

## A SQUARE PEG IN A ROUND HOLE?

### QUESTIONING THE USE OF THE CONCEPT OF TIME IN TEACHING THE OLD TESTAMENT IN AFRICA

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#### Abstract

*A linear concept of time forms the basis of most of our use of the first testament, both scholarly and in faith communities. The African concept of time, however, differs markedly from the conventional Western linear concept. The Biblical concept of time stands somewhere in between. This article explores these concepts of time and points out some problems which are caused by an unwitting use of a linear time concept in communicating the Bible in Africa. Apart from seeking to raise consciousness with Biblical scholarship for this issue, it seeks to propose practical ways of bridging the gap.*

**Keywords:** African concept of time, Biblical concept of time, Western concept of time

#### The Conception of Time in the Old Testament

The Western world, and particularly Western scholarship thinks of time in linear terms. The linear concept of time forms a maxim of all critical Old Testament scholarship. Apart from the way Israelite history is presented; it forms the basis of source, tradition and social criticism in particular. Gerhard von Rad pointed out that the Western abstract concept of time was foreign to Hebrew thought (1975:99-100, see his note 1). To the Hebrews time was constituted by (meaningful) events and they thus saw life as a series of "times". Apart from events in personal life, particularly festivals constituted such events, it is "time". For the ordinary Israelite "time" was therefore "cyclic", very much similar to the Canaanite who's religion was bound up with the cycles of nature. Mathys concludes that a study of both Hebrew time-terminology and tempus gives no basis to an idea that Hebrew thought on time was unique. This he says over against Th Boman, J Petersen and Von Rad's views on the uniqueness of Hebrew thought over against its neighbours (also Bosman 2001:109). According to him, Wolff's suggestion that, according to Hebrew thought "bewegt sich der Mensch durch die Zeiten wie ein Ruderer, der sich rüchwärts in die Zukunft bewegt" helps us to appreciate Hebrew time concepts (2004:520-521).

Mathys (2004:521), however, distinguishes this concept of time as it was experienced and spoken of by ordinary Israelites, from what he calls "theological" speech in the Old Testament. According to him, the Hebrew Bible presents a different picture at a theological level: God is confessed as the God of time(s) (history), He is the Creator of time. The Pentateuch and the historical books present Israel's traditions in a chronological order, in historical epochs. A keen awareness of chronology, or at least of the succession of generations by using explicit ages is expressed in the Priestly genealogy in Genesis 5. The Deuteronomist also seeks to create an understanding of historical distance by dating the building of the temple 480 years after the Exodus (1 Kings 6:1). The performances of the

prophets are explicitly linked to the historical realities of their day and are 'dated' according to the rulers of their day. In the apocalyptic visions of Daniel 2 and 7, the experience of God's people is pictured explicitly in terms of successive epochs (Mathys 2004:521-522, also Bosman 2001:106-108).

According to Von Rad the change in Hebrew thought occurred when the archaic agricultural festivals became associated with decisive historical events in the life of the people of Israel, events which were, in faith, viewed as acts of their covenant God (1975:102-109). He writes: "Israel has in this way broken through to the concept of a linear historical span ... by gradually building up the time-span through the summation of the various divine acts as they were remembered in various places" (1975:106). Mathys concludes that "Das Alte Testament als *Buch* ist stark geschichts- und zeitlastig", and that, he says, is Von Rad's point (2004:522, his italics).

### **The Development of Chronological Thought**

Chronological thought developed early in the "Hochkulturen des Alten Orients" (Golzio 2004:584). Judging from cultures where these developments occurred, it seems to co-exist with the art of writing, thus with the ability of keeping record of past events in some way or another. In Egypt recording of dates in terms of particular dynasties occurred before the middle of the third millennium. Though later, in Mesopotamia, chronological thought around the second millennium seems to have been used in the political sphere (Golzio 2004:584-585), while in cultic sphere time was perceived as cyclical (Von Rad 1975:111).

A further development in chronological thought occurred in Greece when years were counted, starting from a particular fixed point in history, namely the year of the first Olympic Games<sup>1</sup>. In Jewish circles precise dating, taking the creation of the world as starting point, is found around the second to third century CE. Although the actual method of calculation is not quite clear, the precise date of creation was dated on the 6/7th of October of 3761 BCE (Golzio 2004:587).

