

## A Theological Reflection on Mbiti's Conception of Salvation in African Christianity.

By Adewale J. Adelokun

### Abstract

In his book titled *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, John Mbiti shares his beliefs about theological issues such as faith, prayer and salvation and how they are understood in African Christianity. He is able to prove that Africans have internalized Christian beliefs to the extent that Christianity is no more regarded as a foreign religion but a traditional religion. He opines that African traditional religion contributed to the spread of Christian beliefs in Africa. This paper attempts to reappraise his views on salvation from a theological point of view. The paper concludes that African Christians' understanding of salvation as total deliverance, not from sin alone, but from all misfortunes, is informed by the untoward socio-economic situation in the continent. The methodology adopted is intercultural hermeneutics.

### Introduction

John S. Mbiti is one of the doyens of Christian theology in Africa. His immense contributions to the formation of academic African theology and philosophy cannot be underestimated.<sup>1</sup> The interest of this paper is in his theological reflections on salvation in African Christianity as presented in one of his books on theology in Africa.<sup>2</sup> Most of what he writes on this subject is discussed by Kenneth Enang in his book on the understanding of salvation among the Annang people of southern Nigeria.<sup>3</sup>

Salvation is an indispensable element in all religions. It can be defined as "the deliverance of humankind by religious means from sin or evil, the restoration of human beings to their true state, and the attainment of eternal blessedness."<sup>4</sup> It is the ultimate concern of all religions because, as the definition implies, all religions aim at restoring human beings to their true state. All religions also have a belief that people must be saved from something: it can be salvation from sin, hell, dangers, poverty and anything that is unpalatable within life. The pages of the scriptures of religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam are full of messages on salvation. In fact, the thrust of their messages is salvation

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<sup>1</sup> His book, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980), is a small compendium on the meaning of life in traditional and modern African society.

<sup>2</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 134-175.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Enang, *Salvation in a Nigerian Background: Its Concepts and Articulation in the Annang Independent Churches*, (Berlin: Verlag von Reimer, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Goring, ed. "Salvation" in *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions*, (Herefordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1995), 455.

per se. For example, the message of the Bible is that “God actually has in concrete historical fact saved his people from destruction; and it proclaims that the historical salvation thus attested is but the foreshadowing or “type” of the salvation that is to come.”<sup>5</sup> Although salvation is a common feature in all religions, its meaning is different from one religion to another and from one people to another. This paper is of the view that the situation in which humans find themselves will determine their need for and understanding of salvation. The paper adopts intercultural hermeneutics, a methodology in theological studies, which is used to facilitate interpretation and the appropriation of the meaning of salvation in Christian theology into African culture.<sup>6</sup>

### **Biblical Concept of Salvation**

Salvation is a common theme in the Hebrew Bible. Etymologically, the principal Hebrew term translated as ‘salvation’ is *yash’*. *Yash’* and its cognates basically mean “to be wide,” “roomy.”<sup>7</sup> It also means deliverance from factors which constrain and confine. It is used in the Old Testament (OT) to refer to deliverance from disease, trouble and enemies. Another important word that portrays vividly the idea of salvation in the OT is *ga’al* which means ‘to redeem.’ Redemption is conceived as deliverance from adversity, oppression, death, and captivity.<sup>8</sup> The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, used *soteria* for salvation. In classical Greek *soteria* means ‘deliverance’ or ‘preservation’. It can be used for a man’s safe return to his own home or his own country after an absence and a journey. It can also mean a ‘guarantee of safety’ or a ‘security against danger.’<sup>9</sup> The New Testament (NT) writers incorporated both the word and its meanings in the OT into their writings. The verb *sozein* in the NT means both to save a man in the eternal sense, and to heal a man in the physical sense.<sup>10</sup> The verb *sozo* (I save) from which *sozein* (to save) is derived has three meanings in the NT. First, it means to rescue someone or something from danger and to restore the person or the thing to a former state of safety and well being. Second, in a therapeutic sense, it means to cause someone to become well again after having been sick. The third meaning which is the most popular is to cause someone to experience divine

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Richardson, “Salvation” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick, vol 4, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 168.

<sup>6</sup> See Ukachukwu C. Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003), 32-33.

<sup>7</sup> C.M. Horne, “Salvation” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), 221.

<sup>8</sup> (Horne, “Salvation”, 1980, 222).

<sup>9</sup> (Horne, “Salvation”, 1980, 222).

<sup>10</sup> William Barclay, *New Testament Word*, (London: SCM, 1964), 270.

salvation.<sup>11</sup> This meaning has been over-emphasized to the neglect of the other two meanings.

