

## A BIBLICAL AND CULTURAL VISION OF GOD IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN PENTECOSTAL/CHARISMATIC HOMILETICS

SIMON KOUESSAN DEGBE<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the biblical and contextual relevance of two sermons preached by one of Ghana's leading contemporary Pentecostal/Charismatic preachers by name Mensa Anamua Otabil. The titles of these sermons are: "Our God is an Awesome God: The Great Provider", and "Our God is an Awesome God: The Lord of Hosts". Otabil, is the founder and overseer of the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC), and the founding Chancellor of Central University College. In Ghana and beyond, he is described by many as a statesman, an entrepreneur, a scholar, a leader, an author, and even a 'politician'. Otabil in particular, is one of the contemporary African Pentecostal/ Charismatic preachers who has contributed to a radically new understanding and appropriation of the Bible in relation to African Christianity, traditional religiosity and identity, and the African social, economic, political, and cultural challenges. These new understandings represent a decolonization of biblical theology and interpretation, and the making of authentically contextual contributions to contemporary African Christian theology. He actually belongs to a new generation of African preachers who are pioneering a new synthesis arising from engagement of Scripture with the total African experience.

**Keywords:** *theology of provision, the Isaac view of life, living by facts; faith-life principles, attitude of faith, Mount Moriah, living by faith; the Mount of the Lord.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### Sermon One: "Our God is an Awesome God - The Great Provider"

The theological view expressed by Otabil in this sermon is that, "there is something in God that causes him to come to the aid of his people when they are in need [and] when they are going through challenges", or crises and difficulties.<sup>2</sup> He then indicates that the purpose of this particular sermon is to show from Scripture the methods God uses in providing the need of his people and what is required from his people as beneficiaries of his providential care. Otabil at this point introduced into the sermon what could be described as a 'theology of provision'.<sup>3</sup> Below is the Old Testament narrative upon which the 'theology of provision' was constructed:

And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father and said, my father; and he said, here am I, my son. And he said, behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said my son God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.... And Abraham stretched forth his hand,

<sup>1</sup> SIMON KOUESSAN DEGBE PhD, Associate Professor; teaches African Christianity, African Pentecostalism, and Biblical Studies. He is currently the President of Maranatha University College, Accra, Ghana.

<sup>2</sup> Otabil, *Our God is an Awesome God - The Great Provider*.

<sup>3</sup> Otabil, *The Great Provider*.

and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called unto him out from heaven, and said, Abraham, and he said, here am I.<sup>4</sup>

The final parts read:

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah *Jireh*: as it is said to this day. In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen.<sup>5</sup>

The reading of this story and a brief but insightful background to Abraham's calling and life in relation to the narrative as recorded in Genesis literally elicited a comment from Otabil. This comment partly set the hermeneutical agenda for the story and its message. Otabil commented:

Abraham hears a word from God to do a very unthinkable and very unimaginable act to go and sacrifice his son the same son he had believed God for ninety years God says give him back to me and as unthinkable and unimaginable as that request was Abraham believed is from God because it was the same God and the same voice he has been hearing which had directed him to where he was and he could tell this was not the devil deceiving him.<sup>6</sup>

Otabil's comments on the passage at stake were not radically different from describing the command to Abraham as "dramatic and theologically significant"<sup>7</sup>. According to some biblical scholars, that command from God to Abraham represents the 'last great test of Abraham's faith'<sup>8</sup>; a command that was not meant to incite sin, but to try, prove and to give more room for the development of his faith.<sup>9</sup> For John F. Walwood and Roy B. Zuck that command to Abraham defies all logic.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps, Walwood and Zuck in their use of the term 'logic',<sup>11</sup> seem to be more in agreement with Otabil's use of the terms 'unthinkable' and 'unimaginable' to describe the command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac his only son to the very God who miraculously gave him that only child. The fact of the matter is that the use of those two words by Otabil was not meant to impress his audience. Rather, he believes that as an African Pentecostal preacher of faith in God and prosperity, one's 'response' to God's word and 'mindset' are critical to the fulfilment all the goodness of God in one's lifetime or otherwise. It is therefore in light of this 'attitude of mind' that Otabil seeks to explain the actions of Abraham and Isaac in relation to the command of God.

### Isaac – Living by Facts

As Otabil continues to narrate how Abraham and Isaac journeyed to mount Moriah, his attempt at imagining the sort of conversation that went on between Abraham and Isaac inspired his thoughts on the passage. These thoughts were based on the synthesis between the biblical record and the creative, imaginative, and contextual use of the biblical narrative in contemporary African Pentecostal homiletics.

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<sup>4</sup> See Genesis 22:7-11.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 22:7-11; 22:13-14.

