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# CONTEXTULIZING JESUS "THE ONLY MEDIATOR" FOR THE SUKUMA PEOPLE OF TANZANIA

*Fabian F. Maganda*

## INTRODUCTION

African Christians and missionaries, who have a desire to contextualize the biblical message for people to whom they minister in Africa, are confronted with several theological issues. It is common in Tanzania and in other African countries to find Christians mixing their traditional beliefs with the biblical truth. This syncretism has affected the kind and quality of their Christian life. Janet Lundblad has similar concern about the problem of syncretism in the church of Africa. She says that most African Christians still resort to the practices and beliefs of the traditional religions in time of crisis.<sup>1</sup> Paul Kalanda also makes a similar observation,

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Lundblad, "Toward an Authentic African Theology," *Covenant Quarterly* 36 (August 1978): 37.

There is a phenomenon in Africa that is paradoxical. Many people have embraced Christianity and the prospects are that in 30 to 50 years from now, Africa may have the largest number of Christians in the world. But the paradox is that many of these Christians still practice their tradition. In fact, any pastor will tell you that many Christians live two lives: one Christian and the other traditional.<sup>2</sup>

Some African Christians not only have resorted to the practice and beliefs of the African Traditional Religion, but they have also tried to equate the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ with that of the ancestors in Africa Traditional Religion. François Kabasélé comments on how Christ relates to ancestors to some extent. He says,

Just as Christ, the one priest, does not abolish human mediation, but fulfils them in himself, so does he consummate in himself the mediation exercised by our ancestor, a mediation that he does not abolish but which in him, is revealed to be henceforward a subordinate mediation.<sup>3</sup>

The above quotation raises questions such as, Who is the mediator between God and man? Is there any difference or similarity between the New Testament concept of mediator with that held by African Traditional Religions? Is the person and role of Christ as mediator similar to the mediators of African Traditional Religions? These questions require careful attention of both African Christians and missionaries. And it is essential that we deal with them in the light of the Bible.

This essay will focus on the evaluation of five passages: Galatians 3:19-20, 1 Timothy 2:5-6 and Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24, with special attention given to the use of *μεσιτης* in the New Testament. These exegetical studies will form the foundation by

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Kalanda, "Consolidating Christianity in Africa," *Missiology* 4 (Cotber 1976): 400.

<sup>3</sup> François Kabasélé, "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother" in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*. ed. Robert Schretter (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991): 126.

which missionaries and African theologians will contextualize the *concept of a mediator* for the *Sukuma* people of Tanzania.<sup>4</sup>

## THE SUKUMA UNDERSTANDING OF MEDIATOR

### Development of the Concept

The understanding of the concept of mediator among the Sukuma people arises from their understanding of the universe. They view the universe as existing in levels: The Supreme Being (*Liwelelo*)<sup>5</sup>, the spirits of ancestors (*bakulugenji*), man himself, and in the last category are animals, plants and minerals.<sup>6</sup> As the universe is in various levels, there are intermediaries between levels. The Sukuma people believe that God is not imminent but transcendent. He is considered as an inactive guarantor for the existing conditions. He does not in any way change from good to evil like man. His benevolence is always seen in a negative fashion. He refrains from doing both evil and good, and His withdrawal from the affairs of man is deemed good. There is no trace among the Sukuma that God has revealed Himself to them in a special way.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Sukuma* is the name of a tribe in Tanzania. The majority of the Sukuma are situated to the south of Lake Victoria (Nyanza), mainly in Mwanza and Shinyanga regions.

<sup>5</sup> There are a number of different names for the Supreme Being, each one indicating a specific attribute, but all refer to the one High God. For a complete discussion on the name of God, read Berta Millroth, *Lyuba: Traditional Religion of the Sukuma* (Uppsala, Studie Ethnographic Upsaleensia XXII: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckert AB, 1965), 95-106; and Ray Hatfield, "The *nsumu* in tradition and change: A study of the position of religious practitioners among the Sukuma of Tanzania, East Africa" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1968), 47,48.

