

An Eschatological Critique of the African Christian Fear of the Dead

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Abstract

The article seeks to contribute to an African Christian theology that empowers African Christians to relate to their ancestors in ways that affirm their historical importance while freeing them from fear of the spirits of the dead. It addresses the central question: what theological-biblical position can be taken regarding the African Christian belief in the continuing agency of ancestors – a belief that leaves many in fear of them? The article proceeds in six steps. First, it defines the fear of the dead. Second, it analyses the eschatological understanding of the dead within African traditional religion. Third, it describes selected expressions of the fear of the dead among African Christians. Fourth, it examines the element of restlessness in African conceptions of the realm of the dead. Fifth, it explores the biblical-eschatological view of the state of the dead. Finally, it proposes a theological-biblical framework aimed at empowering African Christians to overcome this fear. In doing so, the article contributes to the development of an eschatological framework that addresses and seeks to overcome the fear of the dead among African Christians.

Keywords: Ancestors; Fear; Continuing agency; Dead; Heaven; Hell; Soul-sleep; Africa; Freedom

Introduction

The fear of the spirits of deceased relatives and those regarded as ancestors among many African Christians calls for careful eschatological assessment of the state of the dead between death and the resurrection of the saints. This fear presents an eschatological challenge that raises questions concerning the activity of the dead during the interim period before the resurrection at Christ's second coming. As such, it gives rise to the following question: *what eschatological position can be adopted regarding the African Christian belief in the continuing agency of the dead – a belief that leaves many African Christians fearful of them?* I approach this question in light of Mudau's (2025:1) assertion that pastoral comfort to the bereaved must preserve theological integrity. The primary focus, however, is not on bereavement itself, but rather on the perception that the dead, including ancestors, remain active agents who continue to be feared for their perceived influence over human lives.

The research question is addressed by first defining the fear of the dead among African Christians. Next, the eschatological perspective on the dead within African Traditional Religion (ATR) is examined. This is followed by a discussion of various expressions of this fear among African Christians. The analysis then turns to the concept of restlessness in the African understanding of the realm of the dead. Subsequently, the biblical-eschatological perspective on the state of the dead is explored. Finally, an eschatological-biblical framework is proposed to equip African Christians to overcome this fear. This article seeks to contribute to an eschatological framework to empower African Christians to overcome the fear of the dead.

Describing the fear of the dead

By “the dead”, I refer to those who have physically departed from the world of the living. The fear of the dead therefore relates to the anxiety surrounding the belief that the deceased continue to take an active interest in the world they have left behind, exerting their influence over the living. It is believed that they bless those who honour and remember them, while punishing those who neglect or forget them. Among various traditional African communities, notions of malevolence associated with the dead are expressed in different ways. For example, the ChiShona concept of *ngozi* describes a powerful belief that the dead may return to punish those, even immediate family members, who were responsible for their death or who greatly wronged them during their lifetime, causing them to die with unresolved bitterness (Magezi and Myambo 2011). The fear of the dead among African Christians warrants eschatological evaluation, given that Christianity is inherently eschatological, with its ultimate aim being eternal life in God’s glorious presence. The biblical narrative presents the death of a believer as an entrance into the fulfilling and glorious presence of God, where all earthly desires, including the longing for human veneration, are dispelled as one is completely satisfied by communion with God (Phil. 1:23).

On the other hand, African Christians fear their deceased relatives, primarily because they perceive them to be, among other things, in a state of loneliness and material need, and therefore requiring company through veneration and sacrifice (Achebe 1996:108; Kunhiyop 2012:213). The fear that the dead can harm those who neglect or forget them raises questions about the condition of the dead in the intermediate state between death and the resurrection.

The seriousness of the fear of the dead among African Christians is evident in the 2006 Pastoral Letter of the South African Catholic Bishops’ Conference (SACBC), “Ancestor Religion and the Christian Faith”. The letter states: “Fear of the spirit world has become intensified instead of the love of the ever-merciful God definitively revealed by Christ through his death and resurrection” (SACBC 2006:2). This fear originates from the “African worldview which depicts the deceased as possessing enhanced supernatural power” (SACBC 2006:6). Such anxieties are not confined to African Catholics, but are found throughout African Christianity, including among Reformed Christians, who reject the Catholic system of venerating the saints; Evangelicals who hold to the uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ for all people; and the Holy-Spirit-affirming Pentecostal communities. It may be argued that the desire to overcome this fear drives the growth of modern African Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Prophetic churches, which focus on delivering people from oppressive spirits, including ancestral spirits (Biri

2020:184–194; Tsekpo 2019; Meyer 1998). Many African Christians move from conservative mainline churches to neo-Pentecostal prophets and African Independent Churches (AICs), as these churches place particular emphasis on addressing problems related to the dead within their ministries. There is a widespread belief that Pentecostals free people from oppression linked to the dead (Kgatle and Mashau 2023), whereas conservative mainline churches perpetuate the fear of the dead by accommodating ancestor veneration and, in some instances, allowing Christians to respond to ancestral calls to become diviners and healers (Mokhutso 2024; Ntombana 2015).

