CHAPTER 7

The Church as an Assembly on Mt Zion: An Ecclesiology from Hebrews for African Christianity

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I classify ecclesiological studies, against which I briefly survey African ecclesiological scholarship. From this survey I show that, relative to ecclesiological studies elsewhere, there is a paucity of literature on ecclesiology within African scholarship. I argue that this paucity puts African Christianity at a disadvantage in the quest of African Christians to be simultaneously African and biblical, thereby embodying an African biblical Christianity. In an effort, therefore, to contribute to African ecclesiological scholarship, I offer a conceptual ecclesiology drawn from Hebrews in which the church is understood as a community approaching God, in Christ, in his heavenly dwelling (the heavenly Mt Zion) to offer him, through the same Christ, prayers and immaterial sacrifices, and to live in obedience to him en route to partaking in the coming fullness of his presence and kingdom. This fullness will result in the realization of God's purposes for creating the world.

I wish to propose from Hebrews a biblical theological ecclesiology that is at home in African Christianity. But since the subject of ecclesiology is vast I will begin my paper by classifying academic discourse on ecclesiology, and within that classification give an overview of ecclesiological studies in Africa. This overview will support the view that, although all types of ecclesiological study are found in Africa, more ecclesiological studies from Africa are needed, especially in the area of conceptual

ecclesiologies, if the quest for an authentic but biblical African Christianity is to be achieved.

Global and African Ecclesiological Studies

Ecclesiological studies can be classified into three distinct areas of study, namely, identity ecclesiologies, concrete ecclesiologies, and conceptual ecclesiologies. In identity ecclesiologies the content of ecclesiology is focused on, and/or is from the perspective or in the interests of, a given denomination.[1] Ecumenical ecclesiologies are also included in identity ecclesiological studies although their intent is to transcend denominational boundaries.[2] African identity ecclesiological studies are found in historical studies literature on African Initiated Churches (AICs),[3] which are churches in Africa that were founded by Africans, in historical studies literature on various African churches which were started by missionaries,[4] and, in exceptional cases, in studies of the church in a given African country.[5] These African identity ecclesiologies

1. See, for example, Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality, and Mission* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); and Paul Avis, *The Anglican Understanding of Church* (London: SPCK, 2013).

2. See, for example, Gillian R. Evans, *The Church and the Churches: Towards an Ecumenical Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994); and Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, *Ecumenical Ecclesiology: Unity, Diversity, and Otherness in a Fragmented World* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

3. See, for example, F. B. Welbourne and B. A. Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home* (London: Oxford University, 1966); David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University, 1968); Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000); H. J. Becken, "A Healing Church in Zululand: 'The New Church Step to Jesus Christ Zion in South Africa,'" *Journal of Religion in Africa* 4 (1972): 213–222; M. C. Kitshoff, ed., *African Independent Churches Today: Kaleidoscope of Afro-Christianity*, African Studies 44 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1996); and Allan H. Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Asmara: Africa World, 2001).

4. See, for example, Walter L. Yates, "The History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in West Africa: Liberia, Gold Coast (Ghana) and Nigeria, 1900–1939" (PhD diss., University of Hartford, 1967); Adrian Hasting, *A History of African Christianity 1950–1975*, African Studies 26 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1979); and Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008).

5. See Kenneth R. Ross, "Current Ecclesiological Trends in Northern Malawi," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 19 (1999): 465–485; Christine Chaillot, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Tradition: A Brief Introduction to Its Life and Spirituality* (Paris: Inter-Orthodox

usually discuss the genesis and spread of African churches, together with their peculiarities.

Also to be found within identity ecclesiological research are studies along the lines of race and ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, gender.[6] They are highly contextual in nature and are usually fueled, for various reasons, by the need for ecclesial emancipation from Eurocentric or Western ecclesiologies. Black ecclesiologies in Africa belong to such studies where, for example, Vellem articulates a black ecclesiology based on the narrative of the uprising of liberation spirituality.[7]

Concrete ecclesiological studies are ecclesiological studies which focus on the practical and empirical matters of a church or churches. These practical studies include how to be church or a certain kind of church,[8] church order and church polity,[9] church ministry,[10] how to grow a church,[11] what successful or healthy churches look like,[12] church

Dialogue, 2002); and Frank-Ole Thoresen, *A Reconciled Community of Suffering Disciples: Aspects of a Contextual Somali Ecclesiology* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2014).

