





An Examination of *ἁμαρτία* (sin) in 1 John and the Akan Concept of *Bɔne* (sin)

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ABSTRACT

The concept of sin or what constitutes sin is very crucial in any culture insofar as the conduct of the people and their relation to the divine is concerned. Using the mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics approach because of the insight it brings to the text, the writer did a comparative study of *ἁμαρτία* (sin) in 1 John and *bɔne* (sin) among the Akan of Ghana. The study revealed that even though there is a critical divergence in the way sin is dealt with in 1 John from the Akan concept, there are, however, several similarities. The one-time sacrifice for sin by Christ in 1 John calls for the Akan of Ghana to rethink the efficacy of the annual purification rites for sin. The study contributed to the study of mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics by explaining the concept of sin from the Akan mother-tongue biblical perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding the concept of sin in any culture is critical as it defines how to relate with neighbours and to the divine. One agrees with Millard Erickson that the Christian understanding of hamartiology has direct implications on how Christians understand the other doctrines as well as how they live their lives.¹ For instance, if humankind is seen as being good and knowledgeable with moral capabilities, then any difficulty insofar as their walk with God is concerned, may be attributed to just obliviousness to right or wrong actions and hence, the need for education or appropriate example.² However, as posited by Erickson, if one sees and understands humankind as being immoral and insubordinate, and hence either incapable or averse to doing that which is right, a deep-seated change of the individual would be desired.³ In other words, the understanding of salvation and the critical need for a transcendent saviour is influenced by how individuals conceive of sin as being grievous or not. This, in turn, has ramifications on the personhood and mission of Christ. A person's appreciation of the nature of sin will enable him or her to appreciate the depth of God's mercy and love through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Even more importantly, a person's understanding of sin, as it relates to humankind has a direct impact on his or her attitude and message as a preacher. Those who see the

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 515.

² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 515.

³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 515.

problems of the world as basically being economic, usually preach about prosperity and charity. However, if it is seen to be a sin, the appeal in preaching is for conversion.

As vital as the concept of sin may seem, discourse about it is not welcome in today's world.⁴ This may be due to the fact that sin, like death, is a cold subject. To think of humankind as sinners has become to some people, ear-splitting blasphemy and offensive statement at a sacred meeting.⁵ Again, describing sin as an innate state of humankind with influence on humankind is unthinkable to many. Such people view sin only in terms of that which is against the law of society.

The concept of sin, as expressed in both the Old Testament and New Testaments, has great variations of terminologies whose diverse shades of sense are sometimes either difficult to express in English or are inadequately conveyed by the word "Sin." Bible translators have had to deal with the challenge of translating the concept of sin into other mother-tongues partly because there is no single word that is suitable for theological purposes in Hebrew and Greek.⁶

Several methods have been proposed for the study of sin. Erickson proposes at least three methods or approaches: the first is the inductive approach in which the actions of biblical figures or contemporary persons are studied after which general observations on their behaviour, as it relates to sin, are made. Erickson calls the second approach a paradigm method. In this approach, one type or terminology for sin is carefully chosen and made the archetypal through which related sins are analysed. The next approach, used by Erickson, assembles all the terminologies for sin in the Bible, after which the various concepts that emerge from examining these terminologies are studied to discover the essential nature of sin as a whole.⁷ This work, which examines the concept of sin in light of the Akan concept of sin proceeds differently. Instead of assembling the various terminologies for sin in 1 John, it begins with English and Akan Translations of selected passages of concern that relate to sin and then proceeds to use a mother-tongue exegetical approach⁸ to understand the concept of sin in 1 John and how John's concept relates to the Akan concept of sin.

Definition of Sin

The Western worldview, according to Joseph Lam, views sin as comprising several concepts related to misconduct and offences, its sources, and implications.⁹ Such understanding mostly concerns the limits of appropriate human behaviour, the nature of ethical culpability, and sometimes, the status of a person before God or the gods. Generally, the Old Testament and New Testament depict sin as constituting "a deviation from the ideal; it is missing the mark or failure to achieve a goal."¹⁰

John uses *ἀμαρτία*, missing the mark, for sin. His definition of sin is lawlessness, *ἀνομίαν*. Once an individual deviates from God's standards and nature, he/she has committed sin. Given God's nature as light and love, walking in darkness as well as hating one's neighbour also constitutes sin. For John, sin is something an individual possesses by being human and also commits intentionally. It is only in Christ that the principle of sin is dealt with.