Developments of the Babylonian month calendar via Persia and Greece, became operative in the Roman Empire and these form the basis for the way in which the Western world calculates time. The so-called Julian calendar was instituted by Julius Caesar in the year 46 BCE. The Christian manner of calculating time in terms of the birth of Christ is attributed to Dionisius Exiguus. On instruction of Pope John 1, around the year 532 CE, he made calculations to fix the year of Christ's birth (*ab incarnatione Domini nostri Iesu Christi*) (Golzio 2004:586-587). Although this was later found to be erroneous, through Christian missions, coupled with imperialism, this manner of calculating time and of dating has become almost global.

Early Christianity seemingly did not find it necessary to make the birth, or death, of Jesus into a turning point in history. It simply expressed the Christ events in terms of the Roman Caesars of the time (Luke 2:1, 3:1). Very early the Christ event was already regarded as the final and turning point in God's dealings with humankind, as it is expressed in the Israelite view of history and revelation within the first testament. Luke, in his genealogy of Jesus (Luke 3:23-38), explicitly links the Christ event through successive generations to creation. But instead of being interested in precise dating, as in Jewish circles (Glessmer 2004:602), he uses the typically Jewish numerical structuring of

<sup>1</sup> It was the year 776 BCE, and this manner of dating was continued until after the Games were discontinued, up until the Byzantine period. A similar dating system was later developed, also in the Roman Republic (Golzio 2004:585).

generations (11 times 7 in this case) to make a theological point. As the imminent *parousia* expectations of the early Christian community did not materialize and reflection by the early fathers developed, the Christ event was more and more held to be the decisive turning point, and as point of orientation of Christianity (Mell 2004:598-599). The explicit division of history into BCE and CE is commonly attributed to Dionisius Exiguus, who was mentioned above.

With the development of historical consciousness around the sixteenth century, coupled with the later 'discovery' of comparative cultures of Israel's *umwelt*, relatively precise dating of mayor events and turning points in Israel's history became possible. A reasonably clear chronological picture of Israel's history on a linear timeline became a cornerstone of most academic work of Old Testament scholarship: of historical, sociological, exegetical and theological studies. Through Western education, a mathematical understanding of time and history, entrenched through the use of calendars and watches, became a cornerstone of the industrialized sections of the world community, at least. In this, Biblical sciences and the communication of the contents of the Bible to faith communities find an ally in reading the Bible in such historical terms.

### African Time Concept

In his monumental work "African Religion and Philosophy", John Mbiti proposes "the African concept of time as the key to our understanding of the basic religious and philosophical concepts" of the African "ontology" (1969:15). Yet, at the same time, the African concept of time can only be understood properly within the African ontology. Mbiti says for Africans<sup>2</sup> "time is simply a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and which are immediately to occur" (1969:17). These are, however, not great events of wide-reaching significance, but is "good time" for individual people in harmony with their community (Akiiki 1980:365,367-368). For this reason Bosman calls the African concept of time both social and democratic (Bosman 2001:103). This concept of time can be called "humanistic" (Booth 1975:83), because it is reckoned in terms of the meaningful events in the ordinary existence of individuals and community from conception till death (Mbiti 1969:19-22; Akiiki 1980:361-365). Out of the ordinary events, which tend to 'make history' in Western terms, are abnormal and as such dangerous, life threatening, it "is an invasion of the ontological harmony" (Mbiti 1969:25).

This concept of time is not philosophical and abstract, instead it is "phenomenological" because it is relates to the activities and concerns of living people (Akiiki 1980:358). It is also not mathematical, because it is calculated in terms of natural events in the life of the community. Mbiti tells how, for example, the length of years may differ because of the irregular occurrence of the raining season, (Mbiti 1969:21). Time does not exist, so to speak, it is made, it has to be experienced. "Actual time", says Mbiti, "is therefore what is present and what is past" (1969:17). He coined the idea that the African concept of time is in effect two dimensional. He points out that there is a very limited concept of future, or better said, a concept of a limited future. What is already in process, for example a pregnancy, is known, from past experience, to become real in future. "What is certain to

