

CHRISTOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CHRISTOLOGY

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Abstract: In this article, the author underscores the fact that every Christological discussion must begin with the New Testament foundation and evidence about Jesus the Christ of God. Following Reginald Fuller's trajectory of thought, the author sees the Christology of the New Testament Church developing the three phases upon which three Christological paradigms can be discerned. It is from these paradigms, say the author, that 'we get the fullest pattern of Christology' and 'we are provided with the Christological foundations of the theologies of the New Testament writers'. The writer again points out that it was this same paradigm that the ontological statements of the Church Fathers followed at Nicaea and Chalcedon; and it is the same foundation that African theologians are following today in their search for who Jesus is and what He does for African. Taking the title 'Son of God' as an example, the author underlines that the African worldview and thought-forms are shedding great lights on New Testament Christological titles and concepts.

The foundations of the New Testament Christology are the foundations not only for the New Testament theologians themselves and the christological foundations of the fathers, they are also the foundations for Christology today.¹

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Introduction

Prior to the Enlightenment, theologians built their portraits of Jesus of Nazareth from all kinds of unscientific assumptions. It was during the Age of Reason that the scientific methods of the historian were brought into academic Christology. Thus, from Form Criticism and *Redaktionsgeschichte* came the recognition that in the New Testament are not just one Christology but a number of christologies evolving from competing and conjoining christological traditions, each having a different point of departure and a different emphasis. There was another recognition—that, in the New Testament times there was no such thing as “the early Church” in the singular but rather, “the early churches” in the plural, which had different backgrounds and developed different christological traditions.²

¹ Reginald R. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1965) p. 257.

² Cf. Norman Perrin, “New Beginnings in Christology: A Review Article,” *Journal of Religion*, 46 (1966), p. 491.

Veritably, the varieties of early churches and of christological traditions pose a problem. This problem becomes more complex if we consider the relationship that these different churches and christological traditions had with the actual teachings of Jesus of Nazareth; or, with what the neo-Bultmannians called Jesus' own implicit christological self-understanding.

Doubtlessly, this problem was what confronted Reginald Fuller and, in an effort to solve this, traces out what he calls "the foundations of New Testament Christology" by distinguishing three phases or strata in early Christianity and separating the traditions according to the titles and conceptions used. As the title of his much celebrated book—*The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (1965)—suggests, Fuller's main aim is not to present the Christology or christologies of the New Testament writers as to lay bare the christological foundations of their theology.³

Surveying the tools, the terms, images, concepts and patterns "which the church picked up and used for christological response," Fuller mentions "three successive environments in which the early church was operating" from which these tools were derived, namely; *Palestinian Judaism*; *Hellenistic Judaism* and *Hellenistic Gentile circles*.⁴ Fuller therefore sees the Christology of the New Testament Church evolving in three phases, upon which three different christological paradigms can be discerned.

Christological Paradigms of the New Testament

The first pattern, which evolved in the matrix of Palestinian Judaism conceived a two-foci Christology. One focus was on Jesus' early life—His historical word and work. Like the post-Bultmannians, Fuller sees in "the *kerygma* of the earliest church," the distinction between the *Proclaimer* and the *Proclaimed*; and speaks of Jesus' own self-understanding in terms of the Mosaic eschatological prophet.⁵ To Fuller, the earliest church interpreted Jesus' message and ministry in continuity with Jesus' self-understanding.⁶

The other focus was the *Parousia*—the expectation of Jesus' imminent return and exaltation in the Son of Man to consummate and "validate His own earthly word and work which were still present in the church."⁷ So in this survey of the Palestinian paradigm, "we have Jesus understanding His ministry as that of an eschatological prophet and expecting its consummation at the coming of the Son of Man; the Palestinian *kerygma* identifying Jesus as the Son of Man and interpreting His ministry in terms of *exousia*, so reaching a two-foci Christology."⁸

The second christological pattern that Fuller identified was that which developed in the Hellenistic Jewish Church. Here, there were considerable developments that brought an important shift of emphasis concerning the Lordship of Christ. Unlike in the *kerygma* of the earliest church, where the emphasis was placed on Christ's future

³ Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, pp. 16f.

