

AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN APPROPRIATION OF THE EUCHARIST

UNA APROPIACIÓN CRISTIANA AFRICANA DE LA EUCARISTÍA

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Abstract:

The Eucharist holds a significant place in the life of the Church in Africa. Beyond symbolizing salvation and reminding believers of God's provision, it aligns with the traditional African worldview, which emphasizes the necessity and power of blood for salvation. However, despite its importance, many African Christians struggle to fully grasp the relevance of the Eucharist in addressing their daily challenges. While some scholarly works have explored the topic, a gap remains in connecting Eucharistic theology to the practical socio-economic and spiritual issues faced by African Christians. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by exploring way by which Eucharistic theology might be or has been interpreted to address socio-economic and spiritual challenges of everyday African life. Using a literature-based research approach, the paper examines data from existing publications (including journal articles, bible commentaries, books and dissertations/theses) through thematic analysis. The central argument of the paper is that Christ, through the shedding of his blood symbolized in the Eucharistic meal, provides solutions to both physical and spiritual human needs. Consequently, partakers of the Eucharist must approach it with proper understanding and faith, thereby accessing its full benefits. The paper contributes to knowledge by demonstrating how the Eucharist can serve as a transformative practice, offering theological and practical insights for the Church in Africa to engage with the daily realities of its members.

Keywords: Eucharist, Salvation, African worldview, Theology.

Resumen:

La Eucaristía ocupa un lugar significativo en la vida de la Iglesia en África. Más allá de simbolizar la salvación y recordar a los creyentes la providencia de Dios, se alinea con la cosmovisión tradicional africana, que enfatiza la necesidad y el poder de la sangre para la salvación. Sin embargo, a pesar de su importancia, muchos cristianos africanos luchan por comprender plenamente la relevancia de la Eucaristía para abordar sus desafíos cotidianos. Aunque algunos trabajos académicos han explorado el tema, sigue existiendo una brecha entre la teología eucarística y las cuestiones socioeconómicas y espirituales prácticas a las que se enfrentan los cristianos africanos. Este artículo pretende salvar esa brecha explorando la forma en que la teología eucarística podría interpretarse o se ha interpretado para abordar los retos socioeconómicos y espirituales de la vida cotidiana en África. Utilizando un enfoque de investigación basado en la literatura, el artículo examina datos de publicaciones existentes (incluidos artículos de revistas, comentarios bíblicos, libros y tesis doctorales) mediante un análisis temático. El argumento central del artículo es que Cristo, a través del derramamiento de su sangre simbolizado en la cena eucarística,

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proporciona soluciones a las necesidades físicas y espirituales del ser humano. Por consiguiente, los participantes en la Eucaristía deben acercarse a ella con la comprensión y la fe adecuadas, para poder acceder así a todos sus beneficios. El artículo contribuye al conocimiento al demostrar cómo la Eucaristía puede servir como práctica transformadora, ofreciendo perspectivas teológicas y prácticas para que la Iglesia en África se comprometa con las realidades cotidianas de sus miembros.

Palabras clave: Eucaristía, salvación, cosmovision africana, teología.

1. Introduction

The Eucharist is a public ordinance instituted by Christ as an everlasting memorial of his sacrificial and atoning death, and as a means of fellowshiping with him and other believers. It has been described variously as follows. The word “Eucharist” comes from the Greek word *eucharisteō* (“to give thanks” or “thanksgiving”). Therefore, the meal signifies Christ’s thanksgiving act during its institution and the worshipper’s act of thanksgiving as they partake in it. The meal is also referred to as “the Lord’s Supper” because it was the Lord (Christ) who engineered the preparation of the table and invited others to join in the celebration. It was the last evening meal that the Lord ate before his death. Therefore, it is also referred to as “the Last Supper.” The communal sense of the meal and the fact that it is “holy” (by virtue of it coming from the Lord- Christ) gives it the name “Holy Communion.” When referred to as “the sacrifice of the Mass” (or simply, Mass), the sacrifice associated with it is emphasized. The Westminster Larger Catechism defines the Eucharist as

“a sacrament of the New Testament wherein by giving and receiving bread and wine according to the appointment of Jesus Christ, his death is showed forth; and they that worthily communicate, feed upon his body and blood to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace; have their union and communion with him confirmed; testify and renew their thankfulness and engagement to God, and their mutual love and fellowship each with other, as members of the same mystical body”(question 168)².

The above definition underscores the New Testament origins of the Eucharist. It also reminds the believer of the need to show gratitude toward God, renew their commitment and thank him for his grace.

For African Christians, the Eucharist not only connects them to the universal Church but also resonates with their cultural values such as communal sharing and the importance of blood in traditional rites. Yet, many African Christians struggle to appreciate the practical relevance of the Eucharist to their daily lives. While existing studies highlight the theological importance of the Eucharist, they often fail to connect its significance to the socio-economic and spiritual challenges faced by African communities. This lack of connection leaves a gap in understanding and prevents many from fully appreciating the transformative potential of the Eucharist.

This study uses a literature-based research approach, drawing on theological and biblical publications and analyzing them thematically. It explores the biblical foundations of the Eucharist, particularly its connection to the Old Testament Passover, and examines its contextual relevance for African Christians based on three key interpretations of the meal. The paper is expected to equip African Christians to partake in the Eucharist with the proper orientation, understanding and faith that address their life’s challenges.

² Westminster Larger Catechism. *The Book of Confessions*. Study Edition, Geneva Press, Louisville 1996, 7.278.

