

# YHWH, HIS SON AND HIS SPIRIT: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF GOD

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## **Abstract**

*I articulate a biblical theology of God in outline in the hope of making a contribution to shape views of God amongst African Christians through the theological education of clergy. In the OT, YHWH, the God of Israel, is almighty and thus Lord. He is the only God and therefore referred to as the Most High, the true God, the living God, the Lord of Lords and King of kings, and the Lord of the earth. YHWH is also eternal, perfect in knowledge, of unmeasured wisdom, and merciful. This view of God is sustained in the NT. However, the nature of YHWH is implicitly elaborated as a trinity by virtue of YHWH having a Son and a Spirit who is also a person, which makes both divine persons. But YHWH's Son and Spirit do not become two Gods besides YHWH for they share his nature and are thus divine in unity with him, i.e., the divinity of YHWH is the divinity of his Son and Spirit. Furthermore, they are not two Gods besides him because they are united with him in his will, purposes, and motivations.*

**Key Words:** African Christianity; Biblical theology; God; YHWH; God of Israel; Lord; Jesus; the Holy Spirit

## **Introduction**

This paper is prompted by a worry of how African Christians view God and consequently the need to shape those views into ones that are in harmony with the Bible. For Christianity, God cannot be defined apart from Jesus; a situation that makes views of God in African Christianity often less than what can be supported by the New Testament. From my experience, for example, a significant number of African Christians

make no distinction between God and his Son the Lord Jesus Christ. This indiscrimination is manifest particularly in prayers. Prayers without any change of subject may first be addressed to God, then to Jesus, then back to God, then again to Jesus and so on. This same indiscrimination is seen in proclamations and conversations whereby God and Jesus are referred to, and taken as, one and the same even when a distinction is biblically imperative. Underlying this lack of distinction is a certain view of God's oneness. It is therefore not uncommon for me to hear in African Christians say that the trinity is God in three different forms: Father, Son, and Spirit; or even that it is same God wearing three different hats and acting accordingly just like a man without becoming a different person can be a father, a husband, and a brother. Both views of God have no biblical support.

Short of not differentiating God and Jesus, a sizable number of African Christians will view God exclusively as Jesus. Indeed, in some Christian circles in Africa, the mention of God (or God the Father, or God as Father) is virtually absent in favour of Jesus. Jesus is exclusively the focus of their faith, prayers, inspiration, mission, and future hopes. So, for example, they pray to him, they confess that they love him, that they have given their lives to him, that he is their saviour, he has transformed their lives, he has healed them, he walks and talks to them, that they live in hope of spending eternity with him in heaven etc. In some case as epitomised in the following popular song in Eastern Africa, Jesus, and not God, is taken as the heavenly Father:

"O Lord I am very very grateful  
for all You have done for me  
O Lord I am very very grateful  
I say thank you my Lord  
**I have a Father who never ever fails me**  
(2x)  
**Jesus is my Father who will never ever fail me**  
Rock of ages  
He will never ever fail."

Such christonomism may perhaps be supported psychologically by the feeling that Jesus can be appreciated as close, warm, and personal and one they can identify with in contradistinction to a

transcendent God. But a footlose view of God as Jesus too has no biblical support.

African Christians' views of God are therefore in need of shaping into biblical views of God. Biblical theology courses on God offered to those shepherding the African Christian congregations can go a long way to contributing to such a shaping of African Christian views of God. This is because pastors regularly teach and proclaim the Bible's content to many African Christians.

Biblical theology studies regard the Bible in some sense as a unity. Without such a perception biblical theology would have no basis. Biblical theological studies of the Bible, therefore, usually proceed either by seeking to determine what the message of the Bible is when its content is read as an integrated whole,<sup>1</sup> or by seeking to determine what the Bible's content says about a topic or theme of choice.<sup>2</sup> This article is an attempt to articulate a biblical theology of God following the latter procedure.

