JESUS THE ANCESTOR:
READING THE STORY OF JESUS FROM
AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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1. Introduction

For more than two-hundred years South Africa has been the meeting place for two fundamentally different types of religious traditions: African traditional religions and Western European Christian religions. Each of these two traditions possesses its own world view, its own beliefs, practices, and behaviour codes and is embedded in its own distinctive culture. One, European Christianity, is historically an interloping missionary religion with numerous quite distinct and often competing manifestations. As an interloping religion in South Africa it has sought to convert people to its beliefs, practices, and behaviour patterns, as well as to European culture which is its carrier. African traditional religions, by way of contrast, are not missionary religions at all. Instead they are the religions of small scale, non-literate societies and are based on lineal descent from a common ancestor or membership in a particular clan or tribal group.

Two-hundred years of missionary Christianity supported by European colonial power and European culture, which itself was a interloping missionary-type culture, have changed the face of religion, political power, and culture in South Africa. With respect to religion the vast majority of African people would now claim to be at least nominally Christian.[1] Although Christianity appears to have won out over the traditional religions of South Africa, the truth is more complex. At the core of all African traditional religions in South Africa, as with almost the whole of sub-Sahara Africa (Ray 1976:140), are the beliefs and practices associated with the family or group ancestors (Hammond - 1981; 1986:158). The vast majority of Xhosa Christians still accept that their ancestors can and do influence their lives (Pauw 1975:140-144) and the same appears to be true of other groups as well (West 1975). Bishop Mogoba, the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, has encapsulated the complex situation when he says:

> The Church in Africa has had problems which are peculiar to the African context. These come from the culture and religious beliefs which preceded Christianity and which continue to try to co-exist with it (1994:3).

Bishop Mogoba goes on to point out that one of the key problems in the relation between European Christianity and African Christianity centers on Christ and the ancestors of African Christians (1994:3-6). The problem is this. The European Christian interpretation of God resonates reasonably well with the vague notions of deity held by most Bantu people. The difficulty comes in fitting Christ into the African world view since his roles as judge, mentor, and intermediary for Christians comes into immediate conflict with the traditional functions of African ancestors.

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[1] I have not been able to find accurate figures for the whole of South Africa. But to give some idea of the proportion of Christians in the population Pauw (1975:35) gave statistics for the Eastern Cape and Transkei indicating that more than 60% of Xhosa people in the region were Christians. From the same period as Pauw, West (1975:189) claimed that the majority of people in Soweto, the largest complex of African townships in the country, were Christians.

What Bishop Mogoba appears to be calling for is theological reflection on how to relate Christ to the abiding importance of ancestors for African Christians. By linking the two together it might well help Bantu Christians to preserve a key element in their identity as Africans while resolving some of the problems they have with the role of Christ in their faith. For this reason I will attempt in this paper to explore the possibility of Africanizing Christology through connecting it with both traditional and Christianized understandings of the ancestors.

2. Methodological Reflections

Nyamiti (1989:17) has observed that African theologians have adopted two broad strategies for inculturating Christology for Africa. One strategy, employed by Mbiti and Appiah-Kubi, according to Nyamiti, attempts 'to construct an African Christology by starting from the biblical teaching about Christ and strive[s] afterwards to find from African cultural situation the relevant Christological themes.' The other strategy, which is far more commonly employed, begins with 'African cultural background' as the starting point for the development of African Christologies. People employing this approach either explore Christology from the general 'perspective of the African world view' or begin with a particular theme derived from the African world view or African culture (Nyamiti 1989:18). While I do not wish to dispute the validity of either strategy, it is worth pointing out that the very first followers of Jesus, those who shared in his human existence and became witnesses to his resurrection, began the process of Christological elaboration by interpreting Jesus in terms of the world view and themes derived from their own cultural experience. This is the approach I intend to follow in this paper.

I will first focus on the ancestors as the key for understanding the religious experience and beliefs of contemporary Africans in South Africa, the vast majority of whom identify themselves as Christians of one sort or another. I will then discuss how ancestor beliefs articulate with Christology in the development of an Ancestor Christology based on the Bible as the authoritative text of all types of Christianity.[2]

2.1. The Problem of Religious Texts

Those familiar with the study of religious traditions with sacred written texts cannot help but be struck by the complete absence of such texts in relation to African traditional religions. African traditional religions historically have had no written texts because Africa had, and by and large still has, an oral culture, though this is changing. The small scale, stateless societies of pre-colonial Africa neither required nor generated written languages. As the traditional religions of Africa focused primarily on the lineage family and only secondarily on larger groupings such as the clan or tribe, religion operated on the same small scale as society in general. Yet African traditional religions were not without their own implicit texts:[3] they were oral and ritual in character, as well as lived. These implicit

2   The importance of developing an Ancestor Christology has been widely recognized in Africa. Pobee (1979), Bujo (1982), Nyamiti (1986 and Kabasélé (1991), to mention but a few, have already begun developing Ancestor Christologies based on their own traditions within Africa. Because of the diversity of African traditional religions throughout the continent, meaningful Christology must be localized to some degree to take account of variations in the beliefs, practices, and rituals of ancestor religions. For example, Pobee's Christology based on the specific religion traditions of the Akans of Ghana is simply not appropriate for Sothos or Nguni speakers in South Africa.