2. The Eucharist as typified in the Old Testament Passover

One cannot fully understand the origin of the Eucharistic meal without examining its historical antecedents in the Old Testament. This section, therefore, examines the Jewish Passover to provide foundation for the institution of the Eucharist in the New Testament. The first Passover celebration in the Old Testament takes place in Exodus 12, on the night before the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The Israelites had lived in Egypt for over four hundred years, following Jacob's migration there during a global famine in the days when Joseph served as the "minister of agriculture" in Egypt (cf. Gen. 15:13; 41:41–57). One reads in the Book of Exodus a vivid account of the experiences of the Israelites living in Egypt, a land of slavery (Ex. 13:3; 20:2; Deut. 5:6), where they endured oppression (Ex. 1:10–11), harsh working conditions (Ex. 5:6ff.), and humiliation (Ex. 1:13–14), among other sufferings.

In fulfillment of His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land, the land of Canaan (Ex. 3:1–14). Pharaoh, the Egyptian king at the time, was reluctant to let the Israelites leave, which led to the imposition of ten plagues upon Egypt: water turning to blood, frogs, lice, flies, livestock pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and finally, the death of all firstborn children (see Ex. 7–12). Each time, Pharaoh promised to free the Israelites but rescinded his decision as soon as the plague ended—until the final plague. The tenth and final plague, the death of the firstborns in Egypt, is closely associated with the Passover meal.

In Exodus 11, God informed Moses of a final plague, which would involve the death of all firstborn Egyptians at midnight. Despite being warned about this impending disaster, Pharaoh's unwavering determination to keep the Israelites as slaves led him to refuse their release. On the night of the 14th of Nissan, the Israelites were instructed to slaughter a animal without blemish (Ex. 12:5). The Passover animal is central to the ritual, with most instructions revolving around its selection and preparation³. The animal, a year-old male without blemish, could be a sheep or goat though Moses later specifies a small cattle (Ex. 12:21). The animal was to be roasted whole, including its head, legs, and inner parts, and consumed entirely on the same night, with leftovers burned (Ex. 12:9–10). The unity of the participants is symbolized by consuming the whole animal⁴. Despite being prepared outside a cultic setting, the Passover animal fulfils the qualities of a sacrificial offering: it must be unblemished and male (Lev. 1:3, 3:1). It could not be eaten raw or boiled, only roasted.

The Israelites were instructed to eat the roasted flesh of the Passover animal with unleavened bread (Ex. 12:8). While the text does not explicitly state the function of unleavened bread within the Passover meal, it distinguishes this usage from the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ex. 12:15–20)⁵. Unleavened bread symbolized the haste of the Israelites' departure from Egypt, as they had no time to prepare leavened bread (Ex. 12:39). It served both as a sign and a means of remembrance of their exodus, commemorating their liberation from slavery⁶.

Bitter herbs (Ex. 12:8) were included in the Passover meal, although no explicit reason is given for their inclusion. Some believe the bitterness symbolizes the Israelites' painful experience in Egypt, from which God delivered them. Gary Smith connects the bitterness to physical and emotional turmoil⁷, while William Propp interprets the herbs as a reference to lettuce, symbolizing pain and humiliation (Lam. 3: 15)⁸. Later Jewish tradition linked the bitter herbs to the hardships in Egypt (Ex. 1: 14). Füglistner adds that the bitter herbs also serve a liturgical purpose, contributing to the remembrance of Israel's suffering and redemption⁹.

In Exodus 12: 22, the Israelites are instructed to apply the blood on the sides and tops of the

³ J. W. ACHEAMPONG, *I will pass over you: The relevance of the Passover to the Understanding of salvation in contemporary Ghanaian Pentecostalism – A critical reflection from an Akan perspective*, University of Hamburg, Hamburg 2014, 168.

⁴ BRAUMER cited in: J. W. ACHEAMPONG, *I will pass over you...*, 169.

⁵ J. W. ACHEAMPONG, *I will pass over you...*, 169.

⁶ J. W. ACHEAMPONG, *I will pass over you...*, 169.

⁷ SMITH cited in: J. W. ACHEAMPONG, *I will pass over you...*, 170.

⁸ W. C. H. PROPP, "Unleavened Bread and Passover", in: D. N. FREEDMAN (ed.), *The Anchor Bible* vol. 2, Doubleday, New York 1999, 394.

⁹ FÜGLISTER cited in: J. W. ACHEAMPONG, *I will pass over you...*, 170.

doorframes of the houses where the flesh was to be eaten (using a bunch of hyssop). J. B. Segal notes that hyssop is associated with Temple rituals for symbolic cleansing from uncleanness and suggests its role in Passover was as a protective medium, preventing direct contact with the sacred or unholy¹⁰. Menahem Haran also emphasizes the purificatory significance of hyssop in the ritual, highlighting its role in symbolizing cleansing¹¹. On the other hand, this act signified protection, as the angel of destruction passing through the land that night would “leap over” or “pass over” these marked homes, sparing the Israelites from harm.

The day after this ritual was done, every Egyptian household mourned because “there was not a house without someone dead” (Ex. 12: 30). This tragedy finally compelled Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to leave his land. The institution of Passover (from the word *pesach*, meaning “passing over” or “protection”) originated from the salvation God granted the Israelites when the ‘angel of death’ “leaped over” or “passed over” (Heb. *pasach*; Bono-Twi: *Twa-gya*, to exempt) their homes on the night the firstborns of every Egyptian household were killed. God commanded Israel to celebrate the Passover annually (Ex. 12: 14), and it became one of their major festivals.

The blood served as a visible mark of identity and a shield against destruction, reflecting its critical role in the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. To appreciate the Eucharist fully, it is essential to explore the significance of blood within the context of Ancient Israel, as it provides the theological foundation for its meaning in both the Old and New Testaments. This exploration not only bridges the historical practices of Ancient Israel with contemporary African Christian experiences but also emphasizes the continuity of God's redemptive plan through the symbol of blood. The next section focuses on this.

