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flesh. Even now God is the incarnate God. Thus the final judgment is both God's act and at the same time, Christ's act. The deep-level structure of the Christian faith implies that the incarnate Christ is indeed the judge of the world. In addition, the final kingdom, the final eschaton, the final harmony has Jesus at its very centre. Paul says, in [Ephesians 1:9-10](#), that the historical Christ unfolds the divine mystery that all things will someday be united under one head, even Christ. And [Revelation 22:1](#) says that at the centre of the New Jerusalem will be a single throne, which is 'the throne of God and of the Lamb'.

The Christian *a-priori*, the deep structure of the Christian faith, declares the unique Christ to be both the hope and the judge of the world.

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Jesus in African Culture

Kwame Bediako

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To an evangelical Christian steeped in classical western systematic theology and missionary practice (and this includes many 'third world' Church and missionary leaders) this article may raise many difficulties. Its importance lies in the fact that the author, a Ghanian of the Akan clan, is an evangelical theologian struggling with his identity as an African and as a Christian and how he relates the gospel to the traditional beliefs and values of his people. He explores two areas: Jesus 'our Saviour' who reigns over the spiritual realm including evil spirits and is mediated to us by the Holy Spirit and secondly, the relation of Jesus Christ to God the Supreme Spirit Being (Onyame), creator and sustainer of the universe and to the ancestors or 'spirit fathers'—the living dead of the clan. He argues that the more rapid spread of Christianity among societies with primal religious systems than among other societies occurs because Africans find in Jesus Christ the reality and spiritual experience that meets the needs and fears of their traditional religious beliefs and practices. He criticizes the early missionaries for creating an unnecessary dichotomy in the converts' religious experience. However, the author is careful to show that the gospel judges those elements of primal faith that are contrary to biblical revelation (for example, witchcraft and the occult), replaces others and points to the 'new story' of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He shows the importance of the Epistle to the Hebrews as a bridge to the knowledge of salvation in Christ.

Editor

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN RETROSPECT

One of the most telling commentaries on the presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ in Africa is the following statement:

Christ has been presented as the answer to questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?

p. 55

It was made by one of the more perceptive and sensitive missionaries to Africa of our time and describes neatly the general character of western missionary preaching and teaching in Africa since the arrival of missionaries on our continent during the 19th century. It also raises a question which must be faced by African churches and African Christians of today who are convinced that Jesus Christ is the *universal* Saviour and thus the Saviour of the African world, and who feel that the teaching they have so far received is inadequate.

And yet the negative side of missionary history in Africa must not be exaggerated, for several reasons. Firstly, the vitality of our Christian communities bears witness to the fact that the gospel really was communicated, however inadequate we may now consider that communication to have been. There is always more to the 'hearing' of the Word of God than can be contained in the actual preaching of it by the human agents; the Holy Spirit is also present to interpret the Word of God directly to the hearers. Therefore we must allow the mercy and providence of God to override the shortcomings of human achievements.

Secondly, African theological thinkers now share in the inheritance of the gospel as the apostle Paul proclaimed it, the gospel that set the early Gentile Christians free from Jewish Christian attempts to impose upon them the regulations of the Jewish Law. Paul grasped firmly the universality of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah, and by insisting that the gospel includes all peoples without reserve, gave Gentile Christians the essential tools for assessing their own cultural heritage, for making their own contribution to Christian life and thought and for testing the genuineness and Christian character of that contribution. For many years now African theologians have refused to accept the negative view of African religion held by western missionaries and have shown consistently the continuity of God from the pre-Christian African past into the Christian present. They have therefore, like the apostle Paul, handed to us the assurance that with our Christian conversion, we are not introduced to a new God unrelated to the traditions of our past, but to One who brings to fulfilment all the highest religious and cultural aspirations of our heritage. In this way the limitations in our missionary past need no longer hinder the growth of Christian understanding and confidence in our churches.

A further reason touches on the nature of African traditional religion itself, and its encounter with the Christian faith. The common western missionary view of traditional religion was that it formed 'the religious beliefs of more or less backward and degraded peoples all over the world', and that it held no preparation for Christianity'. Yet in more recent years, it has been shown that Christianity has spread most rapidly in 'societies with primal religious systems', that is, religious systems akin to African traditional religion. These societies are the Mediterranean world of the early Christian centuries, the ancient peoples of northern Europe and modern 'primalists' of Black Africa, Asia, South America and Oceania. This fact of history has led to the question whether there might be 'affinities between the Christian and primal traditions?' It shows clearly that the form of religion once held to be the furthest removed from the Christian faith has had a closer relationship with it than any other. Indeed, since primal religions have been 'the most fertile soil for the gospel', it has been argued that they 'underlie therefore the Christian faith of the vast majority of Christians of all ages and all nations'. John Mbiti, probably the best known African theologian outside of Africa, has repeatedly argued that Africa's 'old'

religions have been a crucial factor in the rapid spread of Christianity among African peoples. They were a vital preparation for the gospel.

