

Research Article

Abosom, A Theological Issue in the Celebration of Odwira by the Akuapem of Ghana

ABSTRACT

The people of Akuapem in the Eastern Region of Ghana celebrate *Odwira* annually. Akuapem Christians see the celebration of *Odwira* as *bosomsom* (service or worship of gods/deities/divinities) which conflicts with their faith as God commands that “Christians” should not worship *abosom* (Ex. 20: 3–4). This paper makes use of Bibles, Bible concordances, commentaries, and literary works of theologians and others in the field of religious studies, and interviews in analysing theologically the concept of *abosom*, with reference to the first commandment. With the view that Akuapem Christians may have arrived at this conclusion based on the Akan translation of this passage in the Bible, the article considers the words used in the translation and also looks at the Akan translation of other passages in the Bible where the words “gods” and “idols” appear. The findings are that the translation of the Bible into a mother tongue can affect the religious concepts of the people. The paper also shows how the concept of *abosom* may come into the conversion story of the Akan. The contribution of the paper to scholarship is that it further strengthens the view that Bible translation into mother tongue requires a knowledge and understanding of the religious categories and concepts of the people into whose mother tongue the Bible is being translated. It falls in the disciplines of mother tongue theology and Bible translation.

Keywords: Akuapem, *Odwira*, *Onyame*, *abosom*, *ahoni* spirits, gods, and idols.

INTRODUCTION

Every year, the people of Akuapem celebrate a festival known as the *Okuapehene Dwira*. It is a variant of the *Odwira* festival celebrated by other Akan groups like Akwamu and Akyem. Many Akuapem people who are Christians refuse to join in the celebration of the *Okuapehene Dwira* and those who participate do so with some misgivings. In a research conducted by the author to find out why Akuapem Christians have misgivings about the festival, several reasons were given.² Of the fifty-two indigenes of Akropong who are Christians living in Akropong and around Lashibi and Sakumono in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana who responded to the question, “Do you participate in the celebration of *Odwira*?”, Thirty-eight (38), representing 73.1% of them responded in the negative. All of them mentioned, among other things, the relationship of the festival with *abosom* as their reason for not participating in the celebration.³ To the question, “Are there aspects of the festival which you think are against the Christian faith?”, fifty-one of the fifty-two respondents said “yes” and mentioned “feeding of the gods”.⁴ What they refer to as “gods” are the *abosom*. Further responses to questions about why respondents had issues with the feeding of the “gods”, revealed that they

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² Ernestina Afriyie, “The Theology of the *Okuapehene’s Odwira*: An Illustration of the Engagement of Gospel and Culture among the Akan of Akropong-Akuapem”, Thesis presented to the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture, 2010, 197 – 199.

³ Afriyie, “The Theology of the *Okuapehene’s Odwira*”, 197.

⁴ Afriyie, “The Theology of the *Okuapehene’s Odwira*”, 199

saw it as worshipping idols when God has commanded that idols should not be worshipped. Are *abosom* what God has commanded not to be worshipped? Are they worshipped at all in the celebration of the festival?

This paper is a theological analysis of the concept of *abosom* among the Akuapem people. It considers the “moral” nature of *abosom* in Akan conception. The responses of some respondents show that they believe *abosom* are “gods” and are therefore evil spirits which God warns against worshipping or serving. Celebrating a festival in which they are prominent therefore conflicts with the Christian faith.

First, there is a deliberation on what Exodus 20: 3 – 4 means and is about as put forward by some Bible commentators. Then there is a discussion on the translation of the passage in the Twi Bible, as well as other passages to determine if translation of the Bible into Twi is the cause of Akuapem Christians believing that the first commandment is about *abosom*. This is followed by an analysis of who *abosom* are in Akan thought, and whether “gods” or “idols” correctly translate *abosom*. Finally, the paper looks at *abosom* in the light of the Gospel in the hope of finding a place in the story of the Akan who becomes a Christian for *abosom*.

Views of some Biblical Commentators on Exodus 20: 3 - 4

Almost all the Christian respondents to the question of why they felt uneasy about celebrating *Odwira* cited Exodus 20:3 – 4 as a reason for saying that the acknowledgement of *abosom* in the festival conflicts with the Christian faith. A look at what Biblical scholars and commentators say about this commandment is therefore useful in this paper.

Different views are held by different people on whether Exodus 20: 3–4 constitute one commandment or more. For Catholics and Lutherans, they form one commandment. “You shall not make for yourself an idol...”⁵ is seen as an elaboration of the commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.”⁶ After commanding Israel not to have other gods, Yahweh explains what Yahweh means by telling them not to make any graven images which they would bow down to or worship.⁷ In this sense, the idols become representations of the gods which Israel is not to have. On this issue, George V. Pixley writes that for Catholics and Lutherans as well as orthodox Jews the commandment against the making of images and that which says: “You shall not bow down to them nor serve them...” belong together, so that it is the making of images to be worshipped that is forbidden. Anyone who makes an image with the intention of worshipping it breaks the commandment of God. Images that are worshipped are “gods.” Citing Walther Zimmerli, Pixley says that the former has demonstrated that in Deuteronomic texts, the prohibition of worship and service always has to do with worship of “other gods”⁸, except in Deuteronomy 4. In his view, the phrase “you shall not bow down to them or serve them,” connects the second commandment to the first.⁹ What Zimmerli means is that because of the statement “you shall not bow down to them or serve them,” which would usually be made where other gods are concerned, the two verses make up one commandment; verse 4 is an elaboration of verse 3.

Considering the views of Pixley and Zimmerli, the “graven image” is a description of a “god.” These views give the impression that a god is just a graven image, an image made by human beings as described by Jeremiah, images that have no power.

J. Gerald Janzen on his part, argues that the commandment was given within the context of polytheism. Commenting on the first commandment, he refers to the work of Thomas Mann to buttress his point. According to him, Mann says that in the ancient world, worship was given to the ultimate mystery or mysteries whose power and wisdom were experienced by the people as making a valuable difference in their daily lives. They did their best to understand them, bow to them and benefit from them in worship. A god’s reality was experienced through the powerful reality of the life processes with which the god was linked.¹⁰ Gods were therefore not just images made by human beings but beings with power.