6. See, for example, Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993); De Woong Park, "Towards an Asian Ecclesiology Based on Asian Liberation Theology and Minjung Theology," PhD dissertation (Drew University, 2008); and C. René Padilla, "A New Ecclesiology in Latin America," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11 (1987): 156–164.

7. Vuyani S. Vellem, "Black Ecclesiology: Uprising Faith Praxis for the Blackness of Humanity," *The Ecumenical Review* 67 (2015): 651–663. See also Goba Bongonjalo, "Towards a Black Ecclesiology," *Missionalia* 9 (1981): 47–59.

8. See, for example, Michael Moynagh, *Being Church, Doing Life: Creating Gospel Community Where Life Happens* (Oxford: Monarch, 2014); and C. René Padilla et al., eds., *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation: An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairós, 2004).

9. See, for example, Mark Dever, ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (Washington DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001); and Steven B. Cowan, *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

10. See, for example, Robin Greenwood, *Transforming Church: Liberating Structures for Ministry* (London: SPCK, 2002); and Brian D. MacLaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

11. See, for example, Bob Jackson, *Hope for the Church: Contemporary Strategies for Growth* (London: Church Publishing House, 2002); and George Barna, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In: Understanding the Unchurched and How to Reach Them* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2002).

12. See, for example, Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012); and Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Leicester: IVP, 2006).

life and membership,[13] and church architecture[14] (from which "ecclesiology" as a technical term was first used).[15] There is a small amount of African literature on concrete ecclesiologies dealing with how to be an indigenous church,[16] being a local church,[17] types of congregations in Africa,[18] church ministry to youth in Africa,[19] and church architecture in Africa.[20]

Conceptual ecclesiologies address the topic of who or what the church is, or simply the nature of the church.[21] For this reason, they are considered ecclesiologies of the first order, are prescriptive in nature, and provide guideposts for concrete forms of being church, of church practice, and doing mission. Studies on the creedal pronouncement of belief in the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" are in this group of ecclesiological studies and, as such, have inspired a variety of forms of being church. African literature on conceptual ecclesiologies is dominated by understandings of the church based on socio-cultural dynamics

13. See, for example, James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, eds., *American Congregations*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994); and Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

14. See, for example, Mark A. Torgerson, *An Architecture of Immanence: Architecture for Worship and Ministry Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); and Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003).

15. Gerard Mannion, "What Is Comparative Ecclesiology and Why Is It Important? Roger Haight's Pioneering Methodological Insights," in *Comparative Ecclesiology: Critical Investigation*, ed. Gerard Mannion (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 13–40 (14).

16. E. Bolaji Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: Oxford University, 1965).

17. See A. Radoli, ed., *How Local Is the Local Church?* (Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Gaba, 1993); and John Gichinga, *The Local Church* (Kampala: IFES, 1995).

18. H. Jurgens Hendriks, *Studying Congregations in Africa* (Wellington, South Africa: Lux Verbi BM, 2004).

19. Jesse Jackson Mirega, *The Youth and the Church in the 21st Century: A Handbook for Youth Ministry and Pastors* (South Bend, IN: Sahel, 2010).

20. Richard Tambwe Mutibula, *Towards an African Ecclesiology in Stones: A Theological Cry of An African Newborn Child* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2011).

21. See, for example, Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987); Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); and Scott MacDougall, *More Than Communion: Imagining as Eschatological Ecclesiology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

of family, such as family itself, clan, ethnic group, and ancestorhood.[22] Stephanie Lowery's essay in this volume concerned with ecclesiology in Africa from the perspective of its developments also points out the predominance of "church as family" in virtually all church groupings in Africa.[23] This dominance she pins on the metaphor's cultural resonance in Africa and the plentiful biblical support for it. But we also have conceptual ecclesiologies based on some aspect of mission,[24] on understandings of sacrament,[25] and on biblical imagery of pilgrims.[26]

The Need for African Ecclesiological Studies

The ecclesiological studies highlighted above from other parts of the world are but a representation of a vast literature on ecclesiology, while those from African ecclesiological studies are virtually all that there is. This state of affairs puts Christianity in Africa at a disadvantage in view of African Christians' ongoing need for both indigenousness and faithfulness to Scripture.

