

The Influence of the Kipsigis Concept of Blessings and Curses on the Understanding of Biblical Concept of Shalom: Toward a Renewed Understanding

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Abstract

This study examines the traditional African concept of blessings and curses among the Kipsigis people to uncover how these beliefs influence the understanding of the biblical concept of Shalom, which depicts peace and wholeness in all spheres of life. Biblical salvation is often wrongly construed as the ending of all forms of pain and suffering. This is compounded by the theology of prosperity that teaches that authentic Christian faith results in material wealth and physical well-being. Thus, many believers in Christ suffer in silence because of the stigma and faulty understanding that a Christian should not experience brokenness. This paper presents the true meaning of Shalom as an integral aspect of salvation. It highlights the power of God through pain and suffering. The study argues that many Christians fear curses because they are ignorant of the scriptures. Christians need to understand their identity in Christ's work to overcome the fear of curses and the powers of evil.

Keywords: Blessing, Curse, African religion, Christian, Salvation, Suffering, Kipsigis

Introduction

High poverty levels and the desire to get rich quickly have seen many unsuspecting congregants fall prey to fake pastors whose miracles never materialize. In their deceptive schemes, these church leaders enrich themselves at the expense of their flock. The basis of their teachings is the gospel.¹ Most neo-Pentecostal churches in Kenya are driving the explosive growth of the prosperity gospel. In these churches, miracles are staged to hoodwink and attract more followers. They tell their congregants to “plant a seed” (in Swahili- “Panda mbegu”) by giving a certain amount of money as an offering for them to get whatever breakthrough in life. A particular pastor from one of the new mushrooming churches visited a family friend some two decades ago. He was concerned that the Christian couple had jobs, but it seemed to him that there was nothing to show in terms of material success. The pastor from one such movement challenged a couple, saying: “What is wrong with you? Look at this Zion church pastor. He just planted his church around here but now look! Unlike you, he now drives a big car. You are graduates and, besides, lecturers, and you don’t even have a car, yet his church is much younger than yours.”² Indeed, the couple owned little after many years of devoted service; from this perspective, they were seen as failures.

In many areas and spheres of life, work, and almost all human institutions, it is natural and normal to want to be prosperous and not stagnate. Traditionally, having material possessions was a sign of being blessed, but their lack is viewed as a curse.³ Thus many fail to understand that spiritual blessedness can be different from material blessings, partly because the prosperity gospel gains more attraction in charismatic African churches.⁴

In a given society, one’s position is referred to as a social status; it forms how one compares with another in any context- a village, town, community, locality, institution, nation, and others. A person’s social status does not reflect their value or potential.

¹ Akaranga Stephen Ifedha. "Prosperity Gospel in Kenyan Urban Centres: Come, See, Pay and Receive your Miracles and Healing." *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5, no. 10 (2015):199.

² Male Participant, M9. The respondent narrated the story to the writer. 2011

³ Maimela Simon, *Religion and Culture: Blessings or Curses?* EATWOT Pan African Theological Conference, Harare, 1991, 12.

⁴ Bernard Alwata, “The Fate of Prosperity Gospel in Kenya.” *East Africa Journal of Traditions, Culture, and Religion*, 2, no. 1 (2020):23-33. doi:10.37284/eajtr.2.1.152.

Rather, it is defined by the extent to which they possess things and how that particular culture deems them valuable.⁵ For example, Americans place a high value on wealth, fame, and power, which explains why millionaires, actors, and politicians occupy the highest rank on the social ladder.⁶

The main argument in this study is that Christian calling to salvation in Christ Jesus does not promise blessings without suffering; therefore, Christians should not see afflictions through the cultural lens as curses. It is thus imperative that a correct interpretation of the Scripture be offered for renewed thinking, which would result in the experience of Shalom amidst pain. Shalom is one of the keywords and images for salvation in the Bible. The ancient Hebrew word ‘*shalam*’ means “to make something whole,”⁷ not just regarding practical restoration of things that were lost or stolen, but with “an overall sense of fulness and completeness in mind, body, and estate.”⁸ In the New Testament, shalom entails the reconciliation of all things to God through the work of Christ (Col 1:19–20). True biblical Shalom is thus multidimensional, complete well-being, physical, psychological, social, and spiritual; it flows from all of one’s relationships being put right—with God, with(in) oneself, and with others.⁹

This study is organized around three main headings: African understanding of sin and curse, the biblical teachings on blessing and curse, and the role of the African church in bringing about a renewed cognizance among believers regarding blessings and curses.

The African Traditional Understanding of Sin and Curses

This study section considers the Kipsigis’¹⁰ perceptions of evil, sin, and curses. In the African heritage, life is possible in communal relationships. Mbiti aptly expressed it when he said, “I am because you are, and you are because I am.”¹¹ Similarly to the

⁵ David White, *Downward Social Mobility*, Study.com/ academy, accessed November 11th, 2021

⁶ Ibid., 2021, 4.

⁷ Tyndale Dictionary, online, accessed on October 12th 2022, pp340.

⁸ Ibid., 340

⁹ Ibid., 341

¹⁰ Kipsigis is one of the eight sub-tribe that form the Kalenjin community. All the eight sub-tribes are culturally and linguistically connected, though in some instances they find difficulty in understanding the dialect of another (Read Arap Soi K. 1984, 3-4).

¹¹ Mbiti, John. *Introduction to African Religion 2nd ed.* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1975). 201.

