

**DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY, HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY AND GOD'S  
SALVIFIC PLAN: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE**  
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**ABSTRACT**

Many scholars have contested the compatibility of divine sovereignty and human responsibility since the birth of the Christian Church. The obvious question in the debate is how we can be fully accountable for our decisions (as fallen creatures) while God remains fully sovereign over our lives. Current theological interest in the divine sovereignty-human responsibility tension among African scholars justifies this attempt to explore this controversy by assessing the views of some African scholars on the topic in the light of biblical teachings. The limited scope of this study will not allow a thorough analysis of issues related to the subjects of divine sovereignty, human responsibility and God's salvific plan. However, the study covers major issues that need to be understood for a proper appreciation of how God's sovereignty and human free will collaborate in the salvation of humanity. The study begins by outlining the biblical foundations for the debate and then it continues with views expressed by some African scholars (from oral interview and written sources) on divine sovereignty-human responsibility tension as to how we can make meaning out of this issue within the African context. The main thesis of the study is that soteriological discourses should start with God and not humankind because salvation is God's gift and not from human works.

**INTRODUCTION**

To say that God is sovereign and yet human beings are responsible for their actions seems incompatible. For centuries, theologians and philosophers (including Augustine, Arminius, Luther, Erasmus and others) have wrestled with the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, especially as applied to the salvation of humans. The debate has to do with how God's sovereignty can be reconciled with human free will in the process of salvation. That is, if God is sovereign, how can humans be responsible for the decision they take regarding the acceptance or rejection of the gospel message. The debate divided Augustine and Pelagius, Erasmus and Luther, Arminius and Calvin, Wesley and Whitefield and now continues to divide many scholars. Augustine's view of salvation as monergism (salvation is solely from God – "one working") was opposed by Pelagius' view of salvation as synergism (God and human play a role – "two-working").<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther's teaching that humanity is unable to choose God (bondage of the will) is in direct contrast with Erasmus' thought that humanity is free to choose God (the freedom of the will). Calvin taught unconditional election (God chooses) whereas Jacob Arminius taught conditional election (humans choose).<sup>3</sup> Finally, Wesley's emphasis on human freedom in salvation was opposed by Whitefield's emphasis on God's sovereignty in salvation.<sup>4</sup>

The mystery of how we can be fully accountable for our actions while God remains fully sovereign over our lives has been captured by J. I. Packer in these words: "[Humankind] is a responsible moral agent, though he [or she] is also divinely controlled; man is divinely controlled, though he [or she] is also a responsible moral agent."<sup>5</sup> D. A. Carson makes the same point in his assertion that, "God is absolutely sovereign, yet his sovereignty does not diminish human responsibility and accountability; human beings

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<sup>2</sup> See Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 57.

<sup>4</sup> Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 57.

<sup>5</sup> J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 22.

are morally responsible creatures, yet this fact in no way jeopardizes the sovereignty of God.”<sup>6</sup> He argues further, saying, “we tend to use one to diminish the other; we tend to emphasize one at the expense of the other. But responsible reading of the Scripture prohibits such reductionism.”<sup>7</sup> From the above assertions, the bottom line is that there is an apparent tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. How are we to understand God’s sovereignty and human responsibility? The study will attempt to answer this question based on African worldview and with particular reference to God’s salvific plan.

### **Biblical Data on Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility**

Divine sovereignty means “the supremacy of God, the kingship of God, the godhood of God”<sup>8</sup> or “God’s control over His creation, dealing with His governance over it: Sovereignty is God’s rule over all reality.”<sup>9</sup> The Bible declares that God is absolutely sovereign and ordains all things that come to pass for his own glory and directs the affairs of humankind (see, for example, Isaiah 46:9-10, Daniel 4:35; Proverbs 21:1; Romans 8:28-30). He is able to do anything He desires (Job 42:2; Psalm 135:6). The Lord carries out everything exactly as planned (2 Kings 19:25) and knows the end from the beginning and reveals beforehand what has not yet occurred (Isaiah 46:9-10, cf. Isaiah 14:24; 43:13). This means all that God has pre-planned is as good as done and nothing can change it, for there is no authority above Him. He directs the history of the universe along the course of His foreordained plan and chooses individuals and groups for special purposes in the outworking of His plan (Jeremiah 1:5; Galatians 1:15). He changes human hearts, opens blind eyes, softens hard hearts, directs the nations, hardens human hearts, opens and closes wombs, directs kings, stirs up people to be hostile and gives favor. He has mercy on those He wants to, and hardens those He wants to (see Rom. 9).