<sup>6</sup> For a complete discussion on Basukuma view of the universe, see Charles S. Salalah, "The place of Ancestral Spirit in African Theology" (MA Thesis, Columbia Graduate School of Bible and Missions, 1981), 34f

<sup>7</sup> Salalah, "The place of ancestral spirits in African Theology", p. 61.

The Sukuma tradition has given different reasons why *Liwelelo* (Supreme Being) decided to remove himself from his people. But all the reasons given have one thing in common – that man disobeyed God's commands, and because of such disobedience death came to all men. Although the tragedy happened between *Liwelelo* and men, the Sukuma still believe that God has an influence in their affairs.

There have been disagreements among scholars whether the Sukuma people approach God directly or indirectly. Rev. Warren J. Roth summarises the various ideas advanced regarding the influence of *Liwelelo* over men. He stressed that man communicates directly to God (*Liwelelo*) through prayer, ritual, and man's belief in God's ever-present concern.<sup>8</sup> Millroth, together with other writers of this persuasion, claims that most ritual was addressed to *Liwelelo* alone. It was only later that communication with God through ancestors (*bakulungeji*) was added and became dominant. As evidence of her claim, Millroth cites the survival of the "earlier" religion in the invocation to *Liwelelo* which now forms only one part of long litanies in honour of the ancestors.<sup>9</sup> The other view is exemplified by Tanner who claims that *Liwelelo* is little known and unrecognised in ritual and prayers.<sup>10</sup>

In our view, western writers struggle in their writing about communication between God and men due to the complexity of Sukuma belief system. Even the Sukuma differ greatly on the same issue. But Sukuma people have the similar understanding on the ultimate supremacy of *Liwelelo*. They do not exclude the influence

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<sup>8</sup> Warren J. Roth, "Three co-operative and credit unions as examples of culture change among the Sukuma of Tanzania" (PhD dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1966), p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> Berta Millroth, *Lyuba: Traditional Religion of the Sukuma*, p. 203-204.

<sup>10</sup> Warren J. Roth, "Three co-operative and credit unions as examples of culture change among the Sukuma of Tanzania," p. 110. Tanner, however, is not consistent in his view. In his article, "An introduction to the spirit beings of the Northern Basukuma", *Anthropological Quarterly* 29 (1956b) 79, he indicates a number of direct appeals made by men to both God and ancestors.

of *Liwelelo* in the affairs of men, but what is circumscribed is the manner of His influence. Men do not experience the influence of *Liwelelo* with immediate effect as they do the power of ancestors (*bakulugenji*). There are some occasions when a Sukuma could pray directly to God but in most cases prayers are offered to the ancestors.

Based on the above argument, ancestors (*bakulugenji*) have a prominent role in the Sukuma religion, and they are the centre of worship in people's daily life. *Bakulugenji* are regarded as intermediaries between God and man. It is not clear among the Sukuma how ancestors communicate with God.<sup>11</sup> Who then are the mediators according to the Sukuma? What is their role in the community?

#### THE PERSONALITY AND ROLE OF A MEDIATOR IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Sukuma people are convinced of the link between God and the living. The link is possible because of the ministry of the mediator. Sukuma people are among the tribes in Africa who believe in multiple mediators. According to the Sukuma, intermediaries are in at least two categories: spiritual beings and human beings.

The first category is the generic class of those who have died and have now become an undifferentiated group called *batale biswe bakale* ("our great ones of the past"), or *bakulugenji* ("founders"). These are commonly known as ancestral spirits. They are not differentiated by names but are addressed collectively at every commemorative rite.<sup>12</sup> The Sukuma view their *bakulugenji* as mediators. They are believed to be protectors of their families who appear to them, notifying them of imminent peril and reproving those who failed to follow their directives. *Bakulugenji* are believed

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<sup>11</sup> Kabasele, "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother," p. 123.

