

Ewe Christology: The Sonship of Christ in Hebrews 1:1-4 from An Ewe Perspective



Mawuli Nyador ¹ 

¹ Department of Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.

ABSTRACT

This paper is a biblical and cultural reflection and application of Hebrews 1:1-4 from the Ewe Bible in the Ewe context using two main approaches, the Mother Tongue Criticism methodology of biblical studies and the Comparative Approach. From the Ewe text, this study concludes that the primal understanding of the word *Mawu Vi* which is known in local parlance as *Sogle*, according to the evidence in Hebrews 1:1, is not the same as Jesus of the Bible. In their functions as sons and ambassadors of *Mawu*, they are similar but have vast differences when it comes to creation, sustaining creation and being selected as heir to all God's creation. The most important area of dissimilarity is their provision for the forgiveness of sin. In addition, a critical examination of issues from the mother tongue exegesis suggests that it is the son's role as the *domenyila* that gives him eminence in the Ewe culture. His role as the lineage *domenyila* enables him to perform both social and religious functions as well as political.

Correspondence

Mawuli Nyador

Email:

nyadormawuli@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Afua Kuma, says of Jesus, 'when he wants to go to a town, he doesn't ask the way there: his own wisdom discerns the right way to go' and 'when he reaches a town, all its secrets are laid bare.'¹ Over the years, many African Christian scholars have painstakingly endeavoured to bring the traditional religions of non-Westerners such as in Africa and Asia from the margins to the centre of focus. African Christian theologians such as Bolaji Idowu, J.S Mbiti, Mulago Gwa Cikala Musharhamina, and Kwame Bediako, have contributed to this effort. Other Christian theologians but non-Africans, Andrew F. Walls, H.W Turner, J. B Taylor and J. V. Taylor, have also helped to shape and correct some misconceptions about African religions held by the Western Missionaries since their encounter with Sub-Saharan Africa. They engaged with scriptures and comparative-phenomenological studies of Christianity and these traditional religions to conclude that pre-Christian religions are the 'Substructure of Christianity'.² The idea is not revolutionary but an intellectual reconstruction of Christian Theology to make the gospel culturally meaningful. One such reconstruction of theology is observable in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

¹Afua Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest, Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma*, (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1980),15.

²This is an extract from Gillian Mary Bediako's topic, 'Old Testament Religion as Primal Substructure of Christianity: Questions and Issues', *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol.12, No.1 (June 2009), 3-7.

The focus of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Προς Ἑβραίους) is on the Superiority and High Priesthood of Christ. At the time, the gospel needed to engage with the religious and social traditions and culture of the Jews. Jesus' mediatory and reconciliatory roles are demonstrated in the Epistle. Kwame Bediako states it as follows, 'His priestly mediatorial role is fully explored and we are given one of the highest and most advanced understandings of Christ in the entire New Testament.'³ Again, he makes it more vivid when he says, it is the essential message of the Epistle to the Hebrews that Jesus Christ embodies the fullest divine self-disclosure to humanity and is, therefore, superior to all other 'revelations', and that the good news or gospel that he embodies and has brought is altogether unique.⁴

The Epistle points to Christ as the final fulfilment of the message to the ancestors in the old covenant of the Old Testament. The Epistle draws on the OT to communicate the Gospel to Hellenistic Jews in the Diaspora. The author needs to encourage these Jews to keep up the Christian faith even in the face of heresies and persecution.⁵

With the translated scriptures, mother tongue exegesis exposes the affinities the histories and culture the Bible lands have with African culture. 'Exegesis in the mother tongue is possible only because the Bible is available in the vernacular'.⁶ Mother tongue exegesis does not adopt the usual historical-critical approach of Western theology. Rather, it considers the context of the recipients of the translated Bible in the interpretation of scripture.⁷

Hence, the present study investigates insights into the exegetical study of Hebrews 1:1-4 in the mother tongue and brings to bear on the person of Jesus and how this is applicable in the Ewe context. The insights guide the reflection and application processes in this paper. Since this paper falls within Gospel and culture engagement, it begins by observing the Ewe meaning of Gospel and culture.

Culture and Gospel: Ewe Definitions

Culture

Culture has no definite definition as different disciplines may define it to suit their field of study. The theologians and anthropologists may give different definitions based on the lens through which they view it. Thus, Niebuhr cautions the theologian to depend on the anthropologist for a better definition in order to prevent misleading theological interpretations (many theologians accept that culture is a human creation and thus evil).⁸

The Ewe word for culture is *dekɔnu* (transliteration: *dekornu*). This comes from three words *de* (agree), *kɔ* (neck) and *nu* (thing). C.A. Akrofi, G.L Botchway and B.K Takyi in their *An English Akan-Ewe-Ga dictionary* define *dekɔnu* as '*dukɔ ade fe agbenɔnɔ kple wɔnawo*'.⁹ (Literally: a people's way of life and the things they do). This is a normal definition that sides with all other definitions of the word culture.

However, as stated earlier, the word comes from three words *de*, *kɔ* and *nu*. *De* is used in different ways. As a verb, it can mean 'to agree', 'to reach an amount', 'to have been to a place' or

³Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture, a Ghanaian Perspective*, (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990), 33.

⁴Kwame Bediako, 'Christian Faith and African Culture, an Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews', *Journal of African Thought*, Vol.13. No.1 (June 2010), 45-57 (45).

⁵Kassa Tesfaye, "Hebrews", in Tokunboh Adeyemo (Ed), *African Bible Commentary, A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 Scholars*, (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), 1489.

⁶Philip T.Laryea, 'Reading Acts 14 :8-17 & 17:22-31 in Ga:A Critical Examination of the Issues, Meaning and Interpretations arising from Exegesis in the Mother Tongue' *Journal of African Thought*, Vol.6. No.1 (June 2003): 35-43 (35).