⁴ Ibid. p. 16

⁵ Ibid. p. 130

⁶ See *ibid.* pp. 114f. (For example, Jesus calling God *Abba*); cf. Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press/SCM Press, 1959), pp. 275ff.

⁷ Ibid. p. 243

⁸ Norman Perrin, 'New Beginnings in Christology' p. 493. In this stratum, Fuller points out that the title 'Son of God' is used in connection with the *Parousia*. See *ibid.* pp. 187, 164-167.

Lordship at the *Parousia*, in the Hellenistic Jewish Church, the stress was more on Christ's present Lordship as He reigned in Heaven. Christ's exaltation is thus moved back from the *Parousia* to the Resurrection.⁹ Epitomizing the Hellenistic Jewish mission that also brings out the new emphasis, Fuller writes:

Its achievement was to transform the earliest Palestinian Kerygma, with its two foci of Jesus' historical ministry of *exousia* and the *parousia* as its vindication, into a proclamation orientated chiefly upon the present work of the Exalted One. To this present, exalted work the historical ministry was a preliminary stage and the *parousia* the expected consummation.¹⁰

The central title for the Exalted One in this stratum becomes *Kurios* (Lord). This stratum achieves "an adoptionist Christology in which Jesus exercises Divine Sonship at His exaltation after His resurrection."¹¹ However, the christological emphasis here is, like in the Palestinian Judaism, still "functional" with the stress on what Jesus does rather than on what He is. Thus, in these two phases, the ontic question of the divinity of the Exalted Lord has not yet been raised.¹²

The third christological pattern was that which evolved from Hellenistic Gentile environment. The christological thought of this phase came not from the Gentile converts but from the adoption of certain features of the more syncretistic types of Hellenistic Judaism in the Diaspora. With the help of these features, "it produced a threefold christological pattern of pre-existence, incarnation and exaltation to replace the twofold pattern of earthly life-exaltation."¹³ In this pattern, the *parousia* was frequently discarded and where it survived, it did so only as an appendage. Most controversial of all were the acceptance of the "divine man" epiphany Christology and the consequent evolution of "a full-blown doctrine of incarnation . . . The redeemer was a divine being who became incarnate, manifested the Deity in His flesh, and was subsequently exalted to heaven."¹⁴

Thus the Hellenistic Gentile mission evolved an incarnational Christology in which Christ was always a divine being.¹⁵ The incarnation of this three-stage

⁹ See Wayne A. Meek's review article 'New Testament Christology Evolving,' *Interpretation* 21 (1967), p. 189; cf. Perrin, "New Beginnings in Christology" p. 493.

¹⁰ Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, p. 197.

¹¹ Perrin, "New Beginnings in Christology," p. 493.

¹² Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, p. 197. This second pattern therefore has two stage Christology of earthly life and exaltation. To Fuller, in this phase, the 'Son of God' title is transferred to the exaltation instead of the *Parousia* in the early Palestinian Christianity. Secondly, in Hellenistic Jewish Christianity, there was a far-reaching christological development of 'Son of God' in application to the earthly work of Christ. Fuller explains further that this stratum did not only combine "the early Palestinian Mosaic Servant-Prophet Christology with the eschatological Son of God Christology of Psalm 27" but, it also enriched "that combination charismatic elements drawn from the Hellenistic Jewish OT divine man." (p. 196).

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 232.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 232.

¹⁵ We should therefore understand why in the early Church's efforts to solve the christological problem—how to hold both the divine and human natures together in one person, Jesus Christ—it was easier for *Docetism* that emerged among Hellenistic Christians to emphasize the divinity of Jesus to the elimination of His humanity. On the other hand, *Ebionism* that emerged among Jewish Christians also rejected the divinity of Jesus and stressed on His humanity. Both christologies were condemned by the Church and were declared heretic.

christological pattern is initially conceived as a *kenosis*, and later as *epiphany*. To Fuller, this pattern of the Gentile mission—pre-existence, agency of creation, descent in the incarnation, incarnate life as epiphany, atoning death, resurrection and exaltation, victory over the powers, continued reign in heaven until the *parousia*, final consummation at the *parousia*—represent the fullest pattern of Christology.¹⁶

It is this pattern, Fuller holds, which provided the christological foundations of the theology of the New Testament writers. He further suggests that in this pattern, there is a movement from a purely *functional* application of titles to Jesus to *ontic* affirmation about Him, and sees the justification in the further development of ontological statement in Chalcedon. In his own words:

This pattern completes the foundations of New Testament Christology. The theologians of the New Testament (Paul and the Pauline School, the Evangelists, and other sub-apostolic New Testament writings), all erect their theological superstructures upon the foundations, not indeed invariably upon the full pattern, but always upon part of it. It is this pattern which lies behind the process of christological formulation which culminates at Chalcedon¹⁷

Furthermore, Fuller argues that, of the three patterns, the earliest Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism emphasize more on functional Christology while the Gentile Mission stresses ontological Christology—thus disagreeing with Oscar Cullmann who holds that New Testament Christology is purely functional.¹⁸ To Fuller, it was the ontic language of the third pattern that patristic Christology followed.

Therefore, in their attempt to preserve and proclaim the gospel in their world, Chalcedonian and Nicene Fathers used ontological language that was intelligible then in the Graeco-Roman world. This ontological language was derived from Greek metaphysics with which the Fathers were able to explain New Testament terms and concepts such as “Pre-existence of Christ” (as ‘begotten of the Father’ or ‘*homoousios* with Him’); and the “Incarnate Christ” (as ‘One person in two natures’) etc.

For Reginald Fuller, Christology today must not merely concentrate on the earthly life and work of Jesus but must as well reflect the different phases of the New Testament paradigms. For example, the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian formula were attempts of the Church Fathers to proclaim the gospel into their own situation: For “[t]he Definition of Chalcedon was the only way in which the fifth-century fathers, in their day, and their conceptual apparatus, could have faithfully credalized the New Testament witness to Christ” and Fuller therefore calls on the Church “to proclaim the gospel *into* the contemporary situation.”¹⁹ Thus while he disagrees with H. W. Montefiore’s statement that “any attempt to formulate a Christology will properly *start* with the Chalcedonian definition,” he stresses that “such an attempt must surely start where the fathers started, namely; with the New Testament witness of Christ.”²⁰

Fuller’s project has not escaped criticisms. A limitation in his work is that he presents the development of New Testament Christology among the different circles and traditions

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 246.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 246.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 247; cf. Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, pp. 3f.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 250.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 250.

sequentially, as if they are successive in time or no parallel development was possible. This gives the wrong impression that early Christology was as logical, simple and understandable as Fuller presents it. As one critic has pointed out, "Paul who represents the Gentile Mission, gives us letters beginning about twenty years after Jesus' death; his earliest letters show a highly developed Christology, which he has had for years." He then concludes; "it is difficult to trace a step-by-step development in the church's Christology, particularly since the Hellenistic outlook already appears in the early Jerusalem Church."²¹

There is no doubt that there were "stages" in the shaping of early Christian belief, but not all were in the same stream. There might have been different traditions and environments whose developments were parallel, not sequential, from the very earliest time, and "the interactions among these circles, at various stages, will have further complicated the picture."²²

The New Testament Foundations and African Theologians

The New Testament writings are the sources that report on Jesus of Nazareth. The existential locus of these writings of the Jesus tradition in the New Testament is the Church. The gospels are the witnesses of the early Church about the man called Jesus; and although they contain historical evidence, they are not in the modern sense, historical records, but rather, testimonies of faith.

These testimonies provided for us by the New Testament writers are "christological credo" of the early Church. Walter Kasper therefore states more succinctly what is only implied in Reginald Fuller's entire project, namely; Jesus of Nazareth "is accessible for us only by way of the faith of the first Christian churches"²³ and that "the starting-point of Christology is the phenomenology of faith in Christ; faith as it is actually believed, lived, proclaimed and practiced in the Christian churches."²⁴

African Christology, like any other alternative Christology, regards the New Testament and the whole of Scripture as indispensable not merely because it talks about the truth of Christianity or, bears witness to the earliest expression of the Christian faith, but more importantly because, the primary source of our knowledge of the history of the life and death, the teachings and miracles, the pre-existence and exaltation of Jesus the Christ, which figured prominently in the triumph of the Christian movement has come to us from the evidence that the New Testament writers have given us about this Jesus.²⁵

The New Testament is the earliest witness about the man Jesus that is available to us. James Dunn argues his point very deftly when he asserts that Christology is "the most obvious and pressing test case" for the dialogue which New Testament theology provides and, for every New Testament writer, Jesus Christ clearly stands at the center of faith and thought. It is the faith focused on Jesus that from the outset has provided the main reason

²¹ See Floyd V. Filson's review article on Fuller's book in *Theology Today*, vol. 23 July, 1966, p. 316.

