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# Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology

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news of Christ, like the Mumbu Tree, is ageless, enduring and firmly rooted in  
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## THE AFRICAN DIMENSION OF CHRISTIANITY

### *An Editorial*

"Christianity is a European religion," some would say, either in ignorance or with malice. The truth is otherwise. While it is true that missionaries in the last few centuries brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to Africa from Europe, the fact is that Christianity has deep roots in Africa and, in fact, is older than Islam.

The heart of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ, God incarnate in human flesh. If God's Son were to become man, he had to become a particular man in a particular place. He could not be everywhere, speaking every language as his own mother tongue.

What continent is identified with Jesus' earthly life? The land where Jesus was born, ministered and died is on a land bridge connecting three great continents: Europe, Asia and Africa. Jesus was born neither in Africa, Europe, Asia nor in the America's. He was born at a point that most nearly connects the three great continents and the three races. Geographically, the Holy Land and Africa are connected, only separated superficially by the Suez Canal in 1869.

Europeans have pictured Jesus as a pale man with Anglo Saxon features. Africans have portrayed Jesus as a black African. The truth is that he was neither. He was an olive skinned Mediterranean Jew, neither white nor black. Jesus was the Man for all mankind. He identified with every human being. His land and colour help us to understand that God "so loved the world," not just one land or race.

It is also important to understand the African connection with the Bible. No European wrote any book in the Bible. Jesus Christ never walked in Europe. Not until twenty years after the death of Christ was the Christian faith taken to Europe. Lydia was the first European convert (Acts 16:15).

Instead, Africa is prominent in the Bible. Israel was redeemed from bondage in Egypt. The Queen of Sheba who visited king Solomon was probably from Ethiopia in Africa. Moses, the great law giver, was married to one who was possibly an African (Numb. 12:1). It was an African who rescued Jeremiah from a pit when no one else would do it (Jer. 38:7). Israeli prophets foretold of the impact of the gospel on Africa (Ps. 68:31). Jesus was taken as a baby to Egypt

to escape the wrath of King Herod (Matt. 2:15). So Jesus never lived in Europe but he lived in Africa briefly. An African helped Jesus carry his cross when Jesus broke down under its weight (Matt. 2:15). Simon came from Cyrene in North Africa.

On the day of Pentecost Africa was represented. Settlers of Cyrene were there (Acts 2:10). An African from Ethiopia was one of the first converts outside the Jewish circle (Acts 8). An African is mentioned during the first missionary conference (Acts 13:1). Simeon, nicknamed the Niger, was a faithful disciple. Niger, from which the river Niger and the countries of Niger and Nigeria are named, means "black." Simeon was obviously a black man (see Living Bible). Either he was a black man from Africa who had assumed a Jewish name, or he was a Jew in origin but had lived in Africa.

It should be remembered that the gospel was not first taken to Europe but to Africa. The Ethiopian eunuch was converted to Christ and took the gospel back to his home country up the Nile river in Nubia where he was an important official (Acts 8:26-38). People from Cyrene in north Africa were leaders in the church in Antioch (Acts 11:20). Apollos was a powerful preacher of the Word of God. He came from Alexandria in north Africa (Acts 18:24-28).

We know little of the church in Africa from AD 30-180. But by AD 180 there was a large church in Egypt. There is a tradition that John Mark, the evangelist, was a missionary to Egypt and that the churches which grew up in Alexandria were the result of his ministry. The first converts in Egypt were of Greek origin living in the city of Alexandria. But later the gospel spread to the "Copts" or Egyptians of Hamitic origin. In AD 180 twelve Christians were martyred for Christ in the city of Carthage in North Africa.

Not only did the church in Africa grow rapidly but it produced some outstanding leaders. The Catechetical School of Alexandria was a very important school in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. From our limited knowledge we have of church history we can say that this was the first theological college in the Christian church. Clement of Alexandria and Origen were famous teachers. Tertullian from Carthage was a brilliant lawyer and converted to Christ in AD 192. Tertullian was the first Christian theologian to use the word, "Trinity." St. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, was a great preacher and theologian. No other Christian after Paul had such a profound and prolonged influence upon Christianity as Augustine.

Therefore, we can affirm with confidence that there is a vital African dimension to Christianity. Though the Judeo-Christian revelation was granted to the Hebrews, the Africans were among the first to know and love the Lord Jesus.

## FOLK ISLAM IN EAST AFRICA

**R. Marvin Smith**

*Anyone who has studied Islam from a textbook will find the actual beliefs and practices of Muslims in Africa quite varied from orthodox Islam discussed in textbooks. For Islam has always accommodated the various traditional beliefs of the peoples who have embraced Islam. Becoming a Muslim is quite simple. Anyone who recites the Muslim creed once with sincerity is a Muslim. So the traditional beliefs and practices are carried into Islam.*

*In this article Marvin Smith provides a more realistic assessment of the Muslim beliefs and practices in Africa which centre around traditional African beliefs in mystical powers and the world of spirits, intertwined with Muslim doctrines. Knowing these deeply felt beliefs and fears will create many opportunities to present Christ who alone can deliver from the fears of darkness.*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the wonderful truths of Christianity is the protection that believers in Jesus Christ have from the forces of evil. Those who have been born again by hearing the gospel and placing their trust in Jesus Christ have nothing to fear from Satan and his demons. There is no reason for the believer to take steps to appease these evil forces, and believers are never to take steps to gain their power. Muslims, however, do not enjoy this freedom from fear of evil spirits. For many followers of Islam, manipulation of the dark forces of the occult world is part of everyday life. This is particularly the case for the majority of Muslims who practice folk Islam. The purpose of this paper is to explain folk Islam, particularly as found in East Africa, with the hope that believers will share with Muslims the wonderful blessings of faith in Jesus, including freedom from the fear of evil spirits.

**Definition.** "Folk" or "Popular" Islam may be defined as the world of Islam that operates apart from the strict orthodox teachings of Islam and centres primarily around efforts to appease and manipulate demonic forces that are seen

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to control and affect most areas of life. Most Muslims in the world insist they believe the doctrines of Islam, but in their daily lives they follow occult, animistic practices. The primary motive for this emphasis on the occult is fear of evil spirits. As a result, practically speaking they are more concerned with magic than with Muhammad, they follow Allah, but fear demons.<sup>1</sup> This practice of magic is done in an attempt to answer questions of well being (illness and health), success and failure, and knowing the unknown (divination).<sup>2</sup> And even while following the orthodox teachings and pillars of Islam, many Muslims attach occultic meanings to these.

**Importance.** Unless this "folk" view of reality in Islam is understood, witness to Muslims may not be effective. After reading Bill Musk's book, *The Unseen Face of Islam*,<sup>3</sup> one AIM missionary to Muslims said, "This book completely changed our ministry. We now are able to relate to our people on the level on which they actually function." Samuel Zwemer, an early missionary to Muslims, understood the importance of folk Islam and wrote:

The student of Islam will never understand the common people unless he knows the reasons for their curious beliefs and practices . . . all of which still blind and oppress mind and heart with constant fear of the unseen. Witchcraft, sorcery, spells, and charms are the background of the native Muslim psychology to an extent that is realized only by those who have penetrated most deeply into the life of the people.<sup>4</sup>

**Official and popular Islam.** There is therefore an official Islam and a popular Islam. Official Islam is presented in any number of texts on Islam, and is what a teacher of Islam in the local mosque will declare to the inquirer. However, this official, orthodox Islam is simply a veneer over the folk Islam which controls the way most Muslims think and behave. The farther one gets from the Arab world, the more one would expect to see evidence of folk Islam. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Love, Rick, "Muhammad, Materialism, Magic, or the Messiah?," *Urban Mission*, (March, 1998) 17.

<sup>2</sup> Hiebert, Paul. "Power Encounter and Folk Islam." *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*. J. Dudley Woodbury, Ed. (MARC Publications: Monrovia, CA, 1989), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Musk, Bill A. *The Unseen Face of Islam*. (MARC, Monarch Publications: Kent, England), 1989. Bill Musk is probably the leading authority on folk Islam and this book is the best work currently available on the subject.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Musk in "Popular Islam: The Hunger of the Heart," *The Gospel and Islam, A 1978 Compendium*, McCurry, Don, Ed. (MARC: Monrovia, CA, 1979) 209.

books coming out of even Arabia give indication that folk Islam holds sway over those living in the historical heart of Islam.<sup>5</sup>

Folk Islam operates under a world view quite different from the western world view. For example, Bill Musk presents the differences between western and folk-Islamic world views of "being" as follows:<sup>6</sup>

	Western View	Folk-Islamic View
<i>Other-worldly</i> <i>Trans-empirical</i>	God angels devils	God Angels
<i>This-worldly</i> <i>Empirical</i>	humans animals	spirits <i>jinn</i> ancestors ----- humans animals

Note that for most of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims, dealing with spirits and *jinn* is part of everyday life, something that can be seen and felt and experienced. For most Muslims, folk Islam answers questions frequently encountered in their daily lives and meets deep needs arising from their world view.

### THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND FOR FOLK ISLAM IN ISLAMIC TEACHING

It may be argued that the very theology of Islam, particularly in regard to demonic beings, lends itself to the development and accommodation of folk Islam.

**Angels.** According to Islam, angels are living creatures with speech and reason, who were created by God from light. They have no carnal desires or evil emotions. Angels live in heaven and their work includes praising God, performing His commands, and interceding for man. When man was created,

<sup>5</sup> Examples would include Jean Sasson's books, *Princess*, (Bantam Books: New York, 1993) and *Princess Sultana's Daughters*, (Dell Publishing: New York, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, 176.



angels were commanded to bow down before him, and they obeyed, with the exception of Satan. According to Islam, angels perform special tasks. For example, Gabriel is said to be the angel who brought the revelation of the Quran to Muhammad. Michael is recognized as the angel assigned to the Israelites. The angel in charge of hell is named Malik. Islam teaches that every person is attended by two angels, which sit on each shoulder. One records good deeds, the other bad deeds (Sura 50:17-18). There are two angels who examine the dead in their graves on the night after burial and categorize them according to their faith. In Islam, angels occasionally break in to the empirical world for various reasons (such as revealing the Quran). However, in Islam, there seems to be little effort made to distinguish between God's holy angels and Satan's demons who may at times appear as "angels of light" (II Cor. 11:14).

**Jinn.** According to the teachings of Islam, *jinn* are spirit beings created by God from smokeless fire before the creation of Adam. In the order of created beings, they fall somewhere between angels and men. They eat and drink and reproduce. They are able to have sexual relationships with humans, in which case the offspring are part human, part *jinn*. Some *jinn* are said to be Muslim and others infidels. The devil is said to have been a *jinn* before he fell and is called the father of the *jinn*. *Jinn* may appear to humans in the form of serpents, dogs, cats, or human beings. They can be made to do the will of man. For example, Solomon is said to have constructed the temple largely with the help of *jinn* (Sura 34:12-14). There are some *jinn* which are evil, and others which are good. According to Islamic teaching man is in frequent contact with *jinn*. Some are benevolent, and can be encouraged to render assistance. Others are malevolent, and steps must be taken to protect from their mischievous and sometimes evil intentions.

Examples and stories about *jinn* are common in the Muslim world. Musk tells on a well known female *jinn* in Morocco by the name of A'isha Wandisha, a seductress, whose camel feet are kept hidden under a long dress. If a man succumbs and sleeps with her, he becomes her slave forever. However, there are ways through cunning of making a marriage contract with her in order to gain her power for advantage.<sup>7</sup> Similar stories are told in Algeria. In Mombasa, Kenya, men claim to have been seduced by a beautiful woman and go to her house for sexual intercourse. However, upon awakening in the morning, they find themselves high in the branches of a baobab tree and realize they were

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<sup>7</sup> Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, 39.

seduced by a *jinn*! Similar stories are told in Lamu, Kenya, and have even made newspaper headlines.<sup>8</sup>

Many if not most Muslims are terrified of *jinn*, who are blamed for miscarriages, still births, illness, deformity, paralysis, and death.

**Satan (*Shaytan*) and Devils (*Shaytin*).** *Shaytin* are the demonic hordes of Satan. The devil was created from fire. His original name was 'Azazil. He was taken captive by the angels when the *jinn* transgressed. He grew up among the angels and was considered one of them. However, when he refused to bow to Adam, he was banished from heaven. He has authority over the animal and spirit world. Every person has a devil attending him and every child is touched by the devil at birth, making him or her cry. According to tradition, common events are associated with the devil. For example, when a donkey brays, it is because it has seen a devil. However, roosters crow because they have seen an angel!

The Muslim preoccupation with the spirit world opens them up to deception and control by demonic forces. This is particularly true in regard to attempting to gain the assistance of "good *jinn*," and even demons.

**Who is a Muslim?** Another theological aspect of Islam that may contribute to folk Islamic practices is the ease with which someone may become a Muslim. A Muslim is someone who has recited the Islamic Creed with sincerity: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet." From the moment a person recites the creed he is considered a Muslim, regardless of his life and practice. Islam is content to let such "Muslim peoples" continue in their previous life patterns, at times for decades, with the hope of slowly bringing them into conformity with orthodox Islamic teachings. This attitude towards "converts" easily accommodates a wide range of folk Islamic practices in a given group of people. In this way, Islam becomes a veneer over the animistic culture of the people.

**Folk Islam in the *Quran* and *Hadith*.** There are elements of folk Islam in the *Quran* and the *Hadith*, which are collected traditions of what Muhammad said, what he did in the presence of his followers, and things done in his presence without condemnation. There are over 600,000 collected traditions, of which perhaps 7,400 are considered genuine by respected Muslim scholars

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<sup>8</sup> Wills, Christy. "Spirit Worship, Islam, and African Traditions on the Kenyan Coast," a paper written in connection with studies at Friends World College, 1990.

such as Bukhari and his disciple, Imam Muslim. The *Hadith* are filled with references to folk Islam practices, such as the "evil eye." The *Quran* mentions the creation of *jinn* in Sura 55:15 and gives indication of beings and powers not seen, which may be appealed to in times of need. Twenty six other verses in the *Quran* mention *jinn*.

**Arabian traditional religion elements incorporated into Islam.** It can be shown that a number of elements from Arabian pagan practices were brought into Islam, thus setting the stage for other non-orthodox practices to be added to popular Islam. For example, the *Kaaba* was a centre of idolatry for centuries before Islam. Muhammad gave it great significance in the Islamic *Haji* and credited it's construction to Abraham and Ishmael (Islam claims it was originally built by Adam, and was destroyed in the flood). The pilgrimage itself was part of the early pagan idolatry, as was kissing the black stone and circling the *Kaaba*. The part of the pilgrimage involving running between the two mountains and activities at Arafat were pre-Islamic practices related to pagan religion. Later, Sufi Islamic practices, which had elements of eastern religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) were incorporated and popularized by Al-Ghazali.<sup>9</sup>

**Muhammad's concern about occult powers.** It may be shown from the *Quran* that Muhammad himself was plagued by fear of demons and *jinn*. Sura 113:1-5 indicates the prophet's anxiety over evil beings, over those who practiced magic against him, and over those who projected the evil power of envy towards him. Again, in Sura 114:1-5, Muhammad speaks of danger coming from the activity of the whisperer (Satan), *jinn*, and men. There were times when he could not distinguish between God speaking to him and Satan (thus the "Satanic verses found in Sura 53:19-23, which were later canceled by a subsequent revelation, Sura 22:52-53). There are two sermons given by *jinn* to Muhammad recorded in the *Quran*, found in Sura 72:1-15 and Sura 46:29-32. In these messages a group of *jinn*, who confess not being able to enter heaven, proclaim that the *Quran* is wonderful and that its message that God "has taken neither wife nor son" (a reference to the trinity) is believed by them. This indicates that Muhammad had direct contact with *jinn*. From this it may be concluded that beginning with Muhammad, Muslims have had contact with *jinn*, have feared the activities of occult powers, and have taken steps to protect themselves accordingly. This fear of the occult, taking protective measures, and even gaining the support of "good" *jinn* continues to this day in the various expressions of folk Islam.

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<sup>9</sup> Chapman, Colin. *Cross & Crescent, Responding to the Challenge of Islam*. (Inter-Varsity Press: Leicester, England, 1995), 113-115.

## FOLK ISLAM AND ORTHODOX TEACHING

Folk Islam takes the basic orthodox teachings of Islam and infuses new meaning into them which correlate to an animistic world view. Some of these teachings are briefly explained below and examples of folk-Islam adaptations given:

**Belief in God.** Muslims believe in one God called Allah, which means "the God" in Arabic. Islam emphasizes the unity of God. "There is only one God" is the most prominent doctrine of the faith (seen on *almost every mosque*). *Muslims mock the Christian view of the trinity and the Quran* specifically states that Jesus is not God. The greatest sin ("*shirk*") in Islam is that of associating a partner with God. The greatness of Allah is repeated constantly, "*Allah Akhbar*." Everything that exists was created by God (even evil), and God is absolutely sovereign in what He does and is not bound by any of his own attributes. He is transcendent, ultimately unknowable by his creatures. The concept of a personal loving God is foreign to the Muslim. In Islam, Allah has 99 other names, which really are attributes of God frequently recited by Muslims using a rosary.

In folk Islam, the names of God are used in magic for power and protection. For example, one name is "The Forbearing One." It is said that if a farmer writes this name on a piece of paper and puts it where his seed is sown, no harm will come to his crop.<sup>10</sup> Other names are used to attract "spirit guides," wisdom, knowledge of the future, material rewards, etc. The names of God are frequently placed on amulets and charms for protection from evil and attracting benefit. There are many books available to Muslims on the magical use of the names of God, where certain formulas are said to compel God to act according to the person's wishes.

