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Death and Resurrection in John 11: Implications for Seventh-day Adventist Mission in Africa

The problem of death and human responses to it is age long. Right from the time Satan suggested to Adam and Eve that they could disobey God by eating the forbidden fruit and still live (Gen 3:4, 5), humanity has subscribed to different beliefs towards the state of the dead. In Africa in general and West Africa in particular, different cultural and religious practices seem to sustain the belief in a conscious existence of the dead. These practices, which are also found among Seventh-day Adventists (Akpa 2011:93-98),¹ impact on Adventist mission on the African continent. Thus faith issues such as dual-allegiance do not seem to abate among Christians in Africa.

However, the narrative of the resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus in John 11:1-57, especially Jesus' dialogue with his disciples and Martha, the sister of Lazarus (John 11:1-44), delineates several issues that provide ample platform for discussing the implications of death and resurrection for the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa, from a biblical-anthropological perspective. Consequently, utilizing a contextual-exegetical approach, the purpose of this paper is three-fold. First, it undertakes the exegesis of John 11:1-57 in the effort to delineate the biblical teachings on the state of the dead in the passage and the significance of resurrection as the hope for the dead in Christ. Second, it discusses the beliefs and practices associated with the state of the dead in some parts of Africa, identifying their implications for Adventist missions. Third, it makes recommendations toward enhancing Adventist mission in Africa.

Exegesis of John 11:1-57

The purpose of the exegetical study of John 11:1-57 is to delineate the key issues associated with the miraculous resurrection of Lazarus and ascertain how they impact the teachings on the state of the dead in the passage. It also seeks to establish the significance of resurrection as the only hope for the dead in Christ.

Literary Context of John 11:1-57

John 11:1-57 is cast in a purely narrative framework. In its larger context, it is contained within a long discourse that features series of teachings and miraculous acts of Jesus Christ that elicited opposition, antagonism, persecution and even threat to His life by the Jewish leaders. The story of the healing of the invalid at the pool at Bethesda (John 5) flagged off the hostility against Jesus by the Jewish leaders. Such hostility was sustained until the feast held in Simon's house² at Bethany in honor of Jesus where Mary anointed His feet (John 12). Thus, the account of the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:1-57 features within the larger context of John 5:1-12:50.

John 11:1-57 serves as its own immediate context in the sense that it is a self-contained passage that discusses the miraculous resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus. The pericope in view is preceded by the profound pronouncement by Jesus that He is the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-42) and is succeeded by the account of the feast held at Bethany in honor of Jesus with Lazarus in attendance, where Mary also anointed Jesus' feet with an expensive perfume (John 12:1-50). Many people believed in Jesus because of the miraculous resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:45) as well as other miracles He did and what He taught, in spite of the hostility and opposition against Him by the Pharisees and Jewish leaders (see also John 2:23; 4:39; 10:42; 12:42).

The historicity and authenticity of the narrative of the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:1-57 has been disputed by some scholars because of the parallel account in Luke 16:19-31 (Robinson 1985:222-223; Collins 1992:265; Barrett 1978:388; Blomberg 2001:164-165; Milne 1993:156-157; Buttrick 1952:635). Although this study does not delve into the debate, it is important to point out that apart from the resurrection of Jesus Christ which is the climax of the resurrection motif in the entire Bible, the narrative of the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11 could be considered the

¹A recent study conducted in Nigeria, for instance, reveals that some SDA Church members are involved in spiritualistic activities because of issues that border on position seeking and retention, funeral rites, widowhood rites, promotion, health challenges, naming rites, and childlessness.

²The account in the Gospel of John locates the feast in honor of Jesus at Bethany (John 12:1-2) but does not mention that the feast was held in Simon's house. However, two other synoptic parallels (Matt 26:6 and Mark 14:3) locate the feast at Simon's house in Bethany.

clearest and indisputable resurrection motif in the Gospels and provides significant eschatological hope.

Structure of John 11:1-57

The narrative of the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11 is characterized by several intrigues. These intrigues largely revolve around the conditions of Lazarus. The narrative is structured in five major parts as shown below.