God’s sovereign purpose extends to all things in His creation and is not limited by space or time (Proverbs 16:33). God’s sovereignty gives Him total power over his creation just as a potter has over clay and chooses to mold His clay into whatsoever form He chooses, shaping out of the same lump one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor<sup>10</sup> (Romans 9:19-21). Nothing comes to pass without His permission.

Yet at the same time, the Bible teaches that human beings are fully accountable and responsible for their choices and actions in life. To be responsible for an occurrence means to be the cause/initiator of that event and so able to be blamed or credited for it. Scripture says that when God finished His creation, He saw everything and declared it “very good” (Genesis 1:31). This means that evil was not present at creation; evil was not part of God’s creation. God gave humankind the right to choose between right and wrong. Adam was told not to make the bad choice of eating the forbidden fruit (Genesis 2:17); he chose to disobey God (Genesis 3:1ff; Romans 5:19) and hence was responsible for his action. On their own volition, they chose wrong. This is not God’s fault, nor His responsibility. Therefore, “The original sin was a declaration of moral independence from God.”<sup>11</sup> Sin comes as a result of misuse of free will. Thus, Geisler asserts that, “...the power of moral free choice entails the ability either to choose the good God designed for us or to reject it. ... If God made free creatures, and if it is good to be free, then the origin of evil is in the misuse of freedom.”<sup>12</sup>

The Bible teaches that our decisions constitute real causes that produce real effects for which humans will be held accountable (Eccl. 12:13-14). The fact that God is not the author of evil is also explicitly taught when James says: “God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone” (James 1:13). The blame for evil in the world rests with human beings, not with God. As Lynn

<sup>6</sup> D.A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bakers Academy, 2006), 156.

<sup>7</sup> D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics), 18. Accessed 23/9/15 at [http://www.reformed.org/books/pink/pink\\_sov\\_01.html](http://www.reformed.org/books/pink/pink_sov_01.html).

<sup>9</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2011), 536.

<sup>10</sup> Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Lynn Gardner, *Where Is God When We Suffer?: What the Bible Says about Suffering* (Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 2007), 48.

<sup>12</sup> Norman Geisler, *Chosen but Free* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1999), 22.

Gardner notes, “Much suffering is caused by the direct free choices made by others.”<sup>13</sup> If a person chooses to drink alcohol and drive, his/her judgment is impaired. As the drunk person drives, he/she may lose control of his vehicle, hitting and killing people who chose to be walking on the sidewalk at that point in time. In this scenario, it is clear that the tragedy is the result of the driver’s bad choice (the choice to drink and drive), not the pedestrians. Definitely it is unfair to think of God as having a direct hand in the accident.

Sin is not itself something that was created because it is not substance, being, spirit or matter. It is, as it were, a lack of moral perfection in a fallen creature. God is certainly sovereign over evil. However, there is a sense in which it is proper even to say that evil is part of His eternal decree. He planned for it. It did not take Him by surprise. It is not an interruption of His eternal plan. He declared the end from the beginning, and He is still working all things for His good pleasure (Isaiah 46:9-10). In Norman L. Geisler’s opinion, “While God is not the cause of sin, in His eternal wisdom He ordained its possibility, because in the good creation formed out of nothing by His hand it could not be otherwise.”<sup>14</sup> He argues further that:

God is good, and He created good creatures with a good power called free will. Unfortunately, they used this good power to bring evil into the universe by rebelling against their Creator. So evil did arise from good, not directly but indirectly, by the abuse of a good power called freedom. Freedom in itself is not evil. It is good to be free. But with freedom comes the possibility of evil. So God is responsible for making evil possible, but free creatures are responsible for making it actual.

God gave the power of choice. However, God is not responsible for the exercise of that free choice to do evil. God does not perform the free action for [people]...God produces the fact of free choice. God is responsible for the possibility of evil, but we must bear the responsibility for the actuality of it.<sup>15</sup>

Concerning salvation, the Bible clearly teaches that God elected those whom He will save, even before the foundations of the world (see Ephesians 1:3-6 cf. Romans 8:28-30). This decision was based on God’s love and kindness. He predestined us for “adoption as his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the pleasure of his will” (Eph. 3:5). God’s sovereignty is self-determined, and this fact is emphasized three times in verses 5, 9, 11. In God’s loving purpose, all things have been designed to lead “to the praise of the glory of his grace” (v. 6, 12, 14). It is best that God works in all things, for only in this way will all things ultimately glorify God.