Kalenjin, it was essential to teach people to refrain from activities injurious to humankind and community life. Behind this stern warning, in our view, was the understanding of sin and evil which were/ are still believed could threaten or destroy life. In this regard, sin was a problem between human beings and not between individuals and God. Put somewhat differently, sin and evil were measured in terms of life full of suffering, oppression, injustice, and death.¹² Below, we will present selected categories considered fundamental cultural components in understanding the concept of curse in African cultures, specifically the Kipsigis.

The Burial Rite in Honour of the Dead

In Christianity and African cultural heritage, the death of an individual brings great concern and agony to the community. In African cosmology, death is an inevitable passage that prepares the deceased's spirit to travel to the next realm.¹³ The grieving process involves rituals such as family members shaving their hair, slaughtering a domestic animal, and distributing the belongings of the deceased. Different rituals are performed depending on who has died and how they died.¹⁴

The advent of Christianity brought new burial practices to African Christians.¹⁵ The liturgy for burial reflected the Christian belief in resurrection, the communion of saints, and eternal life, as stated in the Apostles' Creed. The Christian funeral became a new cultural experience in Africa with the Bible reading and new singing of hymns. A new theological understanding of the destiny of man was articulated, expressing the conviction that after physical death, a faithful Christian would enter the kingdom of God to live with God eternally, while the unfaithful would be condemned to eternal suffering in hell.¹⁶ Despite the affirmation of the Christian funeral belief of life after death, the relatives of the deceased, after conducting a Christian burial, still believe that traditional death rituals, such as cleansing rituals, must be conducted to enjoy peace and have the

¹² Maimela Simon, *Religion and Culture: Blessings or Curses?*, 13.

¹³ Kirwen, Michael C. 2005. *African Cultural Knowledge: Themes and Embedded Beliefs*. (Nairobi, Mias Books: Mary Knoll Institute of African Studies, 2005), 13.

¹⁴ Okebiro, Gilbert, "Anthropological Study of Burial Ceremony in African Development and Harnessing Traditional Knowledge Among the Abagusii," (2017), 2-3. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3077926> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3077926>

¹⁵ George Busolo Lukalo, "Christianity and African Traditional Conflict Concerning Burial," 2017, 5. Article accessed on November 19th 2022.

¹⁶ Mugambi, J. N. K. *Christianity and African Culture*. (Nairobi: Acton, 2002), 51.

deceased rest in eternal peace.¹⁷ Some Christians do the required rituals without consulting the pastor. In some cultures, if a woman passed on, the relatives would break the water pot and demolish the fireplace; if the deceased was the head of the home, the men would go to the rooftop and remove the iron sheet and replace it with grass. Those well versed in the traditions will know what happened.¹⁸ Traditionally, without performing these rituals, the relatives would presumably experience no peace since the spirit of the departed would torment them.¹⁹ It is against biblical teachings to continue upholding these traditional rituals and values. Therefore, church leaders should teach church members to discontinue these traditional rituals. In the next section, we discuss why many Christians in Africa find it hard to abandon their traditional practices even after embracing Christianity.

Curses in the African Traditional Worldview

The fear of curses in the African worldview emanates from the transactional view of the understanding of deities. When things do not go well, people are tempted to think that gods are angry; thus, any misfortune occurs as a punishment from the supreme being(s).²⁰ Fabulous Moyo and Erwin Van der Meer state that the work of traditional healers was in “divining spiritual causes of bewitchment and who did the bewitchment.”²¹ Medicine men were very significant in society because they served as diviners. They were able to tell the cause of any misfortune. Their services were and are still in high demand.²² They would cure aches, faintness, and sickness that affected community members. In the contemporary world, some professing Christians still value and consult traditional healers in times of trouble. Witchcraft, sorcery, and fear of the unknown are crucial factors leading some Christians to draw back in faith by secretly consulting these traditional

¹⁷ Ibid., 51

¹⁸ Simon Korir. “Effects of Burial Ceremony in Kenya in the Period of Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case of the Kipsigis Community Bomet County.” *International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences*, 8, 4, (2021), 44.

¹⁹ Ibid., 43.

²⁰ Chepkwony, Adam K. (ed.). *Religion and Health in Africa*. (Nairobi: Paulines, 2006), 57.

²¹ Erwin Van der Meer and Fabulous Moyo in “The Christian Church and Witchcraft Accusation in Africa. *Africa Journal of Theology*, 38, 1 (2014), 23.

²² Olupona, Jacob K. *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* 1st ed. (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 81.

experts in search of help. They argue that intervention given by the medicine men is often felt strongly during times of great need.²³

In his book, *Theology and HIV and AIDS*,²⁴ Nkanzah-Ombrebong argues that Africans always look beyond natural causes for death, sickness, or affliction. They commonly consider demons, curses, and witches to be the cause. Christians and pastors alike would be mistaken to think that this cultural assumption will automatically disappear after baptism. African traditional worldview continues to form the core convictions of some believers. Idowu expresses it as a temptation to remain relevant, “While every African may wish to be regarded as connected to one of the ‘fashionable’ religions, most are at heart still attached to their own indigenous beliefs.”²⁵ Similarly, Mbiti speaks of a “religious prostitution/concubinage”²⁶ in which people embrace “the good” in Christianity and African traditional religions.²⁷ This syncretistic life is motivated by the need to remain relevant to both religious beliefs. Though he claimed to be a devoted Christian, one informant in this research study described the efficacy of traditional ways in contrast to the Christian religion. He expressed,

My herd were stolen a few months ago, and the church prayed that the thief would return the stolen animals and, more importantly, never come back for the few that were left. One night I was away on a visit, and the day I arrived, the thieves had visited at night and drove all the animals that remained. I was rendered poor, with nothing to support my family. I was mad at God and went to see a witch doctor, and I hired him to come and help locate the thief in our area. He came, and through his spiritual powers, we successfully caught the thieves. I think the solutions offered in the traditional way are effective.²⁸

Sadly, this syncretistic practice continues to affect believers in Africa.

