

The Scriptures

Introduction

EVERY HUMAN SOCIETY HAS often prided itself in some form of religious or metaphysical experience.¹ These metaphysical experiences are closely associated with the origin of religion or the passionate quest of the human spirit to understand the supernatural dimension of mortal existence.² The value attached to these kinds of supernatural experiences naturally leads to documentation of this religious phenomenon in written forms, thus contributing to the subsequent transmission and preservation of these cherished religious and theological categories from generation to generation. In Africa, the documentation of these religious experiences of the African people has unfortunately not taken place.³ This is because of the dominant nature of oral tradition within African society thus hindering the right documentation and the actual description of these religious experiences of the African people. Describing this religious inclination of the African people, Mbiti rightly observed,

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion

1. See Aerthayil, "Interiority," 279–88.
2. On the dominant study of different theories of revelation particularly in the last three centuries see McDonald, *Theories of Revelation*.
3. For the analysis and study on the complexity of this African religious heritage see Turaki, *Christianity and African Gods*. See also Turaki, *Tribal Gods*, and Turaki, *The British Colonial Legacy*.

permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. A study of these religious systems is, therefore, ultimately a study of the peoples themselves in all the complexities of both traditional and modern life. Our written knowledge of traditional religions is comparatively little, though increasing, and comes chiefly from anthropologists and sociologists. Practically nothing has been produced by theologians, describing or interpreting these religions theologically.⁴

However, the inability to document or keep account of such mystical or metaphysical experiences of the African people does not necessary presuppose that the African people did not value religion nor does it presuppose that the religious experiences of the African people in pre-Christian times are without coherence or systematic patterns.⁵ However, the oral cultural mechanism of African society did not reveal a dominant stimulus to commit such religious experience to writing.⁶ As much as this development is a setback towards the understanding or recovery of the African traditional religions, yet even without such literary medium African traditional religions have expressed themselves in continued piety, zeal, and practices throughout the history of the African people.⁷ In contemporary times, some of the basic metaphysical experiences of the African people have been extrapolated from African traditional songs, proverbs, myths and other African cultic or ritualistic practices.⁸ Contrary to this oral nature of the African traditional religions, the Judeo-Christian faith reached the African people in the category of sacred *writing*. Even though the metaphysical experiences of the Jewish people primarily employed orality within the earlier phase of its development, yet a conscious quest to put it in writing made the Judeo-Christian faith a literate version of “human” religious experiences. It is within this religious heritage of the Jewish people that a significant theological drama took place, which has subsequent universal theological significance for the rest of humanity. In particular, this drama took place in the Scriptures, hence the importance of the Scriptures to the

4. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1.

5. On the many problems of systematized theology see D’Costa, “The End of Systematic Theology,” 324–34.

6. See Mbiti, “Cattle are Born with Ears,” 15–25; Hollenweger, “The Theological Challenge,” 244–46.

7. This orality of the African traditional setting has always posed serious missiological and theological problems for the Christian message that is received in written form. See Klem, “The Bible as Oral Literature,” 479–86.

8. See Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa and African Religions and Philosophy*.

Christian faith.⁹ To underscore such importance, this chapter describes the nature and role of the Christian Scriptures, especially in the context of oral predilection of the traditional African society.

Africans and the Use of the Bible

In traditional African society the concept of a written Scripture is foreign since in the traditional African society Scripture is virtually absent. The words of the gods are not written or documented but spoken verbally by the mouthpiece of the gods from the diviners or the high priest. These verbal spoken words of the gods are conceived as powerful; hence they are respected and revered. The African people in most cases do not fear that the mediators of the messages of the gods could fabricate or manipulate the messages because the integrity of these mouthpieces is often assumed. Such messages of the gods are often existentially related since they deal with the needs and problems within the human society. The gods often speak to address moral, physical, political, social, and spiritual problems of the people, and their diagnosis and remedy are perceived as final in putting to rest a particular problem of a given community. Similarly, the gods speak to settle family problems, reverse a drought or avert a famine. It is always the condition of the African society that is the concerns of the speeches of these gods. Unfortunately, these words from the gods are never documented or put into written form but kept in the memory of the elders, the chief priest or priestess of such gods. In addition, the African people also quote or say incantations from memory as a spiritual defence against the opposing forces or some unpleasant circumstances. It is believed that such incantations have formidable power to check the intrusion of evil powers and to bring about the desired state. Often the words of incantation against a particular undesirable condition are only known to the initiates of a particular cult or shrine. Thus such words said are conceived to be charged with powers in order to bring about the desired outcome. Underscoring the importance of words in traditional African context, Mbiti noted,