22. See Paul J. Sankey, "The Church As Clan: Critical Reflections on African Ecclesiology," *International Review of Mission* 83, no. 330 (1994): 437–449; John Mary Waliggo, "The African Clan as the True Model of the African Church," in *The Church in African Christianity: Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, ed. J. N. K. Mugambi and L. Magesa (Nairobi: Acton, 1998), 111–128; A. E. Orobator, *The Church As Family: African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context* (Nairobi: Hekima College, 2000); Oliver Alozie Onwubiko, *The Church in Mission in the Light of Ecclesia in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines, 2001); Gerald K. Tanye, *The Church As Family and Ethnocentrism in Sub-Saharan Africa* (London: Transaction, 2010); and Charles Nyamiti, *Studies in African Christian Theology*, Vol. 4: *Christ's Ancestral Mediation through the Church Understood as God's Family: An Essay on African Ecclesiology* (Nairobi: Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2010).

23. See also her *Identity and Ecclesiology: Their Relationship among Select African Theologians* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017).

24. See Solomon Andriatsimialomananarivo, "The Missiological Dimensions of African Ecclesiology" (PhD diss., University of South Africa, 2001); and Stan Chu Ilo, Joseph Ogbonnaya, and Alex Ojacor, eds., *The Church As Salt and Light: Path to an African Ecclesiology of Abundant Life*, African Christian Studies (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

25. Kambere Kasai Florent, "The Church as a Sacrament of Reconciliation and Healing in the Africa Context," *African Christian Studies* 30 (2014): 26–47.

26. See P. J. Arowele, "The Pilgrim People of God: An African's Reflection on the Motif of Sojourn in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *African Journal of Theology* 4, no. 2 (1990): 438–455; and David Zac Niringiye, *The Church: God's Pilgrim People* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2016), although Niringiye does not focus on any African context.

The latest statistics project that by 2025, Africa will have the highest population of Christians on any continent, standing at more than 700 million.[27] Alongside this increase Africa has manifold forms of Christianity due to an unrivaled proliferation of churches and denominations.[28] But this numerical strength must be matched by the Christian faith taking root in African culture and thereby being authentically African. For this rooting to happen, African Christians must be helped to think about their faith in African terms; worship and liturgy must be African in thinking, conduct, and instrumentation; Bible interpretation must be through the lens of, and for, African contexts; and theologies must give priority to, and engage with, African needs and realities.[29] The extent, therefore, to which these requirements are met is the extent to which Christianity in Africa takes on authentic African forms. And given that African ecclesiologies are written for, or based on, African churches, more of them would contribute to shaping authentic African forms of Christianity.

Moreover, authentic African forms of Christianity must be matched by fidelity to the Bible for African Christianity to be biblical Christianity, that is, African biblical Christianity. The quest for authentic African Christianity must then be guided by biblical insight or else it will be left at the mercy of what is African, or what is locally expedient and pragmatic for the survival, sustenance, or growth of churches in African cities, towns, and countryside. Otherwise it will even be at the mercy of ecclesiastical entrepreneurs who are out simply to make money through churches. For this reason, ecclesiological studies, particularly the conceptual kind which are informed directly by the Bible, are critical since they help engender faithful forms of African Christianity. Such studies can help Christian communities in Africa to understand the nature of the church they are a part of and who they are in Christ, and, thereby, be guideposts for faithful forms of biblical Christianity that is also African.

27. Todd M. Johnson, Gina A. Zurlo, Albert W. Hickman, and Peter F. Crossing, "Christianity 2016: Latin America and Projecting Religions 2015," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 40 (2016): 1.

28. Paul Kollman, "Classifying African Christianities: Past, Present, and Future: Part One," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 40 (2010): 4.

29. The rooting of Christianity in Africa is what is called inculturation (or contextualization), and it has been a defining goal of African Theology; see K. Davis, "Third World Theological Priorities," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987): 85–105.

I wish, therefore, to articulate an ecclesiology for African Christianity which not only comes from the book of Hebrews but, at the same time, resonates with Africa's spiritual enchanted world. But since Hebrews's ecclesiology can only be grasped against the background of the Old Testament's literature on God's dwelling from the garden of Eden to Mt Zion, my ecclesiology is invariably a biblical theological ecclesiology.

God's Dwelling from the Garden of Eden to Mt Zion: A Biblical Theology

The key to appreciating Hebrews's ecclesiology lies in the second of the Genesis creation accounts. The stories of creation are not a discourse with a lot of literary detail and precision telling us everything we need to know about how God created the world. Rather, they are brief stories imbued with imagery and symbolism whose meanings are foundational for understanding the purposes of God for creation, what jeopardized those purposes, and God's plan for restoring those purposes.