This argument stands the western missionary view of African religions on its head and so opens the way for a fresh approach to how we may understand the relation of Jesus as Lord and Saviour to the spiritual realities of our context.

Jesus as divine conqueror in the African world

On the wider African scene, John Mbiti has written two articles which deal with African understandings of Christ, drawn largely from evidence from the Independent Churches. His view was that it is within these churches that African Christians have been able to express more freely their experience of the Christian faith than in the mission-dominated or historical churches (that is, the mainline denominations). Though the distinctions between 'independent' and 'historical' churches are now less meaningful than they once were, Mbiti's articles did indicate that there was something to write about, that there are characteristically African understandings of Christ. In this area, as in much else, he has been a pioneer.

By way of illustration I shall highlight two major points he makes in those studies. The first is that Jesus is seen above all else as the *Christus Victor* (Christ supreme over every spiritual rule and authority). This understanding of Christ arises from Africans' keen awareness of forces and powers at work in the world which threaten the interests of life and harmony. Jesus is victorious over the spiritual realm and particularly [p. 57](#) over evil forces and so answers to their need for a powerful protector against these forces and powers.

The second important point is that for African Christians the term 'our Saviour' can refer to God and sometimes to the Holy Spirit, as well as to Jesus. Jesus, as our Saviour, brings near and makes universal the almightiness of God. This means that he 'is able to do all things, to save in all situations, to protect against all enemies, and is available whenever those who believe may call upon him'. It also means that the humanity of Jesus and his atoning work on the Cross are in the background, and Jesus is taken to belong essentially to the more powerful realm of divinity, in the realm of Spiritpower. Though Mbiti considers this view of Christ as inadequate, he does stress that the methods and context of present-day evangelism need to be reexamined and that there needs to be also a 'deeper appreciation of the traditional African world, whose grip is so strong that it exercises a powerful influence on the manner of understanding and experiencing the Christian message, however that message may be presented'.

These considerations bring us near the heart of the problem that confronts us now: how to understand Christ authentically in the African world. To make my reflections more concrete, I propose to relate them as far as possible to the religious belief and world-view of the Akan peoples. Being an Akan myself, I shall be dealing with realities with which I can easily sympathize. For I believe such reflection can be authentic only in context. I shall be setting forth some of my own concerns with regard to my own Akan world of ideas and beliefs.

JESUS AND THE ANCESTORS IN AKAN WORLD-VIEW

Accepting Jesus as 'our Saviour' always involves making him at home in our spiritual universe and in terms of our religious needs and longings. So an understanding of Christ in relation to spirit-power in the African context is not necessarily less accurate than any other perception of Jesus. The question is whether such an understanding faithfully reflects biblical revelation and is rooted in true Christian experience. Biblical teaching

clearly shows that Jesus is who he is (i.e. Saviour) because of what he has done and can do (i.e. save), and also that he was able to do what he did on the Cross because of who he is (God the Son), cf. [Colossians 2:15ff](#). Since 'salvation' in the traditional African world involves a certain view of the realm of spirit-power and its effects upon the physical and spiritual dimensions of human existence, our reflection about Christ must speak to the questions **P. 58** posed by such a world-view. The needs of the African world require a view of Christ that meets those needs. And so who Jesus is in the African spiritual universe must not be separated from what he does and can do in that world. The way in which Jesus relates to the importance and function of the 'spirit fathers' or ancestors is crucial.

The Akan spirit world on which human existence is believed to depend, consists primarily of God, the Supreme Spirit Being (*Onyame*), Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Subordinate to God, with delegated authority from God, are the 'gods', (*abosom*), sometimes referred to as children of God (*Nyame mma*) and the ancestors or 'spirit fathers' (*Nsamanfo*). The relative positions of the 'gods' and the ancestors are summed up by Dr. Peter Sarpong, the Catholic Bishop of Kumasi and an authority on Akan culture:

While God's power surpasses all others, the ancestors would appear to tilt the scale in their favour if their power could be weighed against that of the lesser gods. After all are the deities not often referred to as 'the innumerable gods of our ancestors', the spokesmen of the human spirits?

