continuity means that the Christian faith establishes links with areas of African Religion which largely resemble Christian teaching. At these points the same or similar ideas meet and merge into each other without conflict and people feel 'at home'.²⁵

In his sympathetic mind, Mbiti sees compatibility in matters of beliefs such as God, continuation of life after death, spiritual beings, the works of God and others. In the area of uncertainty, Mbiti sees the issue of polygamy as "a thing which the Bible neither condemns nor endorses; a thing which Christianity in Africa should put up with since it is not detrimental to the profession of the Christian Faith for the individuals concerned,

23. J. S. Mbiti, "The Growing Respectability of African Traditional Religion", Lutheran World 19 (1972), 57.

24. J. S. Mbiti, "The Growing Respectability of African Traditional Religion", 57.

25. ----- "Christianity and African Religion", in M. Cassidy and L. Verlinden, eds. Facing the New Challenges: The Message of PACLA (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1978), 309.

and should be more acceptable in the community than the Satanic issue of war."²⁶ Once again Mbiti's compatibility is not beyond the superficial level and he carries over African ideas of morality into Christianity to justify continuity.

Another proof of compatibility which Mbiti uses in support of continuity is the numerous converts into Christianity from African Traditional Religion. Mbiti writes,

Far from being the enemy of Christianity, traditional religion is in fact the main contributor to the rapid Christianization of Africa. Without traditional religion Christianity would take much longer to be accommodated, to be accepted and to penetrate African life.²⁷

Again he writes,

Nearly all the converts to Christianity come from African Traditional Religion, and only a few from Islam....African Traditional Religiosity is playing a major role.... in the rapid expansion of Christianity.²⁸

Here Mbiti is basing compatibility of African Traditional Religion and the New Testament on common grounds that exist between these religious systems. He then uses the rapid growth of Christianity as proof both of the compatibility and the effectiveness of the common grounds. Such reasoning cannot stand in the presence of any other religion that has more common

26. J. S. Mbiti, "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa", International Review of Missions 59 (Oct. 1970), 435.

27. J. S. Mbiti, "The Growing Respectability of African Traditional Religion", 56. Also in Bible and Theology in African Christianity, 177.

28. -----, "Some current concerns of African Theology", in J. S. Mbiti, ed. African and Asian contributions to contemporary Theology (Geneva: WCC 1976), 14.

grounds with Christianity than African Traditional Religion has. This is where Mbiti runs into some inconsistency as often is the case. While discussing the future of Christianity in Africa (1970-2000) and how dialogue with other religions would be a means of survival, Mbiti sees Islam as having more common grounds with Christianity than African Traditional Religion has. He says,

The encounter between Traditional Religions and Christianity will perhaps be more difficult to handle than in the case of Christianity versus Islam. In the latter, there are common grounds like scriptures, theological works, historical developments, methods of missionary expansion and champions for each faith. In the case of Traditional Religions these features are absent,...²⁹

If compatibility depends on common grounds, and Islam has more common grounds with Christianity than African Traditional Religion then Islam is more compatible with Christianity than Christianity is with African Traditional Religion. Then also, the rapid expansion of Christianity should rather be attributed to its compatibility with Islam and not African Traditional Religion. This goes to confirm that there is something not right with Mbiti's notion of compatibility, continuity as well as his attributed reason for the expansion of Christianity. To think that because "Christianity finds in traditional religion a common vocabulary by means of which to communicate its own message in the broadest sense of the terms -vocabulary, communication and message",³⁰ amounts to

29. J. S. Mbiti, "The Future of Christianity in Africa (1970-2000)", *Communio Viatorum* 13 (1970), 35.

30. J. S. Mbiti. "The Growing Respectability of African Traditional Religion", 57.

compatibility and continuity as Mbiti thinks, is nothing but a theological misnomer. And the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Africa should be better seen as a miracle that lies in the hands of God.³¹ As long as the compatibility Mbiti claims for African Traditional Religion and the New Testament is not really there, the continuity he alleges cannot also be there: Therefore whatever authority he wants to claim for African Traditional Religion based on unreal compatibility and continuity cannot stand.

Continuity by Fulfillment

Guided by his idea of revelation, Mbiti reasons that there exists continuity between African Traditional Religion and New Testament Christianity, not only because of compatibility but also because New Testament Christianity fulfills African Traditional Religion. Fulfillment in Mbiti's definition is, completing, perfecting, transforming, changing, adding final meaning, crowning with that which is perfect and ideal."³²

In line with the above definition, Mbiti says, "The Christian Faith comes therefore, to judge, to save and sanctify, to enrich, to fulfill, to crown and to say 'yes' to African

31. P. Kijanga, "Old and New African Society in Relation to the Gospel", African Theological Journal 13 No. 3 (1984), 194.

32. -----, "African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development", in R.P. Beaver, ed. The Gospel and Frontier People: A Report of Consultation, Dec. 1972 (S. Pasadena: W. Carey Library, 1973), 91-92.

Religion and not to destroy it."³³

"Only Christianity has the legal credentials to pass the right judgement on traditional religiosity; and unless Christianity does that in Africa, it will find itself wrapped up in a lot of religiosity.... If there were nothing to be judged and nothing to be saved in African traditional life, then there would be no need for Christianity in our continent."³⁴

With these statements Mbiti is very much in support of one of Neibuhr's four theological positions on the interaction between Christ and culture; the one that says Christ fulfills culture. Christ did not come to destroy but to fulfill, Mbiti would say. According to him, such a theological position demands first the isolation of the essence of Christianity from its peripherals, and the isolation of values within our traditional cultures which are redeemable and need fulfillment by the Gospel, the essence of the Christian faith.³⁵ But the basis of this fulfillment as well as the approach of isolation is Mbiti's idea of revelation.

Referring to his recommended isolation approach Mbiti says,

This approach would inevitably assume that God's revelation to mankind has not been confined to the Hebrew people alone, and that God has made Himself known to African peoples within their own history and religious insights.

33. J. S. Mbiti, "Christianity and African Religion", in Kenya Churches Handbook: The Development of Kenyan Christianity ed. D. B. Barret, et. al. (Kisumu Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1973), 311.

34. -----, "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa", The International Review of Missions 59 (1970), 436.