⁷David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 423.

⁸Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 30.

⁹C.A. Akrofi, G.L Botchway and B.K Takyi, *An English Akan-Ewe-Ga Dictionary* (Accra: Waterville Publishing House, 1968), 83.

'square'.¹⁰ *Kɔ* is the neck that gives support to the head. *Nu* hereby means a thing. The word however mostly appears in the plural, *dekɔnuwo*.

Kɔnuwo is derived from *kɔ ɲu nuwo* (things hanging on the neck or things on the neck). Ewe ancestors believed that the neck of humans or animals is very important. The life of the animal or human is contained in the neck. The organs or things that help an animal or human life are the lungs, kidneys and heart. The arteries or veins that connect these organs to the head are contained in the neck. The head controls most of the activities of the human body. Thus, if the neck is cut, the head dies and the body also dies. What this means is that the things (veins or arteries) of the neck that give life to a person are very important and cannot be cut as long as they wish to exist or continue living. Thus, the understanding the word *kɔnu* brings is the things that are around or in the neck of a people that keep them alive. When such things are taken away, they lose their identity and their very being. The things of the neck are not only physical but also spiritual and this is their worldview. It is therefore important to think of *kɔnu* '...in a more open-ended sense of tradition, history, identity and continuity.'¹¹

From the above, *kɔnu* is life. Hence, *kɔnu* can be defined as '*Ameha adewo fe agbenɔnɔ bliblo si dzi woda asi do eye wowɔnɛ vidzɔvitsodo*.'¹² (Literally: a group of people's way of life (living) on which they totally agree and they do this from generation to generation). It is important to note that the definition in the Ewe language has a deeper meaning than as portrayed in the English language. This is because the word is synonymous with life (what keeps a body alive).

Every community has its own way of life or *kɔnuwo* that keeps the community living. Thus, if any group of people lose such things, they are just as dead as how a fowl is slaughtered by cutting off its head (neck). Hence, any acceptable norm on which the particular community agrees and practises becomes that community's culture (*dekɔnu*). Such a norm is limited to that community. The same norm may be practised in another community but differently or be wholly unacceptable in another community. This demonstrates why cultures differ from place to place. Emmanuel Nyador, therefore, suggests a better word *dekɔɲunu* (agreed things of the neck) as this gives it a direct meaning.¹³

Thus, culture in the Ewe language does not depict just a way of life of a people but also that, which sustains their life and identity and they have been agreed on.

Gospel (nyanyui la)

There are many definitions attributed to the word 'gospel'. Many see the gospel as a set of books about the life of Jesus. Others also refer to it as a set of good principles that one practises. According to Bediako, the Gospel, in the true sense of the word, is who Christ is, and what he means, in his person, his life on earth, his work, his death, his resurrection and its aftermath, and how all that concerning him relates to all human beings, in all our cultural traditions, histories and environments.¹⁴

The above assertion can be summarized thus: the Gospel is Jesus himself. In relation to this conclusion is the fact that Jesus is the good news from God to humankind. It is important to note however that the word itself is the English translation of the Greek *euangelion*, which means 'good news.' In the NT it refers to the good news preached by Jesus that the Kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:15) and the good news of what God has done on behalf of humanity in Jesus (Rom. 1:3-5). The background for the noun is found in the OT where the verbal form 'to bring good news' or 'to

¹⁰D. Westermann, *Gbefiala or Ewe-English Dictionary* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer (E.Voshen), 1930),10.

¹¹Kwame Bediako, 'Gospel and Culture: Some insights for our time from the experience of the earliest Church', *Journal of African Thought*, Vol.2. No.2 (December, 1999), 8-17 (8).

¹²Interview with Emmanuel Kwame Nyador, on 20 December 2014, Akatsi in the Volta Region. Emmanuel Nyador is a retired Ewe teacher and pastor. He was an adherent of Agave traditional religion until his miraculous healing through the prayers of an evangelist.

¹³Excerpts of the interview with Emmanuel Nyador.

¹⁴Bediako, 'Gospel and Culture, 8.

announce good news' appears rather than the noun. So in Isa. 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; and 61:1 the messenger announces the good news of Israel's redemption from Exile.¹⁵

The Ewe rendering of *εὐαγγέλιον* is *nyanyui la*. Akrofi et al however use 'nyanui'¹⁶ for the gospel without the *la*. *Nyanyui la* is a compound word composed of three parts: *nya* (lit. word), *nyui* (lit. good) and *la* (lit. the) – the good word. The use of the word in its literal form is far from meaning or pointing to the Greek noun use, which is 'good news'. However, it is the word used in translation for gospel as used in Greek. In translating *λογος* into Ewe, the translators use *Nya la* (John 1:1) with the capital letter. From this, the author have two observations.

First, when *Nya la* is used to mean *λογος*, which points to Jesus, then the *nya* in *nyanyui la* can equally refer to Jesus. If this is so, then Jesus is the Good Word. What makes it more definite is the *la* (the). The usage in English is the same in Ewe. Going by this, then *nyanui* can refer to any good word. However, the addition of *la*, makes it more definite as a pointer to a specific word – Jesus and his words.

Secondly, there is no personification of 'word' in the Ewe primal understanding. Nevertheless, if the Greek philosophy is conveyed in the translation of *λογος* to mean *Nya la*, then the translation for gospel should have been *nyadzɔdzɔnu la* (the good news). It is evident that the translators use form and meaning in their translation than leaning on only meaning.