- A. Lazarus is Sick (John 11:1-10)
- B. Lazarus is Dead (John 11:11-16)
- C. Lazarus is Buried (John 11:17-33)
- D. Lazarus is Resurrected by Jesus (John 11:34-44)
- E. Mixed Reactions to the Resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus (John 11:45-57)

Interpretation and Theology of John 11:1-57

The structure of John 11:1-57 above reveals several issues regarding death and resurrection, with Lazarus and Jesus as the central characters. Consequently, the interpretation of the pericope that follows takes into account the issues raised in the structure, especially in relation to the conditions of Lazarus; namely, his sickness, death, burial, and resurrection.

Condition 1: Lazarus Is Sick (John 11:1-10)

For unexplained reasons in the text, Lazarus becomes sick (John 11:1). His concerned sisters, Mary and Martha, send a message to Jesus concerning the condition of their brother. The affinity between Jesus and the family of Lazarus (John 11:5) is further attested to by the content of the message sent to Jesus by Mary and Martha, "Lord, the one you love is sick" (John 11:3). This is an invitation for Jesus to come and heal Lazarus so that he would not die. Jesus' assessment of the condition of Lazarus raises hope, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it" (John 11:4).

On the surface, one would understand Jesus as implying that Lazarus would not die of the sickness. However, the subsequent reaction of Jesus to the sick friend is puzzling. Instead of immediately going to Lazarus' home at Bethany, Jesus stayed where he was for two more days from the time he heard the news of Lazarus' sickness (John 11:6). When Jesus finally decided to go back to Judea, his disciples, based on a previous life-threatening experience, dissuaded Him for the fear of death (John 11:7-8). However, appealing to the contrast between walking in daylight and walking in the darkness, Jesus affirms His resolve to go to Judea (John 11:9-10).

Condition 2: Lazarus Is Dead (John 11:11-16)

Between the time Jesus heard the message about Lazarus' sickness and when He decided to go to Judea, Lazarus had died. This is an apparent contradiction to the earlier assurance given by Jesus that Lazarus' sickness will not lead to death (see John 11:4). Even while speaking to His disciples about the death of Lazarus, Jesus refers to it as "sleep" from which He is going to wake him up (John 11:11). This perhaps explains what Jesus meant when He affirmed that Lazarus' sickness will not end in death. In essence, the death of Lazarus as a result of this particular sickness would be temporal since Jesus was going to resurrect him. However, when His disciples obviously misconstrued the death of Lazarus for natural sleep, Jesus plainly broke the news that Lazarus was dead (John 11:12-15).

Thomas' reaction to the news of Lazarus' death is a typical illustration of the hopelessness the living feel over the dead of a loved one or colleague, especially without Jesus Christ. His assertion, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16), is a sign of resignation to the finality of death and futility of going to Bethany after Lazarus had died. Taken more seriously, Thomas appears to be getting back at Jesus. He seems to imply that since Jesus did not allow the disciples to visit Lazarus when he was sick but alive, it is useless going to Bethany now that he is dead.

Condition 3: Lazarus Is Buried (John 11:17-33)

By the time Jesus came to the home of Lazarus at Bethany, Lazarus' dead body had been buried and had stayed in the tomb for four days (John 11:17). The mention of the distance between Jerusalem and Bethany in the narrative as less than two miles (John 11:18) is indicative of the fact that the late arrival of Jesus to the home of Lazarus was intentional. Actually, Jesus did not need four days to travel from where He was to Bethany when he heard that Lazarus was sick or dead. Jesus allowed all the time that was needed for the sick Lazarus to die and be buried so that His detractors would not find tenable grounds to deny the miracle of his resurrection.