The concept of sin in the Akan religio-cultural understanding is *bɔne*. According to J. G. Christaller, *bɔne* refers to something which is bad, evil, and wicked.¹¹ It is derived from *bɔn*. In Akan,

⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 516.

⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 516.

⁶ Philip T. Laryea, "Esha and Hemɔke Yeli: Religious, Cultural and Theological Dynamics Arising from the Translation and Interpretation of Harmatia (Sin) and Pistis (Faith) in Ga," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 19, no. 2 (2016): 41–46, 42.

⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 516.

⁸ Jonathan E T Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Current Trend in Biblical Studies in Ghana," *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 3, no. 4 (2012): 575–79.

⁹ Joseph Lam, "The Concept of Sin in the Hebrew Bible," *Religion Compass* 12, no. 3–4 (March 2018): e12260, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12260>.

¹⁰ Laryea, "Esha and Hemɔke Yeli: Religious, Cultural and Theological Dynamics Arising from the Translation and Interpretation of Harmatia (Sin) and Pistis (Faith) in Ga," 43.

¹¹ J. G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi)*, vol. 2 (Basel: Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, 1933), 38.

ebɔn is used for something that is giving off a foul smell because it has gone bad, spoiled or rotten and hence giving off a foul smell. *Bɔne* in this sense refers to something that has actually gone bad and is smelling. This state of rottenness can refer to human beings (*nipa bɔne*), days (*da bɔne*), work (*adwuma bɔne*), and even a child (*ba bɔne*). As a result, the chief in the Akan traditional set-up, does not come close to dead bodies. The Akan also conceive of sin “as *fi*, (stain) and *tan*, (ugly/filthy). A person with a bad and a good character is rendered in the Akan language as *ne suban nyɛ fɛ* and *ne suban yɛ fɛ* respectively.”¹² Sin in this sense, has a communal effect and hence must be dealt with.

Fellowship, Sin and Cleansing (1:3, 5-7; 2:9-11)

English Translation

1:3 That which we have seen and we have heard we are announcing also to you, so that you also may have fellowship with us; and now, our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ...

5 And this is the message that we have heard from Him and we are proclaiming to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all.

6 If we should say that we have fellowship with Him (God) and we should walk in the darkness, we lie and we are not producing the truth.

7 but if we should walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with each other and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

2:9 The one claiming to be in the light and hating his brother is in the darkness until now.

10 The one loving his brother remains in the light and is not a stumbling block in him.

11 But the (one) hating his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness and has not known where he is going, since the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Akuapem Twi Translation

1:3 *Nea yɛahu ne nea yɛate na y'ɛka kyere mo nso, se nea mo nso ne yen benya ayɔnkofa; na yen ayɔnkofa no yene agya no ne ne ba Yesu Kristo na ɛwɔ...*

5 *Na eyi ne asem a yɛate fi ne nkyen na yerebɔ mo amannee akyerɛ se Onyankopɔn yɛ hann, na esum biara nni ne mu,*

6 *Na se yɛka se ye ne no wɔ ayɔnkofa na yenantew sum no mu a, yedi atoro na yenni nokware.*

7 *Na se yenantew hann no mu se nea ɔwɔ hann no mu a, ye wɔ yen ho yen ho ayɔnkofa, na ne ba Yesu mogya no tew yen ho fi bɔne nyinaa ho.*

2:9 *Nea ɔka se ɔwɔ hann no mu na ɔtan ne nua no wɔ sum mu de besi seseɛ.*

10 *Nea ɔdɔ ne nua no tena hann no mu na ɔnye hintidua mma no.*

11 *Na nea ɔretan ne nua no te sum mu na ɔnantew sum mu, na onnim nea ɔrekɔ, efise esum no afura nani.*

It is interesting how John connects sin to the communal life of believers. The word translated fellowship (*κοινωνία*) is from the word *κοινός* translated as common.¹³ It has the idea of partnership, sharing, communal, participation, and contributory help. It has to do with “the share which one has in anything,”¹⁴ as well as “what is shared in common as the basis of that fellowship.”¹⁵ It is an association involving a shared interest and dynamic involvement in the shared interest and with members of the association.¹⁶ It is thought-provoking to note that the word translating *κοινωνία* in

¹² Augustine Kojo Peprah and Richmond Osei Amoah, “The Akan and the Catholic Concept of Sin and Reconciliation Compared,” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 8, no. 6 (June 16, 2022): 129–36, <https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2022853>.