<sup>6</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>7</sup> R. T. France, et al., *New Bible Commentary: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition* (England, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), p.76.

<sup>8</sup> R. T. France, et al., *New Bible Commentary*, p.76.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Jamieson, et al. *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), p.30.

<sup>10</sup> John F. Walwood and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p.64.

<sup>11</sup> Walwood and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p.64.

Thus the description of Isaac as ‘living by facts’ stemmed from the fact that he posed the question regarding the whereabouts of the lamb for the burnt offering.<sup>12</sup> Though the question itself represented the only instance Isaac opened his mouth to speak to his father, it also showed that, such sacrificial journeys and ritual practices were customs he knew quite well. Therefore the question may have arisen out of sheer curiosity in view of the sudden change in the preparation and procedure of performing such sacrifices.

Otabil argued that, the question Isaac posed showed that, “Isaac saw things differently from the way Abraham saw things”.<sup>13</sup> Hence, Otabil did not only depict Isaac as a critical believer who needed to be taught some lessons in faith, but a type of life, perception, behaviour and approach to life and life’s challenges.

For Otabil, the interrogative pronoun ‘where’, is what distinguished Isaac from Abraham his father.<sup>14</sup> He explained that unlike Abraham, Isaac was sceptical and doubtful about the ability of God to provide the lamb for the burnt offering. So on Isaac as a type of perception and approach to life, Otabil emphasised:

He says ‘where is the lamb’ we are not fully prepared we are not really ready for the assignment we don’t have all the ingredient we don’t have all the qualifications we don’t have everything that is needed for what we want to do these are people who see life as Isaac they see what they don’t have ... that is all they see Isaac says where is the lamb’ ... that is how Isaac sees life.<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, Otabil’s emphasis seemed to be on the ‘where’ question of Isaac; and that is where he proceeded from to propound what he described as ‘the Isaac view’<sup>16</sup> or the ‘Isaac view of life’. This view of life was essentially explained in terms of applications bordering on people’s attitude to life, and the circumstances of life. However, the problem inherent in the way Otabil used Isaac’s question was his failure to relate the question to the excellent and creative ways in which he recast the whole story. Clearly, there seemed to be no consistent theological connection between the practical uses of Isaac’s question by Otabil and the theological character of the narrative.

That use of Scripture did not certainly applaud the faith achievements of Isaac who posed the obvious or realistic question but did absolutely nothing to resist Abraham and the will of God. Isaac’s faith achievement which necessarily placed his question into the right theological perspective has been expressed by Lockyer:

While we have Abraham’s unquestioning faith in his submission to the divine command to offer up his only son, we must not forget Isaac’s supreme confidence in his father and also in his willing consent to become the victim... Thus in Isaac we have a type of Him who gave Himself for our sins. From the day of his surrender to death, Isaac became a dedicated man. “The altar sanctified the gift”.<sup>17</sup>

In line with Lockyer’s comment on Isaac’s yieldedness, other scholars have also maintained that “in this whole experience his filial acquiescence in his father’s purpose, his unquestioning submission and

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<sup>12</sup> See Genesis 22:7, which reads as follows: “And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father, and said, my father: and he said, here am I, my son. And he said behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

<sup>13</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>14</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>15</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>16</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Lockyer, *All the Men of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), p. 155; see Fleming James, *Personalities of the Old Testament* (London: Charles Scribner’s Ltd, 1939), pp. 8, 9, 10.

obedience stand out almost remarkable as his father's faith".<sup>18</sup> This and other views of Isaac's attitude towards the father and the sacrificial dilemma probably account for the reason why there seems to be practically no criticisms of Isaac's question in most biblical commentaries and interpretations. According to Ackroyd and other scholars, the narrative possesses polemical, theological, and faith-life principles.<sup>19</sup> In view of this, Otabil's 'theology of Isaac' becomes problematic considering how Isaac willingly offered himself for the sacrifice and the testimony of Scripture about his posture.

### **Abraham – Living by Faith**

Earlier on, Otabil sought to affirm that Abraham upon acting on the command of God did show that living by faith and not by facts alone is the divinely prescribed way of living. According to him, Abraham did the 'very unthinkable and the very unimaginable' because he certainly had an insight the son did not have;<sup>20</sup> thus unlike Isaac, Abraham did not question the divine command to go and sacrifice his son Isaac. Therefore this attitude of faith, according to Otabil, was strongly and convincingly informed by the fact that there was something about God that Abraham knew that superseded the command to just go and sacrifice the only son. Otabil thus emphasised:

Abraham had a different point of view... Abraham saw the sufficiency of God's grace  
... Abraham said the Lord will provide himself a lamb he says yes there is no lamb but  
God will provide himself a lamb God will provide.<sup>21</sup>

It stands to reason, therefore, that the actual information available to Abraham was somehow provoked by Isaac's intelligent and probing question regarding the whereabouts of the lamb. Thus, Abraham's response that God will provide himself a lamb for the sacrifice was the information unknown to Isaac. Indeed, Abraham's response obviously revealed a certain level of trust in God which might have conquered his anxieties, fears and questions surrounding the divine command to kill his only son. This truth may also raise some legitimate questions about whether Abraham's faith was entirely free from doubts as alleged by Otabil as "unthinkable" and "unimaginable". However, many biblical scholars are of the view that Abraham's response in which he affirmed God's ability to provide did not only aid the submission of Isaac but represented Abraham's own confession or statement of faith in God.<sup>22</sup>

The "unthinkable" and the "unimaginable" in this regard are not suggestive of a 'senseless' or a 'non-sense' attitude to the will of God as Otabil may seem to be suggesting but the willingness and the conscious determination to suppress all curiosities, logic and emotions in order to please the ultimate value of life.<sup>23</sup> The sole foundation for the exercise of such faith in Otabil's word is "trust" in the grace, power, sufficiency and the provision of God.<sup>24</sup>

### **"The Mount of the Lord"**

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<sup>18</sup> Merrill C. Tenney (ed.), *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967), p.383.

<sup>19</sup> See the following works: P. R. Ackroyd et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge Bible Commentary Genesis 12-50* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 92-93; H. D. M. Spence, Joseph S. Exell (eds.), *The Pulpit Commentary: Genesis* (London: Fenk and Wagnalls Company n.d), pp. 283-284; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1972), p. 240 ; Buttrick, George A. et al. (eds.), *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p.729.

<sup>20</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>21</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>22</sup> S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1943), p. 218; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1981), pp. 359-360.

<sup>23</sup> See Jaroslav Pelikan, (ed.), *Luther's Work vol. 4 Lectures on Genesis 21-25* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1964), pp. 92-93.

<sup>24</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

“So what is the mount of the Lord?”<sup>25</sup> This is the question that succinctly captures the theological significance Otabil attached to Mount Moriah as the necessary condition for the provision God made for the burnt offering. Mount Moriah in Otabil’s thought also represents an ‘attitude’ and one’s ‘position in life’.<sup>26</sup> Concerning Mount Moriah, Otabil noted:

To Abraham it was Mount Moriah to you it is a different place a place where God wants you to be and that place is called the mount of the Lord ...the mount of the Lord is several things to several people...for all of us I suppose the mount of the Lord is the place of full surrender to God’s will is the place of full surrender to God’s will.<sup>27</sup>

Otabil further pointed out:

It is a place of total surrender where you are ready to surrender your will to the will of God you can’t have God supply your need if you want to do it your way if you are going to receive God’s supply you have to do it God’s way and God’s ways are not our ways... sometimes he can demand from you what you have worked so hard for to achieve and accomplish.<sup>28</sup>

The mount of the Lord according to Otabil, is not only an attitude or a position in life, but also, ‘surrendering totally to the will of God’, ‘God’s way’ and ‘God’s will’. In his view, the mount of the Lord transcends mere symbolic meanings because Mount Moriah stood for an imperative instruction and a necessary condition without which God would not have provided the lamb for Abraham’s burnt offering.<sup>29</sup> Thus Otabil emphasised:

Abraham could not choose his own mountain... he would not have found the lamb and Isaac would have been killed because the provision is on mount Moriah if God call you to a place he places the provision there when you are there in his will your will find the supply.<sup>30</sup>

This whole theological view about Mount Moriah appears to be pointing to a totally new interpretive trajectory for the entire story of Genesis 22:7-14. The whole discourse seems to be undermining the theological importance and significance of especially Isaac, Abraham and the lamb provided for the burnt offering.<sup>31</sup> What it means is that, the ‘place’ the Lord instructed for the sacrifice had more theological significance than the characters and the ceremony of the sacrifice.

In other words, the religious significance of Mount Moriah is the very theological message that God wanted to communicate to Abraham, as the sacrificial victim was just the medium for the message.<sup>32</sup> The apparent justification for this theological presupposition may be the sense of the verse in Genesis 22 which states:

And he said take now thy son, thine only son Isaac whom thou lovest, and get thee unto the Land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon ‘one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.’<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>26</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>27</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>28</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>29</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>30</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>31</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>32</sup> Otabil *Great Provider*..