<sup>2</sup> Mbiti, while dealing with the Akamba and Gikuyu of Kenya, bases his insights from a great variety of African peoples (see also his *Concepts of God in Africa*, 1970). Other studies on other peoples underscores Mbiti's basic insights (Akiiki 1980:358-9; Booth 1975:83). This concept of African time as described here is not uniquely African, but "simply an African form of a more widespread 'traditional' view of time" (Booth 1975:91).

occur, or falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena, is in the category of inevitable, or *potential time*" (Mbiti 1969:17). What lies outside the boundaries of that in future, he calls "No-time", because it is not real, it cannot be envisaged because it was not yet experienced<sup>3</sup> (Booth 1975:81-82, 84-87).

The center of the African concept of time is the "now-period", which Mbiti calls *Sasa*, from the Swahili (1969:22). It covers the individual's experience: A short future, present and past, the length of which depends on the age of the person. What lies beyond this, in the communal memory of the community, he calls *Zamani*.<sup>4</sup> *Sasa* events become incorporated into the *Zamani*, which is fed by *Sasa* (1969:23). "*Actual time... moves 'backwards' rather than 'forward'..*" (1969:17). According to Booth it is events that move backwards and not time (1975:82-83). A key aspect of Mbiti's thesis is that the African time concept is orientated towards the past, and not the future (1971:24-25).

### **For our topic the following are important:**

1. Because time is experienced primarily in terms of an endless rhythm of recurring events in personal and in communal life, and in nature, African time, in fact, has a definite cyclical dimension.<sup>5</sup> When Mbiti writes that "the linear concept of time in Western thought, with an indefinite past, present and indefinite future, is particularly foreign to African thinking", it is said within the context of his argument on "virtually no future" (1969:17). That a linear concept of time in the mathematical understanding thereof is lacking, is clear (Booth 1975:85-86). Yet, the key role which genealogies play in African communities, suggests some sense of a linear concept.<sup>6</sup> Genealogies, however, do not serve a historical purpose, but a social one instead, particularly in establishing kinship relations between individuals. It serves identity (Mbiti 1969:104-105). Booth says that it is not true that Africans do not have a sense of history. Stories from the past, unless from the *Sasa* period, do not occur in chronological order (Booth 1975:85), but as myths from *Zamani*, to which we now turn.
2. Mbiti calls time which lies outside the experience of the living community *Zamani*. When a person dies, (s)he gradually moves from *Sasa* to *Zamani*, into the collective existence of the ancestors. As long as (s)he is remembered by living individuals, (s)he "is in the state of *personal immortality*". (S)he may appear in dreams and communicate to the living and influence their lives. (S)he remains part of the living community, as the "*living-dead*". But as those remembering her pass away, she becomes "completely *dead*" (Mbiti 1969:25-26). As generations 'move backward', time, history and pre-history becomes "telescoped into a very compact, oral tradition and handed from generation to generation" (1969:24). Mbiti describes *Zamani* as "the graveyard of time... the final storehouse of all phenomena and events, the ocean of time into which everything becomes absorbed into a reality that is neither after or before" (1969:23). Here events become "completed, unchanged, normative, sacred"; this is the source of

<sup>3</sup> Mbiti deals with the implications of this understanding of time in his study on New Testament Eschatology in an African Background (1971). We do not elaborate on this aspect, because it has no direct bearing on the issue of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> In his 1971 study Mbiti calls *Sasa mituki* and *Zamani Tene* (1971:27-28).

<sup>5</sup> Mbiti 1969:21, 1971:25; Booth 1975:85. Bosman (2001:105) suggests a spiral image to incorporate both the linear and cyclical dimensions. This image may, however, suggest that the key point lies somewhere in past, while the key point in the African time concept is the present.

<sup>6</sup> Genealogies go back a number of generations whereafter these become "empty names", because clear memory dissipates (1969:164)

tradition, the domain of myth (Booth 1975:88). In African thinking myth and history belong together (Mbiti 1971:25), and these are of the same 'substance', unlike in Western thought.

