

THE (CHRISTIAN) GOD OF THE ANCESTORS: A PLATFORM FOR RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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Abstract

Biblical authors, in both the Old and New Testament, give various indications of God. The most outstanding is the reference to God as 'the God of the ancestors'. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and of course, of the other ancients. The genealogy of Jesus Christ lines them all out. That is a common feature of African societies. The ancestors form part of the hierarchy of being and never die; they live on in the spiritual realm. We can make this same assertion of the Christian Faith; Biblical ancestors also, live. The paper argues, therefore, that there are more common grounds for a relationship if we must understand the religious worldview of others. Banking on these better set the path straight by pulling off all forms of syncretism now prevalent in African religious practices. Such a move would set the platform for dialogue, appreciation and respect. True religion thrives better on these.

Keywords: Ancestor, Dialogue, God, Religious Worldview, Syncretism.

Introduction

Ancestors occupy a special place in the African cult. From this, it is understandable when African Christians relate this to the *cult of the saints* in Christian Religion. Such forms of reading are common in the Old Testament where God is spoken of as the “God of our Fathers” (Deuteronomy 26:7). Does this then imply there is an ancestral cult in ancient Israel? Different forms of tussle seem eminent between world religions. Such are most probably hinged on the quest for relevance and validity: which religion is better. In this specific context, Christianity has often looked down on African (Traditional) Religion(s)¹ until recently. Notwithstanding efforts to appreciate contributions from ATR, some Christians still abhor it. On the other side, some Christians have borrowed some ATR practices and “Christianized” them, in a form of syncretism.

¹ This shall henceforth be referred to as ATR or African Religion(s).

This ushers in a reality that shows how discourses on the need for dialogue among religions are prevalent. Such dialogues are geared towards promoting some sort of mutual respect among them. A fruitful dialogue seeks common grounds for the religions involved in particular. The fact that we share the same humanity says a lot about us. If religion is man's response to some Supreme Being, then man has to first exist to be in such a relationship. Since there have been generations of humans in the same similar relationship, successive generations relive the faith of their ancestors. Given that this work aims at spurring on the discourse between Christianity and African Religion(s), the place of ancestors cannot be neglected by different religions. Their experiences give strength to our daily resolve to keep our faith. This means that labelling African Religions as ancestral worship is false. Should it be true, then the same could be said of Christianity because the Christian God is also the God of the ancestors. That this too is evident is not an illusion. So, given that there is a special place for ancestors in ATR and there is a reference to "God of our ancestors" in the Old Testament, can reverence for the ancestors be a starting point for dialogue between ATR and Christianity/Judaism?

Furthermore, this indicates too that the notion of the ancestors stands the test of time within and outside religious beliefs. It transcends what we consider as our religious differences. Therefore, this paper argues that ancestors could stand as our platform for religious discourse. They radiate one thing that could unite religions and could promote genuine growth; specifically, between Christianity and ATR. It springs from a non-mythical perspective of religious experience. Ancestors form part of every culture and religion. Our humanity is better understood from this rich heritage. How this is possible unlocks the strength of reciprocity therein. A good grasp of this would better deal with the issues of religious syncretism. What does this mean?

What Syncretism Entails

To syncretise is to mix things. They are usually of things not of the same category. A politician, for example, could be said to syncretise when he merges the ideologies of two different political parties. This would mean making efforts to infuse both in words and practices. It is a common phenomenon in human life. People who have been influenced by other people tend to merge what they have learned from them with what they have already. It is a light way of syncretising. A more profound way deals with distinctive phenomena forced into one such that living both becomes a contradiction. In tandem, the *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* defines syncretism as "the tendency, especially in religion, to combine

elements from different belief-systems.” This seems to show that it is more of a religious phenomenon.

Mokotso gives another example of syncretism with the mixing of two different liquids. An instance of water and oil readily comes to mind if we take the extreme view of it. Or, that water and wine, whereby a new liquid that is neither water nor wine evolves.² Either way, there appears to be a loss and a gain. The former comes up because the ideals of the initial states of the things combined are no longer there. On the other hand, there is something somewhat different from what has been combined. The extent of the blend, therefore, makes the difference. It takes the distinctiveness away, thereby leaving out something else while still laying claim to both. In the religious sense, that makes it an abuse: denigrating the one while exalting the other or just playing to the gallery. It loses itself to the imitation of ideologies different from what it intends initially. This is most probably what Kasomo intends when he notes these divergent imitations of ideologies by some Christians in Africa. He opines:

² R. I. MOKOTSO, *Syncretism of Basotho Traditional Religion and Christianity: Gateway to the syncretistic teaching of Basotho traditional religion and Christianity in Lesotho schools*, In *African Journal of History and Culture*, 7 (2015) 7, 158.

It is amazing that many Christians are unknowingly using magical paraphernalia and occult objects such as amulets, fetish and talisman to protect themselves. In these objects, something occult such as hair, magic, water or blood is incorporated into the object. These objects include crucifixes, pendants, ear-rings, wedding or engagement rings, hagstones, etc. Similarly, Christians are unknowingly using demonic marks in their daily lives. Demons use these marks as the most effective and quickest way of identifying their adherents... By using them does not mean that one is evil. The danger is that using such marks easily unites one with the demons, and this causes one to easily succumb to demonic wishes. Some Christians accept and use such things as Bible, crucifix, cross, icons, and pendants as protective objects from demonic attack. They use them in just the same manner amulets and fetishes are used. That is keeping them under their pillows, burying them at entrance of gates, putting them in foundation of their houses, wearing them on certain parts of their bodies, carrying them in their cars or handbags, etc. Suffice, it to say that although this may appear Godly, it may be contradiction of Christian values. Some people are using such ideas to spread occultism among Christians.³

Such is the bane of syncretism. This does not make the term simplistic. It is a complex one and covers a whole lot of concepts depending on one's point of view. The term has its origin from the Greek *sunkrētizein* which literarily means 'merge against a third party'. It covers the sense of uniting two divergent groups against a third. The word derives from *sun* meaning 'together' and *krēs* referring to 'Cretan'. This roots it in the ancient Cretan communities and captures the sense of 'uniting together' against a common enemy. The ism of the word is traced to the Greek *sunkrētismos*, also rendered in the Latin *syncretismus* which covers the idea of standing together against a third party or a common enemy. What makes cultures, religions, political parties, social groups and the likes different from each other are their ideologies. What each of them holds sets it apart from others. It makes it a school of thought, belief, system, practice, way of life and a standard for its recognition anywhere in the world around. People who live by it do so without any form of contradiction. Syncretism is that contradiction that breeds a loss of identity of the cultural, religious, political or social group in question. It jam-packs so many things together and makes it difficult for one to note a difference in practice. Dwyer affirms this:

³ D. KASOMO, *An Assessment of Religious Syncretism. A case study in Africa*, In *International Journal of Applied Sociology*, 2 (2012) 3, 13.