35. Ibid., 90.

Therefore, if that be valid there is in African heritage something which has, through the centuries; anticipated the Gospel how be it in terms largely different from those of Biblical revelation.³⁶

The usefulness of this principle of fulfillment will be in guiding the church in its life, work, and mission in Africa, as such it should be given a theological articulation as an academic exercise, according to Mbiti.³⁷ If Mbiti sees something in African heritage which has anticipated the Gospel through the centuries, then, once again he must be reading-in or projecting his knowledge of the relationship between the Old Testament religion and New Testament religious system. This is so because the same Mbiti describes African cultures, which cannot be divorced from African religiosity, as having "been all-sufficient and self-sufficient."³⁸ What then could have anticipated the Gospel in such an all-sufficient and self-sufficient religious system? Anticipation of fulfillment by the Gospel connotes the recognition of a need and such recognition negates the all-sufficiency and self-sufficiency of the African religious system. Moreover, Mbiti does not in any way identify what in African religiosity has anticipated the Gospel, and has received fulfillment in Christianity.

In a further explanation of his principle of fulfillment Mbiti says, "As if they waited without knowing it, but not in darkness; there was a light which was divine revelation, and that

36. J. S. Mbiti, "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa", 90.

37. Ibid., 89.

38. Ibid., 92.

light led Africans to the Gospel..."³⁹ Yes, it was as if the Africans waited, but they were not. Putting it in the words of D. J. Hesselgrave,

The uniqueness of the Christian faith does not simply mean that it adds something to the other faiths. It is not the fulfillment of other faiths -- not in anything approaching the sense in which it is the fulfillment of Old Testament Judaism, in any case. No, the Christian faith is qualitatively different from other faiths. To fail to make that fact crystal clear, is to open the door to misunderstanding at best and syncretism at worst.⁴⁰

Element of Discontinuity

Mbiti accepts the existence of some areas of no common grounds between African Traditional Religion and New Testament Christianity; and this forms the basis of the discontinuity between the two religious systems. Mbiti says, "There are also fundamental differences between the two religious systems. This means that there is no common ground in the concepts concerned."⁴¹

Mbiti's enumeration of the areas of differences includes the Biblical view of human history, the prophetic movement of the Old Testament, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God, the Christian hope, salvation, the Trinity, the church and the sacraments on the side of the Christian faith. On the side of African Traditional Religion it includes

39. A personal communication with Kwame Bediako. Cited in "Identity and Integration", 422.

40. D. J. Hesselgrave, Christian Communication and Religious Pluralism: Capitalizing on Differences", Missiology: An International Review 18 No. 2 (April 1990), 134.

41. J. S. Mbiti, "Christianity and African Religion", in Facing the New Challenges, 310.

the belief in and use of mystical power in the form of medicine, divination and magic, and the strong awareness and involvement of the living-dead.⁴² Going by just the differences Mbiti points out, it is easily observable that the things on the side of the Christian faith form the core issues of Christianity. Similarly those on the side of African Traditional Religion form the major part of the core. Where the core beliefs of two religious systems are in disparity, does it not mean that the assumption for compatibility and continuity is on the impossible end of the continuum? Since Mbiti claims that Christianity should be allowed to sanctify, to judge and transform African Traditional Religion, is it possible to remove or do away with the afore mentioned core areas of African Traditional Religion because of their incompatibility with New Testament Christianity? And what will the union of Christianity and African religion be known as? It beats the imagination that Mbiti could stand to argue for compatibility, continuity and fulfillment between African Traditional Religion and New Testament Christianity.

All world religions have points of dissimilarity one from the other. The same goes for African Traditional Religion and the New Testament as Mbiti has pointed out. Never-the-less, the dissimilarity does not dismiss the fact that Mbiti has neither given the proper and full recognition to the authority of the New Testament, nor of the Bible as a whole. Such a recognition becomes difficult for Mbiti because he prefers to see the New Testament revelation as the continuation of the alleged

42. Ibid.

revelation in African traditional religion. As long as he does this the fullness of New Testament authority is compromised.

Mbiti by his definition of fulfillment, sees the New Testament as adding final meaning to African Traditional Religion, or as crowning African Traditional Religion with that which is perfect and ideal. This implies that African Traditional Religion and the New Testament are of the same stock. The testimony of one is comparable to that of the other. Where care is not taken the testimony of African Traditional Religion sometimes supercedes that of the New Testament, especially when the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion which are allegedly at par also seem to agree. Mbiti's suggestion that Christianity should put up with polygamy is an example. Old Testament religiosity does not condemn polygamy. The same is the case in African traditional religiosity. If African Tradition Religion is the same stock with the New Testament, the combined support of African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament for polygamy should be more weighty than that of the New Testament. Therefore, polygamy may continue to enjoy acceptance in African Christianity. It is clear that with such reasoning, Biblical authority is usurped. The Biblical position on polygamy is clear. Mbiti himself is aware of the Biblical recommendation of monogamous marriage.⁴³ But on his ascription of authority to traditional religion, he therefore recommends polygamy for African Christianity, thus placing the

43. J. S. Mbiti, Love and Marriage in Africa, (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1973), 82.

New Testament at par with African traditional religion in terms of authority.

The Old Testament in Relation to the New Testament

Mbiti, in all his writings, has not been directly concerned with the relationship that exists between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Never-the-less, the relationship between the two Testaments as it affects Biblical authority is reflected in his idea of revelation. This is glaring, most especially in his discussions of the relationship between African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament religion.

The parity of African Traditional Religion with the Old Testament religion as maintained by Mbiti, is on the basis of similarity of beliefs, practices, and identical preparatory purpose. On the strength of this alleged parity, it automatically follows, in effect and not in essence, that the relationship between African Traditional Religion and New Testament Christianity according to Mbiti would be similar to that between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Therefore, the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament would mainly be that of continuity by similarity of beliefs, by preparatory purpose and by fulfillment. The latter two shall be briefly discussed by way of inference from some of Mbiti's statements considered earlier.

Continuity by Preparatory Purpose

That the Old Testament is continuous with the New Testament is a fact that is not disputed by most Biblical theologians and believers of New Testament Christianity. That the Old Testament is preparatory to the New Testament is also a fact not disputed.

Therefore the point of examination is not necessarily the fact of preparation but the nature of preparation.

Mbiti considers all religions -- African Traditional Religion, Islam, Old Testament Judaism, Buddhism and the Baha'i Faith -- as preparatory to the New Testament Christianity. Central to the grounds that these religions are preparatory is the non finality of their revelation as compared with the New Testament revelation. Therefore, if the nature of preparation is the same as that of other religions, then the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament is not different from the relationship between these other religions and the New Testament. This is more so when the Old Testament is considered as the product of general revelation.