It can then be concluded that Good news is about the Word – it points to the Word as the source of eternal life. The gospel/good news itself then does not give eternal life! It talks about the one who gives eternal life - Jesus. We then have to turn our culture, which sustains our life to Him for a better life, eternal life

A Literal-cultural Reflection on Hebrews 1:1-4 from the Ewe Text (Biblia, BSG, 2011)

Verse 1 *Le blema la, Mawu fo nu na mia tɔgbuiwo zi gede to efe gbefadelawo dzi le mɔvovowo nu.*

(In the past, God spoke to our ancestors/grandfathers many times through the proclaimers in many ways.)

The gospel as presented in the Epistle to the Hebrews was not to establish the existence of God. It sought rather to show that there was now a 'better' (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24) and 'perfect' (2:10; 5:9, 14; 6:1; 7:11, 19, 28; 9:9, 11; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:2, 23) way the God they knew was communicating.¹⁷

Even though the author of this Epistle did not write in the language of the Hebrews, the concept of God as used in the Greek *ὁθεὸς* (Hebrews 1:1), equates to the Jewish God *יהוה*. In the same vein, God as translated *Mawu*, in the Ewe Bible, equates the God of the Bible to the pre - Christian name of God among the Ewe. *Mawu*, as stated earlier, is a religiously divine name for the Supreme Being among the Ewe. *Mawu* is relational and a communicable God.

The Ewe believe *Mawu* communicates through the *trɔwo*. *Trɔwo*, according to Motte, are 'Mawu fe dɔlawo'¹⁸ (servants or messengers of *Mawu*). It is believed *Mawu* created the *trɔwo* first then later he created man. He sent the *trɔwo* to cater for humankind.¹⁹ It is not clear if these *trɔwo* are angels, as they seem to perform some functions of the angels as known in the Bible. An angel is referred to as 'Mawudɔla'.²⁰ *Trɔwo* serves as the channel of communication to and from *Mawu*.

¹⁵Paul J. Achtemeier, *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (1st ed.), (San Francisco : Harper & Row, 1985), 354¹⁵

¹⁶Akrofi et al, *An English Akan-Ewe-Ga*, 158.

¹⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe, 'Hebrews', *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*, (Wheaton, Ill: Victor Books, 1997), Libronix Digital Library System (LDLS), version 2002-2007.

¹⁸ Motte, *Mia Denyigba*, 103.

¹⁹ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 805

²⁰ Akrofi et al., *An English Akan*, 14.

From the text, however, *Mawu* did not speak through these *trɔwo* but through the *gbefadɛlawo*. Nevertheless, the text indicates that even though *Mawu fo nu na mia tɔgbuiwo*, he did this *le mɔ vovowo nu* (in many ways). According to Emmanuel Nyador, the *gbefadɛlawo* can refer to *bokɔwo*, *hunɔwo* and *amegasiwo* (all these are priests and priestesses of shrines or cults).²¹ They serve as prophets to the community and in most cases are the voice of the *trɔwo*. One of the many ways these priests and priestesses receive or send messages to *Mawu* is *nukaka* or *afakaka* (divination).²² Some other means of communication are dreams, visions and nature such as the colour of the sky, the birds, etc. Unlike the Jews, there are no written records of these revelations or messages. A message to the community is mostly orally passed on from generation to generation.

As an Ewe proverb says, *agɔ mefoa nu dzro o* ('A fan palm tree does not speak for nothing'), meaning 'whoever speaks has a reason for speaking.'²³ There can be no communication between two or more persons unless there is a relationship or the need for communication. The Ewe understanding of Hebrews 1:1 establishes the fact that there was a special relationship between *tɔgbuiwo* (ancestors) and *Mawu*. In that same sense, *Mawu* spoke to the present generations. This text, even though refers to the ancestors of the Jews, is still relevant today since the message and medium of communication is still a force to reckon with.

Verse 2a *Ke le egbe nkeke mamle siawo me la, Mawu fo nu na mí to Via dzi. Vi siae eya nɔtia be wòanyi nuwo katã dome.*

(However, in these last days, God spoke to us through His Son. This is the Son he himself has selected to inherit all things).

Here, the Ewe translation introduces a word that is not in Greek. *Ke* is a particle that denotes a contrast, meaning 'but'. Linguistically, its absence has no great impact on the meaning of the Ewe text. However, it shows a transition from the previous statement and differentiates the former method of communication from the latter.

That *Mawu* spoke through the *gbefadɛlawo* is nothing new in the primal imagination of the Ewe. In addition, the Ewe believe that *Mawu* has a Son who is his envoy and 'prepares a place among people for his father.'²⁴ It is generally believed that *Mawu* has two other deities that relate to him as characteristics. These are *Sodza* and *Sogle*. *Sodza* is a feminine god while *Sogle* is masculine.²⁵ *Sodza* is the wife of *Sogle*, and the weaker and softer of the two.²⁶ Both perform different assignments for *Mawu*. *Sogle* who is the elder, functions 'as spokesman and ambassador of God sent to the people and conversely, as spokesman and ambassador of these to God....'²⁷ Can this be the Son through whom *Mawu fo nu na mí* (*Mawu* has spoken to us)? Can we associate *Sogle* with the person of Jesus? Functionally, *Sogle* as an envoy may be compared with Jesus as the messenger of God. However, in nature and essence, they may not be the same. This is because even though *Sogle* is the messenger of *Mawu*, he is mostly known for wickedness. According to Spieth, 'It is said: "Many people know *Mawu Sogle* better than they know *Mawu Sodza*; for *Mawu Sogle* does much evil and for that reason they invoke him."²⁸ That notwithstanding, let not be quick in dismissing *Sogle's* relatedness to Jesus.

Mawu not only spoke to us *to Via dzi* (through his Son) but has also selected him *be wòanyi nuwo katã dome* (to inherit all things). Culturally, most Ewe are patrilineal. The first son inherits

²¹Focused Group Discussion. December 8, 2014.