Nonetheless, no one will stand before God and blame God for not allowing him/her to believe in Christ or say “I wanted to be saved but could not be saved because I was not elected to salvation.” Even now, in our fallen state, we have the free choice to accept or reject God’s gracious provision of salvation. Jesus spoke of both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of humankind in relation to salvation when he said people had refused to come to him to have life (John 5:40) and at the same time that nobody is able to come to him unless the Father who sent him draws the person to him (Jesus) (John 6:44). John Stott argues that, “Our responsibility before God is an inalienable aspect of our human dignity. Its final expression will be on the Day of Judgment. Nobody will be sentenced without trial.”<sup>16</sup> Stott’s point is that human responsibility does not impinge on God’s sovereignty, and God’s sovereignty does not also reduce human accountability.

D. A. Carson concurs, saying, “At no point whatsoever does the remarkable emphasis on the absoluteness of God’s sovereignty mitigate the responsibility of human beings who, like everything else in the universe, fall under God’s sway.”<sup>17</sup> This brings us to the heart of the issue: Are people free to accept or reject the gospel? If they are free to accept it, can they do so without God’s help? Does a person’s ability to exercise his/her will override the sovereignty of God; or is choosing to believe in Christ, as their Lord and Savior, totally outside the scope of what would be considered human ability/initiative? We find out more in the sections that follow.

<sup>13</sup> Gardner, *Where Is God When We Suffer?*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> As cited in Gardner, *Where Is God When We Suffer?*, 48.

<sup>15</sup> As cited in Gardner, *Where Is God When We Suffer?*, 48.

<sup>16</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 95-96.

<sup>17</sup> Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, 2.

## Divine Sovereignty in African Thought

In African thought, God's sovereignty means He is not compelled or influenced by anything.<sup>18</sup> That is to say no external force can move God to act. God acts because He wills to do so and not because there is anyone or thing that coerces Him. This idea points to God's independence which means that God is not a part of, nor dependent on His creation. God is sovereign because he has the highest power and He is not under anyone's obligation.

Most Africans consider their chiefs as sovereign rulers. This idea is applied to God as a sovereign ruler who is superior to all others in authority, power, or status. God's sovereignty therefore means "He is King (or the King), Supreme Ruler, and Lawgiver of the universe."<sup>19</sup> As a sovereign ruler, His subjects look up to Him for rains, good weather, daily bread etc. It is against this backdrop that Akan libation prayer has the expression "*Tweduampɔn Kwame, Ototobonsu a ɔbɔ nsuo ne awia*" (God Almighty, the giver of rain and sunshine).

Another aspect of God's sovereignty in African thought is His continual exercise of His **perfect rule over people's will**. Molefi K. Asante and Abu Shardow Abarry observe as follows: Africans believe that "God is the absolute being and the ultimate ground of being—the Supreme Being— [Who] constitutes the controlling principle in the world."<sup>20</sup> The Nandi of Kenya conceive God as "the far off driving force behind everything, the balance of nature."<sup>21</sup> The Bambuti of Congo betray their belief in God's control and sustenance of God in the saying "If God should die, the world would also collapse."<sup>22</sup> The belief that God is the reason for our existence is expressed by the Zulu: God "made us, and is, as it were, in us his work. We exist because He existed."<sup>23</sup> These expressions point to the African concept of God's sovereignty and perfect rule over creation.

The African concept of God's sovereignty is evident in names and appellations given to Him. Like ancient Israel, Africans, regard names "as disclosing the attributes and characteristics of a person."<sup>24</sup> God is given several descriptive names by African societies which convey the idea of supremacy and God's other attributes.<sup>25</sup> Vanessa Danso has argued (convincingly, I think) that the Akan<sup>26</sup> reference to God as *Onyankopɔn* is an expression of His sovereignty.<sup>27</sup> Danso opines that *Onyankopɔn* derives from the pentasyllabic word *Oiamekopɔn*.<sup>28</sup> The "O" refers to the basic name of God, a being who is capable of doing and achieving something. The second syllable "Ia" transformed into "Nya," stands for a being that possesses wisdom as in "Nyansa" (wisdom). Then the next syllable "Me" stands for self-consciousness and satisfaction as in the Akan expression "*ma mee*" ("I am satisfied"). Then "Ko" means life as in "Kosua" or "Kosuya" (egg, life seed). The last syllable "Pɔn," stands for the greatness, dependability and sovereignty

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Emmanuel K. Asante on 17th February, 2016 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana. Asante is a professor of Systematic Theology at the Trinity Theological Seminary and the past Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church Ghana.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Livingstone K. Buama on 14th March, 2016 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana. Buama is a scholar in Philosophy and Systematic Theology at the Trinity Theological Seminary, Accra.