Continuity by Fulfillment

Again, it is not much of a problem that the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New Testament. But with the classification of all religions into two categories: Christianity on the one side and other religions on the other, on the basis of their respective revelations, the continuity by fulfillment that comes out of Mbiti's idea of revelation is not different from that expressed by Hans Kung when he says, "Christianity represents the fulfillment and crystallization point for all religions."⁴⁴ Any argument for such fulfillment between the Old Testament and the New Testament must have at its background Mbiti's idea of revelation and a blunt refusal to see and consider the many links that exist between the two Testaments which the other religions do not have.

44. H. Kung, On Being A Christian, Trans. E. Quinn, (London: Collins, 1977), 123.

Mbiti's proposed continuity by fulfillment between African Traditional Religion and the New Testament, and between the Old and the New Testaments has been considered untenable. A point that seems to challenge the argument for the untenability is the continuity by fulfillment between general revelation and special revelation that was maintained earlier. In other words, lets assume that African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament religion are the products of general revelation (as claimed by Mbiti). New Testament Christianity then is the product of special revelation. This would mean that African Traditional Religion is fulfilled by the New Testament just as the Old Testament is fulfilled by the New Testament. But such relationship does not exist between African Traditional Religion and the New Testament. African Traditional Religion and the other non-Judaeo-Christian religions are the response of man and man alone, in his depravity, sinfulness and sinful mindedness, to God's general revelation of Himself through nature and human conscience. But New Testament Christianity is the response of man, aided by divine guidance through prophetic mediation, to God's special revelation of Himself through scripture and the Person of Jesus Christ who was Himself the perfect prophetic mediation. For this reason the continuity by fulfillment between the non-mediated general and specific revelations cannot be carried over as the same for the non-Biblical and Biblical religions.

If by preparatory purpose and by the nature of fulfillment the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament

is the same as that between African Traditional Religion (or any other religion) and the New Testament, then the full authority of the Bible is at stake, being on the diminishing end. It does no good to Biblical authority to maintain a high view of the New Testament and a low view of the Old Testament. If it is both Testaments that make the Bible, then the full authority of the whole Bible should be maintained. This is the area Mbiti is not measuring up to expectations. Mbiti finds himself in this dilemma because he doesn't seem to know what to do with the uniqueness of the salvation that is in Christ Jesus. He wants to accept the salvation as unique since it is the fullest revelation of God to humankind. But he seems to undermine its Old Testament roots. This he does by maintaining that African Traditional Religion is fulfilled by the New Testament just as the Old Testament is fulfilled by the New. He therefore sees no superiority in the Old Testament over African Traditional Religion. On the one hand, he seems to maintain a high view of the New Testament but on the other hand, he down plays the authority of the Old Testament.

CHAPTER FIVE

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AS REFLECTED IN

BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF REVELATION

The relationship between African Traditional Religion, the Old Testament, and the New Testament according to Mbiti's concept of revelation implies denying the Bible its full authority. The testimony of the Bible to this relationship will now be examined.

African Traditional Religion in

Relation to the Old Testament

The nation of Israel in Old Testament times was surrounded by nations that worshipped other gods. Israel's worship of Yahweh was always threatened either by pollution or by the temptation to worship other gods. The greatest threat came from the worship of Baal and calf. Baalism was the national traditional religion of the Canaanites whom the Israelites dispossessed of the land of Canaan. Jezebel officially introduced and promoted the worship of Baal (1 Kg. 16:31, 32), while Jeroboam introduced calf worship in the northern kingdom after the division of the nation of Israel (Ezek. 32:1-6), and it remained until the captivity of the northern kingdom. The worship of other gods in traditional religions therefore struggled for survival in the midst of the worship of Yahweh in Judaism. In both religious systems there is element of similarity as well as elements of dissimilarity. But the emphasis is on discontinuity.

Element of Similarity

The similarity found in these religions exists mostly in the forms and features of worship. These are characteristically similar in most religions. They briefly include prayers, sacrifices (drink, meal and animal) and the burning of incense to the deity by the worshippers. There are sacred places, altars, and pillars of worship. There are religious functionaries -- the prophets of Yahweh and those of Baal. As could be seen from the contest on Mount Carmel, the worshippers of both religious systems are convinced beyond doubt that their deity could bring about the supernatural, that is, accepting animal sacrifice with fire from above. There were also the religious phenomena of prophecy and prophesying (1 Kg. 18:29). The similarity in the phenomenon of prophecy was such that some who claimed to be prophets of Yahweh prophesied by Baal. They even caused those who, among the worshippers of Yahweh, believed their prophecies to err (Jer. 23:13; 2:18). African Traditional Religion is very much in consonance with all the points of similarity mentioned above.

Enhancing the degree of consonance are some outstanding religio-cultural commonalities, such as the widely practised circumcision in Africa, the position of women in both societies, the worldliness of both religious frame of mind, marriage customs especially polygamy and levirate system, the legalism and the literalism of the Old Testament which is very much African. G. E. Phillips rightly says, "legalism comes naturally to the African, who finds it difficult to accept teaching as

binding unless it is supported by outward sanctions."¹ It is on the basis of these worship features and religio-cultural similarities that Mbiti could say, "Specific religious laws, habits, activities, customs like sacrifices, offerings, festivals and prayers, in Biblical record come very close to those observed in African religious life."²

Element of Dissimilarity

In the midst of all the similarity, there exists the element of dissimilarity. While the similarity was mainly in the forms of worship, the dissimilarity is in the areas of object of worship and morality of the system. The Old Testament records the sharp condemnation of that which constitutes the core spiritual practices of the other religions wherein spiritual powers are manifested. The condemnation includes sacrifice, witchcraft, the diviner and divination, sorcery and sorcerers, magic, magicians and spiritists. These are all abomination before God (Deut. 18:1-12; Exd. 22:18; Gen. 41:8; Isa. 2:6). The condemnation made such practices punishable by death (Lev. 20:6, 27).

More than these detestations, the Bible (Old Testament) considers all the gods of the nations that surrounded Israel as worthless idols (1 Chron. 16:26; Ps. 96:5). In other words, the object of worship in these other religions is other than Yahweh.

1. G. E. Philips, The Old Testament and the World church (London: Lutherworth, 1948), 9.

2. J. S. Mbiti, "African Christians and the Jewish Religion", Christian attitudes on Jews and Judaism No. 56 (Oct. 1977), 2.

Infact, Moses identified the object of worship, to whom the backslidden Israelites offered sacrifices, as demons and not God (Deut. 32:17). These two areas of dissimilarity -- the object of worship and the morality of the system completely overshadow the areas of similarity such that little or no consideration is given to points of similarity in the Bible. "There is no single commendation", says B. H. Kato, "of non Christian worship by the Word of God. The so called values in other religions talked about today did not warrant any praise from the Bible."³ It is especially on these points of dissimilarity that the emphasis on discontinuity, rather than continuity, is based.