3. The significance of blood in Ancient Israel context

The Hebrew word for “blood” (*dam*) appears over 360 times in the Old Testament, both literally and figuratively¹². Literally, it refers to the blood of animals and humans, as seen in references to animal sacrifices and human killings (Gen. 37: 31; Exod. 7: 17ff.; 1 King 22: 35). Figuratively, it can represent murder or guilt, and is linked to divine judgment, as God is said to require the blood of the wicked for their rebellion (2 Sam. 3: 27, 28; 1 Kings 2:5, 9, 31, 32; 9:7, 26; Matt. 27: 24)¹³.

The concept of blood traces back to the Fall of humanity in Genesis, where God provides animal skins for Adam and Eve's (Gen. 3:21), implicitly involving the shedding of blood as a reminder of their lost innocence. This act can be seen as the foundation for the sacrificial system. The prohibition against eating flesh with lifeblood (Gen. 9) and the divine command against murder emphasize the sanctity of life, as blood represents the divine image within humans.

Blood holds significant ritual importance in Israel's religious practices. The sprinkling of blood was a central ritual act used for purification and consecration. It symbolized the cleansing of individuals, objects, or spaces from sin and impurity, making them holy and acceptable before God. For example, during the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests, Moses sprinkled blood on the altar and on the priests as a sign of their sanctification (Ex. 29:20-21). Similarly, on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), the blood of sacrificial animals was sprinkled on the mercy seat in the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement to cleanse the sanctuary and atone for the sins of the people (Lev. 16:14-19). This act highlighted the belief that life, represented in the blood, was required to atone for sin and restore a right relationship with God. In line with this, there are specific prohibitions against consuming blood (Lev. 17:4-

¹⁰ J. B. SEGAL, *The Hebrew Passover: From the Earliest Times to A.D. 70*, Oxford University Press, London 1963, 159.

¹¹ M. HARAN, “The Passover Sacrifice”, in: G. W. ANDERSON – R. T. BECKWITH – M.J. SELMAN – G. W. DE BOER – G. R. CASTELLINO – H. CAZELLES – J. EMERTON – E. NIELSEN – H. G. MAY – W. ZIMMERLI (eds.), *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* Vol. 23, Brill, Leiden 1972, 89.

¹² T. D. ALEXANDER – D. W. BAKER (eds.), “Blood”, in: T. D. ALEXANDER – D. W. BAKER (eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, Intervarsity Press; Downers Grove 2003, 87-90.

¹³ S. D. RENN (ed.), *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, Hendrickson Publishing Inc, Peabody 2014, 123.

14; Deut. 12:16, 23, 27) and against revenge killings (Num. 35:19ff.; Deut. 19:6-13; Josh. 20:3ff.). Leviticus 17:11 prohibits eating blood due to its connection with life, as “the life of the creature is in the blood” and because blood is used for atonement on the altar.

According to Gordon (1977: 245) Leviticus 17:11 “is the most explicit statement about the role of blood in sacrifice. . . Here it suffices to say that “make atonement” literally means “pay a ransom” or “ransom,” and 11c could be paraphrased “the blood ransoms at the price of life”¹⁴. He further opines that to say, “the ransom price for man's life is not a monetary payment (as in Exod. 21:30) but the life of an animal represented by its blood splashed over the altar. Because animal blood atones for human sin in this way, it is sacred and ought not to be consumed by man”¹⁵. Gordon's argument is that the animal whose blood is shed for atonement dies in place of the worshipper. The shedding of blood symbolizes the offering of one's life because blood is seen as representing life itself. In this context, the sacrificial blood acts as a substitute, representing the worshipper's life being offered to God. The shedding of blood in sacrifices symbolizes a ransom for the worshipper's life, representing a substitutionary death, where the animal's blood atones for the person's sin.

Hartenstein, however, argues that since blood contains life, the one who sacrifices identifies with the victim and shares in its death¹⁶. Similarly, the priest identifies with the sacrificial victim during the ritual of sprinkling blood in the sanctuary. This act represents both a symbolic and real offering of the worshiper's life to God¹⁷. While God forbids the consumption of blood due to its connection with life, He allows its use for atonement because He has authority over life. Offering sacrificial blood acknowledges God's control over life.

P. M. Venter explains that sacrificial blood represents substitutionary death¹⁸. The offerer identifies with the victim, and the blood becomes a ransom that restores their relationship with God. By offering blood, the worshiper acknowledges their sinfulness and willingness to follow God's will¹⁹. The entire sacrificial system of Israel emphasizes that God, the giver of life, grants forgiveness based on his grace, not human effort²⁰. The atoning power of blood is also seen in Ezekiel's vision of the new temple (see Ezek. 43:18, 20; 44:7, 15; 45:19) and other passages in the Old Testament²¹.

The purifying, substitutionary, and especially protective use of blood in the Passover ritual and other Old Testament religious activities resonates with similar practices in many African traditions, where blood is seen as a powerful protective force. In various African societies, blood is used in rituals to safeguard individuals, families, or communities from harm, often marking boundaries or sacred spaces. Like the Passover blood, which protects the Israelites from death, blood in African contexts can be symbolic of life, purity, and the removal of spiritual threats.

Sacrificial animals, in the African context, may include goats, sheep, fowls, and cattle. To effectively achieve the purpose of the sacrifice, one has to choose the victim carefully. According to Samuel Ngewa the suitability of an animal for sacrifice depends on three main factors: it must not be stolen, it should have a uniform color, and it must be free from defects or injuries²². The value of the animal varies depending on the purpose of the sacrifice and the expectations of the worshipper, as well as the event or person involved. Once the blood is obtained, various rituals can be performed, including sprinkling it on the offerer, the community, or a deity.