<sup>20</sup> Molefi K. Asante and Abu Shardow Abarry, *African Intellectual Heritage: A Book of Sources* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 301.

<sup>21</sup> Aloysius M. Lugira, *World Religions: African Traditional Religion*, 3rd ed. edited by Joanne O'Brien and Martin Palmer (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 2009), 40.

<sup>22</sup> Lugira, *World Religions*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> Lugira, *World Religions*, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Keith Sherlin, *Evangelical Bible Doctrine: Articles in Honor of Dr. Mal Couch Couch* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2015), np. <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=ZSZYCwAAQBAJ&pg=PT125&lpg=PT125&dq=>

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Yaw Attah Edu-Bekoe on 9th March, 2016 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana. Edu-Bekoe is a lecturer at the Trinity Theological Seminary, where he teaches Evangelism and Missiology.

<sup>26</sup> The Akans are a group of people occupy practically the whole of Ghana south and west of the Black Volta. Historical accounts suggest that Akan groups migrated from the north to occupy the forest and coastal areas of the south as early as the thirteenth century. Some of the Akan ended up in the eastern section of Côte d'Ivoire, where they created the Baule community.

<sup>27</sup> Festus Ugboaja Ohaegbulam, *Towards an Understanding of the African Experience from Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Maryland: University Press of America, 1990), 107.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=GX1fNzyNO5AC&pg=PA107&lpg=PA107&dq=>

<sup>28</sup> Vanessa Danso, "The Akan Day Names and Their Embedded Ancient Symbolism" Retrieved from <https://www.modernghana.com/lifestyle/8691/the-akan-day-names-and-their-embedded-ancient-symbolism.html> (Accessed on 23/2/16).



of God. Kwame Gyekye, in agreement to this view, asserts that Onyankopɔn means, “Alone, the Great One”<sup>29</sup> or the Supreme and dependable One.

The Ewe<sup>30</sup> of Ghana also refer to God as Mawu which literally means God, the Supreme Being or God, the Sovereign Being. According to Vensus A. George “*Mawu* is considered as the one reality behind the multiplicity that is experienced in the world.”<sup>31</sup> The Ewe people believe that they can depend on *Mawu* for everything, pointing to God’s dependability. In this manner the Ewe people portray their belief in the providence of God.<sup>32</sup> Ewe children are named Mawusi, meaning “in God’s hands,” as a way of acknowledging God’s supreme protection over people. The name Mawuli, like YHWH, points to the continual existence of God.

Names for God pointing to His sovereign character are not peculiar to Ghana. The Yoruba of Nigeria, for instance, also refer to God as Oludamare which means Almighty or Supreme.<sup>33</sup> Another Yuroba name for God is Olorun Orun which means the Supreme or Sovereign Ruler.<sup>34</sup> This name points to the fact that God is the Most-High God. Still, another name is Chineke. The word Chi means God or Providence and Eke means “to create”. Therefore, Chineke means God who creates. The Igbo also refer to God as Chukwu, which means “Great God”, that is the greatest of all other gods.<sup>35</sup> Theologically, these names/appellations are descriptive of God’s nature, expressive of his sovereignty and superiority over the affairs of humankind.<sup>36</sup>

For Africans, God’s sovereignty has an unlimited extent. The fact that people do not have control over the way and manner of their creation, the parents to whom they are born, the country, place, and home in which they are born (among other things) is an indication that divine sovereignty is at play in all aspects of human lives.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, God cannot be considered sovereign if His sovereignty is limited.<sup>38</sup> If so, then God has total control over little things such as place and time of birth and also over events that people conceive as being influenced by chance, even the minutest detail of events (Proverbs 16:33). Also, God has meticulous control over big things such as kings and their kingdoms. More so, God has absolute control over things that involve other agents.<sup>39</sup> Finally, God keeps all created things existing and maintaining/preserving the properties with which He created them. Through His sovereign will God preserves all creation.