²² Meeks, "New Testament Christology Evolving," p.192. However, it must be pointed out that, some would argue that this should not be regarded as Fuller's weakness at all. If anything, he should rather be commended for making a very complicated subject, such as this, accessible to a wide audience.

²³ Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (London/New York: Burns & Oates/Paulist Press, 1977) p. 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 28.

²⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 186.

and inspiration for the distinctiveness of Christianity.²⁶ It is because the New Testament is the witness of the earliest experience of Jesus that it is a valuable witness to listen to and a document to study meticulously.

It is to this end that African theologians and the New Testament writers must be partners in constant dialogue if we are to tell who Jesus is for Africa today. Differently put, to be able to tell who Jesus Christ is for African people in contemporary society, theologians on the African continent are to be continuing partners in dialogue with the New Testament christological paradigms.

In their attempt to solve the christological problem or, demonstrate how unique Jesus of Nazareth was, the New Testament writers provide many titles or conceptual tools familiar to them. These titles are ascribed to Jesus in order to "express who He is and in what His work consists."²⁷ He is called "Christ," "Son of God," "Lord," "Prophet," "Saviour," "Servant of the Lord," "Son of Man" and so forth. Evidently, not one of these titles is adequate to indicate who Jesus of Nazareth is or, to explain the "infinite fullness" disclosed in Jesus. Each of these titles presents a particular dimension of the christological problem or rather, of the christological solution.²⁸

Following the pattern of the New Testament, African theologians have also used titles as well as other African concepts to respond to the christological question and by so doing, they have tried to show not only what Jesus does for the African, but also, to explicate who He is and why uniqueness is to be ascribed or attributed to Him. But perhaps the best instruction that African theologians draw from the New Testament christological paradigms is the "fluidity of Christology" that the New Testament teaches. There is no single way to respond to the christological question and therefore Africans can also evolve their own Christology or christologies.

To the African, Christ could make sense in the various cultures of Africa only to the extent that Africans use African idiom and therefore, most of the titles and concepts used in African Christology are deeply rooted in African worldview and thought-forms. The term *Christ* (*Christos* in the Greek and its Hebrew equivalent *Messiah*) from which "Christology" is derived is only a title just like *Son of God* or *Lord*. Like all other titles used by the New Testament writers, *Christos* is a human categorization by which one particular culture—be it Jewish or Hellenistic Jewish or Hellenistic Gentile tried to capture the ineffable mystery of salvation communicated in the person and teaching of Jesus.²⁹

²⁶ James D. G. Dunn and James P. Mackey, *New Testament Theology in Dialogue: Christology and Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), p. 54.

²⁷ Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, p. 6.

²⁸ Whereas Fuller discusses the New Testament christological titles from the viewpoint of the three strata he discovered in the New Testament foundations namely: Earliest Palestinian, Hellenistic Jewish, and Gentile Mission; for Cullmann, the christological designations of the New Testament fall into a phase of the Heilsgeschichte and speaks of four functions of Christ in His pre-existence (e.g. Logos, Son of God); His earthly work (Prophet, High Priest, Suffering Servant of God); His present work (Lord, Saviour) and His future or eschatological work (Messiah, Son of Man). See Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, pp. 243-249; cf. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, pp. 13ff.; 109ff; 193ff.; 247ff. Cullmann however, points out that these christological titles are related not only to one of the four different functions of Jesus Christ but two or more of them.

²⁹ Cf. Aloysius Pieris, 'Speaking of the Son of God in Non-Christian Cultures, e.g. in Asia' in E. Schillebeeckx & J-B Metz (eds), *Concilium—Jesus Son of God?* (Edinburgh/New York: T&T Clark/Seabury Press, 1982), p. 62.