Emphasis on Discontinuity

The Biblical declaration of the object of worship (gods) in non-Biblical religions as 'idols' is evidence that the Bible shows no slightest awareness of the worship of Yahweh in these religions. Before further emphasis on discontinuity the position of African Traditional Religion in this Old Testament declaration is worth looking into.

It is an acknowledged and non-dismissible fact that the traditional African religionist has some knowledge of God the Creator who is the same as the God of the Bible. Because of the plurality of the objects of worship in African Traditional Religion, God as known by the African religionist, is just one of these objects of worship; the others being the divinities, ancestral spirits and other spirit beings. The issue of worship

3. B. H. Kato, Theological Pitfalls in Africa, (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 125.

in African Traditional Religion has been considered differently by different African theologians. E. B. Idowu, who sees African Traditional Religion as implicit monotheism,⁴ emphasises the mediatorial role of the divinities, ancestor spirits and other spirits before God. Yet, Idowu displays inconsistency when he says in actual religious life and practice the Yoruba do not treat the divinities, ancestor spirits and the other spirits as means to God (Olodumare), but more often as ends in themselves.⁵ Patrick J. Ryan suggests that the almost total lack of any direct ritual worship of God should be understood not as indicating His otiose nature but His absolute transcendence.⁶ Mbiti states his position by saying, "Individuals may worship God in a private way, but they may also show respect to other religious beings and objects without incurring the wrath of God and without feeling that they are unfaithful to Him in any way."⁷

Mbiti carefully uses the word 'respect' and avoids the word 'worship' with reference to other religious beings. Never-the-less, he means the phenomenon of worship. If he actually meant 'respect' per se then, the point of incurring the wrath of God or the feeling of unfaithfulness may not come in at

4. E. B. Idowu, Olodumare - god in Yoruba Belief, (London: Longmans, 1962), 142.

5. E. B. Idowu, Olodumare, 143.

6. P.J. Ryan, "'Arise O God!' The Problem of 'gods' in West Africa". Journal of Religion in Africa 11 No. 3 (1980), 166.

7. J. S. Mbiti, African Religious and Philosophy, (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 54.

all. He shies away from using the word 'worship' because he maintains that African religion is basically monotheistic.⁸ This was why Mbiti declared earlier that whether the worshippers were aware of it or not, their worship went to God.

The actual position, revealed from an examination of the prayers of African Traditional religionists is that God, though known, is somehow relegated to the background in their worship. Here are two samples of African prayers.

I. You, Father God, who are in the heavens and below,
Creator of all things and all-knowing, of the earth and the heavens.

We are but children unknowing anything evil; If this sickness has been brought by man we beseech you, help us through these roots.

In case it was inflicted by you, the conserver, likewise do we entreat your mercy on your child;

Also you, our grandparents, who sleep in the place of the shades,

We entreat all of you who sleep on one side.

All ancestors, males and females, great and small,

Help us in this trouble, have compassion on us; so that we can also sleep peacefully.

And thus do I spit out this mouthful of water, Pu-pu! Pu-pu!

Please listen to our earnest request.

II. Nyankopon Tweadyampon Nyame, upon whom we lean and do not fall, receive this wine and drink.

Earth Goddess, whose day of worship is Thursday, receive this wine and drink.

Spirit of our ancestors, receive this wine and drink.

This girl child whom God has given me, today has attained nubility.

O mother who dwells in the land of ghosts, do not come and take her away and do not have permitted her to menstruate only to die.⁹

The divinities, ancestors and spirits are invoked and honoured as autonomous power, though they derived from God. They

8. Ibid.

9. J. S. Mbiti, The Prayers of African Religion, (London: SPCK, 1975), 45 and 96.

exercise their will in a free and arbitrary manner, thus usurping the honours due God. "Without this notion of independence in activity, there would be no need to worship and revere them",¹⁰ says K. Bediako.

The nature of worship in African Traditional Religion is very similar to that of the religions of the nations which surrounded Israel. The similarity is such that the acknowledged and non-dismissible fact that the African religionist has some knowledge of God in his worship system can be extended to the religions of the nations surrounding Israel. For example, B. Idowu brings out this point in his argument based on Rom. 3:29 and Acts 14:17. He says,

On the basis of the Bible taken as a whole ... there is only one God the Creator of heaven and earth and all that is in them; the God who has never left himself without witness in any nation, age or generation....¹¹

Definitely, this includes not just the Africans but as well as Syrians, Canaanites, Moabites and the other nations that surrounded Israel. Therefore, one can say with high degree of certainty, that God was also known in the religious systems of the nations which surrounded Israel. Be that as it may, the Old Testament shows no awareness or acknowledgment of such knowledge of God. Why is this so?

10. K. Bediako, "Christian Tradition and the African God Revisited: A Process in the Exploration of a Theological Idiom", in The Living God in Contemporary Africa, ed. D. M. Gitari and G. P. Benson, (Nairobi: Africa Theological Fraternity, 1986), 85.

11. E. B. Idowu, Towards an Indigenous church, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 25.

The answer that comes to mind is that even if these are truly attempts to worship God, the Bible (Old Testament) clearly regards such attempts as unacceptable. It is either He alone is worshipped or He is not worshipped at all. This runs throughout the Bible, starting from the decalogue, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exd. 20:3). Therefore the ontological setup of African Traditional Religion puts it in the same position with the non-Biblical religions -- that the gods worshipped are idols. The Biblical consideration of African Traditional Religion is that God is not worshipped at all, contrary to the loud claims of some African theologians. Thus the emphasis on discontinuity is extended to all the non-Biblical religions, including African Traditional Religion.

The picture that one gets from the Old Testament with regards to the relationship between the non-Biblical religions and the Old Testament is that of absolute or total discontinuity. The Israelites were to maintain this discontinuity by all means. In Deut. 13:1-11 it is spelt out that any enticement by any person, no matter his religious professional status (whether a prophet, teacher or miracle worker) or his family and social status (son, daughter, father, mother or friend), to worship other gods is punishable by death. If any city harbours such a person, that city is liable to be plundered and burnt down by fire, to be rebuilt no more (Deut. 13:12-16). Part of the injunctions received by the Israelites before they possessed the land of Canaan was to seek the place that God had chosen for Him to be worshipped and sacrifices and offerings offered there (Deut. 12:5-11). To effectively carry

this out, they were to utterly destroy all the places where these other nations (they were to dispossess) served their gods. They were to destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, burn their wooden images with fire, cut down the carved images of their gods, and destroy their names from the places they had been put (Deut. 12:2-4). The prophet of Yahweh who ventured to speak in the name of other gods would be liable to death (Deut. 18:20).