### Are Human Choices Free?

The term “free will” is commonly defined as “the power of acting without the constraint of necessity or fate; the ability to act at one’s own discretion”<sup>40</sup> or “the ability to make choices without any prior prejudice, inclination, or disposition.”<sup>41</sup> Such a definition proposes that for the will to be free it must act from a posture of neutrality, with absolutely no bias nor internal or external coercion. This definition has at least

<sup>29</sup>Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, revised ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995), 70-71.

<sup>30</sup>The Ewes are a group of people occupying southeastern Ghana and the southern parts of neighboring Togo and Benin.

<sup>31</sup>Vensus A. George, *Paths to the Divine: Ancient and Indian* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), 13.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=VYRePV92YwC&pg=PA13&lpg=PA13&dq=The+Ewe+name>

<sup>32</sup> George, *Paths to the Divine*, 13.

<sup>33</sup>Edwin Anaegboka Udoe, *Resolving the Prevailing Conflicts Between Christianity and African (Igbo) Traditional Religion Through Inculturation* (Zurich: Lit Verlag Münster & Co, 2011), 36.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=CX4moSf0fmsC&pg=PA36&lpg=PA36&dq=>

<sup>34</sup>Udoe, *Resolving the Prevailing Conflicts Between Christianity and African*, 35.

<sup>35</sup>Udoe, *Resolving the Prevailing Conflicts Between Christianity and African*, 35.

<sup>36</sup>Udoe, *Resolving the Prevailing Conflicts Between Christianity and African*, 36.

<sup>37</sup>Interview with Emmanuel K. Asante on 17th February, 2016 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana.

<sup>38</sup>Interview with Stephen N. Morgan on 17th February, 2016 at University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana. Nkansah is an Assistant Lecturer at the department of Philosophy and Classic Department of the University of Ghana, Legon.

<sup>39</sup>Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty*, 24.

<sup>40</sup>Michael Farrell, *Inclusion at the Crossroads: Special Education—Concepts and Values* (London: David Fulton Publishing Ltd., 2004), 76.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=Umdw6pjOXJ4C&pg=PA76&lpg=PA76&dq=>

<sup>41</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Illinois: Tyndale Publishers, Inc., 1986), 51.

two inherent problems. First, if choices are made from strictly neutral posture, without any prior inclination, then people make choices for no reason and therefore their choices have no moral significance.<sup>42</sup> The fact is that “when God judges our choices, He is interested in our motives.”<sup>43</sup> The story of Joseph illustrates this point. When Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery, they did so with wicked motives. Yet, later in his life Joseph informed his brothers: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Genesis 50:20). The single event of Joseph’s imprisonment and enslavement involved two different parties with different and conflicting motivations: God and Joseph’s brothers. God meant it for good, and Joseph’s brother’s meant it for evil. The decision of Joseph’s brothers to sell Joseph was not spontaneous or neutral because they were jealous of their brother and this was their motivation for selling him.

Second, the above definition of free will raises the question as to why a totally neutral will would make a choice of right or wrong. The following illustration is helpful. Assume that a child is given the option to choose between two schools A and B. Without any desire for any of them, he/she cannot choose any of them. Similarly, if he/she has exactly equal disposition towards each of them, he/she would still not be able to make a choice. “His equal disposition would leave him paralyzed.”<sup>44</sup> The point is that it is not possible for a totally neutral will to lead a person in choice making. The neutral-will theory is both irrational and unbiblical and must be rejected.

Jonathan Edwards proposes a better definition of free will as “the mind choosing.”<sup>45</sup> By this, he means choosing only what the mind approves and rejecting only what the mind disapproves. Our inclinations and motives as well as our actual choices are shaped by the mind and therefore if the mind is not involved in our choices then we make choices for and with no reason.<sup>46</sup> Another definition is “the ability to choose what we want.”<sup>47</sup> This means that free will has to do with the power to choose according to one’s desires. In this case it is the desire that provides “the motivation or reason for making a choice.”<sup>48</sup> All the above arguments about free will shows that human free will is the unique ability to reflect on and evaluate one’s desires and to choose one course of action over another. People therefore make choices according to their strongest inclination and this makes their choices free and self-determined.