Commenting further on these verses, other scholars have presented views which help in placing the commandments within context and thus give a better understanding of them. Brevard S. Childs draws attention to the translation in the Authorised Version of the Bible which says “You shall have no other gods beside me” and asserts that this can also be translated in a number of ways.¹¹ He posits that the preposition translated “before me” has a wide use and makes it possible for all the other translations to find some biblical warrant. He continues that the translation “beside me” connotes “except me” and is foreign to the original sense of the text. He would therefore rather choose “before me” which is a neutral rendering.¹² Childs in his comments further draws attention to what is not being said in

⁵ Exodus 20: 4a (NIV).

⁶ Genesis 20: 3 (NIV).

⁷ See George Arthur Buttrick (Chief Ed.), *The Interpreter’s Bible in Twelve Volumes* (Vol. I), (Nashville, Tennessee: Parthenon Press, 1952), 981.

⁸ George V. Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 131.

⁹ The oldest commentary on this prohibition which is Deuteronomy 4: 9 – 40 shows that as far back as the sixth century BC, the people of Israel distinguished the prohibition of images from the first commandment.

¹⁰ See J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 143 – 144.

¹¹ See Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary*, (Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1976), 402.

¹² Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 403.

the commandment. In his view the exclusiveness of Yahweh is not contained in the first commandment. It does not say that Yahweh alone has existence. By this, Childs is saying that the commandment is given in the context of the existence of other gods. Thus, the prohibition of the first commandment describes what the relation of God to Israel ought to be by eliminating other gods and doing so emphatically.¹³

Pixley in his comments on this first commandment says that with the phrase “before me,” *’al* usually has an opposing denotation in Hebrew and means “against”.¹⁴ According to him, in Genesis 16:12 and Deuteronomy 21:16, *’al* governs the noun “face.” For some translators therefore the first commandment is “You shall have no other gods despite me,” or “You shall have no other gods against me.” If the expression is taken as realistically alluding to Yahweh’s presence in the sanctuary, then the command forbids the positioning of idols in the sanctuary with Yahweh. In Pixley’s view however, none of these interpretations is particularly convincing. He sums up by saying that what the commandment prohibits is pretending to be loyal to Yahweh while having a loyalty to other gods as this would constitute making peace with the enemy.¹⁵ That Yahweh commands Israel to “have no other gods,” before Him in the first commandment¹⁶ could mean that gods are beings that compete with Yahweh for the people’s loyalty.

On the issue of why Yahweh would give such a commandment to Israel, Walther Eichrodt argues that Yahweh’s intolerance with respect to other gods is a fundamental part of Mosaic religion and can be inferred from the covenant itself.¹⁷ On the other hand, R. Knierim says that the formulation must have come from a concrete situation within the history of Israel’s tradition.¹⁸ He also holds that the formulation is from the “covenant at Shechem and the threat of rival Canaanite deities.”¹⁹ Pixley however intimates that the prohibition was because the worship of Baal was a constant temptation to the people of Israel. Baal was the god of rain and these farmers depended on rain for their crops. They praised Baal for the good harvest instead of Yahweh. It could therefore be said that the gods prohibited by the commandment were in a kind of competition with Yahweh and were therefore Yahweh’s enemies. He states further that the formulation of the command to have no other gods, but Yahweh, lies in the long struggle of the peasants of Israel to get rid of the domination of Canaanite and Israelite kings who brought up again the old forms of class domination. Due to the nature of the society in which Israel arose, it was necessary to maintain the awareness of Yahweh and to avoid getting involved with other gods.²⁰

On the fact that the commandment gives the impression that Yahweh acknowledges the existence of other gods, George Arthur Buttrick says that in the commandment, Yahweh tells Israel that He is to be the only God they recognise and worship. He further states that even though Israel was surrounded by people who worshipped other gods they were not to serve any of those gods.²¹ R. Alan Cole’s²² statements on the commandment agree with Buttrick’s. Janzen also shares this view.²³ Pixley holds that the commandment is not a demand for loyalty but rather a prohibition of other gods. He says that if these gods are non-existent, they cannot be worshipped. Referring to older texts, he comments that these do not deny the existence of “other gods.” They exist and are spurned and scoffed at. Thus, in 1 Samuel 5, the impotence of the Philistine god Dagon is scoffed at. Mention is also made of Baal of Tyre’s inability to compete with Yahweh on Mount Carmel. In all these texts, Yahweh is seen as mightier than the gods, but their existence and limited power are not denied.²⁴

H. L. Ellison on his part posits that translating “you shall have no other gods before me...” with strict regard to Hebrew grammar should read: “you will not have...” Such translation makes the commandment more of a description of the behaviour of a person in a covenant relationship with God, rather than prohibitions. He goes on to say that what is being demanded of the Israelites in the commandment is “henotheism,” which has to do with the worship of one God only without wondering if other powers exist or not.²⁵

Despite the differences in the views of all these commentators, it is clear that the command was made with “gods” in mind, whether they are graven images of beings of power, whether it was meant as a prohibition or a call for loyalty to Yahweh. Israel had a duty to keep gods out of their lives, they were to acknowledge only Yahweh as their God. It is necessary to know at this point what gods were in the context of the Bible. *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, says that the Hebrew word for “gods” can refer either generically to a god or

¹³ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 403.

¹⁴ See Pixley, *On Exodus*, 130 – 131.

¹⁵ See Pixley, *On Exodus*, 131.

¹⁶ Exodus 20: 2.

¹⁷ See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Vol One), (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 222.

¹⁸ See R. Knierim, ‘Das erste Gebot’, *ZAW* 77,1965, pp. 20ff, cited in Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 404.

¹⁹ R. Knierim in Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 404.

²⁰ Pixley, *Exodus*, 129 – 130.

²¹ See George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter’s Bible in Twelve Volumes* (vol. 1), 980.

²² See R. Alan Cole, *Exodus, An Introduction and Commentary*, (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 153.

²³ J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, 143.

²⁴ Pixley, *On Exodus*, 129.

²⁵ See H. L. Ellison, *The Daily Study Bible* (Old Testament): *Exodus*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 106 – 107.

specifically to the high god *El*. The plural *'lm* or *bny'lm* refers in Ugaritic texts to a lesser order of gods who serve in the circle or council of *El*. *El* is a generic Semitic appellative for the deity. It is also the name of the high god in some cultures as seen in the Ugaritic texts. In the Hebrew Old Testament, *El* is used with compounds over two hundred times. It is a generic name for Yahweh and is often used with descriptors and compounds that speak specifically in terms of places or themes.²⁶dj

What are “gods” in the Biblical context?