Furthermore, one of the concerns raised by South African Catholic bishops was that some priests had become *sangomas* (traditional diviner-healers), which created a conflict between loyalty to Christ and loyalty to the ancestors (SACBC 2006:2). However, priests becoming *sangomas* demonstrated a strong belief in the ongoing agency of the dead among Christians (Mudau 2025:1). This ultimately raises the eschatological question regarding the state of the dead between now and the final resurrection at the Parousia.

Background of the ATR eschatological view of the dead

In ATR, the dead, especially those regarded as ancestors, are described as the “living-dead” to convey that they are “physically dead but [are] alive in the memory of those who knew [them] in [their] life as well as being alive in the world of the spirits” (Mbiti 1970:32). Amavenku and Boaheng (2021:133) explain that, “Africans believe that the soul/spirit of the dead is alive”, which leads to the use of the term “living dead”. Among the deceased, there is a distinct group of influential individuals, such as founders and heroic figures, who are recognised as ancestors. Their names are invoked during ceremonies, and they are regarded as guardians of social and moral order, givers and sustainers of life, and mediators between God and human communities (Wanamaker 1997:287–290). However, the realm of the dead encompasses the spirits of all family members who have died, including ordinary people, regardless of their character (Ozioko 2023:118). Mbiti (1970:110) notes that in ATR, terms like “ancestral spirits” or “ancestors” can be misleading, as they imply that only prominent individuals, such as family heads, become ancestral spirits. This perspective neglects the spirits of ordinary people, including children, siblings, and women who never had children.

Essentially, the African belief in the ongoing agency of the dead reflects the hierarchical cosmology of ATR, which is shaped by a worldly materialistic eschatology. According to Mbiti (1970:20), within this hierarchical cosmology, the spirits of the deceased occupy a position between God, the Supreme Being, and human beings, who are regarded as God’s supreme creation. Within this framework, human beings rely on the intermediary role of the dead, particularly those recognised as ancestors, to reach God (Ozioko 2023:118; Wanamaker 1997:287–291; Mbiti 1970:20). This group of human spirits possesses intermediary significance and acts as God’s representatives to those who are physically alive in the world (Falconer 2024:6; Taringa and Sipeyiye 2018:201–202). The intricate realm of human spirits forms the foundation of the African cosmology of kinship, serving as the thread that connects God and humanity (Ozioko 2023:118; Wanamaker 1997:287–291; Mbiti 1970:136–137). Mungwini (2019:93) mentions, “Each family relies on the good work of their ancestors and their level of alertness and ability to listen to their descendants, relaying that to God and then passing

the feedback to the living”. This supports the intermediary function of the ancestors and the kinship dimension underpinning it in African cosmology.

The eschatological framework discernible within the ATR hierarchical cosmology of the dead and kinship is fundamentally this-worldly and centred on humanity. In African cosmology, eschatological hope primarily involves ascending to the hierarchy of ancestors, thereby enabling the departed to continue engaging in the affairs of the living, whom they left behind upon entering the realm of the living-dead. As Mbiti (1970:119) explains, African cosmology is “basically anthropocentric: [hu]man is the centre of existence, African peoples see everything else in its relation to this central position of [hu]man[ity]”. Amevenku and Boaheng (2021:16) capture the anthropocentric and materialistic character of the African understanding of the ongoing agency of the dead, stating: “There is no hell fire and there is no heaven in African cosmology”.

In the this-worldly, anthropocentric, and materialistic nature of African cosmology, instead of aiming to go to heaven, the focus of the spirits of the dead is to exercise active influence in the affairs of the living (Amevenku and Boaheng 2021:133). Both benevolent and malevolent spirits are this-worldly and anthropocentric, since the dead and the ancestors are primarily relied upon for people’s well-being, while malevolent spirits – rejected by their people and hence not becoming ancestors – also direct their harmful influence towards human affairs. Thus, the ultimate orientation of both benevolent and malevolent spirits remains within this world of the living. In other words, the eschatological focus lies on how one returns to the world and what they will be when they return to it.