²²Akpelesi, Interview, 8 December 2014.

²³Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 622.

²⁴Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 461.

²⁵Motte, Mia Denyigba, 99.

²⁶Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 458-460.

²⁷Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 473.

²⁸Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 473.

the properties of the father. The first son commands more respect and recognition when he is truly the *alimevi* or *avamevi*²⁹ of the father. He takes over the management of the deceased father's properties.

However, if the first child is a woman, the right to inherit is passed on to the second born if he is a male. It is in rare cases that women inherit their fathers. It is not clear in this text (verse 2) if Jesus was the firstborn and is really *alimevi* of *Mawu*. However, a deduction from other parts of scripture supports his first position among the children of God (Rom. 8:29, Col. 1:15, Heb. 1:6 etc.).

It is, therefore, problematic to conclude that this Son is *alimevi*. The question will arise: who is the wife of *Mawu*? Though there is the concept of sexuality associated with *Sogle* and *Sodza*, none is attributed to *Mawu*. He is not known to have a wife but is only believed to be the father of *Sogle* (with an unknown mother/wife?). In addition, it is nowhere stated that *Sogle* is the inheritor of *Mawu*'s properties. Neither has it been established that *Sogle* is *alimevi*: if he was, the same question will be raised as that of Jesus. The text however establishes that this Son of *Mawu* will inherit all things making us believe that he must be a true Son of *Mawu* (*alimevi*). More so, according to Ewe custom, a father must die to pave way for the son to inherit his properties. Since *Mawu* does not die, when will the Son inherit these properties? This however shows the uniqueness of this Son.

Verse 2b *Eyama ke dzie Mawu to wə xexea me hã.*

(He is also through whom *Mawu* created the world.)

It is established that *Mawu* is the Creator of the world. However, Ewe cosmogony does not support the idea that *Mawu* created the world with the help of another deity or through a Son. However, in the creation of humankind, God assigned *Se* (god of destiny).³⁰ This deity determines how a person lives on earth. However, it does not serve as a messenger or inheritor of *Mawu*'s creation. It only helped in the formation of human beings and is not the Son of *Mawu*. *Sogle*'s role in creation is passive and thus, cannot be the one through whom *Mawu* made all things. We will not be too quick to dismiss him now even though the proceeding text does not directly apply to him.

Verse 3a *Vi lae de ale si Mawu fe ηutikəkæ le la fia, eye Mawu fe nənəme tututue le eya hã si. Vi lae tsə efe nya fe ηuse la le xexeame blibo la de te.*

(He is the son who revealed the glory of *Mawu*, and he also has the exact character of *Mawu*. He is the son who took the power of his word to firmly hold the whole world.)

The text continues to elaborate on the Son, his role and relatedness to *Mawu*. The Son reveals *Mawu fe ηutikəkæ* (the glory of *Mawu*). *ηutikəkæ* is made up of two words, *ηuti* (body) and *əkæ* (clean, holy, pure or clear) implying a pure or holy body (person). Much of Ewe literature does not discuss the nature and person of *Mawu*. What is mostly written about him plays around his works and relation to humankind than his nature. That notwithstanding, the descriptions of the meaning of the name, *Mawu*, and the dressing of his worshippers have many implications for his nature even if not explicit; this is especially for *Mawu fe ηutikəkæ* (the glory of *Mawu*).

In deciphering the meaning of *Mawu*, Spieth attests that 'It harmonizes, on the contrary, with the colour white...with physical and moral purity or chastity as well as with the cool of the evening.'³¹ Thus, 'The worshipper of *Mawu* should therefore also paint himself with white paint and dress in white cloth. Only the colour white harmonizes with *ma*.'³² It is a known fact that the colour white symbolises

²⁹The Ewe have accepted four types of children: *alimevi* or *avamevi* (the child from the loins of a man), *atikəmevi* or *dotanakplevi* (the child a woman brings into the marriage), *ameflelevi* or *aqəkə* or *dəkutsuvi* or *dzikplaqui* (a bought child) and *dzidehləmevi* (a child a woman has with another man outside her matrimonial home. This is not with her own husband). See Emmanuel Nyador, *Ekekevo*, (Keta: Photo City Press, 2013), p. 50.

³⁰Focused Group Discussion. 2014. It is however not clear whether *Se* is different from *Bomenə*, the caretaker of children in *Bome* before they are born unto this world. This is because she also determines the destiny of the children before sending them into our physical world. *Se* is sometimes used synonymously with *Mawu*.

³¹ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 455.

³² Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 456.

purity, cleanliness and holiness. Hence, implicitly the dress code of *Mawu* worshippers shows a glorious nature of purity and holiness. The expression *Mawu fe ηutikəkəe* (the glory of *Mawu*) as used here indicates the Greek meaning of ‘...excellence, perfection, such as belongs to God, and such as there is in heaven.’³³ This Son of *Mawu* then brings more light on the nature of God, his glory.

He not only shows *Mawu fe ηutikəkəe* (the glory of *Mawu*), but has *Mawu fe nɔnɔme tututu* (the exact character of *Mawu*). The word *nɔnɔme* denotes ‘form, figure, shape, stature, size; kind, character.’³⁴ From these meanings, it will be unwise to go by form, figure or shape. It is more prudent to go by *character* as the Greek text *χαρακτήρ* means. Going by this definition or meaning, this text goes a long way to confirm the Ewe proverb *Adela ηkɔ mevona le adelā ηu o* (‘A hunted animal is eternally identified with the name of the hunter.’³⁵). Traditionally, ‘whoever eats the meat asks of the person who had killed the animal.’³⁶ The meaning and usage of this proverb have to do with character or behaviour. Accordingly, ‘whoever sees the behaviour of a boy asks of the name of the father, if the father is bad, one should not expect anything better from the son.’³⁷ Thus, *Vi la* (the Son) has the exact character of *Mawu* even showing his glory.