9. There is a subtle relationship between the treatment of revelation in the previous chapter and our treatment of Scriptures in the present chapter since Scripture is the authoritative and canonical documentation of divine self-disclosure. The writing of divine revelation and the authority of such writings in the matter of faith and practice is the basic preoccupation of a branch of systematic theology known as bibliology. For the Christian faith the Scripture is not merely words of God, but actually the words of God with a definite article.

There is a mystical power in words, especially those of a senior person to a junior one, in terms of age, social status or office position. The words of parents, for example, carry “power” when spoken to children: they “cause” good fortune, curse, success, peace, sorrow, or blessings, especially when spoken in moments of crisis. The words of medicine-man works through the medicine he gives, and it is this, perhaps more than the actual herb, which is thought to cause the cure or prevent misfortunes.¹⁰

For many Africans coming from this background where words are conceived as portents for magical effects it is not surprising the divine words in the Scriptures are also conceived within these traditional definitions. The magical treatment of the Bible is rampant in many parts of Africa. For example, the Bible is often used to find a thief when money or other valued objects are missing. Similarly, in a study by David T. Adamo, the Bible, especially the Psalms, is used among the Yoruba people as a means of incantation.¹¹

As already highlighted in passing, in the traditional context of Africa, books are of little value since most of the communication employs oral means. Thus, what does canonicity or the Bible mean in this traditionally defined oral setting? Interestingly, as argued by Mbiti, the Bible has profoundly shaped African Christianity. Bible passages have been committed to memory and had been expressed in songs, prayers, and sermons.¹² It seems African Christian folks have put the Bible back in orality, consequently using oral means to spread its message. Similarly, in Africa, seen as a sacred text, the Bible is often viewed as a charm to ward off evil, thus there are instances of the Bible used to divine or placed under the pillow as a magic potion in order to aid in the protection of the person. Such a magical use of the Bible reveals the influence from traditional African religion whereby things or objects held sacred are also conceived to have the vital force needed for protection or in order to find good luck. Although these kinds of Bible abuse are fairly common, they are an aberration from the norm; generally speaking Africans read the stories of the Bible in order to find the protective promises of God, which are fervently believed in faith to take place in the life of the person involved. Even as an aberration, the magical use of the Bible did not come out of some delusional understanding of the Bible, but from the firm conviction of the power and

10. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 197.

11. Adamo, “The Use of Psalms,” 336–49.

12. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 222–34.

authority of the sacred text.¹³ In many ways, African Christianity is firmly based on the Bible and richly colored by the cultural worldviews of the African people. The interlacing of these two categories while it reveals the quest of the African people to understand the Bible based on their own distinct cultural forms, it also poses a serious danger since the motivation and basis for such interaction of the two is primarily determined by traditional cultural factors. Nonetheless, these culturally defined presuppositions ultimately reveal the high value that Africans generally attach to the Bible as a religious sacred text, which is pragmatically employed to confront the problems of African society. Often, there is a successful transition or replacement of the power of charms with the powers believed to literally reside in the very words of the Scriptures, thus quoting or chanting of the Scriptures are often common practices, particularly during moments of crisis or unfriendly circumstances. For many Africans, the Bible is the revelation of the divine blueprint for their lives and thus every word of the Scriptures is conceived to inherently contain the divine power of God needed to bring to pass the aspirations or promises of biblical texts. The power of words is traditionally seen in the use of words to bless and to curse, which are chanted magically in order to bring about the state desired. The word of God in the Bible conceived within these culturally defined meanings are common across the African continent. This treatment of the word of God came partly from the dominant understanding of the universe in the religious category.¹⁴