I offer this paper with two hopes. First, that it will provoke debate on the need of classes on God within the discipline of biblical studies in Africa's theological colleges and seminaries, and Africa's university

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Stephen G. Dempster, *From Dominion to Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, (New Studies in Biblical Theology 15. Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), Hays, D. J., Duvall, J. S., et al., *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2013); and Miles V. Van Pet, ed., *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossways, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See for example Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011); Pet J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossways, 2012); and Craig Blomberg, *Christians in an Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

faculties of theology and/or religion. Secondly, I hope that my paper could in principle provide structure and content for teaching biblical studies classes on "God" akin to the way course textbooks do for the teaching of courses. I myself have used the structure and content of this paper to teach on the subject in my biblical studies classes in Africa. Needless to say that this paper is offered on the conviction that African biblical scholarship is meant to contribute in positively informing and theologically deepening Christianity in Africa by means of both supporting relevant biblical theological education and training, and offering the same to those who pastor African Christian congregations. In other words, Biblical scholarship must make its fruits available particularly on issues affecting the church and the lay faithful.

Before we proceed to my biblical theology of God, it is important we note here that the Bible does not contain sustained articulations (in narratives or other literary forms) for a singular audience in a given set of circumstances about God from which to draw a biblical theology of God. The numerous Bible references I give in articulating a biblical theology of God come from brief and often incidental proclamations, confessions, remarks, and phrases about God, from comments on God, and from labels and images of God. These Bible references are themselves drawn from various contexts and from various forms of narratives, occasional hymns of praise or thanksgiving, petitions, poems, prophetic oracles, sermons, pastoral letters, and paraenesis found in the Bible. Although I have not ignored the varied contexts of these references, I hardly discuss them in any detail due to constraints of space. For the same reasons I limit my Bible references on any matter about God under discussion to a maximum of three per Bible book even where there are more than three references present in a book. My article is therefore a biblical theology of God in outline.

We should also note here that there are relatively few biblical studies books<sup>3</sup> that articulate a biblical theology of God from the whole Bible

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<sup>3</sup> See Ben Witherington III and Laura M. Ice, *The Shadow of the Almighty: Father, Son, and Spirit in Biblical Perspective*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); the first three chapters in Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology and Worship*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R

(or even from only the whole OT<sup>4</sup> or the whole NT<sup>5</sup>). Although there is invariably considerable common ground between the content of my biblical theology of God in outline and these books, my paper is not a synthesis or repetition, albeit in summary, of what has already been said in those books. Rather, it has its own unique approach such as its use of history of religions scholarship as a starting point to discussing God in the OT, as well as unique insights, such as the argument for continuity of OT theology of God into the NT based on the use in the NT of labels for God that are found only in the OT and not in the Greco-Roman world of the NT. That said, my paper should serve to call attention to, and lead to more interaction with, these biblical studies books on God for the sake of supporting and offering biblical theological scholarship on God to those who pastor African Christian congregations. With this clear, we begin articulating a biblical theology of God in the OT for it is God as revealed in the OT who is further defined in the NT.

## God in the OT

### *El, Elohim*

Although the notion of God and Gods can be very complex, there is compelling support for the view that deities in human societies are believed to be 'humanlike, but nonhuman, beings'<sup>6</sup> with immense

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Publishing, 2004); and Markus Witte, *The Development of God in the Old Testament: Three Case Studies in Biblical Theology*, (Critical Studies of the Hebrew Bible, Warsaw, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2017).

4 See for example Aubrey R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961).

5 See for example Arthur W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament*, (London: SPCK, 1962); Jerome H. Neyrey, *Render to God: New Testament Understandings of the Divine*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), and Larry W. Hurtado, *God in the New Testament*, (Library of Biblical Theology, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010).

6 Term borrowed from Pyysiäinen (Ilkka Pyysiäinen, 'Buddhism, Religion, and the Concept of "God"', *Numen* 50.2 (2003): 147-171.