3. In the light of what has been said thus far, it is misleading to think of what lies outside of personal experience as "past" in a Western frame of mind. Both previous generations, the living-dead moving into *Zamani*, and the events communicated in myths, are co-temporary with the living generations (Booth 1975:88). Instead of thinking in linear terms, it may be more appropriate to think in geographical terms. Space is closely related to 'time'. Thus relationship with 'home' and 'land', where ancestors are buried, are key aspects of Africans ontology (Mbiti 1969:27, see: 15-16). What passes from memory into distant past in Western terms, simply moves beyond the horizon (Mbiti 1969:26). We will return to the implications of this insight for Biblical interpretation.
4. Since "the center of gravity of human thought and activities is in the *Zamani* period" (Mbiti 1969:23), what lies in the 'past' is normative. Myths and traditions determine present life. Mbiti goes as far as saying that "African people have no 'belief in progress' ... (or in) the development of human activities ..." (1969:23). Yet it is true that African traditions are by no means static (Booth 1975:89-90). Contact with the outside world which became inevitable in the time of colonialism, forced inevitable changes. Christian proclamation, Western education, and political and economic systems were enforced on African traditional communities. Perhaps even at a more fundamental level Africans' ontology, and thus their perception of 'time', has been challenged by them having to leave their homes, the geographical time-space (Mbiti 1969:27), through economic pressure or political displacement. The global world, linear mathematical time, as symbolized by the calendar and the watch, became part of the life reality of the majority of African people today. Particularly the educated, who meet in institutions of higher learning, have over a long period of time been drenched in linear and mathematical time concepts. All this, despite elements of the 'traditional African understanding of time,' have survived to a greater or lesser extent with many Africans, particularly those in the pews of most of the African grassroots churches. Key aspects of a deep-seated ontology tend to be resilient and often persist to operate at a fundamental level of people's lives, be it alongside other frames of reference.

### Some Observations

1. It has become clear that there is a certain affinity between the time concept of ancient Israel and that of traditional Africa (Akiiki 1980:366). The importance of calculating time in terms of meaningful events, and the cyclic movement of events, play a role in both. The differences must, however, not be overlooked: Meaningful events in African life are those in the lives of individuals within the family, be it extended family, while in Israel events constituting time were primarily cultic events at fixed times on the agricultural calendar. The cyclic way of thinking operates more on the 'pre-literary level' of the text of the Old Testament, though it is sometimes reflected in the text. Of course, if the focus of Old Testament study is on 'the world behind the text', the former is of importance.
2. Mbiti's observation that in African world-view one moves to the 'future' facing backwards towards the 'past' correlates well with Wolff's image of the oarsman quoted above. Of course this is true of those parts of the Old Testament where there is no interest in the future, and particularly for life beyond death. Apart from a few exceptions, there is no interest in the Old Testament for a reality which lies beyond this

concrete world. The expectations of a better future, introduced by some prophets, mostly deal with this earthly life. In African ontology 'those beyond' (*abangasekhoyo*) are part of this earthly reality – at least for as long as they are remembered.

3. It has been noted that the development of a clear chronological picture of the past seems to go hand in hand with the development/introduction of the art of writing and recording. It is a known fact that illiterate communities have an exceptional ability to memorize and transmit information on an oral level. But in oral memory time spacing is not important, while with the introduction of writing more detailed recording becomes possible. The recording of African history in writing has increased tremendously over the past century. It draws on the oral memory of groups, but seeks to present these within a wider chronological frame by correlating different individual histories to form a broader picture. This comes close to what has happened in the course of the production of the Old Testament through the integration of different sources or traditions, the formation of collections, up till the formation of the Pentateuch and the former prophets and the Chroniclers in particular.
4. While a limited awareness of the linear aspect of time can be detected in genealogies in Africa, there does not seem to be a strict use of chronology, with a total absence of mathematical calculating of time. In the Old Testament a linear and chronological presentation of the past is clearly intended in the Deuteronomistic and Chronicistic histories. The only move towards mathematical calculation of time is found in the (probably) late version of the genealogies in Genesis. The New Testament presents the Christ event as the highpoint of the Old Testament story; he is said to be born in the "fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4). Within the Jewish and Roman world where chronological and mathematical calculation of time seems to have gained importance by that time, it is no wonder that similar moves occurred within Christian circles of the first centuries CE. Would it be far fetched to conclude that the Western chronological and mathematical calculation of time are simply the logical outcome from these roots which fed on these cultures?
5. The calculation of time from a fixed point, which was regarded as significant to the community, is known from the ancient world (see above). That the Christian community would eventually make a similar move in taking the birth of Christ as decisive point in their understanding of the unfolding of (their view of) world history and counting time in terms thereof, is thus also not surprising. But since this becomes possible only in so-called high cultures, it is to be expected that this would be foreign to traditional communities. In African, and in other communities with a traditional concept of time, the present, today, this very day, is the decisive point of orientation.