Because of the hegemonic character of slavery, Christianity was the ideal tool for collective identification and formal organization amongst the slaves, and represents a deliberate strategy for resistance rather than a passive acquisition. Thus the slaves took on the framework of the Christian church as a vehicle for their identity production in order to shield their culture and blossoming collective action from the caustic forces of hegemony.⁴

Care must be taken, however, not to give the term a carefree definition that does not pay attention to its different perspectives. This paper takes into cognizance the fact that there are different forms of syncretism ranging from political, cultural, social, philosophical, religious, and the likes. Being that this discourse is on God, it will be limited to religious syncretism. This too is wide and greatly undefined, given that it covers a whole range of issues. It is a major theological issue and for long has had linkages with other theological terms deemed more fitting. Comparative religious studies put it side by side with other presumably preferred terminologies. While this would not be the preoccupation of this work, such interesting mentions could be made. Wijzen compares it with inculturation.⁵ Having made the same comparison between syncretism and enculturation, Ezenweke and Kanu described Catholicism as a synthetic religion. This seems to distance it from syncretism.⁶ Naula traces different forms of syncretism in ATR.⁷ Daniel on his part, with many examples, lays bare some instances of religious syncretism with particular reference to Kenya.⁸ Kleinhempel, like Daniel, does something else with the Sangoma practice of South Africa.⁹ While it is true that no one can deny the African his religiosity¹⁰, how this is lived within the context of the Christian faith or the converse becomes the problem; hence, syncretism. Mokotso graciously provides us with other terms of comparative studies with syncretism. He argues that in place of syncretism, “[t]heologians prefer to use the

⁴ C. DWYER, *The Construction of the African Slave Identity: Defying Hegemony through Syncretic Religious Practices*, In *Denison Journal of Religion*, 16 (2017) art. 7, 50.

⁵ F. WIJZEN, *Popular Christianity in East Africa: Inculturation or Syncretism?* In *Exchange*, 29 (2000) 1, 37-60.

⁶ E. O. EZENWEKE - A. I. KANU, *Perspectives of Syncretism and its Modern Trend: A Case of Christian and African Traditions*, In *UJAH*, 13 (2012) 2, 81.

⁷ M. NAULA, *Portrayal of Religious Syncretism in Akiki Nyabongo's Novel: Africa Answers Back*, In *Advances in Research*, 19 (2019) 3, 1-7.

⁸ K. DANIEL, *An Assessment of Religious Syncretism. A Case Study in Africa*, In *International Journal of Applied Sociology*, 2 (2012) 3, 10-15.

⁹ U. R. KLEINHEMPEL, *Covert Syncretism: The Reception of South Africa's Sangoma Practise and Spirituality by "Double Faith" in the Contexts of Christianity and of Esotericism*, In *Open Theology*, 3 (2017) 1, 642-661.

¹⁰ Cfr. J. S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, Oxford, 1990, 1; *Introduction to African religion*, 2nd ed, Waveland Press, Illinois, 2015, 2. This religious dimension of the African is prominent in the works of African scholars. Mbiti's coinage of the African as being "notoriously religious" is epic for this.

concepts such as inculturation, contextualization, concretization, accommodation, adaptation, indigenization, localization, incarnation, Africanisation, hybridity and reformulation to explain the formalization of the integration of African beliefs and practices with Christianity.”¹¹

What all these tend to indicate is that when two distinct religions meet, it's either they remain at parallel or syncretise. The extent to which any of this is done determines the extent of their relationship. Could it then be said that religious syncretism cannot exist in an African society that has been religious before the coming of the missionaries? If the starting point of syncretism is contact, is there any world religion that was not in any way influenced by another? If such were possible, man could as well be an island; but unfortunately, no one is. Religion is at the heart of humanity's existence, whether we affirm it or not. Beliefs and practices define who we are. Our cultural differences make us unique. Contacts with other people in their divergent uniqueness create opportunities for assimilation. This too is syncretism. Elements of beliefs and practices are shared voluntarily or involuntarily. The difference lay in the extent and method employed to bring about this. This makes clear the distinctions between “critical syncretism” and “uncritical or crude syncretism”.¹² The former makes fruitful the mutual relationship between two religions while the latter blindly loses itself in a crude copycat to the religion with the greater influence. This latter is the problem that must be avoided in all its forms.

Influenced by Imbach, Naula defines religious syncretism as “a process by which elements of one religion are assimilated into another religion resulting in a change in the fundamental tenets or nature of those religions. Syncretism is the fusion of two or more thought systems, and can be applied to philosophy, politics, and religion.”¹³ This definition by Naula notes that syncretism has a mutual effect on the religions in question; in this specific case, Christianity and African Religion(s). It sums up the assimilation therein. It would not be out of place to say that the other terms much preferred to this slightly could have more advantages. Howbeit they do not rule out their relationship with it; at least at the foundational and comprehensive level. Given that the essence of this work is to foster a fruitful platform for dialogue in both religions, the cult of the ancestors, evident in both religions, becomes a necessary step for this. While this might not necessarily be a form of syncretism, it affirms the reality of some form of

¹¹ R. I. MOKOTSO, *Syncretism of Basotho Traditional Religion and Christianity*, 158.

