

THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD: HAVE THEY NO HOPE?

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Anthropological studies have revealed that the Yoruba people of Nigeria worship a Supreme Being whom they call Olodumare. Olodumare is known as the Creator (cf. Isa 40:28), the Most High (cf. Ps 91:1), and the King who dwells in the heavens (cf. 113:5). He possesses all superlative attributes, executes judgment (cf. 75:7), is the discerner of hearts who sees both the inside and outside of man (cf. Heb 4:12-13), and he alone can accomplish his work merely by speaking (cf. Gen 1:3 ff.). Olodumare is the all-powerful Creator who deserves to be worshiped by mankind. He cannot be represented by images, but he can be approached as the Father.¹

It is not known when the Yoruba traditions about Olodumare originated, but "research has shown that the High God [of the Yoruba] was not a later insertion through contact with Western Christianity."²

Where did the Yoruba obtain their knowledge of God? More importantly, could a Yoruba tribesman who recognizes his need cast himself upon the mercy of God as he knows him and still be saved without ever hearing the gospel?

What about those who have never heard the Christian message? M. Erickson says that this is one of the most troublesome questions asked him by undergraduates in a Christian liberal-arts college, second only to the problem of evil.³

The words of William Cowper, written two hundred years ago, still express the sentiment of many hearts toward this perplexing issue:

Is virtue, then, unless of Christian growth,
Mere fallacy, or foolishness, or both?
Ten thousand sages lost in endless woe,
For ignorance of what they could not know?
That speech betrays at once a bigot's tongue,
Charge not a God with such outrageous wrong.
Truly not I—the partial light men have,
My creed persuades me, well employed, may save.⁴

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¹ E. D. Adelowo, "Yoruba Oral Traditions, the Qur'an, the Hadith, and the Bible," *African Theological Journal* 15/2 (1986) 129-130.

² M. Welton, "Themes in African Traditional Belief Ritual," *Practical Anthropology* 18/1 (January-February 1971) 2.

³ M. Erickson, "Hope for Those Who Have Never Heard? Yes, But . . .," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 11/2 (April 1975) 122.

⁴ W. Cowper, *Poems* (London: Proprietors of the English Classics, 1794) 59.

Cowper's words reflect what perhaps many of us hope is true. The problem at hand is so difficult because passages like John 14:6, Acts 4:12 and Rom 10:14-17 seem to exclude the possibility of salvation apart from the gospel of Christ. Yet it seems unfair to many that millions of unreached people would be condemned by a just and loving God even though they never had a chance to hear of Jesus.

It is my contention that there is a possibility of salvation for the hidden peoples who, by the way of grace through faith, recognize their need and repent before God, seeking his forgiveness.⁵ Just as the Israelites of the OT brought sacrifices to God and, through faith, placed themselves on his mercy, so may the unreached "heathen" come to the one true God in repentance and faith and be forgiven (of course, they must have a knowledge of the right God). This forgiveness was extended to them through Christ's work on the cross (1 Tim 2:6). Thus the God of mercy may work in the heart of the "heathen" by his Spirit, "bringing him in some measure to realize his sin and need for forgiveness, and enabling him, as it were, to throw himself on God's mercy."⁶

If such a person were to subsequently hear the gospel he would instinctively recognize its truth (John 8:47; 18:37b). Of course God knows who would accept the gospel if he had a chance to hear it. I believe this explains why, on occasion, previously unreached tribes wholeheartedly accept the missionary's message when he does arrive and ask, "Why didn't you come here sooner?"

Since the position taken here is opposed by many, we must now look at the arguments that support it. To begin with, Rom 3:25 offers an explanation for such exclusivistic passages as John 14:6; Acts 4:12. The latter teach unequivocally that it is only through Jesus Christ and the cross that anyone's salvation is actualized. There has been no other, and this is true even for those who existed before Christ's life on earth.

Rom 3:25 teaches not that God simply forgot about the sins committed by the OT saints but that he passed by the debt incurred by their sin by looking forward to the satisfaction of his broken law at the cross, which is the means by which sins were paid for for all believers (1 John 2:2). The ultimate basis for salvation for OT saints was faith in God (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3, 22; Gal 3:6), who knew what he was going to do through the cross.