Therefore, in their attempts to retell Jesus' story, African theologians also use African idioms to communicate Jesus' unique identity—idioms which come from African thought-forms. African theologians, following the foundations laid in the New Testament, educe their christologies from the depths of Africa's own cultural, religious and political experience. After all, does the notion of *foundation* not suggest or presuppose an uncompleted erecting structure? Thus the "foundations of New Testament Christology" are but partial insights into the mystery of the Incarnation. They are indeed 'foundations' to be built on. This is what African theologians are trying to do. In this endeavour, they have accepted as 'relevant' those New Testament titles (or foundations) which fit into African thought-forms and religio-cultural experience. Those that have no parallels in African history, tradition, and experience are regarded as "irrelevant" and are given little or no christological significance.³⁰

Besides, new titles and concepts that are purely and authentically African and are not found in the New Testament have been brought into Christology. Included in such titles and concepts that have been given christological importance by African theologians are; Ancestor,³¹ Brother,³² Woman,³³ and others. For our purpose, we select just one of the "relevant" New Testament titles namely, *Son of God* and show how the African worldview and thought-form can illuminate the New Testament paradigm and provide aid to understanding Jesus as the "Son of God."

'Son of God' in African Theological Reflection

The African worldview is replete with myths and, as such, much of African Christianity is mythical and much of the African Christological images also come through mythology.³⁴ For this reason, the African Christian finds no difficulty in understanding

³⁰ See John Mbiti, 'Some African concepts of Christology' in Georg F. Vicedom (ed) *Christ and the Young Churches* (London: SPCK, 1972) especially pages 58ff. Included in the "relevant" titles and concepts that Mbiti mentions are: Son of God, Lord, Saviour, Redeemer, Servant of the Lord, Mediator Christus Victor, Sacrifice and Liberator. The 'irrelevant' titles he mentions include: Son of David, Son of Man and Messiah. However, there are some African theologians who would disagree that the title *Messiah* is irrelevant since in Africa Jesus is also referred to as the 'Black Messiah' or its equivalent the 'Black Christ.' See for instance, Emilio J.M. de Carvalho, 'What Do the Africans Say That Jesus Christ is?', *African Theological Journal*, 10 (1982), pp. 18-22; cf. Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study of Black Theology and Power* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976) and his *Black and Reformed* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984) etc.

³¹ John S. Pobee, *Toward An African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979); E. Milingo, *The World in Between* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984); de Carvalho, 'What Do the Africans Say That Jesus Christ is?' pp. 22ff., G.H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985); John Kurewa, 'Who Do You Say That I am?', *Voices from the Third World*, VIII, (1985), pp. 14f.; Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993) pp. 84-86.

³² Kurewa, 'Who Do You Say That I am?', pp. 10f.; de Carvalho, 'What Do the Africans Say That Jesus Christ Is?' p. 17, etc.

³³ Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Oduyoye, 'The Christ For African Women' in Virginia Fabella and Mercy Oduyoye (eds), *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 44; Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology*, pp. 82-84.

³⁴ Cf. Kofi Appiah-Kubi, 'Jesus Christ—Some Christological Aspects From African Perspectives' in John Mbiti (ed), *African and Asian Contributions to Contemporary Theology* (Geneva: WCC, 1977) p. 55; also Kofi Appiah-Kubi, 'Who Do You Africans Say I (Jesus) am?' *Voices From The Third World*, XI (1988), p. 85.

and accepting similar mythological concepts used in the New Testament to explicate the mystery of God's salvific act communicated in the person of Jesus. A typical example is the concept of *Parthenogenesis* (or the Virgin Birth) as there are African myths that also talk about women having children without male involvement; as it is among the *Bare* of Southern Sudan. The same is equally true with the concept of "Son of God."

In African mythology, many references are made to God—who in many societies is androgynous and not exclusively male³⁵—as having a son or sons. Sometimes also the expression "children" is used in certain societies. For example, the *Bemba* of Zambia call the founder of their nation "the son of God"; and the *Dogon* of Burkina Faso also refer to an aspect of God called *Nommo* which is defined as "the son of God" who is "the appointed model of creation" and the "symbol of the ordered world."³⁶ In *Nuer* mythology, both the *Nuer* and *Dinka* of Sudan were "sons of God."³⁷ Among the *Ganda* of Uganda, there is a saying that, in the beginning, there was only God and God's two sons.