In Genesis's second account of creation (Gen 2:4–24), the garden of Eden is depicted as God's own dwelling where human beings are placed to care for and tend it (Gen 2:15). This depiction is first seen in God's full accessibility to human beings within the garden, symbolized in God being with the humans and talking with them face to face. Second, it appears in the words used to explain the duties of the human beings in the garden, that is, "work" (*avad*) and "taking care of" (*shamar*), words used to describe Levitical duties of guarding and ministering in the sanctuary (see Num 1:53; 3:7–8; 4:23–26; and 18:4). The use of *avad* and *shamar* to designate the duties of human beings in the garden, therefore, implies that the garden was God's dwelling place. Third, the depiction is seen when human beings sin against God, since the movement of God when he finds out the humans' sin is a movement (*hithallek*) specific to one's residence (Gen 3:8; cf. Lev 26:11–13; Deut 23:14).[30] It was as God was taking a walk in his garden that he confronted the human beings' disobedience to his express command. Fourth, the depiction is seen in the

30. The verb used for movement (*mithalek*) in Gen 3:8 is, as pointed out by Hamilton, "a type of Hithpaal that suggests iterative and habitual aspects." Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 192.

consequence of sin, when human beings are expelled from the garden as God's abode. The cherubim, who are associated with God's presence and throne, guard the garden from human beings so that they cannot re-enter it, lest they enjoy what it has to offer (Gen 3:22–24). Finally it is seen in the reference to the garden of Eden in biblical literature as God's garden (Gen 13:10; Isa 51:3; Ezek 28:13 and 31:9), thereby underscoring the view that the garden is indeed God's dwelling.

The depiction of the garden of Eden as God's dwelling where he is fully accessible to humans and where humans live to serve reveals a fundamental purpose of God's creation of the world: God intended the world to be the place of his dwelling with human beings. God's residence and kingship are inseparable, as later biblical literature makes clear with the ark, the mercy seat, and the cherubim (Exod 25:19–22) in the temple's inner room (*hekal*) making up God's throne or footstool (see Pss 11:4; 99:1, 5, 9; 132:7; Isa 6:1–3; 37:16; 60:13; Ezek 10:1–4; 43:6–7; cf. Num 10:35–36; 1 Sam 4:3–4; 1 Kgs 22:19; Mic 4:7). Therefore it is implicit that, by virtue of God's dwelling with humans, he intended to rule the world from his dwelling. In other words, God intended the world to be his place of residence with humans and a part of his kingdom.

However, these purposes were jeopardized by Adam and Eve sinning, which led to their expulsion from God's dwelling (Gen 3:22–24). In calling Abraham and promising him offspring, land, kings, and blessing to all nations (Gen 12:1–3, 7; 13:15; 15:18–20; 17:6, 16 [cf. 35:11]), YHWH sets out to restore his residency and kingdom purposes for creation (i.e. Edenic restoration). YHWH clarified this restoration plan by the person of Abraham when he spoke through Moses about Israel's identity as his people and himself as their God, including their vocation as a holy nation and a royal priesthood for the sake of other nations if they were obedient to him (Exod 19:1–6; cf. Deut 4:5–8; Jer 4:2). He commanded Moses to have the people of Israel build him a sanctuary according to his design (Exod 25:9–40) so that he could dwell with them (Exod 25:8). But it was through another prophet, Nathan, that YHWH clarified his restorative plan, according to his kingship promise made to Abraham. He chose David and his line for kingship which he would use to exercise his rule (2 Sam 7:4–17; 1 Chr 17:3–15). So the restoration plan of God's residency and kingdom by means of Abraham entailed God's dwelling with Israel in the land under Davidic kings and then using them to

restore both his kingdom and his dwelling with human beings (the nations) in the world.[31]

In the tabernacle and later the temple we have the beginning of YHWH restoring his dwelling among humans and his kingdom in the world. This conclusion is supported by numerous correspondences between the tabernacle and the temple and YHWH's garden dwelling.[32] Furthermore, this correspondence is seen when human beings are referred to as trees in the temple (Pss 52:8; 92:12–13), and in the reference to a river in Jerusalem where the temple is located (Ps 46:4–5; cf. Ezek 47:1–12), both of which correspond to the setting in the garden of Eden. This parallelism is also witnessed in the Chronicler's consistent use of God's compound name (*YHWH Elohim*) in connection with the temple (see 1 Chr 17:16–17; 28:20; 29:1; 2 Chr 1:9; 6:41–42; 26:18), which corresponds to the use of the same name to refer to God in the garden story.[33]

It is important to note here that the temple as God's dwelling was referred to as Mt Zion. This reference was due to the association of mountains with divine dwellings in ancient Near Eastern cosmology. Numerous studies[34] show that, because they reached to the clouds, mountains were believed in the ancient Near East to be places where

31. See details of this, albeit with different shades and emphases, in T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2009); and C. Marvin Pate et al., *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), amongst others.