The dialogue between Jesus and Lazarus' sisters delineates several issues that have profound theological and anthropological implications and thus, deserve attention. First, Martha and Mary strongly believed that if Jesus had come to their home while Lazarus was sick, he would not have died. Both of them at different instances stated their cases in the same words with the second class (contrary to fact) conditional sentence (Wallace 1996:694-696; Brooks and Winbery 1979:182-183) in the Greek text, *ei ēs ōde ouk an apethanen ho adelphos mou* (εἰ ἦς ὠδε οὐκ ἂν ἀπεθάνεν ὁ ἀδελφὸς μου)³ "if you were

³In Mary's statement, μου is placed after αν (compare the Greek text of John 11:32 with that of John 11:21).

here, my brother would not have died"⁴ (John 11:21, 32). Thus, Martha and Mary implied that Lazarus died because Jesus did not come when he was still sick. However, Martha expressed faith in Jesus because of her conviction that God always grants whatever He asks Him (John 11:22).

Second, Jesus gives an assurance that those who believe in Him will not be overpowered by death for ever since He is the resurrection and life (John 11:23, 25-26). Third, Martha's response to Jesus' assurance that her brother will live again is a major pointer to the content of the Jewish belief in the resurrection (Mason 2000:1150-1151; White 1940:44; Cohen 1987:147-149; Ferguson 1987:411).⁵ From this, most of the Jews believed that resurrection of the dead is possible only at the *eschaton* (John 11:24; see also 1 Thess 4:13-18; Rev 20:4-13). Following Martha's statement, Jesus made His fourth 'I am' saying in the Gospel of John (Adeyemo 2006:1275).

Fourth, believing in Jesus Christ is a major prerequisite to obtaining what we desire or ask from Him (John 11:27). Fifth, the reaction of Jesus to Mary's deep emotional weeping indicates that He is touched by our life challenges and vicissitudes (John 11:33), an attribute of Jesus that is corroborated in John 11:35 and Heb 4:14-16.

Condition 4: Lazarus Is Miraculously Resurrected by Jesus (John 11:34-44)

This may be considered as the *summum bonnum* in the resurrection narrative. Jesus had arrived at Bethany. He met a large crowd of mourners and sympathizers at the home of Martha and Mary (John 11:33). He apparently came late as most people would think and as has been affirmed by Martha and Mary in their assertions. His enquiry on where Lazarus was buried (John 11:34) may seem out of place to many. But Jesus knew what He had come to accomplish. He had earlier affirmed that the conditions of Lazarus (his sickness, death and burial) are intended to bring glory to God and the Son (John 11:4). He had also assured Martha and Mary that their brother will rise again (John 11:23, 25-26). The problem in the mind of many, including Martha and Mary would be how this would happen.

After expressing His emotional sympathy for the family of Lazarus (John 11:33-38a), Jesus set in motion the process of working a great miracle among the people by resurrecting Lazarus as He approached the tomb (John 11:38b). He commanded that the stone which was used to seal the tomb should be removed (John 11:39). One would have expected Jesus who had performed several miracles earlier to command the stone to roll away by itself. However, by involving those who were standing around the tomb, Jesus indicates that for some miracles to take place there must be a co-operation between the divine and the human (White 1998:60).

Martha's response to the command to open the tomb reechoes the human hopelessness at the face of the death of a loved one. Martha pointed out that Lazarus' body had been in the tomb for four days and had begun to decompose, producing foul odor (John 11:39). Although this was a clear confirmation that Lazarus was really dead, Martha may have attempted to restrain Jesus from proceeding, possibly to forestall further embarrassment for the grieving family resulting from exposing the smelling dead body of their brother. Once again, Jesus restates His intention to bring Lazarus back to life by appealing to the glory of God (John 11:40). This makes a bold statement about miracles: God is the source of all good miracles and does or permits all to be done for His own glory.

By praying to His Father (John 11:41-42), Jesus demonstrated again His reliance on His Father for the resurrection of Lazarus. Thus, the resurrection of the dead is God's prerogative. After praying, Jesus called on and resurrected Lazarus but he was still bound by the grave clothes (John 11:43-44a). Employing the co-operation of those around the second time, Jesus asked them to take off the grave clothes from Lazarus so that he could freely move about (John 11:44b).