**Belief in angels, demons and *jinn*.** As discussed above, Islam emphasizes belief in supernatural beings. Folk Islam centres around the appeasement of these supernatural powers and attempts to "harness" such powers for personal gain.

**Belief in Books.** According to Islam there are 104 books that have come from God. Of these, only four remain: The *Torah*, the *Zabur* (Psalms), the *Injil* (gospel) and the *Quran*.

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<sup>10</sup> Stacey, Vivienne. "The Practice of Healing and Exorcism." *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*, J. Dudley Woodbury, ed. (MARC Publications: Monrovia, CA, 1989), 292.

All that is necessary for Muslims to know is in the Quran. Muslims accept that the *Torah*, *Zabur* and *Injil* are also books from God, but claim they are presently invalid and unreliable for the following reasons: Corruption. Muslims claim that Jews and Christians have hopelessly corrupted these scriptures by alterations and additions and misinterpretations. Abrogation. The *Quran*, being the superior, final revelation, cancels and replaces all previous scriptures. Muslims believe the *Quran*, revealed to Muhammad over a period of 23 years, came from an exact copy in heaven, and is God's final and perfect revelation to mankind.

In folk Islam, the Quran is used extensively in charms and amulets. It is common for words of the Quran to be written on a piece of paper with ink, which is then washed off into a glass of water and drunk by a person who is ill as a cure. Portions of the Quran are tacked to wooden doors as a protection on the household. The Quran is recited as protection from evil spirits. Portions of the holy book are recited in order to place a curse on another individual. Miniature copies of the Quran are pinned to babies' clothing to ward off evil spirits, or placed in vehicles or homes to ward off misfortune.

**Belief in apostles.** Islam accepts that God has sent prophets to mankind, the first being Adam and the last Muhammad. Actually there are two classes of prophets, a *nabi* is one sent to teach and guide, but who is not given a book. An apostle (*rasul*) is inspired to teach and guide, but has been given one or more books. In all, Islam claims that 124,000 prophets have been sent by God, and of these 315 are apostles. The most important messengers sent by God are nine in number: Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Job, Jesus, and Muhammad, who is the most important of the nine and is the "seal" of the prophets.

In folk Islam, the concept of special messengers from God is used in producing fetishes and in saint veneration for the purpose of gaining blessing. For example, in Pakistan, a mosque displays 27 relics of the prophet and his companions. Among items included are Muhammad's sandals and underwear, and Fatima's prayer mat.<sup>11</sup> Pilgrims come from far away to gain the blessing associated with these items. An example of folk-Islamic veneration in East Africa is the extensive celebrations of *Maulidi*, the prophet's birthday, in Lamu, Kenya each year.

**Belief in the last days.** Islam teaches that certain eschatological events will take place in the last days. These include the arising of a *Mahdi*, who will usher in a reign of peace on the earth under Islam. Another event will be the

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<sup>11</sup> Stacey, 292.

return of Jesus, who will preach, kill all pigs, destroy all crosses, pray with Muslims, die of old age, and be buried next to Muhammad. The anti-Christ will appear, along with the great beast who will mark the faces of believers and unbelievers. Following these events will be the resurrection of all peoples for judgement. Those whose good works prevail will proceed to paradise, a place of sensual pleasure, the rest to hell, a place of torment that may be temporary or permanent, depending on the degree of wickedness of the particular person.

In folk Islam, certain saints are seen as mediators, operating between the present time and eschatological events of the future. An example of such saints is Fatima, Muhammad's daughter married to his cousin, Ali. In addition, the spirits of departed saints are believed to remain at the grave site, thus encouraging pilgrimages for veneration and obtaining power and blessing.

**Predestination.** In Islam, a basic doctrine is that God is sovereignly responsible for all that occurs, both good and evil. Nothing can happen in the world, whether it concern sickness or health, obedience or disobedience, faith or infidelity, riches or poverty, etc., that is not pre-written in the decrees of God. The phrase, *Insha'llah*, "if God wills," is used constantly by Muslims. Allah is not bound by ethical or moral considerations. Ultimately this results in a fatalistic view of life that places responsibility for all that occurs on God entirely.

Even though predestination is a strong doctrine in Islam, practitioners of folk Islam find ways to intervene. For example, there are dates in the Muslim calendar, when attempts are made to alter a person's fate.

## FOLK ADAPTATIONS OF THE PILLARS OF ISLAM

The five pillars of Islam (Some Muslims see *jihad*, holy war, as a sixth pillar of Islam) are utilized in folk Islam for gaining power and protection. Below a brief explanation along with the significance of these basic practices for "folk" Muslims will be given:

**The Creed.** The Creed of Islam states, "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet." All Muslims recite this frequently. It is used as a battle cry, a cry of joy at the birth of the child, and words of mourning at a funeral. All that it takes to be a Muslim is to repeat this phrase once with meaning.

In folk Islam, the words of the creed are held to be powerful in themselves in warding off evil. The words appear on amulets. The phrase is repeated constantly when traveling in places of danger or where evil spirits might lurk.

**Prayer.** Prayer is considered to be the most important of the prescribed duties for the Muslim. It is said that Muhammad referred to prayer as the "pillar of religion, the key to paradise, and that which causes a man to be a true believer." There are several specifications to be followed for prayer to be valid:

**Purification.** Sura 4:43 of the *Quran* explains the need for ritual purification by water (or sand if necessary) before prayer may be made. According to tradition, Muhammad stated that purification is half of faith and prayer without purification is invalid.<sup>12</sup> Purification relates to those parts of the body which are most exposed: Hands and arms to the elbow, the head, especially mouth and nostrils, feet and ankles. Running water is preferred, otherwise water poured over the body. Where water is not available, sand is substituted. Washing must be done in the prescribed manner to be valid, and must be accompanied by appropriate statements of intent to perform the purification. For certain defilements it is necessary for the whole body to be cleansed.

**Times of prayer.** Prayer is to be made at certain times of the day, as specified by the *Quran* in Sura 30:17-18: At dawn (4:30-5:30 a.m.), shortly after midday (12:30 p.m.), late afternoon (4:00 p.m.), at sunset (6:30 p.m.) and two hours after sunset (8:30 p.m.).

**Place and direction of prayer.** Prayer may be made anywhere, but is most valid in a mosque. Ladies are normally expected to pray in the privacy of their homes (some mosques have separate facilities for women). Originally Muslims faced Jerusalem when they prayed. However, in Medina, when Muhammad turned against the Jews, the direction was changed to be towards Mecca (Sura 2:144).

**The order of prayer.** Prayer must be conducted in the proper order.

1. Declaration of intent, stating how many times the Muslim intends on performing the prayer cycle.
2. Repetition of "Allah Akhbar," with hands raised to the ears.
3. Standing with arms folded across the chest, the worshipper repeats Sura 1 of the *Quran*.
4. Placing hands on knees the Muslim repeats words of praise to Allah.

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<sup>12</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, Vol. 1, 435 (page 149).

5. Standing the worshipper declares, "God hears him who praises Him, Oh our Lord, thou art praised."
6. Kneeling with toes, knees, palms, forehead and nose touching the ground, "Praise be to Thee Oh my Lord the Most High" is repeated.
7. Sitting on heels with hands on thighs, praise is repeated.
8. Number six above is repeated.
9. Standing with arms folded across the chest again, the Muslim prepares to repeat the cycle.

The whole cycle is repeated at least twice, and sometimes more. On special occasions such as Ramadan, it may be repeated a dozen or more times. Omission of certain parts of the procedure or stumbling render the prayer invalid and it must be repeated. At the conclusion of the prayer, a blessing on Muhammad and his descendants is pronounced.

The purpose of prayer in Islam is to gain merit with God. According to the sayings of Muhammad, prayer can cover minor sins such as lying, lust, and anger. Other more serious sins require more extensive good works (such as keeping Ramadan)

In folk Islam, the prayer ritual is seen to cleanse a person of demonic pollution. According to one tradition, Muhammad decreed that the nose be included in the ritual washing procedure because the devil spends the night inside people's noses.<sup>13</sup> Washing can also remove sin for some Muslims practicing folk Islam. Additions to the prayer ritual by some have folk Islam roots: preventing gaps in the line of men praying, lest Satan join in, and moving the fingers about during prayer to keep demons from hiding between them.<sup>14</sup>

**Giving Alms (*Zakat*).** *Zakat* is the portion of a Muslim's property which is given in order to purify the rest of his property and to gain blessing and merit from God. It is mentioned some 82 times in the *Quran*. In order to give alms, the following conditions must be met: 1. The giver must be a Muslim. 2. He must be free (not a slave). 3. He must possess a certain minimum of property (alms start with a minimum of 5 camels) which has been his for at least a year. Today alms are calculated at approximately 2% of a person's net worth, and are paid annually. Those qualified to receive alms are:

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<sup>13</sup> *Sahih Muslim*. Vol. 1, 462 (page 153)

<sup>14</sup> *Musk*. 217



1. The poor, people who do not own enough property to pay alms.
2. The needy, those whose income is not sufficient to cover daily needs.
3. Those who collect alms are entitled to keep a portion in accordance with time spent collecting.
4. Recent converts to Islam may be encouraged by gifts from alms collected. Muhammad established the practice of giving gifts to help motivate people to accept Islam.
5. Ransom to free another person's slave (not your own slaves).
6. Debtors, who cannot pay their debts.
7. Helping a poor person take the pilgrimage to Mecca or engage in holy war.
8. The person stranded on a journey without funds to continue.
9. For the cause of promoting Islam. Many wealthy Muslims contribute heavily for this, going beyond the amount required for *zakat*.

In folk Islam, the giving of alms may be associated with protection against the "evil eye," where jealousy brings about a curse.<sup>15</sup>

**Fasting.** There are several one-day fasts in Islam, but the most important fast is that of Ramadan, which continues throughout the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar. The fast is mandatory for all Muslims according to Sura 2:183-188 (exceptions below). The purpose of Ramadan is to purify and guard against evil. Muslims believe that those who keep the fast are pardoned for their past excusable sins. Regulations for the fast are as follows:

1. For Sunni Muslims it cannot start until some Muslim states that he has seen the new moon. This is difficult when the weather does not cooperate. Shi'ite Muslims accept the calendar date for the rising of the moon, whether or not it is actually sighted.
2. The fast begins at dawn as soon as a white thread may be distinguished from a black thread. It continues until sunset. During this time nothing may be eaten or drunk. Not even saliva may be swallowed.
3. The fast must be kept by all Muslim age 12 and above. Exempted are pregnant women and travelers on a journey of more than three days.
4. During the month of Ramadan, at least 20 cycles of prayer are to be observed for the evening prayer.

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<sup>15</sup> Musk, 218

5. The fast lasts for 30 days, the length of the lunar month. Because the lunar calendar is shorter than the solar calendar by 10 days, Ramadan comes earlier by that many days each year.
6. From sunset until dawn a Muslim may eat as much as desired and indulge in any lawful pleasure.
7. The fast is broken the day after Ramadan and ends with a great feast. This important celebration may be compared to Christmas, with new clothes purchased, cards and gifts sent to friends. Special alms are given and prayers may be made for dead relatives.

Folk Muslims have ways of practicing their beliefs during Ramadan, including veneration of Muhammad for special merit and blessing, and special ceremonies on the 27th night of Ramadan (the time when the first revelation came to Muhammad), when it is said the gates of heaven are opened and one's fate or destiny may be altered. Some Muslims at the coast of Kenya make special sacrifices and offerings to demons after Ramadan to appease them because such sacrifices and offerings are not allowed during Ramadan.<sup>16</sup>

**Pilgrimage.** Every adult Muslim is required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his lifetime unless he is too poor to afford it or is constantly ill. The *Hajj* takes place during the 12th month of the Muslim lunar year. A person taking the pilgrimage may add *Hajj* (*Haji* in Swahili) to his name. Nine duties are obligatory for the pilgrim, the first three being most important:

1. Wear a special garment consisting of two pieces of cloth wrapped around the waist and shoulders.
2. Stand on the Mount of Arafat.
3. Make a circuit around the Kaaba seven times, kissing the black stone.
4. Spend a night in the desert area between Mina and Arafat.
5. Run between two nearby mountains, Al Safa and Al Marwa.
6. Throw stones at a pillar representing Satan.
7. Offer a sacrifice of a goat or lamb (some offer many sacrifices, depending on their wealth).
8. Make an extra circuit around the *Kaaba* if a non-Meccan.
9. Shave the head at the end of the pilgrimage.

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<sup>16</sup> Giles, Linda, "Mbaraki Pillar and its Spirits." *Kenya Past and Present* (Issue 19, 1982) 46. This is an excellent article detailing the extent of occult involvement by Muslims at the coast.

There are specific and detailed forms, recitations and rituals to be completed at each stage of the pilgrimage for the event to be valid. The ceremony takes ten days to complete. It is said that for the Muslim who participates in the pilgrimage in a sincere manner he will return home as pure from sin as the day he was born.

There are many aspects of the pilgrimage with special meaning for folk Muslims. For example, some teach that the black stone is actually the remains of the clay that God used to create Adam, and that all the energy, love and unity of Islam generates out of the sacred cube of the *Kaaba*.<sup>17</sup> Therefore there is great power available to those who encircle the *Kaaba* and touch the black stone. Water used during the pilgrimage for cleansing is carried home in hope of healing ill relatives back home.<sup>18</sup> Muslims returning from the pilgrimage are thought to have extra *baraka* or power.

In conclusion, it is seen that folk Muslims attach special meanings to the basic teachings and practices of Islam, converting them to symbols and vehicles for obtaining power, protection and blessing.

### EXAMPLES OF FOLK ISLAM PRACTICES AND BELIEFS

**The evil eye.** Many Muslims in East Africa live in fear of "the evil eye." The meaning of the evil eye is that people and things may be destroyed by the force of envy which is projected through the eye, and no one knows for sure who might have this "evil eye." For example, if a visitor looks with jealousy upon a possession, the force of evil projected through the eye may bring devastating damage to the owner and his household. For this reason, Muslims will often give a visitor the object of admiration rather than risk the power of the evil eye. One new missionary woman was visiting a Muslim family and expressed praise for the couple's new baby. The husband immediately got very upset and threw her out of the house! He was afraid her admiration for the baby would bring about a curse.<sup>19</sup>

Muslims attribute many of the problems of daily life to the evil eye syndrome. Various means are used to try and determine who it was that cast

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<sup>17</sup> Mahdi, Sayyid Al Imam Isa Al Haadi. *Science of Healing*. (Ansaaru Allah Publications: Brooklyn, New York, 1977) 31-32.

<sup>18</sup> Sadat, Jehan. *A Woman of Egypt*. (Coronet Books, Hodder and Stoughton: England, 1989) 313.

<sup>19</sup> Musk, Bill. *Touching the Soul of Islam*. (MARC, Monarch Publications: Crowborough, England, 1995) 100.

the evil eye and caused the problem. Cures may include special readings of the Quran, burning of incense, or visiting a saint's tomb to obtain counteractive baraka.

There are many prophylactics used against the power of the evil eye. One very common measure is "the hand of Fatima." Fatima was the daughter of Muhammad who was married to Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law. Fatima is seen by Muslims to have great power as a protector and advocate, and appeals are often made to her. The "hand of Fatima" consists of a drawing, painting or small sculpture (often jewelry) of a hand, palm facing outward, with an eye pictured in the middle of the hand. The hand is worn (or painted on doorways or vehicles, etc.) in such a way that it faces the one who might cast an evil eye. Other amulets and talismans are also employed.

Another preventative measure is using the phrase, *ma sha allah*, which means, "What God has willed." This is spoken as a protective measure in all cases of admiration and praise, so as to direct attention away from the object to God, who created the object being admired.

Undoubtedly, there is great demonic power associated with the evil eye, and Muslims who turn to the occult for protection entwine themselves in Satan's plan for control and manipulation. It may be noted that the concept of the evil eye has parallels with the "jealousy curse," common among many tribes of Africa. For example, the jealousy curse is very common among the Mijikenda, and it is reported among tribes in Uganda, Tanzania and Mozambique.

**The Names of God.** It is very common to see Muslims holding a rosary of either 33 or 99 beads and with lips moving, silently reciting the 99 names of God (some use 100 beads, with a larger bead for Allah). Every Muslim is aware of the 99 names of God, even if he does not know the *Quran*. There is great merit for those who memorize the 99 names and recite them repeatedly. Many do so on a daily basis. Of interest is the fact that the name "Love" is not among the 99 names.

In folk Islam, many of the names are repeated over and over in an effort to bring about the attribute of the name on behalf of oneself or someone else. Musk lists several examples:<sup>20</sup> Repeating the name, "The Peace" (The healthy One), *Ya Salaam*, is used to bring healing to a friend. The name must be repeated at least one-hundred times with concentration. Another example is repeating the name *Ya Qahhar*, "The Destroyer," in order to bring about the

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<sup>20</sup> Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, p. 157-158, 209.

death of an enemy. Repeating *Ya Rahman*, "The Merciful," is said to free a person from depression. There are apparent examples of the effectiveness of these practices, indicating the demonic power associated with folk Islam beliefs.

Another use of the names of God is when they are written on charms or talismans. They are also used in number charts for the purpose of divination, with numbers designating the names of God.