It is important to note that worldview transformation in a believer proceeds from the known to the unknown. Therefore, when the church proclaims the gospel, servants of the gospel should come to the level of the hearers to communicate truth and relate the message to that person’s needs. This effort will reduce the desire to seek help from other

²³ Male p6, interviewed March 2021,

²⁴ James Nkansah-Ombrebong, *Theology and HIV and AIDS*, *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 31, 1, (2012), 36.

²⁵ Idowu, E. Bolaji. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, (Orbis Books, 1973), 105.

²⁶ Mbiti, John. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Rev. ed. (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers. 2002), 79.

²⁷ Ibid., 79.

²⁸ Male 2, A nominal Christian in an interview with the researcher in Kericho county 2021

agents, like witch doctors, but from God alone. Another major problem in the African church that often makes Christians fearful of the efficacy of curses is barrenness.

Married and Childlessness- Am I cursed?

In African society, any woman who was married but unsuccessful in bearing children was perceived as abnormal. Similarly, in every particular culture, it is believed that life normally flows through marriage.²⁹ Hence, if some couples were struggling with infertility, they could easily be judged they were suffering the fate of their previous actions. Furthermore, the cultural belief regarding childbirth was that good parents are rewarded and would have several children, which was a sign of blessing from the deities and ancestors. On the contrary, infertile couples were perceived as cursed.³⁰

African cultures celebrate childbirth as a critical rite.³¹ Marriage is a cultural process that ushers in new life, also viewed as an incubator. According to Leena Honkavuo,³² women's experiences of traditional beliefs about pregnancy and childbirth in Zambia give a glimpse of what happens to childless couples in Africa whenever life takes a dark turn. Barrenness is viewed as death, for it reflects a dead womb. The overall African perspective of marriage is that life and reproduction are the core of human society. Expectedly, men and women should bear children who ritualize their parents and ancestors.³³

Many childless individuals silently suffer because society tends to isolate them. The cultural assumption that marriage without children is not a good sign is unscriptural. If church members are not mature in faith, they will be tempted to think that the God they serve is slow to act or limited in power. They may not reconcile the belief that God is more powerful, yet they seem to suffer from the effect of a curse, as informed by their worldview. The question of suffering occasioned by childlessness, despite the existence of a powerful and good God, has elicited questions concerning God's character as

²⁹ Chukwuendo, M. U., & Ede, A. C. "The Paradox of The Concepts of Life and Death in African Traditional Religion." *African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 5, 1, (2019), 1.

³⁰ Ibid., 13.

³¹ Magesa, Laurenti. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. (Nairobi: Paulines, 1997), 47. See also Mbiti, J. S. *Introduction to African Religion*. (Waveland Press, 2015), 71.

³² Leena Honkavuo, "Women's Experiences of Cultural and Traditional Health Beliefs about Pregnancy and Childbirth in Zambia: An Ethnographic Study," *Health Care for Women International*, 42, 4, (2021): 374.

³³ Ibid., 374. See also Shorter, Aylward. *African Culture: An Overview*. Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1998

omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent. Why do the righteous suffer? Why is there much unfairness in human communities? We shall discuss this matter later when we embark on the biblical view of suffering. But first, we continue the discussion on the traditional understanding of sin and curses and their results.

Taboos and Curses in Kipsigis Community

In the Kalenjin community, it was taboo to commit evil and hide it by refusing to admit responsibility. For example, murder, adultery, theft, lies, and incest, among others, were forbidden.³⁴ If a community member was found guilty, it affected everyone. The repercussions for concealing any sin committed affected the individual and the clan. Strict adherence to taboos ensured morality was upheld between the living and the supernatural world for the good of the community and the individual.³⁵

In Kipsigis society, curses were considered serious; hence Christians from such contexts would struggle to overlook this cultural component.³⁶ As a result, true change in a believer's life becomes evident in moments of crisis. In such situations, maturing Christians can find themselves at a crossroads, having to choose between Christianity and cultural tradition. This challenge is not limited to Kenyan Christians, particularly the Kipsigis, but is a widespread problem.³⁷

Curse as Related to Sickness and Diseases

In the traditional African worldview, nothing happens without a cause.³⁸ Therefore, when misfortunes occur, people bring underlying presuppositions to the surface. In such a situation, though unspoken, sickness and diseases are interpreted as judgments sent by deities. This belief is prevalent in neo-Pentecostal and charismatic churches when they conduct exorcism and power encounter prayers in their assemblies.³⁹

The Kalenjin community's perceptions of illness and death were attributed to an angry spirit of an ancestor or a super being, whereby they pass judgment on those living

³⁴ Naama Rop, "Investigation of Kipsigis Worldview Items towards Understanding of the Catholic Doctrine of Salvation through Inculturation Approach: A Case of Kericho Sub-County," 2015, pp50-51. <http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/> Article accessed on November 19th 2022.