Going by the meaning of form or shape may defeat the purpose of the text since sometimes, *vi qi tɔa mewoa tɔa nugbe o* (‘A child may resemble the father but not behave like him’³⁸). What it means is that ‘Exterior resemblance is not conditioned by the resemblance of character.’³⁹

It has been established that *Mawu* is the Creator of the universe. What is not known is that he created the world through his Son. The text continues that *Vi lae tsɔ efe nya fe ηuse la le xexeame blibo la de te* (he is the son who took the power of his word to firmly hold the whole world). There is no folktale or folklore, narrating how *Mawu* made the universe, except the formation of human beings from the dust (this shows how important humans are among *Mawu*’s creation). He is known to be powerful by how he upholds the world firmly, certainly not through a word, especially that of a Son as the Greeks and Jews will have readers believe. One cannot know all about God. It can then be concluded that *amedzro ηku lolo menya xɔ dome o* (‘A stranger with big eyes does not know inmost part of the house’),⁴⁰ meaning ‘even if a person knows a lot, there are secrets that she/he does no (sic) know.’⁴¹

Verse 3b *Esi eyama klɔ mɪafe nu vɔ wo da vɔ la, eyi dabɔbɔ anyi de Mawu Bubutɔgã si le dzifo vi i la fe nuɖusi me.*

(When he had finished washing our sins away, he went to sit at the right hand of *Mawu* the most honoured who is high in heaven.)

The text continues to exalt the Son and shows his mediatorial role: He *klɔ mɪafe nu vɔ wo da* (washed our sins away). *Klɔ* basically means to wash or clean an object or body. This is mostly an act of washing the outer surface of an object, say a plate or the human body. Though *nu vɔ* (sin, evil, wickedness) is not seen on the body, the act of cleansing is done on the outer surface. The text does not state what the Son used in washing *mɪafe nu vɔ wo* (our sins) nor how he did this. However, the author of the Epistle explains the act in chapters 9:11-14 and 10:12.

Traditionally, the act of cleansing mostly involves blood (of animals but sometimes a person is offered to the shrine of a cult (*Adzemu-Kosi*) to pay for a sin committed) depending on the gravity of the sin

³³ Barnes *Notes on the Epistle*, 39.

³⁴ Westermann, *Gbefiala*, 176.

³⁵ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 622.

³⁶ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 622.

³⁷ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 622.

³⁸ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 631.

³⁹ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 631.

⁴⁰ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 620.

⁴¹ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 620.

committed. Some primal acts of cleansing include *dzawuwu*, *amawuwu*, *trɔkosi* and *vɔsasa*.⁴² The text however establishes that now it is the son of *Mawu* that had washed our sins away and now is with the father in heaven.

In translating καθαρισμόν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος, the translators carried the idea of δι' ἑαυτοῦ καθαρισμόν τῶν ἡμῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος but did not translate δι' ἑαυτου. The author proposes this translation, *Esi eyama ηυτῶ τσῶ εδῶκui klῶ mīafe nu vῶ wo ḍa vῶ la...* (when he by himself had finished washing our sins...). Gilbert Ansre however thinks there is no reflective pronoun (in reference to δι' ἑαυτου) in this verse, thus, there is no need for “himself.”⁴³ Akpeleasi also thinks this proposed translation is unnatural.⁴⁴

Verse 4 Mawu wῶ Via wozu ga wu Mawudῶlawo, elabe ηκῶ si Mawu va tsῶ ne la xῶ asi wu Mawudῶlawo tῶ.

(*Mawu* made his Son bigger than angels because the name *Mawu* has come to give him is more precious than that of the angels.)

As stated earlier, *Mawudῶlawo* (*Mawu* = God and *dῶlawo* = servants) are best known as *trῶwo*. Hence, the Hebrew and Greek angelology is not the same as that of the Ewe primal imagination. These servants do not have wings nor are they described as robed in white. However, ‘people say that all those who live with God have tails.’⁴⁵

Comparatively, from the least to the greatest of the angels, *trῶwo* are not angels. Motte contrasting between the angels and *trῶwo* explains that ‘dῶla siawo menye *trῶwo* o, eye womawῶ wofe nῶnῶme hā asubῶ to nuwῶwῶ bubu aḍeke dzi o.’ (these servants are not *trῶwo* (gods), and no one shall make an image of them and worship through any other activity). What this means is that even though in the primal mind of the Ewe, *Mawu* has *dῶlawo* who are referred to as *trῶwo* and have images representing them with such powers as *dzo* being the small *dῶlawo* to these *trῶwo*, they are not the same as the angels presented in the Bible.

In the Ewe traditional setting, *trῶwo* who are known as the servants of *Mawu* receive worship and can punish the individual worshipper should the one go against these gods. In sharp contrast, the servants of *Mawu* in the bible do not accept worship (Revelation 22:8) and do not have the power to destroy or punish. Conclusively, though the concept and function of servanthood may be the same, the physical descriptions and the nature of these servants of *Mawu* among the Ewe and from a biblical perspective are in sharp contrast.

According to Mama Zogbé, ‘The naming of a child in Ewe/Fon/Mina et.al, culture is one of the most important social and spiritual events, that mark the beginning of a child's destiny here on Earth.’⁴⁶ ‘It is a universal belief that names have an impact on the character of a person... However, it is important to note that all ethnic groups in Ghana have their own unique naming systems.’⁴⁷ What name then did the Son of *Mawu* receive that has made him better than the angels? What naming system did the Father use?