In his article in French entitled; "Approches Christologiques en Afrique," ("Christological Approaches in Africa") Paul Stadler shows how several African peoples have a tradition of a "Father-Son" relation within God such as among the *Ndebele* and the *Shona* of Zimbabwe, the *Shilluk* of Sudan, and the *Dogon* of Upper-Volta (now Burkina Faso). In his own words;

Plusieurs peuples africains, par exemple, les Ndebele et les Shona du Zimbabwe, les Shilluk du Soudan, les Dogon de la Haute-Volta connaissent une relation Père-Fils à l'intérieur de Dieu. La mythologie africaine offre bien d'autres exemples de ce genre.³⁸

Among the *Ndebele* and *Shona*, God is perceived in trinitarian terms as Father, Mother and Son.³⁹ The son of God concept is also present in African thought-forms for divine beings or spirits surrounding God or in the world. To the *Balese* of Congo for instance, God is surrounded by two spirits namely—*Mutshemi* and *Fond*. One of these is God's son and knows all the thoughts of God and decides for the good or ill of human beings in the world. The other spirit, the spirit of evil, is responsible for evil in the world.⁴⁰ Among

³⁵ For example, among my own Ga people of Ghana, God (*Nyonmo*) is either referred to as *Ataa Nyonmo* (meaning Grandfather/Father God) or *Naa Nyonmo* (meaning Grandmother/Mother God). God is also referred to as *Ataa-Naa Nyonmo* (Grandfather-Grandmother or Father-Mother God). For more on this, see, Rose Teteki Abbey, 'Rediscovering Ataa Naa Nyonmo—The Father Mother God' in *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* edited by Nyambura J. Njoroge and Musa W. Dube (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), pp. 140-157.

³⁶ See Mbiti, 'Some African Concepts of Christology' in Vicedom, *Christ and the Young Churches*, pp. 58f; cf. John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), p. 115. Another writer has shown how Dogon Creation Myth begins with 'the egg of the world' which is divided into twin placenta, each of which contains a 'pair of twin *Nommo*, direct emanations and sons.' Sally Falk Moore, 'Descent and Symbolic Filiation' in John Middleton (ed), *Myth and Cosmos: Readings in Mythology and Symbolism* (New York: Natural History Press, 1967), p. 70.

³⁷ Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, p. 99; cf. p. 116.

³⁸ Paul Stadler, 'Approches Christologiques en Afrique,' *Bulletin de Theologie Africaine*, V, (1983), p. 43.

³⁹ H. Kuper, A.J.B. Hughes and J. van Velsen, *The Shona and Ndelebe of Southern Rhodesia* (London: 1954), p. 105; cf. W.J. Van der Merwe, *The Shona Idea of God* (Fort Victoria, 1957), p. 12, cited in Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, p. 115; see also Mbiti, "Some African Concepts of Christology", p. 58.

⁴⁰ H. van Geluwe, *Les Mamvu-Mangutu et Balese-Mvuba* (Tervuren, 1957), p. 166. Cited in Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, pp. 54 & 83.

the *Ga* people of Ghana, the divine beings called *jemawoji* are referred to as “sons of God.” Modupe Oduyoye quotes Joshua Kudadjie in reference to this and writes:

The sons and daughters of *Naa Nyonmo* [God] are as *jemawoji* “the gods of the world.” They are powerful and intelligent beings that walk about the world but they have their abodes in the sea, lagoons, mountains and other natural objects. Having been delegated by *Naa Nyonmo* to be his [sic!] vice-regents, they are in active contact with the world of nature in [humans].⁴¹

In his attempt to answer who the *ben-ey ha-‘eloh-iyim* are, in his interpretation of Genesis 6, Modupe Oduyoye has cogently argued that this “refers to the same divine beings whom the Ga of Ghana know as *jemawoji* [and] whom the Akan of Ghana know as *abosom* [*abosom ye Onyame maa*, ‘the *abosom* are the children of *Onyame* (God)’. ”⁴²

The concept of divine sonship is also given to African traditional figures. First, it is given to African chiefs or kings. For instance, the *Shilluk* of Sudan hold their kingship to be divine and refer to him as “the first-born of God.”⁴³ Second, African religious or national heroes are also given the title of divine sonship. The *Sonjo* of Tanzania “believe that their national and religious hero simply appeared without mother or father, that he died, rose again, ascended to God (or the Sun) and is now identified with God.”⁴⁴ Finally, divine sonship is given to people in general so that the *Bemba*, “who think of God as the universal ‘Father’ call themselves ‘the sons of God’—a title which one hears [them] calling each other.”⁴⁵ As noted above, the *Nuer* and *Dinka* also call themselves “sons of God.” To the *Akan* of Ghana, men and women are all God’s children because God created them.⁴⁶