¹² Cfr. E. O. EZENWEKE - A. I. KANU, *Perspectives of Syncretism and its Modern Trend*, 74.

¹³ M. NAULA, *Portrayal of Religious Syncretism in Akiki Nyabongo's Novel*, 2.

presence common to both climes. This, if properly harnessed, could give us a level ground for an open dialogue that would respect what each holds dear to without necessarily losing any aspects of both religions. Such could be a goal for a true dialogue: arising from a possible common ground (cult of the ancestors in this case) and treating the same issue from respective divergent viewpoints. It will be in accord with the urgency the Second Vatican Council seems to call our attention to. Thus,

In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.

One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth... One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men, until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light.¹⁴

Who Is an Ancestor?

Every society holds soft spots for the aged. Old age has long been a sign of wisdom and experience. It is so, probably because life itself is a lesson. We garner experiences as we journey through them. Little wonder the famous saying that "experience is the best teacher." To an aphorism as this, Nkemnkia submits, "Human experience is the source of everything and culture becomes a response to the questions emerging from this experience. It is a result of that same experience."¹⁵ One who possesses more of it by his age earns a special place. It serves to denote the fact that people who lived to their old age(s), alive or dead, have more experiences of life. In the most generic sense, such persons are called ancestors. This sense looks at ancestorship based on age and parenthood. Most dictionary meanings would go with this. An instance of the *Holman Illustrated*

¹⁴ *NOSTRA AETATE*, 1.

¹⁵ M. N. NKEMNKIA, *African Vitalogy: A step forward in African Thinking*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi, 95.

Bible Dictionary defines ancestors as “those from whom a person is descended both literally and figuratively.” They are remembered for this.

From this, we know that an ancestor is one from whom many others descended. Grandparents are on this note, ancestors. The only evident limits to attaining it based on this definition are age and parenthood, hence, descendants. On this ground, synonyms of an ancestor might include fore-father, fore-elder, fore-bear and even parent, etc. This open-ended description qualifies everyone as an ancestor if, and only if, he reaches the age of transition and has descendants. To such a description, Allen lends his voice:

On the faces of the aged there are wrinkles made by sympathy, others by strong and pure thought, and others are carved by passion: who cannot distinguish them? With those who have lived righteously, age is calm, peaceful and softly mellowed, like the setting sun. I have recently seen a philosopher on his deathbed. He was not old except in years. He died as sweetly and peacefully as he had lived.¹⁶

However, societal norms raise the bar. Age by this standard is just a number. One who marries at an early age could have descendants without really getting on in age. Both seem to crumble. Other concerns are louder. The moral norms set one apart. One who models his life on these norms achieves excellence. This means that people’s moral standing in the community speaks volumes. Should they be known for doing evil, their remembrance would be as such even after death. They become bad examples for the younger generations. No one in the community would want to be associated with such persons. Even their immediate family members would live with this shame for a long time. That seems not to be a criterion for ancestors. This brings the change. Culture and religion redefine the perspective of who an ancestor is. On these two, the African moral norms stand secure. The idea of the afterlife plays an important role. Those whose lives become exemplary for obvious reasons are named ancestors. A young person who gives his life to save his community is immortalised. This act of immortalization makes him worth remembering even in death.

This is probably a good reason Mbiti and some African authors retain the coinage ‘living-dead’¹⁷ at the expense of the term ancestor. It is more open to all

¹⁶ J. ALLEN, *As a Man Thinketh*, Mockingbird Classics Pub., England, 25.

¹⁷ J. S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 82; Cfr. E. OEZENWEKE, *The Living Dead in African Ontological Scene*, In *Issues in African Traditional Religion and Philosophy*, Edited by Ezenweke, O. E. - Kanu, I. A., Augustinian Pub Nigeria, Jos, 2012, 177-191; M. I. NWAFOR, *The living-dead (ancestors) among the Igbo-*

classes of people who continue to maintain communion with their people posthumously. In what seems to be in support of this idea, Itumeleng asserts, the “term ‘living dead’ is thus an all-inclusive one. Mbiti uses it to refer to recently dead children, brother, sisters and other family members who were not in any way ancestors.”¹⁸ The inclusion of children in this sphere lays emphasis not on age as a criterion but on the moral standing of the individual, which in turn, is the very reason for which one would be remembered. Here, there seems to be a bridge that captures the dead whose memory lives on. As such, an ancestor could be one who lived a simple but extraordinary life. Reading further into this, Itumeleng stresses this ageless brand in Mbiti and quickly defends his retention of the use of age in the qualification of an ancestor. For him, Mbiti

strongly advocates the abolition of the two terms “ancestral spirits” and “ancestor” in order to replace them with “spirits” and the “living dead”. However, since the term “living dead” has no age distinctions, or regard for social status, it cannot be accurately used in this paper. Instead the terms “ancestors” and “ancestral spirits” must be retained in reference to the qualification of being guardians of morality in African families, clans and tribes.¹⁹

What matters the most for Mbiti seems to be their status as spirits. This holds no bounds since everyone who passes on lives as a spirit, irrespective of age. No further differentiations are made than that they once shared corporeal experiences with their earthly communities; though they maintain this relationship now but in another form. The living-dead, according to him, commune in two languages:

African people: An interpretation of Catholic sainthood, In *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 9 (2017) 4, 35-42.

¹⁸ M. ITUMELENG, *The Living-Dead/Ancestors as Guardians of Morality in African Traditional Religious Thought*, In *Glob J Arch & Anthropol*, 10 (2019) 5, 99.