From the Greek exegesis, it is concluded that the better name the Son has been accorded that has set Him above the angels is ‘Son of God’. However, a reflection from the mother tongue would not really accord the Son this superiority just for being called ‘Son of God’. Rather, the son will have

⁴²Focused Group Discussion, 2014.

⁴³Interview with Gilbert Ansre, on 8 December 2014, in Accra Ghana. Professor Gilbert Ansre, is a retired Bible Society translation Consultant and Linguist. He was instrumental in the translation of the New Ewe Bible.

⁴⁴ Akpeleasi, Interview. 8 December 2014.

⁴⁵ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 727.

⁴⁶Mama Zogbé, ‘Bestowing of names in Ewe culture’, <http://www.mamiwata.com/names.html>. Accessed 19 March 2015.

⁴⁷Veronica Penelope Onuman ‘Incredibly Inspiring Names from the Volta Region of Ghana’ Ghanaweb, 14 October 2013, <http://bibini.ghanaweb.com/cultural/not/incredibly-inspiring-names-from-the-volta-region-of-ghana/>. Accessed 19 March 2015.

a better place in the presence of *Mawu* and before the Ewe community for being the *domenyila* (heir). It is more prestigious amongst the Ewe to be an inheritor or next of kin than just being called a son of your father. The burden of being the next of kin earns one the right-manship of the father and places the one above all others, especially *dɔlawo* (servants). That the Son of God is the appointed heir of the creation of *Mawu* places him at a place of respect that is readily acceptable amongst the Ewe than just being the son of *Mawu*.

The Sonship of Christ through Ewe Cultural Lens

From the literal-cultural exegesis in the mother tongue as well as in the exegesis in the Greek, *Mawu* has revealed Himself in these last days through *Via* (His son). That *Mawu* has a Son is nothing new to the primal imagination of the Ewe. The average Ewe would on no grounds dismiss the fact that *Mawu* has a Son. His or her belief in this becomes stronger when the Bible in the mother tongue confirms it. What is mind-boggling however is if this Son is the same as *Sogble*, the male spirit in the Godhead of *Mawu* according to Ewe religious thought. As mentioned earlier in this work, *Sogble* is believed to be the son of *Mawu*. The Epistle to the Hebrews also affirms that *Mawu* has a Son through whom He has communicated to His people in these last days. Comparatively, both the Christian and Ewe belief of the person and nature of God points to the paternity of God. This paternity is not comparable to human parenthood. Conversely, He still is described in human terms and thus, is difficult to separate His unique parenthood from human understanding even though the nature of His paternity is theologically different. Nonetheless, the description of the 'Christian Son', according to Hebrews 1:1-4, gives a lower profile to the description and relatedness of *Sogble* to *Mawu*.

The New Testament elaborates more on υἱός τοῦ θεοῦ. Yet, limited to the Epistle to the Hebrews, this Son carries the very nature of God. He is the heir of all things; through him, the universe was made and by the power of his word, he sustains it. He provided purification for humankind's sins and intercedes at the right hand of the God Most High in heaven. Not only is he a messenger but he is also the one that bears an excellent name than that of the ministering angels. This honour accorded the Son is not self-imposed nor forced.

Sogble on the other hand is believed to be the son of *Mawu* yet not equal to him in any way. Spieth asserts that 'People say *Mawu* (God) is older than *Sogblē* and is his master because He is the one who made everything.'⁴⁸ Here, *Sogble*'s active role in creation is passive. He is destructive and kills both men and animals in his anger.⁴⁹ He demands adoration. 'In the lightning, he shoots his arrow and wants to be adored by man.'⁵⁰ His 'abode is at the top of a tree and within a fence.'⁵¹ On a good note, *Sogble* is considered responsible in carrying out his ambassadorial work; 'he hears the prayers of men and informs his father God accordingly.'⁵² In addition, he '...goes ahead of hunters and kills the animals for them.'⁵³

Comparatively, from a semantic view, though these two sons may be described as sons of God, theologically, they are different in essence and in nature and in their relatedness to *Mawu* and roles in creation as well as relation to humans and their sins vary. Whiles one provides purification for sin, the other destroys *Mawu*'s creation in anger. Hence, when one limits his/her theological understanding to the language or words, they may have a conflicting view on these sons. Though from the Ewe religious perspective, one cannot quickly separate that mindset of *Mawu* having a son (known as *Sogble*) which is confirmed in the biblical text, he/she may defeat the revelation of God in His Son Jesus and his mediatorial role as presented in this Epistle if they only give a glimpse into the words υἱός τοῦ θεοῦ.

⁴⁸Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 808.

⁴⁹ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 727.

⁵⁰ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 808.

⁵¹ Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 661.

⁵²Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 808.

⁵³Spieth, *The Ewe People*, 808.

It is only the functions of this Son described in the Epistle to the Hebrews (1:1-4) and His being the glory of God that truly separate Him from *Sogble* the Ewe religious son of *Mawu*. Thus, hesitantly, one may say *Sogble* may not necessarily be Jesus the Son of God described in Hebrews 1:1-4. That *Sogble* is described by the Ewe as the son of *Mawu* semantically puts him at par with Jesus. However, the subsequent depictions of the Son of God in Hebrews: Son as Creator- Heir (v. 2b), Son reveals the father (v. 3a & b), Son purges sin (v. 3c), and has a more excellent name than angels (v.4) do not apply to *Sogble* in the primal religious view of the Ewe. Whiles, readers may dismiss *Sogble* as not equal to the Son of God, they cannot conclusively end this discussion without stating the limitedness of African sources, which are mostly oral. That notwithstanding, all the evidence presented in this discussion from the perspective of the text under study conclusively points out that *Sogble* is not Jesus just as angels are not *trɔwo*.