Condition 5: Mixed Reactions to the Resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus (John 11:45-57)

Contrary to natural expectation, the resurrection of Lazarus generated mixed reactions among the people. Two groups quickly emerged among the Jews. One group believed in Jesus and put their faith in Him (John 11:45). The other group, possibly loyal to the Pharisees, went and told them what Jesus had done (John 11:46). In their fury, the chief priests and Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin to discuss the consequences of the resurrection of Lazarus and the many miracles which Jesus was doing. Fearing that the Romans would take over their nation, the Sanhedrin, at Caiaphas' insinuations, hatched a plot to kill Jesus (John 11:47-53). Aware of the dangers, Jesus withdrew from public life to the desert region of Ephraim. Angered by Jesus' delayed appearance even at the fast-approaching Passover feast, the Sanhedrin authorized a warrant of arrest against Jesus (John 11:54-57).

⁴English translation is ours.

⁵Not all the Jews believed in resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees flatly rejected the tradition of the "fathers," denied the resurrection of the dead (Matt 22:33), and denied the existence of angels or spirits whereas the Pharisees affirmed all of the above. This usually brought the Sadducees in constant conflict and debate with the Pharisees.

Highlights of the Narrative of the Resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:1-57

There are several high points that emerge from the exegesis of John 11:1-57 that are relevant to the discussion of the implications of death and resurrection to the mission and ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa.

1. In this life, humanity, irrespective of the level of relationship with Christ, is mortal—subject to sickness, death and decay (John 11:3, 13-14, 39; compare with Gen 2:16-17; 3:4).

2. Although fear of death appears to be a universally intrinsic human response (John 11:7-8), those who believe in Jesus can overcome the fear of death (Rev 2:10).

3. Although God may not always intervene in our life challenges when we want Him to (John 11:1-17), His apparent delay does not imply denial.

4. The dead are unconscious in the grave (John 11:11-17, 39; compare with Eccl 9:5-6).

5. The resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus is a foretaste of the resurrection of the dead that will take place at the end of time, which Martha alluded to (John 11:24).

6. The resurrection at the end of time is the only guarantee of the next existence for the dead (John 11:20-24).

7. Jesus is the only hope of life beyond death and the grave (John 11:25-26).

These key ideas are foundational for formulating a biblical anthropology as well as the subsequent discussion on the African concept of life, death, and resurrection and instructive for Adventist Mission in Africa. But before providing some recommendations based on the truth about death and resurrection in John 11, the next section of this paper surveys the African concept of life and death, with special attention to the nature of man, reasons for belief on life after death and certain cultural practices based on this worldview.

Survey of the African Concept of Life and Death

Of the mysteries and reality of life and death in African society, the one that engages the living the more is death. This, perhaps, is due to the unstructured eschatology of the African Religions, an element which presupposes that man was not created to die.

According to Anderson, “Death, although a dreaded event, is perceived as the beginning of a person’s deeper relationship with all of creation, the complementing of life and the beginning of the communication

between the visible and the invisible worlds. The goal of life is to become an ancestor after death" (Anderson 2011:xx). Among the Yorubas, death is seen as a possible elevation. Writing on this, Bade Ajuwon avers,

Death *{iku}* has double tool; with one he elevates the dead elders; with the other he reduces the status of those who die young. Elders are moved to the rank of ancestors, to grace, and to a position of authority, those who die young are transformed from humanity into fairies and aimless wanderers who lack respect from both the living and dead ancestors (Ajuwon 1989:4).

This African worldview of death and life after might be understood from the perspective that African Religions generally believe in the timelessness of human existence, especially the old.

Mbiti posits that certain African myths presume that God gave man three major gifts at inception: "the gift of immortality. . . the gift of becoming young after getting old . . . the gift of resurrection, which meant that even if death did kill people they would rise again" (Mbiti 1991:85; Mbiti 1990:93). Even though by strange circumstances of disobedience, or accident or severing of the link between man and God which eventually resulted in unpleasant circumstances and death (Mbiti 1990:95), it appears that in traditional African worldview, the communal life which people enjoyed together is supposedly not broken by death, even though the nature of immortality and resurrection is vague in African worldview.