A foundational aspect of ATR is that time and history are not perceived as progressing towards a teleological end. Rather, they are regarded as cyclical, with the ultimate aim being a return to one’s original state, albeit in an improved condition (Mbiti 1970:29). Evidence of this cyclical eschatology is apparent in the prevalence of myths concerning the origins of the world and humanity, contrasted with a near complete absence of myths addressing the end of the world or humanity (Mbiti 1970:30). Amevenka and Boaheng (2021:10) note that “for Africans, no one dies in the sense of being totally annihilated, and every community of the living includes the spirits of the dead”. It is therefore appropriate to refer to an incarnational eschatology within the African context, signifying the hope that individuals will return to the world through what Mbiti (1970:32) terms “personal immortality”. According to Mbiti (1970:175), “The living dead are reincarnated in part, so that aspects of their personalities or physical characteristics are ‘re-born’ in their descendants”.

It is not uncommon for some African parents to attribute a child's exceptional achievements to the reincarnation of an ancestor renowned for similar abilities. Consequently, eschatological hope is often expressed as the continuation of one's existence through the manifestation of personal qualities in future generations. Although genetic factors must be acknowledged, African eschatology differs from the Christian perspective, which regards the spirit of the deceased as having left the body to be kept by God until the resurrection (Amevenku and Boaheng 2021:10). The following section explores the ways in which fear of ancestral wrath, and of the dead more generally, is expressed among African Christians.

Some expressions of the fear of the dead among African Christians

The enduring consciousness of the dead present in ATR also permeates African Christianity, spanning numerous denominations within African churches. The SACBC has expressed concern regarding the pervasive fear of spirits among African Catholics (SACBC 2006). In response, SACBC, through the National Catholic Board of Education (NCBE), developed guidelines for Catholic schools to address situations where learners may be experiencing a calling from their ancestors to become traditional healers (NCBE 2024). These guidelines were prompted by a “major concern ... that the ancestors and their cult should not be a source of fear, because God alone is all-powerful” (NCBE 2024:2). Additionally, unlike most Protestant churches, which often adopt a hostile stance towards African ancestral systems, Catholic doctrines such as the Communion of Saints and Purgatory have created a context in which the veneration and worship of ancestors can flourish among African Catholics.

Archbishop Buti Tlhagale advocates for a positive disposition towards the ancestors, asserting that “African traditional belief is not necessarily intrinsically incompatible with Christian belief” (NCBE 2024:2). He recognises, however, that such accommodation can generate confusion at the parish level, as Christians may attempt to operate within both systems, resulting in divided loyalties that compromise Christianity’s “exclusivist monotheism” by attributing spiritual power to ancestors and thereby overshadowing Christ (NCBE 2024:2). Mbaya (2024:37) highlights Archbishop Tlhagale’s proposal that African ancestors be accorded a status comparable to that of the saints, calling for their veneration alongside the saints within the church’s liturgy. While this approach renders Catholicism more culturally sensitive and inclusive of African cosmologies, it simultaneously affirms and perpetuates the African belief in the continuing agency of the dead among Christians.

The 2006 Pastoral Statement addresses the fear of ancestors, stating: “Fear of the spirit world has become intensified instead of the love of the ever-merciful God definitively revealed by Christ through his death and resurrection” (SACBC 2006:2). It rejects the “African worldview which, depicts the deceased as possessing enhanced supernatural power as out of tune with the teaching of the New Testament and of the Church” (SACBC 2006:6). The statement aimed to dispel the fear of the dead and ancestors, as well as reliance on *sangomas*, viewing these as challenges to the Christian monotheistic primacy of one God. It clarified that ancestors should be regarded solely as intercessors, invoked in prayer as “pray for us” rather than “do this for us”, as they remain dependent on God’s mercy and do not possess divine power. The SACBC’s pastoral letter sought to desacralise ancestors by instructing that they are not to be feared or worshipped but instead regarded as intercessors who themselves require prayer. This approach is rooted in doctrines of purgatory and the communion of saints.

The fear of ancestors is also evident among many Christians in mainline Protestant churches, who appeal to their ancestors during times of distress (Nürnberg 2007:19). Conservative Protestantism typically affirms the supreme mediatory role of Jesus Christ, and thus rejects the veneration of ancestral spirits, as practised by some African Catholics. Nevertheless, Archbishop Tlhagale’s favourable perspective on African systems has found resonance among certain Protestants. Wanamaker (1997:290) refers to the former Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, M.S. Mogoba, who asserted that ancestor-beliefs are not incompatible with Christian beliefs

and may, in fact, facilitate the acceptance of the good news of Jesus Christ, who died and was raised from the dead, among African Christians. The integration of ancestral concepts within the Christian faith is also evident in the work of Gabriel Setiloane, another Methodist minister, where elements of fear are discernible in the Christian accommodation of ancestors. Setiloane (1978:34) explains that the ancestors are not dead, but are alive and present among us, “to watch over us and reward each person as they deserve”.