<sup>12</sup> Ray Hatfield, "The *nfumu* in tradition and change: A study of the position of religious practitioners among the Sukuma of Tanzania, East Africa" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1968), 47,48.

to have power to destroy the harvest through thunderstorms, and to cause sickness or even death. The whole range of human success and misfortune is subject to *bakulugenji*.<sup>13</sup> This belief causes the Sukuma to manipulate their ancestors through worship and rituals so as to be assured of their good will. The relationship between the *bakulugenji* and the living is reciprocal. The latter can only survive as entities if their offspring remembers them and the former can only prosper if the *bakulugenji* are pacified and thus bestow their blessing.

Apart from the *bakulugenji* there are other ancestors who are called *masamva* (singular- *isamva*). The Sukuma's contact with them is often tangible, personal, and direct. The experience of contact is called *kuding'wa isamva*, "to be grabbed or seized by *isamva*". *Masamva*<sup>14</sup> contacts the living because they are angry at being neglected and they want to remind the living that they are still wielding some influence in the lineage. The presence of mediators is vital for the well being of Sukuma societies. They constitute the highest link between man and God.

The second category of mediator is that of the living. John Mbiti calls them "religious specialists". He says,

"Specialists" are in effect the repositories in knowledge, practice and symbolically, of the religious life of their communities. They are the ones who make history of African traditional societies both sacred and religious. "Specialists" are the symbolic points of contact between the historical and spiritual worlds. In them are the continuity and essence of African religious thought and life.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ralph Tanner, *Transition in African Beliefs* (NY: Maryknoll Pub., 1967) 17.

<sup>14</sup> Children who die, young boys and girls, or men and women without offspring do not become *masamva*. Dead persons who are not grandparents or members of their families are not *masamva* toward their children, but they might be *masamva* towards others. For a complete study of *masamva* read Berta Millroth, *Lyuba: Traditional Religion of the Sukuma*, p. 117-124.

<sup>15</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 5.

For the Sukuma people the religious specialists are called *bafumu*. A religious specialist engaged in the enterprise of *bufumu*<sup>16</sup> is usually called generically *nfumu* (plural *bafumu*). The *nfumu* is the traditional doctor.

The word *nfumu* relates to two verbs: *kufuma*, meaning "to emerge", and *kufumbula*, meaning "to discover". *Nfumu* is also a generic name for a diviner or magician. *Nfumu* has been translated in a variety of unsatisfactory ways. The most common translations are "witch doctor" and "medicine man". In this paper I will use the term *nfumu* to mean an individual who engages in purveying medicines and divination. The practice of *nfumu* includes the performance of rituals directed toward divinities for the preparation and sale of medicine with curative, assertive, protective and aggressive properties; and divination (mediatorship). This paper will only discuss the role of *nfumu* as mediator.

As I have mentioned, the Sukuma people believe that calamities and troubles in the family or society are sent by God or sometimes by offended ancestors. *Nfumu* is consulted in order that he/she might perform his magic to find out what is the reason for the calamity or trouble. It is therefore urgently necessary to establish a good relationship with the spiritual being in order to preserve the state of *mhola* (peace) which has been disturbed. In this situation a sacrifice is demanded. The Sukuma believe that God Himself established the institution of sacrifice.<sup>17</sup>

The central concern of the Sukuma is to understand why an event, particularly a misfortune, has occurred. If there is sickness or death in the family, the Sukuma believe that there has to be a spiritual cause. Most Sukuma attribute sickness or death to the displeasure of his/her ancestor or perhaps to a sorcerer. To know

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<sup>16</sup> *Bafumu* is a secret religious society of the Sukuma. This is also used to refer to a magic bond which links a person with his ancestor (*bakulugenji*), or the knowledge of any procedure which contains or is based on a magic element.

<sup>17</sup> There is a myth among the Sukuma which explains how God came with a white goat to a troubled family because their child was ill. The people were advised to sacrifice the goat and look to the east and utter the name of deity. When this was done, the child got well again.



which is the cause between the two, or some times, three alternatives, a person goes to a *nfumu* who does divination.