32. For details of correspondences, see, for example, Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "YHWH's Exalted House: Aspects of the Design and Symbolism of Solomon's Temple," in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 63–110 (80–81); Elizabeth Bloch Smith, "'Who Is the King of Glory?' Solomon's Temple and Its Symbolism," in *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays in Honor of Philip J. King*, ed. Michael D. Coogan and Philip J. King (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994); Gregory K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 66–80; D. Sawyer and P. Morris, eds., *A Walk in the Garden: Biblical, Iconographical and Literary Images of Eden*, Journal for the Study of the OT Supplementary Series 136 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992); and Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven: The History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem* (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2008).

33. I am indebted on this point to Stordalen's comprehensive study. For a fuller discussion, see T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2–3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 457–458.

34. See, for example, Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1958), 367–387; Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1972); and Robert L. Cohn, "The Mountains and Mount Zion," *Judaism* 26 (1977): 97–115.

the nether-world, earth, and heaven met (the fulcrum of the world, the *axis mundi*), and were therefore believed to be the dwelling place of divinities. As such, mountains were viewed as the hot spots of encounters and communications between humans and divinities. And so the temple, and by extension Jerusalem as YHWH's abode, was referred to as a mountain, namely, Mt Zion (Pss 2:6; 3:3–4; 24:3; 99:9; Isa 4:5; 8:18; 11:9; 56:6–7; Mic 4:7; Joel 2:1; 2:32), although it was not a mountain. Indeed, the movement of God to the temple as his permanent dwelling was seen to be the movement of God from Mt Sinai, where his presence was felt by the people of Israel definitively (Exod 24:17), to Mt Zion (Ps 68:15–18).

We have already mentioned that the purpose of God having residence in Israel was to restore his dwelling among humans and his kingdom in the world. This was first to start taking effect with Israel, who approached YHWH in his dwelling through all manner of prayers, such as thanksgiving, praise, and petition, as the prayer of Solomon (1 Kgs 8:30–45) and the psalmists' petitions and thanksgiving indicate, and through sacrifices and feasts (Lev 1 – 7:19; 16; 23) which YHWH had prescribed. YHWH would in consequence respond to their approaches (Ps 73:15–20; Isa 37:14–34) besides revealing his presence one way or another on account of them being in his house. This explains the psalmists' longings for visits to and residence in the temple (Pss 42:1–2; 27:4–5; 84:1–4; 122:1–2), and even their eschatological-like hopes of living there forever (Pss 23:6; 26:8; 27:4). The people of Israel would then go back to their homes and daily lives to live in obedience to God (Pss 15:5; 24:3–4; 36:7–9; cf. 65:4), consequently experiencing his blessings of life in the land (Exod 19:5; Lev 26:3–13, 14–39; Deut 7:12–16; Ps 24:5) and becoming a light to the nations (Exod 19:1–6; Deut 4:5–8). Other nations would in turn flock to Zion to be in God's presence and be exposed to his law and ways (Pss 47; 48:1–2; 50:1–2; 67:1–2; 68:28–34; 84:5–7; 87; 96:3–4; 99:1–3; Isa 2:2–4; Mic 4:2) and, as a logical implication, go back to their nations and kingdoms to live in obedience to YHWH, as seems to have been the case with the queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1–13). Mt Zion as God's dwelling would become a magnet to Israel and to all nations, who would then, respectively, be and come under God's kingdom. Unfortunately, due to Israel's disobedience to God's commandments, this plan did not come to pass.

The pre-exilic prophets then proclaimed God's judgment on Israel on account of their sins, which ranged from rebellion (e.g. Hos 1:2; 4:1–2, 6–10), injustice, lies, and deceit (e.g. Mic 2:1–2, 8–10; 3:1–3, 9, 11),

to violence and murder (see Jer 5:26–28; 9:4–6). In regard to false worship in the temple, their drawing near to God in the temple was not accompanied by obedience to God in their daily living, and this was tantamount to rejecting him (e.g. Amos 2:8; Isa 1:12–17), and to idolatry (see Ezek 8:1–18; 16:1–52). Judgment upon Israel included the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the decimation of Israel's population but for a remnant (e.g. Isa 1:7–9; 3:1–8; Ezek 2:10; 4:9–17), and exile (e.g. Hos 9:3–6; 10:3–6; Jer 1:14–15; 5:8–19).