In his discussion on “Gods and rulers as lords,” Gerhard Kittel discusses what “gods” are in the Biblical context. According to him, in Greek religion, the conception of “god” has the element of personal legitimate power. However, for the Greeks these gods do not relate with the people in a lord-slave way. This is because in Greek religion the basic personal act of Yahweh’s creativity is lacking.²⁷ In this culture, gods are only ‘basic forms of reality.’ They are neither creators nor designers. They do not have fate, the reality which holds all realities together, in their hand. These beings and humans “breathe from one mother.” They are connected limbs of one being. Human beings do not have any basic responsibilities to them. Also, these gods cannot punish human beings. It is illogical for humans to direct prayers to them.²⁸ However, in the Orient and Egypt, the context in which the command we are considering was given, the concept of gods is different. They hold fate in their hands. They are the creators of human beings and therefore humans owe them personal responsibilities. These gods can intervene in human life with punishments. They ordain what is right. They are the all in all.²⁹

Patrick J Ryan clarifies what pertained in much of the Semitic language area. According to him, the concept of the gods was that of a divine assembly. At different times and in different areas, a god would rise over the others. When such a god became supreme in the assembly, he could keep his proper name or become known as *the* God. Referring to Psalm 82, Ryan points out how the pattern of the rise of the God over the other gods and the demotion of the other gods is demonstrated.

God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment;
I say, “You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you;
nevertheless, you shall die like men, and fall like any prince.”
Arise, O God, judge the earth;
For to thee belong all the nations!³⁰

The commandments were given in the oriental context and it is likely that it is against this concept of “gods” that the first commandment was made. If this is it, how does this concept compare with what *abosom* are to the Akan?

What are *abosom*?

The word *Abosom* is the plural for *ɔbosom*. Several attempts have been made at arriving at its etymology. There are scholars who claim that the word “*ɔbosom*” comes from the words *ɔbo* (stone) and *som* (worship or serve). Thus, *ɔbosom* is “a stone that is worshipped”. To go by this would mean that *abosom* are stones that are worshipped. However, not all *abosom* are stones; some are waterbodies, rivers, lakes and so on. In J. G Christaller’s *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called TSHI (TWI)*, he mentions that the word is supposed to come from *ɔbo* and *sōm* but then he puts a question mark in brackets at the end of the statement, showing that it is questionable. He continues with a statement in Twi:

*Tete abósóm no a mpanyinfo som wɔŋ (a.s. wɔde nsɛ̀ nɛ̀ ɲɲuaŋ kogyaw wɔn) no ye
abo ara ɲkɔ̀. Ebi ye nnuu, se abe, odum, onyɛ̀ɛ̀; ebi ye siw n.a.; ebi ye koro (s. kóro).
The fetishes which our forefathers served (by bringing them palm wine and sheep)
were only stones. Some of the fetishes are trees, as, the palm, odum, silk-cotton tree;
some are ant-hills, &c.; others are kóro³¹*

From this statement, it is seen that even though the speaker asserts that the *abosom* were only stones, he/she goes on to mention that they are sometimes trees and other things. Many times, they are rivers or lakes. This is what makes it difficult to accept that the word comes from *ɔbo* and *som* and that *ɔbosom* means worshipped stone. *Abosom* are not all stones. It must also be noted that in typical Twi expression, if the word comes from *ɔbo* and *som*, *ɔbosom* would mean

²⁶ Willem A. Van Gemeren (Gen Ed.), *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Vol. I), (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 200 – 201.

²⁷ Gerhard Kittel, *Bible Key Words* (Vol II), (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1933), 13.

²⁸ Kittel, *Bible Key Words* (Vol. II), 15.

²⁹ Kittel, *Bible Key Words*, 15 – 17.

³⁰ Psalms 82: 1, 6 – 8 (RSV).

³¹ J. G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called TSHI (TWI)*, (Second Edition, Revised and enlarged), Basel: Printed for the Basel Evangelical Mission Society, 1933), 43.

“the worship of stone.” It would not be the name of the object being worshipped but, the act of worshipping the stone or the name given to the worship or service of the stone. In Twi, worship of *abosom* is known as *abosomsom*.

Another school of thought on the etymology of *abosom* is that the word comes from the expression, *som* bo which means “of worth, or of great worth”. In this sense then, *abosom* is what is said of a thing of worth. *Abosom* are then objects of worth, whether stones or water bodies. Of the two views, the second would be more acceptable as the etymology of *abosom* even though several writers on Akan religion have given the etymology as *abo* and *som*.

Abosom are spirit beings. In Akan world view, the world is populated by spirit beings.³² Some of these are benevolent and some are malevolent.³³ According to Harold Turner, human beings form relationships with the benevolent spirits for protection from the malevolent spirits and forces.³⁴ *Abosom* belong to the group of benevolent spirit entities.³⁵ Usually, the English words “divinities,” “deities,” and gods are used to translate *abosom*. For the Akan, *abosom* are beings derived from the Supreme Being *Onyankopon*. They are *Onyame mma*, children of *Onyame*,³⁶ just as the Psalmist in Psalm 82 says of the gods. They may inhabit waterbodies, trees or rocks³⁷ and they mediate between human beings and *Onyame* as the Akan believe that *Onyame* is removed from human beings and can be accessed mainly through benevolent spirits.³⁸

Are *abosom* evil spirits?

Generally, Ghanaian Christians, including those who come from Akuapem hold that *abosom* are spirits which are demonic and evil.³⁹ However, in Akan religion, as noted above, they belong to the category of *ahonhom* papa (good spirits). These are spirits who cooperate with *Onyame* to ensure that human beings fulfil their destinies. They are the ones through whom *Onyame* speaks to His people.⁴⁰ In Akan world view, *abosom* are not evil. Saying this, it must be added that there are two categories of *abosom* – *tete abosom* and *abosom abrafo*,⁴¹ also called *akomfo abosom* in Christaller’s dictionary.⁴² *Tete abosom* are the *abosom* that derive from *Onyame*. They are the tutelary or guardian *abosom* of a people. They are given to the people by *Onyame* and they are subordinate to Him.⁴³ *Abosom abrafo* on the other hand, are *abosom* that are brought in by individuals from other places. They are made by human beings. Opoku informs us that the right designation for these man-made *abosom* is *asuman*.⁴⁴ This is the view of Christaller also.⁴⁵ These do not play an intermediary role between *Onyame* and human beings. These are what *Okomfo Bea*, a traditional priestess in Akropong refers to as the “*kum-no-ma-me abosom*” (the *abosom* that may be consulted to kill one’s enemies).⁴⁶ Christaller agrees with this view. He calls them the “soothsayers’ fetish”. According to him, these are what Europeans call fetish.⁴⁷ They are better called *asuman*.⁴⁸ Nana Kwame Afari Bampo II, *Banmuhene* in Akropong holds the view that many Akan people call both *abosom* and *asuman abosom*. He says that the real *abosom* do not harm people but rather protect them. He continued that even though the *Odosu*, the object for which *Odwira* is celebrated is a *suman*, many Akuapem people call it a *bosom*.⁴⁹