3   I am using the expression 'implicit text' in the sense of unwritten but religiously authoritative sources of data and interpretation. In literate societies these things are normally reduced to written text form. In non-literate

texts were passed on from one generation to the next within the lineage group or tribe and had every bit as much authority as written sacred texts. As Mogoba (1981:53) explains:

'African Traditional Religion, has no scripture, no written creed or history. It is embodied in the lifestyle of people and has been passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth and by precept. It is so embedded in the lives of the people that the culture, language, legal system, economic, social and political systems all bear the stamp of seal of religion.'

This makes comparisons between the textuality of African traditional religions and Christianity difficult, unless we recognize that Christianity itself has from its beginnings had a variety of forms of sacred textuality. For example, as late as the second century CE some groups of Christians treated the oral traditions regarding Jesus as more authoritative than the written accounts of his sayings and deeds embodied in canonical Gospels. We too easily forget that the majority of Christians from the beginnings of Christianity until very recently, perhaps even still, have experienced their Christianity both through oral and ritual processes and patterns of living which were only loosely connected to the Bible as written text. Yet those oral and ritual processes, and patterns of life were, in effect, implicit sacred religious texts which contained authoritative information and interpretation.

2.2   The Problem of Sources

The above observations have considerable importance for the methodology employed in this paper. Written religious texts about ancestor religion do not exist. Where are we to find sources of information and interpretation then? As Kuckertz (1981a) shows, two groups are concerned with the question of the ancestors in Bantu experience and need to be in dialogue with one another. On the one hand cultural anthropologists provide empirical data and reflection on the social and sometimes the psychological dimensions of the ancestors in African experience. But the nature of their discipline does not allow them to ask, let alone attempt to answer, questions about ultimate meaning and value with regard to the ancestors. On the other hand African theologians have a very different task in relation to the ancestors. Their role is to develop a theological understanding of the ancestors that is based on genuine African perspectives and is accountable to African people but remains tied to Christian revelation.

In this paper I depend upon both the work of anthropologists and of African theologians for data and interpretation, but I do so critically. Anthropologists generally come from a Western perspective, asking questions that are relevant within their own world view but not necessarily to the African world view. 'One cannot simply assume that the nuances of primal thought and understandings of reality are readily reducible to the categories of western language and the kinds of thought that our linguistic forms presuppose' (Staples 1981:82). In addition they tend to want to systematize what may not be systematic in the thought and experience of Africans. For these reasons caution is needed in assessing both the information offered by cultural anthropologists and their interpretations, a point noted by Mogoba (1981:54).

The work of African theologians poses its own set of problems. All too often African theologians generalize about African religions as though there were cultural uniformity throughout Africa. For example, Kabasélé (1991:118) claims that not everyone can become an ancestor. He enumerates five characteristics of the 'virtuous life' which must be fulfilled

societies they cannot be. Though as Gill (1985) points out, there may be very good reasons why a society would not reduce such things to written text forms even if it had the technology to do so.

before someone can become an ancestor. These include 1) observing the law; 2) not being wrathful, quarrelsome or a dabbler in sorcery; 3) encouraging unity among people; 4) leaving descendants on earth; and 5) dying a natural death. Apart from his fourth characteristic of the virtuous life none of them apply among South African Bantu as a qualification for becoming an ancestor.

Apart from a critical use of the evidence and interpretation of cultural anthropologists, I also have information derived from personal informants whose views have generally helped corroborate my use of material from the other two sources.

3.   Difficulties in Understanding the Ancestors in South Africa

One of the first difficulties to be encountered in attempting to understand the ancestors involves a conceptual problem. For decades a debate has been going on about whether African people worship their ancestors or simply honour them or remember them (West 1975:185-187; Kuckertz 1981a:10-11). West (1975:185-187) argues that Bantu do not worship their ancestors. Setiloane (1986:18), an African theologian, argues that Africans 'strongly resent the suggestion that they 'worship' *Badimo* [ancestors].' Worship, he argues, does not adequately express the sense of service rendered to the ancestors which is qualitatively similar to the service one renders to one's living parents (cf. Nxumalo 1981:73). Behind the rejection of the term 'worship' for the interaction between the living and their ancestors is an historical problem. Christian missionaries perceived African people to be worshipping their ancestors and sought to suppress it as worship of false gods.

Hammond-Tooke (1978), arguing from a Western phenomenological perspective has provided a strong case for defining the cultic activity directed at ancestors among the Zulu and Cape Nguni as worship. Even if we accept that he is correct for the Nguni, we would have to look at other groups to determine whether they also worship (or worshipped) their ancestors. Since African people generally deny that they worship their ancestors for historical reasons, I will refer to ancestor veneration and the cult of the ancestors without wishing to imply that the ancestors are formally worshipped, especially by Christians.

Two further problems related to understanding the ancestors and their function among South African Bantu require attention.

In the first place it is widely recognized that within greater South Africa four major groupings of people can be identified based on language and culture: the Nguni, the Sotho, the Venda, and Tsonga (Hammond-Tooke 1994:2-3). Within each of these groups a number of distinct sub-groupings exist such as the Zulu, Pondo, and Xhosa of the Nguni group and the Northern and Southern Sotho and Tswana within the Sotho grouping. Not surprisingly a number of differences in social organization affecting the details of ancestor worship exist among these groups. For example, among the Nguni groups the emphasis traditionally has been upon the patrilineal ancestors while among some of the Sotho groups, like the Kgaga, the bi-lateral ancestors of the kinship group are important (Hammond-Tooke 1981b:86; 1981a:25). Nevertheless, a considerable degree of homogeneity can be found in the general function and significance of ancestors among these groups in response to the process of urbanization and Christianization.