¹⁴ GORDON cited in: I. BOAHENG, “Afɔdepreko Christology: An Akan Christian Theology of Jesus' Once-For-All Sacrifice”, *Journal of Religion and Theology* 4.3 (2020) 35.

¹⁵ GORDON cited in: I. BOAHENG, “Afɔdepreko Christology...”, 35.

¹⁶ F. HARTENSTEIN, “Zur Symbolischen Bedeutung 76 des Blutes im Alten Testament,” in: J. FREY – J. SCHRÖTER, *Deutungen des Todes Jesu im Neuen Testament, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 181, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2005, 133.

¹⁷ F. HARTENSTEIN, “Zur Symbolischen Bedeutung...”, 135.

¹⁸ P. M. VENTER, “Atonement through the Blood in Leviticus”, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 26 (2005) 288.

¹⁹ P. M. VENTER, “Atonement through the Blood...”, 288.

²⁰ P. M. VENTER, “Atonement through the Blood...”, 290.

²¹ S. D. RENN (ed.), *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words...*, 123.

²² S. NGEWA, “Colossians”, in: T. ADEYEMO (ed.), *African Bible Commentary*, WorldAlive, Nairobi 2006, 1529.

The significance of blood in the Old Testament sacrificial system, particularly in its roles of purification, substitution, and protection, sets the stage for a deeper understanding of the Eucharist in the New Testament. In this new act of sacrifice, Jesus Christ, through the shedding of His own blood, establishes a new covenant, offering His life as the ultimate atonement for sin. The next section considers this issue further.

4. The Institution of the Eucharist

The institution of the Eucharist is a pivotal event in Christian faith, marking the establishment of one of its most sacred practices. It took place during the last evening meal that Jesus had with his disciples before his crucifixion. All the four gospels record the Supper (cf. Matt. 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-38; John 13:1-17) which the Lord referred to as a Passover feast (Matt. 26:18-19). The typological relationship between the Passover meal and Christ's death is evident in Paul's reference to Christ as the Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7).

Making reference to Mark 14:12-26, William L. Lane offers the following reasons why the Last Supper is the Passover meal:²³ First of all, Jesus' return to Jerusalem for the Supper (14:17; cf. John 12:12, 18, 20; 13:2; 18:1) is a fulfilment of the requirement that the Passover meal be eaten only in Jerusalem (cf. Deut. 16:5-8). Secondly, the practice of reclining at the table (Mark 14:18; cf. John 13:12, 23, 25, 28) satisfies the first-century Greco-Roman world tradition which required people to recline for festive and formal meals, such as the Passover meal. Thirdly, Jesus' act of breaking of the bread in the course of the meal and after the serving of a dish (Mark 14:18-20, 20) is in line with the Passover tradition in which the bitter herbs were eaten before the breaking of the bread. In non-festive meals, the breaking of the bread came before serving the dish. Fourthly, it was only festive meals which involved the serving of wine; ordinary meals were taken with water. Fifthly, the Last Supper was eaten late at night just like the Passover (1 Cor. 11:23; John 13:30); normal supper was eaten in the late afternoon.

The Passover liturgy required the youngest child to ask about the origin and reason for the celebration (Ex. 12:25-27), so that every generation would understand its meaning and significance. The head of the family or the host had the responsibility to respond to the child's enquiry by recounting the biblical account of the deliverance of the Israelites from their Egyptian bondage (see also Deut. 26:5-9)²⁴. Jesus, being the host, fulfilled this liturgical requirement and (re)interpreted the Passover bread and wine in terms of his body and blood, respectively. Jesus blessed the bread, and having broken and distributed it to his disciples, said, "Take, eat, this is my body" (Matt. 26:26). Jesus' then (re)interpretation of the Passover bread as his body is a way of identifying himself with the sacrificial lamb that is eaten at the Passover festival. France is right to suggest that "as God first rescued his people from Egypt and made his covenant with them at Sinai, so now there is a new beginning for the people of God, and it finds its focus not on the ritual of animal sacrifice but through the imminent death of Jesus"²⁵.

Jesus later took the cup (wine) and after giving thanks, gave it to the disciples to drink (Mark 14:23). He then (re)interpreted the Passover wine as the "blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many" (Mark 14:24 NKJV)²⁶. The act of giving of his blood to his disciples underlines Jesus' act of self-giving in his death for the sake of his disciples. The statement, "blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many" recalls the sprinkling of blood to ratify the Sinaitic covenant in the Old Testament (Ex. 24:8). The sprinkling of the blood on the people in Exodus 24 corresponds to the drinking of the blood at the Last Supper. The "covenant" refers to God's

²³ W. L. LANE, *Commentary According to the Gospel of Mark. The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids 1974, 497.

²⁴ R. T. FRANCE, *The Gospel of Mark. A Commentary on the Greek Text*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids 2002, 563.

²⁵ R. T. FRANCE, *The Gospel of Mark...*, 570.

²⁶ Some manuscripts (such as Vaticanus and Sinaiticus) do not have the word "new" qualifying the word "covenant."

covenant with Israel, which Israel may accept or reject but cannot alter²⁷. The New Covenant alludes to the fulfilment of God's promise of a new (and different) covenant through Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-34; cf. Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:5-14; Heb. 8:8-12; 10:16-17). Jeremiah 31:31-34 is an important Old Testament antecedent to the institution of the Eucharist. Here, God prophesied about the transition of the old Covenant God had with his people which was broken because of covenant infidelity on the part of the Israelites to the New Covenant with all its ramifications. The New Covenant is more of an internal knowledge about God than external knowledge and is completely different from the old, and signified by the expressions "no longer" (Jer. 31:34). The old covenant also centred on the blood of animals but the new is about the blood of Jesus, who is the Lamb of God. The expression, "shed for many" (Mark 14:24), reminisces a pre-Markan tradition in which Jesus' death is considered as an act "for" the benefit of others (Rom. 5:8; 8:32; 1 Cor. 11:24; Gal. 1:4; 2:20; see also Mark 10:45).