The Nature of the Divine Word

In the African worldview, as already seen, spoken words are often conceived to have certain mystical power. Thus, often the African herbalist or witchdoctor employs the use of words in order to invoke a blessing or a curse, and to call on the services of good and malevolent spirits. This power of the spoken word is assumed because human words are presumed to be

13. See Adamo, "The Use of Psalms," 336–49.

14. Describing this instinctive religious inclination of the African people, Mbiti observed, "for Africans, the whole of existence is a religious phenomenon; man is a deeply religious being living in a religious universe" (Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 15). Unfortunately, "Failure to realize and appreciate this starting point, has led missionaries, anthropologists, colonial administrators and other foreign writers on African religion to misunderstand not only the religions as such but the peoples of Africa" (ibid.). The word of God in this highly religious environment is normally treated with a certain degree of mystical or magical importance.

the means by which spiritual realities are brought into physical being. In this understanding, spoken words are the mediators of spiritual realities. Even though human touch could be employed in order to transfer such spiritual reality into being, priority of place is always given to the power of spoken words. Thus the African children look to their parents for orally worded blessing and the aged people are generally conceived to have the power to bless or curse by the utterance of their words. In this persuasion, spoken words are highly respected and African men and women often manipulate or persuade the aged by way of gifts or good behavior in order to get or secure for themselves good words of blessing from their parents.

In the same sense, words are highly conceived to be mediators of divine blessing in the Bible. The story of Jacob and Esau is a good example because both Jacob and Esau seek to battle for the words of blessing from their father Isaac (Gen 27:1–40). From the Bible story, these orally pronounced words from the lips of Isaac are conceived in magic form to determine the destiny of the person who happens to have them. In this particular instance, human spoken words from the lips of one's parent were conceived as magical since they are powerful enough to determine one's destiny on earth.

On the other hand, the revelation of God in the Bible also uses or understood words in other different ways. Some of the basic ways in which words are conceived in the Bible could be easily illustrated. The first understanding of the word is in the category of a person, hence some passages of the Scriptures refer to Jesus as the "Word of God" (See John 1:1, 14, 1 John 1:1). The labeling of Jesus Christ as the "Word of God" is directly linked to his prominent role as the revelator of the divine will. In Jesus, the divine purpose and will is disclosed for the World to see. The Scriptures also use the label, "Word of God" to describe "speeches made by God," particularly in God's decrees that cause events to happen or program things into existence (Gen 1:3, 24; Ps 33:6). These speeches made by God might not be decrees, but might also describe friendly talks or a personal address that God gives to humans (Gen 2:16–17; Exod 20:1–3; Matt 3:17). But beyond these direct speeches from the lips of God himself, speeches made by God could also include speeches made through human lips (Deut 18:18–20; Jer 1:7, Exod 4:12; Num 22:38; 1 Sam 15:3, 18, 23; 1 Kgs 20:36; Isa 30: 12–14). The designation "Word of God" is also used in the Bible to describe the written word of God (Exod 31:18; 32:16; 4:1, 28; 31:9–13, 24–26; Josh 24:26; Jer 30:2; 36:2–4, 27–31; 51:60; John 14:26; 1 Cor 14:37; 2 Pet 3:2). The written word of God was for preservation

and transmission to other generations of divine dealings with his people in history. It was aimed at generating better study of God's word for the subsequent necessity of obedience. It was also written to facilitate easy access to the divine word rather than making references to God's word from memory. Similarly, it was written down for the sake of accuracy and the necessity to guard against unorthodox or heretical teachings since written copies of God's word serve as a standard to check all doctrinal errors. In Africa, the "words of the gods" are transmitted to the people via the spiritual office of the medicine man, diviner or the herbalist. It is not written. It is preserved by the medium of orality.