**Veneration of Saints.** The veneration of important leaders and holy men (and sometimes women) in Islam is a practice that goes back to the beginning of Islam. Naturally, the burial place of Muhammad became very significant to his followers, and even articles of his clothing and hair from his beard and head are claimed to be in existence and to have great power for gaining *baraka*. The burial sites of early leaders of Islam following the death of Muhammad are also seen as places where people may obtain a measure of the *baraka* that permeates the sites.

Today, especially in Africa, the tombs of well known religious leaders of Islam (*pir*) are destinations for pilgrimages by ordinary Muslims seeking blessing, healing from illness, cures for infertility, success in business and other areas of life. Miracles are often attributed as the consequence of visiting a holy site. Often vows are made at these burial sites. The vow is composed, often being written on a piece of paper, and is dropped in a "vow box" located at the shrine. Vows may involve the promise to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, or the promise to perform a certain number of prayers, or give money for the support of a Muslim institution.

An example of a well-known Muslim shrine in Kenya is found in the village of Mackinnon Road, between Voi and Mombasa. Sayyed (meaning he was a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad) Bargahali Shah was a Punjab holy man who died in 1902. It is claimed that he served as a humble railroad laborer, and when carrying a load of soil, the basin never touched his head. Muslim truck drivers slow down when passing the area, and Muslims from Mombasa make pilgrimages there in hope of having prayers answered and gaining blessing. A similar shrine has been built around the grave of his brother, another holy man, buried at Ulu.<sup>21</sup>

**Divination.** The practice of divination takes place in folk Islam for various reasons: fortune telling, predicting the gender of an unborn child.

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<sup>21</sup> Salvadori, Cynthia. *Through Open Doors, A View of Asian Cultures in Kenya*. (Kenway Publications: Nairobi, n.d.) 208

discovering the cause of an illness along with its cure, and determining the best marriage partner for a man or woman.

Various methods are used for divination. Sometimes the *Quran* is opened at random, and the verses revealed are interpreted according to the situation in mind. Prayer beads are used, with a bead randomly selected, and the corresponding name of God interpreted in respect to the issue at hand. A book is available in a Muslim bookshop in Nairobi in which hundreds of possible subjects of dreams are listed, along with the interpretations which usually involve an event occurring in the future. Sometimes a Muslim shaman is called, who contacts the spirits and learns the cause of an illness.

**Healing.** Illness is one of the most common causes of concern for Muslims, and various means are used in folk Islam to determine its cause and come up with a cure. It is interesting to note that along the coast of Kenya, the Mijikenda believe that Islam has greater mystical power to heal illness than does Christianity or traditional religion. Therefore Muslim Wadigo medicine practitioners carry a higher status among the Mijikenda for their healing abilities.<sup>22</sup>

According to folk Islam, some causes of illness are:

*Attack by jinn.* After the name of the offending *jinn* is determined, the proper prescription is given for cure. Many Muslims in Kenya burn incense in their homes to keep *jinn* away.

*Possession by evil spirits.* Various means of exorcism are employed, ranging from burning incense to animal sacrifice to repossession by an even more powerful spirit who can subdue the offending spirit.

*Poisoning by enemies.* This is determined by a medicine man, who prescribes the proper herbal cure.

*Breaking taboos.* The ill person must with help determine what taboo has been broken and the corrective remedy applied.

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<sup>22</sup> Mkangi, Katama. "The Perception of Islam by the Mijikenda of Kenya Coast." in *Islam in Kenya, Proceedings of the National Seminar on Contemporary Islam in Kenya*, Bakari, Mohammed and Yahya. Saad S. Eds. (Mewa Publications: Nairobi, 1995) 113.

*The evil eye.* As previously discussed, diagnosis and prescription take various forms.

*Sorcery and black magic.* This is a high level illness requiring the assistance of a powerful medicine man. One of the most influential men in a Muslim society is the medicine man. He is respected and depended upon in the community. He offers herbal as well as magical potions for curing of various illnesses, common and demonic. Muslim medicine men often sell small packets of tablets said to cure ailments, including demon possession.

As related previously, miracles of healing are often attributed to visiting the tomb of a Muslim saint.

**Protection from Evil.** According to the Muslim world view, an assortment of evil supernatural beings come into frequent contact with human beings, and various means are used as protection:

Charms are worn on various parts of the body. Most often a charm consists of a portion of the *Quran* sewn into a piece of leather and hung on the body, attached to a door, or placed in a vehicle. The "hand of Fatima" may be employed to ward off the evil eye.

Muslims constantly repeat the words, "*Bismillah*" (In the name of God), as a protection from evil. Before eating, many will drop a pinch of salt on the food while repeating the phrase, to keep evil spirits away from the meal. It is repeated when entering a bus or leaving the house, or entering a building or passing a place known to be inhabited by *jinn* (an outhouse, for example).

In folk Islam, animal sacrifice is often associated with protection from evil. In Lamu, whenever a new dhow is launched, an animal is sacrificed as means of protecting the craft from *jinn* and evil spirits on its voyages. For a small dhow, a chicken is killed. For a larger craft, a goat must be slaughtered. For the largest ships, a cow is pushed and pulled up to the deck and its throat slit in a special ceremony followed by a *pilau* feast.

Special precautions are taken for new-born babies. In Mombasa, Muslim mothers often put a dark paste on the babies eye lids and forehead as a protection against evil spirits. Even before birth precautions are taken with pregnant women. It is believed that an angel comes and forms the baby in the womb and determines the baby's future life. For this reason, a pregnant woman should not be wakened from sleep, lest the angel be disturbed in its work.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, 132

Throughout the child's life, various folk Islam ceremonies may accompany rites of passage such as naming the child and circumcision.

Various ceremonies are performed at weddings in connection with keeping the new couple free from evil influences. In fact, often the right partner is determined by divination practices. At the *nikah*, the wedding ceremony, the bride and sometimes the groom are completely covered as a protection against the evil eye. After marriage, the wife may take occultic steps to keep her husband from straying to other women. Some potions are used to render the husband impotent with all women other than his wife.

Some steps may be taken in popular Islam to secure employment. One Muslim family in Mombasa noticed black powder on their food and learned that their worker had paid for witchcraft which would guarantee that he would never be fired from his employment.

In times of death, Muslims often follow folk Islam prescriptions. If death is imminent, the person's face is turned toward Mecca, giving him a better chance of entering paradise. Muslims believe that upon burial of a body, angels come and question the deceased in regard to their good works as well as shortcomings. During this time relatives may read the *Quran* and do good deeds in hope of enhancing the deceased chances of making it to paradise. Along the coast many Muslims sprinkle rose water in graves to keep evil spirits away from the body at burial.

In some Muslim areas, new buildings are "protected" against evil spirits by special charms placed in the cement walls of the structure. Incense is burned in many Muslim houses along the coast to repel spirits and *jinn*.

In addition to protection, Muslims often appeal to occultic powers for gaining prosperity. Charms may be purchased which are said to attract good luck and financial gain.<sup>24</sup>

**Cursing in Islam.** Although orthodox Islam decries the practice of cursing in Islam, the practice is very common in folk Islam. Cursing works by employing the powers of the occult world and directing them against an enemy. In 1992, the IPK political party in Kenya slaughtered two goats and a rooster at Mwembe Tayari as part of a curse ceremony directed against the KANU

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<sup>24</sup> An example of this may be seen in the film, "The Charm," available through Maturity Audio Visuals, Nairobi, Kenya.



government.<sup>25</sup> Though the practice of cursing is condemned by orthodox Muslims, many find support in the practice in Sura 3:55-63, which encourages Muslims to pray for a curse from God against those who lie by ascribing deity to Jesus Christ. In popular Islam cursing takes the form of the "evil eye" and "fire in the eye," resulting in many living in fear and taking steps to protect themselves.

**Days of the Week and Places.** Times and places are very significant in folk Islam. For example, Musk lists the significance of days of the week in Popular Islam. Friday is seen as the best day of the week, though one hour of that day may be unlucky. Thursday is also a good day, and Sunday and Monday are acceptable. Wednesday is the worst day; Saturday and Tuesday have negative connotations.<sup>26</sup>

Events are planned to coincide with positive times and avoid negative days. There are also significant dates on the Muslim calendar, some being positive and others associated with demonic mischief and danger. Naturally, Ramadan is the best month of the year, and *jinn* are said to be imprisoned during that month. The 27th day of Ramadan, the "night of power," when it is said that Muhammad began receiving his revelations, has strong positive connotations for folk Muslims.

Orientation towards Mecca is very strong in Islam. Mecca is seen as the holiest place on earth and is the centre of the universe. Whenever a sacrifice is made, the head of the victim is turned towards Mecca. Oaths are made while facing the holy city. Muslims are buried facing the birthplace of Islam. Prayer is always made facing Mecca.

There are geographical and spatial areas of blessing in folk Islam. Shrines of departed saints are held to be areas of strong *baraka*. Of course the cities of Mecca and Medina are significant, and soil and water may be carried from these places to transport the blessing.

Certain areas are held to be the abode of demons and *jinn*. Toilets, garbage piles, caves and heavily wooded areas are said to be inhabited by *jinn* and demons, and are to be avoided as much as possible. The phrase *bismallah*, is repeated frequently when entering such areas.

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<sup>25</sup> Mbugguss, Martha. "What's this curse mania all about?" *Daily Nation* Wednesday Magazine, (July 15, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, 150.

**Demon Possession in Islam.** Cases of demon possession seem very common among Muslims. Muslims along the coast of Kenya are known to seek out this condition for the purpose of gaining power.<sup>27</sup> Missionaries working in Muslim evangelism are frequently confronted with this situation. Muslim novels feature this syndrome prominently. Descriptions of life in Arabia by Muslim authors include examples of demon possession as part of everyday life.<sup>28</sup>

**The zar Cult in the Muslim World.**<sup>29</sup> A well documented part of life in the Muslim world is what is known as the zar cult, in which ritual demon possession takes place. The history of the cult is traced back to at least the early 1800s, most likely beginning with Sudanese women. It has spread throughout the Muslim world since then. There are reports of ritual cult demon possession activities taking place along the coast of Kenya.<sup>30</sup> The cult involves men as well as women, though women feature more prominently in the cult. The focus of the cult is identifying the particular demon or demons which are afflicting an individual, causing disease or other manifestation, and then taking steps to form a permanent alliance with the demonic powers so the victim may live in harmony with the demons and utilize their power.

The ritual is carried out when someone realizes they are possessed by a demon. Symptoms of this possession include illness, apathy, depression, erratic behavior and sometimes wild screaming and running. The spirits who possess such individuals may be male or female and have distinct names and personalities. Some are "dirty, ugly, unkempt, foul smelling and eat dirt and excrement." They are associated with dysfunction, lack of self control and death. Others are characterized as being clean, beautiful, well groomed and bathed. They desire and are attracted to gold, fine clothes, perfume and fine foods, and are associated with seduction and sexual pleasure.

The zar priests or priestesses are individuals who are themselves demon possessed by zar demons and have become skilled at controlling their demons for advantage. Male specialists are often homosexual. When a victim requests assistance in forming a compatible alliance with the demon, the specialists are called

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<sup>27</sup> Giles. 48.

<sup>28</sup> An Example of this may be seen in Jean Sasoons book, *Princess Sultana's Daughters*, when one of the daughters becomes involved in the occult and demonstrates characteristics of demon possession.

<sup>29</sup> This material on the Zar cult is taken from a paper on the subject by a missionary who worked in a Muslim country in Africa. Source protected.

<sup>30</sup> Giles. 48.

The *zar* ceremony lasts from one to seven days, depending on what the patient can afford. It is attended by the specialist and others who have performed the ceremony in the past. There are parallels to preparation for a wedding, with women wearing a white dress. Part of the ceremony involves animal sacrifice in honor of the spirits. In response to loud monotonous drumming, music, dancing and songs, the patient enters into a trance. The spirit is invited to enter the body. In return for various demands, the spirit makes a contract to restore the victim's well being. Neglect of the contract opens the victim to relapse.

Once a *zar* covenant has been made, the victim is demon possessed until death (apart from responding to the gospel and being delivered by Jesus Christ).

### **FOLK ISLAM AND WITNESS TO MUSLIMS**

It may be concluded that folk Islamic practices affect every part of the ordinary Muslim's life. The motivation is fear of the powers of evil and the desire to gain supernatural power to solve life's problems. This interaction with occult forces takes time and often money, and leads to oppression and manipulation by the forces of evil. What a wonderful message believers have concerning Jesus, who delivers people from the domain of darkness and transfers them to His kingdom. Along with presenting the gospel clearly, those who witness to Muslims must be aware of folk Islam and take advantage of every opportunity to proclaim the power and protection that Jesus gives those who trust Him.

For example, believers can use charms and other protective measures taken by Muslims to establish a conversation that leads to the gospel. When Muslims demonstrate fear of evil spirits, the message of freedom through Christ may be presented. Muslims may be asked, "Have you heard of the wonderful blessings of protection from evil that Jesus offers those who trust Him?" Those who practice folk Islam may be encouraged to study the life of Christ, including his complete power over the forces of evil.

Believers involved in this kind of ministry must of course realize the importance of "putting on the whole armor of God" as they deal with powerful forces. There may be times when Muslims seek help and deliverance from demon possession. One missionary encountered such a situation and spent several days teaching the elders of the village about Jesus and his power to protect from evil. Finally they agreed that the afflicted person could trust Jesus as savior and that the missionary could pray for him. This "power encounter" resulted in a new openness to the gospel, but also renewed opposition from Muslim authorities.

In dealing with such issues with Muslims, there is the need for wisdom and care to prevent faith in Jesus from being seen as simply another protective charm in folk-Islamic societies. Paul Hiebert gives some excellent cautions in this regard as missionaries proclaim the power of Jesus to protect from demons. In "Power Encounters and Folk Islam," he points out "The danger of a new Christian magic."<sup>31</sup> Jesus certainly protects believers from the evil one, but this is only a side effect that comes with the new birth. In telling Muslims about the wonderful blessings of faith in Christ, we must first and foremost emphasize the salvation that comes through acknowledging sin and its consequences and trusting the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

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<sup>31</sup> Hiebert, 58.

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# THE PROPER PROCEDURE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH

## *Part II*

***Philip Mutetei***

*In the last issue of AJET Philip Mutetei presented a foundational study on church discipline, showing the necessity and basis for it. Unfortunately, some churches discipline members without following biblical procedures. In this second part of this study on church discipline Pastor Mutetei demonstrates from Scripture the appropriate procedures for exercising church discipline and seeks to apply these principles to a particular context in which he serves.*

Before any serious discussion about the proper procedure of church discipline, we need to be reminded of the unique relationship of those who have called upon the name of the Lord for salvation and are indeed saved. These now belong to God as his beloved children. This was the context into which church discipline was introduced by Christ (Matt 18:15-20) and practiced by the early church.

True family implies responsibility and accountability, whereby each individual does things in consideration of the other and cares for one another accordingly. In an ideal family, love controls what is done, no one is a reject, each member takes care of the other and does everything for the common good.

As J. Robertson McQuilkin has said:

God designed the church to be a true family; the eternal blood ties of Calvary are even stronger than human blood ties. It is in the context of this koinonia or loving mingling of life that God does his work of building Christians into the likeness of Christ (Eph 4:11-16). This is no superficial Sunday-club relationship. God intended an intimate sharing of life on the pattern of the character of God, the Trinity. To have such family solidarity, there must be discipline. Fellowship without purity of

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faith and life is flawed at its core. Unity and purity are interdependent elements of a single relationship. Just as in the family so it is in the Church that where either love or discipline is missing, the children will be greatly handicapped.<sup>1</sup>

The church that is growing spiritually has healthy relationships developing within her members. The members feel with each other in good and bad seasons. They have the same goal—that of glorifying Christ. Donald L. Bubna says: "Effective discipline takes place in the context of these relationships. And from Proverbs 27:6—'Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.'"<sup>2</sup>

The words of Jesus (Matt 18:15-17) outline clearly the biblical pattern for discipline in the church. However, it is unfortunate as Bubna observes that:

too often, leadership within the local church (body) charged with the responsibility of discipline in the church, either is unfamiliar with the instructions or treats them as irrelevant.<sup>3</sup>

Failure to obey Christ's instruction on the matter of discipline has serious consequences but obedience leads to a healthy and visionary church.

However, McQuilkin cautions the disciplinarians to the understanding of their own sinfulness (vulnerability) and so the need for an examined attitude:

Before any thought of discipline, of course, there must be prayer and self-examination (Gal 6:1; Matt 7:1-5). If a person has not given himself to prayer for the brother/sister and if he has not carefully examined his own life, he is disqualified because he does not have the love and humility necessary to be God's agent in discipline.<sup>4</sup>

But when prayer and self-examination is present, then the words of Jesus should control and guide us in this matter of discipline of an erring believer.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Robertson McQuilkin, "Whatever Happened to Church Discipline," *Christianity Today* 8 (1974): 8-10.

<sup>2</sup> Donald L. Bubna, "Redemptive Love: The Key to Church Discipline," *Leadership Journal* 2:3 (Summer 1981): 78.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>4</sup> McQuilkin, 10.

