TIME TO RING SOME CHANGES:
REFLECTIONS ON EAST AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON TIME, ESCHATOLOGY & MISSION

The Problem

How we think about time has an effect on how we read and understand texts and ideas from Scriptures. Yet, we often do not examine our own understanding, and the fact that it may be an anachronism.
Modern thought often describes time in spatial terms:

> Consider time. Many languages use spatial terms to describe it. In English, we say things like "The best is *ahead* of us" or "We're *behind* schedule" or "let's move the meeting *forward*". To English speakers, in other words, time is horizontal and the future lies ahead. In Mandarin, however, time is vertical, springing up from the ground like oil from a well, and this is reflected in the phrases that Mandarin speakers use to talk about it….
>
> …people think of time in fundamentally different ways depending on their native tongue. (Motluk:2002, 37-8)

In much English thought, this linear, horizontal movement has been combined with ideas of progress. Each age or technological advance is seen as marking an improvement on previous ages. This also affects the location of meaning: it is placed in the future. The stages which lead towards the final, and best, stage, can only ever be partial witnesses of that perfection and its full meaning.
However, this brings its own problems when applied to a reading of New Testament texts which may not conform to this pattern. The timing of the Kingdom of God is seen as a case in point. It is seen as the culmination of a process, of salvation history, the series of events in which God engages with his creation and redeems it. Such a view may be perpetrated in the variety of time lines which adorn Bibles and textbooks, drawing a line from creation, through the OT, NT and history of the church to some distant, usually unspecified, point in the future. The Resurrection is a key point in this chain of events, and is seen as inaugurating the Kingdom of God, or the promises of redemption.
Here lies a major problem. For the linear view drives a wedge between the Resurrection and the full manifestation of the Kingdom. The Resurrection of Christ on that first Easter morning two thousand years ago is obviously separated by a long gap from the coming of the Kingdom which Jesus told his followers to expect. Scholars such as Dodd attempted to develop theories of a "realised" eschatology as a solution to this problem, but ended up doing violence to the inherent pattern of many NT texts, which clearly pointed to a final consummation that had not taken place (Perrin:1963:64-7). Conzelmann's "yes, but not yet…" eschatology attempted to address the two traditions of future and realised theologies of the Kingdom. Not only that, but the Resurrection becomes divorced

from the Kingdom as a locus of meaning and "truth". It may be an important point in the process of salvation history, but it does not reveal the ultimate goal which God has prepared for His people. The facts of the resurrection can be displaced by all kinds of speculation (Grenz:1992, passim).

Whilst the different linear theories may reach a variety of conclusions, the following common features can be identified:

- Critics assume that there is a single understanding of time in the Bible
- The Western linear concept of time (past, present and future), without further examination, governs understandings of time and eschatology
- There have been few studies which even question the linear understanding of time
- The unconscious assumption of linear understandings of time undermines the Christological foundations of eschatology. Such understandings are built on a concept of time rather than the person of Christ (Mbiti: 1971, 37-8)

Taking this as our starting point, it is possible to examine whether or not linear expressions of time are the only choice, or whether other models are helpful. Such a search begins with an overview of the variety of theories about time found in the ancient world.

The second stage is to note that, despite its dominance in modern Western thought, theories other than the linear progressive model can also be found in the modern world. An examination of a Swahili theory of time exemplifies this. A comparison of the Biblical and Swahili views will also show that some problems caused by the Western, linear, progressive model may be avoidable. Further, the overlap between these two models may have a positive role. Mbiti's study noted the differences that existed between Biblical and Swahili views of time, and the obstacles which these presented for mission and theology.

This study owes much to Mbiti's research. Yet it departs from his line of argument. In Mbiti's analysis, NT views of time become Christocentric. This Christocentric concept of time raises difficulties of comprehension, and may bring in false understandings or interpretations of core theological ideas (ibid., 56-61, 89-90, 156, 181-5). For Mbiti, part of this difference comes from "newness in Christ": a teleological way of thinking very different from Akamba and Swahili concepts. However, this interpretation is open to question, for there would seem to be other ways of expressing "newness in Christ" without teleology. In fact, some of the concepts of time found in Scripture may explain "newness in Christ" using ideas about time which are more compatible with Akamba or Swahili thought.

Concepts of Time in the NT World

The philosophies and religions of the ancient world did not subscribe to a theory of progress. Hesiod believed in a series of ages which marked decline rather than progress. *Works and Days* 110-155 describes a history of decline: gold to silver to bronze. The fourth race, the demigods, was assigned no descriptive element. The decline is not uniform. The fourth generation appears superior to their iron predecessors (ibid. 155-160). The fifth generation, iron, is the human race, whose impiety and social behaviour marks them as the worst age (169-200).

This pattern is also picked up in *Daniel* 2:31-45, in which the kingdoms are described as increasingly *less* precious metals (gold, silver, bronze, iron, iron mixed with clay).