Some African Pentecostals have articulated a pronounced concern with the continuing agency of the dead. Fear of the dead features prominently among African Pentecostals. For example, in her study of the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA), Biri (2020:184) illustrates the significant extent to which fear of the dead shapes the beliefs and practices of these Christians. She highlights Ezekiel Guti, the founding leader of ZAOGA, who affirmed the enduring power of words spoken by a person before their death. Drawing on this perspective, Biri (2020:186) cites a ZAOGA church elder who explicitly affirmed the ongoing agency of the dead in the following statement:

A person dying is already saying farewell and once s/he breathes his/her last, he/she is no longer your relative. Whatever [they] said must be done because [it will become *ngozi* –the avenging spirit] if you do not, especially [if it concerns the wishes of *amai* (mother)]. She is not your relative, so what the man of God (Guti) teaches about valuing the last testament of a dying person it is important.

This suggests that these Christians fear that the dead acquire greater spiritual power through which they are able to harm their descendants and others. They also appear to retain the ATR understanding of the dead as having become impersonal beings, a status that renders them unpredictable towards their living relatives. Notably, the same fear of the mother’s vengeful wrath (*ngozi yamai*), commonly found among ordinary vaShona people, is also evident among ZAOGA Pentecostals.

Biri (2020:186) records the account of a church counsellor in a ZAOGA congregation who advised a young man seeking guidance after complaining that his mother had wearied him with her nagging. He had therefore decided to move away from home. The counsellor urged him to reconsider, citing Eph. 6:2–3 to warn that if his mother were to die holding a grudge against him, he would experience lifelong misfortune and lack prosperity. Through this counsel, the ZAOGA counsellor presented the dead as extremely powerful, capable of punishing a Spirit-filled, tongue-speaking Pentecostal in much the same way as they might afflict a Christian in a traditional mainline church – institutions that some Pentecostals commonly dismiss as ‘dry’ churches lacking the Holy Spirit.

Anderson (2018:81–112) likewise demonstrates that Christians from AICs continue to struggle with fear of the dead. Many African Christians remain reluctant to abandon ancestral practices or the appeasement of the dead, driven by the belief that the dead remain actively present and that their lives are inextricably intertwined with those of the living. Underlying this reluctance is a deep conviction that ancestors and the dead possess the capacity – and the willingness – to act decisively against anyone who dares to deviate from established traditions or sever ties with them.

Indeed, although some may agree with Bediako's (1995:218) statement that "strictly speaking, [African ancestors and the dead] do not become after death what they were not before death", and that "they do not have the metaphysical implications of the Western notions of the immortality of the soul", people's attitudes towards the dead – and the responsibilities and fears associated with them – convey a strong sense of finality (Wanamaker 1997:286). Thus, a serious problem with the African Christian affirmation of the continuing agency of the ancestors is its function as an instrument of fear, binding believers to ATRs.

The African realm of the dead as a realm of restlessness and not of blissful rest

It is evident that within ATRs, fear of the dead arises from the perceived restlessness and insecurity experienced by the deceased, whose welfare and security in the afterlife depend on the remembrance and honour they receive from their living relatives. Nürnberger (2007:25) states that "Ancestors depend on the recognition of their offspring for their continued authority and belonging". Accordingly, the deceased are considered lost when their descendants cease to honour and venerate them as senior members of the family. The personal immortality of the dead is therefore perpetually threatened, as it relies solely on the extent to which living descendants sustain their memory through veneration and sacrificial offerings. Consequently, there exists a pronounced sense of restlessness and uncertainty among the dead. This condition renders the dead potentially perilous to their living relatives, as they are compelled to ensure that they are not forgotten. Frequently, such reminders are manifested violently, with the neglect of the dead said to "endanger the well-being of the living" (Nürnberger 2007:24).

This is well-illustrated by the protagonist in Achebe's classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo experiences intense anxiety about being rejected and forgotten by his sons if they choose to follow their brother Nwoye, who has converted to Christianity. Achebe (1996:108) conveys Okonkwo's sense of unease as follows:

Suppose when he [Okonkwo] died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps [conversion to Christian] and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god. If such a thing were ever to happen, he, Okonkwo, would wipe them off the face of the earth.