¹⁹ M. ITUMELENG, *The Living-Dead/Ancestors as Guardians of Morality in African Traditional Religious Thought*, 99.

they speak the language of men with whom they lived until recently; and they speak the language of the spirits and the God to who they are drawing nearer ontologically. These are the 'spirits' with which African peoples are most concerned: it is through the living-dead that the spirit world becomes personal to men. They are still part of their human families, and people have personal memories of them.²⁰

Such memories linger through generations. Members of their family and community simply live each day seeking their interventions in good times and in bad. This form of keeping in constant touch with the living-dead is an integral part of African society. Either we go by this Mbiti's choice of the living-dead or ancestors, as the case may be, the reality of their communion with their people is paramount. The reverence the African people give to their forebears is unquantifiable. While they do this, they never lose sight of the place of God as the Supreme Being. This is real. It goes beyond any form of myth. Bae and Van der Merwe seem to note this clearly:

In most societies where the belief in ancestors is common, a record of people who have lived and died is kept in the memory of the living members of the community. They have moved into the category of ancestors, or the living dead. The concept of ancestral involvement in everyday life is more than a story or a myth. It is lived by millions in many areas in the world.²¹

One outstanding thing here is the immortalization of the dead. Their lives are relived in the day to day events of society. One can hardly think of a society without such memories of the dead. This creates the basis for a continuous relationship between the living and the dead, the physical and the spiritual. By this, it is understandable when people speak of ancestral worship in the widest sense. Ezenweke opines that the "phenomenon of ancestral cult seems to be a central phenomenon since it is upheld in virtually every community."²² This seems an appeal to its wider coverage. The term cult, used either as some prefix or suffix to an ancestor, is not strictly related to worship. It accommodates all that seems approvable by the people. Being very popular, one could speak of the cult of ancestors without necessarily thinking of some form of worship in the religion. In this sense, it is taken as something very much familiar to the people

²⁰ J. S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 82.

²¹ C. S. BAE - P. J. VAN DER MERWE, *Ancestor Worship - Is it Biblical?* In *HTS Teologiese Studies*, 64 (2008) 3, 1300.

²² E. O. EZENWEKE, *The Living Dead in African Ontological Scene*, 176.

and how they remember their peers, the dead. As such, arguments like this seem to appeal to our common humanity. They affirm the fact that there is much that unites us than divide us. For Bae and Van der Merwe,

The living dead who hold influence over their living descendants is a succinct and common way of defining ancestors. Their identity is further explained as transcendental beings representing the religious, ethical and institutional values of society in their community. Their abode and influence range from the physical to the spiritual world.²³

This transition from the physical to the spiritual world marks a fundamental point in life. It means that life does not end; it is a continuous process. This is why we have ancestors as people who have gone beyond this terrestrial life. It breaks the limits of age and descendants as criteria for an ancestor, should we go by Mbiti's choice of terms. One who lives well can be an 'ancestor' or better put, a living-dead, because he has transcended the physical realm to the spiritual. He has experience beyond the physical. He lives on and communes with his own. The level here attained is one beyond the spatio-temporal. Diverse traditions hold this view. How it is attained could probably make the difference between them. The fact that it is endless poses no doubt. While this paper does not give an account of these aspects for the different religious traditions, it gives particular attention to those between Christianity and African Religion(s). It is pertinent to note that in both, there is a place for the ancestors. What this entails for each is our next concern.

'God' of the Ancestors

At the heart of religious experiences is the sense of the sacred. This is not some idea, notion or concept; it is always a real presence man seeks to understand. It concerns people who are opened to relate to a transcendental being. Such relationships are done in a particular place. A place is so named because there are inhabitants who live in it. They make the different experiences: be they religious or secular. This is passed from generation to generation as an intrinsic aspect of the people. If religious, it is so irrespective of the form of religion in question. This makes religious experiences lived experiences. Describing this bond among a people, their place of origin and their (religious) experience(s), Goetz contends: "[t]his experience is not translated into abstract language but into symbolic language: a language of experience, which makes use of those

²³ C. S. BAE - P. J. VAN DER MERWE, *Ancestor Worship*, 1300.

same realities that were the site of this experience.”²⁴ This is something intrinsic to different religious cultures. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council note this:

From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense.²⁵

As such, to speak of ‘God’ in any religion is to recount these lived experiences passed on by different generations. Given this specific case under discourse, they are passed on by the ancestors to their descendants. What they lived, their people relive in continuity. On this ground, ‘God’, we can say, has always been the God of the ancestors. He has been the God of a people who lived this experience and pass it on to their children who live in constant touch and memory of them. How we understand this depends on our ability to let our reasoning free of biases. These biases have always been our greatest weakness in the quest for the Divine and our weakest testimony to those that could be termed, unbelievers or atheists. These too, seem lost in their quest to seek answers to the many endless questions life poses before us. Nevertheless, this would seem another topic of discussion. For the moment, it is important to highlight that the transition from the terrestrial life to the life beyond creates a link between these realms of existence. The soul is the reason we maintain this link. In his *Summa Theologiae*, St Thomas Aquinas while describing human beings affirms that they are things with souls.²⁶ The soul is the animating principle and so lives on after death. Highlighting this further, Davies adds to the understanding of these “things with souls” as “things with bodily functions and sensations, things with the ability to understand and choose.”²⁷ If these souls are opened to God, whose experiences they lived while on earth, nothing else would limit their reign with him. St Augustine’s famous quote on the restless state of the human soul better captures this: “The thought of

²⁴ Translation mine, the original text reads: “Questa esperienza non si traduce in linguaggio astratto ma in linguaggio simbolico: linguaggio d’esperienza, che si serve di quelle stesse realtà che sono state il luogo di questa esperienza” (J. GOETZ, *L’Esperienza di Dio nei Primitivi*, Morcelliana, Rome, 1983, 47).

²⁵ *NOSTRA AETATE*, 2.

²⁶ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 75-76.

²⁷ B. DAVIES, *Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 126.

you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”²⁸

The loss of our dear ones imprints their memories in our hearts. This memory creates a yearning for them although they are no more with us in the flesh. The yearning opens us to the hope that we shall someday somehow meet them again. Such is the role the presence of our ancestors’ guarantees. The idea of God better explains this seemingly unclear puzzle. We have memories of our dear ones who have gone to be with God. This is what sustains our hope in all the forms of restlessness we might find ourselves. This yearning comes with the consolation that the memory we have of them is not in vain. It is alive and active, experientially permeating our being as a people. We do not remember the dead as some past event. We do in a present living reality that paves the path for our future as a people. Memory comes alive again and again. As each day comes and goes, their unending presence seems to overwhelm us. Our hearts seek the future in the present. This future points to an eternity in God, whose experience they left us with.