The discontinuity between African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament is on a very thick line and one wonders whether this down to earth Biblical position is given due proclamation. G. E. Wright wonders at the responsibility of the church in this regard. He says,

The surprising thing is not that the cult of magic and divination was not known in Israel but that it should be so definitely forbidden in the law ... so perfectly is the Old Testament on this point that it seems strange to me its resources together with those of the New Testament are not more vigorously used by the modern church to combat our modern superstitions which ultimately go back to the same environment as that of Israel.¹²

What Wright says about magic and divination in the above statement goes for the whole religious setup.

The severity of the Old Testament on its discontinuity with non Biblical religions is not something that should suffer from religious 'dialogue erosion' and be eroded away with time. The hindrances these religions pose to the worship of God in the Biblical way are obvious in present day societies. Any argument

12. G. E. Wright, The Old Testament Against its Environment, (London: SCM Press, 1960), 87 and 88.

for the continuity between the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion (or such related religions), as Mbiti does, implies a number of things. It implies the promotion of these religions and the hindrances they pose to the worship of God. It implies the consideration of only the outward religio-cultural forms of the two religious systems in order to arrive at the commonalities on which the supposed continuity is based. This has been the observation of P.E.S. Thompson as well as one of the warnings of K. A. Dickson to any one making a comparison between the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion. According to both of these men, comparisons between the Old Testament and African life and thought have usually centred upon areas which are not central to the message of the Old Testament.¹³ It implies a disregard for the Biblical position on the matter for a sentimental, reactionary, and over protective position, thereby denying the Bible its full authority. Otherwise, how could Mbiti consider what he sees as similarity between African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament, a weightier proof for their parity than what the Bible considers as the dissimilarity and discontinuity between them.

The Old Testament distances itself from the non Biblical religions. By affirming the object of worship in these religions as idols and demons, the Old Testament separates the revelation

13. P.E.S. Thompson, "The Approach to the Old Testament in an African setting", The Ghana Bulletin of Theology 2 No. 3 (Dec. 1962), 5; and K. A. Dickson, "The Old Testament and African Theology", The Ghana Bulletin of Theology, 4. No. 4 (June 1973), 35.

on which it is based from that on which the non Biblical religions are based. In explanation of this difference, E. Brunner distinguishes the Old Testament prophets who mediated God's revelation from mere religious or moral geniuses who first discovered a truth which subsequently became common knowledge.

According to Brunner, "The important thing is not merely what the prophet says, but that what he says is said with divine authority; or -- which amounts to the same -- that he says something which gains significance from the fact that no one else may say it because none other has been commissioned to -- because none other may say: thus saith God himself."¹⁴

The revelations are different and their authority base must be different. The consciousness in the Old Testament prophets of the divine authority with which they uttered the Old Testament prophecies makes the Old Testament claim for itself a divine authority which is not found in the non Biblical religions. Recognizing the distant position (from the non Biblical religions) that the Old Testament has put itself enhances its authority, and this is called for to maintain Biblical authority. To Mbiti such a distance does not appear and should not be maintained. Rather, all religions (it would seem) are the same because they are God's revelation and are heading towards the same goal -- the fulfillment or crowning of salvation.¹⁵

14. E. Brunner, "The Significance of the Old Testament" in The Old Testament and Christian Faith: A Theological Discussion ed. B. W. Anderson, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 253.

15. See page 66, quote 41.

African Traditional Religion in

Relation to the New Testament

Similarly the New Testament is not silent concerning its relationship with traditional religions. There are areas of similarity, dissimilarity and discontinuity in the relationship.

Element of Similarity

Unlike the Old Testament, the New Testament gives a clearer acknowledgment of the self disclosure of God to all peoples on the planet earth (Rom. 1:19; 3:29), and man's consequent knowledge or awareness of God. Man expresses this awareness by having a place for God among other objects of worship in his religious setup (Acts 17:22, 23). The same is true for African Traditional Religion. This is the main point where African Traditional Religion is accommodated by the New Testament. This accommodation should not be taken for approval. Apart from some outward forms of worship such as prayer, fasting, sacred places of worship and worship functionaries, African Traditional Religion is in no way similar to New Testament Christianity. Because of the reduced emphasis on outward forms and rituals in the worship system of New Testament Christianity, what is apparent in the relationship between African Traditional Religion and the New Testament is much more of dissimilarity and discontinuity.

Element of Dissimilarity

On a general note, the object of worship in these religious systems are quite different. The Scripture says that whatever the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and

not to God (1 Cor. 10:20). The Gentiles did not know God (1 Thess. 4:5), and in this position they "served those which by nature are not gods" (Gal. 4:8). Man's awareness of God referred to earlier was not to the degree that could make him to worship God. Talking about man generally, the Scripture says that man knew God, but did not glorify Him as God, nor was thankful, but became futile in his thoughts (Rom. 1:21); that man knew God, but did not like to retain God in his knowledge (Rom. 1:28), that man knew God, but changed the glory of God into an image of things created by God (Rom. 1:23); that man knew God, but exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). This was the position of every man until God's special revelation dawned. This still remains the position of every man except those who have responded to God's special revelation through faith in Christ Jesus. Apart from sacrificing to demons, the substance of Gentile sacrifice itself cannot be acceptable to God. He accepts no sacrifice for sin apart from the sacrifice of His only begotten Son (Heb. 10:4; 9:26).

An enumeration of the points of dissimilarity between African Traditional Religion and New Testament Christianity can go on and on, but this will not be further engaged in this study. A look at African Traditional Religion in the light of the essence of New Testament Christianity will suffice. The essence of Christianity is the redemption of humankind from sin by faith in the person and finished work of Christ Jesus unto eternal son-Father relationship with God in the hope of an eternal communion with God after the resurrection from the dead.

In African Traditional Religion sin is conceived as an offense against the lower objects of worship, the individual or the community, but rarely against God.¹⁶ As such, the concept of salvation is also totally different. In fact Mbiti says, "African Traditional Religion is not a 'salvation' religion like Christianity..."¹⁷ "Salvation in African Traditional Religion has to do with physical and immediate dangers ... that threaten the individual or community survival, good health, and general prosperity or safety."¹⁸ Salvation in African Traditional Religion has nothing to do with Christ Jesus. There is no hope of resurrection, no hope of eternal life. "In traditional African concepts", writes Mbiti, "there is nothing that looks towards the future, nothing to be awaited, and nothing to be expected in the future apart from the rhythm of day and night, birth, initiation, marriage, death and entry into the company of the departed."¹⁹ In African Traditional Religion man approaches God through prayers, sacrifices and offerings,²⁰ but in New

16. J. S. Mbiti, "Some Reflections on African Experience of Salvation", in Living faith and Ultimate Goals: A continuing Dialogue ed. S. J. Samartha, (MaryKnoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1975), 116.