The institution of the Eucharist, rooted in the Passover meal, marks a shift from the old sacrificial system to the new covenant in Christ's body and blood. This transformation resonates deeply with African traditions, where blood and sacrifice hold central spiritual and communal significance. The next section examines the key way in which African Christians interpret and appropriates the Eucharist.

5. Appropriating the Eucharist in an African context

The Eucharist is widely celebrated across Christian churches in Africa, but its meaning, frequency, preparation, and administration vary among denominations. In the Roman Catholic Church, the Eucharist is part of every service and is reserved exclusively for Roman Catholic communicants. Non-communicant Catholics and members of other denominations cannot partake in this "closed communion." In contrast, churches like the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal-Charismatic churches practice "open" or "inclusive" communion, allowing communicants from other denominations to participate. In Methodist and Presbyterian traditions, communicants are baptized adult members who may also need to be confirmed. Most Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, however, permit all adult members to partake in the Eucharist. Despite these differences in understanding and practice, there is broad agreement among denominations on the significance of the Eucharist. This paper explores three ways in which African Christianity interprets and appropriates the Eucharist.

This article engages with the doctrine of the Eucharist from an ecumenical perspective, recognizing the richness of both Catholic and Protestant traditions. While the Catholic Church upholds transubstantiation, affirming the real presence of Christ—body, blood, soul, and divinity—under the species of bread and wine, other Christian traditions, such as the Lutheran, Reformed, and Evangelical Protestant traditions, offer alternative interpretations that emphasize consubstantiation, symbolic representation, or memorialist significance. While acknowledging the different denominational positions in the subject of the Eucharist, it is important to note that the interpretation below come from non-Catholic perspective. They are more often associated with African Initiated Churches, churches that were established and are led by African leaders.

5.1 The Eucharist as a Communal Life

The Eucharist is a communal meal. Jesus used plural verbs and pronouns, as he spoke to the disciples in the upper room (Matt. 26:26-29 and its parallels). The early church maintained the communal nature of the Eucharist (Acts 2:42-46). The text depicts this ordinance as that which brought the early Christians together. The Eucharist also brought the early church together on Sundays or the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). Paul underscored the unifying significance of the Eucharist when he called believers in Corinth to order and in strong terms

²⁷ J. D. GRASSMICK, "Mark", in: J. F. WALVOORD – R. B. ZUCK (eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, David C. Cook, Colorado Springs 1983, 178.

disapproved of their lack of genuine mutual love in the Eucharistic service (1Cor. 11:23-27). It was, therefore, Paul's expectation that the Eucharist should strengthen the bond of love, interconnectedness, and brotherhood among members of the Corinthian church.

The unifying dimension of the Eucharist is also alluded to by the introductory words of the Eucharistic celebration taken from 2 Corinthians 13:14: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (NIV). The word "fellowship" or "communion" (Gk. *koinonia*), highlights the unity of the church. The church forms a *koinonia*, a communion or a fellowship of people through the works and power of the Holy Spirit. The Greeks used *koinonia* in reference to "people who are united for a common purpose, who own something in common and who share common interest"²⁸. This means the Eucharist signifies the life, being, and activities of a united people.

Paul also called the church to keep the Passover feast (metaphorically) by living together in lives of holiness, and hence, expressing their unity in love (cf. 1 Cor. 10:17). Here, Paul alludes both to the typological relationship between the Passover and the Eucharist and the unifying nature of the Eucharist. One's participation in the Eucharist connects him/her to Christ and other believers. Those who share the communion meal also share their joy and sorrow, victory and suffering, concern, and comfort in faith and love. Thus, the Eucharist unifies and heals divisions.

The *koinonia* dimension of the Eucharist is significant to the global church, more so the African church. The traditional African worldview has a communal nature of social life. A person's life is tied to the life of the community. Therefore, societal welfare is more important than individual welfare. The African sense of community and solidarity is expressed in the Zulu saying that "I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours." Wilbur O'Donovan states that "Africans tend to find their identity and meaning in life through being part of their extended family, clan, and tribe. There is a strong feeling of common participation in life, a common history, and a common destiny"²⁹. In Africa, therefore, one cannot detach him/herself from the community and still live as a happy person because "an individual who is cut off from the community organization is a nothing"³⁰. Kwame Gyekye defines "community" in the African sense as "a group of persons linked by interpersonal bonds, which are not necessarily biological, who share common values, interests, and goals"³¹. Therefore, Africans willingly share their food with visitors (and even strangers). Traditionally, after food is prepared, it is served in a bowl for all the people to come and eat together. Also, communal meals are served at social events, such as festivals, marriage and naming ceremonies. Such practice does not only symbolize peace and harmony but also underlines the fact that a person's survival is a shared responsibility. Thus, Africans participate in communal meals to maintain peace, harmony, solidarity and interconnectedness. Failure to partake in communal meals is regarded as a sign of hatred for or disunity with others in the society. Communal meal may serve as the means of reconciling estranged parties. The idea is that two people cannot eat together while still holding grudges against each other. Therefore, just as in traditional African communal meals where everyone shares in the same food, the Eucharist brings believers together to share in the body and blood of Christ. This act is a communal expression of faith, where individuals partake of the sacrament not only for their own spiritual nourishment but also as a way of reinforcing their unity with each other and with Christ.