The *abosom* of Akan religion are the *tete abosom*. In Akan belief, they are not *ahonhon bone* (bad or evil spirits), but rather, as already noted, *Onyame mma* (children of God) or *Onyame akyeame* (God’s linguists). They are the messengers of *Onyame* and He sends messages to His people through them. There is no way in which the traditional Akan may think of *abosom* as evil spirits. Why Akuapem Christians believe that they are evil spirits is therefore a question that needs to be answered.

Abosom and “other gods” and “idols”

Akan Christians tend to be of the view that *abosom* are the same as the beings referred to as “gods” in the Bible. While there is nothing that is done openly to draw attention to *abosom* during the celebration of *Odwira*, apart from

³² K. A. Busia, “The *Ashanti*”, in Daryll Forde, *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 191.

³³ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, (Akropong- Akuapem: Regnum Africa, 2000), 87.

³⁴ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 87.

³⁵ Kofi Asare Opoku, “Aspects of Akan Worship,” *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, 4, no. 2, 2.

³⁶ Opoku, “Aspects of Akan Worship,” 2.

³⁷ Noel Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835 – 1960: A Younger Church in a Changing Society*, (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1966), 77.

³⁸ Opoku, “Aspects of Akan Worship,” 2.

³⁹ All respondents to a question on what kind of spirits *abosom* are said that they are evil/demonic spirits. These respondents were all Ghanaian Christians.

⁴⁰ Busia, “The *Ashanti*”, 193.

⁴¹ Opoku, “Aspects of Akan Religion”, 2.

⁴² Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi*, 43

⁴³ Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi*, 43.

⁴⁴ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), 56

⁴⁵ Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi*, 43.

⁴⁶ She said this when I engaged her in a conversation in her house on Tuesday, June 28, 2005.

⁴⁷ Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi (Twi)*, 43.

⁴⁸ Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called TSHI (TWI)*, 43.

⁴⁹ Interview with him in his palace at Akropong on October 22, 2004.

mentioning them among those who are addressed during the pouring of libation, and the water that is sprinkled on the people on *Odwira* Friday coming from the Ntoa shrine, many Akuapem Christians believe that the festival has connections with *abosom* and so should not be celebrated by Christians. One biblical text that is usually cited for saying that the celebration of the festival conflicts with the Christian faith is Exodus 20: 3–4. This has to do with the part of the Ten Commandments which says:

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them;...⁵⁰

*Nnya anyame foforo nka me ho. Nye ohoni bi anaa ade a ewɔ wim wɔ soro anaa nea ewɔ asase so wɔ fam anaa nea ewɔ nsu mu wɔ asase ase nseso biara mfa; nkotow wɔn, na nsom wɔn.*⁵¹

As can be seen, the Akwapem-Twi translation of the passage does not mention *abosom*. However, respondents to a question on why a connection of the festival with *abosom* made it one that Christians should not get involved in unanimously mentioned the commandment and said that it refers to *abosom* and that *abosom* are “other gods.” They explained that the importance of *abosom* in the celebration of the festival conflicts with the Christian faith. The question is, are *abosom* “other gods”?

A survey of different editions of the Akuapem Twi Bible shows that the Twi word used to translate “gods” in the passage under discussion is “*anyame*”, and that used for “graven image” is *ohoni*.⁵² It is a wonder then that many Akan Christians believe that the commandment has to do with *abosom*. In many theological and religious works on the Akan, “gods” refers to *abosom*. It could be, though it cannot be said for sure, that when the early missionaries saw the structures, the shrines, that the Akan make to house the *abosom*, they referred to them as “gods,” because they saw them as idols, and their Akan converts took it up. The *ɔbosom* is however not the shrine. This point is clearly stated by S. G. Williamson when he writes:

The *ɔbosom* may inhabit a natural shrine, such as a river, tree, or rock, or dwell at call in a manufactured shrine, usually the brass pan in the room of the priest’s house. The *ɔbosom* is never confused with the abode or shrine it favours. The state of dilapidation and decay of houses and shrines often remarked upon by travellers does not reflect a state of religious apathy, but merely that this aspect of cult maintenance is not considered important. This may indicate a limited understanding of the value of material symbols which in a more sophisticated context are considered proper in the conduct of a religious cult, but it proves that the Akan does not confuse the shrine and the spirit that inhabits it.⁵³

Rattray also makes this point strongly in his description of the making of a shrine in his *Ashanti*.⁵⁴ According to him, the shrine itself is nothing until the *honhom* (spirit) for which it is prepared accepts it and enters it.⁵⁵ He mentions shrines which are empty because the *abosom* have left them.⁵⁶ So J. G. Christaller defines *ɔbosom* as:

The tutelary or guardian spirit of a town or family; imaginary spirits, subordinate to God (ne mma anasâ n’akyeame), worshipped or consulted by the natives, generally called fetishes by the Europeans, though the term fetish would better be restricted to *asuman*, “charm,” or to avoid confusion, not be used at all.⁵⁷

Clearly, *ɔbosom* is not a “graven image.” A survey of some Twi translations of the Bible, show that word *ɔbosom* or *abosom* is what is sometimes used to translate “idol” or “idols” respectively. The word “*ohoni*” is also sometimes used to translate “idol.” The Twi word used to translate “gods” is *anyame*.

To Christaller, *abosom* are subordinate to God; they are *Onyame mma* or *Onyame akyeame*. When we take *mma* to mean children as in when one begets, then we can say that *abosom* are born by *Onyame* and there is thus a familial relationship between them. Kwesi Dickson however draws attention to the fact that in the African languages words that denote familial relationships may be used in non-specific senses. *Mma* could therefore be used in referring to people

⁵⁰ Exodus 20: 1 – 5a (NIV). Also found in Deuteronomy 5: 7–9a.

⁵¹ Eksodós 20: 3 – 4. Akuapem Twi Bible published as Kyeraw Kronkron anaa Bible, (James Town, Accra: The Bible Society of Ghana, 2012), 80.