What does all this mean for Christology? There are significant constituents in the usage of the title ‘Son of God’ by Africans that can illuminate our understanding of Jesus. Firstly, since several African societies have a tradition of “Father-Son” (or Parent-Child) relation within God, the African worldview has prepared the Christian for this title given to Jesus. The African understanding of the concept does not merely show who the son of God is but also the functions he performs in the society. Perhaps, of all the christological paradigms that are found in the New Testament, the *Son of God Christology* is the one that can best be understood in the African context to portray who Jesus is and what He does for us. The title is used in Africa not only for divine beings, but also, for human beings. Thus it is an abiding concept that affirms the *divinity* and *humanity* of Jesus. The African concept of Son of God also answers the unity as well as the distinction within the Godhead.

⁴¹ See Modupe Oduyoye, *The Sons of the Gods and the Daughters of Men: An Afro-Asiatic Interpretation of Genesis 1-11* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984) p. 30.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 31.

⁴³ Mbiti, ‘Some African Concepts of Christology,’ p. 58; also, his *Concepts of God in Africa*, pp. 93f cf. pp. 116 and 228f.

⁴⁴ Mbiti, ‘Some African Concepts of Christology,’ p. 59; cf. Modupe Oduyoye, *The Sons of the Gods and the Daughters of Men*, p. 24 where referring to the strength and fame of Shaka, the King of the Zulu he writes: ‘The theory (the myth) of the sons of the gods and the daughters of men was offered as an explanation for the supernatural—the extraordinary—military performance of famous warriors of old . . .’.

⁴⁵ Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, p. 93.

Secondly, the New Testament testifies to the filial obedience and submission of Jesus to God whom He calls *Abba* (John 4:34; 8:29; 14:28, 31). This “son’s obedience” as related in the New Testament resonates with African traditional custom where parental authority and filial obedience are still esteemed.⁴⁷

The Son Sets Free

Africans refer to people or human beings as sons of God. Therefore what ‘son of God’ means for the African must start from and remain related to sons and daughters who are free men and women; and this is to be distinguished from being slaves and prisoners. It is a view that stands against all enslaving structures or structures of oppression in Africa.

On the basis of this sonship which the African Christian shares with Christ and other believers—whether male or female, black or white, rich or poor—there is no longer distinction between Jew and Gentile (*race*), slave and free (*class*) or male and female (*sex*); for we “are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28). Sonship with the Son is freedom in Christ—freedom from *racism*, *classism* and *sexism*, and all that tend to dehumanize the sons and daughters of God.

If this freedom in Christ includes the social sphere—which we hold it does—then, the African is unwilling to limit the existence of the new humanity and the new liberated life in the eternal Son of God to an internal religious dimension in contemporary society. In Africa today, the concept of ‘son of God’ is as politically pertinent as it is religiously relevant. To the African Christian, the divine sonship of Christ also affirms that he or she is the child of God. As the Apostle Paul writes: ‘And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also a heir, through God.’ (Galatians 4:6-7, NRSV)

Jesus’ Sonship erupts into the world of social structures and critically breaks through the oppressive status quo, thus inaugurating a new social order. For us Africans therefore, Jesus, as the Son of God means He is our “soteriological prototype”; and the title does not just mean an isolated dogmatic statement about the man called Jesus, as if the christological inquiry could be detached from contemporary context of the experience of salvation in practical terms.⁴⁸

The title ‘son of God’ cannot be separated from the existing religious, cultural, social and political situation of the African continent. It is thus not irrelevant in Africa today to use the title ‘Son of God’ Christologically; for, it has for us both religio-cultural and socio-political relevance.

By affirming and declaring Jesus as the Son of God, Africans do not merely declare Jesus to be one of us; we as well declare *parenthood* to be a divine attribute. The African at the same time also expresses from the conviction that is derived from his or her reflection on the fate of Jesus that, the African faith in Jesus’ Resurrection gives us the glorious hope for the resurrection of all humankind in the face of suffering and death. Divine love transcends destruction in mortality and human existence—the African existence—will surely attain fulfillment and true identity in belonging to God.