Expounding on this concept, Francis Njoku (2002), gives the classifications of the African concept of life; namely, (i) All life originates from God who created man, the universe and sustains creation; (ii) The ancestors play a significant function in the communal life. Their relationship with the living is not severed. They could reveal themselves in dreams or appear to their living relatives to guide or correct them; and (iii) The African views life as a communal affair not lived independently. There are interactions between men, God, ancestors, divinities (Njoku 2002:167-168). Thus, as Opuku argues, death in African Religions is no more than a transition which involves transformation from the physical into the spiritual as the dead continue to live as ancestors (Opoku 1978:133).

Similarly, writing on the concept of life in relation to time, Mbiti posits that in African philosophy, man has a nature which time cannot destroy. In his words: "this rhythm includes birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, procreation, old age, death, entry into the community of the departed and finally entry into the company of the spirits" (Mbiti 1990:24). The last phase of existence is the phase of 'immortality' which Mbiti describes as the "living-dead" where a person though physically dead lives "in the

memory of those who knew him in his life as well as being alive in the world of the spirits" (Mbiti 1990:25), and no resurrection for the individual or humanity is envisaged (160).

A critical look at the arguments expressed by the various scholars above on the concept of life and death leads to some conclusions. First, in African worldview, man was created immortal but certain occurrences introduced death into human existence. Second, even though death came, African worldview does not see death as a complete cessation of human life. Third, although the African believes in the continuous existence of the dead and the nature of this existence is vague, the living are reluctant to sever complete relationship with the dead in one form or another.

Reasons for Belief in Life after Death

Two major factors account for the belief in the continuous existence of the dead in Africa— ignorance and fear on one hand and denial of emotional loss on the other hand. Ignorance of the real nature of the dead is one major factor that is behind the belief that the dead are alive in one form or the other and could still participate in and influence human affairs. This ignorance arises mostly from the worldview of the African which is incapable of explaining the existence of world of the spirits and the real nature of man. This ignorance also leads to fear of being harmed by death. Consequently, some names given to people from the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria evoke this fear of death. Examples include *Egwuonwu* (fear of death), *Onwuagalaegbula* (death, please do not kill yet), *Onwubiko* (death, I implore you) and *Onwuasoanya* (death is no respecter of persons).

Often, the fear of death is in actual fact the fear of the dead since it is believed that the dead morph into spirit beings whose abode and operational methods differ from that of humans. This tendency of fearing death makes most Africans susceptible to all kinds of deceptions. On the contrary, Rosalie H. Lee, reflecting on Paul's theology of death, is convinced that death "was not something to be feared and dreaded" since it was just a brief moment between it and eternity (1 Cor 15) (1997:26). Thus it appears that one way of supposedly combating the spirits in the African worldview is to assume the existence of the dead and appease malevolent spirits which may masquerade as the dead.

A second factor that is responsible for belief in life after death in Africa is the denial of the emotional loss that the death of a loved one brings. Belief in the continuous existence of the dead in certain forms becomes a psychological response to the loss of perhaps a very key figure or cherished person in a family or society. Sometimes, they are still called by names in the assumption that they are still very much part of the living.

Cultural Practices on Belief of Life after Death

Certain cultural practices define the belief in the continuous existence of the dead in African society. These practices are predominant in African communities. There are indications from the authors' ministerial experiences and interactions with colleagues that these practices are also evident among Adventists, at least in the West African sub-region. We briefly describe the practices below:

Cultural festivals: In certain African communities, cultural festivals such as the celebration and worship of masquerades (*egungun* in Yoruba), which are believed to be the spirits of the dead, are key in the cultic calendar of the people. Participation in this is supposed to bring blessings from the masquerades (Ray 2000:100). Abstinence from this festival in some communities is a taboo. In these circumstances, sometimes, Adventists are lured to participate.

Burial rites: In most African communities burial rites that include the placing of objects such as the Bible, clothing, farm implements, and work tools in the caskets and graves of the dead are prevalent even among Christians. It is believed that the dead would need them in their next existence to continue their living.