⁵² Editions of the Akwapem Twi Bible surveyed were 1932, 1936, 1964, 1976.

⁵³ S. G. Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith: A Comparative Study of the Impact of Two Religions*, (Accra: Ghana Universities Press), 102-103.

⁵⁴ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 145 – 150.

⁵⁵ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 145.

⁵⁶ Rattray, *Ashanti*, 164.

⁵⁷ *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called TSHI (Twi)*, (Second Edition, Revised and enlarged), by J. G. Christaller, (Basel: Printed for the Basel Evangelical Mission Society, 1933, 4

much younger than the one making the reference without implying any familial relationship.⁵⁸ Thus calling *abosom* *Onyame mma* may not necessarily mean that there is a familial relationship between them. It could refer to the fact that *Onyame* existed before the *abosom*. Interactions with some of the leaders of Akropong however show that for them *mma* means children as in deriving from. This means that the relationship between *Onyame* and the *abosom* is a cordial one and not one of rivalry or competition; it is one of cooperation. The Akan *abosom* do not seek to take up leadership role over *Onyame*. They are not “divine antagonists of Yahweh” as Ryan describes the gods. This is something that is missing from the Oriental concept of gods. In Akan religion, as is the case with the religions of some other African peoples like the Anlô of Ghana⁵⁹ and the Yoruba of Nigeria,⁶⁰ there is only one Supreme Being. The Akan call this being *Onyame* or *Onyankopɔn*. It is for this reason that the names *Onyame* or *Onyankopɔn* have no plural forms.⁶¹ No other being qualifies to be *Onyame*.⁶² *Abosom* are derived from *Onyame* and authorised by Him to help human beings. To say to the Akan: “*Nsom Onyame foforo bi nka Nyame ho*” is to say something that is meaningless. This is because the Akan is not aware of any other *Onyame*. The concept of “god” as exists among the Semitic and Graeco-Roman peoples, beings that are against God, exist in Akan cosmology;⁶³ they are *ahonhom bɔne* (evil spirits). *Ahonhom* are either *ahonhom pa* or *ahonhom bɔne* with only one being *Onyame*. In a paper that looks at various mother-tongue translations of Acts 17: 22 – 23, Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor comments also about the mother tongue translations of “gods” and shows how incompatible with African thought these translations are.⁶⁴ The first commandment has come to have meaning among the Akan because of Christianity, Bible translation and interpretation.⁶⁵ The word *anyame* even though it appears in Christaller’s dictionary, has been coined for translating “gods.”⁶⁶ Ryan mentions that perhaps because West African Bible translators were reluctant to use words for lesser transcendent beings of West Africa to translate the plural sense of *’elohim* they created “ersatz” words to make the plural reference to gods in the Hebrew.⁶⁷ In the Twi Bible, the word “*anyame*” is used to translate “gods.” On some occasions, *abosom* is also used to translate “gods.” This may perhaps be the reason why “gods” is often used for *abosom* by writers on Akan religion.⁶⁸ This is not acceptable as the concept of “gods” in the Bible is different from the concept of *abosom* in Akan religion. “Gods,” being “divine antagonists”⁶⁹ may be compared to *ahonhom bɔne* in the Akan context. They may therefore be evil and demonic, but the same cannot be said of *abosom*. In Ryan’s view, West African Bible translators should have used *abosom* to translate “gods” instead of “*anyame*.” Rattray also says that the only correct word to use for the Akan word “*abosom*” is “god.”⁷⁰ Translating “gods” as *abosom* however, puts *abosom* in the category of antagonists of *Onyame*,⁷¹ as, according to Ryan, this is what the gods are in the context of the Bible.⁷² However, in Akan world view, *abosom* are not “antagonists” of *Onyame*; they cooperate with him in helping human beings.⁷³ Translating “gods” as *abosom*, makes *abosom* enemies of *Onyame*, Yahweh. Ryan makes this suggestion because he believes that using *anyame* to translate gods has led to over-dignifying the “divine antagonists of Yahweh in Israel.” It has also led to the underrating of the Supreme Being in West Africa.⁷⁴ “Anyame” is an “ersatz” word and should not be used to translate gods, but *abosom* should not be used in translating “gods” either. This is because the two represent different concepts. *Abosom* are not “gods”, they are *abosom*, ministers of *Onyame*.

Why Christians believe *abosom* are evil spirits

The Twi translation of Exodus 20: 3 -4 uses the word *abosom* to translate neither “gods” nor “graven image.” However, in passages like I Corinthians 8: 4, 7, and 10:19, “idols” has been translated as “*abosom*” in the Akuapem Twi Bible.⁷⁵

⁵⁸ Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 55.

⁵⁹ See C. R. Gaba, “The Idea of a Supreme Being Among the Aālô People in Ghana,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, II, Fasc 1, (1969): 64 – 79.

⁶⁰ See E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare God in Yoruba Belief*, (London: Longmans, 1962).

⁶¹ Christaller writes that the word *Nyame* has in recent times been used for a god and then he puts the following sentence in brackets: of polytheists, with a newly introduced pl. a-. The heathen negroes are, at least to a great extent, rather monotheists, as they apply the term for God only to one supreme being.

⁶² Some scholars claim that the word *Onyame* is not a name but refers to nature of *Onyankopɔn*. These people say that *Onyame* is the Akan word for god. Even if this view is true, for the Akan, there is only one *Onyame*. *Abosom* are not seen as *Onyame*.

⁶³ See Patrick J. Ryan, “‘Arise, O God!’ The Problem of ‘Gods’ in West Africa,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XI, Fasc.3 (1980), 164.

⁶⁴ See Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, “Reading Acts 17: 22 – 23 Through the Lens of the Graeco-Roman Religions and Ghanaian Mother Tongue Translations of the Bible,” *Sapientia Logos* 6.2 (2014), 39-41.

⁶⁵ See Ryan, ‘Arise, O God!’ 164.

⁶⁶ In Christaller’s *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Languages*, he notes that even though *Onyame* refers singularly to the Supreme Being, there is a recent use of it for a god (of polytheists) and a plural of it has been introduced by putting “a” in front of “nyame so that the word becomes *anyame*..

⁶⁷ See Ryan, ‘Arise O God’ 164.

⁶⁸ See Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 52 – 62.

⁶⁹ See Ryan, ‘Arise, O God,’ 164.

⁷⁰ See R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti*, 90.