The *bafumu* are important to the Sukuma society. Their role is to interpret the events of life. They communicate with the ancestors (*bakulugenji*) and tell the victim what is required of him/her. The power involved in divination is believed to come from the ancestors. The *nfumu* appeals to the whole community of *bakulugenji*. There is no singling out of one ancestor in divination. All ancestors are recognised as needed supporters.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear from these facts that the Sukuma people do not have a biblical understanding of the personality and the role of mediators. We see that on the one hand, mediators bring good health and prosperity to their family, but on the other hand, they bring evil. And we have seen also that mediators range from a *bakulugenji* ("ancestral spirits") to *bafumu* ("traditional doctor"). Our task as ministers of the gospel is to find the way which can be used to contextualize the truth of the Scripture that "Jesus is the only mediator between man and God". Having understood the concept of mediator in the Sukuma tradition, now it is essential to understand the biblical concept of mediator

### **THE BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF MEDIATOR**

In this essay, our study is limited to the New Testament, with special emphasis on the passages in the Pauline epistles and the book of Hebrews where mediator (Greek μεσσητης) is used.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ralph Tanner, "The Theory and Practice of Sukuma Spirit Mediumship" in *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa*, eds. J. Beattie and J. Middleton (NY: Africana Pub. Corp., 1969), 275.

<sup>19</sup> For a study of Christ as mediator see Emil Brunner's Book, *The Mediator: a study of the central doctrine of the Christian faith* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1934); and Archer E. Anderson's dissertation which deals comprehensively with the study of *Christ as mediator* ("The Mediator", Th.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1956).

### The Word, *μεσιτης*

**Background:** The Greek word, *μεσιτης*, occurs six times in the New Testament as a noun.<sup>20</sup> The word appears once in the LXX in Job 9:33. Becker comments on the occurrence of the term *μεσιτης* in Job that the rendering of the term is inaccurate.<sup>21</sup>

The word is found occasionally in Hellenistic writers from Polybius onwards, and is common in the papyri from the third century B.C. Twice it is used in connection with Moses being the mediator of the law (Gal. 3:19-20). Several times it is used in the book of 1 Timothy and the book of Hebrews.

It is very important to know the meaning of *μεσος* in order to understand the meaning of the word, *μεσιτης*, and how it is used in the New Testament. *μεσος* is translated, "in the middle, between or in the midst." A. Oepke translates the word, *μεσος*, 'between contestant of parties,' 'neutral'; *το μεσον* 'no man's land'.<sup>22</sup> Louw and Nida suggest that *μεσος* is used to refer to "a position in the middle of an area (either an object in the midst of other objects or an area in the middle of a larger area)."<sup>23</sup> The literal meaning of *μεσιτης* then is *a go-between or mediator*.

The Greek word, *μεσιτης*, has a range of meanings. **First**, *μεσιτης* is used to describe a person who is involved in the process of causing agreement between the parties in disagreement; or a person who intervenes to bring peace; or a person who stands in a neutral ground. In this category Oepke translates the word, *μεσιτης*, to refer to "a person who acts as an umpire", or "a peace

<sup>20</sup> For the occurrence see Gal. 3:19, 20; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24.

<sup>21</sup> Archer E. Anderson, "The Mediator" (Th.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1956).

<sup>22</sup> A. Oepke, "μεσιτης", *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich and Gerhard Kittel, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965-1974), 599

<sup>23</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *A Greek-Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (NY: United Bible Societies, 1989), 2:714.

maker".<sup>24</sup> Philo brings out this idea also in his writing as he reports a case of King David and his son Absalom, in which Joab acts as μεσιτης to bring about reconciliation.<sup>25</sup> In *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* the word is defined as "one who mediates between two parties to remove a disagreement or reach a common goal."<sup>26</sup>

**Secondly.** μεσιτης refers to one who causes or helps parties to come to an agreement, with the implication of guaranteeing the certainty of the arrangement. In this sense μεσιτης means "surety, security or guarantor." In Ant. 20. 62 Izates acted as μεσιτης in a sense of guarantor of an agreement, when he wrote to the Parthians and urged them to welcome Artabanus. One may understand this as implying not only a guarantor of the agreement but also the guarantee of its validity. For the similar usage see Philo.<sup>27</sup> Oepke translates it as a person who establishes a relationship between two hitherto unrelated entities. 'mediate' their coming together.<sup>28</sup>