¹³ Marvin R Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament. Vol. 3, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers Inc, 2009)*, 456.

¹⁴ Thayer's Greek Lexicon, ‘Electronic Database.’ Accessed 26 February 2023 <https://biblehub.com/greek/2842.htm>

¹⁵ HELPS Word-Studies, Accessed 26 February 2023, <https://biblehub.com/greek/2842.htm>

¹⁶ Vincent, “Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament. Vol.,” 456.

Akan is *ayɔnkofa* which has to do with friendship and companionship.¹⁷ In the Akan, *me yɔnko* breaks the barriers of ethnic group, age, gender or even blood relations. The Akan proverb which best describes the heart of this friendship is: *sɛ abofra hu ne nsa hohoro a, ɔne mpaninfo didi*. Literally, if a young person learns how to wash his or her hands, he or she qualifies to dine with elders.

The Akan concept of friendship in this way also has the idea of doing things in a way accepted by those to-be friends. In other words, one does not become a friend unless he/she participates in something or have something in common. In this way, those who believe the message that the apostles are witnesses to, are brought into fellowship with the apostles by virtue of something they now share together, their faith, and this, in turn, makes them partners, coheirs of the inheritance of the saints as well as co-labourers as the apostles. However, this fellowship is not just with the apostles, but with the Father, and Jesus Christ His Son. Indeed, this is essential because, the ministry is the Lord's own ministry, and hence, whoever becomes a partaker of the ministry is in fellowship not just with the visible church but with the Father and the Son. Believers become partakers not just of the divine nature but also of the ministry.

In 1 John 1:5, the writer now turns to the character of God, with whom we have fellowship. He expresses the same idea both in a positive and negative light. In the positive, *θεος φῶς ἐστὶ* signifies God's absolute moral nature.¹⁸ God is neither 'a light' nor 'the light.' He is, in His very nature, light. As light, the writer is emphasizing God's absolute holiness and moral purity. Concerning the holiness of God in the Akan and other African religious systems, John S. Mbiti has noted that God is seen to be beyond all weakness that can be classified as sin or lead to sin and hence cannot be charged with an offence.¹⁹ This is evidenced in the strict rules regarding rituals which are believed to be directed to God. For example, chiefs and those involved in a particular ritual cannot engage in sexual activity. They cannot consume some particular foods as well before and after the ritual.²⁰ For the Akan, this is the premise on which conduct must be regulated. It is in this regard that the writer goes on to describe God's nature in the negative: there is absolutely no darkness in Him. That God is light then, defines the mode of human existence. The point here is that where God is, there is absolutely no trace of darkness and hence one cannot have fellowship with God and or the believers and still have one foot in darkness. In this sense, the writer denies any claim to the possibility of dual life - communion with God and living in sin, of which the latter is portrayed as darkness. The two are incompatible.

The writer in this sense implies that sin or sinlessness has everything to do with who one associates with and the shared values of that association. To associate with the believers means that one is automatically in the light and hence not sinning. To dissociate from the fellowship of the believers will mean that one is walking in darkness. The communal nature of sin is brought to bear further when one considers 1 John 1:6-7. Fellowship with the believers is possible only when they all walk in the light. Again, cleansing from sin is also connected to walking in the light and fellowship with the believers. Sin then is not passive but what is done or not done.

The Akan concept of sin also expresses this communal nature. The Akan undoubtedly portray sin as disturbing the communal life, insofar as they believe that individual sins contaminate one's family and society at large.²¹ Just as those walking in darkness cannot belong to the community of faith at the same time, the sins of a person separate him/her from the life of the community and endanger society's existence as well.²² But for the writer, sin does not only refer to those sins that are ordinarily punishable by law but even inward attitudes such as hatred. Hatred becomes a stumbling block, a cause for sin in such a person. The Twi rendering brings the seriousness of this better. *Hintidua* is literally, a tree or log in one's way that causes falling when hit. For hatred is in this sense, a product

¹⁷ Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi)*, 596.

¹⁸ Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament. Vol. 3*, 312.

¹⁹ John S Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1990), 38.

²⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 38.

²¹ Pephrah and Amoah, "The Akan and the Catholic Concept of Sin and Reconciliation Compared," 132.

²² Kofi Asare Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), 157.

of darkness and not light. This is why in the Akan religious system, offenders are sometimes banished from the community (*asuo twa*) or are sometimes even killed. One cannot belong to a community and be practising vices at the same time. To belong to the community implies living out the principles of that community. An act is thus adjudicated good or bad when it brings about good things or departs from that which is seen as good respectively.²³ In other words, belonging to a community places a demand on an individual to live up to a certain expectation.

Again, related to fellowship and sin is truth. For the writer, if one claims fellowship with God and walks in darkness at the same time, then the claim to fellowship constitutes a lie. *οὐ ποιοῦμεν τὴν ἀληθειαν* (we are not making/producing the truth). That the truth is made in connection with believers' walk is indicative of the fact that for the writer, truth is not just cognitive but that which is expressed through believers' daily way of life. In the same vein, lies, as it relates to darkness, are also not what believers know cognitively but a contradictory lifestyle to the absolute nature of God who is light. Truth in this sense is a life of light while lie belongs to darkness.

In relating fellowship and cleansing, the writer here too, seems to connect the cleansing from sin to fellowship. If one should walk in the light, one is brought into fellowship. It is after this that one experiences this cleansing by the blood of Jesus, the Son of God. The use of present indicative active of the verb, *καθαριζει*, emphasises the work of Christ as an unending provision for present and imminent exigencies. The writer includes himself when he uses *ἡμᾶς*. In other words, believers, even though do not dwell in darkness, are not sinless either. Believers do not live in sin but are not sinless either. The point here is that insofar as believers live in the light, they are engrafted into the *κοινωνία* of the church, and God makes provision to purge them from anything that can ruin their fellowship in the light and with each other. This also means that enduring fellowship would be impossible without the continual cleansing by means of the blood of Jesus, for guilt ensuing from sin ruins *κοινωνία*.²⁴

The power of this blood of Jesus insofar as sin is concerned, is expressed through the use of the adjective *πάσης*, to qualify the sin. In this sense, the writer is saying that when it comes to cleansing from sin, there is absolutely no sin that the blood of Jesus cannot cleanse. It reflects the comprehensive nature of sin and how the blood of Jesus is efficacious for all sins. Again, the use of the singular for sin may mean not just the sins believers commit but the idea and power of sin inherent in humankind as a result of the fall of Adam, the principle of sin. Thus, Jesus' blood frees everybody from sin.

That blood is needed for cleansing is not new to the Akan culture as well. The festival of *Odwira* is observed by the Akuapem people in the Eastern Region, of Ghana. It is believed to be a festival of communal purification for the purpose of receiving blessings and protection from the deities and ancestors.²⁵ Like the writer of John, once a person belongs to the community, it is believed that he/she has sinned against one's neighbour, the *nananom* or *Onyankopɔn*. The cleansing, among many things, involves sprinkling a non-defective ram's blood for the purpose of renewal and cleansing which serves as the basis for the blessings as well as a restoration of their fellowship with the *nananom* and with their family members and other neighbours since the festival also serves as a time for reconciliation.²⁶ The cleansing in this sense also affects fellowship with the Supreme Being and with neighbours.

²³ Pephrah and Amoah, "The Akan and the Catholic Concept of Sin and Reconciliation Compared," 132.

²⁴ Glenn W. Barker, "1 John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 311.

²⁵ Frimpong Wiafe, Benjamin Anson, and B D S Enam, "The Biblical Concept of Sacrifice and the Ghanaian Worldview: Relevance for the Modern Ghanaian Christianity," *The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention* 3, no. 8 (2016): 2519–26.

²⁶ Wiafe, Anson, and Enam, "The Biblical Concept of Sacrifice and the Ghanaian Worldview: Relevance for the Modern Ghanaian Christianity," 2521.

The Universality of Sin, Confession and Forgiveness (1:8-10)

English Translation

8 If we should say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

9 If we should confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, so that He may forgive us the sins (our sins) and may cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

10 If we should say that we have not sinned, we are making him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Akuapem Twi Translation

8 Na se yeka se yenni bɔne a, yedaadaa yen ho, na nokware no nni yen mu.

9 Na se yeka yen bɔne a, ɔye ɔnokwafo ne ɔtreeneɛni, senea ɔde yen bɔne bekye yen, na watew yen ho aƒi nea entee nyinaa ho.