Livingstone K. Buama uses four terms to explain human free will in his statement, “A person is a living being that consciously thinks, feels, wills and acts.”<sup>49</sup> Free will may be understood as personal independence, the ability to say “no.”<sup>50</sup> A person is free not from nature, not from society and their laws, but within the framework provided by the operation of both the laws of nature and society.<sup>51</sup> However, it is crucial to note that “free will is not sufficient to enable man to do good works, unless he is helped by grace.”<sup>52</sup> This position agrees with Calvin’s assertion that “If ever a person gets it right, it is by the grace of God. ... Human beings cannot do anything right without God’s grace.”<sup>53</sup> The paramouncy of grace is God’s supremacy and this supremacy is not a kind of force which turns human being into robots but rather allows them to act freely.<sup>54</sup> This means that to say that a person has this sort of free decision, “does not mean that he [or she] has “free choice equally of good and evil, but [that he or she] acts wickedly by will, not by compulsion.”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 51.

<sup>44</sup> Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 53.

<sup>45</sup> See Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 53.

<sup>46</sup> See Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 53.

<sup>47</sup> Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 55.

<sup>48</sup> Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 54.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Livingstone K. Buama on 14th March, 2016 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Emmanuel K. Asante on 17th February, 2016 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana.

<sup>51</sup> George K. Neequaye, Interview by author on 15th March, 2016 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana. Neequaye is lecturer in Philosophy and Ethics at the Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon.

<sup>52</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1 (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 262.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Livingstone K. Buama on 14th March, 2016 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Livingstone K. Buama on 14th March, 2016 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana.

<sup>55</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 266.

Consequently, it is wrong to think of one's free will as implying that the person is a master of both his/her own mind and will, able of his/her own power to turn him/herself toward either good or evil. That is to say, the freedom of choice does not mean autonomy. According to Sproul God's sovereignty does not cancel out human freedom. However, if God is truly sovereign, humankind cannot be autonomous. If humankind is autonomous, God cannot possibly be sovereign. Though not autonomous, humankind is free because the will of a person is free from external compulsion. Again, a person's will is also free from natural instinct (by which animals, without being conscious of it, are motivated to function according to their purpose) for the will responds to the intellect and functions rationally. Human free will is therefore limited and operates in a person's finitude. For example, one cannot will to fly when he/she has no wings. Therefore, "human beings, out of their own free will, take certain actions, and God in His sovereignty acts through these freely chosen actions. Yet, "God has capacity over His own strength so as to have enabled everyone to operate freely."<sup>56</sup> All these point to the fact that God's absoluteness enables Him to control His own strength and power to the extent that within His power, He still allows human beings to operate freely.

### Human Destiny

The belief in destiny is widespread in Africa. The Akan belief in destiny is reflected in the saying "*nkrabea nni kwatibea*"<sup>57</sup> "destiny is very difficult to deal with or destiny is inevitable." In African thought, "God not only continues to create physically, but He also ordains the destiny of His creatures, especially that of [humankind]."<sup>58</sup> Destiny may be conceived as a predetermined future, whether in general or of an individual. Although fate and destiny are used interchangeably, they differ slightly in the sense that fate relates to both present and future while destiny is mainly about future events. As Kenny Felderstein notes, "destiny is used with regard to the finality of events as they have worked themselves out; and to that same sense of 'destination', projected into the future to become the flow of events as they will work themselves out."<sup>59</sup>

African concept of destiny is closely related to human personhood. The African concept of a person has both physical and non-physical dimensions. Kwame Appiah presents a summary of the Akan concept of a person in his tripartite analysis of a person:

... a person consists of a body (*nipadua*) made from the blood of the mother (the *mogya*); an individual spirit, the *sunsum*, which is the main bearer of one's personality; and a third entity, the *okra*. The *sunsum* derives from the father at conception. The *okra*, a sort of life force that departs from the body only at the person's last breath; is sometimes as with the Greeks and the Hebrews, identified with breath; and is often said to be sent to a person at birth, as the bearer of ones *nkrabea*, or destiny, from Nyame. The *sunsum*, unlike the *okra*, may leave the body during life and does so, for example, in sleep, dreams being thought to be the perceptions of a person's *sunsum* on its nightly peregrinations...<sup>60</sup>

Like Appiah's tripartite division of the human person, the Yoruba concept of personhood is also tripartite. The three elements are *ara* (body), *emi* (vital principle) and *ori* (destiny).<sup>61</sup> The Yoruba believe that *theori* rules, controls, and guides the life and activities of the person. The *ori* as the essence of a person derives from *Olodumare* (Supreme Being).