**Third.** μεσιτης refers to an intermediary (Mos 2, 166). Luow and Nida call this person. "one who stands in the middle, one who speaks to both, one who cuts palavers, or one who causes arguments to cease."<sup>29</sup>

**New Testament Usage of Mediator:** The use of the word, μεσιτης, in Galatians 3: 19-20 is very important even though it does not refer to Jesus Christ. It is used in connection with Moses, the mediator of the law. It is plain in the Pentateuch that Moses served as a go-between, receiving the law from God to give to the

<sup>24</sup> Oepke "μεσιτης". *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4: 601.

<sup>25</sup> Ant 7, 193.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*. Revised and translated from W. Bauer's 5<sup>th</sup> ed. of *Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 505-507.

<sup>27</sup> Som 1, 142.

<sup>28</sup> Oepke, 4:601.

<sup>29</sup> Louw and Nida, *Greek-Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2: 503.

people, as the Bible says in Deuteronomy 5:5. "At that time I stood between the LORD and you to declare to you the word of the LORD. . ."<sup>30</sup> Other scholars view the mediator in Galatians 3:19-20 as closely associated with the angels.<sup>31</sup>

In 1 Timothy 2:5, we read, εἰς καὶ μεσσητὴς θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπου Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς. Paul places εἰς with μεσσητὴς. He uses εἰς as an adjective to refer "to one in contrast to more than one".<sup>32</sup> In this verse he indicates that there is *one* "mediator" or "go-between" between God and man. John Norman Davidson Kelly suggests that the phrase, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus," excludes on the one hand, the Jewish ideas of Moses (Gal. iii. 19), or angels (Heb. ii. 6 ff.; Tes. Xii Patr., Dan. vi) acting as intermediaries, and on the other hand, all the intermediary deities, Gnostic aeons, etc., accepted in pagan circles."<sup>33</sup>

The idea of a single mediator is brought forcibly by the addition of the word ἀνθρώπος (without the article) at the end. It not only excludes all Sukuma mediators but also all other African traditional religious mediators. Bernard believes that the absence of an article before the word, ἀνθρώπος, suggests the **universal** bounty of Christ's incarnation.<sup>34</sup> This qualifies **Jesus Christ** to fulfil this unique role of a mediator between man and God precisely because he is himself man.

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<sup>30</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the *New International Version*, copyright 1984 by the International Bible Society.

<sup>31</sup> For more discussion on the interpretation problem of Galatians 3:19,20 passage, see Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 178-179, and Walter F. Adeney, "Mediator, Mediation," in *A Dictionary of the Bible*, 3: 318.

<sup>32</sup> Louw and Nida, 605.

<sup>33</sup> John Norman Davidson Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 63.

<sup>34</sup> John Henry Bernard, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 42.

In verse 6 Paul proceeds to define the work of Christ as mediator between God and man. This Christ "gave himself as a ransom for all men." The word, "ransom" (Greek ἀντιλutron), means "that which is given in exchange for another as the price of redemption". So Christ paid the ransom to free us from the slavery of sin. It is very interesting to find two elements of representation in this verse. The compound word, ἀντιλutron, precedes ὑπερ παντων. This suggests that both ἀντι, meaning "instead of", and ὑπερ, meaning "on behalf of" emphatically affirms the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross as an "exchange price". Donald Guthrie says,

The addition of the proposition *anti*, 'instead of', is significant in view of proposition *hyper*, 'on behalf of', used after it. Christ is conceived of as an 'exchange price' *on behalf of* and *in the place of* all, on the ground of which freedom may be granted. Yet not all enjoy that freedom.<sup>35</sup>

Christ as μεσιτης is the one who represents God to men and men to God, and brings them together. Oepke says, "He (Christ) is the attorney and negotiator. . . That He makes peace between God and man."<sup>36</sup>

The other usage of μεσιτης is in the book of Hebrews. The term is used in connection with the *covenant* in 8:6; 9:15, and 12:24. The author of the book of Hebrews contrasts the mediator of the Old Covenant (Moses), with the mediator of the New Covenant (Christ).