John Pobee formerly of the University of Ghana, has also underlined the importance of the ancestors in the religious world-view of the Akan. He has devoted a whole book to developing some aspects of an Akan Christian theology. He concludes that

Whereas the gods may be treated with contempt if they fail to deliver the goods expected of them, the ancestors, like the Supreme Being, are always held in reverence or even worshipped.

We shall not discuss here whether ancestors are worshipped or simply venerated. We need only to recognize that the ancestors form the most prominent element in the Akan religious outlook and provide the essential focus of piety. Pobee's comment on the ancestors is therefore well-founded:

Perhaps the most potent aspect of Akan religion is the cult of the ancestors. They, like the Supreme Being, are always held in deep reverence or even worshipped. The ancestors are that part of the clan who have completed their course here on earth and are gone ahead to the other world to be elder brothers of the living at the house of God. Not all the dead are ancestors. To qualify to be an ancestor one must have lived to a ripe old age and in an exemplary manner and done much to enhance the standing and prestige of the family, clan or tribe. By virtue of being the part of the clan gone ahead to the house of God, they are believed to be powerful in the sense that they maintain the course of life here and now and influence it for good or ill. **p. 59** They give children to the living; they give good harvest, they provide the sanctions for the moral life of the nation and accordingly punish, exonerate or reward the living as the case may be.

Ancestors are essentially clan or lineage ancestors. So they have to do with the community or society in which their progeny relate to one another, and not with a system of religion as such, which might be categorized as 'the Akan religion'. In this way, the 'religious' functions and duties which relate to ancestors become binding on all members of the particular group who share common ancestors. Since the ancestors have such an important part to play in the well-being (or otherwise) of individuals and communities, the crucial question about our relationship to Jesus is, as John Pobee rightly puts it: 'Why

should an Akan relate to Jesus of Nazareth who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe and tradition?’

Up to now, our churches have tended to avoid the question and have presented the gospel as though it was concerned with an entirely different compartment of life, unrelated to traditional religious piety. As a result, many of our people are uncertain about how the Jesus of the Church’s preaching saves them from the terrors and fears which they experience in their traditional world-view. This shows how important it is to relate Christian understanding and experience to the realm of the ancestors. If this is not done, many of our fellow African Christians will continue to be men and women ‘living at two levels’—half African and half European—but never belonging properly to either. We need to meet God in the Lord Jesus Christ speaking immediately to us in our particular circumstances, in a way that assures our people that we can be authentic Africans and true Christians.

John Pobee suggests that we ‘look on Jesus as the Great and Greatest Ancestor’ since, ‘in Akan society the Supreme Being and the ancestors provide the sanctions for the good life, and the ancestors hold that authority as ministers of the Supreme Being’. He considers some of the problems involved, but because he approaches the problem largely through Akan wisdom sayings and proverbs, he does not deal sufficiently with the religious nature of the question. In addition, he does not let the biblical revelation speak sufficiently in its own terms into the Akan situation. He too easily assumes similarities between Akan and biblical (for him ‘Jewish’) world-views, underestimates the potential for conflict and so does not achieve real encounter. For if we claim as the Greatest Ancestor one who, at the superficial level, ‘does not belong to his clan, family, tribe and nation’, the Akan non-Christian might well feel that the very grounds of his identity and p. 60 personality are taken away from him. It is with such fears and dangers, as well as the meanings and intentions behind the old allegiances, that a fresh understanding of Christ has to deal.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF JESUS CHRIST AND OUR ADOPTIVE PAST

I suggest that we should read the Scriptures with Akan traditional piety well in view. In this way we can arrive at an understanding of Christ that deals with perceived reality of the ancestors. I also recommend that we make the biblical assumption that Jesus Christ is not a stranger to our heritage. I therefore start from the universality of Jesus Christ rather than from his particularity as a Jew. By doing this I do not disregard the Incarnation; rather I affirm that the Incarnation was the incarnation of the Saviour of all people, of all nations, and of all times. Also, by insisting on the primacy of Jesus’ universality, we do not seek to reduce his incarnation and its particularity to a mere accident of history. We hold on to his incarnation as a Jew because by faith in him, we too share in the divine promises given to the patriarchs and through the history of ancient Israel (cf. [Ephesians 2:11–22](#)). So those promises belong to us also, because of Jesus. Salvation, though ‘from the Jews’ ([Jn. 4:22](#)), is not thereby Jewish. To make Jesus little more than a ‘typical’ Jew is to distort the truth. There is clearly more to him than Jewishness. His statement in [John 8:43–44](#) that a Jew could have for father, not Abraham at all, but the devil, was outrageous from the Jewish point of view. What counts is one’s response to Jesus Christ. Here we find one of the clearest statements in Scripture, that our true human identity as men and women made in the image of God, is not to be understood primarily in terms of racial, cultural, national or lineage categories, but in Jesus Christ himself. The true children of Abraham are those who put their faith in Jesus Christ in the same way that Abraham trusted God ([Rom. 4:11–12](#)).