In the initial stage of our dealing with a sinning believer,<sup>5</sup> the Scripture instructs a private visit to the erring brother or the one suspected to be living in sin or behaving sinfully. One of the reasons for such a private visitation is a matter of clarification, for the person who feels offended may have misunderstood the whole situation. On this, Bubna says: "This is the time to gather information and to learn. It is not the time to gossip, an act which brings injury to the church family."<sup>5</sup>

This step of going to see the erring or the suspected offender is what is usually called confrontation. The goal of confrontation is to bring the persons close to each other after confrontation. The aim of confrontation is not to get one's own way or intimidate other people. Unfortunately, many times confrontation causes isolation and intimidation and this should not be the case. When confrontation results in isolation or intimidation of people, it has failed. The writer of this project suggests that the reason for this failure is perhaps the lack of courtesy on the side of the confronters. Above all other reasons is the failure to follow the biblical pattern and the choice to follow our wisdom and short cuts. Other reasons include arrogance, an assumption that others are wrong and we the confronter are always right. Such an assumption is misleading and unbiblical. It should be remembered that Christians' confrontation of each other is not a contest but a ministry. Quoting Watch-Man Nee, Dr. Johnny Miller asked: "What do we do if we prove our brother wrong, except to hurt our brother."<sup>6</sup> Surely hurting the brethren is not the reason for confrontation even though in the process the person may be hurt, but the overall reason for confrontation is to win/rescue the person. Therefore, in a healthy church, this ministry of confrontation is essential.

## THE OBJECTS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

It is necessary as a prerequisite for one to understand both the types of church discipline and its manner of execution, that one be familiar and have clearly in mind who the objects of church discipline are or to whom church discipline is directed. First it should be clearly understood that church discipline is concerned with and applies only to the professing believers, those who have named the name of Christ. It is only over the professing members of the body of Christ that the church has any spiritual jurisdiction and against whom the principles of discipline can be applied. As Paul H. Schwarze has said:

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<sup>5</sup> Bubna, 81.

<sup>6</sup> Johnny Miller, "Confrontation," President's Chapel Message, Columbia International University, April 5, 1994.



It is impossible for a church and its rulers to exclude from their fellowship a person who never belonged to the society. We cannot possibly put out a person who was never in. Excommunication, therefore can take no effect on a pagan, a Jew, or person making no profession of Christianity, or even upon the member of another Christian church. A sentence pronounced in the circumstances is simply null and void, and that on two grounds, first that the rulers pronouncing sentence have no jurisdiction, and secondly that it is impossible to deprive a man of what he never possessed.<sup>7</sup>

This means the church is not obligated to discipline non-Christians. In other words, to put away or reject a person because he is not a Christian is in direct antithesis to the spirit and teaching of the word of God. It is against the teaching of love and compassion which Christ himself taught and attempted to instill in the lives of his followers. The example of the early church bears testimony to this truth:

The Primitive Church never pretended to exercise discipline upon any but such as were within her pale, in the largest sense, by some act of their own profession, and even upon these she never pretended to exercise this discipline so far as to cancel or disannul their baptism. But discipline of the church consisted in a power to deprive man of the benefits of eternal communion, such as public prayer, receiving the Eucharist, and other acts of divine worship. This power, before the establishment of the church by human laws, was a mere spiritual authority, or as St. Cyprian terms it, a spiritual sword, affecting the Soul and not the body.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, it should be noted very clearly that the disciplinary power which was committed to the church and which was wielded to maintain the purity of the people and the holiness of God's house, was exercised only against the sins which were committed by her members. These may have been sins committed either against God or against the Christian society as a whole. Thus the scope of church discipline involves only those members who make up the body of Christ. Unbelievers are excluded from the discipline of the church. Whereas unbelievers are concerned only with the keeping of the civil law,

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<sup>7</sup> Paul H. Schwarze, "The New Testament Criterion of Church Discipline" (MA thesis, Wheaton Graduate School, 1954), 27.

<sup>8</sup> John McLentock and James Strong, *Encyclopaedia of Biblical Theology and Ecclesiastical Literature*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 816.

professing Christians, living on an a higher ethical plane and concerned not only with fulfilling the civil and governmental laws are also constrained in the maintenance of the purity and wholesomeness of the church of Christ.

## THE FOUR PROCEDURAL STEPS TO CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Instructions concerning the procedure for church discipline in Matt 18:15 are: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." The parallel in Luke 17:3,4 says: "So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him."

Lonzo Sellars Taylor comments:

In one short teaching Christ gave the essential principles that are to prevent and heal breaches in the relationships between believers. With salvation and humility as a base, a believer is to walk circumspectly so that he will not cause others to stumble and when he is sinned against, being anxious to forgive, he is to institute measures to bring his brother to repentance.<sup>9</sup>

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus gave four steps to be taken as the situation requires in discipline process. The four basic steps include private reproof, private conference, public announcement, and public exclusion.

Though the author is aware of other passages where believers are instructed to discipline the erring believers, places including 1 Cor 5:1-13; 2 Thess 3:6-15; 1 Tim 5:6,8,20; 1 Thess 5:14; 2 Cor 2:5-11; 2 Tim 2:24-26; Titus 3:10; 1 Thess 5:12-14; he has chosen to concentrate on Matthew 18:15-17, a passage in which Jesus outlined for the church the proper procedure for confronting her members for the purpose of restoring a sinning believer.

### The Offended and the Offender Alone (vs. 15)

This first step in the discipline process is designed to heal a breach between the two believers. As Taylor says: "The offended party is to go and reprove the offender privately. Christ's purpose in giving this procedure is that sin be quickly and quietly removed."<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that Christ desires that

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<sup>9</sup> Lonzo S. Taylor "An Exegetical Study of Important New Testament Passages Dealing with Church Discipline" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974), 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

sin among his followers be dealt with immediately. Thus, he commands the wronged brother to go and reprove the offender. This accomplishes several things. First, the people who can do something about this sin are brought together. This avoids the gossip that can so easily lead to hard feelings and even friction among believers. Second, it brings the issue into clear focus. The offender might be quite unaware of his sin if he is not confronted with it or he may feel that he had adequate provocation to do what he did. Also, this may prove that there is no real offense but only a petty complaint on the part of the offended party. Third, it provides a clear means of ending the problem created by sin. The truth is the offended is in the best position to do something about the sin because he does not have to face the spiritual and emotional battle of admitting his fault that the offender has. Also, if the offender is a proud man, there may be a resultant unwillingness to admit that he is wrong. Again, the offender may fear the response his confession may bring and thus be reluctant to come to the offended party.

The offended party does not have most of these emotional roadblocks. He has only to guard his heart from hardness toward his brother and to open his heart in brotherly love to such a degree that he is willing to risk reproving his brother. It is unfortunate that this instruction in many cases of church discipline is overlooked. Many times the people claiming to be offended prefer telling other people instead of going to see the brother or sister concerned. It is our duty to reprove others when sin has been committed against us or when the tendencies to sin are evidenced in their behavior. As Carl Laney has said: "Reproof is a Christian duty. But it must first be in private as indicated by Jesus' words 'between you and him alone.' Any discussion of sin must be with the offender, not behind his or her back."<sup>11</sup> It is a great sin for a Christian to see another Christian living in sin and fail to go to him/her for reproof.

The Greek word for reprove used in Matt 18 is *elegcho*, which means "to bring to light, expose, convict, or convince someone of something." In Matthew's context, the word "reprove" simply means to show someone his/her fault. This means the most biblical and loving thing one can do for a sinning brother/sister is to reprove, demonstrating to him/her the fault with the truth and the solution for the sinful conduct. Christ's purpose in the instruction was a call to show our love to the sinning person(s) by going to see and talk the matter over with them. William Barclay writes:

At its widest what Jesus was saying was: "If anyone sins against you spare no effort to make that man admit his fault, and to get things right

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<sup>11</sup> Carl J. Laney, "The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 143 (1986): 358.

again between you and him." Basically it means that we must never tolerate any situation in which there is a breach of personal relationship between us and another member of the Christian community.<sup>12</sup>

This ministry of reproving others is so delicate and yet so important. Sometimes people afraid to confront the sinning brother have committed great mistakes in writing letters to express their feelings about a situation or even to *reprove*. There may be good reasons for writing a letter instead of going to see the person but one must be very cautious as he/she writes, otherwise if at all possible going to the offender is the best thing. Of course, our Savior instructed us to go and did not say to write a letter to the person. Barclay writes:

More trouble has been caused by the writing of letters than by almost anything else. A letter may be misread and misunderstood; it may quite unconsciously convey a tone it never meant to convey. If we have a difference with someone, there is only one way to settle it and that is face to face. The spoken word can often settle a difference which the written word would only have exacerbated.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, we see that according to the prescription of Matthew 18:15, true biblical disciplinary procedure begins with an encounter between two individuals and what takes place in this encounter is often termed as "*reproof*." If we see our brother in sin and we do not take the initiative in reproving him we do not love him at all. And we have violated the commandment of Christ, the head of the church, who has commanded us to love one another (John 13:34). Laney reports that:

In his sermon entitled *Reproof, a Christian Duty*, Charles Finney remarked, "If you see your neighbour sin, and you pass by and neglect to reprove him, it is just as cruel as if you should see his house on fire and pass by and not warn him of it."<sup>14</sup>

Such a statement tells of the significance of the ministry of reproving one to the other in love. Pointing out someone's fault is risky for there is no way of knowing how he/she will respond. But if done gently and graciously, the offender will be more likely to recognize the error than become stubborn and bitter. This is what might be called the loving, caring confrontation between the believers.

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<sup>12</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 187.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>14</sup> Laney, 358.

The last clause of Matt 18:15 reveals the potential results of this first step. The offender might listen, implying he/she might see his/her sin and repent. If that happens then we have gained our brother or sister and the will of God is done and so we will rejoice together with the restored brother or sister.

### **Witnesses to the Attempted Reconciliation**

Jesus anticipated that in some circumstances a brother or sister may be unwilling to listen (repent) and respond to the private reproof. So he sets forth the second step in church discipline. In Matthew 18:16 we read: "But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."

Jesus drew on the Old Testament requirement that a person may not be convicted of a crime on the basis of a single witness (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6, 19:15). At least two witnesses were required to ensure that the testimony was truthful and unprejudiced. Numbers 35:30 states: "Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness." It seems that the witnesses in the Old Testament were supposed to have witnessed the event in order to testify about it. In contrast, Matthew 18:16 does not seem to indicate that to be the purpose of the one or two witnesses accompanying the offender person. Alfred Plummer writes:

Yet these are not witnesses of the original wrong-doing but of the wronged person's attempts at reconciliation and the response which the wrong-doer makes to them. They will be to certify that the one has honestly tried to bring the other to a better mind, and that the other has or has not yielded to his efforts.<sup>15</sup>

These men are to be witnesses not judges. Christ seems to be anticipating the need for confirming testimony if this matter is not settled and must go before the entire church. The word mouth in this case is used metaphorically for testimony. The testimony of these witnesses will confirm every fact that the offended party brings to the attention of the church. Their testimony helps give the church adequate information on which to stand united and demand the offender's repentance.

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<sup>15</sup> Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Robert Scott, 1909), 253

The additional witnesses, therefore, serve a threefold purpose. First, they bring additional moral pressure to bear on the offender so that he may be encouraged to repent. Second, they bear witness of the offender's response to the reproof so that if necessary they can testify before the church. They can also hear the evidence and determine whether or not an offense has really been committed in the first place.

Robert H. Gundry says:

Matthew leaves no indication that the one or two others shall have witnessed the sin committed against the one who takes them along. Therefore their going does not have the purpose of establishing the original charge (the truth of which is taken for granted or of enabling them to act as witnesses before the church in case of a second refusal but of strengthening the reproof with a view toward restoration).<sup>16</sup>

Thus, while the witnesses may serve to bring new objectivity to the situation, it appears that their primary purpose is to strengthen the reproof and thus lead the offender to repentance. Surely bringing a matter of sin to a brother's attention in the presence of witnesses may sound like a threatening or intimidating situation, yet the purpose is not to threaten or intimidate the sinner into repentance. The intent is to help the offender realize the seriousness of the situation. Donald L. Bubna acknowledges "Although moving into the group process is scary it does improve the attention level."<sup>17</sup>

It is hoped that the offender will take the reproof before the witnesses seriously and repent. If he repents, then the brother is won back and reconciliation takes place.

### **The Public Announcement (Tell it to the Church)**

The third step in the process of discipline is revealed in Matt 18:17: "And if he refuses to listen to them (witnesses), tell it to the church." It should be noted that up to this point in the process the disciplinary procedure is to have taken place in private. But now an unresponsive saint requires strong public action. The congregation is the final court of appeal in such disciplinary matters. It is interesting that the Lord himself advised that Christians should take their disputes to the church and not to the secular courts. Here is a great teaching about our relationships as Christians. We cannot take each other to the secular

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<sup>16</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literacy and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 367.

<sup>17</sup> Bubna, 81.

court, instead we are supposed to settle disputes with each other in the church and not to accuse the other before the secular court. Persons may think that their legal disputes are personal, unrelated to spiritual affairs. But that is far from the truth, because whatever disputes we may have as Christians, they belong to the community of God. In 1 Cor 6:1-5, Paul criticizes the believers of Corinth for using the secular courts to resolve disputes between members of the Christian community:

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?

The church is gifted by God with men with much wisdom and He expects them to settle their disputes among themselves. Paul went on to say the church will ultimately judge the angels and if so it should be a small thing to judge disputes amongst themselves. To take each other to the secular courts brings shame to the church. It destroys the witness of fellowship and unity. Robert L. Buzzard says:

In fact, it is so disgraceful that it would be better to be defrauded than to go to courts. Defrauded! That is a powerful language. It assumes that one may have been ripped off, cheated, abused. Yet it would be better to suffer wrong and loss than to destroy the role and witness of the church.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore the Lord said to take disputes to the church.

On this third step, it is possible that the church is to be represented by its leaders (elders) but it seems that Matthew 18:17 and 1 Corinthians 5:4 include all true members of that specific local church. This means that even though any mature/spiritual, caring consistent believer is qualified to initiate the church discipline process, only the church or its leaders are qualified to complete the process. The local church is the final authority in disciplinary matters.

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<sup>18</sup> Robert L. Buzzard, *Tell It to the Church* (Elgin: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1982), 32-33.

### **The Public Exclusion (Excommunication)**

Jesus presented the final step in the discipline of an impertinent sinner. He said, "if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17b). When the church leaders and congregation have made every effort to bring the sinner to repentance without results, they must then disassociate the offender from the church fellowship.

While Christ was the friend of tax gatherers and sinners, he still recognised them as sinners. Christ looked at them as classes of people who were morally defiled. Taylor writes:

The primary force of Jesus' words seems to be that believers are to maintain limited contact with the unrepentant offender (sinner). To treat one as a Gentile was to see him as a source of defilement and, therefore, to limit contact with him.<sup>19</sup>

It is suggestive here that the offender may first need repentance toward God for salvation before he can establish proper relationship with the church. Perhaps this person never had any personal relationship with Christ which is the basis for relationships in the church. Maybe this person is still a Gentile (unsaved)--that is why his heart is hardened. Gentiles and tax gatherers would, for the most part, be outside of God's salvation. To treat an offender like an unbeliever may suggest that that may be his spiritual state. It is possible that the offender may be saved, but his conduct puts his calling into question. By his conduct, then, he has excluded himself from the church and is no longer to be considered a part of the local assembly.

Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians exhorts them to excommunicate certain disorderly brethren. "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed" (2 Thess 3:14). He also exhorted the Corinthian church to excommunicate the immoral person:

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people--not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or

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<sup>19</sup> Taylor, 19.



greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat (I Cor. 5:9-11).

The object of excommunication may be discussed along two lines of thought, each equally important. First, the effect upon the church and second the effect upon the individual excommunicated. The effect desired with respect to the church as a whole is the preservation of the church's spiritual testimony, particularly before the unbelievers. And the effect upon the individual (excommunicated) is to help him come back to his senses and repent of his sins before God. Taylor said:

Even this action is a final attempt to cause the man to face his sin and repent. It also protects the church from his corrupting influence and removes a person from the church who would provide reasons for non-believers to ridicule the church.<sup>20</sup>

This action is often viewed by many as punishment. The punishment perspective is not the biblical intention for excommunication, though sometimes the disciplinarians as well as the one disciplined may think it that way. A more biblical perspective is evidenced by Donald L. Bubna:

This (excommunication) means that you treat the person as a non-believer, because he is not walking as a believer. It means to keep loving him as Jesus loved the publicans and sinners. It means to reach out to him in witness, but not to relate to him as a member of the body of Christ. Like all evangelistic outreach, the goal is to bring a soul to Christ and back into the functioning body.<sup>21</sup>

Part of what is involved in excommunication is denying this person communion at the Lord's table, any leadership participation in any capacity in the worship service, singing in the choir and the person should even be told that his monetary offering is not acceptable. Once again it should be remembered this is an act of love. The church is caring enough to deny her member a meaningful fellowship with a view that he will repent. Paul Schwarze says:

Although the church has taken drastic action against this obstinate member, yet the church is not to give him up and let him go without any further effort to restore to their fellowship, but rather unceasing prayer

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<sup>20</sup> Taylor, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Bubna. 82.

should be made for him so that in the end he may be restored as a member of good standing in the Christian church.<sup>22</sup>

This means the one excommunicated is to be treated and regarded as being like the rest of the unbelieving world, a Gentile and publican (Matt 18:17b), and though unworthy of Christian fellowship, yet love and Christian sympathy should be extended to him even as Christ manifested this same compassion to those still outside of the kingdom of God. We should avoid personal hatred. In excommunication there is no room for personal vengeance. After all, the person has sinned against God and vengeance belongs to God.