In Akan the *okra* (the soul) is the bearer of ones *nkrabea*, or destiny. The *okra* is believed to originate from God. This believe is betrayed in the proverb "*Nnipa nyinaa ye Onyame mma' obiara nye Asase ba*", "All humankind are the children of God' no one is a child of the Earth." The *okra* is the very inner self which provides the principle and source of life, energy and vital force for the person. At death the *okra* goes back to God to give accounts of his/her life on earth. The Akan believe that one's *okra* is predestined. If one's destiny is preordained for failure, then one cannot will otherwise; hence the saying, "destiny is inevitable" is proven to be true. The term *nkrabea* refers to "the manner of taking leave. The

<sup>56</sup>Interview with Emmanuel K. Asante on 17th February, 2016 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Emmanuel K. Asante on 17th February, 2016 at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana.

<sup>58</sup> As cited by Asante and Abarry, *African Intellectual Heritage*, 301.

<sup>59</sup>Kenny Felderstein, *Happiness The Forgotten Ingredient* (Bloomington: iUniverse Inc., 2013), 378.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=hxOTJi70csoC&pg=PA378&lpg=PA378&dq>

<sup>60</sup>Kwame Appiah, as cited by Asante and Abarry, *African Intellectual Heritage*, 28.

<sup>61</sup> Imafidon, "The Concept of Person in an African Culture and its Implication For Social Order", 5.

belief holds that when a child is born, a ghost or spirit leaves the spirit realm and takes residence in the child.”<sup>62</sup> This entity expresses its desire to perform a particular mission within the child.<sup>63</sup> This *nkrabea* according to the Akan is fixed. That which is affixed to one cannot be rectified by medicine. Whether a person experiences good luck or bad luck it is attributed to the person’s *okra*. It is believed that the *okra* of a person can be interrogated by priests while it is still in the mother’s womb.<sup>64</sup>

What is not clear is whether destiny is self-determined, that is, chosen or decided upon by the individual soul or divinely imposed. Some Africans believe that destiny is chosen by the individual while others argue that it is conferred by the Supreme Being. Among the Yuroba for instance, it is observed that “the manner in which the destiny comes to the individual is ambiguously conceived: In one way, the individual ‘chooses his [or her] destiny; in another he [or she] ‘receives the destiny,’ that is from *Olodumare* (God): in yet another way ‘his [or her] destiny is affixed to him [or her].”<sup>65</sup> In the conceptions of the Rwandas, the Fon of Dahomey, the Lele of Kasai (southern Congo Kinshasha), and others, God decides the destiny of the individual.<sup>66</sup> Whatever the source of the individual’s destiny the fact remains that, the individual enters the world with predetermined destiny.

### Salvation, Human Responsibility and Judgment in African Thought

The African understanding of salvation is rooted in the belief that the life of the individual is controlled by certain spirits. One’s salvation is therefore not complete unless he/she is freed from these forces which hinder life progress. To be saved is to be freed from economic, social, spiritual and psychological problems. This concept of salvation finds its expression in the ministry of Christ (Luke 4:18-20). Salvation in African thought also has to do with sin. However, sin in African thought is a communal matter rather than a private affair. For J.S Pobe “sin is an act, motivation, or conduct which is directed against the *sensus communis*, the social harmony and the personal achievement sanctioned by the traditional code.”<sup>67</sup> The community is saved when God, through His gracious act wipes away the sin which destroys the community so that the society lives in peace and harmony.

While the African concept of salvation reflects their worldview, it must however be balanced with the individualistic dimension of salvation depicted in the New Testament. It is a fact that the New Testament concept of salvation <sup>68</sup>intends to create the *ecclesia*, a community of called out ones. Yet, the formation of the community depends on the response of individuals to God’s call to salvation. Some Africans may argue that their acceptance or rejection of the gospel depends on their destiny and so they are not responsible to work out their own salvation. However, even though “there is an element of unavoidability about destiny, there is also an element of exercising one’s freedom. As a matter of fact, destiny is not intended to say that there is nothing that a person can do. The concept of destiny should therefore not in the least way lead anyone to suggest that God will hinder anyone from believing in Christ and that one is not responsible for his/her unbelief.

Generally speaking, Africans belief in destiny does not make them think that they are not responsible for their sins hence the reason why they take responsibility of their sins and make sacrifices to deities to take the penalty of their sins away. In times of calamity, they do not attribute their situation to their destiny. The responsibility of the individual is seriously upheld in African thought. For most Africans, though the concept of destiny exists, it does not negate the concept of human responsibility because humans are endowed with the capacity for thought and action. It follows therefore that, once an issue is thought about and action is taken by the individual on such thoughts, whatever the outcome may be such an

<sup>62</sup>Douglas E. Thomas, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, North Caroline: McFarland, 2015), 189.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=iWJiCQAAQBAJ&pg=PA189&lpg=PA189&dq>

<sup>63</sup>Thomas, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World*, 189.