⁷¹ *Onyame*, the Akan name for the Supreme Being has been used to translate God in the Bible.

⁷² See Ryan, ‘Arise, O God,’ 164.

⁷³ See Ryan, ‘Arise, O God,’ 168.

⁷⁴ An Akan may refer to someone as his *Onyame* not because he sees that person as *Onyame* but because the person may have been very instrumental in a deliverance of some sort he may have received.

⁷⁵ Kyerâw Kronkron Anaa Bible, (Accra: Bible Society of Ghana, 2012)

Taking the Twi translation of these verses alone, it would be difficult to say that the verses refer to the worship of *abosom*. However, considering other passages in the Bible where *abosom* has been used to translate “idols,” it may be understood why Akuapem Christians would say that the commandment has to do with *abosom*. This section considers some of these passages.

In Leviticus 19:4, God says:

Do not turn to **idols** or make **gods** of cast metal for yourselves. I am the Lord your God.⁷⁶

The Twi says:

*Monnan mo ho nkɔ abosonhuhuw no nkyɛn, na monnye anyame a wɔagu mmfa: Mene Awurade mo Nyankopɔn.*⁷⁷

In the translation, the word *abosonhuhuw*, from *abosom*, is used to translate “idols” thus making *abosom* idols. *Abosomhuhuw* means many *abosom*. Idols can be said to be things that a person cherishes. The context of its usage here however shows that it is used in reference to an image which a person depends on for protection and perhaps, provision. *Anyame* is used in this text to translate “gods” and not *abosom*.

Again, Psalm 97: 7 says:

All worshippers of images are put to shame, who make their boast in worthless **idols**; all **gods** bow down before [H]im.⁷⁸

In the Twi translation, the verse reads:

Ahonisomfo, wɔn a wɔde abosonhuhuw hyehye wɔn ho no nyinaa ani awu, mo anyame nyinaa, monkotow no.

Here, images refer to idols; the images that are worshipped are the idols. The word “idols” is translated as *abosonhuhuw* from *abosom*, “gods” as *anyame* and worshippers of images as *ahonisomfo*. *Ahoni* are images. The Twi translation therefore makes idols *abosom*, and gods *anyame*. The view that *abosom* are idols is seen here. The verse also brings out the fact that idols are gods.

Another verse in the Bible worth looking at is Isaiah 42: 17,

But those who trust in **idols**, who say to **images**, ‘You are our **gods**,’ will be turned back in utter shame.

Na wɔn a wɔn ho da abosom so no, wɔbesan wɔn akyi, na wɔn ani bewu; wɔn a wɔka kyere ogu ahoni se: Mone yen anyame no.

In this verse, “idols” is translated as *abosom*. These are “images”, *ahoni*. “Gods” is translated as *anyame*. The translation here is the same as in Psalm 97: 7. The gods of the people are idols which are images. These may be cast images.

One other passage is found in I Corinthians. It reads:

Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an **idol** is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to **demons**, not to God and I do not want you to be participants with **demons**. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of **demons** too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the **table of demons**.⁷⁹

In this passage, Paul teaches his readers the implications of participating in pagan religious feasts. The Akuapem Twi Bible translates this passage thus:

*Monhwe shonam fam Israel! Enye wɔn a wodi afɔreduan no na wɔne afɔremuka no wɔ ayɔnkofa? Afei mise den? Se abosom afɔre ye biribi anaase abosom ye biribi? Dabi; na mmom mise, afɔre a wɔɔ no, wɔɔ ma ahonhomɔne, na enye Onyankopɔn, na mempe se mone ahonhomɔne fa ayɔnko. Montumi nnom Awurade kruwa ano ne ahonhomɔne kruwa ano; montumi nnidi Awurade pon so ne ahonhomɔne pon so.*⁸⁰

⁷⁶ NIV

⁷⁷ Leviticus 19:4 *Anyamesám anaa Kyeráw Kronkron Akan Kasa Mu.*

⁷⁸ RSV

⁷⁹ I Corinthians 10:18-21. The words in bold are for emphasis.

⁸⁰ I Korintifo 10:18-21. Words in bold for emphasis.

The Twi words *abosom* and *ɔbosom* have been used to translate “idols” and “idol” respectively. This directly connects *abosom* with *ahonhommɔne* (demons). In this passage, the English word that is translated as *abosom* is “idols”. Commenting on what Paul says in verses 19 – 20, Phebe Perkins notes that Paul mentions that sacrifices made to idols are made to demons. This compared to the fact that Paul, in verse 18, asks a rhetorical question to show that an idol is nothing, gives the impression that he is contradicting himself.⁸¹ It is likely that Paul is saying that the idols in themselves are just images which cannot do anything for themselves but they represent demons. They are images that are believed to have supernatural power to assist those who rely on them in various ways. Sacrificing to these idols therefore is sacrificing to the demons they represent. Within the Hebrew context, people saw idols as things that were worshipped as ends in themselves and even if they had a “spirit” behind them, it was a spirit that had no affiliation with Yahweh. They were spirits that challenged Yahweh, they were demons. In Akan religion, when a person bows to the *ɔbosom*, it is not the image that he/she puts his/her trust in, but the *honhom* that dwells in it, that spirit which is derived from *Onyame*. Western anthropologists and missionaries had the tendency to believe that it is the images that are the *abosom*. However, as we have noted above by quoting Williamson, the images are only abodes for the *abosom*.⁸² The prophet Jeremiah describes how an “idol” is made and how it is worshipped.⁸³ The making of a shrine for an *ɔbosom* may appear to follow the same lines as that described by the prophet Jeremiah but a *bosom* is not an idol. Rattray who observed how shrines are made knew that the shrine is not the *ɔbosom*. The Akan believe that the *honhom* that dwells in the shrine is not an enemy of *Onyankopɔn*.⁸⁴ In Akan thought, *abosom* are not evil beings but messengers, or functionaries, of *Onyankopɔn*.⁸⁵ They do not challenge the authority of *Onyankopɔn*. The Twi translation of I Corinthians 10: 19 – 20, is one of the passages that have made many Akan Christians believe that *abosom* are demons. What the Akan means by *ɔbosom* is however not the same as what the Bible means by “idols”.

It is not only “idols” that is translated as *ɔbosom* in the Twi Bible, “gods” is also translated thus sometimes. Jeremiah 10: 11 says:

“Tell them this: ‘These **gods**, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and under the heavens.’”