The Canonicity of the Scriptures

The concept of an authoritative oral or written text is strange in Africa, thus the concept of a canon of authority in terms of Scripture is also in this sense foreign. However, Africans have some authoritative canon of oral beliefs or ethos which guides their moral and religious systems. But since these beliefs are oral in nature there is room for easy manipulation, reinterpretation, or even absolute displacement. In this sense, there is little rigidity in the oral canon of beliefs or religious observances since a persuasive religious representative could maneuver or manipulate these oral religious beliefs for cultural and political ends. Often existential exigencies determine how such oral beliefs are interpreted or used. In this sense, the oral canon remains fluid, but also elastic since it can accommodate the shifting changes of the contexts of human society. In this significant role, the oral canon of beliefs is easily framed or reframed for the generally conceived good of society by the religious representatives or practitioners. The advantage of this oral canonical system of authority is that it is easily redefined or reframed in the light of unforeseen challenges in human society. However, one defining disadvantage is the potential for abuse since the religious representative or custodian of the canon could largely manipulate or exploit such orally defined canon for their selfish ends. On the other hand, even though the written canon can also be abused in the phase of interpretation, it has the stability of authority since every reader can easily see the boundaries of former canonical authority and the newer changes incorporated into the written text.

Generally, every religious movement moves from the phase of an oral canon to a written one. This is also true of Christianity, which employed the use of an oral canon before sectarian necessity imposed on it

the need to define its beliefs and revelation in written form. This is also true of the Old Testament religion. The Old Testament religion develops first with some orally defined canon of authority before the crystallization of its beliefs or authority in a written document. Unfortunately for the African people their religious expression and experiences did not evolve from this oral phase to a written one, thus rendering the religious beliefs of the African people credulous and even dubious.

For now, let us turn to the subject of the Christian canon. As already highlighted to guard against unorthodox rendering, understanding or interpretation of God's word, the words of God were put into writing. However, other writings also developed that assumed sacred status (in the sense that they were religious documents) but which were not included in the Jewish and Christian canons. The term, "canon" is used to describe the standardization or the systematic organization of the books into the sacred library we now call the Bible. While the divine authority of some books was disputed, others were readily accepted to be part of the sacred Scriptures of both Jews and Christians. Thus, canonicity deals with the theological processes or steps taken in the course of Jewish and Christian history by which the books of the Bible come to assume sacred ecclesiastical authority. In Israel there were many religious books that were not included into the Jewish canon because of the understanding by the Jewish faith community of their non-divine origin. Such books as the book of Jashar (Josh 10:13; 1 Sam. 1:18), or the War of the Lord (Num 21:14), the Chronicles of Samuel the Seer, Nathan the prophet and Gad the prophet (1 Chr 29:29), and the Oracles of Jehu the son of Hanani (2 Chr 20:34 and 1 Kgs 16:7). Even though quoted within the Old Testament canonical books, were denied entrance into the Old Testament canon because of the understanding of their non-divine origin or authority. After the exiles and the events described in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, the books of the Old Testament were closed. Even though during the inter-testamental period writings in the name of Yahweh or other prophets of the Old Testament continued, however they were not accepted as part of the Jewish canon and thus subsequently tagged the "Apocrypha." The Apocryphal texts spoke to the religious and turbulent nature of the inter-testamental period. They were creative theological efforts to keep the faith alive in the midst of divine silence. Thus, they were theological forgeries using the label of ancient characters to speak to the yearnings and aspirations of the Jewish community at this period. The Roman Catholics include the Apocrypha in their canon following the Jerome's Vulgate inclusion of the

same. This inclusion by the Roman Catholic Council of Trent in 1546 was not merely a reaction against the Protestant rejection of these books. For the Roman Catholics, the defense of these books became very important because of the theological justification it gives to some doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church that are not found in the Protestant canon and thus they are not defensible using the mainstream Jewish canon. Bishop Melito of Sardis and Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria writing in 170 AD and 367 AD acknowledged all the books of the Old Testament by giving a list of them. However, they omitted the book of Esther. This arises from the Jewish early misgiving about the divine origin of Esther because of its glaring omission of the divine name.