### **SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR APPLYING NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH DISCIPLINE PRINCIPLES IN A KENYAN CONTEXT**

Merely understanding what the Scripture teaches about church discipline will not edify the church. To be doers of the Word and not hearers only, application is essential. And application must be specific to the circumstances in order to be effective. So now the question is raised, "How should the Kenyan church discipline its members?" There are three aspects to the answer: the attitude of the church, when to teach about church discipline and who should practice it.

#### **Attitude of the Church**

The New Testament concept of discipline parallels that of the Old Testament. Thus it is not a new concept peculiar to the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God is the Father to his son Israel. As a loving father, He was obligated to discipline whenever Israel went astray. Moses wrote:

Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land that the Lord promised on oath to your forefathers. Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you (Deut. 8:1-5).

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<sup>22</sup> Schwarze, 36.

The concept of God's love in discipline is clearly portrayed in Solomon's words: "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in" (Prov. 3:11,12).

According to the above passage, the basis for God's discipline is His great love for His children. Love is the attitude behind proper biblical discipline. Richards has said: "God rebukes, and even His punishment flows from love. God accepts the parent's responsibility: he will discipline (train) his sons."<sup>23</sup> God disciplines because He loves. In reality, though discipline arises because of a brother's need for correction, it finds its precedent in God's gracious dealing with His children individually. Robert L. Saucy has said that:

The discipline of the church rests upon the fact that God Himself disciplines His children. No true believer is without the chastening hand of God. "For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth" (Heb 12:6). God disciplines His own directly concerning matters of their family relationship to Him. But He has also ordained mediate discipline by the church concerning those affairs that concern the life and walk of the corporate household of faith.<sup>24</sup>

God disciplines in order to produce good character in His sons. He disciplines because He accepts persons as His sons. The church should exercise discipline because it cares for the fallen person--because of their acceptance of the person and not because of hatred.

The key New Testament passage for the understanding of the character of discipline is Hebrews 12:4-13. The author points out four basic characteristics of God's discipline:

1. Divine discipline is evidence of God's love not of anger or abandonment. The hardships related to the discipline serve to remind us that God is simply treating them as sons. (Heb 12:6-7--"because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?")

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<sup>23</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 228.

<sup>24</sup> Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 119.

2. God disciplines for the good of His sons. He has a specific goal in His sons' discipline. His specific goal is that they might become holy as He is. (Heb 12:10--"Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.")

3. To be sure, the disciplinary experiences are painful but are meant to produce for the ones (sons) disciplined a life of righteousness and peace. (Heb 12:11-- "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.")

4. To profit from discipline, one needs to endure it, neither making light of it nor becoming discouraged. There is a need to be aware of God's grace in those times, even when one is hurting, and avoid becoming bitter about the discipline of the Lord.

The church today can benefit much by understanding the purposes of God's discipline. Ted Kitchens has said: "The church should understand God's purposes for the exercise of corrective discipline, and understand that it must be done in faith."<sup>25</sup> The understanding of the characteristics of New Testament discipline should help to clarify the purposes for practicing church discipline. It should also help with the formulation of the comprehensive definition of church discipline. Church discipline properly includes the whole work of educating, training, admonishing, and correcting the members of the church in all things that pertain unto life and godliness as well as the exclusion of members who are disorderly and refractory.

## **WHEN TO TEACH BELIEVERS ABOUT CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

Discipline is so important to Christians that delaying to teach about it is as bad as delaying disciplining one's children. As early as the time of conversion, discipline should be introduced to the new converts. Any discipleship process that fails to introduce the importance of discipline as a guide into spiritual maturity denies the new convert a very important truth about the Christian life. As Neil M. Lines has said:

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<sup>25</sup> Ted Kitchens, *Aftershock: What to do When Leaders (and Others) Fail You*. (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1992), 242.

Church discipline is a part of the Church's disciplining program and must be seen as a means of helping to develop Christ-like attitudes in the lives of disciplinarians as well as the disciplined.<sup>26</sup>

Introducing discipline to new converts at an early stage in their Christian life should not be difficult. The persons who have decided to place their lives in Jesus are aware that they have a new disposition. Paul made this clear in his letter to the Corinthians. He wrote:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:17-21).

And as said earlier, these new converts belong to a unique family--the family of God. Therefore, God has set for them good standards whereby they will know what is expected of them in the new disposition. Richards remarks that "Scripture is given by God for 'teaching,' rebuking, correcting and training (discipline) in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). We need the guiding words of the Bible to correct us and to point us toward holiness.<sup>27</sup> New converts need to be taught to obey God who by His sovereign grace has called them to salvation. Peter made this clear in his letter to the scattered Christian saints. He wrote: "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance" (1 Pet. 1:14). The benefits of obeying as children need to be taught clearly as well as the consequences of disobedience. God will bless the obedience (Deut 28: 1) but a curse will fall on the disobedient children (Deut 28:15).

Since the exercise of church discipline is so crucial for the health of the church, the writer suggests the following guidelines regarding where church discipline might be taught.

### **The Church Constitution and Bylaws**

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<sup>26</sup> Neil M. Lines, "Church Discipline: Ruination or Restoration" (D.Min. Dissertation, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1982), 117.

<sup>27</sup> Richards, 229.

There is a need for an official statement in every church constitution and bylaws. The church's position on discipline should be stated clearly in the constitution or other official documents. There are several reasons why it is wise to include a clear statement about church discipline.

1. Scripture clearly commands a local church to be involved in the process of restoration of fallen believers and of purifying the church. Since a constitution is to reflect the way in which the church intends to carry the commands of Scripture, it is only logical that it be included.
2. The members need to know what to expect from the church whenever they adopt a lifestyle contrary to the Scripture.
3. The church needs to make an official commitment to its members. If stated in the constitution, the church will be forced to make an effort to follow through when sinful behavior is noticed. If there is no statement, it will encourage the tendency to do nothing.
4. If an unrepentant person insists on taking the church to court, a constitution limits the chances of being sued for exercising biblical discipline. Paul made it clear that the church has its own jurisdiction and that Christians should not take each other to secular court (1 Cor 6:1-5). As Lynn Robert Buzzard has said, "The church has jurisdiction not simply over religious litigation, but over all disputes between believers."<sup>28</sup>

We can learn from the following example of the First Evangelical Free Church, as their "Constitution and Bylaws" state:

#### B. Discipline of Members

1. All members of this fellowship are expected to conduct their lives according to the standard set forth in the Scriptures. Such conduct includes moral purity (1 Cor 6:18-20; 1 Thess 4:1-7), personal honesty (Eph 4:25), and biblical fidelity (Jude 20 and 21); 2 Tim 3:14-17). Our lives are to be consistent examples of authentic Christianity as we walk in the light (1 John 1:6-7), emulating the character of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23; Eph 5:15-21; 2 Pet 1:5-8).
2. Should any members willfully depart from this scriptural standard and engage in conduct which conflicts with biblical principles of holiness, the

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<sup>28</sup> Lynn Robert Buzzard, *Tell it to the Church* (Elgin: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1982), 32.

procedure set forth in Matthew 18:15-16 shall be followed for the purpose of leading the erring individual to repentance and, ultimately, to full restoration. This shall be done in a spirit of humility and gentleness (Gal 6:1) as well as loving honesty (Eph 4:25). If after these steps of reproof are taken there is no repentance, one of the pastors, with at least one elder, shall confront, counsel, and pray with the person. Should there still be no evidence of repentance, the person shall be removed from the membership and fellowship of this church (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:11; 2 Thess 3:14-15).<sup>29</sup>

### **In the Catechism**

Whenever catechism is taught to new believers before water baptism they should be introduced to the biblical truth of church discipline. Church discipline should be introduced then as one of the important doctrines which the church believes.

### **Bible Schools and Bible Colleges**

Almost every denomination has Bible Schools or colleges, training centres or theological education by extension. The main objective of these institutions is to train workers (pastors and other church workers). Church discipline should be taught in these institutions as a subject, perhaps in the area of church polity, with a view that when the students in these institutions graduate and are back to pastoral work they will teach the believers church discipline as an important part of Christian life.

### **Acceptance of New Members**

Any time the church is accepting new members to the fellowship it is proper to ask them to sign statements of commitment to the doctrinal positions. Also, a statement of subjection to the church discipline process of the local church should be signed by the new member. This way the church will be obligated to care and take necessary actions toward any member when needed.

### **Church Conferences**

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<sup>29</sup> First Evangelical Free Church, "Constitution and Bylaws," facsimile received from Executive Assistant, March 30, 1994, Fullerton, California.

The planning of the subjects/topics to be discussed in various church conferences, both national and regional, should occasionally include the discussion of church discipline. This should be done with sincere motives, without referring to any known situation unless it is necessary to speak regarding a known situation. In other words, the writer sees the need to discuss the subject because of its importance whether or not there are current disciplinary issues in the church.

### **Bible Studies**

Many of those who attend Bible studies are sincere Christians who are desiring to grow in the Lord. From time to time a Bible study could discuss the importance of church discipline--what it does to an individual and the whole body of believers when faithfully exercised and what happens to an individual and the church where discipline is neglected.

### **Youth Camps**

Church discipline should be taught at youth camps. This way the young people will grow up with a better understanding of the biblical teaching on discipline. If the youth, the leaders of tomorrow, understand God's purposes for discipline, there will be a great hope for a dynamic church.

### **The Pulpit Ministry**

Though the pastors have so many important subjects to preach on, surely church discipline is not any less important. Therefore, faithful preachers should occasionally prepare and preach on the subject of church discipline.

Because of the continued depravity of man, these suggestions may look impractical, but the writer believes they could be practical. After all, the whole matter of church discipline is to be done in faith, trusting God to bring the fruit of righteousness in His blessed church so the church should not shy away from this important subject and ministry.

## **WHO SHOULD PRACTICE CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

Christians are responsible to each other. Where true church growth is taking place the accountability of believers to each other is cherished. When it comes to the practice of church discipline all believers can begin the process. Johnny Miller, president of Columbia International University, made these remarks:



Church discipline is the end of a process. The process begins on an individual level when one caring Christian confronts another Christian with what seems to be sin (Matt 18:15; Gal 6: 1). If that contact confirms the sin but does not effect repentance and restoration, then the second step is to widen the circle to one or two other mature, consistent believers. The third step is to include the church (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:4). It is possible that the church is to be represented by its leaders (elders), but it seems to me that both the above noted passages seem to include all those who are a regular part of the fellowship of the church. Therefore, any mature/spiritual, caring, consistent believer is qualified to initiate the process, but only the church or its leaders is qualified to complete the process.<sup>30</sup>

In the case of the local church, the council of elders is responsible for completing the process. Gordon F. Schroeder says:

In many constitutions the governing board had the final say unless the individual wanted to make an appeal. He could appeal to the congregation and then the voting members of the church had the final authority.<sup>31</sup>

It seems there is a potential problem when the entire church is involved. In a sense, it is difficult to see how a sense of peace could be maintained if it was brought to the entire church. It seems more proper to have fewer mature Christians completing the process if possible and keeping the peace of the whole church.

Any believer living an inconsistent Christian life or living in sin should be disciplined accordingly. This may be a young man, girl, older man, a woman, a leader in the church, or even a political leader who is a believer and a member of the given local church. There should be no respect of men's personality or position in carrying out church discipline; for God is not a respecter of men and will not be happy if the church showed favoritism in this matter of church discipline.

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<sup>30</sup> President Johnny Miller of Columbia International University, interview by writer, April 27, 1994, Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>31</sup> Gordon F. Schroeder, "An Analysis of the Current Practice of Discipline Among Churches Pastored by Graduates of Dallas Theological Seminary" (D.Min. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986), 137.

## CONCLUSION

It has been the intent of this study to call the universal church and more specifically the churches in Kenya back to the responsibility of being actively and profitably engaged in the practice of biblical discipline. Church discipline should always be viewed redemptively. This redemptive mission, outlined in Matt 18:15-18, if it is to reach a satisfactory conclusion for the offended as well as the offender, must be administered in the right spirit. As Lines writes, "Just as right behavior determines right feelings, so right attitudes will result in restoration of the fallen and the magnification of Jesus Christ."<sup>32</sup>

The following observations emerged during the study on the biblical practice of church discipline:

1. Discipline, regardless of the nature or type, is always exercised in the spirit of love and long-suffering.
2. Discipline has as its immediate goal the spiritual benefit of the individual, the welfare, and purity of the local church, and ultimately the testimony of God and the promotion of the program of the whole universal church of Christ.
3. Though the proper ecclesiastical officers are to preside over the matters of the church as appointed representatives there is no evidence in the New Testament that there is to be an ecclesiastical hierarchy.
4. There are varying degrees of severity in the sundry types of disciplines to be employed, and the exercise of discipline is to be enforced accordingly.
5. Church discipline applies only to the erring and disorderly within the boundary of the Christian church; unbelievers are not apprehended through the exercise of church discipline.
6. While church discipline deals with the spiritual relationship of men with one another and their attitude and action toward God, civil authorities, and all in power deal with transgressors of the governing laws of the given land.
7. The truth is that God has endowed the church with a self purifying process and when used for its God-given function it enables the church to educate, train, admonish, and correct the members of its body.

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<sup>32</sup> Lines, 117.

It is an amazing truth. The practice of church discipline is a God given privilege to His church. If practised in true obedience to God and according to His guidelines, it must prove a total blessing causing the church as a corporate body as well as individual believers to maintain a spiritual dynamic. As Paul Schwarze has said: "The church discipline must be maintained in order to assure not only the purity of the church, but also the dynamic of the church, for where there is a mixture of the pure with impure there can be no spiritual power." So many churches are powerless today because proper discipline is lacking. No wonder God insists that His people maintain a purity and a holiness of life and thus, to that end, have the principles of discipline, its function, and its application being instituted with a view that his people "may share in his holiness" (Heb 12:10).

## **SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE**

***Alan Chilver***

*As the theological colleges go, so go the churches. If the theological colleges veer to the left with many doubts about the authority of Scripture, the churches in time will be so affected. If the theological colleges major on academic preparation and fail to train the students in godliness, the churches in time will be so affected.*

*Hence the spiritual formation of students in our theological and pastoral training institutions has generated much concern in recent years. What can we do? What should we do? How can we do it? In the last issue of AJET we published a substantive article on a survey of literature on the subject. In this issue we publish a paper originally presented at a plenary session of an ACTEA regional consultation for theological educators held in Jos, Nigeria. Alan Chilver has served for more than thirty-five years in theological education in Nigeria, including various posts at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN), and is well qualified to reflect on this issue.*

Many of us involved in theological education are rightly concerned that the spiritual growth of our students should match their academic development while under the formative influence of our institution. But how can a theological college assist in the spiritual formation of its students?

The ICETE Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education urges:

Our programmes of theological education must combine spiritual and practical with academic objectives in one holistic integrated educational approach . . . . We so often . . . hope for student growth . . . but leave it largely to chance. . . . Our educational programmes must deliberately foster the spiritual formation of the student (Article 7).

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And the ACTEA Standards for post secondary theological education in Africa state:

The institution's programme should evidence a holistic approach combining both curricular and extracurricular activities in an educational plan which embraces objectives concerned for spiritual and vocational as well as academic development. Thus worship, community life, work, sports, social activities, practical Christian service, and so forth should be intentionally and manifestly shaped to participate in the educational objectives of the institution (Standards, 4a).

Faced with such expectations, many of us are tempted to switch off. We either say to ourselves that this is not really possible in our situation; or else we say that indeed this is what we would like but that we will simply have to leave it to others. Or perhaps, more subtly, we are tempted to excuse ourselves from such effort by attributing this aspect of training to the work of the Holy Spirit!

Is it possible to achieve these standards? Paul saw it as his task "to present everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28). Is it practicable to attempt to present every student mature in Christ through the training received in our theological colleges?

The subject of spiritual formation inevitably brings us deeply into differences. There may well be differences as to what we mean by 'spirituality'. Certainly there are differences in our understanding of the way spiritual formation actually takes place. And these differences can frequently have denominational or national or ethnic roots. For example Lutheran piety is different from Baptist piety, Brethren piety is different from Reformed piety, and these are different again from Pentecostal piety or Catholic piety. Or we may speak of national differences: German piety is different from Italian piety, as Nigerian piety is different from Danish piety, which is different again from Dutch piety, American piety or even British piety. And ethnically, of course, Western piety is different from African piety. It is very important to notice this fact of variety, to recognise it, and to take full account of it.

In our experience at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN), we have been very exposed to such differences, for all of the denominations mentioned above are represented except the Catholic; and we have had all of these and more nationalities present on the staff at one time or another, except the Italian.

For example, there is one group at the college who feels that communion is incomplete without foot-washing. I wonder how many of us have

experienced foot-washing, a very moving service, and something I had never experienced before coming to Nigeria. Or again, personally, I well remember how I was put on the spot when I went to lunch at the home of a fellow missionary who came from a different tradition. In the middle of the day, while sitting at the table, they had a family reading before the meal, and then I was asked to pray. I assumed I was being asked to say grace, so I said grace. And the youngest of the children piped up, "My, that was short!"

I wonder whether one of the reasons we are having such a struggle at TCNN in addressing the challenge of spiritual formation is because, by virtue of the nature of our situation, we cannot channel our efforts into only one particular approach. And does this perhaps also lie behind some of the struggle we face in all our colleges, the fact that by its very nature spirituality is personal, individual, and gloriously varied, and cannot be forced into any one form or pattern?

## SPIRITUALITY

What is spirituality? What is the purpose of spiritual formation? What are we aiming at? What is the end result that we are seeking? And what, in fact, is the purpose of all our theological training?