Application of Insights

One important aspect of exegesis is interpreting and applying the message to everyday life. The author agrees with Pascal Fossou when he writes, ‘being transformed by the word of God involves receiving it and applying it in all areas of life, whether of the individual, the community or the whole nation.’⁵⁴ Exegesis in the mother tongue raises new questions and fresh theological insights. ‘It adopts an inductive approach’ which ‘is contextual and takes into consideration the challenges people are confronting on the daily basis.’⁵⁵ Following the themes and the etymological understanding of some of the words in Hebrews 1:1-4 in the mother tongue, the following sections will apply the insights from the Ewe context in understanding who Jesus is.

An attempt has been made to establish in this study that, *Mawu* has a son (Hebrews 1:2) which is not surprising to the Ewe. What is most important is this son’s qualities to qualify as the inheritor of God’s creation. Reading Hebrews 1:2 in Ewe, the NEV renders the portion that brings out the selection of the son as inheritor or heir, *Vi siae eya n̄to tia be wòanyi nuwo katā dome* is literally translated from the Greek in the OEV, *amesi woɔo nuwo katā fe domenyila*. The word used in translating heir, is *domenyila*, which comes from three words, *dome*, *nyi* and *la*. *Dome* literally means ‘between’ or ‘among’ and can also mean inheritance. *Nyi* literally means suck, lick or eat. This same word can mean ‘to bring up, nurse, nourish, to rear, educate; to breed, [and] raise.’⁵⁶ *La* here indicates a specific person, in this case the inheritor.

Thus, *domenyila* may mean the one who eats or sucks inheritance. Going by the other meaning of *nyi*, it means the person who raises, educates, and nourishes an inheritance or the middle of something. The concept of inheritance among the Ewe is in two folds: clan or lineage and individual.

The lineage properties include land, stool or office (succession) and *trɔ* while individual properties include one’s own acquired wealth such as land, television, car and sometimes wives.⁵⁷

Lineage properties are usually shared among members of the lineage but the lineage head serves as the administrator of these properties. This is peculiar to lineage lands. When the lineage head dies, succession to this office passes to ‘the next senior man in terms of generation and age...’⁵⁸ who is seen as the link between the living and the dead who must know all the departed souls in the lineage

⁵⁴Pascal Fossou, ‘Scientific Reading of the Bible in Mother Tongue : Cases from Cameroon and Rwanda’ in Gillian Mary Bediako, Benhardt Y. Quarshie and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (eds.), *Seeing New Facets of the Diamond, Christianity as a Universal Faith –Essays in honour of Kwame Bediako*, (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 210-224 (210).

⁵⁵Fossou, ‘Scientific Reading’, 211.

⁵⁶Westermann, *Gbefiala*, 187. The same word can mean elephant, a fine or to observe religious prescription.

⁵⁷Victor S. Gedzi, ‘Principles and Practices of Dispute Resolution in Ghana, Ewe and Akan Procedures in Females’ Inheritance and Property Rights’ (Phd Thesis, International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotherdam, 2009), 47. Accessed May 11, 2015, http://repub.eur.nl/pub/32640/90-423-0372-7_DOK%5B1%5D.pdf

⁵⁸G. K. Nukunya, *Tradition and Change in Ghana, an Introduction to Sociology (2nd ed.)*, (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 2003), p. 27. For explanation on succession and inheritance, see Nukunya, *Tradition and Change in Ghana, an Introduction to Sociology (2nd ed.)*, 27- 33.

as well as the history of the lineage. Personal properties on the other hand go to the deceased's sons and daughters with the bigger shares to the former.⁵⁹

The lineage *domenyila* is not only an administrator of the lineage lands and properties but performs other functions that are relevant to the sustenance of the lineage and properties. As enumerated by Nukunya,

the lineage head who serves as the *domenyila* administers lineage land and other property, and no transaction concerning this or other lineage interests can take place without his consent. He judges disputes involving the lineage members and is the lineage's representative on the ward's governing body. He is normally always consulted about any major undertaking in an individual member's life such as marriage, joining of a cult group and joining any of the Christian denominations.⁶⁰

The functions above show that the idea of inheritance is not only 'sucking' or eating of the *domenyinu* (what is inherited) but ensuring that the individual members are brought up well and educated in a less disputed environment. He protects the interests of the lineage by ensuring that the individuals in the lineage respect his office.

Thus, when the Ewe Bible mentions that *Mawu's Vi* is the *domenyila*, he is expected to perform these functions. According to the OEV, *Mawu* has already chosen the Son as *domenyila*,⁶¹ hence he already performs the above functions. The implication is that the Son of God is already at work in the protection and administration of the lineage properties. Fossouo from a bible discussion concludes on this text that 'between a dead parent and the reigning heir, Christ is there to watch over the family, and the successor who approaches him will know everything, even the hidden things.'⁶²

Another insight the Ewe text brings to bear is the fact that the heir has already been appointed even though the owner of the property who is God still exists. The word *tia*, in the NEV can mean selected or elected. The OEV uses *dɔ*, which means set, in this context. In rare cases, 'if the father himself wants to compensate any of his children for one reason or the other, he could do so during his lifetime by means of gift...'⁶³ *Mawu* has already given all creation unto the Son. *Mawu* is living and has already 'compensated' the Son as *nuwo katā fe domenyila* (heir of all things). Hence, the human agencies (lineage heads and heirs to individual properties) serving as stewards of the Son's properties must understand that 'it is not from the dead that one receives the wherewithal to manage the whole family, but from Christ who is the heir of everything.'⁶⁴

In addition to the above functions performed by the *domenyila*, he also serves as the spiritual leader, 'the chief priest of the lineage.'⁶⁵ According to Nukunya,

The lineage head's functions are not only secular. He is also, so to speak, the chief priest for the lineage. He is believed to be the link between the living and the dead, and the only one who can speak with sufficient authority to the understanding of the ancestors. All offerings made to the dead are presented to them by him on behalf of the lineage.⁶⁶

The office of the *domenyila* is such an important office since he plays both 'secular' and 'sacred' roles. From the above, inheritance is more than just eating or educating people but also involves ensuring the spiritual welfare of the lineage.