The foundation for the New Testament writings came from Jesus' admission that the Holy Spirit will come on the apostles thereby leading them to know spiritual truths that are not comprehensible to them now during his advent (John 14:26; 16:13-14). Similarly, the office of the apostles shouldered the responsibility of divine mediation of his revelation in the same fashion as those of the Old Testament prophets (2 Pet 3:2; Acts 5:2-4; 1 Cor 2:9, 13.). The apostles assumed a certain divine unction to speak on God's behalf to the different issues which they addressed (1 Cor 14:37; 2 Cor 13:3; Gal 1:8-9; Rom 2:16; 2 Thess 3:6, 14. See also 2 Pet 3:15-16 and 1 Tim 5:17-18; cf. Deut 25:4; Luke 10:7). Apart from the apostles that wrote the New Testament, there are also other individuals that were also conceived of as having the divine unction to pen down his words for humanity. These non-apostles were the writers of Mark, Luke, Acts, Hebrews and Jude. These books were accepted into the New Testament canon because of their close association with the apostles and the assumption by the early church that their writings were equally authoritative thus giving them the same status as the divine mouthpiece. As early as the fourth century, the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were accepted in the Eastern and the Western parts of the Mediterranean world. This is evidence in Athanasius Paschal's letter of 367 AD and the Council of Carthage in 397 AD respectively.¹⁵

The Characteristics of the Divine Word

Apart from the issues of canonicity, there is also to be considered in this section, the divine features of the Scriptures which set it apart from any form of human documents or writings. Five characteristics of the

15. See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 63-64.

Scriptures are worth considering in this section. The first characteristic of the Scriptures that set it apart from any human documents or books is the authority of the Scriptures. Even though other human books such as constitutions also claim to have authority, the validity of such claim could easily be put to the test by recognizing that the authority of the constitution lies heavily in the domain of human authority; however, the Scriptures derives its authority absolutely on the divine. The authority of the Scriptures is based on the certainty that the Bible is actually the word of God and that rejecting or accepting its words is tantamount to accepting or rejecting divine words. The Bible generally asserted that all the words found within its pages are authoritative words of God (See Num 22:38; Deut 18:18–20; Jer 1:9; 14:14; 23:16–22. See also 2 Tim 3: 16.). Thus, the Scripture is its sole basis to ascertain or define its own authority. To say that the Scripture is the divine word does not mean a straight-jacket dictation, even though there are instances of divine dictations in both the Old and New Testament (See Rev 2:1; 2:12; Isa 38:4–6.). However, there are indications that the normal process of transmission is usually not direct dictation, but employs diverse of mediums (Luke 1:1–3; John 14:26; Heb 1:1). The second characteristic of the Scripture lies in the concept of inerrancy. The understanding of inerrancy asserts that the Bible in its original manuscript prior to the myriad translations is a document that is free from error and also free from contradiction. The authority of the Scripture comes also from the recognition that God cannot lie or speak falsely (Num 23:19; Heb 6:18; Titus 1:2; Prov 30:5; Ps 119:89; Matt 24:35). Thus, all the words of the Scriptures are completely true and without error, falsehood or dishonesty.¹⁶ From this understanding of the veracity of the Scriptures, the Bible becomes God's ultimate standard for truth and thus the basis for all matters of faith and practice (John 17:17). Beyond the domain of faith and practice, the Bible is equally infallible in matters of history, scientific presentation, and philosophy as found in its most sacred pages. The theological implication of the biblical teaching of inerrancy is that it encourages trust and comfort in the reader of the Bible. It also presupposes that the Bible rightly provides direction and guides to various issues of human existence. Without the infallibility of the Scripture, the Bible becomes another human book deprived of authority and hence unable to serve as the