The pervasive sense of insecurity among both the dead and the ancestors, as articulated by Okonkwo, is reflected in numerous accounts of individuals seeking guidance from diviners after experiencing misfortune, only to be informed that their difficulties have been instigated by their ancestors as a form of warning or punishment for neglect or disregard. Such accounts reveal a dual anxiety: the dead are concerned that their kin will forget or abandon them, thereby leaving them cold and hungry without proper worship and sacrifices. Conversely, the living fear that the ancestors, driven by restlessness and loneliness, may act with hostility towards them. To mitigate these fears, the living diligently perform rituals to appease the dead. In African traditional communities, "All

kinds of distress are attributed to irate ancestors who have not been given their due” (Nürnberg 2007:24).

Moreover, in ATRs, the realm of the dead is characterised by restlessness, arising from the nature of the afterlife as a domain of intense labour for the ancestors rather than a state of restful bliss and enjoyment. Wanamaker (1997:286) expands upon Ray’s observation that in ATRs, “What is important here is not the afterlife itself but the way in which the dead continue to be involved in this life among the living”. Fundamentally, rest eludes the dead in these belief systems, as they are expected to work in order to provide for, protect, and maintain order among the living. The perception of the afterlife as a sphere of work, rather than repose, is reflected in burial rituals and accompanying messages, which frequently involve imploring the deceased to watch over their family and to seek retribution against those suspected of contributing to their death.

Furthermore, in ATRs, the realm of the dead is perceived as similar to the earthly world, with the same needs and problems that define earthly existence also present in the spiritual world. Consequently, in some ancient African societies, rulers were buried with their servants and even their wives or virgin girls, to ensure continued service in the afterlife. This suggests that the afterlife is essentially a realm not vastly different from the present world. In certain cultures, individuals are buried with their tools of trade so they may continue their work in the world of the dead. While it could be argued that burying someone with their tools is intended to prevent their spirit from returning to reclaim them, it may also reflect the belief that the deceased should continue the activities they engaged in during their earthly life.

That the realm of the dead is regarded as a domain of work rather than blissful rest is further demonstrated by the practice in certain African traditional societies of burying men, particularly family heads, with weapons such as spears intended for use in the afterlife to defend their living descendants or to seek justice against those responsible for their death. In some communities, it is also customary for murder victims to be interred with weapons like spears and knives, conveying the expectation that they should avenge their own killing. Consequently, the afterlife in these African societies is not perceived as a state of repose, but as one involving ongoing responsibilities of caring for, providing for, and protecting the living. The expectation of labour rather than rest is further illustrated by the stern reproaches directed at the dead by their descendants when misfortune occurs, as they are blamed for failing in their duty to support their families. As the following section will demonstrate, biblical eschatology does not align with either the fear of the dead or the conceptualisation of the afterlife as a sphere of work on behalf of the living.

A biblical-eschatological view of the dead that challenges the continuing agency of the dead

The fear-driven belief in the ongoing influence of the dead prompts the question: what eschatological-biblical stance can address the African Christian apprehension regarding the dead? Among African Christians, this fear can often be traced to a limited eschatological understanding of the state of the dead between physical death and Christ’s second coming, the Parousia. This interim period is theologically referred to as the “intermediate state”. In examining the intermediate state of the dead, it is worth noting

Erickson's (2013:1077) comment regarding the "relative scarcity of biblical references to the intermediate state".

Horton (2011:911) attributes this scarcity to the fact that nearly all passages discussing heaven focus more on the everlasting state than on the immediate state. Nevertheless, what can be gathered from scripture concerning the condition of the dead between physical death and the final resurrection directly challenges the African Christian fear of the dead, which supports the belief that ancestors and the departed continue to exist and actively participate in earthly life. The African Christian perspective and apprehension regarding the dead – whether referring to revered ancestors or the spirits of those considered evil – are shaped by one's understanding of the intermediate state.

An important passage on the eschatological-biblical perspectives that should inform our view of, and fear of, the dead is the Pauline text in 1 Thess. 4:13–18. The background to Paul's eschatological teaching on the state of dead believers is that the Thessalonian Christians were grieving over fellow church members who had died prior to Christ's return (Weima 2014:303). They had originally believed that Christ's return was imminent, but it was delayed, during which time some of their believing relatives and friends began to die. Those left behind feared that their deceased compatriots would be unable to participate equally with the living believers in the glorious events associated with the coming of Christ (Weima 2014:303). Paul therefore instructs Christians not to grieve over their deceased fellow believers with hopelessness, because of Christ's promise that God will resurrect all believers at his Parousia.

