

COMPARISON BETWEEN BIBLICAL AND AFRICAN CONCEPT OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

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Abstract

This paper on the comparison between biblical and African concept of live after death seeks to unearth some of the minute similarities and broad differences between the two believe systems about death. In the pursuit of this agenda, a brief survey is made on each concept before the comparison is made and conclusion drawn.

Introduction

Death and life after death is a mystery that has occupied the minds of people from ages past. As John Hick observed;

.. death is a central concern of all the religions of the world and has been reflected upon by nearly all the great religious and none religious thinkers, so that much of the literature of the faiths and philosophies of all ages, written in many ancient and modern languages is relevant to it.¹

Yet despite such a number of literature about death, no one has come up to conclusively say he / she has discovered the reality about death since it is not yet clear as to what happens to a man after death. In the times of the Buddha there was a great multiplicity of rival views as today concerning death.² This period saw raising of many questions about the mystery of death and life after which did not receive adequate answers, such as; is the death of the body the extinction of the person? Or does he survive as a continuing consciousness? Or as a resurrected person? With a spiritual body? In perpetuity or for a limited period? Will he be born again to live an earthly life? or there is time or timelessness beyond death? Is the individual absorbed back into some great spiritual reality, like a drop returning to the ocean?³

¹ John Hick, *Death and Eternal life* (London: Macmillan, 1976), 21.

² "Brahma – Gala Suttarta," *Digha-Nikaga*)Dialogue of the Buddha, Part 1), 25-55

Much as the attempt to venture in digging into the subject of death and hereafter has left many people in dilemma, it does not mean people should stop thinking about it just as they do not stop thinking about life because death is much a mysterious a fact as life and that the two mysteries are inextricably bound together that if we wish to think realistically about life, we can not desist from thinking about death and hereafter.

Although death leaves much to be done undone, the bible gives a perfect hope for human beings that there life after death. Such assurance is also given to the Africans in their traditional beliefs, though not to the extent that the bible gives. It is to this hope that is provided by the bible and African tradition that we are going to concern ourselves with.

Biblical Concept of Life after Death

The bible is very explicit about the subject of death and hereafter. For, it looks at death as a place of man's last destiny,⁴ because all men who descended from Adam are mortal and immortality is a gift of God, which is achieved through the resurrection of the whole person.⁵

Based on the above assertion, therefore, the Bible takes death seriously because it is not an illusion but the consequence of sin,⁶ and evil,⁷ from which men tremble in fear.⁸

Death is an enemy of God and man which would be destroyed,⁹ abolished in principle at Christ's resurrection,¹⁰ and to be finally done away with at the end.¹¹

However much as the bible provides hope that there would be life after death, initially, the Old Testament was not clear about the state of the dead. For, the Old Testament pictures the state of the dead as existence in sheol, the grave or the underworld.¹² But existence in sheol is not life

³ John Hick, *Death and Eternal life*, 21

⁴ Hebrews 9:27

⁵ J.D. Douglas (Org. Ed), *New Bible Dictionary* 2nd Ed. (Leicester: IVP, 1982) 346.

⁶ Gen. 2:17, Ps. 90:7-11, Rom. 5:12, 6:23, 1 Cor15:21 & Jos 1:15

⁷ Deut 30:15, 19

⁸ Ps. 55:4f

⁹ 1 Cor. 15:26

¹⁰ 2 Tim. 1:10

¹¹ Rev. 20:14 cf Isa. 25:8

¹² J.D Dauglas (org. Ed) *New Bible dictionary*, 346, Hades is the New Testament equivalent of sheol (Mt 11:23, 16:18, Lk. 10:15, Acts 2:27, Rev 1:18, 20:13f) in most cases referring to death or the power of death.

because it is a life of darkness,¹³ and silence,¹⁴ in which God is not remembered.¹⁵ This makes such dead in sheol to be cut off from God.¹⁶ Therefore, such a state makes life a nonsense.¹⁷

Probably because of the above, in some circles, the Old Testament teaches that once someone is dead, there is no hope for him. To this effect Job asserts that:

There is hope for a tree that has been cut down, it can come back to life and sprout. But a man dies and where is the end of him, he dies and where is he? Like rivers that stop running and lakes that go dry, people die and never to rise.¹⁸