This leads me to the second problem. The conception of the ancestors including their nature and function has changed significantly over the course of time and continues to do so. Several powerful factors have been at work. Missionary Christianity has had an

enormous impact on ancestor religion in South Africa during the last two-hundred years.[4] In the first instance it has sought to suppress ancestor religion altogether (Staples 1981:216-219). As Hammond-Tooke (1981a:29) has noted

> As far as the Church is concerned, it has always taken a critical attitude to the ancestor cult. The Protestant churches, in particular, have tended to classify the ancestors as strange gods whose worship must be extirpated.[5]

At the same time the influence of Christianity has reshaped aspects of traditional ancestor belief. For example, evidence exists to suggest that Christianity has helped overcome much of the fear that people have had of their ancestors in the past, though it does not lead them to reject them (Pauw 1975:147; Nxumalo 1981:67). Even more importantly, as we shall see, the ancestors have become mediators between their descendants and God, thus taking on a role found within the heavenly hierarchy of various Christian symbolic worlds but not a significant part of traditional ancestor cults.

A second major force, the process of urbanization, including the closely related phenomenon of modernization, has exercised enormous influence upon traditional ancestor beliefs and practices.

Hunter (1961:486-487), writing in the mid-1930s, believed that the ancestor cult was inevitably in decline in the urban environment of South Africa and predicted its increasing marginalization for urban Africans. She did so because she recognized that the traditional practices associated with the cult, particularly animal sacrifices, were problematic in the urban environment. But she also pointed out that the fear element inherent in the cult was undermined when town people were not punished by their ancestors for their failure to perform the necessary rituals. Anthropologists in the first half of the century put forward two other reasons for the likely demise of ancestor worship among urban Africans. First, the replacement of the 'primal' world view by the scientific world view was thought to render the myths and beliefs upon which ancestor religion was based untenable. In addition the breakdown of the lineage system upon which the ancestor cult was founded and the disruption of traditional patterns of authority based on seniority under the impact of modernity and urbanization were seen as decisive factors leading to the ineluctable decline of ancestor religion (Staples 1981:11-12).

The anticipated demise of ancestor religion has not happened. Beliefs and practices associated with the ancestors have proved far more resilient but also far more adaptable than had initially been thought (1974). This suggests that ancestor religion has potential viability even in the modern world where Bantus no longer live in small scale societies dominated by a closely knit lineage group as existed in pre-colonial Africa. What creates problems for analysis is that no authoritative body determines the speed at which family units or even individuals modify their beliefs and practices regarding their ancestors. Thus important variations in ancestor religion occur among differing groups, as well as within groups which historically have been homogeneous. This makes it impossible to offer a definitive account of the ancestors that will be universally agreed upon by all African

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4   For a useful discussion regarding the interaction between traditional African religious practices and Christianity during the last two-hundred years, see Staples (1981:209-266)

5   The attempt to suppress the ancestor cult has not been the exclusive domain of missionary Christianity. West (1975:190) has shown that Ethiopian-type independent churches generally hold a negative view towards ancestor belief and ritual. Zionist-type churches vary in their reaction. Presumably the problem is one of perceived religious competition.

people in South Africa. But it is, nevertheless, possible to offer a broadly accurate portrait of the social and religious functions of the ancestors in contemporary South Africa.

4.   The Social and Religious Function of Ancestors and Ancestor Cults

What is it about the ancestors that makes them so important to African people? Why have ancestor related beliefs and practices persisted in spite of religious opposition from the politically dominant religious tradition, Christianity, and the corrosive effects of urbanization and modernization?

To begin with we must understand the traditional relationship between religion and society among African people and its implications for the way in which we perceive the role of the ancestors. Within the perception of most traditional African world views no real distinction exists between religious and non-religious experience, between sacred and secular areas of life. In this respect traditional African world views are holistic because religion embraces all areas of life from social existence to material production (Mogoba 1981:53; Thorpe 1991:107). This has considerable importance for how we approach the study of the ancestors. As Hastings (1989:24) remarks

> You can analyse ancestor veneration in almost entirely secular terms, and many good social scientists have done so, or you can analyse it in almost entirely religious terms. But you certainly cannot separate it into two.

Both the social and religious dimensions of ancestor veneration must be explored if we are to understand their significance within South African culture, a necessary prior step to reading the story of Jesus from the perspective of ancestor veneration. We may begin by examining the basic structure of ancestor cults among South African groups.

Like most other groups in Africa, the various South African Bantu divide reality into two spheres, the visible and the invisible worlds. An indivisible unity and continuity is thought to exist between these two worlds, and this plays a crucial role in African people's perceptions of reality. Death does not lead to non-existence or as in Christianity to some form of final judgment. Instead it represents a transition or transference from the visible world to the invisible 'but metaphysically real, world' (Staples 1981:169-170) which overlaps with the visible world. This is important to stress because the traditional beliefs in afterlife were extremely this-worldly in their orientation with little or no speculation by Africans about the nature of afterlife for the ancestors (Staples 1981:150). As Ray (1976:140) points out, '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.'

In the past, before the impact of Christianity had become so pervasive, the living-dead, as they are often referred to, joined a spirit world inhabited by a variety of spirit-powers including those of animals, witches' spirits and the dead who had become ancestors. While there was a notion of a creator or supreme power among most groups, this concept remained extremely vague and underdeveloped until the influence of Christianity began to be experienced (Hunter 1961:269-270; Hammond-Tooke 1981b:84).