In Hebrews 8:6 Jesus is the mediator of a "superior covenant". μεσιτης is used as a legal term for one who arbitrates between two parties. Christ mediates between people and God; it is he who establishes the new covenant. This new covenant is better than the old because it is "founded on better promises" – it concentrates on spiritual things (e.g., the forgiveness of sins) and is unconditional

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<sup>35</sup> Donald Guthrie, "Pastoral Epistles" in *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 56, R.V.G. Tasker ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 72.

<sup>36</sup> Oepke, 4: 619.

in nature. Paul Ellingworth reminds us that "He (Christ) is an intermediary for God to humanity; his action is on behalf of humanity in relation to God."<sup>37</sup>

In Hebrews 9:15, 16 there is again a contrast of ideas between the "New Covenant" and the "Last Will and Testament". The second phrase in vs. 15b is introduced by ὅπως, meaning, "in order that", which sets the purpose of a New Covenant whose mediator is Jesus Christ. The purpose is "that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance". The contrast includes the idea that the covenant is new in time and kind. In 12:24 μεσιτης is used in the contrast between Moses and Jesus.

Another usage of μεσιτης is alluded in 7:22 where εγγυος, meaning, "guarantee, guarantor", a synonym of μεσιτης ("mediator") is used. Nash gives a comment on the relationship of μεσιτης and εγγυος, he finds εγγυος a stronger term than μεσιτης since εγγυος was not a mere "go-between", but one who undertook legal obligation in connection with a bond.<sup>38</sup> In this sense then, Jesus becomes the guarantee, or pledge of what God has promised, and mediator stresses the actual accomplishment by mediatorial death.

In summary, the word mediator (Greek μεσιτης) is used to mean, *first*, "a neutral and a trusted person, one who mediates" between two parties with a view to producing peace as in 1 Timothy 2:5. Jesus is the only mediator between God and man who is trusted by both sides, because He has a true representation of God and man. He is true man and true God. *Second*, one who acts as a "guarantee" so as to secure something which otherwise could not be obtained. Thus in Hebrews 8:6; 9:15. Hebrews 12:24 portrays Jesus Christ's mediatorial death as the guarantee of the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham.

The story of the whole Bible is the story of redemption. And as we have seen in our study, the redemption of human beings rests on

<sup>37</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 410.

<sup>38</sup> Ronald H. Nash, "The Notion of Mediator in Alexandrian Judaism and the Epistle of the Hebrews." *WTJ* 40 (1978), 114-115.

the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ. He is the mediator of the New Covenant, the arrangement by which God and man are one at last. He is the only way through which man can reach God and have fellowship with him.

Having established the biblical concept of mediator, we are in a position to evaluate the Sukuma concept of mediator.

### **CONTEXTUALIZING THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF MEDIATOR FOR THE SUKUMA PEOPLE OF AFRICA**

There are many contrasts between Christ's mediation and Sukuma mediation. The Sukuma believe that God is far away from man and left man in the care of ancestral spirits (*bakulugenji*). These spirits are believed to have power to punish and reward the living people. With that note, the worship and care of the intermediary spirits becomes more important than seeking God. The role of the Sukuma mediator is not similar to that of Christ. He is not a go-between, he is not one who mediates" between two parties with a view to producing peace. For example, the *nfumu's* duty is not to bring reconciliation between man and God but rather to find what is the reason for the calamity or trouble which has been brought either by God or ancestral spirits. Our study also suggests that reconciliation among the Sukuma people is possible through man's effort.

The Sukuma people do not say clearly whether *Liwelelo* (the Supreme Being) is loving and caring. The Sukuma people believe in myth and not in the Bible. It is our responsibility to reject those concepts which are un-biblical and prayerfully substitute what is biblical.

It is our duty to affirm the similarities which are there between the Sukuma understanding of a mediator and the biblical understanding. The Sukuma people believe that there is a need for a mediator between man and God. They also believe that man broke his relationship with God and that is why God was displeased and moved away.