Christ's promise of the resurrection assured believers that those who had died were safe and cared for by Christ while awaiting the final resurrection. As a result, those who remained should not grieve without hope for the departed (1 Thess. 4:13). The great reassurance was that the dead were not lost, but secure in Christ's presence. Thus, the death of Christians differed from that of non-Christians, who lacked Christ's promise of life beyond death. In the culture of that time, death was generally seen as a loss and a final ending, with no hope beyond the grave. Paul therefore instructed the Thessalonians to mourn their deceased Christian relatives with "grief [...] tempered and informed by the hope they held, based on the resurrection of Christ and the promise of his coming" (Green 2002:219). This meant they were not to mourn their Christian relatives as permanently lost, but with the hope of a future reunion at Christ's promised and victorious return.

Other scholars argue that Paul responded to a sense of hopelessness arising from the Epicurean rejection of resurrection and their belief in the dissolution of the soul. Cho (2013:35) notes that the Epicurean aim in life was to attain peace of mind and tranquillity (*ataraxia*). Accordingly, they maintained that when the physical body dies, the soul also ceases to exist. This implies that "when a person is dead, his whole self dies. Therefore, there is nothing to fear in death and there is no future punishment" (Cho 2013:36). Paul challenges this Epicurean perspective, asserting that the soul of a Christian does not simply cease to exist; rather, it continues in a spiritual state in the presence of Christ.

The Thessalonians should therefore comfort one another with the truth of Christ's resurrection, which assures them that the souls of their Christian relatives remain alive and intact, and will be resurrected at Christ's second coming. Ademiluka (2025:3) follows Richard (1995:232), who maintains that Paul is not primarily concerned here

with the resurrection of the dead, but rather with the assurance that those who have died in Christ will continue to belong to God's people when Christ returns. This means, as Ademiluka (2025:3) highlights, that the dead in Christ remain members of God's community and his kingdom. They are not lost, nor have they dispersed into some unknown realm, but remain as distinct individuals in God's glorious presence.

The state of the dead is described as "those who sleep" (1 Thess. 4:13). In this phrase, Paul uses the Greek word *koimaō*, a common euphemism for death among believers, which differs from *katheudō*, meaning to literally sleep. Weima (2014:308–309) indicates that the verb *koimaō* literally means "sleep, fall asleep", but "figuratively refers to the state of being dead" (1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thess. 4:13, 14, 15). He points out that there are no Pauline examples of this literal meaning (Matt. 28:13; Lk. 22:45; Jn. 11:11, 12; Acts 12:6). Beyond Paul's writings, the use of *koimaō* as a figurative reference to death appears in other New Testament passages (Matt. 27:52; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 2 Pet. 3:4). The use of sleep as a euphemism for death is also present in several Old Testament passages (e.g., Gen. 47:30; Deut. 31:16; Ps. 13:3; Dan. 12:2).

Weima (2014:309) explains that the use of sleep as a metaphor for death was prevalent in the Greco-Roman world, appearing in Greek and Latin literature as early as Homer's era. Given the widespread euphemistic employment of sleep to describe death, "there is no justification for finding in 1 Thess. 4:13 any support for the notion of 'soul sleep', that in the time immediately followed death the soul of a person 'sleeps', or exists in an unconscious state, unaware of its surroundings, until it is awakened at Christ's return, when the resurrection of the body takes place" (Weima 2014:309).

The Pauline focus on the consciousness of the dead challenges the doctrine of soul-sleep held by churches such as the Seventh-Day Adventists (Kunhiyop 2012:225). Various New Testament texts point to a conscious and more blessed existence for believers in the intermediate state, which stands in stark contrast to their previous fallen bodily condition (Grudem 1994:821). For instance, in Matt. 17:1–8, during Christ's transfiguration, Moses and Elijah are depicted as consciously appearing with Christ prior to the resurrection of all believers, and in a more glorious state than their original earthly form. Additionally, several biblical passages portray believers as experiencing a conscious state rather than an unconscious sleep (Lk. 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:20–23; Rev. 6:9–11). Although they have not yet been resurrected or received their transformed, glorified bodies, deceased Christians are portrayed as recognisable individuals who possess consciousness and emotional awareness.

Therefore, the state of the dead before Christ's Parousia is a glorious one in the presence of God. This affirms that those who die in Christ do not become lonely, meandering, restless, and ghost-like spirits, dependent on sacrifices or worship from their descendants. As Horton (2011:911) points out, in the intermediate state believers are neither in a contemplative pose "nor are they lost souls wandering throughout the realm of shadows or crossing back and forth over the river Styx ferried by Charon". Rather, "they are made part of the company assembled at the true Zion" (Horton 2011:911). This true Zion is described in Hebrews as the city of the living God, with innumerable angels in festal gathering; the assembly of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven; God, the judge of all; the spirits of the righteous who have been made perfect; Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant; and the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:22–24).