10 Na se yeka se yenyee bɔne a, na yɛama no aye ɔtorofo, na n'asem enni yen mu.

In 1 John 1:8-10, the writer reveals at least two groups of people or two positions in respect of sin. The first claim they have no sin at all. The second claim they have not sinned. The first is a noun and the second is a verb. For one to say one has not sinned and has no sin is to deny the concept of original sin and the universality of sin. Indeed, for the writer of 1 John, people are only deceiving themselves if they claim they have no sin. On the other hand, if they claim they have not sinned, they make God a liar insofar as it is a denial of God's truth. In other words, they can only make these claims if they are not of the truth. *ἡμαρτήκαμεν* (we have not sinned) which is in the perfect indicative active means that it is past tense with present effect. *Οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν*, therefore, means that while people cannot claim that they have not sinned, they cannot also claim sinlessness even now.

In their quest to explain the universality of sin, the Gnostics, in the early days of Christianity propounded a theory that says that "the contact of the human soul with matter at once rendered it sinful."²⁷ One agreed with Louis Berkhoff that "this theory naturally robbed sin of its voluntary and ethical character"²⁸ as if humankind had no control over his will to sin. The beginning of sin can be traced to Adam and Eve's decision to turn away from God in order to satisfy their flesh. Because all humankind traces their origin to Adam and Eve, they all share in the sins of Adam (Roms 5:19).²⁹

Augustine of Hippo's analogy of sin is relevant here as it explains the universality and the concept of original sin:

1. The first analogy treats sin as analogous to some form of hereditary disease, which is passed down from one generation to another. This disease weakens and incapacitates humanity and cannot be cured by human agency. Christ is the divine physician, by whose "wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53: 5). Augustine understands salvation partly in sanative or medical terms, in that humanity is healed by the grace of God, so that the mind may recognize God and the will may freely respond to the divine offer of grace.
2. The second analogy conceives sin as a power which holds humanity captive, and from whose grip it is unable to break free by its own resources. The human free will is captivated by the power of sin, and may only be liberated by grace. Christ is thus seen as the liberator of humanity, the source of the grace which breaks the power of sin.
3. The third analogy considers sin in essentially judicial or forensic terms – guilt – which is passed down from one generation to another. Christ thus comes to bring forgiveness and pardon.³⁰

Just as one cannot escape from a hereditary disease in one's bloodline except by grace, so it is with sin. One does not choose to be with sin. One is a sinner by virtue of being human. Like the writer

²⁷ Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 219.

²⁸ Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology*, 219.

²⁹ Alister E McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 329.

³⁰ McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 331-332.

of 1 John, Augustine believes that just as it takes medical professionals to save people from hereditary diseases, so in the same way, it takes Christ for one to be free from the power of sin.

John quickly adds a statement of comfort which is the remedy for sin. Believers are sinless and may continue to sin once they fail to abide in God's presence; however, when believers confess the sins which they commit or have committed, they can be sure of their forgiveness and cleansing. John bases their forgiveness and cleansing on two legal terms which are the nature of God: *πιστός* (faithful) and *δικαιος* (righteous). The picture here given by John is about a judge who has to be faithful and righteous. The accused has to come and confess and the judge will pronounce a judgement. The judge here is righteous and faithful and so one can be sure of their forgiveness. It is in this vein that Jesus is the *παρακλητον* in 2:2. Believers' assurance lies in the fact that He will forgive them and even cleanse them from "the principle of sin in all its forms and manifestation."³¹ But *ὁμολογῶμεν* which is in the present subjunctive, together with *εἰαν* is indicative of the fact that the ball is partly in believers' court when it comes to dealing with sin. Believers have the opportunity to confess. If only believers choose to acknowledge their sins, repent and confess, then they have done their part. The rest is with God, the Judge's court to decide. Again, that *ἀφῆ* is in the subjunctive does not mean God sometimes does not forgive but it reflects God's total sovereignty when it comes to forgiveness as a judge. A person may be forgiven based on whether they meet God's conditions or not.