Such a view of life when death occurs, made King David, at the death of his son, to say, “I will some day go to where he is but he can never come back to me.”¹⁹

As time went by, however, the Old Testament started to see a hope for real life beyond death: a life out of reach of sheol in the presence of God.²⁰ Then a clear Old Testament reference to the doctrine of the resurrection is found in Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2.²¹

In the New Testament, however, God’s victory over death through the resurrection of Christ gives hope for all believers about life after death. This hope therefore, delivered those who believe in Christ from the fear of death,²² thus making them to see death as a transition stage: a sleep from which they will awake,²³ or even as a departing to be with Christ,²⁴ and or waiting.²⁵

¹³ Job 10:21

¹⁴ Ps 115:17

¹⁵ Ps. 6:5, 30:9, 88:11, Isa 38:18

¹⁶ Ps. 88:5

¹⁷ This is very reminiscent of the basic questions raised in the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 1

¹⁸ Job 14:7-11

¹⁹ 2 Sam 12:23

²⁰ Ps 16:10f, 49:15, 73:34 and to some extent Job 19:25f. this hope might have probably been stimulated by the example of Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11) who did not test death but rather went to join God with their physical body.

²¹ Stephen H. Travis, *I Believe in the second coming of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Staughton, 1982), 161.

²² Heb. 2:14f

²³ Acts 7:60, 1 Cor. 15:51, 1 Thes 4:13ff, 5:10. in his book “Know the Truth” page 268, Bruce Milne said it is not difficult to see how the term sleep could be linked to death because death have some characteristics of sleep: rest from labour, ceasing of responsibility, abstraction from immediate involvement in events, a different kind of awareness.

When Christ returns, there will be judgment to decide in the fate of people (Mt. 12:24). Then those who are found to be righteous would inherit a life which is different from our present experience,²⁶ (though some traces of the present life would be retained).²⁷ There would be a life of activity where there would be singing and praising,²⁸ a life of no suffering,²⁹ and a life of community,³⁰ where God and Jesus would be kings. But those who would be found unworthy would be sent to hell.

African Concept of Life after Death

Africans are well versed with the belief that death awaits every body born into this world. For this reason, they regard death as a monster that robs people of their dear ones.³¹ Though this enemy robs people of their kin, Africans conceive of it as a departure but not a complete extinction of a person. For, to them when someone dies he /she moves to join the company of the departed in another state of existence in the next world. This explains why when death occurs some societies perform elaborate rituals to prepare the dead for the life in the next world. In some society, such rituals involve burying the dead with food stuff, drinks, weapons, wife / wives or slaves and smearing the body with oil.³²

The Abaluya, for example, burry their dead naked as a preparatory stage for rebirth in the next world.³³ The Madi on their part before burying ladies wraps the opening of their genital organ to

²⁴ Lk. 23:43, 2 Cor. 5:8, Phil. 1:23. according to Bruce, this is the most important description. For to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord. To die is to depart to be with Christ, which is far better (pg. 268).

²⁵ Rev. 6:9f. this implies that death is a transit point such that when Christ come for the second time, those who have been waiting will join him in eternity.

²⁶ Life in the new heavens and earth will be free from limitation brought about by the fall and sin. We shall be changed since flesh and blood as we know here can not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 15:50f). taking Jesus' resurrection body as a model we meet new and strange properties (Lk 24:31, 36ff, Jn 20:19-20).

²⁷ Bruce, Know the Truth 270

²⁸ Stephen, I believe in the second coming of Jesus, 179-180

²⁹ Rev. 21:1-5

³⁰ Steven, 178

³¹ In African societies death is always assumed to have been caused by witchcraft or bad hearted people.

³² For details about this see John S. Mbiti: African Traditional Religion and Philosophy (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1971), 151. a classic example of burying people with wives or slaves and other materials was during the Pharaoemic period in Egypt. Such people are to assist the dead and give company while food staff is food for the dead and the weapons are for protection.