17. ----- . "Ho soter hemon as an African Experience", in Christ and Spirit in the New Testament ed. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley. (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), 406.

18. ----- . "Some Reflections on African Experience of Salvation Today", in Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals: A continuing Dialogue, ed. S. J. Samartha (MaryKnoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1975), 116.

19. ----- . "Some African Concepts of christology", in Christianity and the Younger Churches ed. G. F. Vicedom, (London: SPCK, 1972), 60.

20. ----- . "Some Reflections on African Experience of Salvation", 113.

Testament Christianity Jesus Christ alone is the way to God, the truth and the life (John 14:6). In African Traditional Religion man fights against death through marriage and procreation,²¹ but in New Testament Christianity Jesus is the resurrection and the life, he who believes in Him overcomes death (John 11:25, 26). Still, if one turns around to look at Christianity in the light of what constitutes the hallmark of African Traditional Religion, the story remains the same. Magic, divination, sorcery, charms, ancestral cult, spiritism and idolatry are all incompatible with New Testament Christianity. And there is no way you can give up this hallmark and still have African Traditional Religion.

It is in the midst of this sharp and glaring dissimilarity that Mbiti argues for compatibility. He would say,

Traditional religion ... has permeated all areas of human life, activities and understanding of the world. It has acquired its own system of beliefs and practices, its values and institutions, its interpretations of the universe in terms of creation, the place of man, human destiny and man's relationship with nature, all of which are largely compatible with Christianity itself.²²

The strength of the dissimilarity lays a good foundation for the argument for discontinuity. Mbiti's emphasis on compatibility is not because he is unaware of the points of dissimilarity. Some of them are found in his writings. It is just that he prefers to see compatibility more than he sees dissimilarity. If only the compatibility he sees was genuine, it would have been better. But it is not genuine. This is why the high view Mbiti has for

21. J. S. Mbiti, "Some Reflections on African Experience of Salvation", 113.

22. J. S. Mbiti, "The Growing Respectability of African Traditional Religion, The Lutheran World 19 (1972), 57.

the New Testament is a seeming one. The New Testament revelation would clearly be averse to the traditional religion Mbiti upholds.

Emphasis on Discontinuity

From all indications the New Testament does not negotiate the discontinuity between African Traditional Religion and the New Testament. The hallmark of African traditional religious system faces direct condemnation in the New Testament. The New Testament condemns idolaters and idolatry (1 Cor. 5:10; 6:9; 10:7; Rev. 2:8; 22:15). Believers are enjoined to flee from idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14). At the conclusion of his speech at the Areopagus -- a speech some people have used to argue for the continuity of African Traditional Religion and the New Testament -- Paul calls his audience for a complete dissociation from their ways of worship; that "these times of ignorance God has overlooked, but now commands all men every-where to repent", (Acts 17:30). The Bible has it on record that the Areopagite, due to Paul's speech, believed and effected the discontinuity (Acts 17:34). The same was true of those who practised magic in Ephesus. On repentance, "they brought their magic books together and burnt them in the sight of all" (Acts 19:19). Business for silversmiths collapsed and the worship of Diana was under threat (Acts 19:24-27). The demand of the Gospel as preached in the early church was that men should turn from their idols to serve the living God. And because this was maintained the Thessalonian Christians submitted to such turning around (1 Thess. 1:9).

There was nothing like continuity. There was no room for the history of religion thesis that all faiths are but variants of an original Ur-religion and therefore all religions are valid and lead to the same God. Chrys Caragounis opines,

God's revelation of Himself through various religions must exhibit continuity and coherence... be complementary, but not contradictory. If their indispensable presuppositions of continuity and coherence do not obtain, the revelations claimed by the various religions cannot all be authentic.²³

The opinion of Caragounis is very true of African Traditional Religion and the New Testament. They lack continuity and coherence. Even where similarity is to be mistaken for coherence, H. Kraemer is quick to say,

The revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is discontinuous even with what is normally held to be 'what is best in the other religions.... The Person of Jesus Christ presents us with an entirely new world of facts and norms such as never did rise within the heart of man.'²⁴

Where such lack of continuity exists, there can be no basis to see the New Testament as fulfilling African Traditional Religion. The use of Jesus Christ's statement, "I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17), to justify the argument that Christianity fulfills African Traditional Religion and any other religion, is a complete misapplication of Scripture. The context makes it clear that Jesus in this text referred to 'the Law and the Prophets'.

23. C. Caragounis, "Divine Revelation", Evangelical Review of Theology 12 No. 3 (1988), 238 and 239.

24. H. Kraemer, Why Christianity of all Religions, (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1966), 96.

This was a phrase used to refer to the Jewish canon of Scripture (Matt. 7:12; Lk. 16:16; Acts 13:15), and not any other religion. Apart from the Law and the Prophets, it can be said that New Testament Christianity fulfills certain desires in man because there is an inner hunger and thirst in man to fill the religious vacuum in his nature. The traditional African has tried to fill this vacuum with African Traditional Religion, but to no avail. The religious vacuum was not created by African Traditional Religion to be filled by Christianity (for in that case one would have argued for fulfillment).

Rather, the vacuum is part of human nature as created by God. Fulfillment connotes, especially expectation, hope and promise. These do not exist between African Traditional Religion and the New Testament. This is why Kraemer again says,

Only through Christ, and thus only through Christianity, is the new order of eternal life inaugurated. There is no basis for viewing Christianity as the flowering of fulfilment of world religions. Jesus Christ does not fulfill the non Christian religions; He absolutely annihilates them. God's revelation in Christ is entirely *sui generis*.²⁵

Even though the New Testament accommodates, to some extent, an aspect of African traditional worship system, it is also firm and definite on its dissimilarity and discontinuity with the latter. The discontinuity is based on the fact that both African Traditional Religion and the New Testament are not the products

25. Cited by B. A. Damarest, General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1982), 132.

of the same revelation. The two religious systems stand on different planes. That is why it is difficult to accept W. Temple's affirmation that "all that is noble in the non-Christian systems of thought, or conduct, or worship is the work of Christ upon them and within them."²⁶ It is therefore difficult to see any authority connection between the two religious systems.