Jesus as the *Mpata* For Sin (2:1-2; 12; 3:5; 4:9-10, 14)

English Translation

1 My Little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin; even if anyone should sin, we have an advocate (intercessor) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

2 And he is the propitiation for our sins, however, not only ours but also for that of the whole world...

12 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you on account of his name...

3:5 And you know that he was manifested so that he might take away sins. And sin is not in him... 4:9 In this the love of God was manifested in us, because God has sent his only begotten Son into the world in order that we might live through Him.

10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His son as a propitiation for our sins....

14 And we have seen and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world.

Akuapem Twi Translation

1 Me mma nkumaa, merekyerew eyinom mabɛ mo na moanye bɔne. na se mpo obi ye bɔne a, yewo okyigyinafo wɔ Agya no nkyen, Yesu Kristo ɔtreneeni.

2 Na ɔno ne yen bɔne ho mpata, nanso enye yen nko na mmom ewiase nyinaa nso de ho bi...

12 Merekyerew mabɛ mo, mma nkumaa efise wɔde bɔne no akye mo ne din no nti

3:5 Na mo nim se wɔdaa no adi senea ebeye a obeyi yen bɔne afi hɔ. na bɔne nni ne mu.

4:9 Eyi mu na Onyankopɔn dɔ no yii ne ho adi wɔ yen mu, efise Nyankopɔn asoma ne ba koro aba wiase se nea ebeye a yebe fa ne so anya nkwa.

10 Eyi mu na ɔdɔ wɔ, enye se yedɔ Onyankopɔn na mmom ɔno na ɔdɔ yen na ɔsoma ne ba se ɔmmeye yen bɔne ho mpata...

14 Na yáhu na yedi danse se Agya no asoma ɔba no se wiase agyenkwa.

Having demonstrated the fact that they are sinners by nature and may sin even now that they are Christians, John now turns to remind his audience of God's love as demonstrated in Christ's incarnation and death, which deals with sin. John uses two keywords to describe this: *παρακλητον* in 2:1 and *ἴλασμος* in 2:2.

³¹ Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament*. Vol. 2, 317.

The former is found only in the gospel according to John and 1 John. It is derived from “*παρα*, to the side of, and *καλεω*, to summon, hence, originally, one who is called to another’s side to aid him as an advocate in a court of justice.”³² As an advocate, Jesus’ plea for the justification of His people is unique in that He himself is their *ἰλασμος* (*mpata*). John uses *ἰλασμος* only in 2:2 and 4:10. *ἰλασμος* originally means “an appeasing or propitiating.”³³ This definition corresponds with Ekem’s definition of *Mpata* as an event and not just the object of sacrifice. For Ekem, *mpata* is best in describing believers’ reconnection to God because it represents “the pacifying event itself”³⁴ rather than *mpatade* which connotes “a pacifying means of atonement.”³⁵ In this sense, the *mpata* is not seen as only instrumental but as an inimitable earnest occurrence. The ‘Christ Event’ in this sense is *mpata* par excellence.³⁶ It is noteworthy that the Akan peoples of Ghana also believe—that there are certain calamities that result from sins that cannot be pacified by animal sacrifices but by human blood. There are in fact, legends about certain individuals who voluntarily presented their own lives as human *mpatade* for the whole community to survive. Ekem’s description of Egya Ahor is relevant here.

Among the Abura-Mfantse people, this legendary figure is identified as Egya Ahor. The latter is said to have been offered, on his own volition, as a sacrificial victim on behalf of his people who were faced with famine and deadly epidemics. According to the legend, Egya Ahor’s blood was mixed with water and sprinkled on the entire community for their healing and purification. The calamity was consequently averted and this also resulted in harmony between the community and their objects of worship.³⁷

The difference between Egya Ahor and Jesus’s sacrifice is that while Egya Ahor was never sinless, Jesus was sinless. Furthermore, Egya Ahor’s sacrifice had a limited effect – on his people only. And it does not have a present effect. But Jesus’ sacrifice is for the whole world and it has a present cleansing effect as well as the future. Again, the life restored through Jesus’ life has both existential and eternal effects but Egya Ahor’s death only had a one-time existential effect. Finally, Jesus’ sacrifice was a demonstration of God’s love. For He sent His own Son while humankind sinned against him. Jesus is in this way, the one whom God put forth, based on His love for humankind, as *ἰλασμος περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν*. He is, in this sense, the *mpata* par excellence.