The communal nature of the Eucharist ensures that people maintain proper relationship with other people and with their environment. As one partakes in the Eucharist, the person must also not only seek his/her welfare but also that of others, both living and unborn. This calls for ecological ethics whereby the participant also seeks to maintain the world and make it a better place for human habitation. For this reason, the worshipper needs to examine him/herself both vertically and horizontally in preparation for the sacrament. Paul rightly

²⁸ P. E. NMAH, "Luther and Zwingli's Eucharistic Controversy: A Reflection on Nigerian Christianity", *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities* 14.2 (2013) 123.

²⁹ W. O'DONOVAN, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective*, Paternoster, Carlisle 1996, 4.

³⁰ J. V. TAYLOR, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence and African Religion*, SCM, London 1963, 100.

³¹ K. GYEKYE, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, Sankofa Publishing Company, Accra 1996, 35.

points out that each communicant must examine himself before God (1 Cor. 11:28) and also conduct him/herself in a Christian manner over against other believers (1 Cor. 11:17ff) in preparation for the Holy meal. It is, therefore, both theologically and ethically wrong to partake of the Eucharist with malice toward others (Matt. 5:23-24). Again, the Eucharist of the New Covenant opposes any form of discrimination. In short, such values, such as sharing, interdependence, caring for others, solidarity, interconnectedness, hospitality, and social harmony, which characterize the African social life, are all highlighted in the Eucharist. The Methodist Church Ghana (for example) raises funds to support “invalids” any time they go for Communion. Invalids are usually old members of the church, who are no longer able to worship with church due to ill health. Most of these people are marginalized and financially vulnerable. The funds raised by the active church members during Communion services are distributed among the invalids to reduce their plight.

The communal nature of the Eucharist, therefore, transcends the act of partaking in the sacrament; it embodies a way of life rooted in care, justice, and solidarity. It emphasizes not only spiritual nourishment but also practical expressions of love and support within the community, such as the Methodist Church Ghana's practice of supporting invalids.

5.2 The Eucharist as Spiritual Weapon

The blood component in the Eucharist is very significant for African Christians in spiritual warfare. In many African cultures, belief in spiritual entities and spiritual warfare plays a key role in the worldview of individuals and communities. These beliefs are deeply rooted in the understanding that the physical world is intricately connected with the spiritual realm. Spiritual entities, both benevolent and malevolent, are thought to influence the lives of people in various ways, from health and prosperity to misfortune and death. These entities include ancestors, deities, spirits of nature, and, in some traditions, spirits of the deceased. Ancestral spirits are considered particularly important, as they are believed to maintain a connection between the living and the deceased. Ancestors are honored and invoked for guidance, protection, and blessings. Similarly, nature spirits, or spirits associated with specific places, animals, or natural forces, are usually regarded as powerful and can be either protective or harmful. Deities, often associated with specific aspects of life such as fertility, rain, or war, are another category of spiritual beings. Traditional Africans worship them through rituals, sacrifices, and prayers to seek blessings or avert curses. In many African communities, these spiritual beings are seen as intermediaries between humans and the Supreme Being, who is often more distant and less directly involved in everyday life.

Africans often view life as being under constant threat from malevolent spiritual entities and negative forces. These are believed to manifest in various challenges, such as illness, financial hardship, conflict, or misfortune, and are frequently attributed to evil spirits, witchcraft, or ancestral curses. Spiritual warfare, therefore, becomes a vital practice for safeguarding individuals, families, and communities from these perceived threats. It typically involves rituals, prayers, sacrifices, or the intervention of spiritual leaders like shamans, traditional healers, or priests, who are thought to possess unique knowledge and power to counteract these forces through communication with the spiritual realm.

In light of this, when Africans convert to Christianity, they often look to their new faith to fulfill the spiritual and physical needs that were previously addressed by their traditional religious leaders. This transition reflects their desire for continuity in seeking protection, deliverance, and solutions to life's challenges. As a result, many African Christians turn to the church, seeking the same spiritual intervention that their traditional faiths offered. Within this context, the blood of Jesus is perceived as a powerful spiritual weapon capable of overcoming malevolent forces. This understanding aligns with the African traditional belief that blood holds unique power, granting access to supernatural realms and providing protection and empowerment in spiritual matters. Given this, the blood component in the Eucharist takes on profound significance for the African Christian, as it symbolizes not only Christ's sacrificial

death but also a powerful means of spiritual defense and healing in their lives.

Two main ways of applying the blood of Jesus are evident. The first is the apotropaic function of the blood of Jesus. This refers to its protective or warding-off power against evil, malevolent spiritual forces, and harm. In this context, “apotropaic” is derived from the Greek word *apotropein*, which means “to turn away” or “to avert.” The blood of Jesus, as understood in Christian theology, is believed to have the power to shield believers from spiritual dangers, such as sin, demonic forces, and spiritual death. Nicholas Duncan-Williams, the leader and founder of the Action Chapel International, for example, asserts that Jesus’ blood is “efficacious”, “redeeming”, “sanctifying”, “cleansing”, “justifying”, “prevailing”, “overcoming”, and “triumphant”³². For this reason, most African Christians make such declarations as “I cover myself and my family with the blood of Jesus,” “I sanctify this food with the blood of Jesus,” and “I cover my properties (car, shop and others) with the blood of Jesus.” David Oyedepo of the Winners Chapel International also believes that when a person declares that “I cover myself with the blood of Jesus” he/she becomes a “no trespass” territory to Satan because “[t]he blood is a devastating weapon against Satan; he hasn’t got an answer to it and never will”³³. In the above example, the blood is used passively to achieve a purpose.