<sup>33</sup> *Genesis 22:2.( KJV)*



von Rad has acknowledged the difficulty surrounding the name “Land of Moriah” and further indicated that it was a place that nothing is still known about precisely. He also hinted that the name probably occurred just once in that patriarchal account and nowhere else.<sup>34</sup> Claus Westermann on the other hand did not accord the name any expository merit.<sup>35</sup> Other background works to the Old Testament located the Land of Moriah somewhere in the Land of the Amorites or the rocky hilltop of Jerusalem where Solomon built his temple.<sup>36</sup> Thus the attempts to specify the exact location of the place called the ‘Land of Moriah’ as occurred in Genesis 22 have all been conjectural. Could this mean that indeed, the Mount Moriah in itself meant something symbolic and therefore was more at the heart of the narrative than Abraham and Isaac, thus justifying why Otabil seemed to draw his congregation’s attention to its significance and what it meant for their spirituality and life?

One may be tempted to conclude that it was probably due to the myth surrounding the name ‘Land of Moriah’ about which nothing is specifically and geographically known in the ancient Near East that motivated this whole interpretation of Mount Moriah in Otabil’s preaching. In any case, Mount Moriah in Otabil’s preaching came to acquire an allegorical status and subsequently came to represent a career goal in life, a profession, a talent, relational challenges, emotional experiences, ethical dilemmas, the realities of spiritual growth and the struggle for the ideals of life.<sup>37</sup>

The clearest evidence of the use of Mount Moriah as a symbol of all of life’s challenges is in the following words of Otabil:

Thank God he didn’t tell you to murder your son all he told you is to forgive your enemies let go of the pain let go of the past let go of the ill treatment... move on with your life and God says there are so many things I have prepared for you but your heart is too full of bitterness... I can’t bless bitterness that is your Mount Moriah and all of us at such point must climb that mountain and sacrifice something until we climb that mountain we will never find the provision that is waiting for us....<sup>38</sup>

From this point, Otabil interpreted mount Moriah to mean, being where God has called you to be in terms of your church so that He God will provide for you and enable you to discover your calling, professional skills and fulfilments in life.<sup>39</sup> He also stressed the fact that the Christian calling and life is all about giving; therefore as seen from the example of Abraham, it is in giving to God in different ways and forms that we receive far more beyond what we give to God. As may be expected, Otabil then used the story to teach on the principle of sowing and reaping as a divinely instituted principle that are still relevant, effective and applicable for all times.<sup>40</sup> The point needs to be made that the themes of giving, blessing, prosperity, and divine protection are themes that are rarely missed in Otabil’s sermons; these themes are constant in his homiletical and sermonic applications and conclusions irrespective of the title and the biblical text of his sermons.<sup>41</sup> These homiletical applications and appropriations are employed to relate to all areas of experience, existence, and aspirations in life.

<sup>34</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 240.

<sup>35</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, p. 357.

<sup>36</sup> Buttrick (ed.), *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, pp. 438-439.

<sup>37</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>38</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>39</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>40</sup> Otabil, *Great Provider*.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. The following messages by Otabil, for how those themes pervade most of his messages; God and his word 1-2, *The Power of Atonement 1-2*, *Divine Provision 1-3*, *Divine Promotion 1-2*, *Divine Protection 1-2 Faith Versus Works*, *Discovering Your purpose*, *Subdue the Faith 1-2*, *Enlarging Your Tent*, *Run with the Vision*, *The God of All Flesh etc.* See, the following: The Shepherd’s voice, ‘Preserving Your Talent’ in *ICGC Green Pastures*, 1995; The Shepherd’s

Another important observation is how Otabil arrives at discovering biblical clues, insights and data for his theological views, applications, appropriations and principles. In the Genesis 22:7-14 story for example, he demonstrated his ability to conduct a ‘macro’ and a ‘micro’ study of texts, and historical background of books, chapters, and passages of Scripture. In most cases, key words, places, ideas and major twists and turns of a biblical passage or story afford him the creative clues for personal insights.

He also brings into Scripture not only ‘received interpretations’ and information from commentaries, dictionaries, lexicons and theological works, but original, personal, experiential, and spiritual insights from his intellectual and African spiritual heritage. Once a theme like Mount Moriah offers him an insight into the word of god for the Church, the application is stretched to all possible limits. The following is an example:

God has not brought you into this church by chance and it is likely the territories you will be taking for your life has been closely tied to the vision and commission of this church. It cannot be assumed that all of us have an understanding of the vision of this church and therefore implication for our lives. For some, God may be calling to move into new areas for many God may be calling us to focus on the vision of ICGC it becomes incumbent upon us therefore to study the vision of the church and ask God to show us how our destinies relate to this big thing He wants to do with the ICGC.<sup>42</sup>

Another example is this:

The ICGC is not a narrow-minded body but one which has a lot of room to accommodate as many as identify with its vision. When you join the ICGC you don’t just become a member of a church but also a partaker of a commitment and a team player in the vision of the ministry. Our vision is big enough to create opportunities for fulfilling service for pastors, politicians, traders, students, teachers, farmer, medical practitioners, civil servants, self-employed, evangelists, prophets, men, women, children, blacks, whites, brown ... whosoever.<sup>43</sup>

The last part states:

The price for the vision is challenging and demands our utmost and best. There are lots of opportunities to serve. Don’t sit on the fence and just [cheer] others on. There are no spectators on this team. Everybody is a player with a unique role and responsibility.... Ask the Lord to show you how your personal dreams link up with the vision of ICGC.<sup>44</sup>

These statements, though not meant to suggest any malice, show how Otabil’s theology of the ‘mount of the Lord’ fits into his personal sense of calling and vision. As a preacher, and being aware of the competition and strategies for church growth among Pentecostals in Africa, he clearly chose to use that sermon to also protect his interest and the vision of a united and stronger ICGC churches and members. This somehow renders his theology of ‘Mount Moriah’ partly controversial.

### **Sermon Two: “Our God is an Awesome God - Lord of Hosts”**

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Voice, ‘Growth Means Responsibility’ in *ICGC, Green Pastures* 1996; p.2 The Shepherd’s Voice, ‘True Independence means Responsibility’ in *ICGC Green Pastures* 1994; The Shepherd’s voice, ‘Maintaining Your Focus in Taking’ in *ICGC Green Pastures* 1996, p. 2; The Shepherd’s Voice, ‘Let’s Hear God’s Voice’ in *ICGC Green Pastures* 1995, pp. 1-2; The Shepherd’s Voice, ‘Make Good Friend’s’ in *ICGC Green Pastures* 1994.

<sup>42</sup> See The Shepherd’s Voice, ‘Maintaining Your Focus in Talking’ in *ICGC Green Pastures*, 1996, p.2.

<sup>43</sup> The Shepherd’s ‘Growth Means Responsibility’ in *ICGC, Green Pastures* ICGC, 1996, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> ICGC, *Green Pastures*,

As Otobil introduced the second sermon (Lord of hosts), he reiterated the fact that the sermon was meant to teach on the various manifestations of God in the days of the patriarchs and Israel.<sup>45</sup> He maintained that though God is whole and complete, he chooses to reveal only parts of his totality to mankind. And these partial revelations tend to cloud his wholeness and completeness, thereby leading many to arrive at partial experiences and conclusions about God.<sup>46</sup>

Otabil, however, claims that he cannot give a total picture of God and that he could only help to offer a clear picture of God as per the series of messages on the different aspects of God.<sup>47</sup> He further affirmed that he would have wished to present a somewhat complete image of God but what keeps dawning on him is his inability as a mere mortal to use his preaching and words to offer a total picture of God. His use of phrases such as ‘fuller picture’, ‘total picture’ and ‘clear picture’,<sup>48</sup> are clear evidence of his theological and intellectual struggle to find an appropriate category for God in some linguistic, imaginary and other terms. It is against this background that the message on the ‘Lord of hosts’ could be described as a theological exploration expressed in indigenous African traditional and cultural images, concepts, symbols, history, values and institutions.<sup>49</sup> The chosen text for the sermon was taken from the book of Psalms; it reads:

Oh Lord God of host, who is mighty like you oh Lord, your faithfulness also surrounds you, you rule the ragging of the sea, when its waves rise you still them. You have broken Ra-hab in pieces as one who is slain; you have scattered your enemies with your mighty hand. The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours, the world and all its fullness you have found them, the north and the south you have created them, Ta-bor and Hermon rejoice in your name. You have a mighty arm, strong is your hand and high is your right hand.<sup>50</sup>

Having briefly commented on what he refers to as the ‘various works of God’, relative to the details of the passage, Otobil straight away drew attention to the Psalmist’s use of the phrase ‘Lord of hosts’. Since the passage and its context did not prove very useful to Otobil in his search for the meaning of the phrase, he resorted to the etymological meaning of the word “hosts” as rendered the Hebrew Old Testament. His preliminary findings reveal the meaning of the root *tsebaoth* as an ‘army’, or a ‘multitude’.<sup>51</sup> Otobil went further to place the root *tsebaoth* into the wider biblical and theological contexts by saying:

The host refers to angelic and heavenly armies and all the forces of creation as well as God’s covenant people the host of God encompasses angels in all their ranks Cherubims Seraphims ministry angels right up to archangels all of them are part of the host of God ...but the hosts of God is not only about angels is ....also about everything God has created the sun the planetary systems the constellations the earth and all the geographical features the earth the mountains the trees, the things in the world all of these are part of the hosts.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Otobil, *Our God is an Awesome God - The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>46</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>47</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>48</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>49</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>50</sup> Psalm 89:8-13.