16. For a detailed study on the subject of biblical authority and inspiration see Packer, *Fundamentalism*; Packer, "Infallibility," 337–39; Packer, "Scripture," 627–31; Carson and Woodbridge, eds. *Hermeneutics*; Helm, *The Divine Revelation*; Geisler, *Inerrancy*; Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*.

absolute authority of morality and ethics.¹⁷ The third characteristic of the Scriptures is its clarity. Even though the Scriptures do have some aspects that are hard to understand,¹⁸ generally the Scripture affirms its absolute clarity (See Deut 6:6–7; Ps 19:7; 119:130; Matt 12:3, 5; 22:29). The Scripture was not written to the scholar or the academic community; instead the Scripture was written to the congregation of faith. Similarly, it was not written to church leaders or shepherds of the church, rather it was written to the members of the body of Christ, or to the faithful in each generation (See Phil 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:2; Col 4:16; John 20:30–31; Jas 1:1, 22–25; 1 John 5:13). However, since the contemporary readers of the Bible are distant from the world of the Bible in language, time, culture and beliefs, there is need for scholars to aid in the process of rediscovering the meaning and purpose of divine revelation in the pages of the Scriptures so that the community of faith will adequately understand the divine voice across time, culture, and language.¹⁹ The fourth characteristic of the Scriptures is the theological necessity of the Scriptures. The Bible is cardinal or primary in knowing the gospel, understanding the prerequisites of spiritual life and the divine will. Without the Bible all knowledge of humans on such matters is riddled with problems since it does not relate these categories under divine consideration. This does not suggest that God's nature or attributes could not be known outside of the Bible; however it presupposes that the fullness of the divine nature or attributes is made known clearly within the sacred pages of the Scriptures.²⁰ The last characteristic of the Scriptures is the sufficiency of the Scriptures. This biblical teaching assumes that God at each stage in redemption revealed himself progressively and all that we now need to know about salvation, ethics in the present times and even the knowledge of the hereafter are adequately given or revealed within the pages of the Scriptures (See 2 Tim 3:15; Jas 1:18; 1 Pet 1:23; 2 Tim 3:16–17. See also Deut 4:2; 12:32; Prov 30:5–6; Rev 22:18–19). The general implication of this last characteristic of the Scriptures is that it presupposes that the Scriptures can be trusted in every matter that pertains to its general

17. See Warfield, *Limited Inspiration*; Haley, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*; Geisler, ed. *Biblical Inerrancy*; Feinberg, "Inerrancy," 141–45.

18. For example see 2 Pet 3:15–16.

19. See Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*; Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*; Barr, *The Semantics*; Hirsch Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation*; Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation*; Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*.

20. Concerning the necessity of the Scriptures in relationship to the gospel, cultivating a spiritual life and knowing God's will see Acts 4:12; Rom 10:13–17; 1 Tim 2:5–6; Deut 8:3; 32:47; 1 Pet 2:2; 1:23–25; Deut 29:29; 1 John 5:3.

preoccupation of salvation, development of spiritual life and godly living in the present world and also the hopes and anticipation of the next.

Conclusion

The chapter outlines the basic issues pertaining to the subject of the Bible or God's word. It reveals the nature, the characteristics, and the issues of canonicity. The cardinal presupposition behind the study is the recognition of the inerrant nature of divine word and the translation of such lofty conceptions of the divine word in the context of the daily experiences of the believer. Despite the radical criticism launched against the Bible the contemporary world reveals an unabated reverence and regard for the Bible as God's divine word for the salvation of humanity. In Africa, such lofty regard of the Bible is often seen in the magical treatment of the Bible and the use of it in order to confront the many ills of African society. The simple presuppositions behind such use of the Bible lie in the culturally conceived understanding that there is a vital force that lies behind words when such words are magically recited or chanted. The chapter places the cultural understanding of the Bible within the matrix of theological discussion of the subject of bibliology or the study of the Bible. It seeks to underscore the relationship between the nature of divine words as conceived in the Bible and the traditional conceptions of the words of the gods in traditional African societies.