³⁵ Ibid., 53

³⁶ Chepkwony, Adam K. (ed.). *Religion and Health in Africa*. (Nairobi: Paulines, 2006), 63.

³⁷ Kanu, I. A. "The Paradox of Secrecy in African Tadtional Religion." *Journal of Religion and Human Relations*, 10, 1 (2018): 35-55.

³⁸ Mbiti, J. S. *Introduction to African Religion*. (Waveland Press, 2015), 201.

³⁹ Chepkwony, Adam K. (ed), *Religion and Health in Africa*, 65.

on earth, if disrespected.⁴⁰ Due to diversity in African cultures, different communities adopt different views on the consequences of sins against these deities. How illness and pain are experienced and expressed would determine the types of treatment to give the patients. Traditional experts in those instances were essential in providing treatment for the sick. Reliance on medical priests in the health and well-being of community members mirrored significantly on the belief that supernatural agents caused unexplained illness, misfortune, and infant mortality.⁴¹ A story by an elderly mother who had lost four infants resonates well with this,

Immediately I arrived in my matrimonial home, I was able to conceive, carry the pregnancy to full term and deliver safely. But I never enjoyed the favour of the spirits of this clan. Four of my older children died a few days after birth. It got to a point when I decided to quit and return to my father's home. Then, the elders of this clan installed a cleansing ritual to prevent further deaths. When I delivered my daughter after this cultural activity, I was told to lay her on the roadside and to name her "*Chesiror*" which means "may the spirit of death pass over the gate," and so through the blessings of the passers-by, my child survived.⁴²

In research done in Ghana by Kofi entitled- "*Man Cures, God Heals*," the author concluded that an "increased understanding of the indigenous Ghanaian healing systems would foster an integrative exchange between the Western orientation and indigenous health systems."⁴³ The findings of this research have enormous implications for African theologians because spiritual leaders in the church cannot afford to be ignorant of African beliefs. The writer describes the types of diseases treated, the patients attracted to the indigenous and Christian faith healers, and the roles played by each. We will see how societies prepared members for a prosperous life and the prevention of curses.

How African Communities Dealt with Societal Problems Identified

The African traditional religious beliefs dictated how to handle societal problems. Even when an individual converts to another religion like Christianity or Islam, this should not mean abandoning his African culture altogether; rather, it implicitly remains with them

⁴⁰ Ibid., (2006), 57. See also Fish, Burnette C; Fish, Gerald W. *The Kalenjin Heritage: Traditional Religious and Social Practice*. (Kericho, Kenya Africa Gospel Church, 1995).

⁴¹ Mbiti, J. S. (2015), 202.

⁴² Female P3, old woman's tale during research study in 2021 in Kericho county.

⁴³ Kofi Appiah-Kubi, *Man Cures, God Heals: Religion and Medical Practices among the Akans of Ghana*, " (N. J.: Allanhela, Osmun & Co. 1981), 92.

for several generations and sometimes centuries.⁴⁴ Mbiti, in his *African Religions and Philosophy*,⁴⁵ describes a landscape of tribal and national religions in Africa that might have lacked sacred texts like the Bible but lived deeply in people's hearts and minds, in rituals and oral histories, and through priests, elders and kings. He adds, "Everyone is a religious carrier, and wherever the African is, there is his religion."⁴⁶ Therefore, with this in mind, it was interpreted through cultural and religious convictions whenever disaster hit the community or individual.

Everything was attributed to the supreme beings.⁴⁷ For things to go right, an offering to God was necessary, "Diviners treat illness through facilitating the direct intervention of the spiritual world."⁴⁸ Obina explains that if an illness is believed to be caused by inappropriate behaviour on the part of the patient, a remedy or cure for the disease could only come through spiritual intervention.⁴⁹ In traditional African understanding, Mbiti asserts that God is for everyone and does his work through ancestral spirits and diviners.⁵⁰ It implies that God is the healer but works through mediums such as spirits, herbalists, and deities with the assistance of diviners or traditional healers.⁵¹ Therefore, Africans believe in the work of these agents in the healing process. Their role is broader in many respects because they learn the cause of illness, give treatment, and apply prevention to further misfortunes from happening again.⁵²

Blessings in African Worldview

In traditional African societies, blessings are intertwined with religion; they are either from God, parents, or ancestors.⁵³ Olupona refers to African people as religious by

⁴⁴ Olupona, Jacob K. *African Traditional Religions: In Contemporary Society* 1st ed. (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 45

⁴⁵ Mbiti, John. *African Religions and Philosophy*. (2002).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁷ Mbiti 2012., 5.

⁴⁸ Obina, E., 'Life is Superior to Wealth?: Indigenous Healers in an Africa Community, Amarir, Nigeria,' In A. Afe, E. Chitando & B. Bateve (eds.), *African Traditions in The Study of Religion in Africa*, Farnham, Ashgate. 2012, 137-143), 142.

⁴⁹ Obina 2012, 142.

⁵⁰ Mbiti, J.S. *Concepts of God in Africa*, 2nd ed., (Action Publishers, Nairobi, 2012), 6-15.

⁵¹ Obina, E. *Life is Superior to Wealth*, (2012), 135.

⁵² Sundermeyer, T. *The Individual and Community in African Traditional Religions*, (LIT Verlag, Hamburg, 1998), 203-204.