Barclay summarizes the distinctive and characteristic NT usages of *soteria* and *sozein* as follows: first, *soteria* is the aim of God and the purpose of Jesus Christ. God's intention from the beginning was to save men and it is always his will to save men. When Jesus Christ came his intention was to save sinners. Second, *soteria* may be refused by humans since God will not force anybody to come to salvation. Humans can neglect it. In addition, the place of Jesus in God's *soteria* is central. Without him and his work, *soteria* is not possible. In no one else is *soteria*, and there is no other name in heaven or earth by which humans may be saved. Yet, he needs his human agents to achieve his purpose of saving the world. In other words, believers have a role to play in saving the sinners.<sup>12</sup>

Why does man need salvation? Man needs salvation because of sin. When God created "man" he entered into a covenant with "him" in which obedience was required from the man. Obedience would lead to eternal life in communion with God, while disobedience would bring death and slavery to Satan. Man lost his communion with God when he disobeyed him (Genesis 3). Man also needs salvation because of his guilt which came as a result of his sin against God. Lastly, man needs salvation because of his estrangement. Due to his sin man's predicament may be described as one in which he finds himself a victim of anxiety, dread, despair, frustration, alienation, absurdity, meaninglessness and estrangement.<sup>13</sup>

The Salvation in the NT, according to Barclay, is 'total salvation'. It saves a man, body and soul. *Soteria* is salvation from 'physical illness' (Mat. 9:21; Luke 8:36, in both of which cases the verb is *sozein*). Jesus was concerned with men's bodies as well as with men's souls. However, Foerster and Fohrer have a different opinion. They are of the view that the NT *soteria* does not refer to earthly relationships. They write:

its contents, is not, as in the Greek understanding, well-being, health of body and soul. Nor is it the earthly liberation of the people of God from the heathen yoke, as in Judaism... It denotes neither healing in a religious sense, nor life,

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<sup>11</sup> I.H. Marshall, "Salvation" in *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Daniel G. Reid, (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 998.

<sup>12</sup> (Barclay, 1964, 270-272).

<sup>13</sup> (Barclay, 1964, 271)

nor liberation from satanic or demonic power. It has to do solely with man's relationship to God.<sup>14</sup>

By saying this, they clearly capture the general understanding of salvation in the Western world. Barclay notices that most Christians in the Western world no longer believe in salvation as wholeness when he says that it is significant that the Church rediscover the biblical meaning of salvation as a whole instead of the notion that salvation only affects the soul of man and not the body. Foerster and Fohrer, like many other scholars, do not see Jesus as the savior of the body and soul. Rather, Jesus is a restorer of the broken relationship between God and man; his work of atonement should be regarded as salvation from sin only and not from any other danger. In other words, "in Western traditions, both Catholic and Protestant, the main emphasis has been on overcoming the alienation created between God and humankind by sin."<sup>15</sup> Salvation, to the Western traditions, does not encompass everything that *soteria* means from the OT point of view. It is "the rescue of fallen man through Christ from all that would ruin his soul in this life and in the life to come."<sup>16</sup> This is so because their interpretation of the NT does not take the progressive revelation of the NT theology from the OT into consideration.

#### **A Reflection on Mbiti's Concept of Salvation in African Christianity**

Mbiti's conception of salvation in African Christianity is that salvation is wholeness. Man is created as a physical and spiritual being. He needs to be saved both physically and spiritually. He notes that "The presentation of salvation in the hands of overseas missionaries has not always struck this balance, and in many places it has stressed the spiritual dimension to the neglect of the physical."<sup>17</sup> As noted earlier, Mbiti makes use of Kenneth Enang's book on understanding of salvation in the Annang Independent Churches. He uses the Annang's concept of salvation as a case study of the understanding of salvation among African Christians. An excerpt copied by Mbiti from Enang's book reads thus:

Perhaps more than elsewhere, the sharpest contrast to our form of Christianity is perceived in the liturgical life of the independents. Our liturgy in the mission churches is Western, cool and intellectual. There is no doubt that this appeals to the soul. But what about the body?... The independents have come to terms with this need.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Werner Foerster, Georg Fohrer, "Sozo, Soteria, Soter, Soterios" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, Vol. VII, (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 1002.

<sup>15</sup> (Rosemary Goring, 1995, 455)

<sup>16</sup> (Horne, 1980, 222).

<sup>17</sup> (Mbiti, 1986, 159).

<sup>18</sup> (Mbiti, 1986, 154).