The second use of the blood of Jesus personifies it as an active force, actively engaging in spiritual warfare. For example, the blood of Jesus may be used actively in such statements as “May the blood of Jesus rebuke you!” as a way of suppressing and rebuking evil spirits or “I cancel it by the blood of Jesus,” as a way of reversing so-called demonic plans and activities. Pastors pray over water or olive oil (popularly referred to as anointing oil by Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians) to turn them into “the blood of Jesus” and then give them to their followers to sprinkle in their homes as means of warding off evil spirits. It is in this light that Apostle-General Sam Korankye Ankrah of the Royal House Chapel, once offered the following, after raising the Lord’s cup which he believed contained “the blood of Jesus”: “You will not be afraid of witches anymore because the blood will put them to flight”³⁴. The minister later asked the congregation to pour some “blood” into their right hand and smear it on their forehead while saying the following words: “I mark my life with the blood. When the enemy sees me, when accident sees me, when sicknesses see me, when poverty sees me, when anything from hell sees me, they will bow because of the power of the blood”³⁵. He also prayed for the blood to put an end to financial struggles, academic struggles, spiritual struggles, harassment, and troubles in the lives of his members³⁶. In this active application, the blood is understood as an unstoppable force that disrupts negative forces to bring deliverance and empowerment in the believer’s life. Thus, the blood of Jesus in both passive and active forms becomes a central tool in the spiritual battle African Christians perceive themselves as engaged in.

5.3 The Eucharist as therapeutic and salvific element

In the African context, sickness is often viewed not just as a physical ailment, but also as a spiritual and social concern. It is believed that illness can result from various factors, including spiritual imbalance, ancestral displeasure, or the influence of malevolent forces. Traditional African healing practices often involve a combination of spiritual, herbal, and communal interventions. Elders, spiritual leaders, and traditional healers play a significant role in diagnosing and treating illnesses, often using rituals, prayers, and medicinal herbs passed down through generations.

Healing in the African setting is closely tied to the concept of salvation. In many African communities, salvation is not only seen as a spiritual state of being right with God but also involves physical, emotional, and communal restoration. Healing, therefore, is an essential

³² N. DUNCAN-WILLIAMS, *Deploying the Blood*, Dominion Publications, Accra 2012. (Blurb).

³³ D. OYEDEPO, *Signs and Wonders Today: A Catalogue of the Amazing Acts of God among Men*, Dominion Publishing House, Ota 2006, 119.

³⁴ ANKRAH as cited in: J. W. ACHEAMPONG, *I will pass over you...*, 177.

³⁵ J. W. ACHEAMPONG, *I will pass over you...*, 177.

³⁶ J. W. ACHEAMPONG, *I will pass over you...*, 179.

part of the salvation experience. It is understood as a holistic process that addresses not only the body but also the mind and spirit, bringing harmony and balance to the individual and the community.

Within this framework, the Eucharist holds profound therapeutic and salvific significance. It is seen not only as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice but also as a means of healing and restoration. Just as healing in African thought involves addressing the entirety of a person—body, mind, and spirit—so too does the Eucharist serve as a medium for spiritual nourishment, emotional renewal, and physical healing. Oyedepo describes it as a “miracle meal” because it “services the body” and enables the participant to experience physical health, vigour, and vitality³⁷. He argues that “among the benefits of redemption of a spiritual menu is that it guarantees a sound body and flourishing body”³⁸. For Oyedepo, Jesus' statement, “my flesh is meat indeed and my blood is drink indeed” (Jn. 6:55) means the “miracle meal” provides “the highest form of nutrients [one] will ever need anywhere in the world”³⁹. This healing and powerful significance of the blood is expressed in Christian songs. The following Akan Christian chorus—which is usually sung at Eucharistic service in most Akan churches—highlights the African perception about the power in the blood of Jesus.

<i>Tumi wɔ (2x)</i>	There is power (2x)
<i>Tumi wɔ Jesus Ne mogya ne mu</i>	There is power in the blood of Jesus
<i>Ayaresa wɔ (2x)</i>	There is healing
<i>Ayaresa wɔ Jesus Ne mogya ne mu</i>	There is healing in the blood of Jesus
<i>Nkwa wɔ (2x)</i>	There is life (2x)
<i>Nkwa wɔ Jesus Ne mogya ne mu</i>	There is life in the blood of Jesus
<i>Mogya no mu o (2x)</i>	In the blood (2x)
<i>Mogya no mu na tumi wɔ</i>	It is in the blood that power resides
<i>Mogya no mu o (2x)</i>	In the blood (2x)
<i>Mogya no mu na tumi wɔ</i>	It is in the blood that power resides

The Sotho people of South Africa, like the Akan and many other African communities, deeply understand and value the religious significance of blood. They beautifully express the importance of Jesus's blood in the following song:

<i>Seteng sediba sa madi (Amen! Amen!)</i>	There is a well of blood (Amen! Amen!)
<i>Aletareng ya tofelo</i>	lying next to the altar
<i>Diba se e leng sehlare</i>	It has the power of healing
<i>Matl'a sona ke bophelo</i>	the power that gives life
<i>Baetsadibe ba bats'ho</i>	Sinners who were doomed
<i>Ba se kenang ka tumelo</i>	their sins have been washed away
<i>Ba tloha teng ka basweu</i>	by the blood and they are spotless
<i>Ka thabo le ka tshwarelo</i>	with happiness and forgiveness
<i>Bare amen Halleluyah</i>	They say Amen Hallelujah
<i>Ho boraro bo teroneng</i>	The Trinity (three) in the altar
<i>Ntate le mora le moy'a</i>	Father, Son and Holy Spirit
<i>Ba bine ka ho sa feleng</i>	They that give new life

These choruses suggests at least two major significances of the blood of Jesus. The first is its therapeutic effect. In Africa, healing is a function of religion. Therefore, when people fall sick, they look up to their religious leaders to provide solution to their sicknesses. The belief is that diseases and misfortunes are caused by such entities as charmers, enchanters, sorcerers, witches and wizards, all of which need to be dealt with through the deliverance ministry. The

³⁷ D. OYEDEPO, *The Miracle Meal*, Dominion House Publishers, Lagos 2002, 6.