Having noted that ancestors are the living dead, it is just to appraise the fact that they are so-called because there is God. As he is the God of the living, so he is for the dead while remaining the undying One. Nothing about this aphorism is contradictory to both religions in question. A careful examination of this from their perspectives will soon show. Hence, it is significant to ask: is the Christian God the God of the ancestors? What are the bases for this affirmation? If the Scriptures form the corpus of God’s self-revelation to humanity, can this too, be found within this revelation? The first question has an affirmative; the second only pre-empts the third and so confirms that God is of the ancestors as he is for the living. What then does the Scripture say?

Biblical Status of Ancestors

The Bible is the story of God’s self-revelation to a people. It is replete with many references to ancestors. In another phrase, we could say the Fathers which in turn mean the same thing. It is the book of faith; the faith of our fathers. This is one of the most obvious phenomena of life since faith is lived experience and not some

²⁸ SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, 1.1.1

abstract phenomenon. As such, added to faith, it is a book of the history of God's initiatives and interventions in human life. The implication is most evident when the concept of revelation is brought to the limelight. What this means is never unconnected with the life of a people. It connects their beginnings, past, present and future as a people. Nothing of these events is left to chance. All fall within the plan of God. A brief examination of both the New and Old Testaments will so show. Care must be taken to note that this is not some form of Biblical exegesis. That is the speciality of Scriptural scholars. A dialogue can be done with simple comparative studies. Indications of ancestry are enough to serve as a pedestal for our discourse. What does the Bible say?

Ancestors in the Old Testament

In the book of Genesis, we have the story of the very beginning of all things. The first two chapters present the creation story. Creation as a whole is by this story, God's self-communication. Psalm 19 is specific on this: "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." God created man in his image and likeness. After the fall, there is a projection for the salvation of man.²⁹ The call of Abraham is the most epic of God's move to intervene in human history. To him, God made the promise of many descendants (Genesis 12:1-3). By the first description of an ancestor above, one could paraphrase this to mean that God chose Abraham and made a future reference of him as an ancestor, a father of many descendants. By this title is he known, henceforth, in the biblical references to him: as the father of a nation. The same promise goes for Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 26:1-6; 35:10-15). They shared the same heritage and promise. They were to be referred to onward as fathers with many descendants, hence, ancestors.

God to Moses, reveals himself as the God of the ancestors in the story of the burning bush. This marks the call of Moses as a prospective liberator of his people (Exodus 3:6). The revelation of the Divine name indicates God as the God of the ancestors. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and must be so known for generations to come (Exodus 3:13-15). He chose to be so-called. The people had the duty to recognize him in this precise way. Here, there is mutual

²⁹ Cfr. Genesis 1-3. The theological exegesis of this seeming prophecy is not of concern here. Worthy of note, however, one could make an argument for creation as another platform for dialogue against the discourses of animism and the likes meted on people who practice African religion(s) by the early missionaries. This would make a good dimension for dialogue, but not just now. Much strength for such a venture could be derived from POPE FRANCIS, *Praise be to You: On Care for Our Common Home*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2015.

knowledge both on the part of God and his people. There is a mutual alliance. This paved the path for the covenant, which is an agreement or a pact between God and his people. More so, it is observable that biblical narratives build this story from individuals to a people as God's possession; from the distinct parent(s) to their descendants. God's relational nature was then open to a chosen people. He calls them his own (Exodus 29:45; Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 32:38) and they, in turn, invoke him as theirs. The choice of Israel as God's people, one could dare to say, marks the choice of every other nation. Should there be no reason for this claim, our share of common humanity is more than enough. He is the God of all creation and distinctive creatures proceeded from him. He is the God of all peoples, nations and languages (Exodus 15:14-16; Isaiah 25:3; Jeremiah 10:7; Zechariah 8:20-23; Malachi 1:11). With the narrative of the people in view, Carse avers that the "Torah is not the story of the Jews; it is what makes Judaism a story."³⁰ This probably gives it a wider view, beyond its initial Jewish cultural context.

The prayers of Queen Esther and Mordecai are lucid on the notion of God as the God of their forefathers, the God of the ancestors. In their moments of grief, they so invoke him by tracing the history of their salvation. His unending intervention in their lives and history is something very clear to all Biblical authors. Esther's prayer, in particular, sums up the entire idea of God as the One who sustains them through their ages past. She reminded God of his faithfulness in the past; his ability in the present; and his glory through their deliverance in the nearest future. It recognizes God's omnipotence in the face of impending evil. Parts of it read:

God of Abraham and God of Isaac and God of Jacob, blessed are you... I have heard, Lord, from the books of my ancestors that you saved Noah from the waters of the flood... I have heard, Lord, from the books of my ancestors that you rescue all who are pleasing in your sight, forever... Come, Lord, appear!³¹

This shows that God is relational. Without experience, would not be possible if there has to be communion. To relate is to be in communion with others. It is not to be in isolation but in communication. God always has an interest in human affairs. This is probably what *Imago Dei* affirms graciously; that we are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). We carry his semblance; as a result, he seeks us as a people through many generations. This makes us all the people of God by

³⁰ J. P. CARSE, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*, Free Press, New York, 1986, 95.

³¹ Cfr. Esther 4.

birth. Explaining further the term ancestor, the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* deepens our grounds of the biblical use of ancestor. This would help our understanding of its usage in the New Testament. It highlights:

Some English versions use the term frequently to translate *'abot* in the OT and *pater* in the NT, both of which are the normal word for "father," "grandfather," etc. When these words are plural and the context deals with the past, the term usually refers to male ancestors or forefathers. Likewise, genealogies normally list male ancestors.