In the same breath the prophets also proclaimed God's restoration of Israel, which showed his intent to still use Israel, Davidic kings, and Mt Zion to restore his dwelling and kingdom. However, the future restoration which the prophets prophesied was in some of their oracles indicative of a transformative restoration and not simply a restoration of what had gone before, since some descriptions of the restored state of Israel, Davidic kingship, covenant, land, Jerusalem, and temple could not be reconciled with their current or past states. This transformative restoration is explicit in covenant restoration, since Jeremiah's description of a new covenant meant a radical transformation of the existing one (Jer 31:31–34).

In regard to the prophecy of temple restoration, the restored temple would not just be a rebuilt temple but would be transformed into the highest mountain (Isa 2:2–4; Mic 4:1–3), which was in all probability symbolic of Mt Zion's superiority over other houses of divinities because YHWH, its resident, is superior to all other gods. The restored temple would have life-giving waters flowing from it (Ezek 47:1–12; Zech 14:8), perhaps symbolic of God's dwelling supporting life, as was the case with the rivers in the garden of Eden. It would also be the eschatological site of a great feast for all peoples and the destruction of death and all things that hurt (Isa 25:6–8). However, it was not until the advent of Christ that the nature of this transformative restoration was clarified. This clarity is the case in point when the author of Hebrews admonishes his audience to be aware that in Christ they have come to a heavenly temple and city which are ontologically superior to God's dwelling in the past. Indeed the clarity which Hebrews provides on the nature of the restored Mt Zion to which the church has come is central to its ecclesiology. It is this connection of Hebrews' ecclesiology with God's past dwelling which makes the discussion of a biblical theology of God's dwelling necessary, without which Hebrews' ecclesiology would not be comprehensible.

Ecclesiology in Hebrews

We can view Hebrews as a sustained rhetorical discourse[35] on Jesus as mediator par excellence. Jesus's mediatorial functions are articulated in comparison with Old Testament prophets and Moses in particular (Heb 1:1–2; 3:1–6), angels (1:4 – 2:18), and, for the most part, Aaronic high priests (1:3; 2:14–18; 4:14 – 5:10; 6:16 – 8:7; 9:1 – 10:18). Given that Jesus's mediatorial functions are largely spelled out in comparison with those of Aaronic high priests, God's dwelling forms a significant part of the content of Hebrews since priests and Aaronic high priests served in the tabernacle and then in the temple. In consequence, the author of Hebrews (referred to from here on simply as Hebrews, given the book's unknown authorship) envisions his audience (community of faith from here on) as a worshipping community both in their approach to God in his dwelling and in obedient living. This vision of the church is most prominent in Hebrews' unique revelation to the community of faith that they are approaching God on the heavenly Mt Zion and Jerusalem (12:22) and, therefore, are also receiving God's unshakable kingdom (12:28).

The subject of God's dwelling (*skēnē*) is articulated in Hebrews in relationship to Jesus's high priestly role for the community of faith. For the purposes of discussing Hebrews' ecclesiology, we shall pay attention to God's dwelling in relationship to the community of faith. With regard to Jesus, it suffices for the purposes of this paper only to note that in contrast to Aaronic high priests, Jesus is said to be a minister in the true tent pitched by the Lord (Heb 8:1–2; 9:11, 24).

In the above study on God's dwelling which was a necessary backdrop to Hebrews' ecclesiology, we pointed out that the people of Israel approached God in his dwelling through prayers and the feasts and sacrifices which YHWH had prescribed. YHWH would then respond to their approaches and reveal himself to them. This is one half of what constituted worship. Accordingly, in four instances (Heb 4:16; 10:19; 12:18–29; 13:15–16) Hebrews' audience is called upon to worship God in his house in ways similar to the people of Israel's worship in the temple.