<sup>51</sup> Psalm 89:8-13.

<sup>52</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*. The following references fundamentally concur with the sense and meanings expressed in Otobil’s findings on the etymology and application of the word ‘host’. See Merrill C. Tenney, (ed.), *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, pp. 215-16; Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Exegesis* (UK: Paternoster Press, 1996) pp. 733-735; Jay Green (ed.), *The Interlinear Hebrew-Greek-*



## Lord of Hosts – Traditional and Cultural Appropriations

Otabil's first attempt at interpreting the phrase 'the Lord of hosts' to his congregation in order for them appreciate was to recourse to African tradition and culture.<sup>53</sup> Focusing on the other meaning of *tsebaoth* as 'commander in chief' of armies, he adopted the African concept of the 'chief' as his hermeneutical clue.

This conscious leap was not just intellectual, but a major and a deliberate shift aimed at endorsing the relation of culture to theology, especially in the areas where apparent affinities exist between biblical revelation and African life and thought.<sup>54</sup> Thus, seeking an interpretation for the 'Lord of hosts' in African traditional culture and thought, Otabil remarked, "it is almost in a measure like the way you know a king or a big chief in Ghana".<sup>55</sup>

Therefore in relating the biblical 'Lord of host' to that of the traditional African chief, Otabil divided the discourse into two separate experiences. The first is knowing such a chief personally, and having had the opportunity to share the chief's private life with him as a friend, father, husband, brother, or whatever. According to him, this level of experience is important and vital because all African chiefs belong to families, clans and communities first and foremost before their ascension to their stools.<sup>56</sup> And becoming a chief does not deny them the right to private and personal lifestyle.

The second experience according to Otabil is when the chief or the king sits officially in state in his kingdom and dressed in his full regalia in accordance with custom and tradition as the king of his hosts.<sup>57</sup> Otabil further painted the picture of a typical traditional chief or king in his official personality as the King of hosts in the following words:

It is a totally different picture the dressing is frightening the people around him are frightening they have all kinds of postures and some have their face painted...and they are holding guns and they are holding big machetes and scratching them on the floor and all of a sudden you are wondering is this rely my friend because you see him not only as a friend but now as command of his army.<sup>58</sup>

He then related the traditional picture of the chief to the biblical revelation thus:

And when you come into contact with God as the Lord of host something will happen to you that is why when he stands as the Lord of host God arises and he does not need

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*English Bible Vol. II I Samuel-Psalms* (Delaware: Associated Publishers and authors, 1976), p.658; Kohlenberger, John R., (ed.), *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew- English Old Testament Genesis-Malachi*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), p.446, differs in translating 'hosts' as almighty as may be the case in other translational variants; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs (eds.), *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 838-839; George V. Wigram, *The Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980), pp. 107-1060

<sup>53</sup> Otabil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>54</sup> See Bediako, Kwame. *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa*. (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), p. XX on his analysis on the meaning of the pre-Christian heritage as a prime concern' in which Dickson was cited as the major proponent of the Bible and African thought and life.

<sup>55</sup> Otabil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>56</sup> See Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 121; Max Assimeng, *Social Structure of Ghana* (Accra-Tema: GPC, 1981), pp.53-54. Again on Kinships, clan, lineage, and their relations to chieftaincy, see G. K. Nukunya, *Tradition and Change in Ghana – An Introduction to Sociology* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 2003), pp. 67-70.

<sup>57</sup> Otabil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>58</sup> Otabil, *The Lord of hosts*.

to fight his enemies scatter because when he shows up as the Lord of host it is terrifying sight to see the Lord strong in battle entering into battle on behalf of his people.<sup>59</sup>

The enduring emphasis here is the different manifestations of the totality of the awesome God whose manifestations as the Lord of hosts represent the most terror-like of all manifestations. Otabil described this as ‘a totally different picture’.<sup>60</sup> The essence of this description has been conveyed in another sense by Otabil as, “it is one thing to know God as a good God as a kind God as a merciful God and all the nice things about God but it is another thing to know God as the leader of his army”.<sup>61</sup>

### Manifestations of the Lord of Hosts

The first of the manifestations of the Lord of hosts Otabil talked about is the Lord’s ‘magnificent glory’. For Otabil, the Lord’s magnificent glory denotes the Lord’s frightening posture; a posture that explains why the whole of nature tends to react in an extremely ugly, violent, disorderly and dangerous manner when God decides to show himself as the Lord of hosts.<sup>62</sup> Dyrness concurred with Otabil’s understanding by noting the two fold senses of the Lord’s magnificent glory. These include the magnificent glory of the Lord as necessarily engendering respect, and a sheer displaying of the Lords divine potency.<sup>63</sup>