<sup>64</sup>Asante and Abarry, *African Intellectual Heritage*, 432.

<sup>65</sup> As cited by Asante and Abarry, *African Intellectual Heritage*, 301.

<sup>66</sup> As cited by Asante, and Abarry, *African Intellectual Heritage*, 301.

<sup>67</sup>J. S. Pobe, *Towards an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 111.

<sup>68</sup> The New Testament concept of salvation is the deliverance, or redemption of sinful humanity from death and separation from God by Christ’s death and resurrection, and the justification following this saving act.



individual is to be held responsible for such actions. If such actions demand judgment, then it will be given and this is equally justified. There is the provision for human improvement in the African concept of character and morality. Hence, the Akan of Ghana say: “We offer advice (in order to reform one’s character) but we do not change destiny.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, it may be concluded that the concept of judgment in African thought hinges on the African subscription to human responsibility.

Africans perceive judgment to be an immediate occurrence due to the belief that people are to be held responsible for their deed and at the same time conceive judgment as remote (eschatological) due to the conviction that God will ask the individual to give an account of his/her life while on earth. There is therefore both now and eschatological dimensions of judgment. Furthermore, judgment is regarded as an event that cannot be escaped. Even when the judgment is delayed or it seems like the evil-doer is going scot-free, Africans still believe that judgment is sure. Every action or inaction will necessitate a reaction which may be a judgment by another human being or the creator.

From the above discussion, it is safe to conclude that God, as a sovereign Being, permits all that happens in the universe but is not responsible for them. God is involved in human events as the primary cause while human beings act as secondary causes. Grudem describes the divine cause of each event as “an invisible, behind-the-scenes, directing cause and therefore could be called the “primary cause” that plans and initiates everything that happens.”<sup>70</sup> The “created thing brings about actions in ways consistent with the creature’s own properties and ways that can often be described by us or by professional scientists who carefully observe the processes.”<sup>71</sup> These creaturely factors and properties can therefore be called the “secondary” causes of everything that happens, even though they are the causes that are evident to us by observation. What this means is that, God is not in control in the sense that He makes everything happen, but He is sovereign; He has control over all that happens in the sense that nothing can happen outside His sovereign permission. God is not the active agent of all that happens; but nothing happens without His permission. Hence even though things work according to God’s decree, it is not God who directly causes them to happen. Let us illustrate this point. When God hardens the hearts of people like Pharaoh, He is not compelling them to act contrary to anything within themselves. God did not directly cause Pharaoh to sin but probably withdrew his grace from Pharaoh. Thus, without the grace of God there is nothing human being can do and get it right; apart from the grace of God human beings freely sin. The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (as stated earlier) should be understood as God withdrawing His grace from Pharaoh so that he (Pharaoh) would act according to his sinful desire.

## CONCLUSION

From the study the following features of God’s sovereignty are noteworthy. Firstly, God’s sovereignty is universal, and extends over all his creatures including humans, animals, plants and others. Secondly, God’s sovereignty is absolute and infinite. Thirdly, God’s sovereignty does not change. Fourthly, God’s sovereignty binds all creatures. Concerning freedom of will, we have made the following points. First of all, the freedom of the will is not neutrality but one of necessary consequence. A person’s free will is not independent from God. Secondly, the will functions in conjunction with the judgment faculty of the intellect. Thirdly, the will of humankind is informed by human peculiarities, because a person functions according to his/her nature.

From the African perspective, the belief in destiny should not in any way negate the concept of human responsibility because humans are endowed with the capacity for thought and action. Any action thought about and taken is the responsibility of the person involved. The study gives two suggestions in making meaning out of the mystery. First, theological discourse should be God-centered, especially the doctrine of salvation. Discussion on the doctrine of salvation should start with God and not humankind because salvation, as the Bible teaches, is God’s gift and not from works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Approaching the problem this way will minimize the tendency of placing so much emphasis on the role of the sinner in the salvation process. Second, extreme positions on either side of the issue are biblically and theologically

<sup>69</sup>Interview with Stephen N. Morgan on 17th February, 2016 at University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana.

<sup>70</sup>Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 272.

<sup>71</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 272.

unbalanced and must be avoided. The doctrine of salvation must start with God and not humankind because salvation is God's gift and not from human works.

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