In the first call, the recipients of Hebrews are encouraged, in view of Christ's high-priestly sympathetic intercessions (4:14–15), to approach

35. Indeed, the speaker in Hebrews characterizes it as "a word of exhortation" (*logos tēs paraklēseōs*, Heb 13:22), which is usually understood as an oral discourse, that is, a sermon (cf. Acts 13:15).

the throne of grace with confidence to receive mercy and grace to help them in their moments of need (4:16). This has to do with prayers in the house of God, because the mention of God's throne of grace corresponds to God's mercy seat in the temple. In addition, the verb used for "approach" (*proserchōmetha*), also found elsewhere in Hebrews (7:25; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22), corresponds directly to its use in the Septuagint to denote prayers in the temple where God's mercy seat resides.[36]

The second call to Hebrews' community of faith to worship God in his house comes in the exhortation to have confidence to enter God's house ("holy places," *tōn agiōn* – 10:19) and to draw near to him (10:22) because of the blood of Jesus (10:19). The entering into God's house and drawing near to him presumes that they will engage in worship of the kind that occurred in the temple – prayers and sacrifices – for that is what was prescribed and done there. This presumption is, again, supported by the word for drawing near (*proserchōmetha*) to God being similar to that used for worship in the temple.

Given the preeminence of the third call to the community of faith to worship God in understanding Hebrews' ecclesiology, we shall look at it last. The fourth call to worship comes in the pastoral admonition to the community of faith to offer to God a continuous sacrifice of praise through Jesus, a sacrifice of good deeds and sharing what they own (13:15–16). Here sacrifices in the prescribed way are commended to the community of faith since they too worship in God's house. However, in this case the sacrifices commended are not material, as was the case on Mt Sinai, the tabernacle, and Mt Zion, but immaterial. The immaterial sacrifices are in keeping with the kind of house that it is. Before we turn to this house below, it is important to note here that Hebrews makes it clear to the community of faith that their approach to God in his house is enabled by Christ: by his sympathetic priesthood (4:14–15), by his blood (10:19), and through him now in God's very presence (13:15).

The third call to Hebrews' audience to worship God in his house (12:18–29) is essential for understanding Hebrews' ecclesiology given its content: (1) it clarifies the location and nature of God's dwelling; (2) it points to the nature of God's dwelling in relationship to God's past dwelling among the people of Israel, and in so doing helps us to relate

36. For more on this word and its cultic context, see J. M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Journal for the Study of the NT Supplement Series 49 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 91–95.

God's dwelling to the prophets' prophecies of temple restoration; (3) it ties God's dwelling to God's kingdom; and (4) it mentions both halves of worship (prayers and sacrifices on the one hand, and obedience on the other) as integral to being in God's dwelling.

None of the three "calls to worship" in God's house in Hebrews directly specifies to the community which house of God is in view nor its nature. But the nature of the house is indirectly suggested in Hebrews 10:19–22. This is because the house of God the community is encouraged to enter confidently in drawing near to God is the same one in which Jesus the high priest (10:21) serves. If this is the case, then the house of God in which the community has been called to worship is metaphysical in nature, since Jesus serves in God's house which is built by God himself (8:2). It is not of this creation (9:11). In other words, Jesus serves in God's house – in heaven itself (9:24). In Hebrews 12:22 the location and thus the nature of God's house are directly specified.

In the said passage (12:18–29), the author reveals to the community that they have drawn near (*proselēluthate*) to the heavenly (*epouraniō*) Jerusalem, the city of God where Mt Zion is located, to pray and offer sacrifices. In contrast to earthly life, heaven here is not simply spatial, as in the sky above, which would mean that it is beyond the reach of the community of faith who live on the earth. Rather, it is a dimension of existence or life beyond the realms of ordinary human experience, where God's presence is experienced fully and God's will is done because his reign is experienced absolutely (Matt 5:34; 6:10). For this reason, Mt Sinai as God's past dwelling on earth is inferior to the heavenly Mt Zion. According to Hebrews, Mt Sinai was earthly, and the people of Israel were accompanied by fire, gloom, darkness, the sound of trumpets, and a voice, all of which brought fear and dread (Exod 19:16, 18; 20:18–19). In contrast, Mt Zion is heavenly, and the community of faith finds itself in the company of a myriad of angels, of just ones made perfect, and of Jesus, and of God, himself. Such a place and company bring forth joyous praise and gratitude.