Thus the atonement of Christ, though it occurred at a particular time in human history, extended to all time in its effectiveness. If the eternal God, who does not necessarily view time sequentially, has applied Christ's blood to people of faith in the OT who has no knowledge of Jesus, why can he not do likewise for the unreached person today who has no explicit knowledge of Christ but may believe in the One who raised Jesus from the dead (cf. Rom 4:23-24)?

⁵ N. Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984) 148-149.

⁶ *Ibid.*

In this sense, then, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and his name is the only one by which we must be saved. It is only through his work on the cross that anyone ever has or ever will come to salvation.

Rom 10:11-17 is often invoked to prove that the preached Word must be heard before the "heathen" can come to God. Verse 18, however, is often overlooked. In v. 17 Paul states: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." In the following verse he asks the rhetorical question: "But I say, surely they have never heard, have they?" He then answers "Indeed they have" and goes on to quote Ps 19:4, which is part of a classic passage on God's general revelation via the natural world (19:1-6).

Apparently some of the gospel of Christ is known through general revelation apart from the written Word. This makes sense in view of the fact that Christ is the agent of creation and the sustainer of the universe (1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15-17; Heb 1:3).

That this inferred knowledge of God is by itself insufficient for salvation seems evident from the context of Rom 1:18-21, due to man's rejection of the God he sees in creation. But God has also provided man with an intuitional knowledge of himself (2:12-16). Because man is created in God's image (Gen 1:27; 9:6) he has God's moral law written upon his heart. Man's conscience bears witness to those moral laws and renders judicial decisions as to whether they are being followed. If he sincerely accepts the verdict of guilty handed down by his conscience, thereby recognizing that he is a sinner in desperate need of the Lawgiver's grace, then the stage is set for that person's encounter with God's special revelation. This may consist of the gospel or the Scriptures, but it may also be in the form of dreams or visions (Daniel 2; Acts 9:3 ff.), an angel (Revelation 14), or through oral tradition.

Traditions may be thought of as a possible form of special revelation because of the possibility that they are based upon the ancestral knowledge of God. This knowledge has its roots in man's common ancestors in the Garden of Eden and in the post-flood era. God spoke directly to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3) and Noah (6:13-7:4; 8:15-17; 9:1-8). It seems presumptuous to assume that none of the truths known by them have been passed down and preserved in oral tradition.

This is not to say that all traditions contain truths of God, of course, but could it be that this explains why some unreached peoples at various times and locations have been found to have an amazing awareness of the one true God? They may not know where they got this truth, but does that matter? Perhaps this is why the eminent anthropologist W. Schmidt found that many of the preliterate peoples he studied were worshipers of only one God, causing him to theorize that primeval revelation is the ultimate source of primeval monotheism.⁷

⁷ H. Zimon, "Wilhelm Schmidt's Theory of Primitive Monotheism and Its Critique within the Vienna School of Ethnology," *Anthropos* 81 (1986) 248.

C. H. Kang and E. Nelson believe that the ancient Chinese worshiped the one true God and that their writing system reveals that traditions about man's origin were passed down to them from the time of Genesis. For example, the character for "flood" consists of symbols that indicate that eight people were united with hands joined, forming the total number of those left on earth (Noah and family?).⁸

Some of the spiritual truths found within traditions may also in fact be based upon past contacts with Christians, even though those contacts themselves may be forgotten. It is interesting that Luke points out that "devout men from every nation under heaven" were present in Jerusalem during the events of Pentecost (Acts 2:5). Since three thousand of them accepted Christ (2:41), is it not possible that portions of the gospel were then diffused throughout the world?

In connection with this, note that Paul said that the gospel "was proclaimed [past tense] in all creation under heaven" (Col 1:23). Could it also be that some of the "heathen" heard part of this gospel and preserved it in their oral traditions? Of course some of them may have come to the gospel instead of the gospel coming to them, as was the case of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.

Perhaps this may partially explain how lost peoples like the Karen of Burma had a tradition of *y"wa* and his lost book that would someday be brought back to them.⁹ This is the type of phenomenon that led J. H. Bavinck to state that "everywhere in Asia we can see a trace of faint influence of the ancient preachers of the gospel."¹⁰

Further support for the argument presented here is found in Rev 5:9; 7:9, which indicate that individuals from every nation, tribe, people and language will be found in heaven. This is not only a great source of comfort for those missionaries who feel that their work is bearing no fruit but also a fulfillment of Gen 12:3. Yet if there will be Christians in heaven from among every people-group and language, what can be done with those civilizations and small tribes who have disappeared without ever having a missionary witness because of war, or disease, or natural calamity? These verses seem to indicate that there may be members of even these peoples who will be in heaven, so God must have dealt with them in a special way.