⁵³ Njoh A. J. & Akiwumi F. A. "The Impact of Religion on Women Empowerment as a Millennium Development Goal in Africa." *Social Indicators Research*, 107, 1, (2012), 3.

nature. He argues, “African spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and practices touch on and inform every facet of human life, and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the everyday or mundane.”⁵⁴ Religion is a way of life. Kamar, defines religion as “The observance of rules of conduct in the way the individual conducts his/her daily life, the practice of rituals, and the recognition of the ever presence of the living-dead (ancestors) to allow the person to co-exist in harmony with other members of the community in order to please God.”⁵⁵ Concisely, traditional African religion is part and parcel of culture. It informs every facet, including marriage, health, diet, dressing, economics, politics, and death.⁵⁶ In other words, African spirituality is truly holistic. For example, Olupona observes that sickness in traditional African worldview is not just an imbalance in the body but also in one’s social life, which can be linked to a breakdown in one’s kinship and family relations or even to one’s relationship with one’s ancestors.⁵⁷ Blessings in African traditional societies depended on the member’s spirituality. Morality was highly valued because it was associated with God. As Mbiti states, if one does not want to invite God’s wrath on oneself, the person must not indulge in any evil deed. Thus, men and women were taught right from birth to shun immoral acts.⁵⁸

African society valued childbirth because children removed the curse of barrenness.⁵⁹ Therefore, a reproductive couple was considered blessed.⁶⁰ God can only reward good parents. According to Mbiti, the high value placed on children is because they protect the community and care for their parents during old age. Children provided continuity of the family lineage and the community. Also, they were seen as a sign of wealth; hence they caused their parents to be respected. They also inherited their parent’s property.⁶¹ Therefore, the concept of blessings was attached to various experiences by the community, one of which was children.

Regarding death and burial rituals, African society believed death was just a

⁵⁴ Olupona, Jacob. African Traditional Religions: In *Contemporary Society*, (1991), 43.

⁵⁵ Kamara, M. G. “Regaining our African Aesthetics and Essence through Our African Traditional Religion.” *Journal of Black Studies*, 30(4), 2000, 503.

⁵⁶ Olupona Jacob (1991), 44.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 44-45.

⁵⁸ Mbiti. J.S. *African Religion and Philosophy* (2002), 73.

⁵⁹ Kamara, M.G, (2000), 503.

⁶⁰ Donkor, Kwabena, (2011), 94-95.

⁶¹ Mbiti J.S. *African Religion and Philosophy* (2002), 89.

passage to a new stage in life, into the spirit world of the living dead and ancestors.⁶² Therefore, Africans respected the dead by giving them a proper burial to avoid annoying them and any bad omen. The life of the living also changed in some societies. If the person who died was from a good family, it was believed that blessings would come to that family.⁶³ Further, naming children after their ancestors was a way of pleasing their spirits. Ancestors were thought to visit and interact with their living relatives.⁶⁴ African people examined their experiences as a blessing or a curse from this perspective. A focus was put on the safety and harmony between the living and the dead. As long as peace prevailed, it was worth celebrating because it was a sign of prosperity. In the next section, we turn to the biblical view of blessings and curses.

Understanding of Blessings and Curses in the Bible

According to the Tyndale Bible Dictionary, “God’s intention and desire to bless humanity is a central focus of his covenant relationships.”⁶⁵ The Greek definition of the word “blessed” comes from *Makarios*. It describes a believer “as being in an enviable position for receiving God’s provisions (favour).”⁶⁶ Unfortunately, most interpreters fail to understand the reality of these blessings, especially when the wicked flourish.

In Genesis 12:3, God tells Abraham that those who bless him will be blessed, and those who curse him will be cursed, showing that God has the ultimate authority to bless or curse. A good example of this effect is Numbers 23. King Balak tried to have Balaam curse the Israelites but failed because God had blessed Israel and would not let Balaam utter curses against His people. When God says no, nothing and no one can harm a child of God, but this is only so for those who choose to live a life pleasing to God; there would be no need to fear curses.

In Proverbs 18:21, the human race is the only creation God has given the power in their tongue. Hence the need to watch what proceeds from our tongues. Words have

⁶² Ibid., 73.

⁶³ Olupona, 97.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 97.

⁶⁵ Tyndale Bible Dictionary: *A Comprehensive Guide to the People, Places, and Important Words of the Bible*, edited by P. W. Comfort and W. A. Elwell, 340–341.

⁶⁶ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, accessed through <https://www.internationalstandardbible.com-blessedness>, November 29th 2022.

power (of life and death), thus the need to master one's speech.⁶⁷ African cultures acknowledge this fact, and some people are feared because they have the power to curse. In African tradition, cursing involves using words or actions against an individual or group. The words indicate the misfortune one will suffer for engaging in a particular activity. Certain actions, for instance, a mother exposing her nakedness to her son for something the son did, constitute a curse that negatively affects the person cursed.⁶⁸ For Christians, this implies that one needs to be wise to understand the power of the tongue. It can bring the greatest joy in peoples' lives or harm. Generally, the belief in the power of the tongue rests on the assumption that a curse is not a mere wish for misfortune on a person or thing but a power that produces tangible results. It is believed that when cursing, power determines the destiny of the recipient of the curse is released.⁶⁹

Blessings through Suffering in the Old Testament

God promised to bless Abraham though these blessings were not fulfilled immediately (Gen 12:1–3). While waiting for God's time, he encountered suffering during drought, famine, and war. The goal of God's promise was to demonstrate His glory and power.