In response to these questions, Colossians 1:28 is particularly relevant: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ". In Colossians 1:22 Paul has already spelled this out in a little more detail. He says: "God has reconciled you . . . to present you holy, and blameless, and irreproachable before Him". And in Colossians 2:10 Paul speaks of the Colossian Christians as coming to "fullness of life" in Christ. Again in Galatians 4:19 Paul speaks of a similar objective for his work in these terms: "My little children with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you." In Ephesians 3:17 he expresses the prayer "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . . that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." And in Ephesians 4:13 Paul speaks of the reason the gifts of the Spirit have been given: "until we all obtain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature adulthood," which he then explains as being "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ". Or again in Philippians 1:10\_11 Paul prays that the Philippians "may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ."

What does all this mean in terms of spiritual formation? What is spirituality? What is this maturity of which Paul speaks? I have found much

stimulating reflection on these and related questions in a collection of essays edited by Jill Robson and David Lonsdale and titled: *Can Spirituality be Taught?* Let me quote selectively from the opening essay in this collection.

"What is taught as spirituality . . . will of course deal with prayer and meditation. But how and why it deals with them is important . . . .

The function of a re-discovered spiritual theology will be to understand, interpret, guide, and facilitate the experience Christians have of God . . . .

It focuses upon the communion we have with God in Christ and the ways in which that communion is initiated, maintained, and improved. It has to do with what used to be called "interior life", but . . . as Jesus was truly incarnate, both divine and human, so also Christian spirituality must have an incarnational flavour, with moral, social, corporate, and private elements . . . .

The word spirituality is used to indicate the recognition that the way we are with ourselves, and the way we are with other people, depends upon the way we are with God" (pp.3-6). "The heart of Christian spirituality is to do with a living, growing relationship between ourselves and God" (p.108).

### **CAN SPIRITUALITY BE TAUGHT?**

Now if all this is true, then it raises the question whether 'spirituality' can be taught. Is it not too inward, too private, too individual a matter to be taught? This is so crucial an issue that in fact it is the title of the collection of essays just mentioned. Each essay approaches that question from a different perspective. I want now to rephrase the question slightly, "Is spirituality taught or is it caught?" How is it acquired? How is it gained? Certainly many of us in theological education act as though we feel it is caught. If only 'spirituality', a changed character, would simply brush off on our students! But will it? Certainly our experience at our theological college demonstrates quite clearly that it does not inevitably happen, and that only very rarely does it just simply happen.

So can it be taught? Well certainly Paul thought it could. From the passages just quoted from Colossians (1:28, 29; 2:1) he certainly assumes that yes, it can be taught. Paul's stated objective is to present each person mature in Christ. He does this by proclaiming Christ, and by warning and teaching everyone. And he says this is hard work: "I toil, struggling . . . . I want you to know how greatly I strive for you."

In Paul's ministry it seems that the proclaiming of the Gospel is explained and developed by warning and teaching. We should note exactly the

same phrase, translated slightly differently, in Colossians 3:16, where Paul speaks of the community as "teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom". It is not just to be a one-man show; it is to be a community effort directed towards Paul's great objective to present everyone mature in Christ, to bring into God's presence each individual as a mature Christian incorporated fully in Christ, and to display that person as clearly mature. The goal then is to present to the 'audience', in this case *mirabile dictu*, to God, every person as mature in Christ.

A look at the context, Colossians 1:21-22, shows that Paul is saying that the intention of God's work of reconciliation is to present Paul's readers holy, blameless, irreproachable before Him. That is the ultimate objective of God's work of reconciliation. But now in Colossians 1:28, it is further explained that God gets this intention of His brought about by Paul as His agent. The divine and the human are intended to work together. So spiritual formation is not something to be just left to God, for Him to get on with, to present every person mature in Christ. We as theological educators do have a responsibility in spiritual formation, just as Paul did.

### 'MATURITY'

And what does 'mature' mean? (i) First, it means 'perfect', 'complete'. It is used as a parallel word to mean 'filled', 'fulfilled', 'filled full'. In Colossians, Paul is very careful to make it clear that his idea of 'perfect' has nothing to do with the Gnostic ideas of being perfect, of being filled with a special supernatural wisdom or a particular divine power or ability. 'Mature' means full-grown, a man not a boy, fully educated rather than a learner, someone now equipped and trained to do the job. It means someone who in the 'completeness' of himself is not an unworthy offering to bring to God.

And yet we must notice that Paul does talk of this perfection in terms of being 'filled'. In Colossians 4:12 he says that Epaphras is someone who "is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured." When Paul talks about being filled, it is not being filled with some strange esoteric supernatural wisdom; rather it is being filled with everything that is God's will. This is very close to the moral and ethical tone of the Old Testament phrase, "walking perfectly in the ways of God". Paul's understanding of perfection is wholly directed towards obedient fulfilment of God's will. That is what it means to be mature. 'Perfection' is directly related to the will of God, not to some special wisdom or to some special power. So in Paul's thinking the act of presenting people as 'mature' is not just something for the *eschaton*, something at the end. It is something that happens in daily life.



(ii) Secondly, if we go back to Colossians 1:22, we find some of the parts which make up this maturity: 'holy', 'blameless', and 'irreproachable'. What does 'holy' mean? Basically it means different, separate, set apart. The temple was 'holy' or different, not because it was not made out of bricks and mortar like all other houses, but because it was set apart, it was for a different use. The Sabbath was 'holy', not because it did not have 24 hours in it; it was different because it was set aside for a different purpose. And God Himself is called 'holy' because He is totally other, so different. A mature Christian is first and foremost someone who is different; not different by withdrawal from the world, but different by and in his involvement in the world. The New Testament does not know of saints 'in the desert'; it does not have saints in the monastery; but it knows of saints in Colossae, saints in Rome, saints in Philippi. Are our students trained for this?

And 'blameless'. A mature Christian is to be without blemish, which means a life of radiant purity, loveliness, such that it can, like the Old Testament unblemished sacrifices, be taken as an appropriate offering to God. It is something good enough for God. That is what the mature Christian is, a blameless Christian; his or her life is offered to God as a sacrifice, offered to God as a gift, and it is acceptable. The truly mature Christian's life can be taken and offered to God; the whole life, not just the Sunday parts of it. Can this be said to be true of our students?

Then 'irreproachable'. Christian maturity also involves unimpeachable innocence. The mature Christian life is so good and so pure that no one can level any charge against it. He or she is an unimpeachable advertisement for the Christian faith. Do our students measure up to this?

This then is the goal toward which we are aiming in spiritual formation, as we seek to present every student mature in Christ.

And even more troublesome, even more demanding, even more challenging, is that our task is to train our students so that they themselves in turn will be able to present every man and woman in their congregation mature in Christ in this way. The tragedy all too often is that those in training to minister to others legitimately complain that they themselves have not received a prudent and loving quality of pastoral care while in training.

## **MEANS TOWARDS SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

Paul speaks in Colossians 1:28 in both negative and positive terms. First, he speaks of 'warning', setting right, correcting, admonishing the believers. Paul did not shrink, as I find myself often wanting to, from the very uncongenial

work of rebuking. Do we rebuke where it is necessary, or do we shy away from it? Or do we, God forbid, sometimes even enjoy it, waiting until there is a clear error, a clear wrong, and then enjoy being right, and our student being wrong? It is so much easier when the issue is clear cut! Or are we prepared to discuss and talk over, to counsel with our students, being open and being vulnerable, and learning together? In fact, a true warning is always positive in intention, and if it is effective it is certainly positive in result.

And then secondly, Paul speaks of 'teaching' every man, positively. Now we are on home territory! That is what theological education is all about; that is what we are all involved in!. But again we have to ask ourselves whether our lecturing, our classroom teaching, first and foremost leads our students to maturity, to spiritual maturity? Is that both our objective, and what we achieve? Or are our energies largely aimed at putting facts into the minds of our students? Can spirituality be taught? Yes! That's what theology is all about.

As we see and recognise the goal and begin to touch on the means, it becomes clear that in Paul's thinking and in practice this spiritual formation must be a life-long process, the process of sanctification. Now of course we have students within the orbit of our influence for only two, three, perhaps four or at the most five years. So there is a sense that in no way can we present them fully mature in that limited time. And so let us realise that the full burden is not entirely on us.

So can spirituality be taught by us in a theological college? Well, we do have them for those two, three, four or even five years. And so, surely, we can make a start. Surely we must take them forward from where they are, rather than allow them to stagnate and to decline. I suggest we can teach spirituality, and that we must. I suggest that it is at the peril of our own Christian integrity, and of our own Christian responsibility as theological educators, as well as to the detriment of Christ's church, if we fail to do all that we can in guiding and facilitating our students in their spiritual formation, helping them, enabling them, and providing them with the relevant tools.

## **FACTORS IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

But the big question surely is how to do it? That is the toughest question. If there is a grain of truth in the quip "education is what you remember after you've forgotten all you were ever taught", then in our context of theological education may not spiritual formation similarly be thought of as that which our students do with their privacy, once we and our demands as teachers on their time and attention have receded from the foreground? What do they do with their spare time, in college, out of college?

How can we set about dealing with their growth in grace? Our concern is growth in faith, growth in love, growth in character and life, growth in prayer, growth in worship, in spiritual as opposed to merely cerebral understanding. If we recognise that the quality of the service a person gives to Christ, is determined by the nature of the life he lives, if we remember that what is central in the kingdom of God is not what a person does but what he is, then I suggest we need to give more attention to this aspect of our training, but at the same time to get firmly fixed in our minds that teaching about spirituality alone is not guaranteed to produce it. It is going to take more than teaching about spirituality.

And it is right here that we need to be especially on our guard against the dangers of manipulation. We are there to train, to teach, to guide, to facilitate spiritual formation, to facilitate spiritual growth and development. But ultimately that will mean to facilitate our students to be themselves, to be their sanctified selves before God, not (thank God) to be copies of us. And this means of course that there will be variation, there will be no stereotypes, there will not even be a hard and fast official line in many areas of spiritual growth within the college. So when we are talking about how to do it, we need to bear in mind that there are different types of spirituality and that there will be variety. Such variety must both be allowed, and I would even dare to say encouraged. Encourage your students to express their spirituality in the way that best suits them.

## **ASPECTS OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

Let us summarise what we have seen regarding the "how to" of spiritual formation. There are at least three different dimensions. (i) First there is teaching, whether explicitly on prayer and personal commitment, or on ethics and counselling, or implicitly during study whether of the Bible or doctrine or any of the formal subjects within the curriculum. Our teaching in class needs to be made relevant, and needs to be shown that it is relevant, to issues of personal and community spirituality. What do students learn spiritually from what we teach? And from how we teach?

(ii) Secondly, there is the less formal, but equally formative impact that is implied in the training situation we provide, through the actual practice of prayer in our college, through the practice of worship, whether in community or in groups, through the example and role modelling of both staff and other students, and through the structures of our whole college life. How do we administer discipline, for example? What do students learn from the way our institution is? What do they learn from the underlying assumptions that are made, from the

customs that the institution has in practice, from the whole prevailing ethos during the period of their training?

Both of these aspects of spiritual formation depend heavily on the commitment of the staff and of the governing bodies, the administration and the organisation of our various institutions. Spiritual formation depends far more on these intangible factors than we are usually prepared to recognise, and often also depends more on these factors than on that which is studied, stated, and overtly communicated.

(iii) And the third aspect of spiritual formation is that fundamental outlook, that attitude of commitment, that 'way of being' which trainees have while they are at college and which they take away with them; that quality of faith and prayer, of commitment, of receptivity, and the capacity to develop relationships. And much of this does in fact depend on what they "catch" from us, their trainers.

### **MODELS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

As we continue to look at the "how to", we need to remember that there are going to be different models, different patterns, different ways of thinking about spiritual formation, even within the members of our staff and our governing body.

Spiritual formation can be regarded simply as a specialist branch of theology, one more subject in the theological curriculum. Of course it is very important to scrutinise and to analyse the theological assumptions that underlie various schools of spirituality. So, an objective academic study of spirituality is important. But of course we also have to remember that being an informed expert does not imply that the expert is a practitioner of that expertise.

Spiritual formation can also be seen as introducing students to a set of principles. But that rather implies that what spirituality is is already known, what holiness is, what righteousness is. Or at least it assumes that they can be defined. This approach also assumes that there is a definite set of rules, a set of principles that apply, and that certain things ought to be done and ought not to be done in a certain way. That can be a very limiting approach.

At the other end of the scale, spiritual formation can be looked upon as giving people a chance to fall in love. This way of looking at it is very unstructured, much less organised and patterned, more individualistic maybe. The strength of such a model is that it is very heart-warming; it allows room for a full-hearted development and an enthusiastic life. The weakness is that it may

ignore the discipline needed for the hard realities of a continuing relationship which is growing into maturity with Christ. Surely most of us are aware of the problems that have come into western society with its concern for romantic love and cosy marriage, without giving any help for the everyday realities of living together. So we have to be careful there as well.

Spiritual formation in the theological college can also be seen as offering role models, exhibiting a different lifestyle, the lifestyle of the holy person, setting up such a life before students as a good example. A weakness of this approach is that attention may centre on the externals of the person that is being copied, the peculiarities of his dress or his habits may become thought of as the essence of spirituality. The strength of this approach is that it demonstrates that there are different ways of being holy. Spirituality is not sticking to one particular practice. And this approach makes it possible for individuals to embody their own spirituality, to work it out in their own way.

Or again, spiritual formation has also been seen in terms of passing on various skills in order to fulfil a specific function, i.e. a part of the training to become ordained. Passing on such skills can be a very useful part of training a person in spirituality, but it depends on how it is done. The weakness is that the emphasis can be on the outward activity, the outward singing of the liturgy, the outward ability to lead in prayer or worship; on the assumption of a certain technique rather than the inner attitude which should naturally issue in appropriate ways of doing things. We all know of the 'perfect' or 'special' voice that is produced when someone is leading in prayer. The strength of teaching specific skills is that, as human beings, we often really only learn the inner meaning of an activity by learning how to do it. Few people would really learn to enjoy tennis by sitting in an armchair. And I suggest few people will really enter into praying, or preaching, without practising it. So there is room for passing on these skills.

Perhaps one of the most important patterns for training in spiritual formation is that of engaging in action-reflection in this field. As students are stimulated to reflect theologically on what they are doing, opportunity is given to adjust praxis in the light of that reflection. In experience, the weakness of this is that it is often thin in the area of genuine systematic analysis of the issues. Its strength is that it can help to affirm all of life as 'spiritual', not just special parts or times; and thus the whole of life can be seen as a vehicle for God's action.

So there are many different ways of regarding the task of spiritual formation, and hence there are many different ways of doing it, as well as different tools for accomplishing it.

## TOOLS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

I have already indicated some of the tools we may use in seeking to ensure that the spiritual development of students in theological college is commensurate with their academic growth. Let me now draw attention to other possible helps from various sources, including especially the experience of some of the contributors to the volume of essays already recommended.

(i) The ACTEA Standards for post-secondary level accreditation state: "The institution must have an organised arrangement whereby all students are regularly in contact with designated staff for personal counselling and encouragement" (5b). That seems to me to be an absolute minimum.

(ii) One of the persons contributing to the essays in *Can Spirituality Be Taught?* tells of a rather shattering experience shortly after joining the staff at a theological college.

Two years after I joined the staff of the theological college, an ordinand dropped one of those chance remarks that effectively hit home like a sledge hammer. He said, "You [meaning the tutors] presuppose that we pray, but you never teach us how."

The writer goes on to say:

I shared this with my colleagues, who responded by asking me to experiment with a teaching syllabus in Christian spirituality . . . . The first thing I asked for (and it took some time to get) was that once a week we should have a college rule of quiet between 8:30am and 11:00am. One hour was for a lecture, the other hour was for use in whatever ways students found conducive to quiet, reading and prayer. Over the next few years we gradually constructed a spirituality syllabus in which a number of tutors took part. Each term, over two years, a different unit of ten lectures was offered, and these included:

Year 1 - Foundations of Christian spirituality (looking at the different parts of prayer). Individual and corporate aspects of prayer (including liturgy and also including aspects such as the family and prayer). Finding and using a rule of life.

Year 2 - Biblical patterns of spirituality (based on Biblical characters). Spirituality in the history and traditions of the Christian church. Spirituality and ministry.

Generally, student feedback was very encouraging, as was attendance. We seemed to be scratching where they itched. When asked in their first term, it came to light that only a handful had ever been on the receiving end of any consistent teaching on prayer in their churches, most using models or patterns which they had picked up in a rather random variety of ways. They were often left feeling inexperienced, lacking in guidance, support and direction. They also lacked confidence as to how they might teach other people to pray" (pp. 108-109).

In retrospect the writer felt the need to ask whether the approach to the teaching of prayer and spirituality had been too cerebral, and whether it had adequately allowed for difference in personality types. She then goes on to suggest various less 'obvious', less usual approaches to teaching prayer and spirituality:

(iii) Listening to God in and through our life experience--as a group recollecting and sharing what God has done in and for the members; privately recalling first in general, and then in particular, and deliberately re-living and enjoying a specific occasion which the member is prepared to share; trying to describe it, or draw it, or find a verse or write a song to put with it, and looking at what has happened since. In so doing we are in prayer to God, and our spiritual perceptions are heightened. A further stage is actually to share it with another, and to learn from that other's comments.