### **What is the Challenge?**

Once all this has been said, the question as to how to go about communicating the Biblical message to people who are living with a time concept as sketched above, needs to be addressed. As long as the communication is done in terms of a Western concept of time and received within an African frame of understanding, it is inevitable that major miss-communication would result. It is simply a case of a square peg in a round hole.

I am speaking from a position of teaching lay grassroots church leaders with limited literacy skills for the best part of my career. The majority of these church leaders have quite a detailed knowledge of both Testaments – and the same applies to those who are practically illiterate too. Since teaching is done in a dialogical fashion, I manage to pick up some problems in understanding the Biblical contents. I often experience that for them

everything in the Bible lies more or less on the same level. A crude example would be that they find it hard to distinguish between, for example, Saul of the Old Testament and Saul of the New Testament, though they may know their respective stories well. To them, what 'God said' has to be applied, often in a direct, literal way, irrespective of whether it is a legal pronouncement, a phrase or an anecdote from a narrative or a prophetic text, etcetera. In practice, what the Old Testament says is on par with the New Testament and differences are simply ignored or rationalized. It may be argued that all these are the result of poor literacy skills, coupled with the Biblicist way in which Scriptures were introduced by many missionary traditions and which are perpetuated by fundamentalist church traditions. True. But I am of the opinion that Africans' concept of time and of how the 'the past' is perceived, also play an important role here.

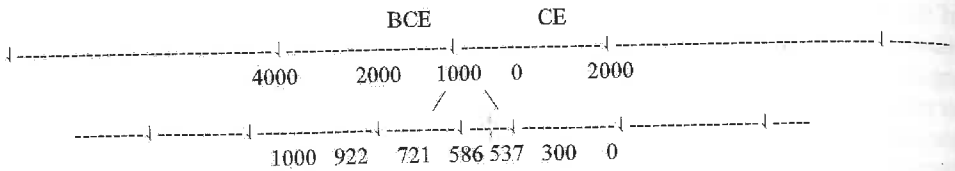
Perhaps we have to take what Mbiti says about *Zamani* serious in terms of how readers operating with a traditional African ontology read the Bible. For them the contents of the Bible might simply belong to "the graveyard of time ... the final storehouse of all phenomena and events, the ocean of time into which everything becomes absorbed into a reality that is neither after or before" (1969:23). There is thus little appreciation for the historical (and cultural, for that matter) distance between the present reader and what is recorded. In a sense these Biblical stories, etcetera, are perceived as co-temporary with us, they merely belong to the realm of *Zamani* (see D above). What is found in the Bible needs simply to be accepted as part of people's 'new' (read 'Christian') tradition. And, if it is thus regarded as tradition, the content of the Bible is accepted as "completed, unchanged, normative, sacred", as Booth (1975:88) says of the way in which tradition is regarded. What is more, the stories in the Bible are more explicit about God, and these people seem to be closer to God than even our own ancestors! This may account for the unchallenged authority with which the Bible is regarded in African communities. The Bible thus becomes a source of new (Christian) traditions and myths on which one may draw at will. For many the Biblical tradition operates, in most cases sub-consciously, on par with traditional African beliefs and the latter may even become a filter through which, or the context in which, the Bible is appropriated (Anderson 2000:132-133). This is by no means true only of the so-called 'spiritual churches' which Anderson writes about. Coupled with this is the manner in which the role of the spirit-world is perceived. Apart from the normal spontaneous application of tradition in everyday life, application of specific aspects of the tradition is revealed by the spirit world through mediums and dreams, etcetera. The way in which the role of the Holy Spirit is perceived, also wider than in the spiritual churches only, corresponds with this tradition. The Spirit reveals in a direct manner which Biblical text should be used in preaching, for example, and how it should be applied (Anderson 2000:135-137). The Bible thus operates as 'pool of tradition' from which one may draw for life, and where this happens through 'divine inspiration', the way it is used is not open to challenge.