Ancestors in the New Testament

The history of salvation initiated in the Old Testament continues in the New Testament. It comes as a fulfilment of God's promises to his people. The incarnation event ushers this in. God takes on human nature to save it. He mixes with us that we might participate in his Divine Life. To do this well, he shows us the way. This becomes the passage through to eternity. In his Son, God perfects the promises made through the Law and the Prophets (the entire Old Testament). The New Testament did not just come from the blues. It is a continuation of the same story of God's relationship with people. The genealogy of Jesus Christ confirms this (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38). It traces Jesus' family tree and roots it in Abraham for Matthew's account, and even tends it to Adam in Luke's narrative. This is a central issue in all the Gospels and the writings of the apostles and early Christian communities. God is presented all through as the source and strength of the ancestors, the forefathers. As he was in their time so he is in ours and those of future generations; he never changes. Divine Providence opens the door to future generations.

Concrete demonstrations of his relationship with past generations are eminent all through the New Testament. It is a call to re-establish ourselves in the same God who was, who is and who is to come (Revelation 1:8). Zechariah's praise at the naming of John the Baptist upholds this:

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel! He has visited his people and redeemed them... He has raised up for us a mighty saviour in the house of David his servant, as he promised... He swore to Abraham our father to grant us, that free from fear, and saved from the hands of our foes, we might serve in holiness and justice all the days of our life in his presence... (Luke 1:68-79).

This canticle maintains the link between the past, present and future of God's people. Such a link is what ancestry seeks to maintain; a relationship between the living and the dead. It forms part of what defines a people and gives them direction. The same sentiment is maintained in Mary's *Magnificat*: "... He protects Israel, his servant, remembering his mercy, the mercy promised to our fathers, to Abraham and his sons forever" (Luke 1:46-55). This shows that the New Testament is a fulfilment of this promise made by the same God to the same people. It widens the horizon of the promise to include all people(s) through faith like Abraham's. One, therefore, becomes a descendant of Abraham through faith.³² Jesus, against the position of the Sadducees, refers to God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The emphasis here is on the fact that he is a God of the living and not of the dead. That is to imply that these patriarchs are not dead but alive (cf. Matthew 22:32; Mark 12:26-27; Luke 20:37-38). While the twist in this statement indicates that the dead are raised back to life, in ATR, the dead seem not to have died but to have transited to another world to continue living. Either way, their remembrance in our day-to-day events gives us a sense of hope. In this hope, the Christian Faith advances that God, by being the creator of the universe demonstrates that his promise includes all peoples. Jesus' commission to his disciples to go into the whole world and make disciples of all the nations seems to buttress and imply this too (Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-18).

Besides the numerous mentions of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as ancestors, David, their descendant and our ancestor, also holds a special place in biblical discourses. All these aims at showing that human history has a link to God. It is his initiative. The people he chose to work with all through this history, according to the Judeo-Christian faith, are our forebears through faith. They were humans like us in all things. As such, they are our ancestors because virtually all communities hold such a special place for the generations before them. They are the just that lived by their faith.³³ Their presence and influence on us, depending

³² Cfr. Romans 4, Galatians 3:6-9; Hebrews 7 and 11; James 2:21-24. The list of the New Testament references to Abraham our father in faith is endless.

³³ Cfr. Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38.

on how we view them, are as real as we are. It is difficult to imagine a human community that would deny the effects of its ancestors. We are today because they were and charted our course. Hence, the memory lives on in and through us their descendants. This already pre-empts an African understanding of ancestors.

The Place of Ancestors in African Religion(s)

Ancestors occupy a central place in the African thought system. An African worldview that neglects this is incomprehensible. This is because it forms part of human nature. Describing a worldview, Ejiaga argues that it "encompasses assumptions about a variety of topics, including human nature, the meaning and nature of life, and the composition of the universe."³⁴ The African perceives the universe as composed of both the physical and the spiritual realms, in constant communion. This possibly accounts for the conception of ancestors as the living dead. Of death, Mbiti says, it "stands between the world of human beings and the world of the spirits, between the visible and the invisible."³⁵ This buttresses the cult of the ancestors as the spiritual and invisible realm, in communion with the physical world. To pass from one, the lower (physical), to the higher (spiritual), one has to die first. As such, "death becomes the necessary door to enter into the company of the ancestors and of God."³⁶

One obvious point that we can draw from this is the notion of immortality; in particular, of the soul. Without this, one cannot conceive of ancestors, be it in African Religion(s) or any other religion or culture. The soul, being incorporeal, is a spark of the divine in man, it cannot die. Since God cannot die, so is His image immortal. This [the soul], Ezenweke comments, "may account for the basis of the immortality of the soul in African religion and other religious cultures."³⁷ Nkemnkia puts this in other words:

³⁴ R. EJIAGA, *African Worldview*, In Mwalimu, J. S. - Kenya J. S. (Eds), *Sage Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America*, 2 (2015), SAGE Publications, California, 155.

³⁵ J. S. MBITI, *African Religions and philosophy*, EAEP, Nairobi, 147.

³⁶ N. M. NKEMNKIA, "African Vitalogy": *The African Mind and Spirituality*, In *Analecta Husserliana*, 83 (2004), Springer, Dordrecht, 275.

³⁷ E. O. EZENWEKE, *The Living Dead in the African Ontological Scene*, 173.

The basis of African ideas of immortality can be found in the figure of the ancestors. The African is conscious that when one dies, the body remains buried in the ground and it decomposes, but the relationship with the ancestors remains and this is the sign that in human beings exists a spiritual reality which does not die with the body.³⁸

This doctrine of the immortality of the soul is at the heart of African ontology. Nkemnkia concurs with this in his affirmation of the fact that the “doctrine of the existence of the soul as an immortal substance is the root of the African vision of the human person.”³⁹ While the human person has both body and soul, however, Ezenweke posits, “it is the soul that continues to live in the abode of the living dead or ancestors or wanders about as a wandering ghost when not admitted into the ancestral cult on the basis of the failure of the physical part to live up to the moral expectations while on earth.”⁴⁰ Although it “is believed,” Nkemnkia proposes, “that while the body is still alive, the soul and the body itself are indivisible. Separation occurs only after death. Those still living know that their departed ones are now living in an immortal state of being.”⁴¹ They commune with them from that state. Metuh adds that man “continues to live after death. But the after-life,” he continues, “is not viewed from the point of view of the terminal state of human existence but... from the point of view of a continuing relationship between the living and the living dead.”⁴² It is within this web of relationships with the supra-sensible world that man is understood in the African sense.