The point being made here is that that Western idea of salvation only addresses the soul and that some Africans, especially those who attend the mainline churches, hold the Western belief on salvation. Another cogent point he makes is that the independent churches in Annang hold salvation to be total, complete and all inclusive.<sup>19</sup> African Christians believe that if Jesus is the Savior he must be able to save both the soul and the body. Mbiti regards this belief as biblical. He writes that

The biblical message of salvation has landed on fertile soil in African societies. The biblical record is so broad that it easily encompasses the African world....when an African opens the Bible, he finds something which speaks directly to him. This is particularly so in the case of the biblical portrait of salvation which embraces several meanings that are readily applicable to the African world.<sup>20</sup>

He further asserts:

...certain varieties of missionaries from Europe and America have proclaimed a restrictive understanding of salvation from sin and largely for the soul. But with the reading of the Bible, African Christians have increasingly broadened their interpretation and application of biblical salvation beyond the question of sin and soul however important this is.<sup>21</sup>

Mbiti makes it clear here that Africans discovered for themselves from the Bible the true meaning of salvation which their white missionaries never told them. He is silent, however, on the reason why the missionaries preached a salvation which was not all inclusive. One can guess that the missionaries were so influenced by modernity and civilization to the extent that they did not see any reason for preaching deliverance from all evils. The missionaries built hospitals instead of preaching deliverance from sickness; they built schools so that the darkened minds of the Africans would be enlightened and would be freed from beliefs in witchcraft and magic.<sup>22</sup> They did not have problems like the ones Africans encountered every day. Hence, there was no need of preaching deliverance from the power of darkness as understood by Africans.

Mbiti is of the opinion that two worlds informed African Christians' understanding of salvation – the African world and the biblical world. Prior to the emergence of Christianity in Africa, the African world was full of dangers and threats to life. Life was seen as a struggle in the face of threats which were both physical and spiritual in nature. African Traditional

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<sup>19</sup> (Mbiti, 1986, 159).

<sup>20</sup> (Mbiti, 1986, 159).

<sup>21</sup> (Mbiti, 1986, 159).

<sup>22</sup> For further reading on the missionary activities see E.A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria (1842-1914): A Political and Social Analysis*, (London: Longman, 1966).

Religion (ATR) was part of this world. However, he is silent on how ATR was part of the dangers and threats to life Africans suffered. In traditional African society, there was widespread belief in witchcraft and sorcery. The calamities in the society and a great number of infant mortality were arrogated to either the witches or the angry gods who needed to be pacified. A vivid example of belief in witchcraft is given by Dzugba thus:

When a person died, in pre-colonial Tiv society, and the council of elders could not know the cause, the council of elders occasionally cut the person's chest open and inspected the heart, the liver and the lungs. If one of these organs was abnormal by being swollen or otherwise, the council of elders concluded that he had got indebted to other persons who had *tsav* in their chests and because he could not or refused to pay back debts, they had no other option, but to kill him to share his meat among them to settle the debt....A man who has *tsav* in his chest is known as *ormbatsan* which means "a man who has *tsav*." A woman who has *tsav* in her chest is called *Kwasembatsan* ("a woman who has *tsav*").

In English, they are known as a wizard and a witch respectively.<sup>23</sup>

More explanation on the belief in witchcraft and sorcery can be seen in the works of ATR scholars such as Bolaji Idowu,<sup>24</sup> Awolalu,<sup>25</sup> and Adegbola.<sup>26</sup> Witches and wizards were parts of the world Mbiti describes. If Christianity will make sense and have impact, it must enter the African world-view. Mbiti opines further

This biblical salvation comes where people are, and they open the doors of their world to it. It is inevitable; therefore, that this traditional background colors the way salvation is interpreted and applied.<sup>27</sup>

The impression given here by Mbiti is too negative even though one cannot deny the existence of evil in traditional African society. The picture of Africa he paints here is that of hopelessness. It is to be noted, however, that Africans enjoyed themselves even with various problems that bedeviled them because they had solutions to every problem that arose against them. In other words, they had the concept of salvation in Africa before the arrival of Christianity and Islam. For example, the Yoruba word for salvation is *igbala*. The word was neither coined by the white missionaries who came to evangelize in Yorubaland nor borrowed from any language. It is a pure Yoruba word which implies that the concept of salvation is not alien to the Yoruba.

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<sup>23</sup> Akpenpuun Dzugba, "A Theological Reflection on Tiv Religion", *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, xxxvii, 2005, 88.

<sup>24</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, (Ibadan: Fountain Publications, 1999), 175-179.

<sup>25</sup> J. Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, (Essex: Longman, 1981), 79-89.

<sup>26</sup> E.A. Ade. Adegbola, *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, (Ibadan: Sefer, 1998), 317.

<sup>27</sup> (Mbiti, 1986, 156).