In all of what has been said up to this point, one must be careful not to overlook the work of the Holy Spirit. John 1:9 says that Jesus, the true light, "enlightens every man." Christ promised that the Holy Spirit he would send would "convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). Thus the light Christ provided, working through the Holy Spirit, is vital to anyone's salvation. What is known through creation, combined with truth found in oral traditions, dreams,

⁸ C. H. Kang and E. Nelson, *The Discovery of Genesis* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1979) 97-98.

⁹ D. Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura: Regal, 1981) 84.

¹⁰ J. H. Bavinck, *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 106.

miracles, and/or visions, may be utilized by the Holy Spirit to bring one to the point of repentance.

Another important consideration concerning the question of those who have never heard the name of Christ is found within the doctrine of the Trinity. Since Christ and God the Father are equal (John 5:18; 10:30; Phil 2:6; Heb 1:3), then sincere belief in the God of creation as the one and only true God is implicit belief in Christ (and the Holy Spirit, the other co-equal member of the Godhead). This is why A. H. Strong could write:

A humble and penitent reliance upon God, as a Savior from sin and a guide for conduct, is an implicit faith in Christ; for such reliance casts itself upon God, so far as God has revealed himself—and the only revealer is Christ.¹¹

Of course one who believes in the one true God would instinctively accept the gospel of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were he to ever hear it. If his faith was real and based upon the correct God, Christ would not be a stumbling-block to him.

One argument against the possibility of salvation apart from explicit knowledge of the gospel is that there are no examples in the Bible of such an event. Admittedly there are no clear examples of this in the NT (Cornelius was not saved prior to hearing the words of Peter; cf. Acts 11:14), but there are possible instances in the OT.

Melchizedek, Job and his friends, Naaman the leper, Jethro, and Rahab were all believers outside of the Israelite fold. Since the latter three all had contact with Israelites, it could be argued that their knowledge of Yahweh was through them. But where did Job and his friends, and Melchizedek, receive the knowledge of God they needed to be saved?

The account of Melchizedek is much clearer concerning its dating (c. 2100 B.C.) than is that of Job, since the former had direct contact with Abram (Gen 14:18-24). It is interesting to note that even before the formation of the nation of Israel a "heathen" king was known to be "a priest of God Most High." The title for God used in v 18 is a proper name for the Supreme God of Abram, and Melchizedek indicates that he is serving the one true God by calling him the "possessor of heaven and earth" (v. 19).

B. Demarest explains that Heb 7:1-10 "fully regards Melchizedek as an historical figure who united kingship with the worship and service of God in the midst of a pagan culture."¹² Naturally this historical priest-king must have been serving other worshipers of God Most High in Salem, since a priest needs some believing followers in order to be a priest. Could, then, Melchizedek represent an independent line of believers in Canaan? Is it not possible that God provided them with special revelation of himself that we do not know about and that he could do so for others today?

¹¹ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood: Revell, 1907) 843.

¹² B. Demarest, *A History of Interpretation of Hebrews 7:1-10 from the Reformation to the Present* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1976) 131.

For the reasons stated above I feel that a sincere believer in the one true creator God may possibly be saved apart from explicit knowledge of the gospel of Christ. This does not lessen the urgency of the great commission (Matt 28:19-20). Since God's normative way of reaching people is through the gospel, the vast majority of all people must hear the Word before they will ever consider seeking God, and even a saved unreached person would have no assurance of salvation and could not mature in the Lord apart from the Scriptural knowledge of Christ.

It must also be cautioned that sincerity alone is not enough: One must sincerely seek and believe in the right God. The thesis presented here is not an escape-valve for followers of other religions. This is true even for modern-day monotheistic Jews and Muslims, both of whom have some knowledge of Christ but have distorted it and rejected him as the Savior.

Perhaps conservative Christianity should at least allow for the possibility of the salvation of those very few unreached people who apparently do seek God, grope for him, and find him (cf. Acts 17:27). Possibly even some of the unevangelized "heathen" of centuries past are among the elect who will be found in heaven. By avoiding a too-confident and sweeping dogmatism against the feasibility of salvation for some of those who have never heard, we will be refraining from adding unnecessarily to "the offense of the cross."