Instead of viewing the dead in Christ as restless or lonely spirits, they should be understood as experiencing active rest in God's presence. The concept of rest is supported by the phrase "those who sleep" (1 Thess. 4:13), as Scripture presents the death of believers not as soul sleep or annihilation, but as a state in which the soul is at rest and remains conscious before God. In biblical eschatology, death can therefore be described as rest from the world and a state of being awake to God. As Hendriksen (1953:109–110) points out,

The comparison of death to sleep is particularly appropriate in implying not only rest from labor but also the glorious awakening which believers expect on the other side. This falling asleep does not indicate an intermediate state of unconscious pose (soul-sleep). Though the soul is asleep to the world it has left (Job 7:9; 10; Is 63:16; Eccl 9:6), it is awake with respect to its own world (Lu 16:19-31; 23:43; II Cor 5:8; Ph 1:21-23; Rev 7:15-17; 20:4).

The dead in Christ sleep in the sense of resting from the sinful world; they cease to experience the earthly labours, toils, and sufferings of this world. Instead, they awaken to a new life in Christ, which severs their ties with this earthly realm. This is a significant point that challenges fear of the ancestors, as if they continue to exercise rule and authority over the living. The view of the dead as resting from the world but conscious to God challenges Setiloane's (1978:34) claim that ancestors remain present in the world and continue to accompany people in their earthly lives.

One could argue that the vehement biblical prohibitions and warnings against necromancy not only reflect the Hebraic and Christian understanding of the separation between the dead and the living, but also convey the idea that the dead are in a conscious rest in God. According to the Bible, the realm of the dead is not among the living on earth, but either heaven – a place of joy reserved for God's redeemed – or hell, a place of suffering reserved for sinners, depending on one's relationship with God. In 1 Sam. 28:15, Samuel rebukes Saul at the house of the Witch of Endor for "disturb[ing] me by bringing me up?" This is illustrated by Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Lk. 16), as well as Jesus' response to the thief crucified alongside him (Lk. 23:43). Both accounts portray death as a departure from this world, severing the connection between the deceased and those they leave behind. Samuel's reluctance to be disturbed from his rest in heaven by being summoned back to the fallen world further supports this understanding.

In Lk. 16, Lazarus is presented in a conscious state of rest in the bosom of Abraham. While Lazarus is fully aware of his comfort, the rich man is also conscious of his suffering. It is important to note that, although Lazarus is at rest in Abraham's bosom and the rich man is in torment in hell, both are completely separated from any active personal relationship with those still living on earth. The rich man is so removed from the world of his relatives that he cannot reach out to warn them about hell and the need to avoid it. Notably, the rich man asks for someone else to be sent to his brothers, rather than requesting to return himself and personally warn them about his painful experience in hell.

Furthermore, the tormented rich man does not request a second chance, which suggests the finality of physical death and rules out the possibility of the soul's

reincarnation. In addition, Abraham rejects the rich man's assertion that his brothers will only repent if they receive a personal message from someone returned from the dead, stating, "If they [the brothers still living on earth] do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (Lk. 16:31). This statement denies any continuing influence of the dead and indicates their inability to contribute to God's purposes. If conviction and repentance are found only through Moses and the prophets, and not through those who have risen from the dead, then the dead have no power to achieve what is good and pleasing to God.

Eschatology as a response to the fear of the dead

A central concern in the African Christian fear of the dead is the belief that the deceased remain actively involved in the affairs of the living. Additionally, as previously discussed, the dead are feared because their realm is perceived as one of restlessness, where they strive to be remembered by their descendants. Christian eschatology questions this fear by portraying the world of the dead as a place of rest in God's glorious presence for Christians, and a state of painful separation from God for unbelievers. In every instance, as shown in Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19–31), whether in God's presence or separated from him, the dead are released from all earthly responsibilities they had prior to death.

Erickson (2013:1080–1081) contends that, although Jesus's primary aim was not to impart detailed teaching on the nature of the intermediate state, it remains improbable that he would provide misleading information on this matter. Christians are therefore not to regard their deceased relatives as dangerous or malevolent beings to be feared or venerated, since there is a complete separation between the living and the dead. Believers experience peaceful rest in the presence of God, whereas non-believers exist in a state of torment, isolated from God's presence.