Consequently, we have not merely our natural past, for through our faith in Jesus, we have also an 'adoptive' past, the past of God, reaching into biblical history itself. This also—aptly described as the 'Abrahamic link'—is our past.

In the same way, Jesus Christ, himself the image of the Father, by becoming one like us, has shared our *human* heritage. It is within this *human* heritage that he finds us, and speaks to us in terms of its questions and puzzles. He challenges us to turn to him and participate in the new humanity for which he has come, died, been raised and glorified. p. 61

THE GOOD NEWS AS OUR STORY

Once this basic, universal relevance of Jesus Christ is granted, it is no longer a question of trying to accommodate the gospel in our culture; we learn to read and accept the Good News as *our* story. Our Lord has been, from the beginning, the Word of God for us as for all people everywhere. He has been the source of our life, and illuminator of our path in life, though, like all people everywhere, we also failed to understand him alright. But now he has made himself known, becoming one of us, one like us. By acknowledging him for who he is, and by giving him our allegiance, we become what we are truly intended to be, by his gift, that is, the children of God. For he himself is the Son of God, originating from the divine realm. If we refuse him that allegiance, we lose that right of becoming children of God. Our response to him is crucial because becoming children of God does not stem from, nor is it limited by, the accidents of birth, race, culture, lineage or even 'religious' tradition. It comes to us by grace through faith.

This way of reading the early verses of John's Gospel, from the stand-point of faith in Jesus Christ as *our* story, is valid and necessary. The beginning of the Gospel echoes the early verses of [Genesis 1](#). We are meant to appreciate the close association of our creation and our redemption, both achieved in and through Jesus Christ ([Col. 1:15ff](#)). We are to understand our creation as the original revelation of God to us. It was in the creation of the universe and especially of man that God first revealed his kingship to our ancestors and called them and us to freely obey him. Working from this insight, that our creation is the original revelation to, and covenant with us, we, from African primal tradition, are given a biblical basis for discovering more about God within the framework of the high doctrine of God as Creator and Sustainer, which is deeply rooted in our heritage. More significantly, we are enabled to discover ourselves in Adam (cf. [Acts 17:26](#)) and come out of the isolation which the closed system of clan, lineage, and family imposes, so that we can recover universal horizons.

However, 'as in Adam all die ...' ([1 Cor. 15:22](#)). Adam sinned and lost his place in the garden. Where the biblical account speaks of the expulsion of man ([Genesis 3](#)), African myths of origins talk of the withdrawal of God, so that he is continually in people's thoughts, yet is absent from daily living in any practical sense. The experience of ambiguity which comes from regarding the lesser deities and ancestral spirits as both beneficent and malevolent, can be resolved only in a genuine incarnation of the Saviour from the realm beyond. But p. 62 trinitarian doctrine is preserved, for the God who has become so deeply and actively involved in our condition is the Son ([Jn. 1:18](#)), whom to see is to 'see' the Father (cf. [Jn. 14:15ff](#); [Acts 2:38f](#)), and this is made possible through the Holy Spirit ([Jn. 14:23](#)).

JESUS AS 'ANCESTOR' AND SOLE MEDIATOR

Thus the gulf between the intense awareness of the existence of God and yet also of his 'remoteness' in African Traditional Religion and experience is bridged in Christ alone because 'there has been a death which sets people free from the wrongs they did while the first covenant was in force' ([Heb. 9:15](#)). How does this death relate to our story and particularly to our natural 'spirit-fathers'? Some suggest that ours is a 'shame-culture' and not a 'guilt-culture', on the grounds that public acceptance is what determines morality, and consequently a 'sense of sin' is said to be absent. This view is oversimplified and is challenged by African theologians and sociologists. However in our tradition the essence of sin is in its being an antisocial act. This makes sin basically injury to the interests of another person and damage to the collective life of the group. Busia's comment on the Ashanti is significant:

The Ashanti conception of a good society is one in which harmony is achieved among the living, and between the living and the gods and the ancestors.