Hope and Purification (3:3)

English Translation

3:3 And everyone having this hope in him purifies himself, even as he is pure.

Akuapem Twi Translation

3:3 Na obiara ɔwɔ saa anidaso yi wɔ ne mu no tew ne ho senea ɔno ho tew no.

In the Akan religious culture, purification, like that of the legendary Egya Ahor, and that seen in the *Odwira* purification rites, is primarily done because of the fear of the gods and of evil in the society. However, John reveals a critical element which is and should be the basis for purification on the part of every Christian– the hope of becoming like Christ.

The basis of becoming like Christ becomes the hope which is configured in the purification. The purity here does not depend on humans but remains in the one who is pure. Remaining in him is the bedrock for the hope which paves the way for believers to become pure because they are in the one

³² Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament*, 243-244.

³³ Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament*, Vol. 2, 325.

³⁴ John D. Kwabena Ekem, *New Testament Concept of Atonement in an African Pluralistic Setting* (Accra: SonLife Press, 2005), p. 58-59.

³⁵ Ekem, *New Testament Concept of Atonement in an African Pluralistic Setting*, 58-59.

³⁶ Ekem, *New Testament Concept of Atonement in an African Pluralistic Setting*, 59.

³⁷ Ekem, *New Testament Concept of Atonement in an African Pluralistic Setting*, 62.

who is pure. This purity has to do with being born of God. What is important is that believers being pure is not only for the future but it begins immediately.³⁸

Remaining in Christ and Sinlessness (3:6-15)

English Translation

3:6 Everyone remaining in him does not sin; everyone sinning has not seen him nor known him...

Akuapem Twi Translation

3:6 Obiara a akɔso te ne mu no nnye bɔne; obiara a ɔreye bɔne no nhuu no, na onnim no...

John now sets forth to challenge Christians that unlike those who claimed to be righteous apart from a living communion with God, which is impossible, it is possible to live a sinless life as a Christian. But this is only possible when one lives in the sinless one. In other words, “if your abiding in Christ is not compromised, then your sinlessness is assured.”³⁹ We sin when we jump out of the presence. That ἁμαρτανῶν is in the present participle active is indicative of what the writer is talking about, the habit of sinning. Abiding in Christ, seeing Christ, and knowing Him are the things that ensure that Christians will not intentionally commit sin and even if they fall into sin, they acknowledge it, confess it, and are washed by the blood of Jesus Christ.

The righteous one’s first coming was to deal with sin (3:8). He marks the beginning of the end of sin and the works of the father of sin. In this sense, those who remain in Christ can be said to be sinless. Because the power that causes one to sin has been destroyed by the Christ who lives in them.

Types of Sin (5:16-17)

English Translation

16. will give him life—to those committing sin not towards death. There is a sin towards death; not concerning that I am saying he should ask.

17 All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.

Akuapem Twi Translation

16 Se obi hu ne nua se ɔreye bɔne a emfa no nkɔ owuo mu a, ɔnsre na Onyankopɔn bema no nkwa, wɔn a wɔreye bɔne emfa wɔn nkɔ owu mu. Bɔne bi wɔ hɔ a ede onipa kɔ owuo mu; eno ho de menka se ɔnsre.

17 Nea entee nyinaa ye bɔne, na bɔne bi wɔ hɔ a emfa onipa nkɔ owuo mu.

While all forms of unrighteousness constitute sin, John seems to suggest that sins can be categorised into two: ἁμαρτια πρὸς θάνατον (sin towards/unto death), and ἁμαρτια οὐ πρὸς θάνατον (sin not unto death). What constitutes these two supposed types of sins has been the subject of debate among many biblical scholars.⁴⁰ Some ascribe sin unto death to the following sins: sins that God chastises with a deadly disease or unexpected death; sins chastised with exclusion; sins which cause believers to fall or withdraw from the life of Christ into death or the repudiation of Jesus as the Christ of God. Sins not unto death in this way, are the reverse.⁴¹ The context of the passage suggests that John is not talking about specific acts of sins but about a class or type of sins that have the propensity to sever the fellowship bond believers have with Christ.⁴² The author is talking about spiritual death. Sins committed by believers that they ask forgiveness for, do not result in spiritual death. The sin that results in spiritual death, that will take away Jesus and His life, will have to be apostasy, giving up on salvation

³⁸ B. Y. Quarshie, Lecture Notes, 2022.