Those who become ancestors, and not all spirits of the dead do, are thought to obtain increased authority over their lineage group and considerable supernatural power to influence the lives of their descendants (Staples 1981:186). The ancestors involve themselves in the day to day lives of their descendants as 'mentors and protectors' (Hammond-Tooke 1986:159) and as providers and sustainers. As a result they remain a living part of the social experience of their descendants, an affirmation of the central significance of the family among African people. The ancestor cult itself reinforces the

importance of respect for seniority and therefore the hierarchical character of social relations within the family and the wider society.

Ancestors are experienced by the living members of the family through various ritual practices, through dreams, through their role in everyday explanations of good fortune and misfortune, and, under the influence of Christianity, through their serving as mediators between their descendants and God. In ritual communication takes place between the living and the dead members of the family (McAllister 1988:67).

Kabasélé (1991:118), as I noted above, argues that people must 'have led a virtuous life,' which he defines in terms of such characteristics as law abiding, not wrathful or quarrelsome, and advocates of unity, in order to become ancestors. There is nothing similar among South African Bantu. The situation is much closer to what Fortes (1965:133) found among the Tallensi of Ghana: 'the personality and character, the virtue or vices, success or failures, popularity or unpopularity, of a person during his lifetime make no difference to his attainment of ancestorhood. Traditionally death, a progeny to honour a deceased person, and correct burial rites along with ritual installation as an ancestor were the requirements for attaining the status of communicating ancestor,' those named in cultic ritual, among most groups (Hammond-Tooke 1981a:24). This was restricted to the male line whether patrilineal, as with the Nguni, or bi-lateral, as with many of the Sotho-Tswana groups. Nevertheless, all deceased family members appear to become part of the aggregate of ancestors and can therefore influence the lives of their descendants (Nxumalo 1981:66-67). Under the impact of urbanization which has changed social relations and ritual practices, there is evidence which suggests that mothers and matrikin from among the aggregate of ancestors are being encounter in dreams and other experiences among urban born Africans (Pauw 1974:106-107).

The crucial question for us is the specific roles which ancestors play among their descendants since if Christ is to be conceived as an ancestor it will require some correspondence between the function of the ancestors and Christ's own function in the lives of his followers.

4.1   The Ancestors as Guardians of the Social and Moral Order

Bantu ancestors in South Africa appear to have three interrelated functions to perform in the lives of their descendants and the kinship group of which their descendants are a part. As in most other African societies where ancestors play an important role, one of the most crucial functions performed by ancestors in South Africa involves their traditional role as 'guardians' of the social and moral order.[6] The classic statement regarding the importance of the ancestors for the social order comes from Fortes (1965) who argues:

> Ancestors symbolize the continuity of the social structure, and the proper allocation, at any given time, of the authority and right they held and transmitted. Ancestor worship puts the final source of jural authority and right, or to use the more inclusive term, jurisdiction, on a pedestal, so to speak, where it is inviolable and unchallengeable, and thus able to mobilize the consent of all who must comply with it.

While he based this largely on his work the Tallensi of Ghana, Hunter (1961:266) makes the same general point in relation to the Pondo, an Nguni group. Naturally this aspect of the ancestor cult works best in the traditional small scale societies of peasant Africa which are

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6   His expression is borrowed from Ray (1976:146) who indicates that this role is perhaps the most widely understood role of the ancestors throughout Black Africa.

unilineal, whether patrilineal or matrilineal. In such societies ancestor veneration inculcates respect towards those living members of the group with authority and control of property rights thereby reinforcing the hierarchical nature of the group. At the same time it stresses solidarity among the corporate kinship group as the whole lineage group is invited to participate in rituals directed to deceased ancestors by the senior male member of the family.[7]

This traditional function of the ancestors still seems to prevail to a large degree in the rural areas of South Africa where the lineage group is patrilineal in character. As West (1975:188) notes, however, the ancestor cult is not simply about the social order with its concerns for power and property; it also concerns broader issues of morality and the underlying beliefs of those who engage in the ancestor cult.

Within traditional ancestor religion in South Africa, the ancestors have been guardians of public morality. But what is meant by morality needs to be specified since it is very different from the concerns of contemporary Christian morality. The ancestors are not concerned with impelling individuals to personal goodness through private morality Rather the ancestors require 'filial piety, and an unquestioning respect for tribal law and custom' (Eiselen and Schapera 1937:270).

It is widely believed that the ancestors use their power to bring illness and misfortune on their lineage descendants when they are angry with them for their failure to perform rituals (Pauw 1975:148; Staples 1981:67) or when parents neglect children (Pauw 1975:146), or when younger members of the kinship group fail to show proper respect towards their seniors whether the living or the living-dead (Hammond-Tooke 1981b:89).[8] They may also intervene causing illness or misfortune whenever the bad behaviour of a member or members of the group affect the other members of the group in a significant way.[9] For example, the ancestors may punish a person who quarrels with other members of the family (Hammond-Tooke 1981b:93) or fails to act with kindness and hospitality towards strangers. As Setiloane (1987:407) has put it in a poem:

> The dead are not dead, they are ever near us;
> Approving and disapproving all our actions,
> They chide us when we go wrong,
> Bless us and sustain us for good deeds done,
> for kindness shown, and strangers made to feel at home.
> The increase our store, and punish our pride.

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7 Until the last twenty or so years the separation between Christians, so-called 'school people' because of their attendance of missionary schools, and pagans or so-called 'red people,' had almost no dealing with one another when it came to ritual occasions for common ancestors. The various mission churches had suppressed their converts' sense of obligation to their ancestors and their kinship group. This situation has been changing for some time as Christians are no longer under pressure from their churches to avoid contact with their so-called 'pagan past.' See Manona (1981).