As we minister to the Sukuma people or other African traditional religious believers, *first*, it is appropriate to start from the book of

Genesis by telling the creation story, and then move on to the fall of man in Genesis 3. Our people need to hear why the relationship between man and God was broken from the biblical perspective, not from their mythology. We should help them to understand that it is the disobedience of man that wounded the relationship. *Secondly*, they need to hear about the authority of the Bible instead of myth or other traditional beliefs. We should tell them why God decided to put down his story in writing. They need to know that oral preservation of any story is not reliable. We should affirm that the Bible is the only reliable revelation of God

*Thirdly*, we should ask God to convict them to believe that the Bible reveals a God of love who makes known His loving intention through his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the only Mediator who gave his life to restore the broken relationship between God and man (1 Tim 2:5, 6). We should tell them that Jesus is qualified to be a mediator because those who come to God through Him have access to God the Father. The direction of mediation is descent from God to man, and then from man to God and only through Jesus Christ.

*Fourthly*, we need to teach them that the revelation mediated by Jesus Christ directly conflicts with the Sukuma way of approaching God. It is common among the Sukuma to approach their ancestral spirits, because when they are not appeased, ancestral spirit can bring bad fortune. Therefore, Basukuma worshipers manipulate their ancestors through worship and rituals so as to be assured of their good will. This approach to worship is quite contrary to the teaching of Jesus Christ. He says, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (Jn. 4: 24). We do not manipulate God in our worship. We are to worship him with sincerity and truth. God is not unjust. The Bible says "He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Ac. 14:17).

*Fifthly*, we should help them to understand that their *bakulugenji* (ancestral spirits) have no ability either to communicate with the living or act as mediators between man and God. We must make it clear to them that the Bible forbids any kind of communication with the dead.



Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead (Deut 18:10-11).

We need to teach them that in Deuteronomy 18:10-11, not only was adherence to the false gods of Canaan restricted, but also the means by which the Canaanites attempted to communicate with them were to be totally abhorred and rejected completely. Israelites were told to free themselves from such practices.

The *bafumu* are mere men. They have no ability to act as mediators between man and God. There are many incidences in the life of the Sukuma people where a person has to see more than one *mfumu* to hear the second opinion of the cause of either sickness or the death in the family. We need to show them that the *bafumu* are not trusted. They need to know the superiority of Jesus, who qualifies to be our Mediator because of His relationship to man (He is fully man, Romans 1:3) and to God (He is fully God; Colossians 1:15; 2:9; 2 Corinthians 4:4). He can be trusted.

They need to know that their tradition does not tell them how the relationship between man and God can be re-established. It is our task to show them that there is hope as well as good news in the Bible. It teaches that the work of Jesus as our Mediator is to redeem us from the power of death (Lk. 19:10; 1 Jn. 3:7,8). He is the mediator of redemption, and His personality and role puts Him in an entirely different category from the *bakulugenji* (ancestors), *bafumu* (tradition doctors), and *batemi* (kings). The function of Jesus is to impart eternal life to those who believe in Him. He says, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (Jn 10:10b).

**In conclusion**, Christ's mediatorship is superior to that of the Sukuma as well as all other traditions. Christ is the answer to all human needs, whether physical or spiritual, emotional or psychological. He qualifies to be the Mediator because of His relationship to man (He is fully man) and to God (He is fully God). He is also qualified as the mediator because His work is to reconcile God and man by means of his death on the cross (Eph 2:13; Col 1:19-22).

The recognition of the unique mediatorship of Jesus Christ will exclude syncretistic practices from the African Christian life. The Scripture, as we have seen in other places, condemns any kind of divination. In 1 Samuel 28: 7-20, King Saul attempted to have contact with the dead and lost his kingship because of disobedience to God in this matter and others. The Sukuma and Africans in general need the liberating message of Christ's power to flee from this distorted traditional view of a mediator. The fact that a number of Africans still follow traditional religious belief is a challenge to the church leaders and theologians of Africa to teach the Word of God faithfully. We need to hold onto the Bible as the only source of truth without mixing traditional beliefs and the biblical truth. We need to examine all traditional beliefs and practices in light of the Bible.

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