Such a view of morality does not resolve the real problem of the assurance of moral transformation which the human conscience needs. For the real problem of our sinfulness is the soiled conscience and against this, purificatory rites and sacrificial offerings to achieve social harmony are ineffectual. And yet the view of sin as antisocial seems to be also biblically valid: sin is indeed sin against another person and the community's interest. But human beings are the creation of God, created in God's image, so social sin is also sin against God. The blood of Abel cried to God against Cain ([Gen. 4](#)). The Good News underscores the valid insight about the social nature of sin, but brings the need for expiation into a wider context. Sin is more than the antisocial act; the sinner sins ultimately against a personal God who has a will and purpose in human history.

Seen from this angle, our needs in our tradition make the insights about Jesus Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews perhaps the most crucial of all. Our Saviour has not just become one like us; he has died for us. It is a death which has eternal sacrificial significance for us. It [p. 63](#) deals with our moral failures and the infringements of our social relationships. It heals our wounded and soiled consciences and overcomes, once and for all and at their roots, all that in our heritage and our somewhat melancholy history brings us grief, guilt, shame and bitterness. Our Saviour is our Elder Brother who has shared in our *African* experience in every respect, except in our sin and alienation from God, an alienation with which our myths of origins make us only too familiar. Being our true Elder Brother now in the presence of God, his Father and our Father, he displaces the mediatorial function of our natural 'spirit-fathers'. For these themselves need saving, since they originated from among us. It is known from African missionary history that sometimes one of the first actions of new converts was to pray for their ancestors who had passed on before the gospel was proclaimed. Such an action is an important testimony to the depth of these people's understanding that Jesus is sole Lord and Saviour. Jesus Christ, 'the Second Adam' from heaven ([1 Cor. 15:47](#)) becomes for us then the only mediator between God and ourselves (cf. [1 Tim. 2:5](#)). He is the 'mediator of a better covenant' ([Heb. 8:6](#)), relating our human destiny directly to God. He is truly our high priest who meets our needs to the full. (We shall have more to discuss on this all-important epistle of the New Testament, later).

From the kind of understanding held about the spirit-world, the resurrection and ascension of our Lord also come to assume great importance. He has now returned to the realm of spirit and therefore of power. From the standpoint of Akan traditional beliefs, Jesus has gone to the realm of the ancestor spirits and the 'gods'. We already know that power and the resources for living are believed to come from there, but the terrors and misfortunes which could threaten and destroy life come from there also. But if Jesus has

gone to the realm of the 'spirits and the gods', so to speak, he has gone there as Lord over them in much the same way that he is Lord over us. He is therefore Lord over the living and the dead, and over the 'living-dead', as the ancestors are also described. He is supreme over all 'gods' and authorities in the realm of the spirits. So he sums up in himself all their powers and cancels any terrorizing influence they might be assumed to have upon us.

The guarantee that our Lord is Lord also in the realm of the spirits is that he has sent us his own Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to dwell with us and be our protector, as much as to be Revealer of Truth and our Sanctifier. In [John 16:7ff](#), our Lord's insistence on going away to the Father includes this idea of this Lordship in the realm of spirits, as he himself enters the region of spirit, it also includes the idea of the protection and [p. 64](#) guidance which the coming Holy Spirit will provide for his followers in the world. The Holy Spirit is sent to convict the world of its sin in rejecting Jesus, and to demonstrate, to the shame of unbelievers, the true righteousness which is in Jesus and available only in him. But he is also sent to reveal the spiritual significance of God's judgment, this time not upon the world, but upon the devil, who deceives the world about its sin and blinds people to the perfect righteousness in Christ. Our Lord therefore, entering the region of spirit, sends the Holy Spirit to his followers to give them understanding of the realities in the realm of spirits. The close association of the defeat and overthrow of the devil ('ruler of this world') with the death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus (cf. [In. 12:31](#)) is significant here. In addition the thought of the 'keeping' and the protection of his followers from 'the evil one' forms an important part of Jesus' prayer recorded in [John 17](#) (cf. [In. 17:9](#)), which is aptly described as his 'high priestly' prayer.

These are some of the areas for us to investigate when we begin to reflect on the Good News from the standpoint of the world-view of our heritage. Some important insights are in store for us, not from isolated passages of Scripture, but from entire and significant bodies of teaching in the Word of God.

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The Finality of Jesus in Africa

Roy B. Musasiwa

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THE HISTORICAL AND CURRENT SITUATION

The traditional missionary came to Africa, which was then considered a 'dark continent' and in effect said, 'Be a Christian and cease being an African.' Christianity became almost synonymous with Western culture. For example, those who wished to be baptized first had to renounce their African names and adopt Western ones.