8 In one survey rural African Christians indicated that their ancestors 'show their dissatisfaction by causing death, deterioration of health, adversities relating to stock, and mental derangements or deficiency.' Urban Christians showed a similar pattern except for issues relating to livestock, 'but failure in one's efforts and accidents were referred to more often than any of the other, while inferiority in prestige and character, taken as a single category, figured more frequently than illness and death.' Urban dwellers also attribute lose of or lack of material goods and unemployment to the anger of the ancestors (Pauw 1975:149).

9 This was pointed out to me by my colleague Ms. Nokazola Mndende. Pauw (1975:148) offers an interesting case of this where a social worker ascribed his brother's paralysis after a stabbing incident to the anger of the ancestors about the brother's misbehaviour.

The consequence of ancestors dealing with misbehaviour of all sorts has considerable import for the Bantu understanding of what Christians call judgment. Mogoba (1981:56) using Christian language, claims that traditional (pre-Christian) Pedi theology holds the belief that 'the sinful behaviour of the people is judged and punished in this life' by God and the ancestors. The living-dead, having experienced justice and punishment during their lifetimes, then become 'part of the divine judicial panel' who dispense justice to their lineage group.

4.2   The Ancestors as the Givers and Sustainers of Life

Central to ancestor religion are two key factors. First, kinship groups are aware that the ancestors are the original source of life force for the lineage group and for this they deserve honour. Second ancestor religion is focused on very practical matters such as health and material necessities, with a real paucity of what people in the West might call theological speculation regarding such issues as the nature of God and the nature of afterlife for the ancestors (Staples 1981:84). Thus the ancestors as the original givers of life are looked to for the sustaining of life among their descendants. Traditional benefits bestowed by ancestors include 'offspring ... fertility in both fields and livestock, rain, good health, protection from physical and mystical danger, and the curing of illness' (Staples 1981:90). In urban areas the assistance provided by ancestors has been adapted to the changed situation including 'continuing economic struggle, the concern with educational advancement, the dangers of traffic and industry, and the moral deterioration and crime characteristic of life in many African townships' (Pauw 1974:104).

We have discussed the ancestors' role in using or threatening misfortune for maintaining morality and the social order. Several researchers have noted, however, that Christianity has had a significant impact on people's perception of the ancestors. Conversion to Christianity and faith in Christ 'do help to wipe away fear of ancestors, but do not encourage rejection' (Nxumalo 1981:67). Christians, unlike the unconverted, emphasize more the benevolence of the ancestors rather than their disciplinary functions through causing misfortune. For example, Pauw (1975:151) maintains

> Christians believe that their ancestors manifest their influence in their own lives mainly through their benevolent care, keeping them from death, disease, accidents and other dangers, and aiding them in illness and trouble; and they grant success in economic pursuits and in maintaining prestige, character and sound kinship relations.

This appears to be a significant change in the perception of the ancestors brought about by Christianization and underscores their role in giving and sustaining life for their families and lineages.

The Christian perspective on the ancestors does not end here. Converts to Christianity and their offspring also emphasize the support which the ancestors give them in their Christian faith (Pauw 1974:104). Crucial to this Christianized understanding of the ancestors is a reconstruction of the relation between the ancestors and their lineage group. The understanding among at least some Christians is that their forebears are now in heaven with God but that they continue their relation with their living families, as ancestor did in the past. Now, however, the ancestor are 'spiritual guardians and protectors of their families' (Nxumalo 1981:68), especially protecting them against misfortune, evil spirits, and the malicious power of witches.

In general Roman Catholics and members of Zionist Independent Churches appear to have gone the furthest in Christianizing their ancestors in this respect, though Bishop

Mogoba, the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa recently has declared that 'ancestor-beliefs are not in conflict with the Christian beliefs. They can make easy [sic] for African Christians to accept the good news of Jesus Christ who died and was raised from the dead' (Mogoba 1994:6).

4.3   The Ancestors as Mediators

The ancestors have become the mediators, par excellence, between their lineages and God. This appears to have not always been the case among South African Bantu. The reasons for this are complex, but essentially reside in the conception of the Divine in pre-Christian African religions. Setiloane (1986:21-28) argues that Bantu did not have a notion of a personal deity. According to him *Modimo*, the Sotho-Tswana name for the numinous, creative force behind all that is, 'was understood to be something intangible, invisible, a natural phenomenon able to penetrate and percolate into things' (27). *Modimo* referred to 'energy that is ever active, initiating action, and maintaining interaction' (28). The somewhat nebulous conception of the impersonal divine force behind all that is, had an important consequence: 'no rituals were directed and no prayers were offered' to the divine vital force by most African groups (Hammond-Tooke 1978:138; see also 1974:319 and 1975:17).[10] Before the introduction of a personal God by Christianity the ancestors could have no intermediary role because there was no personal God with whom to mediate. This led to ancestors being viewed as all-powerful in the lives of their living families. Thus Hammond-Tooke (1978:138) emphatically points out that

> the oft-repeated statement that the ancestors stand in a hierarchical relationship to the Supreme Being and mediate between him and man, is not part of any indigenous world-view. Where such an idea has been recorded it is almost certainly due to missionary influence. There is nothing in indigenous concepts to indicate such a relationship (see also Hammond-Tooke 1975:17; Staples 1981:122-125).

When missionaries introduced the highly developed concept of a personal God into the relative vacuum of the Bantu traditions, it tended to fill that vacuum. Even those who did not convert to Christianity were impacted by the concepts associated with the Christian God. Thus evidence exists to show that even non-Christian Nguni people now 'accept the reality of a universal God and may occasionally pray to him directly' (Hammond-Tooke 1986:165).