Many years later, when Abraham's descendants had possessed the land of the promise, God brought calamity upon his people due to their sins,⁷⁰ yet the nation of Israel never seemed to learn (Ps 78). At other times, Israel's suffering had nothing to do with sin, but God could permit suffering to purify and strengthen the soul in godliness. These could be more perplexing, as expressed in the agony of Psalm 44:9–26. While the righteous believed God's promise of blessing, they also suffered innocently,⁷¹ meaning their suffering had nothing to do with sin. Another example is Job. This man was afflicted with horrible skin sores. During this time, he bore the grief of his sons and daughters. All his wealth vanished successively (Job 1:13–21). He became loathsome to his friends and repulsive to his wife, who encouraged him to curse God and die, but Job

⁶⁷ James 3:5, 9; Proverbs 15:4; 12:18; Romans 10:9–10; 1 John 5:11–12; Jeremiah 21:8.

⁶⁸ Kombo, Kisilu. *Witchcraft: A Living Vice in Africa*. *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 22, (1) 2003, 75–76.

⁶⁹ Donkor, Kwabena. "Curses in African Religious Thought and Contemporary Christian Practice: A Biblical Perspective." In *The Church, Culture and Spirits: Adventism in Africa*, (Silver Spring MD: Biblical Research Institute. 2011), 92

⁷⁰ Jeremiah 18:7–10.

⁷¹ When we speak of the innocent suffering, there are no innocent or perfect people because all have sinned but saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. So, their suffering is not attributed to their sin but an outgrowth of their righteousness.

refused, struggling to accept his circumstances as he lay on the ash heap outside town. However, Job did not go through affliction because he sinned against God but because God wanted to demonstrate his faithfulness to his faithful servant. The book of Job shows that afflictions cannot even skip the righteous.

Blessings in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the occasional association of the Old Testament's material benefits is reversed and associated with hardship, as promised in the beatitudes (Matt 5:1–12).⁷² Here “the poor in spirit” have already received their blessing by attaining the kingdom of God. In this regard, the way God blesses is manifested beyond the material reward. Believers are instructed to persevere in trials (Jas 5:11). Though believers are persecuted by the enemies of God (Matt 5:11–12), they should joyfully count themselves blessed. Suffering brings martyrs into a state of bliss⁷³ (Rev 14:13).

Jesus' teaching concerning his suffering surprised His disciples (Matt 16:21–27). Peter rejected the thought that Jesus would suffer and finally die. He erroneously thought that Jesus' suffering was mismatched with God's blessing. On the contrary, Jesus Christ's suffering and death were God's means of blessing us (Acts 3:25–26). Later, apostle Peter, who at one point feared suffering when he denied Christ, had much to say about suffering in his epistles.⁷⁴ Jesus suffered, and since believers are united with God, suffering will be inevitable. Suffering is both a blessing and a means of blessing when suffering for Christ's sake (1 Peter 3:8–9).

The plan of God to bless Christians is to bring about good and not harm (Rom 8:28). This plan incorporates pain, suffering, and sorrow. It instructs Christians to expect suffering and trial as part of his plan to bring about eternal blessing for them. Though we do not seek suffering in this life, we should expect it, recognize it as part of God's bigger plan and accept that God is bringing about our good and is gaining glory. Apostle Paul further teaches (Gal 3:10–14) that those who rely on their observance of the law are under a curse. It means all people who seek to save themselves through good works to please God do so in vain, and all such persons, despite their sincerity and effort, are ‘under a curse.’ Paul then ties Jesus back to Abraham. Jesus did not only fulfill God's

⁷² Bible Commentary produced by TOW Project -The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12)

⁷³ Ibid., 35

⁷⁴ 1 Peter 2:19–21; 3:8–17; 4:12–19.

promise to Abraham regarding offspring, but also, through him, nations would be blessed.⁷⁵ Christ's sacrifice on the cross redeems us from all curses (Deut 21:23). Thus, in Christ Jesus, the Abrahamic blessings have come to the Gentiles through faith.

Trials and Suffering as Refinement of Christian Faith and Not a Curse

Different cultures have their own interpretations of why people suffer. For Christians, it is essential to have a biblical view of why God allows suffering and how we are to go through it. Believers in Christ glorify God through suffering until the parousia.

Donkor Kwabena highlighted the need for a broader understanding of why God uses suffering for His glory. He posits,

When God acts in accordance with our notions, we thank and praise Him, but when He doesn't, we develop misunderstandings and complaints about God, or even betray Him. This shows us how deeply Satan has corrupted us. We always pursue blessings in our faith, which is essentially attempting to transact with God—to do this truly is selfish, despicable, and entirely lacking in reason!⁷⁶

God can use suffering to cause his people to turn to Him. There is a considerable amount of reason why God allows it. Going through suffering also makes a person question their beliefs about God. In addition, God can grow a person the most through suffering. Over and over in the scriptures, God is aware and concerned about the suffering of his people (Rom 8:22; Jn 14: 2–3; Psa 73; 1 Pet 4:12–19). Muhati asserts that God does not create misery to follow the just, but God has a healing, redemptive purpose in allowing suffering to follow unjust deeds (Heb 12:3–13).⁷⁷ This is the truth the righteous should understand and know that the gospel is related to practical life. Christians are not only called to believe but also to suffer for the sake of that faith. Christian faith produces valuable virtues (Rom 5:3–5). Although the Bible offers explanations for pain and suffering, it does not answer why a particular person in a particular situation is suffering.