⁴⁷ Cf. Paul Stadler, ‘Christological Approaches in Africa,’ *Theological Digest*, 31 (1984), p. 221.

⁴⁸ Cf. Dietrich Wiederkehr, “‘Son of God’ and ‘Sons of God’: The Social Relevance of the Christological Title,” *Journal of Theology for Africa*, 19 (1979), p. 100.

In African theology therefore, the christological title *Son of God* has also a great anthropological significance. For instance, speaking on African Anthropology, Engelbert Mveng has pointed out how human responsibility before God is primarily a responsibility toward self, fellow humans and the entire cosmos. Such an anthropological conception, Mveng emphasizes, has a tremendous significance for “any theological expression of faith,” especially Christology. For Engelbert Mveng, Christology means

An attempt to express the mystery of Christ in terms of the anthropology that is part of the theologian’s own tradition. Judeo-Hellenistic tradition, for example, describes the mystery of the incarnation in terms of the mystery of the *Word-made-flesh*. The vocabulary used stems from that tradition. African tradition prefers to talk about the mystery of the *Son of God* becoming the *Son of Man*. It is a mystery of “humanization” or “humanification,” if you will.⁴⁹

Mveng further underscores the fact that since real human beings are a network of interpersonal and cosmic relationships, the incarnation enables Christ to assume all of humanity and cosmos. Christ therefore realizes “a *new creation* that contains a new humanity, a new heaven, and a new earth. That is why a *sacrament* is the cosmic manifestation of the incarnation.” For it is the Son of God “turned into *water* of Baptism, the *bread and wine* of the Eucharist, the *anointing* of the consecrates and the *word, gestures, and rites* that sanctify.”⁵⁰ It is this Son of God who became the Son of Man that African theology identifies as the One who will liberate Africa from every form of oppression, dehumanization or anthropological poverty.

Conclusion

New Testament Christological inquiries have bequeathed us with Christological fluidity. The New Testament times did not only present us with plurality of churches but also plurality of Christological paradigms. From these different paradigms—coming from different ecclesial and cultural backgrounds—we get the fullest pattern of Christology as we are provided with the Christological foundations of the theologies of the New Testament writers. These writers, coming from the various ecclesial and cultural environments, attempted to present and to proclaim the salvation message of Jesus the Christ in the clearest and most coherent language available that would make sense and be intelligible in their respective ecclesio-cultural settings.

The Christological foundations of these Biblical writers ascribe titles to Jesus expressing who He was and what He did; thus affirming not just *functional* Christology but also *ontological* Christology. All subsequent Christological discussions are to follow these biblical patterns. For example, the *ontic* affirmation about Jesus by these New Testament theologians was the pattern followed by the ontological statements of the early Fathers in both Nicaea and Chalcedon.

Today, in their efforts to tell who Jesus *is* and what He *does* among their own impoverished and denigrated people, African Christians have also become continuing

⁴⁹ Engelbert Mveng, ‘Black African Art as Cosmic Liturgy and Religious Language’ in Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (eds), *African Theology En Route* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 140.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 140.

partners in dialogue with these New Testament Christological paradigms. Following the foundations laid by New Testament theologians, African Christian theologians are educating their Christologies from the riches of African soil and religio-cultural experience. These African Christologies, deeply rooted in African worldview and thought-forms, are illuminating New Testament Christological titles and concepts rendering better understanding. For instance, taking the title 'Son of God' which also describes the Pre-existence function of Christ, we have demonstrated how several African societies have traditions of "Father-Son" (or "Parent-Child") relations within God (the Supreme Being). The African worldview has therefore prepared the African Christian for better understanding of the 'Son of God Christology.' Thus, for the African, the title *Son of God* ascribed to Jesus is not just a strange and abstract theological *theorem*; neither is it a sheer empty biblical *axiom* nor a theological *chorus* to be repeated over and over again. It is, rather, an existential reality with a strong soteriological motif. The African Christological inquiry—following the foundation laid by the New Testament—is then not detached from our contemporary existential quest for salvation and liberation from every structure of oppression that promotes anthropological poverty, disease, death and decay.