³⁸ D. OYEDEPO, *The Miracle Meal*..., 10.

³⁹ D. OYEDEPO, *The Miracle Meal*..., 10.

lines, “There is healing in the blood of Jesus” and “It has the power of healing” suggest that Jesus’ blood is powerful enough to effect healing in the body of the partaker. Oyedepo highlights the healing efficacy of the Eucharist in the following quote:

“Every dangerous thing that you have mistakenly eaten, which is now ravaging and tearing up or breaking down your body’s defenses, will be neutralized by eating the flesh of Jesus. Any form of poison responsible for partial blindness, deafness, stomach disorder, chest problems, heart disease, blocked arteries, every form of body poison including AIDS, which is the breakdown of the immune system, will be swallowed up in victory by the meal of life. As you partake of the meal see it as waging a total war against death”⁴⁰.

The Eucharistic elements must, therefore, empower the worshipper to live a victorious life that transcends the power of evil forces.

The use of blood sacrifice for therapeutic purposes is not lacking in African Traditional Religions. One may cite the example from the people of Abura-Fante, which occurred a long time ago. The story is told of the Abura-Fante people experiencing a deadly epidemic, which could only be cured through human sacrifice. A man named Egya Ahor (a traditional chief priest of the Fante god, *Akyen*) willingly offered himself to be used for the necessary rituals⁴¹. Egya Ahor was killed and his blood was mixed with water and sprinkled on the people for ritual cleansing and healing⁴². The ritual served as an effective antidote to the calamity that had befallen the people. During African traditional festivals, blood sacrifices are offered to effect healing and purification, among others. The blood offering given by Jesus through his death is, therefore, very important in the Eucharistic service. This sacrifice brings believers in to a new covenant relationship with God, just as blood sacrifices in African primal religions establish and maintain a covenant bond between the worshiper and a deity. As people belonging to the New Covenant, Christians are expected to emulate Christ, not by offering blood sacrifices, but by offering their lives as a living sacrifice that is holy and acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1-2). The spiritual sacrifices comprise prayer, praise, thanksgiving, repentance, justice, kindness, and love.

Blood also has a life-giving significance. Just as the Passover served as a means of experiencing “abundant life”, so the Eucharistic blood (foreshadowed in the Passover) offers abundant life to those who participate in faith. Jesus used the Shepherd/gate metaphor (in John 10:1-18) to explain how he differs from the false shepherds and messiahs who came ahead of him. He further identified himself as the shepherd who leads out his sheep, goes before them, and brings them home safely (vv. 3-4; see also Num. 27:15-18; Psalms 80:1; Ezek. 34:13) after giving them free access to pasture (vv. 9-10). Jesus’ salvific mission is depicted as an offer of free access to pasture and fullness of life. It is in this light that he describes himself as the “Good Shepherd” who lays down his life for his sheep (v. 11). Earlier (in v. 10), Jesus had indicated that the false teacher (a thief) comes only “to steal and kill and destroy,” but he (Jesus) came so that the sheep “may have life and have it abundantly” (RSV). He offered abundant life to his sheep through his voluntary sacrificial death on the cross, which he referred to as “laying down his life” (John 10:11, 17, 18; see also 13:37-38; 15:13; 1 John 3:16). By laying down his life through the shedding of his blood, he gains life for his sheep. Thus, Christ offered life to his people through his sacrificial death so that those who “eat” his body (the heavenly bread) shall not die (John 6:48-51). The new life that Christ provides for his sheep through the Eucharist is a reminder of the powerful mystical practice of doing away with all leaven in our lives. Thus, as one partakes in the Eucharist, one is reminded of the need to lead a life free of sin. The Eucharist is a call to search within ourselves for any psycho-spiritual leaven (1 Cor. 5:7-8).

⁴⁰ D. OYEDEPO, *The Miracle Meal...*, 20-21.

⁴¹ J. D. K. EKEM, *New Testament Concepts of Atonement in an African Pluralistic Setting*, SonLife Press, Accra 2005, 62.

⁴² J. D. K. EKEM, *New Testament Concepts...*, 62.

The Akan chorus stated above highlights the life-giving significance of Jesus' blood that was shed on the cross and contained in or signified by wine in the line: "There is life in the blood of Jesus." The Akan word *nkwa* ("life") may refer to one's existence on earth from birth to death. However, real life transcends mere existence or being alive to include such notions as peace, being in harmony with others, longevity, fertility, prosperity, good health, being dignified, and others. Therefore, by referring to the blood as the source of "*nkwa*" (life), the communicant expects to have both spiritual and physical benefits from the Eucharist. In other words, the Eucharist is expected to deal adequately with the existential needs of the African participant. The life bestowed by the blood is both physical and spiritual.

6. Conclusion

The Eucharistic service is an integral part of the Christian faith. The Eucharist takes a retrospective look at Israel's deliverance from Egypt and a prospective look at the messianic banquet in heaven. The Eucharist establishes the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (31:31-34). The circumstances under which this sacrament was instituted were solemn and impressive. It was the night of his betrayal, as the Lord and his disciples celebrated the Passover together. In this act, Jesus redefined the meaning of the Passover, identifying himself as the Passover Lamb whose body and blood would bring about the salvation of humanity. This powerful symbol of sacrifice and covenant renewal continues to shape the Christian faith today. As the body of Christ is broken and his blood is shed for many, the Eucharist invites believers to reflect on the significance of Christ's death and the hope of eternal life in the kingdom of God. For African Christians, the Eucharist takes on additional meaning, as it aligns with their cultural practices of offering, sacrifice, and communal unity. This sacrament serves as both a reminder of Christ's sacrifice and a call to deeper participation in the life of the Christian community.

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