Any consideration of their relationship as that of continuity and fulfillment (as Mbiti does) amounts to a gross misunderstanding of both of them and an open door to syncretism. Such a consideration usurps the New Testament authority and that of the Bible as a whole just as the mere inclusion of God among the objects of worship in the African traditional worship system does little to accord God the right of exclusive worship. Mbiti considers neither the dissimilarity nor the discontinuity between African Traditional Religion and the New Testament with the weight these deserve. Rather, it is the alleged continuity by compatibility and fulfillment that seem to matter. Biblical authority demands the maintenance of the discontinuity and non-fulfillment between African Traditional Religion and the New Testament so that the call of God to repentance, handed down by the writers of the New Testament, could be sustained by the church till the consummation of salvation.

26. W. Temple, Readings in St. John's Gospel, (London: Macmillan, 1939), 18.

The Old Testament in Relation to the New Testament

The relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament shall be looked into in the areas of discontinuity and continuity/fulfillment. These shall cover as well, the aspects of similarity and dissimilarity.

Element of Discontinuity

Apart from Marcion and some who might have followed him, it is generally accepted in Christendom that the Old Testament is the foundation of the New Testament.

Never-the-less, there are areas of discontinuity especially as the Old Testament religion -- Judaism -- is a separate religion altogether from New Testament Christianity. The discontinuity is mainly in the area of the Old Testament laws. The laws in their entirety can be conveniently categorized into two -- the moral laws (the basis of which is the decalogue (Exd. 20:1-17)) in one category and the ceremonial laws (comprised of the dietary laws (Lev. 11:1-470) and the temple laws and rituals (Exd. 35 - Lev. 10) in the second category.

The moral laws remain binding even after their fulfillment by Christ. The ceremonial laws have been terminated in Christ's fulfillment of them, and therefore cease to be observed (Heb. 9:8,9; Col. 2:16, 17 and Rom. 10:4). This forms the core of the discontinuity that exists between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Most of the other differences that exist "between the Testaments are one of emphasis."²⁷ Mbiti would not subscribe

27. J. Goldingay, Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation (Leicester: Appolos, 1990 ed.), 132.

to this because the issue of discontinuity is a point of emphasis for him. Discontinuity is seen, not only in the termination of the ceremonial laws, but in every difference that exists between the Testaments. He emphasises the points of similarity between African Traditional Religion and the New Testament. Also, he emphasises the points of dissimilarity between the Old and the New Testaments. This approach helps him to elevate African Traditional Religion to the level of the Old Testament.

Emphasis on Continuity and Fulfillment

The relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament is not just and only that the former is propaedeutic to the Christian faith²⁸ as Bultmann suggests, but beyond this is the continuity-fulfillment relationship. This is a relationship that does not exist between the New Testament and the non Biblical religions. The reason for this is that the kind of links between the Old Testament and the New Testament do not exist between the New Testament and the non Biblical religions. Here are a few of these links.

First, the Old Testament and the New Testament together make God's special revelation of Himself through His word. Psalm 19:7-11 is a point of reference in this regard. In its immediate context, it refers directly to the Old Testament Scripture, but the New Testament cannot be excluded because of its status as Scripture (II Pet. 3:16). Thus, the categories used for

28. R. Bultmann, "The Significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Faith", in The Old Testament and Christian Faith: A Theological Discussion ed. B. W. Anderson, (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1963), 17 and 35.

Scripture -- the law, the testimony, the status, the commandment, and the judgements of the Lord (Psm. 19:7-90) -- can be extended to the New Testament Scripture.

Second, both Testaments have the same subject of discussion -- God (Gen. 1:1 and John 1:1). Of course, the subject can be broken down to other various themes such as, God's salvation for humankind, God's love, justice, reign, kingdom, and so on. Yet at the center of these is the common denominator, God. J. Goldingay has therefore suggested "giving parallel status to both Testaments as joint witnesses of the one God ..."29

Third, standing as the bridge between the two Testaments is the Person of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament testifies of Jesus (John 5:39) as the New Testament does of Him (1 Cor. 15:3-5; 2:2; 1:23). The Old Testament looks forward in hope to Christ (Deut. 18:15). This is the thought expressed by the Samaritan woman, "I know that Messiah is coming" (John 4:25) as well as the author of the book of Hebrews (Heb. 11:13, 39). But the New Testament looks backward in faith to Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3); although it also has a forward look to the *parousia*.

Fourth, Jesus Christ, in Himself, is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. This is His personal testimony to the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17). It is in Him that the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament. The word, 'fulfilled' in six different Greek terms (*pleroo, anapleroo, pleroma, teleo, teleico and ginomai*) is used in reference to the Old Testament about thirty times in the New Testament. Common to the meanings of these terms are the

29. J. Goldingay, 34.

expressions 'to bring something to an end or its goal', 'to bring to full measure or fullness', 'to finish something already begun or bring to completion.'³⁰ The word, 'fulfilled' thus brings out the embedded interdependent continuity between the two Testaments. The Old Testament meanings find fulfillment in the New Testament and the New Testament meanings are in turn understood in terms of the aspirations of the Old Testament. A. G. Hebert could therefore argue thus, "The New Testament in no way justifies the notion widely held today, that God is revealed in Jesus as in an isolated figure separated from the Old Testament...."³¹

These examples reveal the weakness of Mbiti's argument for the parity between the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion, namely that both are equally fulfilled by the New Testament. While the New Testament is completely new and strange to African Traditional Religion (contrary to Mbiti's claims), it finds the Old Testament a familiar ground. Mbiti is silent about the continuity/fulfillment relationship between the Testaments; and the silence seems deliberate. It is meant to pave way for the contrary opinion of those (Mbiti inclusive), championed by Schleiermacher, that the Old Testament religion (Judaism) is not different from heathenism, and as such "the relations of Christianity to Judaism and Heathenism are the same, in as much

30. W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. w. Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), S. V. Pleroo, anapleroo, pleroma teleo, teleioo and ginomai.