Human life is purposeful for the African. It has a goal. This means that “the human person is a being that has its origin and finality in the Supreme Being.”⁴³ There is a little difference in the perception of this after-life. The Christian understanding of the afterlife is followed by judgment. Though Africans strive to live well to avoid a non-acceptance into the ancestral cult; they do not, in the strict sense, expect a judgement after death. “Ideas about retribution are not very prominent,”⁴⁴ Metuh asserts. This is corroborated by Mbiti who maintains that the “majority of African peoples do not expect any form of judgement or reward

³⁸ N. M. NKEMNKIA, *“African Vitalogy”*: *The African Mind and Spirituality*, 275.

³⁹ N. M. NKEMNKIA, *“Vitalogy”*: *The African Vision of the Human Person*, In *Analecta Husserliana*, 89 (2006), Springer, Dordrecht, 103.

⁴⁰ E. O. EZENWEKE, *The Living Dead in the African Ontological Scene*, 174.

⁴¹ N. M. NKEMNKIA, *“African Vitalogy”*: *The African Mind and Spirituality*, 275.

⁴² E. I. METUH, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*, IMICO Publishers, Onitsha, 1987, 147.

⁴³ A. I. KANU, *A Hermeneutic Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*, Augustinian Pub Nigeria, Jos, 2015, 118.

⁴⁴ E. I. METUH, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*, 147.

in the hereafter.”⁴⁵ The point to note, however, is that there is this belief in the afterlife. On this rests the hope of both religions. The place of the ancestors further enhances this belief. Nevertheless, how this is conceived might differ. That could be a topic for another discussion. At the moment, it is pertinent to seek an understanding of how God is perceived in an African society.

God in African Society

Knowledge and belief in ancestors necessarily register something about God. They are believed to be living on in God. African society believes in God as the Supreme Being, as the creator who sustains the universe. This is at the heart of the African worldview. God is seen as the Being who lives beyond the sky. In line with Tempels, Okoro avers that God is seen as “the strong one, He who possesses force for himself. He is the source of the force of every creature... the one who is stronger than others.”⁴⁶ All that the earth holds belongs to him. As such, he is referred to as the creator and owner of the universe.⁴⁷ The religiosity of the African revolves around this. God is beyond the knowledge of man. As a result of this inadequacy, a man reaches God through intermediary beings. This indicates that the African worldview has a hierarchy of beings in the universe; the top-most being is God.

Ejiaga, from his studies of these aspects of Mbiti’s works, gives us a quick identification of the four broad realities that form this worldview. He summarizes:

The first is belief in hierarchies and entities of power in which God is seen as the ultimate reality, followed by deities, ancestors, and humans. The second is communalism. It indicates a conception of the universe where the world of the spirits, human beings, and nature are seen as united in vital or organic communion. The characteristics of African communalism include communal self-respect, interdependence, survival of the community, group assurance, co-operation and harmony, affiliation, and shared duties. Third is belief in mystical powers. In this African

⁴⁵ J. S. MBITI, *African Religions and philosophy*, 158.

⁴⁶ C. M. OKORO, *Appraisal of African Concept of Being*, In *Philosophy and Praxis*, 4 (2008), 38.

⁴⁷ J. C. OKEKE, *God and Man in Igbo Traditional Religion*, In *Issues in African Traditional Religion and Philosophy*, Edited by Ezenweke, E. O. - Kanu. I. A., Augustinian Publications Nigeria, Jos, 2012, 41.

worldview, human events such as birth, death, health, harvests, and thunderstorms are seen to be primarily controlled by spiritual forces. The fourth is the concept of time as made up of events defined by relationships rather than something existing in and by itself.⁴⁸

Ranking him the first among all beings makes God the ultimate resort of the universe. Without him, nothing is. While he is not within immediate reach, the concerns of his creatures are his. Arinze prefers to call him the Supreme spirit. This is probably because of his invisible nature. As it is the case with Christianity, he is the being no eyes can see and still live; the cause of all things.⁴⁹ Accordingly, Arinze writes:

God is the Supreme Spirit, the creator of everything. No one equals him in power. He knows everything. He is altogether a good and merciful God and does harm to no one. He sends rain and especially children, and it is from him that each individual derives his personal 'chi'. But this supreme spirit has made many inferior spirits who are nearer to man and through whom man normally offers his worship to Him.⁵⁰

The presence of intermediary beings seems to have complicated the understanding we may have of African worship. Humans rise to their ancestors who are the immediate close relations they have with the spirit world. This sense of proximity is laudable because the ancestors are their blood. They form members of the same family tree. One who lived exceptionally is venerated for his prowess. His way of life stands out for many through the years. This is why their supplications are sought. They take their people's petitions up the cadre of the spirit world. They are the spirits, which include good and bad spirits. The divinities in their different ranks up to God line up. This long chain of relationship in the spirits places the Supreme Being beyond the reach of mortals. With these, one can understand why the other beings that have immediate effects in human affairs are predominantly mentioned in the day to day events of human beings. Does that put God away? Not at all; it only means that he relates with us through these intermediaries: ancestors inclusive.

Ancestors: A Platform for Religious Dialogue?

⁴⁸ R. EJIAGA, *African Worldview*, 158; also cfr., C. M. OKORO, *Appraisal of African Concept of Being*, 39.

⁴⁹ C. M. OKORO, *Appraisal of African Concept of Being*, 39.

⁵⁰ F. ARINZE, *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, 10. 'Chi' could best be described, in simple terms, as one's guardian angel. It has wide ranging meanings; cfr., J. C. OKEKE, *God and Man in Igbo Traditional Religion*, 56-7.