³³ Just as people are born naked to be buried naked prepares one for another rebirth in the next world. Cf Mbiti: African Traditional Religion and Philosophy. 155

avoid her menstrual blood run on herself to the embarrassment of the people in the next world.³⁴ And for the males, they remove the penis out of the sheet for wrapping the body and open up the foreskin to aid erection and procreation in the next world.³⁵

The apparent belief in the survival of the dead has made Africans to believe that much as a person dies, he does not disappear from the day to day program of the living people because he / she is still there with the people. Thus making them to revere and consult such living dead in matters related to the family.³⁶

Although the belief of Africans is rich in life after death, their concept does not have the idea of judgment or reward. Professor John Samuel Mbiti stressed this when he said:

The majority of African people do not expect any form of judgment or reward in the hereafter. We have only a few exceptions to this statement. The Yoruba believe that after death the person presents himself before God and give an account of his earthly life.³⁷

Mbiti drives this point further when he quoted a saying of the Yoruba from Idowus' book that:

All that we do on earth, we shall account for by kneeling in heaven... we shall state our case at the feet of God.³⁸

Besides the Yoruba, such idea of reward or punishment is found among other societies like the Lodagaa, Lozi and Sonjo. For example, according to Mbiti:

...the Ladagaa fear that suffering awaits bad people at the crossing of

³⁴ This is a testimony from Ven. Pashi William who witnessed this at the burial of a certain lady, but they could not let the people do the ritual because the lady they were burying was a Christian.

³⁵ A testimony from Andruga James.

³⁶ A case in point is one time some one who was killed in a bottle field kept on disturbing his relatives that he was left in the cold. Due to his constant infliction of pain on some of the living relatives, they organized and performed a ritual to bring his spirit home. It was said that when the spirit arrived home, it attacked somebody, who in her convulsion state, was speaking with the voice of the dead person. So such and many other claims by people that their departed spoke to them or revealed some secrets to them or showed the whereabouts of a lost item, is an indication that Africans do believe that the death of a person is not his / her end but rather continuation of life in another state.

³⁷ A quotation from John S. Mbiti: African Traditional Religion and Philosophy, Pg. 161.

³⁸ Mbiti: African Traditional Religion and Philosophy, 161. For details see Idowu, E.B, Olodumere: God in Yoruba Belief (London/ New York 1962), 189-199

the river of death and no arrival in the next world, every one must endure punishment (a kind of bullying) from the older spirits.³⁹

In order to have one received well and have a happy life in the next world, Mbiti asserts that “the Lozi wear tribal marks on the arms and ears so that they may be recognized...⁴⁰ The Sonjo also have a similar belief in that for them “wearing a tribal mark on the shoulders will guarantee them recognition when their national hero returns to save them.”⁴¹

Though the concept of reward or punishment is prevalent among the Yoruba, they are not certain about the final destiny of the departed. In their belief they think some of the dead are put in good place while others are send to a bad place. According to them the first group meet relatives and live more or less as people did in this life, but the other group would go to a place of eternal suffering.

Apart from the few examples sighted above and some other isolated cases in seeing the hereafter in terms of reward and punishment, the majority of African societies believe that the hereafter is a continuation of this present life, though somehow changed. This means, says Mbiti:

.... Personalities are retained, social and political status are maintained, sex distinction is continued, human activities are reproduced in hereafter, the wealth or poverty of a person remains unchanged and in many ways the hereafter is a carbon copy of the present.⁴²

Based on the foregone discussions, it is suffice to contend that Africans are not green about what happens after this earthly life because they have a strong believe in the continuation of the present life after death.

³⁹ Mbiti, African Religion and Philosophy, 161

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Mbiti: African Traditional Religion and Philosophy, 161

Biblical vases African Concept of Life after Death

The above discussion about life after death according to the bible and Africans has now brought us to look at some of the similarities and or divergences that exist between the two. For, a closer observation reveals that there are many striking similarities between the biblical and African concept of life after death.

To begin with, death is seen as an enemy or monster both in the bible and by African societies unlike in Greek philosophy where it is welcomed as a friend / liberator.⁴³ In regard to the bible the synoptic gospels inform us that when faced with death, Jesus began to tremble and be distressed and told his disciples ‘my soul is troubled even to death.’⁴⁴ This fear expressed by Jesus could compare well with the fear expressed by Africans when death is about to occur because it causes sorrow, loneliness and robbing the society of productive people.