Misunderstanding Concerning Divine Blessings among Christians Today

Many Christians today falsely think of God's blessings in terms of material blessings

⁷⁵ *Enduring Word Bible Commentary* accessed through <https://enduringword.com-biblecommentary> on November 28th 2022.

⁷⁶ Donkor, Kwabena. *Curses in African Religious Thought and Contemporary Christian Practice: A Biblical Perspective*, 2011, 93.

⁷⁷ Muhati Allan Isiaho. "God's Justice and Its Implications for Sociopolitical Transformation of the Twa Community in Contemporary Burundi." In *God and Creation*. Langham Global Library, (2019), 52.

such as houses, cars, money, physical health, children, and the absence of pain. However, temporal things are not to be measured in terms of prosperity. God's blessings are more than the absence of pain and good possession of things. Surprisingly, many African Christians still perceive curses as manifested in such misfortunes as financial problems, continual poverty, chronic illnesses, premature deaths, and repetitive accidents or injuries. Also, it could be displayed in chronic strife, repetitive suicide cases in a family, chronic mental torment, poor eating habits, poor sleeping habits, sickly infants, repetitive business failures, barrenness, and repetitive miscarriages.⁷⁸

Consequently, some false preachers and teachers take advantage of the ignorance of many members and promise the congregation God's blessings based on their response. Their target is usually for a donation, and if anyone needs to reap God's blessings, that individual only needs to "sow a seed" and have enough faith for God to hear and answer their prayers. For this reason, the prosperity gospel is gaining attraction among Christians in different churches, particularly charismatic movements.⁷⁹ To have enough faith is to have the means to move God into a blessing in the way we perceive best. It is based on the thinking that God's blessings are not bestowed on us by His grace; instead, they are obtained by doing the right things. This false view of blessing justifies one's expectations of no pain but all joy and happiness in this life. However, the proper view of God's blessings is that which seeks to enjoy God's providence and presence, whether in pain or pleasure.

The Bible does not directly answer whether a believer can suffer a curse. However, Satan will try anything possible to destroy the lives of God's people, but God will not allow it. Therefore, believers should be strong and put on the full armor of God (Eph 6:10–13). In addition, they are to be vigilant and beware of the "roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8). Still, they must resist the devil (1 Pet 5:9) and live in the assurance that they are safe under God (John 10:28; 1 Pet 1:5; Rev 3:5).

There is no better way to conclude this section than by viewing the whole subject of curses and blessings through Mary J. Evans's words when she wrote:

⁷⁸ Chaffart, Rob. *How Do you Break Generational Curses?* 2016, 5.

http://www.answers2prayer.org/bible_questions/Answers/deliverance/generational.html (accessed November 16th 2022).

⁷⁹ Donkor, Kwabena. *Curses in African Religious Thought and Contemporary Christian Practice: A Biblical Perspective*, 104.

NT teaching echoes the OT view of blessing and cursing as relational. The ultimate and only important blessing is that of belonging to God, and being part of his family. The only real curse is being out of relationship with God, outside of the community of blessing. In temporal contexts, both blessings and curses can be described in material terms, but their material dimension is secondary. Although bad things can and do happen to those who belong to the kingdom, those who are part of God's people cannot be under the curse; rather, they are blessed.⁸⁰

Although the content of these curses may vary because of different views by scholars, the purpose of curses seems to be remarkably consistent: enforcement of the law, harassment of enemies, moral teaching, protection of sacred places or objects, and so forth.⁸¹ Therefore, as blessings are factual, so to curses. However, unfortunately, some people, families, and lands are suffering under a curse. It ranges from curses due to disobedience to God and parents, shedding of blood, injustices, violation of covenants, idol worship, and evil association. But a child of God need not fear so long as one remains in the Lord!

Towards a Renewed Mind Among Congregants

The church in Africa has a huge responsibility to educate the congregation on all Christian doctrines to attain maturity. In Romans 12:2, Paul calls on believers to a process of mind renewal and not conforming to the pattern of this world. For African Christians to fully attain a transformed mindset, pastors need to faithfully present the gospel so that believers can understand the mystery and identify with it without distorting the intended meaning. This can be achieved by contextualization.

Contextualizing the Message of the Gospel

The church in Africa needs to contextualize the Christian message so that it becomes truly rooted in the life of the recipients. Tienou suggests that “the heart of the encounter of the Good News with our context is Christology; the significance of our faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for our existence in the world.”⁸² The gospel in its content is unchanging, but the manner of expression and communication of this gospel varies. Today, there is a cry for authentic African Christianity, which is truly rooted in the lives

⁸⁰ Evans, Mary J. Blessing/Curse. In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, edited by T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 401.

⁸¹ Donkor, Kwabena. *Curses in African Religious Thought and Contemporary Christian Practice*, 94.

⁸² Tiénou, T. ‘Indigenous Africa Christian Theologies: The Uphill Road,’ *International Bulletin Missionary Research* 14, 2 (1990): 75.

of the indigenous people. The gospel must be communicated in culturally relevant ways that people can understand. In the same vein, Kraft comments that the gospel must come to the people by clothing the biblical message in African culture and life-ways.⁸³ For this to happen, we need to evaluate and understand every culture in the light of God's Word. Where truth is found, we must preserve it; where errors exist, we must expose them by the standards of Scripture, not human culture.