Otabil’s use of Isaiah’s testimony of the magnificent glory of God, the vision he saw, the sights and the sounds, and the personal feeling of total creatureliness, unworthiness, and sinfulness are consistent with Dyrness’ notion of the nature of the glory of the Lord.<sup>64</sup> His homily on the Isaiah text also shows how Isaiah’s encounter with the glory of the Lord was an experience of fright, worship, fear, self-condemnation, wonder, awe and ontological nothingness.<sup>65</sup>

These pathological experiences of Isaiah were analogous to Otto’s notion of the sense of the ‘holy’. These also include the feeling of insufficiency, dependence, impotence and paralysing apprehension.<sup>66</sup> An experience that indeed cannot be expressed by means of anything else because it is so primary and elementary, and can only be defined by itself.<sup>67</sup> In relation to this, Otabil concluded on the magnificent glory of the Lord of hosts thus:

This God we serve he is mighty sometimes his is terrifying in appearance he is not always nice to see he is nice to see sometimes but sometimes when you see him you will lie down and say leave me alone Lord am a man of unclean lips.<sup>68</sup>

The second manifestation of the Lord of hosts according to Otabil is the Lord’s ‘majestic elevation’, meaning the Lord of hosts is above all gods. Thus on account of Isaiah 1:1, and based on the specific testimony of Isaiah’s vision, Otabil commented:

Can you imagine the majestic attire he saw this figure wearing dazzling beautiful gorgeous colours the eye cannot describe and it fills the whole place and his walking

<sup>59</sup> Otabil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>60</sup> Otabil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>61</sup> Otabil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>62</sup> Otabil, *The Lord of hosts*; see Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline Old Testament Theology* (Holland: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1958), p. 206.

<sup>63</sup> William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1979), p. 42.

<sup>64</sup> Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology*, p.42.

<sup>65</sup> The text is Isaiah 6:1-5.

<sup>66</sup> Rudolf, Otto. *The Idea of the Holy*, Trans. John W. Harvey, (Oxford: Oxford Universities Press, 1950), p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, p. 9.

<sup>68</sup> Otabil, *The Lord of hosts*.

can you imagine in majesty one stop and the train is following him that is what he saw the train cloth in dazzling beauty and unparallel majesty.<sup>69</sup>

This again fits into Otto's claim that the majesty of the Lord embraces the elements of 'overpoweringness', 'might', 'power', 'absolute overpoweringness', and absolute 'unapproachability'.<sup>70</sup> According to Oden, the divine majesty denotes the relational attributes which display God's presence, knowledge and power in the world.<sup>71</sup> The majesty of the Lord in Oden's view is God's way of influencing the world of creatures; it is by virtue of this unique relation to the world that knowing God is considered possible.<sup>72</sup> The influencing element alluded to by Oden as fundamental to the majesty of the Lord is one of the major underlying tones of Otobil's homiletical exposition of the Isaiah text. Otobil overemphasized how the Lord's majesty influenced not only Isaiah but the heavenly beings and all creations.<sup>73</sup>

In the third manifestation, Otobil pointed out that the glory of the Lord of hosts attracts' homage and praise. And on that score, he once again recourse to the traditional and religious categories to explain what he meant. He explains:

In our tradition when the king sits as the Lord of his host and most of the host use antiquated guns...swords...so ancient they are frightening when they sit there there are people who sing the praise of the king they speak appellations and they talk about his ancestors they talk about ...stories and they talk about wars that their tribes have won... and you sometimes even feel like worshipping that person...can you imagine if you go to a king's palace and people say 'Nana ebaoo' and doors are shaking.<sup>74</sup>

Thus within the African religious and cultural traditions, Otobil found the appropriate cultural analogy for Isaiah 6:3 in which is recorded the praise and homage of God when God appears in his glorious majesty as the Lord of hosts. This creative and contextual use of the Old Testament is nothing less than a 'cultural exegesis' of the Old Testament scriptures. Having therefore presented the Lord of hosts as a type of a traditionally powerful chief and king who commands people, lands, spirits, ancestors, and all forces visible and invisible, Otobil set the stage for full scale appropriations.