*Dɛ mbɛrɛ hom nse hɔn nye yi: Abosom a wɔannyɛ sor nye asase bɛhara efi asase do nye sor n’ase.*⁸⁶

In this verse, the word *abosom* is used to translate “gods”. This brings up more clearly, the connection between the Akan Christians’ view that the first commandment refers to *abosom*.

Acts 17: 18 is also a passage in which “gods” is translated as *abosom*:

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating for foreign **gods**.”

This passage is translated into Twi as:

Na Epikurofo ne Stoafo anyansafo bi nso ne no dii anobaabae. Ebinom kae se: Ɔkasafɔ yi se den ni? Na ebinom se : Ɔte sɛnea ɔka abosom ahɔho bi ho asem – efiɛ ɔkaa wɔn Yesu wu ne ɔsɔre ho asempan no.

In these passages, “gods” is not translated as “*anyame*” as is usually the case, but *abosom*.⁸⁷ Though the translation of “gods” as “*abosom*” are not many, these translations could have caused converts to believe that *abosom* are what the Bible refers to as gods and idols and could account to some extent, for the view among Akan Christians that *abosom* are enemies of *Onyankopɔn* and evil. In Akan world view however, as has already been noted, *abosom* are not the same as the gods in the Hebrew or Greek world, they are not the same as the gods of the Ancient Near East.

Abosom in the light of Jesus and the Jewish High Priest

The discussion so far indicates that two different concepts are being mixed up – that of gods and idols, and that of

⁸¹ Phebe Perkins, *First Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2012), 127.

⁸² See p. 4 of this paper.

⁸³ See Jeremiah 10: 3-5

⁸⁴ Interview with the *Banmuhene* on October 22, 2004.

⁸⁵ Compare this view to what Idowu says about the concept of God among the Yoruba. See Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 18.

⁸⁶ In both the Akuapem Twi and Asante Twi Bibles the language of this verse is Fante.

⁸⁷ Of the 238 entries under “gods” in the Abingdon’s Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, the word “gods” is translated as “*abosom*” in the Twi Bible only twice. See James Strong, *Abingdon’s Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), pp. 550 – 551.

abosom. If *abosom* are conceived by the Akan as spirits that cooperate with *Onyankopɔn*, they cannot be the same as “gods” and “idols.” It could further be said that the *abosom* can be compared to the priests of the old covenant as has already been mentioned. These priests mediated between Israel and Yahweh. They brought the people into the presence of Yahweh – they were mediators or intermediaries. *Abosom* have also been mediators, they have stood between human beings and *Onyankopɔn* bringing them into a kind of relationship, in traditional Akan thought. Taking a cue from the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, just as the Jews depended on the High Priest to intercede on their behalf with God, so the Akan depended on the *abosom* to mediate between them and *Onyankopɔn*. This writer, in presenting Christ, places him in the order of Melchizedek and identifies Him with the High Priest thus making His role even clearer to the Jews. In his view, what the high priests did, Christ is now doing in a better and more comprehensive way.⁸⁸ In much the same way, what the *abosom* did for the Akan, Jesus Christ is now doing in a better and more comprehensive way. The Akan Christian therefore can do without the services of the *abosom*. With the revelation of Jesus Christ in Akan society, the services of the *abosom* are no longer required.⁸⁹ This is the point, that Idowu seeks to make when he points out that the divinities would eventually disappear.⁹⁰ The disappearance of a functionary in the face of Christ has happened among Jewish Christians. Jews who have become Christians do not need the services of the High Priest anymore. The office has become obsolete. It is the same with Akan religion. The Akan who becomes a Christian does not need the services of the *abosom* anymore; the office, for him/her, becomes obsolete. They may not be evil *ahonhom* but because Jesus Christ, the better mediator has come, to continue to depend on the *abosom* conflicts with the Christian faith just as it would be for a Jewish believer to continue to depend on the high priest to mediate between him/her and Yahweh. Also, in the new dispensation, the new covenant brought into place by Jesus Christ, even though *abosom* may not be useful any longer, they must not be considered enemies of *Onyankopɔn*.

Saying that the connection of *Odwira* with *abosom* conflicts with the Christian faith may be right even though the *abosom* are not demons. This is because just as it would not be right for Jewish Christians to do anything that shows a continuing dependence on the High Priest; Jesus Christ is the new and true High Priest and they depend solely on Him in their relations with God, even so, Akan Christians cannot continue to depend on *abosom* in their relations with *Onyame* as Jesus is now doing for them what *abosom* used to do.

***Abosom* and African Christianity**

For the Akan, *abosom* are “instruments” that *Onyame* used in working among human beings in the old dispensation. Kwame Bediako notes that in the engagement of African primal religions with Christianity, African theologians have stressed the “centrality and uniqueness of God” in these traditions and done little with their wider spirit-world which includes the *abosom*. He further states that it appears that African theologians like John S. Mbiti and E. Bolaji Idowu would rather these spirit-beings did not exist. Yet, this “unity and multiplicity of Divinity” is real in the African world view.⁹¹

The question at this point is, “considering their place and function in the lives of the Akan and in Akan religion, where do *abosom* fit in in African Christianity”? In Akan religion, *abosom* are, in addition to being intermediaries between human beings and *Onyankopɔn*, messengers or ministers of *Onyame*. No Akan ever refers to *abosom* as *Onyame*. They are always subordinate to Him. If the Akan appear to interact more with *abosom* than they do with *Onyame*, it is not because they believe that they are more powerful and caring than *Onyame*, but because of a philosophy which is portrayed in their political organisation. Among the Akan, a person only goes before the *Ɔhene* (chief/king) as a last resort. It would not be far-fetched to say that the same principle is applied in Akan religion. The Akan approaches *abosom* first because *Onyame* is the greatest being and He is approached as the last resort. Williamson makes this point.⁹²

There is always a question that comes up when the issue of the *abosom* is discussed like this. This question has to do with whether the fact that the Akan see the *abosom* as derived from *Onyankopɔn* makes them beings related to *Onyankopɔn* or not. Is the power that worked through *abosom* from *Onyankopɔn* or are the *abosom* demonic? That there is some power at work where *abosom* are concerned is something that the Akan can testify to. It is this power that traditional Akanfo believe comes from *Onyankopɔn* but Christians believe comes from the devil. Why Christians believe this way could be due to the mentality and actions of missionaries. This is because missionaries called the *abosom* “fetishes” and regarded their priests as agents of the devil.⁹³ They preached against what they regarded as

⁸⁸ Hebrew 4: 14 – 5: 10.