31. A. G. Hebert, The Authority of the Old Testament (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1947), 80.

as the transition from either of these to Christianity is a transition to another religion."³² Rather, the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments is that of an organic, progressive development. Cunliffe-Jones thus argues that the New Testament message is the very principles which the prophets had seen and proclaimed, which have now come into full operation through the advent of a Person who makes all things new.³³ The New Testament is "rather a heightening and focusing of the faith of the Old Testament."³⁴

The stance adopted by Mbiti to the Old Testament is never without its danger. For "our whole understanding of the Christian faith is determined by our attitude to the Old Testament."³⁵ "Indeed", submits Cunliffe-Jones, "there is no possibility of explaining who Jesus was and what was the significance of His preaching and above all of His death and resurrection and what was the true status of the Christian community, apart from the Old Testament Scriptures."³⁶ To give the Old Testament a status lower than that declared by the testimony of the New Testament (as the case is with Mbiti)

32. Schleiermacher, The Christian Faith 2nd ed., trans. Mackintosh and Stewart (Edinburgh: T and T. Clark, 1928), 64.

33. H. Cunliffe-Jones, The Authority of Biblical Revelation (London: James Clark and Co. Ltd., 1945), 201.

34. *Ibid.*, 51.

35. A. A. Von Ruler, The Christian Church and the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Eerdmans, 1971), 10.

36. H. Cunliffe-Jones, 201.

does not only dishonour the Old Testament but the Bible as a whole. Equating the status of the Old Testament with that of African Traditional Religion (as does Mbiti) or any non Biblical religion, regardless of the New Testament testimony to the contrary, is nothing but a revival of "implicit Marcionism or inconsequent Marcionism."³⁷ The Old Testament stands in unity with the New and both share the same divine authority. It is only in such relationship that full Biblical authority can be accorded and maintained.

37. R. Bultmann, "Prophecy and Fulfillment" in C. Westermann, ed. Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics (Richmond, Virginia: Johnknox, 1963), 74.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

Two distinct ideas come to light from the examination of the Biblical terms for revelation. They are the religious and the non-religious sense, just as the Bible considers revelation in two separate categories, general revelation (Psalm 19:1-6) and special revelation (Psalm 19:7-11). Though distinct, they are related. They are both revelations of the same God. General revelation gives a knowledge of certain attributes (power, providence and glory) of God and leads to special revelation. Special revelation builds on general revelation and makes it more appreciated in the man who has responded positively through faith in the work and person of Jesus Christ.

The Bible is God's record of His special revelation and at the same time it is God's special revelation. It however alludes to general revelation.

Revelation and authority correlate with each other. The Bible as the record of revelation possesses the same authority as revelation and more so it is itself revelation. Thus one's view of Biblical revelation correspondingly determines one's view of Biblical authority, as was demonstrated with the view of James Barr whose theology is akin to that of Mbiti.

Mbiti rejects the traditional (which is also a Biblical) view of revelation. That is, the view that revelation is in two different categories -- general and special. To be able to do

this Mbiti first rejects the traditional view of salvation history considered as the history of a people chosen by God to bring about the salvation of humankind. He does this by appealing to the universality of the knowledge of God and His universal activities in His created world. He thereby sees God's activities in the world as divine history and as salvific in nature. Because of the relationship between history and revelation, Mbiti has no problem arguing for the oneness and the salvific nature of all revelations of God, in complete disregard of the distinction between general and special revelation.

The effect of such view of revelation is the damage done to Biblical authority. Mbiti's works reveal his careful attempts to align African Traditional Religion with Biblical faith. He fixes his grips tenaciously on the similarity of beliefs and practices between the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion, as well as the identical preparatory purpose the two religious systems supposedly serve in anticipation of New Testament Christianity. With these he argues vehemently for the parity between the Old Testament and African Traditional Religion. Mbiti argues that both religions are the products of the revelation of the same God.

By maintaining parity between African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament, continuity and fulfillment between African Traditional Religion and the New Testament, Mbiti heads straight on for the alignment he desires. His alignment brings the Old Testament to merely the level of the non Biblical religions. It subtly suggests the attempt to replace the Old

Testament with traditional religions in African Christianity. It strengthens the confidence to question the authority by which the Old Testament, or the New Testament, condemns traditionally accepted norms and values. It makes the Bible to be at the mercy of traditional religions and with time Biblical authority may become a forgotten concept.

In the light of Biblical concept of revelation, the Old Testament relationship to African Traditional Religion would be that of discontinuity despite certain points of similarity that may be suggested to exist between them, especially in their religio-cultural settings. Discontinuity is called for because the Old Testament considers worship in non Biblical religions as directed towards idols and demons and therefore unacceptable in God's sight. The Old Testament maintains a recognizable distance from the non Biblical religions. At the same time, it maintains an authority (which is divine) over these religions; an authority by which it condemns them outright.

In the midst of accommodation and similarity the New Testament would also declare a discontinuing relationship with African Traditional Religion. The adherents of the latter would be enjoined to turn about from idols to serve the living God. The acceptable worship of God presupposes knowledge of God, but the Bible reveals that knowledge of God does not necessarily presuppose acceptable worship of God. Men knew God but refused to worship and glorify Him as God (Rom. 1:21 and 25). The emphasis on discontinuity itself testifies to the fact that the New Testament cannot be the fulfillment of African Traditional

Religion in any sense. Anything other than this usurps the authority of the New Testament, as well as that of the Bible as a whole.

The case is however different between the Old and New Testaments. There is discontinuity mostly in the aspect of ceremonial laws. The emphasis lies on continuity and fulfillment because of the many links between them and the testimony of the New Testament. The New Testament maintains a peculiar relationship with the Old Testament, leaving no room for equating the latter with non Biblical religions. Both testaments distance themselves from the traditional religions. They claim to be God's special revelation mediated through God's specially chosen holy men, whose prophecies and writings were specially inspired by the Spirit of the Almighty (Exd. 34:27; Jer. 36:1 and 2; 27 and 28; 2 Pt. 1:21; 3:15 and 16).

The Bible stands high above every other religious book and oral religious traditions. It does not depend upon men to be what it claims to be (divinely authorized). But men must take it as it claims to be to maximize its influence as authority base on their lives. It is then they can fully and urgently pursue God's missionary purpose for the world He wants to salvage.

R. Gehman and I. Adeyemo have said nothing but the truth that Biblical authority is, at present, the determining factor for victory in the theological battle that has been among African theologians. This has been apparent in the theology of the one

acclaimed as the 'father of African theology', John S. Mbiti. The authority he ascribes to the Bible is rather low. He would readily acclaim African Traditional Religion as an authority base in doing African theology; thus equating the Old Testament with African Traditional Religion.

The fierceness of this battle seems to be on the ebb, but it continues. It will always continue (most probably in more different forms and dimensions) because of the anti-authority age we are in. This is the more reason why those who have, by God's grace, come to the knowledge of the truth should continue in their unswerving position. They should declare the truth at whatever cost, trusting in the Lord of battles who will surely have His way.

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