Although some African theologians like to claim the ancestors have always been mediators between their descendants and God,[11] the fact is that this idea has played an increasingly prominent role in defining the socio-religious function of the ancestors only under the influence of Christianity. This seems to be attributable to two factors.

1) Christianity views Christ as the mediator between God and man. Africans have noted this connection and have substituted their ancestors in the role of Christ. JH Soga, a

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10 This is an extremely sensitive issue since African theologians have either assumed or in some cases tried to prove that Africans had a pre-Christian conception of God that was not dissimilar from those taught by later missionary Christianity. See for example Setiloane (1986:21-28). For a useful discussion of this theme and the changing concept of the Supreme God in African traditional religions with a special focus on Southern Africa see Staples (1981:93-112).

11 The idea of the ancestors as mediators is now widely held among South African Bantu. One of the reasons for its popularity may be that conceptualizing the relation between the ancestors and God as one of mediation had the effect of undercutting the Christian missionary view that the ancestors were actually worshipped and therefore required suppression as a form of worship of false gods. Africans often claim that the ancestors serve the same function for Africans as the saints do in certain forms of Christianity.

Xhosa Presbyterian minister, writing over sixty years ago said, 'God is worshipped through the intermediary, Jesus Christ, so the Xhosa worships the Supreme Being, Tixo, through the medium of the ancestral spirits' (quoted from Staples 1981:124). The same point was made by a Bishop of a Zionist Independent Church more recently when he said,

> You see, in our nation *modimo* {God} and *badimo* [the ancestors] are linked... I have to pray through *badimo* to *modimo*. They are our angels. In the same way you must put your word through Jesus Christ to God, then God will help you (quoted from West 1975:200).

2) Among various Bantu groups one of the fundamental features of social interactions involving unequals is the employment of intermediaries. They are used by inferiors as a sign of respect towards seniors and superiors and as a sign of authority by seniors and superiors when dealing with inferiors (Mogoba 1981:55). As the Supreme Power of various Bantu groups was assimilated to the Christian God of the missionaries, the ancestors inevitably underwent a 'demotion' in power. At the same time the distance increased between humans and the ultimate authority and power of the personalized Supreme Being. Applying the cultural model of mediation, enabled the ancestors to regain a significant role in relation to their descendants and God.

The reason why ancestors can fill the role of intermediaries is well put by Nxumalo (1981:67):

> They have experienced death. They are no longer in this world. They have been elevated to a new status. They have a particular power to pray to God and be heard. They are closer to God than those who are living, [sic] therefore they become our intermediaries. There is a relationship between God and those who are dead and from him they derive the power of doing good.

In light of the above discussion regarding the ancestors I now want to turn to a brief reading of the story of Christ in the New Testament to suggests ways in which contemporary African Christians might read that story and make sense of it in light of their own culture and religious experience.

5.   Reading the Story of Jesus Christ in Light of African Ancestors

To begin with I must sound a word of caution. The development of an ancestor Christology cannot provide African Christians with a total Christology. What it promises to do is link an important dimension of many African Christians' identity and experience with a significant aspect of Christ's function.

5.1   The Family of Jesus

The beginning point for an ancestor reading of the story Jesus Christ must be the question of Jesus' family membership. For the African, family membership is fundamentally important to the person's understanding of who he or she is. Therefore one of the first questions for which an African might wish an answer concerning Jesus is: to what family does he belong?

The New Testament offers several different answers to the question. The genealogy of the Gospel of Matthew links Jesus to one of the most important families of his people, namely, the family of David, the great King of Israel's past. From an African perspective this is significant because it marks him off as a person of authority and power within his

own social group. The Gospel of Luke goes beyond the Gospel of Matthew in its location of Jesus. Luke traces Jesus back to David, the great King, but ultimately he traces Jesus back to the first human, Adam, who was the descendant of the Divine creative force. This means that Jesus' human ancestry links him to all the tribes of the earth.

Luke does something else which effects our understanding of Jesus' family. His genealogy is preceded by his report of the baptism of Jesus where God, the Supreme Father of all humans, speaks to those assembled declaring Jesus to be his beloved and favoured Son (Luke 3:21-22). From an African Christian perspective this makes Jesus the most senior member of the human family. But it is also worth noting that this intervention of the Primogenitor of all ancestors and living humans occurs directly, not through the mediation of a diviner, as normally happens in African societies, and instructs the people to accord Jesus the same special status which the Ancestor of all has bestowed upon him. The juxtaposition of the visible world of humans and the invisible world of the ancestors and of God is implied, but also uniquely bridged by the voice of God from the invisible world.

If we turn to the Gospel of John the significance of Jesus as the Son of the Primogenitor of all the living and the living-dead is spelled out even more clearly. John 1:18 poses certain textual and exegetical problems but the thrust of the passage is certain: No human has at any time seen the Primogenitor of all; but Jesus Christ the only direct descendent of God, who enjoys the closest intimacy with his Father in the invisible world, has made him known. To whom has he made the Father of all known? Jesus Christ himself was the Primogenitor's agent in creating everything in the visible and the invisible worlds according to John 1:1-3. Most importantly for his position as the common Ancestor of all humans, it was Jesus, the only Son of God, who was the original source of all the life forces.