The prophets prophesied of a transformative restoration of Mt Zion. In Hebrews this promised restoration has occurred and Mt Zion has been transformed into the heavenly Mt Zion. Hebrews calls the community of faith to worship at this mountain and not at the temple in earthly Jerusalem. In some real sense, then, in Christ this community is in God's heavenly house offering prayers and immaterial sacrifices as they are asked to do in Hebrews 13:15. However, their worship is

part of the journey to being fully in God's presence when he restores his dwelling in the world and thereby realizes his purposes for it. Thus God's intent to live among the people of Israel on Mt Zion in order to dwell fully once again with human beings is now taking place through his presence with his people in Christ on Mt Zion above. The destiny of the heavenly Mt Zion and Jerusalem is the fullness of God's dwelling among human beings, as was to have been the destiny of the earthly Mt Zion (a destiny that would have been realized had it not been for Israel's disobedience).

This destiny of Mt Zion is supported in Hebrews' constellation of revelatory pronouncements which point to a future in the fullness of God's dwelling. These revelatory pronouncements mention the powers of an age to come (6:5), receiving the promised eternal inheritance (9:15), Christ appearing a second time to save those who believe in him (9:28; 10:35–39), better and abiding possessions beyond the earthly ones that are being plundered (10:32–39, the day of the Lord (10:25), and the city to come (11:10, 16; 13:14). This destiny is also seen in John's vision when he witnesses the heavenly Jerusalem come down and God dwelling fully with the redeemed (Rev 21:1–4).

As mentioned, God's house and reign are inseparable, hence God's throne in the tabernacle and temple. This inseparable relationship is clear in Hebrews. By being in God's heavenly house (12:18–24), the community of faith is before his throne (see 4:16). There, as priest in God's heavenly dwelling, Christ is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (1:3; 8:1; 12:2). The community is part of God's kingdom which cannot be shaken (12:27) and of whose fullness they will partake in the future. The destiny of the heavenly Mt Zion will simultaneously be the restoration of God's kingdom in the world, which results in the realization of God's purposes for God's creation.

Obedience to God in daily living is necessary. This is the other half of worship. Accordingly, Hebrews' audience is repeatedly warned against disobedience. In Hebrews 12:18–29 the relationship between worship in God's house and worship in daily living is most clear. The call to obedience in Hebrews 12:25 immediately follows the revelation that they have come to worship in God's heavenly house (12:18–24). God's people, Israel, rejected God who spoke from Mt Sinai by disobeying him in the desert, and they were punished for it. Now Hebrews warns the community of faith that they will not escape judgment if they reject God by disobeying him (12:25). Moreover, the revelation that their worship is in

the heavenly court prompts the exhortation to obedience (12:12–17). To put it differently, their approach to God in the heavenly Mt Zion should be accompanied by their daily obedience. Such worship (*latreuōmen*) is pleasing (*heuarestōs*) to God (12:28). Other warnings against disobedience in Hebrews (including 2:1–4; 3:7–16; 4:1–11 and 12:1–2) should be viewed from this perspective.[37]

To sum up, Hebrews' ecclesiology is of a community approaching God, in Christ, in his heavenly dwelling, to offer him prayers and immaterial sacrifices. They live in obedience to him on the way to being in the fullness of his presence and kingdom, resulting in the realization of God's purposes for creation which we discussed earlier.

Conclusion: Hebrews Ecclesiology and African Christianity

Some years back I argued that the intersection of Africa's spiritual enchanted world and the Christian faith is what accounts for the character of Christianity in Africa.[38] African Christians believe and understand that the spiritual world is in constant interaction with the material world of humans and largely determines its fortunes. For this reason, African Christians, like the rest of the population, are alert to the spirit world, if not preoccupied with it. Thus, Hebrews ecclesiology, which has to do with a plane of existence not of the material kind, which those in Christ are now a part of, finds hospitable ground in Africa. In consequence, it would readily appeal to African Christians and help them understand in African terms the nature of the church and provide guidance for their faith practices, thus contributing to the formation of authentic African Christians.

In conclusion, Hebrews ecclesiology is not limited to informing the faith and practices of African Christians' understanding of the nature of the church. God's revelation in Scripture is offered to all those in Christ, wherever they may be. However, I have offered this ecclesiology in light of the observation that people's contexts and history will make certain biblical texts more meaningful and have a greater relevance to them

37. Indeed, Son (Kiwoog Son, *Hebrews 12:18–24 as a Hermeneutical Key to the Epistle* [Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005]) has argued that the content of Hebrews should be viewed through Hebrews 12:18–24.

38. Peter Nyende, "An Aspect of the Character of Christianity in Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 132 (2008): 38–52.

than they would to others. Therefore, although Hebrews' ecclesiology may be appreciated by Christians outside Africa, I think it is an ecclesiology that African Christians would more readily ponder and appreciate.

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