In a systematic fashion, Otobil proceeded to enlist Old Testament scriptures as references in support of specific thematic applications under the question, "so what does he do as the Lord of hosts?"<sup>75</sup> This question is against the background of the understanding that the Lord of hosts was the authentic, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent traditional chief and king.<sup>76</sup>

### **'... As the Lord of Hosts'**

This caption forms part of the question posed by Otobil in relation to what the awesome God does as the Lord of hosts. The question "so what does he do as the Lord of host" marks the beginning of the end

<sup>69</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>70</sup> Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God: Systematic Theology Vol. One* (USA: San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1970), pp. 66-67.

<sup>72</sup> Oden, *The Living God: Systematic Theology Vol. One*, p. 67.

<sup>73</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*, especially on his exposition of the Isaiah text.

<sup>74</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>75</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>76</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*; see Robert J. Schreiter (ed.), *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 103 -114; Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa – The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Ghana, Akropong: Regnum, 2000), pp. 7-15; Aylward Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor: An Approach to Healing and Wholeness* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 7-20; see Martin Buber, *Kingship of God* (London: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1967), pp. 85-94.

of the sermon. And as already stated, Otobil proceeded from the premise of this question and the traditional cultural interpretation of the ‘Lord of hosts’ as the most powerful traditional king and chief.

Otobil appealed to some other Old Testament scriptural proofs of battle exploits, acts, and triumphs and interventions of the Lord of hosts in the life of Israel in general and specific individuals in Israel. The first of such references is 1 Samuel 17:45-47. This chapter and verses contain David’s responses to Goliath, the captain of the Philistine army who came to fight war against Israel. But the following comments from Otobil prior to his reading of David’s exact words as recorded in that reference is quiet controversial:

The army is in trouble and they know *Jehovah* they know him but it does not strike anybody that *Jehovah* gets involved in fighting for his people until a young boy comes in with the revelation of the Lord of host.<sup>77</sup>

This assertion by Otobil cannot be entirely true. To say that nobody knew Jehovah as the Lord of hosts in that group of army marshalled by Saul against the philistines cannot be the absolute truth. David cannot be the one to teach Saul’s army that *Jehovah* fights physical battles on behalf of Israel. David may have only re-affirmed that belief and that truth. And he may have also challenged the army by his faith and confession of that truth which might have restored that historical and theological belief to the demoralised army of Saul.

In the second example, Otobil referred to the story of how Elisha’s servant panicked and fearfully complained to Elisha about how the Syrian hosts have surrounded Israel to crush Israel.<sup>78</sup> However, the servant’s spiritual eyes were opened after Elisha prayed for him, and he saw heavenly and angelic hosts in their countless numbers ready to defend and protect Israel. In the light of what Elisha’s servant saw, Otobil then assured his audience that ‘family witches’ are wretched and useless because the people of God have more on their side than the enemy.<sup>79</sup>

In fact, this is one of the instances where Otobil never bothered to ‘properly’ exegete the passage in question but just moves into application. This is very characteristic of several Pentecostal/Charismatic preachers in Africa where sermons are just reading of parts of Scripture and then what is read is creatively activated to encourage, exhort, challenge, and then applied to life’s situations without recourse to the historical, cultural, and linguistic background of Scripture.

It does not mean that this approach to Scripture is always the norm. The analysis of these two sermons has shown that contemporary African Pentecostal/Charismatic preachers are: one, capable of biblical scholarship; two, very much aware of the social, economic, and spiritual context of their ministry; three, they have always demonstrated that they are masters in the art of creative biblical interpretation where all questions, needs, suspicions and concerns are effectively taken care of by any book, chapter, subject and passage of Scripture; These are what the two sermons of Otobil represent in contemporary African Pentecostal/Charismatic homiletics.

As a matter of fact, the Witches Otobil referred to in the conclusion of his sermon was a reference to only female witches and no reference whatsoever was made to wizards - young or old. This is an eloquent testimony of a received traditional and cultural mentality which brand old women as constituting the largest proportion of Witches in African society. But the fact that Otobil underscored one of such core traditional beliefs also reinforces the fact that no level of Christian spirituality, education, civilization and technology can undermine the African’s primal religious awareness.

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<sup>77</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*.

<sup>78</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*; see II Kings 6:8- 20.

<sup>79</sup> Otobil, *The Lord of hosts*.

## CONCLUSION

This exercise is meant to highlight some of the enduring trends in biblical ‘understandings’ and ‘interpretations’ in contemporary African Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity. As the main growing sector of Christianity in the southern continent, there is the need for a major scholarly undertaking into the new contributions that the ‘new Israel’ or ‘people of the Bible’ are making to the history, theology, and the interpretation of the Bible. The example of Mensa Otabil is just a tip of the iceberg. Once the scriptures continue to inspire the renewals of Christianity in the global south, it is high time we expected new and challenging movements, trends, and insights particularly in their appropriations of the Bible.

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