(iv) A Prayer Walk - deliberately slowing down the pace of life, going for a walk and asking God to speak to us about specific questions and concerns; and, maintaining an awareness of the outside world, asking whether God is saying something through it.

(v) Praying the Scriptures -

(a) Imagining oneself into the biblical situation meditatively for 10 to 15 minutes; then sharing what members want to in groups of 3 for several minutes.

(b) Introducing visual objects to focus attention on, or related to the passage, and so encourage imaginative meditation; then again sharing in small groups.

(c) Alone, or in groups, listening to the radio or in front of the TV, praying silently for national or international affairs with a particular verse, like John 3:16 in mind.

(vi) Enacted Experiences such as Foot-washing, or participating in a dramatisation of the Way of the Cross, or a Passover Meal.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

It will have become apparent that, by virtue of the very nature of the topic, I have felt reluctant to spell out much detail on the actual "how to". My concern has been to raise questions, to stimulate thought and concern for discussion--and hopefully also for action; to give pointers rather than to attempt to give solutions

I have wanted to suggest that we need to reflect more deeply on the purpose of our theological colleges, and therefore to work out in practical ways how to meet the needs for spiritual formation in each of our own situations. "Christian spirituality, spiritual formation as a subject for study within Christian training institutions ought to have the aim of assisting people in spiritual guidance by assisting them to understand ... the unity, variety, and possibilities of the Christian tradition of spirituality" (p.8).

My own experience on a number of Visitation Teams for ACTEA accreditation shows that spiritual formation is an all too frequently neglected area. This is an aspect of training which is equally demanding of attention in theological extension programmes, since in them there are certain in-built, additional difficulties in the pastoral care and spiritual formation of students, primarily engendered by sheer distance. However, the fact that students studying through distance-learning are usually integrated into their own Christian community provides a golden opportunity for closer observation and training in spiritual formation, if such opportunities are grasped.

A great deal more thinking by our college staffs, and by our college governing bodies too, needs to be done in this area. In this aspect of training, supremely so, theory and practice must be held in careful balance. In Africa this is essentially an 'African' task, for African spirituality must develop its own forms in its own way. And the "pursuit of excellence", so prominently written into the ICETE Manifesto, must be allowed to reach into this area too. Our prayer is that God will direct and guide us in our theological colleges to lead our students into a spiritual formation that will be to the glory of His Name.

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<sup>1</sup> Robson, Jill, and David Lonsdale, *Can Spirituality Be Taught?* London: Association of Centres of Adult Theological Education, and the British Council of Churches, [1987]. This publication provides especially valuable reflection on some of the issues concerned with how one goes about the task of spiritual formation. It is available either from: Way Publications, 114 Mount Street, London W1Y 6AN, UK; or from: British Council of Churches, 2 Eaton Gate, London SW1 9BL, UK. The cost of original publication was £3.25, plus postage and handling.



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## **Hebrew Kush: Sudan, Ethiopia, or Where? Peter Unseth**

*The descendants of **Cush, Mizraim and Put** are the ancestors of the African peoples according to the Scriptures (Gen 10:6ff). The Bible teaches that the peoples of the world have descended from one of the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth. Of the four sons of Ham, three settled in Africa. **Mizraim** settled in north Africa along the lower Nile. **Mizraim** became the regular Hebrew term for Egypt. **Put**, the third son of Ham, likewise settled in Africa, though the exact location is uncertain, possibly in the area of Libya, near Egypt. This article deals with **Cush** (or **Kush**) and its location in Africa.*

### **The Problem**

When I lived in western Ethiopia, a friend came to my home with a Biblical question that had a very personal application for him. He had grown up near the Sudan-Ethiopia border, spending part of his life in Sudan, part of it in Ethiopia. He was puzzled by different English translations of Psalm 68:31. Some translations said "Ethiopia" would "raise her hands to God", another translation said "Sudan", and even different editions of the GNB varied in this. He asked "Which country is the Bible referring to in this passage: Ethiopia or Sudan?"

Indeed, it is confusing. The translators who produced the Bible translations that he read were seeking a modern equivalent for the Hebrew word *kush*. The goal of the translators that produced the GNB1 had chosen the word "Ethiopia", the team that revised it and produced the GNB2 had chosen the word "Sudan".

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The problem is that the Hebrew word *kush* (also spelled *Cush*) does not match the political borders of any modern state. In their efforts to translate the Hebrew word clearly for modern readers, Bible translators have conscientiously struggled with this word, adopting a variety of solutions, (some better than others), sometimes leaving readers perplexed. In this passage, is God referring to a special relationship with Sudan, or with Ethiopia, or with all of Africa or with whom?

Some writers, notably David Adamo, have argued that *kush* should be always translated as "Africa" (1992b:59,60). This article will explain that Hebrew *kush* does not refer to one specific modern state, either Ethiopia or Sudan. Also, it will explain that Adamo's solution is simplistic and misleading. Biblical passages containing the word *kush* inevitably require different translations of *kush*, according to their context.

### **1. The problem of Hebrew *kush*.**

The term *kush* (including various forms of it) is found over 40 times in the Old Testament. Translating this term has been a persistent problem for translators. Generally, earlier translations into English (and other European languages) used the word "Ethiopia" (or its spelling variant "Aethiopia"), but in the last 40 years there has also been a trend to use other words, such as "Cush", "Nubia", or more recently "Sudan". Adamo advocates using "Africa", in an attempt to find a modern word that includes all the areas referred to.

Some of the reference books have further confused the matter by discussing the different geographical limits of Hebrew *kush* and the classical Greek use of *Aithiopia* in a manner that gives readers the impression that the Greek usage influenced the Hebrew usage of the word. The meaning of the Greek word, subsequent in both time and translation, is not relevant to our understanding of the Hebrew word. The Greek word *Aithiopia*, and its spelling variants in various languages, entered the picture when the Greek Septuagint used this word to translate the Hebrew word *kush*.

Scholarly studies on the topic of *kush* have clearly identified its location, but have not been widely read or understood in the broader Christian community, and have not had as much application in the field of translation as might be hoped. It is my goal here to show the meanings of the word *kush*, then explain some of problems of translating *kush* into modern languages. I will also suggest how it can better be translated.

## 2. Old Testament references to kush.

The Old Testament contains several different forms that include kush. Some of these are references to the land of kush (though scholars do not agree whether all references are to the same area), there are also references to individuals named kushi, there is a reference to a place named kushan, and there are references to people labeled as kushim "Cushites". These references are in a variety of contexts: some in simple narrative passages, others in prophecy, and one (Jer. 13:23) seems to be used in a proverb embedded in a warning to Israel. These references are scattered in 17 of the 39 books of the Old Testament.

The single reference to kushan (Hab 3:7) is presumed here to be different, so this is barely addressed in this article.

## 3. Location of the kingdom of kush.

Many of the references are to a specific land of kush, a specific powerful kingdom, just south of Egypt. It was so powerful and well known that there was contact with Assyria, evidenced by the discovery of a tablet bearing the seals of Kush and Assyria (Welsby 1996:64) and contact with Persia, documented by Herodotus (2.9, 3.25, 7.69).

There is total agreement among scholars that the specific kingdom of Kush was centered in what is now northern Sudan, with a bit of southern Egypt. It had vaguely defined borders that fluctuated throughout the hundreds of years of its existence, as did Israel and Judah. Evidence for the location of kush comes from both the Biblical text itself and from a variety of archeological sources.

Several biblical references pointing to the location of kush clearly link it with Egypt, such as Ezk. 30:9, Ps. 68:31, Nah. 3:8, and Is. 20:3-5. We find a more specific location, putting it just to the south of Egypt, when Ezk. 29:10 speaks of punishment coming on Egypt, "from Migdol to Syene, as far as the border of kush". Migdol was on the Mediterranean at the northern end of Egypt, Syene (modern Aswan) was at the south end of Egypt, so Ezekiel's prophecy includes all of Egypt, from the northern coast to the southern edge, "as far as the border of kush". This puts Biblical kush just south of Egypt at that point in history.

Also, 2 Kings 19:8-13 and Is. 37:9 tell of king Tirhakah of kush warring against Assyria. He is known to have been from the 25th dynasty in Egypt, which was a dynasty from Kush which had conquered Egypt, whose rule extended from the confluence of the Blue and White Nile to the Mediterranean, 727-656 BC (Clayton 1994:190-193). The Pharaohs of the 25th dynasty, of Kushite origin, ruled both Egypt and kush. An inscription by Esarhaddon of Assyria proclaims in Aramaic that he had defeated Tirhakah "king of Egypt and kush" (Pfeiffer 1966:611,612). King Tirhaka was buried not within Egypt proper, but in Napata, which was the capital of Kush (Adams 1977:250), a city between the 3rd and the 4th cataracts, clearly within the present borders of Sudan.

Another Biblical evidence linking kush with Egypt is found in the account of Zerah the Cushite, 2 Chron. 14:8-14. Zerah attacked Judah from the southwest, coming as far as Mareshah. When attacked by Asa, he fled to the southwest, to Gerar. The army of Judah attacked Gerar and plundered the cities nearby, under Egyptian control. This link with Egypt argues against the theories of some for this passage that kush here referred to a group from Arabia.

The archaeological evidence that the Biblical kingdom of kush was in the northern part of Sudan and the southern edge of Egypt, all northwest of modern Ethiopia, is solid and unanimously accepted. White sums it up clearly: "The biblical Ethiopia is Nubia, in southernmost Egypt and the N[orthern] Sudan, not the modern Ethiopia (also called Abyssinia)" (1975:411). Adams, in his monumental monograph, wrote "The Land of Kush.... lies partly in Egypt and partly in the Republic of the Sudan, but comprises only a small part of either country" (1977:13). This is presented on the popular level by Kendall (1990), showing the territory of Kush with maps and photos.

Many scholars feel that some of the references to kush have in mind simply a general reference to distant foreign lands and people beyond Egypt. This usage seems to be reflected in the description of the extent of King Ahasuerus's kingdom (Est. 1:1, 8:9), also Amos 9:7 Ps. 87:4, Zeph. 3:10.

In Genesis 2:13, there is an enigmatic reference to kush. Some scholars understand it as being in Mesopotamia (Keil and Delitzsch p.83, Wenham 1987:65,66), others understand it as a reference to a location in Africa, south of the Sahara. In the face of this uncertainty, a translator is justified in transliterating it simply as "Kush".

Some published sources have acknowledged that Biblical *kush* was in what is now Egypt and Sudan, but they also add "and parts of modern Ethiopia". I have found no actual evidence that the Kingdom of Kush indeed ruled any parts of the territory in modern Ethiopia. King Ezana of Axum (Aksum), a city located in the northern region of modern Ethiopia, defeated Meroe in approximately 350 AD, but this was long after the Biblical period. The Kingdom of Kush was very distinct from the Kingdom of Axum (Welsby 1996:172-176).

#### **4. Practice in translating *kush*: from Septuagint through a recent semantic shift.**

Much of the translators' tendency to translate *kush* by a term that has modern day political significance stems from the Septuagint's use of the word *Aithiopia*. At the time the Septuagint was translated, this was indeed a correct Greek term to use in translating *kush*. The Greek word *Aithiopia* had both a narrow and a wide use. The narrow definition was the Nile valley, south of Egypt, such as used by Herodotus (5th century BC). "Aithiopians inhabit the country immediately above [south of] Elephantine [*n.b.* an island at Aswan]... you will arrive at a large city called Meröe: this city said to be the capital of all Aithiopia" (Herodotus ii.9). He also used the same definition of *Aithiopia* when he wrote of Cambyses procuring interpreters at Elephantine (modern Aswan) for his expedition into *Aithiopia* and marching in via Thebes and back out through Thebes and on to Memphis (iii.19-25). This *Aithiopia* is clearly the adjacent area south of Egypt. This narrow usage of Greek *Aithiopia* is also found in the Greek text of Acts 8:27, where the homeland of the eunuch is referred to as *Aithiopia*, where he served as treasurer to Candace, who is known to have reigned in Meroe, not in the modern state of Ethiopia (Adams 1977:260).

The wider definition of the Greek *Aithiopia* can be seen in Homer's *Odyssey*, where he refers to the Ethiopians as "the most remote of men", living at the farthest edges of the east and west (i.22-24). However, " 'Ethiopia' in most of the references in Greek literature refers to people along the Nile, above [*n.b.* south of] the fourth cataract... This differs from modern Ethiopia, however, which lies well to the east of the Cushites" (Hays 1996:271). We see then that the word *Aithiopia* was a good choice to translate *kush* into Greek, allowing for both a narrow definition and also a wider one.

However, in recent centuries, translators into English and other languages have too often simply transliterated *Aithiopia* (from the Septuagint) into their target languages. This was not a problem as long as the meaning of the transliterated form in the target language was approximately the same as *kush*. This was the case when "Ethiopia" was first used in English Bible translation, at least as far back as 1382, when John Wyclif used it, a tradition continued by the KJV over 200 years later. When the English KJV was translated 400 years ago, the word "Ethiopia" in English was understood to mean the parts of Africa inhabited by black people. Also, at the time, there was no specific political state or government labeled "Ethiopia" known to English speakers. The use of the word "Ethiopia" in English was formerly a legitimate, though overly broad, translation of *kush*, well into the 1800's.

A clear example of how "Ethiopia was understood to include all of Black Africa can be seen in the founding of a denomination called the "Ethiopian Church" in 1892 (Balia 1994:20). Though these people lived far south of the borders of Ethiopia, they felt it to be a legitimate use of the word, reflecting their application of Ps. 68:31 to themselves.

Incidentally, a study of the usage of the word "Ethiopia" in English throughout the centuries disproves Adamo's argument that the use of the word "Ethiopia" in English Bibles led white English speakers to the misunderstanding that dark-skinned Africans are not a part of the Biblical narrative. A brief study of the Oxford English Dictionary, (the standard multi-volume historical dictionary of English), shows that up until at least the late 1800's, the word "Ethiopia" was understood to mean Black Africa and the term "Ethiopian" or "Ethiop" meant "a Black person", or just "black". For example, in 1684 an author described a person as "an Ethiopian, or Negro", using the labels in a synonymous sense. A botanist in 1578 referring to the seseli plant, labeled the black stalked variety as "the Ethiopian Seseli". In an apparent reference to Africa, Dryden wrote of "Ethiopian lands" (1697). We see then that "Ethiopia" and "Ethiopian" formerly did communicate the idea of Africa and black skinned people to English speakers. Adamo's assertion that translating with "Africa" will rectify a long-standing deficiency in English Bibles does not reflect an understanding of how "Ethiopia" was understood in the past. That is, the use of "Ethiopia" in the KJV conveyed exactly what he claims it did not: the people of *kush* were black skinned.

Since the late 1800's, "Ethiopia" has taken on a much narrower, more specific definition, referring to that state in the Horn of Africa which was the

empire of Menelik, then of Haile Selassie, and now is the Republic of Ethiopia. And even the state of Ethiopia has changed borders in major ways, it incorporated Eritrea in 1964; then Eritrea seceded in 1992. If *kush* is translated as "Ethiopia", the question arises: "Ethiopia's borders at which point in time?"

But in the centuries and decades since such early translations as the KJV, the use of "Ethiopia" in translating *kush* into English has become less and less of a legitimate choice. Translators too often retained the word "Ethiopia", overlooking the fact that there has been a change in what was referred to between the use of English "Ethiopia" in earlier centuries (when the English meaning of Ethiopia was very similar to that of Greek *Aithiopia*) and the word "Ethiopia" in common usage of 20th century English (and a number of the world's languages) (Unseth 1998).

But as we have seen above, the kingdom of *kush* was not within the borders of present day Ethiopia, but rather within the borders of Sudan and Egypt. So we must conclude that the use of "Ethiopia" in English translations (and other languages) today leads readers to the erroneous conclusion that the Biblical references were to people and places actually within the delineated borders of the present state of Ethiopia.

### **5. Modern practice in translating *kush*.**

The problem of agreeing on a standard name for the ancient kingdom in *kush* is not unique to Bible translators; historians have also struggled with it. In both fields, history and Bible translation, the term "Ethiopia" had previously been the commonly used term in the past, reflecting the older, wider use of the word "Ethiopia", commonly referring to Africa in general, or to northeast Africa more particularly, especially for ancient times. Adams explained "Most scholars until fifty years ago referred to it as the Kingdom of Ethiopia, retaining the name used by classical [*n.b.* Greek and Latin] writers. However, the latter-day adoption of this name by another kingdom [*n.b.* the state of Ethiopia] far to the east of Nubia raises the possibility of confusion, and makes it desirable to find another name for the ancient Nubian monarchy." He went on to advocate a solution which he himself uses: "Kingdom of Kush [which] has been preferred by many recent writers" (1977:250).



Some have seen the use of the word "Cushitic" by linguists and seen this as an indication of where Biblical *kush* was located. The origin of this label in linguistics is long and complex, but is not grounded in Biblical studies. The word "Cushitic" is used today by linguists to designate a group of languages in eastern Africa. Most of these are in Ethiopia and almost none are in Sudan, but this use of the label "Cushitic" by present-day linguists has absolutely no bearing on the translation of Hebrew *kush*.

I have studied over 30 English translations, charting their translations of *kush* in 21 verses. Their choices were generally from one of four terms: "Cush", "Ethiopia", "Nubia", "Sudan". It was also interesting to note the number and extent of the footnotes that were used to explain the terms used in the text. It was striking to note that almost none of the translations were 100% consistent in their use of a term to translate *kush*. For example, NEB, NIV, and *Tanakh* each use three different terms to translate the geographical use of *kush* in various contexts, "Cush", "Nubia", and "Ethiopia", (in addition to the transliteration of *kush* as a personal name). GW, though it generally uses "Sudan" for *kush* used "Ethiopia" in Ezk. 30:4, but then reverts to "Sudan" in verses 5 and 9.