Death in both traditions is seen as a place of none return. This idea, in the bible is expressed in the Old Testament where those who die are regarded not able to return to live another bodily life. A classic example of this is when king David, at the mourning of his child said “I will some day go to where he is but he can never come back to me,”⁴⁵ a view which is re-echoed in Job,⁴⁶ and Ecclesiastes.⁴⁷ This is the ideal view among the Africans where the idea of the resurrection of the body is unimaginable.

Though death is seen as a place of none return at the beginning of the Old Testament and African thinking, it is not an extinction of the person but instead a state of transition in life to the next place of existence. For like king David who knew he would meet with his son someday after his death, the Africans do believe that after their own death, they would meet their previously dead relatives.

⁴³ welcoming of death as a friend is explained well by Oscar Cullman in his book, “Immortality of the soul or resurrection of the dead? (London: The Epworth Press, 1958), 19-20, where he vividly draws from Plato’s writing the way Socrates welcomed death as the soul’s great friend because to him whoever fears death proves that he loves the world of the body, that he is thoroughly entangled in the world of sense.

⁴⁴ Mark 14:34

⁴⁵ 2 Sam 12:23

⁴⁶ Job 14:7-11

⁴⁷ Ecc. 1:1ff

Based on such view, in both traditions, those who are dead are not regarded dead but rather living. For example when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush he told Moses: I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,⁴⁸ Jesus interpreted this saying of God to “God is not the God of the dead, but he is the God of the living”.⁴⁹ This assertion is an ideal belief in African societies who also regard the dead as being alive and active in their day to day affairs. This is why, before eating or drinking, some Africans first get some food or drink for their dead to show that they are sharing the same food or drinks with those whom they call the living dead.”

The idea of reward or punishment expressed in the bible is seen to be silent in most African societies. However, the few examples sighted among the Yoruba, Sonjo and Ladagaa could some what compare with the Biblical concept of reward and punishment. For, the belief of the Yoruba that people are going to face God’s judgment after death is reminiscent of the New Testament’s talk about the coming judgment of God.⁵⁰ According to the Bible and the Ladagaa / Yoruba people who are found worthy would inherit a place of peace but those who have not behaved well would be punished.⁵¹

Although unlike in the bible the concept of life after death in African belief is not expressed by resurrection, the belief in the continuity of the present life to the next is expressed in both. The bible teaches that at resurrection the body will retain some form of our present existence though in a transformed way.⁵² And in African believe such continuation of this present life would be in a real sense of the word, which is somehow short of the biblical reckoning.

The community life anticipated in the hereafter is expressed both in the bible and African societies. The bible talks of people going to be in the presence of God with other saints,⁵³ and

⁴⁸ Exod. 3

⁴⁹ Mark 12:26-27, Lk 20:37-38, Mat 22:32

⁵⁰ Matt. 25:31-46. for the African view see Edowu E.B Olodumere: 189-199

⁵¹ Matt 25:46 cf Mbiti: African Religion and Philosophy, 161. much as the story Jesus told about the separation of the sheep from the goats is similar to what the Yoruba believe, the concept of being with God for the good people is not there among the Yoruba. For them the good people would instead go to meet their relatives. However, since Africans believe their dead after sometimes join the realm of the divinities, this could be likened to the biblical view.

⁵² 1 Cor. 15:51, Rev. 21:61, Matt. 22:29. however, this in the bible does not mean things like marriage will continue in the hereafter.

⁵³ Re. 59

Africans say they would go to join their departed relatives and enjoy life together. However, according to the bible, this community would be a community of activity where new depth of relationship would develop among God's people: a relationship of love, peace, righteousness and joy.⁵⁴ Such a view is, though not well developed among the Africans.

Conclusion

In the foregone, discussion, I have been laboring to see some of the beliefs about the state of humans after death following the biblical and African concepts. All in all, some striking similarities in the two views were unearthed though to some extent the views in the African settings have been found not well developed. However, such views could shade a bit of light for us to understand that African beliefs are not far from the biblical concepts. Therefore, there is need to develop such ideas well so that Africans could get a right believe about God based on their concept of God and human life.

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⁵⁴ Stephen H. Travis, I believe in the second coming of Jesus (London: Hodder and Stughton, 1982), 180