The implication of Jesus' family origins, as described in the Gospel of John, for traditional African cosmology is that he is the one in whom all of the creative interactive power of the Supreme God has been present and through whom it has been active in creating and sustaining the world and all that is in it, including human beings. This provides a clear Biblical basis for Bishop Mogoba's declaration: 'For me, Jesus is the supreme ancestor. There are other ancestors, but from a Christian perspective I must regard Jesus as the greatest of the ancestors' (quoted from Villa-Vicencio 1994:197). He is greatest because every other human ancestor has Jesus for his or her ancestor. Only Jesus Christ has God directly for his Father.

The New Testament offers another perspective on the family of Jesus which directly effects African Christians. Early Christianity brought together people from disparate cultural, socio-economic, and family backgrounds into what was a voluntary organization made up of small communities scattered around the urban areas of the Mediterranean basin. The problem was how to give people coming from such diverse backgrounds with no previous social contact with one another a sense of common identity and shared commitment. Part of the answer to this crucial question was found in the creation of a fictive family which claimed to have a common parent in God. Thus Paul writes, 'For those whom he [God] fore knew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son [Jesus Christ] in order that he might be the first born within a large family' (Rom. 8:29). For Paul the Christian communities were part of the extended family of God, hence the use of the term 'brothers' as Paul's favorite form of address for his fellow Christians. In this construction of the family of God, Jesus occupies the position of eldest brother, a key role in African families since the eldest brother is responsible for the ritual of the ancestor cult and therefore receives the authority of the family's father when the father joins the living-dead.

Contemporary Christian communities often face the same problems of the early church communities in uniting people without social or family connections. This is not unimportant in the urban environment of South Africa. Wilson and Mafeje (1961:91) noted in their study of Langa, an African township of Cape Town, that traditional corporative kinship groups tend to disappear over time in the urban areas. All that remains are elementary family units. This has resulted in many urban African people seeking to replace corporative family membership with a variety of voluntary organizations, the most important of which are church communities. Instead of suppressing ancestor beliefs as many churches did in the past, it would seem that a better strategy would be to attempt to link converts into a sense of identity with the family of God, whose elder brother is Jesus and whose ancestor is God.

5.2 The Importance of the Death of Jesus from an African Perspective

From the viewpoint of ancestor religion the life and public activity of Jesus, the prophet of God,[12] are not important. The reason for this is, as we have seen, the fact that the quality of an individual's human existence does not play a decisive role in whether the person becomes an ancestor or not. It is not unreasonable to assume, however, that for African Christians this may become an important consideration in the future as the ancestor tradition is further adapted to a Christian perspective. From an African point of view it is also not the nature of Jesus' death which is important. What matters is the fact of his death since from the African perspective, Jesus' death leads to his life as an ancestor. This is confirmed by the following statement of an African Christian lay person:

> In my view, there is a relationship between Christ and the ancestors, for the simple reason that Christ died too. He is therefore an *idlozi* [this term refers to the living-dead as those who appear to and communicate with the living (Nxumalo 1981:66)] to us, since those who are dead are *amadlozi* [plural of *idlozi*] for us. Therefore Christ and those who have died are united together. We call them together in Christ (Nxumalo 1981:67).

This statement clearly reflects a person who has assimilated his understanding of the centrality of Jesus for his Christian faith to his continued commitment to his ancestors whom he places under Jesus as their senior. It is also worth noting that no reference is made to the resurrection of Jesus. His afterlife is assumed to be of the same character as all other ancestors, reflecting the fact that resurrection does not fit with African world views, though an African would be quite comfortable with the resurrection appearances as visionary visitations of an ancestor.

5.3 The Function of Jesus, as a Member of the Living-dead

The analysis above of the three primary functions of ancestors provides the framework in which Jesus needs to be understood as an ancestor. An African reading of the New Testament story of Jesus Christ provides a reasonable basis for relating Jesus to the roles of guardian of the social and moral order, giver and sustainer of life, and mediator with God.

The writers of the New Testament repeatedly make clear that Jesus will be the judge of all humanity at the end of the current world order (Matt. 25:31-46; John 5:19-29; Rom.

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12 In my view the term 'prophet' is the best description for the human activity of Jesus. This designation has implications for how an African Christian might view the work of Jesus given the role of prophets in the African Independent Churches, but it lies outside the parameters of this paper to explore this important topic.

2:16), This is not, however, what an African person would expect from an ancestor. Punishment must be more immediate for misdeeds that threaten the proper order of society or breach the moral norms. The Book of Acts contains stories about the kind of judgment which African people would expect from an ancestor, and each one of the stories involves subordinate members from the Jewish people of whom Jesus was the senior member.[13] For example, Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead immediately for attempting to perpetrate fraud against Christ's community thereby testing the spirit of Jesus. (Acts 5:1-11). It is not unknown for an ancestor to bring about someone's death for a breach against the social code, as happened in the family of one of my informants.

Punishment for misdeeds by the ancestors does not normally result in death however. In the Book of Acts the same is true. Paul, a member of the Jewish family of which Jesus was a senior member by virtue of belonging to the lineage of David, was blinded by Jesus on the road to Damascus in order to dissuade him from further abuses against the fictive family of Jesus, the Christian brothers and sisters (Acts 9:1-19). The experience had a salutary effect on Paul since it changed his whole behavior for good. This is what the ancestors seek to do by their punishment.