Second burial rites: The dead in some instances are given second burial rites due to the belief that certain misfortunes of the living such as ill-health, infertility, a downturn in economic fortune, among others were caused by the dead due to the negligence of the living in giving the dead befitting burials or dishonoring certain taboos cherished by the dead.

Sacrifices and invocation: In some communities, sacrifices to the spirits of a dead parent are required before a lady, in most cases, can get married or as gratitude to the spirits of the dead for supposed guidance provided. Similar to this is the invoking of the spirits of the dead to avenge a wrong or watch over the living.

Naming: The giving of ancestral names and certain names to new babies suggesting belief in reincarnation is also another indication of the continuous belief in life after death. Names such as Babatunde (father has come back), given to a baby boy born soon after the death of a patriarch or due to keen resemblance and Yetunde (mother has come back), given to a baby girl in similar conditions as the boy, are indications of belief in reincarnation.

Implications for Adventist Mission in Africa

The belief in life after death and the urge to maintain communal relationship for some or all of the reasons discussed above seem evident among Seventh-day Adventist faith communities in Africa, especially in

the West African sub-region. As mentioned above, the experiences of the authors and interactions with colleagues reveal that this African worldview has adverse effects on the mission of the Church.

The obvious effect on Adventist mission is spiritualism and dual-allegiance. Because some believe that the dead can play significant roles in their lives, situations arise where some professed Adventists, out of fear of harm and the quest for good fortune, engage the services of spiritualists who claim to mediate between them and their dead loved ones. Such a practice, which obviously leads to strange manifestations, inhibits the faith of those involved and exposes them to further harm. The consequence is dual-allegiance where God is perceived as 'incapable' of resolving all life's challenges, paucity of faith, and sometimes outright rejection of the Adventist faith.

Recommendations

This study makes two major recommendations that are directed at assisting Seventh-day Adventist Church members in Africa to deal with key issues of life that border on life, death, and resurrection from a biblical perspective, bearing the African worldview in mind.

Continuous and Sound Biblical Teaching

As mentioned above, one of the causes of the cultural practices that portray life after death among Africans is ignorance of the nature of man, state of the dead, the biblical teachings on the future life, and the spirit world. In other words, there is warped theology on these issues among Africans. In the light of the dangers of the above, there is need for a continuous teaching of the Bible on the state of the dead by pastors and lay-leaders. The Scripture clearly teaches that humanity is mortal; that the dead are unconscious till the resurrection; and that the presence of Jesus Christ is the answer to the fear of death and certainty of resurrection to life for the believers. It is believed that sustained biblical teachings on this subject would guide people away from spiritualism, shield them from further harm, buoy their faith, and provide them the confidence to withstand the onslaught of the devil.

Affirmation of the Power of Christ

African worldview is basically phenomenological. Thus, it seems people are inclined to yield to demonstrations or manifestations. Thus, what is spectacular, even though misleading, captivates the mind. Consequently, the fear of immediate harm by malevolent spirits masquerading as the

dead and the provision of solutions by similar spirits masked by these phenomena easily weaken faith in God who may not choose to work in such ways. This sometimes challenges believers who may have to exercise faith in God and believe that although there may not be immediate physical demonstrations, God is supreme over perceived and actual unpleasant circumstances that might lure them to spiritualism. Thus, there is the need to affirm the power of Christ over all other forces (2 Cor 5:17; Phil 2:10, 11; Col 1:13-18).

Conclusion

Death is a threat to human existence. It is contrary to the desired experience of the living. Thus, its occurrence, like that of Lazarus who Christ loved, leads to sorrow and grief, even though the promise of resurrection at the Second coming of Jesus is assured. In societies with nebulous world-views about the nature of man and the hope of resurrection, death not only brings fears but leads to faith-crisis for even Christians. This faith-crisis is substantiated by certain cultural practices among Christians, such as the Seventh-day Adventists in West-Central Africa in particular and Africa in general. Therefore, the SDA Church needs to clearly and consistently teach the biblical truths on these issues. Further, the Church should affirm in her teachings and ministry the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all malevolent spirits and the reality of resurrection through Him at the end of human history on earth.

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