A foundational element in addressing the African Christian fear of the dead eschatologically is the trinitarian nature of God, which undergirds God's relationality. This means that the Christian afterlife should be understood relationally: the dead do not go to a place where they aimlessly float about alone or are locked up in isolation. Rather, they enter the realm of a relational God. Horton challenges Christians to think of heaven from God's trinitarian perspective. As he explains, "The gospel concentrates on the good news not that our soul survives death but that Christ welcomes us into the fellowship of the Trinity when we die, in which fellowship we await final salvation [of] our whole person in the bodily resurrection at the end of the age" (Horton 2011:910). In other words, at death the Christian enters into a relational realm ruled by a relational God who engages intimately with his saints.

It is noteworthy that in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Lazarus is depicted as resting in the bosom of Abraham, which presents paradise and heaven as relational rest. Therefore, when scripture refers to the deceased in God's presence, it does not speak of fused people "where personal identity is submerged in a cosmic unity, but of a communion of persons, gathered at the lavish feast to enjoy each other's company forever with its gracious host" (Horton 2011:910). The relational God fellowships with the saints as his children, granting them complete rest and peace from all the troubles of the sinful world they left behind at death. Moreover, God becomes the sole focus of the dead. They are no longer preoccupied with the world they have departed, trusting instead

that it remains under God's providential care and recognising that they themselves no longer possess the power to sustain it.

In the eschatological kinship of the relational, trinitarian God, the place and memory of the dead saints do not depend on how their living descendants remember or venerate them. Instead, they depend entirely on God's eternal, inexhaustible, and omnipresent memory. African Christians should not fear the restless spirits of the dead who seek to assert their place among the living through malevolent actions, because being remembered by God is the supreme memory, surpassing all human memories and acts of veneration. In the memory of God, who is merciful, loving, relational and just, those who died long ago and those who die today are remembered equally and presently, because God is not bound by time or space.

Furthermore, God knows, remembers, and embraces the despised Christian who suffered a humiliating death and was denied a proper burial by relatives, their spirit rejected by the family out of fear that it may bring misfortune upon future generations. In certain African societies, for instance, those who are murdered or die by suicide are deprived of the funeral rites accorded to individuals who pass away under normal circumstances. Paul affirms God's unwavering commitment to the memory of all such individuals, declaring that "neither death nor life ... neither the present nor the future ... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38–39). Deceased Christians rest in Christ, eternally secure in God's presence as those who belong to Christ. Significantly, their memory does not rely on fulfilling any role in the lives of the living that would require veneration or prayer from contemporary Christians.

Therefore, those left behind in the world should rely on God's power rather than the human authority of their ancestors. Likewise, our deceased ancestors are neither the creators of the world nor its people; as such, they possess no power to sustain life in God's creation.

This tension gives rise to the question: do departed Christians enter heaven, witness the splendour of Christ's presence, and then turn their attention back to the sinful, material world they have left? Or do they instead leave behind the fallen world and embrace the new, glorious realm before the majestic throne of God? The suggestion that Christians who have died continue to take an interest in earthly affairs does not align with their entry into the glorious realm described by Paul: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no heart has imagined, what God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Cor. 2:9). Accordingly, Mhlophe (2013:60) questions: "How [...] do your ancestors find time to disconnect from what is happening there [in heaven] and appear in your dreams to speak to you?"

Conclusion

The fear of the dead, particularly of one's ancestors, remains deeply rooted among many African Christians. The article does not deny the existence of ancestors; instead, it calls African Christians to interpret their ancestors, especially those who have died in Christ, through a theological perspective informed by scriptural truths (Mudau 2025). Such truths affirm, among other doctrines, the state of deceased Christians between death and the resurrection of believers at the Parousia, the glory of heaven, the sufficiency of Christ

as the sole mediator between God and humanity, and the inability of any human being to fulfil that role.

One important question arising from the belief in the continuing earthly agency of the dead is why any soul that has experienced the glory of God's heaven and received divine approval would wish to return to a sinful world in order to seek the worship and sacrifices of imperfect human beings. Ultimately, overcoming fear of the ancestors requires their desacralisation and the confinement of their significance to historical and anthropological roles as progenitors of nations, tribes, clans, and families. African theologian Kwame Bediako (1995:244) recognises the historical and communal importance of the ancestors as progenitors of their societies, yet insists that they must "become desacralised" so that they do not usurp the authority belonging to Christ and God. Accordingly, the ancestors should be remembered as part of human history rather than regarded as mediators before God. They should be honoured and celebrated for their legacy, but only as human beings.

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