Two further episodes from Acts may be mentioned. In Acts 13:6-12 tells the story of a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus who attempted to thwart the missionary work of Paul. Jesus struck the person down with temporary blindness. The sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest, who misused the name of Jesus in exorcisms, were strongly punished for it according to Acts 19:11-17, and this resulted in many people ceasing to practice sorcery (Acts 19:18-20). Two points about this particular incident need to be made. In the first place, the ancestor Jesus did not intervene directly, but he used a man with an evil spirit. Ancestors need not intervene directly but may use other agencies to express their displeasure, including even witches (Bucher 1980:69). Secondly, for African people who fear sorcery and blame it for much of the misfortune which takes place in their lives (see Hammond-Tooke 1986:160-162), the overcoming of witchcraft is vitally important in maintaining order in society.

Although the direct intervention of the ancestor Jesus to maintain social order are not numerous, those we have looked at fit nicely within the framework on the ancestors' duty to guard the social order. Apart from such occasions, it is clear that Jesus as an ancestor is concerned about the preservation of the moral order. Even while he was alive he enjoined that the members of his family must keep the law of the ancestors (Matt. 5:17-20). His concern for the behavior of his living family is clear from such texts as Gal. 5:16-26. In this passage the moral requirements which Jesus seeks to maintain through his Spirit are contrasted with the evils which he rejects.

The second major role of an ancestor is the opposite to that of bringing about misfortune to maintain good behavior and the social order. The ancestor is also a source of benefit, a giver and sustainer of the life of his descendants. Jesus after his death performs this task continuously for his living family, the church.

The writer of the Gospel of John tell us of Jesus, 'In him was life and the life was the light of all people' (John 1:4). Thus Jesus is the source of all life for all the peoples of the world and for all that exists. But he Jesus has a special life-giving role towards the fictive

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13 According to the John 8:58 Jesus told his fellow Jews, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.' This indicates that Jesus is senior even to Abraham, the founding father of the Jewish people and therefore has the right to discipline them.

family of God that Christians form: 'I came that they [the family of God] might have life and have it abundantly' (John 10:10).

Before his death Jesus made several crucial promises to his family members. First, he promised: 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you [after I die]. In a little while the world will no longer see me [because I will be dead], but you will see me; because I live [beyond death] you also will live' (John 14:18-19). Thus Jesus saw himself performing the role of an ancestor by sustaining the life of his family. Second, he promised: 'I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything I will do it' (John 14:13-14). He also promised to assist his family with whatever their physical or material needs might be. This promise is linked in John to the request for his family to demonstrate their love to him by keeping the commandments which he has given them (John 14:15). As with other African ancestors, Jesus rewards the filial obedience of his offspring by blessing them.

In the Book of Acts we see the practical implications of Jesus' role as life-giving and life-sustaining ancestor. In Acts 3:1-10 the story is told of how the shade Jesus healed a person lame from birth enabling the person for the first time in his life to walk. In Samaria unclean spirits, analogous to the 'spirits of affliction' which now occur among a number of South African groups (Hammond-Tooke 1986:162-164), were exorcised, and paralyzed and lame people were healed through the power of Jesus (Acts 8:4-9). At Lydda a member of the fictive family of Jesus who was also a member of the Jewish family of Jesus, was healed by Jesus of his paralysis (Acts 9:32-35). One of the senior members of the fictive family of Jesus, the apostle Peter, was delivered from prison and possible death by the intervention of Jesus when he sent a special spirit messenger to free him (Acts 12:6-19). Jesus appeared in several visions to another senior member of the family, Paul, in order to give him directions about tasks which he must undertake under his protection (Acts 18:9-10; 23:11). In a variety of dangerous situations including riots (Acts 22:22-29) and a shipwreck (Acts 27:39-44) Jesus protected Paul.

Thus the New Testament maintains that Jesus, the only Son of the Father, is the direct source of life for all humanity from the primal ancestors Adam and Eve onward. But Jesus is also source of life and the sustainer of life for the new fictive family of God which began from his death.

Finally I turn briefly to the role of Jesus as the mediator between God and the living-dead and the living. The unique function of Jesus as mediator is unequivocally expressed in his own words in John 14:6, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' Neither living human beings nor the ancestors have direct access to the Supreme Being, the Primogenitor of all. Only Jesus, the one direct descendant of the creator Father, has direct access to God. Thus when the ancestors of African people, whether they are Christians or not, take the needs of their descendants to God they do so through Jesus, God's unique Son, because he is the direct source of all life, whether human or spirit.

6. Conclusions

The relation between African traditional religions and Western traditional Christianities is a complex and dynamic one. After centuries of political, cultural and religious colonization African people are seeking to reassert their identity and birth right as Africans. The clock, however, cannot be turned back. South Africa has irreversibly changed from the small scale tribal societies which existed before the colonial period to a significantly urbanized society in which tribalism is viewed by many as dangerous to political unity and

social progress. African traditional religions have ineluctably changed as well with a majority of African people understanding themselves to be Christians.

Christianity after two centuries, however, has not managed to suppress the ancestors from the consciousness and experience of African Christians. Quite the contrary, Christianity is now being Africanized to accommodate the beliefs and practices of Bantu Christians. For them, nothing is more important than their ancestors who give them their sense of belonging in their families and communities. In this situation Jesus Christ is undergoing Africanization. So far the most important component of that process is the adoption of Jesus as inclusive ancestor by at least some Christians.

This paper has been an attempt to explore the nature and function of ancestors for African people and then to apply those findings to a possible African reading of the story of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. What I hope that I have shown is that the New Testament itself can be read from an African perspective in which some of Jesus Christ's functions are those of the ancestors of African people.

As Bishop Mogoba (1994:6) observes: the ancestors in all their richness may be 'one of the great contributions African Christianity can make to world Christianity.'

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