⁵⁹Nukunya, *Tradition and Change in Ghana*, 28.

⁶⁰G.K. Nukunya, *Kinship & Marriage among the Anlo Ewe*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1969), 26.

⁶¹amesi woɔo nuwo katā ñe domenyila (the one he has set heir over all things).

⁶²Fossouo, 'Scientific Reading', 218.

⁶³Nukunya, *Tradition and Change in Ghana*, 29.

⁶⁴Fossouo, 'Scientific Reading', 218

⁶⁵Nukunya, *Kinship and Marriage*, 27.

⁶⁶Nukunya, *Kinship and Marriage*, 27.

According to the Ewe text in Hebrews 1:3b, this same Son who has been set heir over all things is the same one who *klɔ miafe nu vɔ wo da* (washed our sins away). As has already been discussed some cultural practices the Agaveawo perform in atoning for their sins. These include *Dzawuwu*, *amawuwu* and the *trɔkosi* system. At the centre of these cultural practices is the elder or chief priest who carries out the rituals. The act of atonement is performed but it is only believed that the sin of the individual or community is forgiven. Though the idea of the Son washing the sin away by himself is not seen in the text (NEV) the all-inclusive adjective *mia* denotes all Agave Ewe.

The implication is that though the lineage *domenyila* may perform the rituals or sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin from *Mawu* and *tɔgbuiwo*, the true heir performs both the ritual and the cleansing. Thus, the Son serves as the *nunɔla* (priest) but cleanses the sin with his own blood as the sacrificial lamb (Hebrews 9). The office of the priest and his role is still held in high esteem among the Ewe people, especially in the Agave traditional area. The book of Hebrews glorifies Jesus as the final and perfect sacrifice. ‘This important message has become the heritage of successive generations of Christians in different cultural settings.’⁶⁷ In addition, it has also become ‘the yardstick by which priestly mediation is measured among various Christian confessions’⁶⁸ including the Ewe people.

There are varied translations and interpretations of the phrase (δι’ ἑαυτοῦ) καθαρισμὸν τῶν (ἡμῶν) ἁμαρτιῶν ποιησάμενος. Some translations and commentators do not support the purification work carried out by the Son as he purged sin by himself. According to Hewitt, some scholars think it is a gloss-over and thus omit it. This is the same in the English Revised Version. The reason these scholars give is that these words lack manuscript authority.⁶⁹ However, the Epistle itself in several places supports the words ...by himself (Hebrews 9:12, 26; 7:27). Secondly, ‘the evidence of the manuscripts in favour of this phrase is stronger than one is often led to believe.’⁷⁰ Hewitt refers to Zuntz’s position, that the original reading is *di’hautou*, ‘through Himself’; and it combines two meanings, or rather two shades of one meaning, (a) ‘by His own virtue and effort, with no assistance from outside’; (b) ‘not through an agent but through, or in, His own person.’⁷¹ Kwame Bediako also holds this stance that Jesus is in himself ‘our Odwira’, a view he says is possible due to the Twi translation of this verse.⁷²

CONCLUSION

From the discussions above, Christ is not only the Son of God but also the true *domenyila* that performs all religious and customary duties expected of the lineage head or the heir to the Ewe properties. It is by this position that he supersedes all the other children of *Mawu*. *Mawu* has set him *domenyila* over all things even before the end of time (Hebrews 2) and by virtue of this position, has cleansed the sins of Ewes. Hence, Jesus has taken care of the main aspiration in the celebration of *Dzawuwuza* and the *amawuwu* ritual including the *trɔkosi* system which is seeking the forgiveness of sin. As *domenyila*, he serves as the true *nunɔla* and has performed a one-time sacrifice that has washed the sins of mankind away.

The author has applied some insights from the mother tongue exegesis. Jesus is seen as the True Son of *Mawu*. His superiority is because of his role as *domenyila*. It is the name that places him above all persons and all of creation. Thus, the human heirs are stewards of his inheritance and he is there for consultation with these stewards. Hence, for any human heir to perform better at his role both spiritually and socially, he ought to consult the True *domenyila* who is Jesus. As heir, Jesus stands in as the *nunɔla* that performs the rituals for purifications of sin but does the cleansing with his own blood

⁶⁷David J.K Ekem , *Priesthood in Context, a study of Priesthood in some Christian and Primal Communities of Ghana and its relevance for Mother-tongue Biblical Interpretation*, (Accra: SonLife Press, 2006), 178.

⁶⁸Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 178.

⁶⁹Thomas Hewitt , *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), 50.

⁷⁰Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*,52.

⁷¹Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*,.53.

⁷²Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 45.

by himself. In light of the above, when the Ewe sees Jesus, he is not only the Son of *Mawu*, but the True *domenyila* who performs both the secular and religious responsibilities

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Mawuli Nyador is an ordained Ghanaian Minister and Teacher of the gospel. He currently serves as the Director for Dunamis Bible Institute in Tamale, Ghana. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D in Religious Studies at Department of Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. He holds a BA (Hons) from Ghana Christian University College in 2012 and an MTh (Bible Translation and Interpretation) from the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture in 2015. His research interests include Christian Education, Mother Tongue Biblical Studies, Missions and African Christology.