For Biblical scholarship to make a meaningful contribution to the reading of the Bible in Africa, what should we do? Should we try to square the hole or to make the peg a little rounder?

The best way to counter a Biblicist and fundamentalist use of the Bible is to help the reader to understand more about the historical and cultural world from which the texts come. This, however, can hardly be done without a linear, and to some extent also mathematical, understanding of time and history. It is therefore necessary that a new historical frame of reference be nurtured with readers.

In my teaching I have opted to do this rather explicitly. At first students are introduced to a broad timeline. Precise dating is not regarded as important at this point; the Timeline

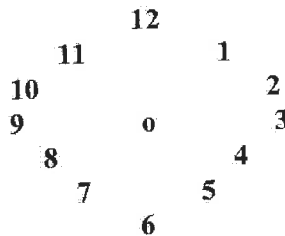
serves rather to communicate a visual image.<sup>7</sup>



Gradually during the course details are filled in and the frame of reference is expanded. In discussing the origin of the Bible, in dealing with the different bodies of material composing the canon and the way in which the text reached us today, the Timeline serves to give perspective to students. In this way the relationship between the testaments can be communicated in a much more perceivable manner. Moreover, it serves to create an understanding of the division of time in BCE and CE. Greater details in terms of dating are filled in as one progresses in dealing with particular bodies of contents. Key to this approach is that students are nurtured into a new frame of reference. To start 'from above' simply handling historical references as is customary in mainline scholarly discourse, is not only unsound pedagogy, and often disruptive of people's faith. But above all it is simply not communicating what one intends, because it operates with a foreign frame of reference, according to the main argument of this contribution.

The manner of dating of Old Testament events with dates increasing in the backward<sup>8</sup> direction is often confusing to students. I therefore use the image of a watch to explain this issue. The dividing point at high noon represents the division between the ages BCE and CE. People are accustomed to minutes decreasing as time moves towards the full hour<sup>9</sup>. This opens up their perception of the way in which Old Testament events are dated.

**Watch**



<sup>7</sup> This is done by dividing the timeline in three equal epochs. For the time of 'Adam' the traditional Jewish dating (in a broad sense) is used at this stage. Critical questions concerning this and on the time of Abraham, etcetera, can be introduced at an appropriate time later when a meaningful frame of reference, in terms of which such critical issues can be appreciated, has been established.

<sup>8</sup> I am aware that in some African communities 'the normal direction' is from right to left and anti-clockwise. Is there any significance in this regard in the fact that Semitic writing is done from right to left?

<sup>9</sup> For example: as the long arm stands at 7, it is said to be "twenty-five-to", but as it moves along the number of minutes decrease; at 11 it is only "five-to". This serves to explain that the number of minutes are counted from the mid-point backwards, as is also the case in dating BCE events. Also the concept "to" corresponds with "before" in "before common era" (or before Christ); likewise counting time as 5 minutes "past" co-insides with the concept of "after" (after Christ). In some African languages the concepts for "to/before" and "past/after" correspond even more closely than in English.



Many years ago I was pasturing an African rural congregation at the Wild Coast in the old Transkei. In a sermon one day I was using the example of a house in making a point. As I was speaking I realized that I had a typical Western four-cornered house in mind, but the people in front of me knew only round thatched roofed houses with no rooms on the inside. I stopped in my tracks: A square peg in a round hole! As scholars and teachers of the Bible we may need to stop for a moment to reflect about the mindsets which we operate with and what the consequences thereof are for those whom we try to teach. Biblical scholarship in Africa is not a novelty; it should be a servant to the people. If Biblical scholarship in Africa does not impact on the masses of people in rural and township churches who use the Bible daily as a norm for their lives, we are erecting new ivory towers. In teaching teachers and preachers in African churches we must make sure that we communicate well with those who use the Bible and who guide others in doing so. Naturally we need to take serious the way in which ordinary people read and appropriate the Bible. But if we are not careful, we may find ourselves strengthening fundamentalist (ab-)use of the Bible instead of contributing to a better understanding thereof.

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