The teachings of Scripture should be applied and related to the particular cultural context in which the African church finds itself. Therefore, Gehman advises that Africans must take the unchanging truth of Scripture and apply it to their particular needs and, in this sense, develop an "African Christian Theology."⁸⁴

When Christian preachers and teachers introduce the power of the blood of Christ; the power of the Holy Spirit; the power of God; and the power of prayer in the name of Jesus, how are these powers understood by a man who just abandoned traditional belief? The Bible should address the traditional theology of power and forces. When a belief in the effectiveness of mystical and mysterious powers and forces is condemned as works of Satan, that new convert from a traditional background needs to know why such things are demonic, yet they seem to work. A mere reference to a Bible verse may not be enough to dissuade and convince him to do and believe otherwise. Kim poses a challenge to the Christian scholars of the Bible to consider "complex elements of culture in understanding Bible passages, and also to develop tools that would help missionaries dealing with cross-cultural work in Bible translation, contextualization and more."⁸⁵ The Bible and the Gospel of Christ must address these traditional religious core values and their dominant influence upon man in traditional Africa. The formulation of biblical and Christian theology must address the traditional theology of mystical and impersonal powers because they subject people to fear.

The theological approach must go beyond matching biblical texts with specific traditional beliefs to addressing the beliefs' theological, philosophical, moral, and ethical bases and foundations. We must lay the axe at the root. Religious beliefs, feelings,

⁸³ Kraft, Charles H. *Anthropology for Christian Witness*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 113.

⁸⁴ Gehman Richard J. *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*. (Oasis International, 2016), 54. See also Mugambi, J.N.K. *Christianity and African Culture*. Nairobi: Acton, 2002, 89

⁸⁵ Kim, Caleb C.S. *Cultural Anthropology: From a Christian Perspective*. (Eldoret: Utafiti Foundation, 2019), 19.

practices, and behavior have roots and bases. The African Christian needs more than just a Bible verse; he needs a worldview transformation. They need to know why they should believe differently. The “why” is contained within the biblical and Christian foundations. A biblical exegesis as foundational for methodology and approach in African theology cannot be overemphasized. According to Nkansah-Obrempong, for African theology to yield any lasting fruit for the community of faith, there is the need to “make full use of biblical scholarship- sound biblical exegesis and sound cultural exegesis of the contemporary culture in constructing a relevant theology and a theology that will not be sterile and bankrupt.”⁸⁶ He insists that African theology needs to consider the teachings of the wider Christian community on how we respond to a natural disaster, leadership, raising their children, and hurtful words and comments.⁸⁷ God’s Word must be the guide for all of life. Jesse Mugambi adds that someone with a biblical worldview will respond to natural events through the lens of Scripture. While others may have their worldview shaken after a disaster, a Christian will respond with trust in God’s wisdom.⁸⁸ A biblical/Christian worldview is based on God’s unchanging Word. Since God is the Creator of everything in heaven and earth, He is the standard for truth.⁸⁹

In summary, Christians belong to God, who is much more powerful than Satan, and are safe with Him. Curses will not be able to affect their salvation in Jesus Christ. At the same time, they need to seek their strength continually in the Lord and be on their guard so they can stand against the schemes of the devil. When people try to survive in their own strength away from the Lord’s power, they become vulnerable. Therefore, the church must continue to encourage believers to stay close to God, nurture their relationship with Him, and deny Satan an opportunity to take away God’s blessings promised to believers.

⁸⁶ Nkansah-Obrempong, J., “The Contemporary Theological Situation in Africa: An Overview,’ *Evangelical Review of Theology* 31, (2007): 143.

⁸⁷ Nkansah-Obrempong, J., 2010, 'Evangelical Theology in Africa: Ways, Perspectives, and Dilemmas', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 34(4), 293

⁸⁸ Mugambi J.N. K. *Christianity and African Culture*, 2002, 67.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

Conclusion

African traditional religion still has much influence on African Christianity. Sadly, some Christians are ignorant of the biblical understanding of blessing and curse. In traditional African societies, curses were associated with struggles in life. On the one hand, problems such as suffering, poverty, oppression, injustice, sickness, barrenness, and death can be traced back to sin, evil, and spiritual powers. On the other hand, blessings were deemed to bring material possession, wellness, and prosperity without any natural disasters.

In the Bible, suffering is not necessarily caused by a curse or sin. There are times the righteous suffer for reasons unknown to the human mind; in such cases, believers should trust in God. The blessings of God are not only measured in those things which are good and desirable, but they are both physical and spiritual. God's blessings are the fulfillment of His promise and the conclusion of a process that includes suffering and sorrow. The righteous suffer because they are in the fallen world but not cursed. God's curse is the process of bringing about divine punishment to men of disobedience. God blesses men out of His grace and curses out of His holiness. His glory is revealed in His blessings and cursing (Exodus 34:5–7).

To help believers experience the biblical *shalom*, African theologians and pastors need to contextualize the gospel, which would result in the inculturation and development of a biblical worldview. This will help transform many Christians today who hold to the same basic mistakes held by the ancient Christians in the days of Christ Jesus, who thought of blessings in material terms. Such believers, even today, believe that since Christ has come, every promise in the Bible is theirs if they believe and pray. This is similar thinking of Job's friend, who equated Job's suffering with sin and saw it as God's judgment. We would do well to understand the blessings of God as defined in Scripture. Blessings are both temporal and eternal. Temporal blessings are enjoyed and experienced by both sinners and believers. Eternal blessing is experienced by those who have been transformed into the image of Christ and continue to live in union with God.

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