Certain patterns were clear from the comparison of versions. First, when *kush* (rather *kushi*) was used as a proper name, (e.g. Gen 10:6 & Zeph. 1:1), it was consistently transliterated. Secondly, *kushan* in Hab. 3:7 was almost always transliterated. There is much scholarly speculation concerning whether this refers to the same *kush* as the kingdom south of Egypt or some other group, such as a tribe in the Sinai, so transliterating it allows a translator to minimize such controversy.

In the first edition of the GNB, it used the word "Sudan" to translate most references to *kush*. But in the second edition, after 1992, "Ethiopia" was used, together with a two-sentence footnote inserted in every passage (1996, p.c. Erroll Rhodes, ABS).

Some translations have found ways to translate certain passages without referring to a specific nation or state. In Is. 18:1, LB used the phrase "land beyond the upper reaches of the Nile" instead of "land beyond the rivers of Kush". In Jer. 13:23, CEV avoided a reference to a specific location by saying "Can people change the color of their skin?", GNB1 translated this passage as "Can a black man change the color of his skin?", GNB2 modified this slightly to "Can people change the color of their skin?" In Zeph. 3:10, NCV translated it by "where the Nile begins". Kaplan's *Living Torah* translated Num. 12:1 by referring

to Moses' wife as being "dark skinned", rather than referring to her geographical or national origin. For the same passage, Knox (1950) referred to her as a "desert wife", a phrase so neutral it leaves the reader wondering why Aaron and Miriam objected to her. Tyndale in 1537 used the now archaic phrase "black Moors" in some passages to refer to people of kush, e.g. 2 Chr. 14:12.

When the Ethiopic (Ge'ez) Bible was translated, approximately in the 6th century AD, under the influence of the Greek Septuagint (Ullendorf 1968:55-65), the word kush was translated as *Ityop'ya*.<sup>1</sup> (Monica Devens, p.c. 1998). The Latin Vulgate, also following the model of the Septuagint, consistently translated Hebrew kush as *Aethiopia*.

Even some other African languages, totally outside of Ethiopia, have continued this pattern of translating kush with a form of "Ethiopia", such as the new Swahili version of 1995. On the other hand, African languages other than those in Sudan have chosen to translate kush with "Sudan", such as Ghana's Konkomba Bible of 1997.

## **6. Problems from mistranslating kush.**

At least four kinds of problems have resulted from kush being translated by a term that has present day political significance. Each of these problems can be eliminated, (or at least reduced), by a translation that avoids, or at least lessens, references to present political states.

First of all, ordinary readers have simply not understood the text correctly. They have assumed that the word referred to an area that coincided with the borders of a modern state. This confusion is increased when different versions use words referring to different states. My friend who grew up on the Ethiopian-Sudanese border was genuinely perplexed and wanted to know "Which country does the Bible refer to in Ps. 68:31, Ethiopia or Sudan?"

Secondly, Biblical prophecy has been applied to the wrong parts of the world as a result of terms with political significance. Writers unduly influenced by translations have misunderstood the Biblical text and interpreted prophecies as applying to the present states of Ethiopia or Sudan. Writing about Biblical prophecy, Otis wrote "Persia, Ethiopia (Cush), Libya ... are all easily identifiable with modern nations" (1991:205). A similar simplistic identification of "Ethiopia"

is found in the prophetic analysis of Phillips and Vines (1990:193). Van Kampen has also equated "Ethiopia" in the Old Testament with the present state of Ethiopia (1993:130). Isichei, writing of the opinion of a broader community, wrote "To twentieth-century African Christians, its [Ethiopian Orthodox Church's] history seemed a fulfillment of the promise of the psalmist, 'Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands to God' " (1995:2).

Thirdly, Biblical allusions to present political states (Sudan and Ethiopia) have mistakenly led to assertions of national pride between competing countries. Psalm 68:32 has been the main focus of this contention, in both Ethiopia and Sudan. "This is undoubtedly Ethiopia's favorite Bible quotation; it occurs twice in the *Kebrä Nagast*<sup>ii</sup> and is frequently used as a motto or in heraldic devices in present-day Ethiopia" (Ullendorf 1968:9). In a book shop in Ethiopia, I bought a 1st edition of the GNB with the following message pasted in the front cover "In the Old Testament read 'Ethiopia' or 'Ethiopians' for 'Sudan' and 'Sudanese' which are misprints."<sup>iii</sup> I am told there are also claims made by people living in Sudan that verses such as this and Is. 18:1,2 apply to them. However, I have never heard of citizens of either Sudan or modern Ethiopia claiming the passages that prophecy bad things for *kush*, such as Ez. 30:5-9 and Zeph. 2:12. For citizens of Ethiopia, reading Amos 9:7 takes on a different meaning than was originally intended, since it is often understood to mean that the people of Ethiopia are specially chosen and loved by God, in a manner similar to his covenant with Israel.

Fourthly, though a lesser problem, the translation of *kush* by "Ethiopia" has led to incongruous passages in Biblical reference books that include information on modern Ethiopia's crops, climate, and recent political history together with information on the ancient kingdom of Kush, e.g. Youngblood (1982).

### **7. Suggestions for understanding and translating *kush*.**

In translating *kush*, as with any other word, readers and translators must be sensitive to multiple senses of the word. In different contexts, it is used to refer to a fairly specific location, to focus on the color of a person's skin, to indicate remoteness, to label the country of a person's ancestry, to refer to a particular person, to indicate the source of fine gems, etc.

**Referring to the Kingdom of *Kush*.** In situations where ancient borders overlap modern states, it is best to translate with a word that is not

equated with a present political state. Thompson, writing about Bible translation and geography, noted that to translate *kush* by "Ethiopia" today is "misleading" (1981:432,433), and the same should be said for translating *kush* as "Sudan". Though *kush* was indeed mostly within the borders of modern Sudan, it was only a small part of the present state of Sudan. Another reason for avoiding the use of the words "Ethiopia" and "Sudan" in a translation is that the borders of the two modern countries are still susceptible to change, Ethiopia's borders having changed significantly in 1964 and 1992, and in both countries there are secessionist movements that seek to further change their borders.

No matter what solution is taken for translating the name of the kingdom of Kush, it seems that a footnote is appropriate. That is, whether translators have chosen to use the word "Sudan", "Ethiopia", "Kush", or "Africa", it is not likely to be totally clear to the reader, especially in light of the conflicting choices that have been made by English translators in the past. Some published footnotes include "Hebrew *Cush*: Cush is the ancient name of the extensive territory south of the First Cataract of the Nile River. This region was called Ethiopia in Graeco-Roman times, and included within its borders most of modern Sudan and some of present-day Ethiopia (Abyssinia)" (GNB2), "that is, the upper Nile region" (NIV)<sup>iv</sup>, "Lit. *Cush*" (NASB). Some specific passages have had modified footnotes, such as Num. 12:1, due to exegetical uncertainties.

When seeking a term for the location of the kingdom of Kush, one possible solution is to simply transliterate *kush* and use a footnote to explain its location. This is the solution taken by NIV and REB.

In languages where the term "Nubia" is known, another possibility would be to use the term "Nubia"<sup>v</sup>, a generic term that has minimal present day specific political significance. This has been used sporadically in some versions, though no English version has done it consistently, e.g. REB Ps. 68:31,87:4, NCV Dan. 11:43, NIV Dan. 11:43, *Tanakh* Is. 11:11,18:11. Holter reports that "Nubia" is used in recent translations in Norwegian and Danish (1997:334). In languages far from Africa, where the details of the location of *kush* are not so crucial, it may be enough to say "Africa" or "Northeast Africa" for many contexts. In passages where the translator understands *kush* to be a referent to simply distant and foreign land and people, the word "Africa" would be a possible alternative.

**Referring to the colour of a person's skin.** In Jeremiah 13:23, *kush* is used in what is apparently a proverb, alluding to the dark skin color of people from *kush*. In this passage, the dark skin color of a person from *kush* is in focus, not the exact location of the person's homeland. In many languages, it would be proper to refer to a person of dark skin by simply using a term for dark-skinned "African". Another approach was used in GNB1, GNB2, and CEV, where this was translated without an explicit reference to *kush*, e.g. "can people change the color of their skin?" (CEV).

**Referring to a particular person.** When *kush/kushi* is used as a proper name for a person, e.g. Gen 10:6 and Zeph. 1:1, the translator can simply transliterate the name into the appropriate form in the target language.

**Referring to a remote region.** Sometimes, instead of referring to a specific area, *kush* was used to indicate a distant, remote region, the edge of the known world in the direction of Africa. This usage seems to be reflected in the description of the extent of King Ahasuerus's kingdom (Est. 1:1, 8:9). This may also be the case in Amos 9:7 and Ps. 87:4. In such cases, transliterating *kush* or using "Africa" could be acceptable.

***Kush* in Genesis 2:13.** In this difficult passage, as explained above, a translator is justified in simply transliterating *kush* into the target language.

**Referring to the country of a person's ancestry.** Several times, a person is referred to as being a Cushite, a person from *kush*, e.g. 2 Sam 18:21 and Jer 36:14. (This is different from cases where *kush* is used as a personal name, as in Gen. 10:6 or Zeph. 1:1.). In these cases, the exact location of *kush* is not in focus; it may be enough to say "African". But there is certainly no reason to identify the location as a specific modern state, either "Sudan" or "Ethiopia".

**Referring to a source of fine gems.** In Job 28:19, in a reference to the surpassing quality of a topaz, Job speaks of the "topaz of *kush*". (The identification of the exact stone is not precise.) There are no topaz (or other similar gems) found in Ethiopia, at least not in the quantity to be known outside of the immediate area. The point of the reference to *kush* is to assert its quality, the particular geography of its origin is not the point of the passage. "Here the place name probably designates the quality of the gem and not its place of origin" (Reyburn 1992:512) Following this line of reasoning, GNB translates this

“the finest topaz”. All other versions in my survey of English translations used a geographical term: “Cush”, “Ethiopia”, and two translations said “Arabia”. Some scholars point to the Red Sea as the source of this stone (Reyburn 1992:512 and Ullendorf 1968:8), (hence the use of the term “Arabia”), but the state of Ethiopia no longer has any Red Sea coast since Eritrea seceded in 1992. Therefore, it now makes even less sense to translate this passage with “Ethiopia”. It may be better to say “from the Red Sea coast”, but for most readers, this still does not address the matter of the quality of the stone, so a reference to its quality (not merely its geographical origin) should be seriously considered, possibly in addition to the geographic reference, e.g. “the fine topaz of the Red Sea region”.

### **8. Problems with Adamo’s suggestion.**

Adamo has suggested that all instances of *kush* be translated as “Africa” (1992:59). This is a superior policy to the use of either “Ethiopia” or “Sudan”, being more politically neutral. However, in the preceding section, I have shown that different uses of *kush* in different contexts require different translations into English and into other languages.

But there is an additional problem with his suggestion, seen in such verses as Num. 12:1<sup>vi</sup>, Is. 20:5 and Ez. 29:10. In these verses, the word *kush* is used in a way that excludes Egypt. The problem is that Egypt is geographically part of Africa. It makes no sense to say in Ez. 29:10 “the land of Egypt... as far as the border of Africa.” Clearly, the reference is to the southern edge of Egypt, to the Kingdom of Kush.

In addition, translating 2 Ki. 19:9 simply using “Africa” for *kush* makes King Tirhakah’s kingdom ridiculously broad. He ruled only a very small part of Africa, from approximately the 5th cataract of the Nile to the Mediterranean. When a specific, known area is referred to, it is not justified to translate *kush* with such a broad term as “Africa”. Yet Adamo goes so far as to claim that even the term “Sudan”<sup>vii</sup> (which does include most of the Kingdom of Kush, and includes much additional territory, as well) “is deficient because it still excludes some parts of Africa represented by biblical Cush” (1992:59).

Adamo argues, with some justification, that translating by transliterating *kush* is obscure to the average reader. But his solution will often lead the reader

into a false sense of accurately understanding a passage, especially for passages where a specific location is in view. The same logic applied to translating "Assyria", another difficult Old Testament geographical term, would lead us to translate it as "Asia".

### **9. A parallel problem, with an instructive solution.**

Translating geographical terms from the Bible into contemporary languages is often challenging. The geographical extent of Biblical countries and kingdoms often overlap modern borders so that choosing a label for a geographical term in a translation has political implications.

As an instructive example, we can profit from looking at the Hebrew word *'asor* "Assyria" and how that is handled by translators. The kingdom of Assyria is mentioned frequently in the Old Testament. In every English version I have examined, it is always labeled as simply "Assyria". No present state or entity has similar borders to Assyria. The core of its territory is now within the borders of modern Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. During times of expansion, the reign of Assyria at some times even included areas of the modern states of Armenia, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and even Egypt. Rather than use the name of one of the modern states, Bible translators have (wisely) simply transliterated the ancient name of "Assyria". This is an instructive example of one way to handle ancient geographic terms that do not match modern borders, such as *kush*.

### **10. The ideological drive to argue for an African presence in the Old Testament.**

There is a movement by some, (mostly in North America), to argue for an expanded understanding of the Black/African presence in the Old Testament, represented by such authors as McCray (1990), McKissic (1990), Felder (1993), and Adamo (1992a, 1992b, in press). A large part of their motivation is that they claim an inadequate recognition of the presence of Africans in the Old Testament. But we must remember that at least from the time of Moses, the Jews and indeed the Middle East were aware of, and in contact with, Black Africa. Some evidences of contact between Kush and the Middle East, including Israel, include:

- There was a Kushite garrison in Palestine before the Israelites returned from Egypt under Moses, mentioned in the Amarna tablets (tablet 287, Pritchard 1958:271).

- Judah fought wars against the armies of Kush (2 Chr. 14:8-14), as did Assyria (2 Kings 19:8-13).
- Kushites lived in Israel (2 Sam. 18:21, Jer. 38).
- Persia claimed to rule as far as Kush (Est. 1:1) and the Persian king Cambyses (Herodotus 3:25) and Xerxes (Herodotus 7:69) fought against kush, (see also Yamauchi 1990:115, 347-356).
- Israel even had a proverb about the black-skinned people of Kush (Jer. 13:23).
- Jewish prophets prophesied about Kush (Is. 18:1).
- There were diplomatic contacts between Assyria and Kush, evidenced by the discovery of a tablet bearing the seals of both Assyria and Kush (Welsby 1996:64)

Without going into the details of the various claims and interpretations or motivations of the movement to find<sup>viii</sup> more Black African presence in the Old Testament, I think that the above list shows that there is clearly a significant Black African presence in the Old Testament, and that Israel and the Middle East had much awareness of and contact with Black Africans. Trying to create more African presence in the Old Testament and emphasize the African-ness of kush by translating all instances of kush with "Africa" will probably be successful in this, but at the expense of accuracy. It has been shown above that "Africa" is not an accurate translation of kush for all passages. Ideology cannot be allowed to take the place of accuracy in translation.

## 11. Conclusion.

In summary, the Old Testament references to kush do not refer specifically or exclusively to the present states of Sudan, Ethiopia, or any other political entity in Africa, and should not be translated with terms that would refer to such political states. The word kush should be translated in a way that is faithful to the text and as clear as possible to the reader. This will generally mean that the word will have to be translated by different words or phrases, according to the particular context and language. Footnotes and maps will generally be helpful.

In situations where we have to work with translations of the Bible that translate kush with a term that signifies a particular state in modern Africa, what



can we do? Preachers and teachers (across Africa and around the world) can help their listeners understand that God has no special love for one political state, but that He loves us all, Ethiopian, Sudanese, African, Asia, European.

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### **End Notes:**

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<sup>i</sup> The label *Ityop'ya* was eventually adopted as the name of the state, but the Greek origin of this word is belied by the spelling and pronunciation of a rare ejective (glottalic) *p'* in the name.

<sup>ii</sup> The *Kebra Nagast*, "The Glory of the Kings" is a sort of national epic, a book of history and legend.

<sup>iii</sup> The same shop sold the widely respected Bible dictionary in Amharic (the official language of Ethiopia) produced by the Ethiopian Bible Society, which defines the Biblical use of "Ethiopia" as "the land and government from Egypt south to the union south of the Blue and White Nile" (p. 150).

<sup>iv</sup> "Upper" is calculated from the Egyptian viewpoint. People from further upstream would probably label it the "Middle".

<sup>v</sup> In Sudan itself, the term "Nubian" is used to refer to a specific group of people, so it would probably be an inappropriate term for use in Sudanese languages.

<sup>vi</sup> Some interpret this as a reference to a Midianite origin rather than an African from south of Egypt.

<sup>vii</sup> The use of the term "Sudan" becomes even more complicated if we look at its historic use in English. In the past, as with "Ethiopia", it also had a broad meaning, as well as its narrow meaning. It used to mean the belt of Sub-Saharan Africa from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. But again, modern readers no longer think of such a broad meaning when they read "Sudan", but rather think of

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the present, usual, narrow meaning, the state marked on the map, with its government in Khartoum.

<sup>viii</sup> Some of these writers have moved beyond “emphasizing” the presence of Africans in the Old Testament toward “inventing” it, such as Felder’s assertion that “Adam” in Genesis should be understood as “African” (1993).

# Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology

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