The second world, which is the biblical world, is full of stories of people who struggled with one problem or the other. A good example of such problems is the situation in Palestine during the time Jesus announced his program of deliverance in Luke 4:18. Writing on the situation in Palestine at the time of Jesus Christ, Abogunrin explains that

Palestine at the time Jesus was born between 6-4 B.C. was undergoing the pains of Herod the Great's thirty years rule. He was called Herod the Great because of his personal abilities and the success of his political policies. Though great, he was also a tyrant. Herod, like several African leaders, had embarked on massive spending both at home and abroad. Herod financed his ambitious building projects which were of no benefits to the common people through heavy taxation. Ruthless means were employed to collect the various taxes. The exorbitant taxes paid, further impoverished the majority of the citizens who were already very poor.<sup>28</sup>

It was in this situation that Jesus proclaimed his message of salvation for all. He was seen as the friend of sinners and the outcasts in the society. He did not only restore the broken relationships between man and God, he also ministered to their physical needs by healing them, saving them from perils, providing food for them and teaching them how they could live together in their communities. This shows that the biblical world was not different from the African world today. Thus, it is right to say that the problems described in the NT are both physical and spiritual. Mbiti reiterates this point further thus:

The biblical presentation of salvation is cast against the background of this struggle. We cannot isolate one item alone and restrict the application of salvation only to that. Salvation is a very wide and open concept in the bible. So African Christians see the concept of salvation against this broad biblical background, and try to pursue their understanding and application of salvation in the light of biblical record.... The message of salvation which is applicable in the Bible must also inevitably find ready application among African peoples, since they face similar threats to their life.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, Mbiti notes that salvation is proclaimed in the name of Jesus. Jesus is seen as the savior who can save one from all dangers. Some Christians put great emphasis on the physical healings of Jesus to show that he is a savior indeed. Another important point he enumerates is the geography of salvation. There are certain places African Christians designate as sacred places where people can run to for salvation. It can be the village of the founder of a church or a church location.<sup>30</sup> Another important characteristic of the

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<sup>28</sup> S. Oyin Abogunrin, "Re-branding Nigeria from Biblical-theological Perspective," (a paper presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Biannual Conference of the Western Zone of Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), Igbaja, March 13-15, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> (Mbiti, 1986, 157).

<sup>30</sup> (Mbiti, 1986, 169).

understanding of salvation among African Christians is the ritualization of their salvation experience. Mbiti notes that “this gives them the opportunity for pouring out their tears and concerns as they struggle to maintain salvation life.”<sup>31</sup>

Looking closely at what is happening in Africa today there are other reasons which are responsible for the understanding of salvation as wholeness among African Christians, which Mbiti does not mention. It is worth noting that African Christians understand salvation as wholeness because they understand life itself as wholeness.<sup>32</sup> Life is not departmentalized and all aspects of life are influenced by religion. No aspect of life can be separated from religion. Hence it will be very strange for an African to understand salvation as deliverance of the soul alone. Moreover, socio-economic and political crises have become the banes of most African countries. This is made worse by insecurity and the high rate of poverty. African countries top the list of the poor nations in the world.<sup>33</sup> This has caused many people to find solace in religion and to be more religious than ever before. It has led to proliferation of Prayer Mountains and churches that offer solutions to all problems. Religious programs on the various media houses in the country are embellished with messages on deliverance from problems. Hardly will one hear anything about salvation from sin or salvation of the soul; the overwhelming emphasis now is on salvation or deliverance from problems such as financial problems, joblessness, marital problem, barrenness, spiritual attacks, deliverance from powers of darkness, just to mention a few. Little or no emphasis is laid on salvation of the soul from sin. This is more rampant among the *Aladura*, Pentecostal and Charismatic movements than in the mainline Protestant churches. Ojo aptly describes the practice in the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches by saying that “their sermons centering on healing and miracles, breakthrough programs, Holy Ghost Night services, and advertisements of conventions and special programs provide utopian escape from deteriorating socio-economic and political conditions.”<sup>34</sup>

This does not mean that African Christians, especially, the members of *Aladura*, Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, do not understand salvation like their counterparts

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<sup>31</sup> (Mbiti, 1986, 171)

<sup>32</sup> Manas Buthelezi, “Salvation as Wholeness” in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt, (London: SPCK 1997), 85.

<sup>33</sup> “Hunger and World Poverty” curled from <http://www.poverty.com> accessed on 30/03/09.

<sup>34</sup> Matthews A. Ojo, *Of Saints and Sinners: Pentecostalism and the Paradox of Social Transformation in Modern Nigeria*, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife Inaugural Lecture Series 227, (Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 2010), 3.



in the Western world. Various socioeconomic and political problems have made them to lay more emphasis on one aspect of salvation than others. In addition to the belief that Jesus can save people from their sins, African Christians see Jesus' healing and other miracles as part of his salvation works. This makes the Christian message to be complete and relevant to Africans. It is also to be noted at this juncture that the message of salvation as wholeness is not peculiar to the independent and charismatic churches alone. Realizing that there is an exodus of youths to charismatic churches, mainline Protestant churches have also adjusted their messages to address all social problems that their church members are facing.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The author is a member of one of the leading mainline denominations in Nigeria. The denomination, even at its national convention, has various messages that address the problems the delegates to the convention may be encountering – be they spiritual, social, economic, political or physical.