⁸⁹ The *akɔmfɔ* and *abosomfɔ* are not being compared with the high priests because they are not the intermediaries between *Onyankopɔn* and human beings. It is the *abosom* who are.

⁹⁰ See Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 89.

⁹¹ Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 89.

⁹² Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, 101.

⁹³ Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*, (Asmara, Erirea: Africa Worlds Press, Inc, 1999), 82 – 85.

worship of the “fetishes.”⁹⁴ But Bible translation may also be held responsible. Yahweh’s dislike for “idols” and “gods” is translated in the Twi as His dislike for *abosom*.

One wonders what the situation would have been like if the word *abosom* had not been used to translate “gods” and “idols” but had been used to translate “angels” who in biblical categories are ministers of Yahweh, as *abosom* are ministers of *Onyankopɔn*. Can it be said that *abosom* are to *Onyankopɔn* what angels are to Yahweh? This paper proposes that if *Onyankopɔn* is Yahweh, then *abosom* are angels. The word which has been used in translating the word “angels” in the Twi Bible is *abɔfo* (sing. *ɔbɔfo*). This is the everyday Twi word for “messengers.” For example, if there is the need for a message to be sent by a family to another, the first family will appoint a messenger to carry the information. This messenger is the *ɔbɔfo*. Among the Akan, the *ɔbɔfo* is not a heavenly spiritual being who brings messages from *Onyankopɔn* but physical beings who are given messages to carry to other physical human beings. The translators of the Twi Bible recognised that *Onyankopɔn* is the Creator God, whose Twi name could be used for Yahweh as expressed in the Bible.⁹⁵ It should have followed logically that the name for the ministers of *Onyankopɔn* would be used to translate “angels.” However, they chose to use the word *ɔbɔfo* putting *ɔsoro* (heaven) or *Onyame* before it to differentiate it from the human messenger. If the early Christian missionaries among the Akan who translated the Bible into Twi had understood the concept of the *abosom* well, it is likely that they would have used the word *abosom* to translate “angels” as *abosom* are also “spiritual” messengers of *Onyankopɔn*. It is not logical that agents of *Onyankopɔn*, the *abosom* have been made His enemies in Christian belief. How could God have been depending on evil spirit beings to minister to His people all the years until the coming of the Gospel to Africa? The Akan say: *Ɔkɔmfɔ bɔne a w’atena ɔyarefo ho ama ɔkɔmfɔ pa abɔto no no, wonnyi no mu* (the bad *ɔkɔmfɔ*, priest, who has attended to the sick person until the good *ɔkɔmfɔ* has arrived is not summarily dismissed). This maxim comes from the practice of *akɔmfɔ* treating the sick. Sometimes an *akɔmfɔ* who is not very powerful has to give what could be called “first aid” until the powerful *akɔmfɔ* arrived. According to the saying, the fact that the first *akɔmfɔ* could not do much does not mean that s/he was not of any use, for perhaps without him/her, the sick person would have died before the powerful *akɔmfɔ* arrived. The first *akɔmfɔ* must therefore not be despised or disgraced. He/she must also be acknowledged. African theologians have been saying that the primal religions of African peoples have been a preparation evangelica ensuring that the African understood the Gospel which was brought by the missionaries. In the coming of the Gospel, a better mediator than the *abosom* has come in the person of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that the *abosom* should be demonised. Demonising the *abosom* means that until the coming of the Gospel to the Akan world, God cooperated with evil spirits to minister to them. How could *Onyankopɔn* have worked with and through “evil” beings all along?

There must be a place for the concept of *abosom* in the story of Akan Christianity otherwise there is a paradox of an *Onyankopɔn* who has all along, until the coming of the Gospel, depended on “evil” spirits for His operations among human beings.

From the above discussion, the issue that Christians ought to have with *abosom* in the celebration of the festival is the fact of its dependence on obsolete functionaries, and not dependence on demons as is the case now. There may be other aspects of the festival that may be related to demons but certainly not in the area of *abosom*.

CONCLUSION

This paper has established that God commands that Israel acknowledges no other gods but Him. The commandment is however not about *abosom* per se, as the gods mentioned in the commandment are not *abosom*. *Abosom* in the Akan world view are not the same as “gods” or “idols,” an “embodiment of opposition” to Yahweh. Gods and *abosom* are two different concepts. When the traditional Akan talks about *abosom*, he/she is referring to beings in league with *Onyame*. If Yahweh is *Onyame*, then “gods” cannot be *abosom*. For anyone to think that a festival with a connection to them would be against God as they are demonic, would not be acceptable. Though Christians have no business with *abosom* any longer, it is not because they are demonic but mainly because following Akan religion through to the coming of the Gospel, *abosom* have become obsolete as Jesus Christ is now the mediator between human beings and *Onyankopɔn*; the services of *abosom* are no longer required.

There are passages in the Twi Bible where the word *abosom* has been used to translate “gods,” and “idols.” This could have led to *abosom* being perceived as demons or evil spirits. With the Akan understanding of *abosom*, the word could have been used to translate “angel” in the Bible as in Akan thought, *ɔbɔsom* is a messenger of *Onyame*, who is Yahweh. If this had been done, the problem of seeing *abosom* as evil spirits would not have come up. Also, considering the part that *abosom* are believed to play in the relationship between human beings and *Onyame*, that they are intermediaries, a good understanding of the concept of *abosom* may have made the proclamation of the Gospel among the Akan much easier, as the role of Jesus Christ would have been better understood.

⁹⁴ See Noel Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835 – 1960: A Younger Church in a Changing Society*, (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1960), 89.

⁹⁵ Ryan notes that such a thing could not happen in the Graeco- Roman context The Septuagintal translators could not use the proper name of Zeus or Jupiter for the name of the God of Israel who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. See Ryan, ‘Arise O God!’ 163.

Again, where concepts in a people's world view are absent from the biblical world view, a translation of the Bible into the tongue of the people may lead to the introduction and creation of new words and concepts that may affect the people's understanding of their world. It may even lead to the people looking down on their traditions when they do not have to.

Finally, it must be said that Akuapem Christians do have a point in saying that the connection of *abosom* with the *Odwira* festival conflicts with the Christian faith. The *abosom* no longer serve as intermediaries in the face of Christ so they must not be treated as such. However, there must be a way of dissociating them without letting the *abosom* disappear from the conversion story of the Akuapem Christian.

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