So far, the discourse acknowledges that the ancestors are people of diverse ages whose exemplary lives, it is claimed, profit their people. They stand out as perfect human examples that enliven the hope of their communities. Their conquest of the vicissitudes of human life gives us strength in our struggles. Centrally placed in human history, their undoubting goals give the desired fragrance to the living. People seek them for their intercession, guidance and mediation. Recognition of the ancestors is recognition of our heritage in our relationship with the Divine. Their lived experience, belief, in other words, is the heritage of their people. This means that what they are now, we only live in hope of. As such, it could be said that they welcome their people and admit them into the cult of the living-dead as a potpourri does to the guests in the home. The story of Lazarus taken to the bosom of Abraham leaves a good example (Luke 16:22).

It is this never-ending relationship between the living and the living-dead that radiates the presence of God among his people. With this sense of connection between the living and the living-dead common to Christianity and ATR, one could take the cult of the ancestors as the common base that sets the parting ground for a truthful dialogue. It unites all and sundry while allowing a form of diversity. This makes it a focal point for unity in the quest for God. Such unity accommodates diversities and fosters growth. Acknowledging it allows for interreligious encounters prior to any form of critical analysis of what implications this could hold for different religions. This is the desired “prudence and love” the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council call our attention to. In this light,

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.⁵¹

Every genuine dialogue seeks common grounds of engagement. The place of ancestors is one definitely. This proposed pedestal changes a lot of things. With this, the Christian Faith would not need to look at African religions as some worship of the ancestors since it maintains the company of the saints. These are similar affirmations referring to people, who though once lived like us, but now exist differently. What the ancestors are for African religions, the saints are for

⁵¹ *NOSTRA AETATE*, 2.

Christianity.⁵² Establishing the fact that the Christian God is of the ancestors implies that they practically serve similar purposes for both religions in this given context. It is pertinent to note that neither of these two religions approves of the worship of ancestors/saints. They are simply respected for the roles they play in the lives of their people. On this laudable note, the terms ancestors and saints sustain similar meanings: the living-dead who share the transcendental life. They address the fact that anyone who genuinely seeks God will find him. Their place in human history is, therefore, an indication of our future in the coming life. Relating this to the sainthood in Catholic Faith, Nwafor argues,

The essence of the veneration of the saints is found in this related concept: "the communion of the saints." In the veneration of the saints, the living do not only accord this great respect to them but they also ask their help in prayer. The communion of the saints is not the same as necromancy where the dead are conjured for the purpose of causing harm or of gaining knowledge of secret things. The communion is rather of prayer done to the triumphant members of the church by the pilgrim members for themselves and for the suffering church since the three make up the Mystical Body of Christ.⁵³

The veneration of the saints in Christian traditions pays due to both the known and unknown saints. God is the ultimate determiner of who becomes a saint. The names of the ancestors might gradually fade in the minds of their people. However, it does not neglect their exigent role in the lives of their people. Be they known or not their significance is beyond any contest. Both religions somewhat seek the aid of their 'eternal pilgrim friends', particularly in moments of need. In this notable instance, the celebration of 'All Saints' and the commemoration of 'All souls' in Catholic traditions portray this. It teaches and highlights the importance of these 'living-dead' for us. From the former, intercessions sought for, rise to God; and for the latter, the prayers offered to God, plead for mercy that they may gain admittance into the company of the saints. Once granted, they qualify to intercede for the living. It clearly shows that both the living and the 'living-dead' need each other in different degrees.

As a platform for religious dialogue, the belief in the ancestors better unites than divides us. The choice of Christianity and African Religion(s) is merely relative. Ancestors permeate all religious traditions. Their very existence is what

⁵² Cfr. M. I. NWAFOR, *The Living-dead (ancestors) among the Igbo-African people: An Interpretation of Catholic sainthood*, In *IJSA*, 9 (2017) 4.

⁵³ M. I. NWAFOR, *The Living-dead (ancestors) among the Igbo-African people*, 39.

reinforces these traditions in their people. Just as the potpourri emits a nasal fragrance, they, in turn, emit the hopes and aspirations of their people. This transcendence means a lot to every religion. While how this is perceived might differ, the fact that it is there is consoling. What goes for Christianity and African Religion(s) could go for other world religions in divergent relative senses. The memory of the ancestors continues to give each religion a reason to keep booming. They believed and so lived; we like them, also believe and live too.

Proselytic religions have been concerned about making believers of people. This act, of making something into another, takes of time and demands patience. It is more complicated with human beings. If done hastily or coarsely or astutely mixed-up with some domineering motives, as it seemed to have been the case, a near mess would result. They need to make the right choices if this making of believers must bear desired fruits. It has not fully worked out well as we have seen. Non-proselytic religions have their creeds, written or unwritten, at heart. The best way to get them to listen is dialogue. Like a foundation for this, ancestors provide the needed common understanding; hence, the need for dialogue. If making disciples entails the conversion of the heart, the ancestors are the best available starting point. All acts aimed at simply eroding all that people hold dear have proven abortive. They only allowed for uncritical syncretism. The world does not need that now.

Religious creeds that promote justice, peace and understanding must have the chance to thrive. The world needs those. They bank on our heritage as people who share the same humanity. They promote our common goals as a people. This sense of interconnectedness seems to be the aim of Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti*.⁵⁴ To seek common human grounds is to seek non-mythical stuff. There is nothing pseudo about such a search. The place of the ancestors is not mythical. They are part of the people who have the same mutual sentiments. Their memories live on after all.

Conclusion

The essence of this research is to advance the argument for the ancestors as common grounds for religious dialogue. Christianity and African Religions, taken in context, seek a sincere dialogue. Despite their diverse creeds, the place of the ancestors or the saints, in other clearer terms, stands out. Like a potpourri

⁵⁴ Cfr POPE FRANCIS, *Fratelli Tutti: Encyclical on Fraternity and Social friendship*, Orbis Books, New York, 2020, n. 1, 5.

collecting different articles, its purpose is the same. From its place, it shines out for others to see and learn. The hopes of those who look up to them grew by the day. There is nothing mythical about them. Their memories enliven the resolve of their forebears. In God, they have found their rest and from his gracious glimpse plead and guide their own here on earth. He is their God as he is ours today. There is, therefore, no room for uncritical syncretism. Our ancestors have provided us with a pedestal. God is the God of the ancestors as he is ours today.