³⁹ Quarshie, Lecture Note.

⁴⁰ Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament*, 370-371.

⁴¹ Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament*, 371.

⁴² Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament*, 371.

and giving up on faith in Christ. These are sins that can threaten the eternal life in Christ and as such they should not be taken for granted.⁴³

That sins are assessed by virtue of the faults committed is also pronounced in the Akan concept of sin. The Akan also differentiate between sins. The more grievous sins are referred to as *mmusuo*, and the less grievous sins as *bɔne*.⁴⁴ These minor sins and trivial prohibitions are pardonable. For they have little effect on the community. *Mmusuo* on the other hand, are unpardonable because they affect both the deities and the community and thus make both the sinner and the community ritually unclean.⁴⁵ Such persons are sometimes killed or removed from the community.

The Power of Sinless Life (5:18-19)

English Translation

18 We know that everyone having been born out of God does not sin (does not continue to sin), but the one having been born out of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him.

19 We know that we are from God and the whole world lies in evil.

Akuapen Twi Translation

18 *Yenim se obiara a Onyankopɔn awo no no nkɔ so nye bɔne, na nea Onyankopɔn awo no no hye ne (ho) so, na ɔbɔnefo no nka wɔn.*

19 *Yenim se yefi Nyankopɔn na wiase nyinaa da bɔne mu.*

John concludes with a reiteration of who the believer is and what the believer enjoys from such life. The believer is a child of God and as such, does not continue to sin. But it is not just about not engaging in sin as a habit. There is insulation for the child of God. Jesus keeps such a person safe. That the evil one does not touch the child of God speaks of the protection from the evil of this world. This is enough motivation for one to seek the righteousness of God.

CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at the concept of sin in 1 John as it relates to the Akan concept of sin. In 1 John, the word for sin is *ἁμαρτία*, which primarily means, missing the mark. That is to say, there is a standard by which human conduct and behaviour are measured. In this sense, the writer defines sin as lawlessness as it relates to God. This law of God includes fellowship, love and righteousness. Anyone who breaches any has committed sin. But sin is not just what one commits; people are sinners by nature as human beings and hence in need of transcendent help. This help came through the vicarious voluntary death of Christ whose blood purges humankind from all sin and who continually pleads their case for them. In 1 John, Christ becomes the better *mpata* because of his sinlessness and the limitless effect of his death on humankind. It is therefore possible to live a sinless life in Christ who destroys the power and principle of sin in humankind. The word for sin in Akan is *bɔne*. *Bɔne* refers to something that has actually gone bad and is smelling, wickedness or evil. It is regarded as a stain or filth that affects not just an individual but the community as well even if the sin is committed by an individual. The concept of sin in 1 John and in Akan have some similarities. Firstly, God is seen as sinless. Secondly, they both see sin as something that has to do with a deviation from an acceptable standard or rule for both individual and communal life. Thirdly, sin in both 1 John and Akan has a communal effect. It results in a break of fellowship. Sin also affects one's relationship with the Supreme Being in both 1 John and among the Akan. Finally, sin is classified into two: serious sins and less serious sins.

There are, however, some differences between the concept of sin in 1 John and among the Akan. The Akan concept has no one-time solution for sin as is found in Christ. There have to be annual

⁴³ Quarshie, Lecture notes.

⁴⁴ Peprah and Amoah, "The Akan and the Catholic Concept of Sin and Reconciliation Compared," 132.

⁴⁵ Peter Kwasi Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect* (Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974), 52,53.

purification rites for sin such as the *Odwira* through animal sacrifices. In 1 John, however, God provides for a one-time sacrifice for sin via Christ's vicarious death. The purification from sin by the blood of Jesus applies also to present and future sinful acts. Christ is thus the only solution for sin for all people. Again, in 1 John, the standard by which sin is measured is God's absolute nature but in the Akan concept of sin, what constitutes sin is determined by the community or the culture, even though the premise on which conducts are regulated is based on the idea that the Supreme being is sinless. Finally, in 1 John, the principle of sin is destroyed by Christ's sacrificial death. Believers can thus live a life of sinlessness if only they will continually abide in Christ who is sinless and has destroyed the power of sin. This provision is, however, not in the Akan concept of sin. Jesus Christ is thus the game changer when it comes to the problem of sin.

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