The idea of time as linear and progressive is, to an extent, found in the pattern of salvation history. After the Fall, humanity returns to God stage by stage. However, it must be noted that this view does not always see progress developing in this world in a closed system. Key events such as the day of Yahweh (OT) or the Coming of the Kingdom (*Rev* 22) depend on a direct intervention by God from His dimension. Thus, whilst time is linear its is not isolated. It is held in tandem with an other realm, which we might describe as the eternal.

Time was not necessarily considered to be linear. Others held to cyclic views of time. These included mystery cults such as Isis, with their cycle of birth, death and re-birth. The Stoic schools also held a cyclic history, the world was created from fire, existed, and was consumed by fire from which a new world arose:

> God not only made all things but is all things. Plants and bodies are "bound up and united with the whole." Since the human soul is really a portion of God as soul of the cosmos, it follows that whatever human beings know, God also knows. The sun that illuminates all things, except one part of the earth, is likewise a small part of God, so that one must conclude that God is even more illuminating.
>
> Since all things are God and come from God the Stoics taught that cyclically the whole cosmos was resolved back into God, thus producing a cosmic conflagration. At such a time all things no matter how long lived are destroyed; thus there cannot be any immortality, except for God. (Lives, 7.157; Epictetus, Discourses, 3.14). (http://www.abu.nb.ca/Courses/GrPhil/Stoic.htm)

Such a cyclic view of time also is found in parts of the Old Testament: the book of *Ecclesiastes* [e.g., 1:4-11, 3:1-8,15] gives examples:

> What now is has already been; what is to be, already is; and God restores what would otherwise be displaced. (*Eccl*. 3:15)

The third Scriptural model of time, which has been briefly indicated above, is found particularly in the Johannine writings:

> Here, Time is almost suppressed for the sake of eternity which lends new dimensions to the characteristic themes of Life, Light, Knowledge, Belief, Judgment and the like. It is almost ridiculous to discuss Time in the Fourth Gospel, and in any case it cannot be done in terms of a linear concept. (Mbiti,1971, 39)

This view of time also is found in the book of *Revelation.* It is tempting to see *Revelation* as a timetable of events. However, the text resists such a classification, and it is very difficult to connect the events described with particular historical events. Rather, the descriptions represent spiritual realities (e.g., of the woman riding on the beast, *Rev* 17:1-8) which are manifested time and time again in different times and places (Sweet: 1990:132, King: 2000, 200). This view of time was not however a creation of the NT period. It had its precedents within Semitic thought. This mythical view of time can be described as follows:

> The mythical world envisages another manner of being, a dimension in which there is neither spatial limitation nor time in our sense, but one which shares with this world the invisible forces of love, hate, obedience, rebellion and so forth. This world is often called Eternity, which does not mean an unbelievably long span of time but rather an existence without time, something which, because it lies outside our experience of time actually underlies in its entirety every perception that we have of time. It could perhaps be called a belief in certain basic principles on which the world was based, principles which could be used to interpret the experiences of life and to predict what was likely to happen. (Barker: 1991, 59)

Thus these should not be seen as two distinct time zones, but rather as overlapping spheres in which a realm beyond time informs understanding of this world. Meaning is found in this overlap, rather than in a generalised theory of decline or progress within the time-scale of this world. While the linear model produces a gap between the Resurrection and the Last Days, the mythic allows ideas common to both to be held together in the overlap between the temporal and the eternal. Writers such as Schweitzer suggest that Johannine eschatological thought emerged as a solution to the problem caused by the delay of the Eschaton[1]. However, the OT precedents suggest that what occurred was a framing of the Christian message in a mythic paradigm rather than a linear. The use of the linear model marks a return to the use of a model whose limitations have already been noted: the problems first associated with it will still be applicable.

There appear to be a variety of theories of time in the ancient world. These suggest that non-linear theories of time may be found within Scripture, and that our interpretation should not force these to conform to linear models. There is freedom to experiment with non-linear interpretations.

Non-linear theories of time are still used within some societies. Let us now examine an example, or two examples, from East Africa.

East African Models Of Time

The Swahili language offers a different way of looking at time. Here there is a distinction between two different periods, *Sasa* (now) and *Zamani* (times, ages)[2]. *Zamani* can be qualified as *zamani zilizopita* (times which have passed) and *zamani zijazo* (coming times). However, trying to force the two periods into a pseudo-linear system is not helpful. It is more helpful to differentiate the two ages in terms from their context. *Sasa* and *Zamani* can have an existential dimension. We can consider this by making a few generalised remarks about ancestor–cults in East Africa. The fact that ancestors are remembered means that they continue to exist in the *Sasa* period. Even though "dead", they have an existence, presence and power. That is why they must be recognised and acknowledged. Failure to do so may bring their wrath down on the living. Whilst in the *Sasa* period they experience existence of a different quality to that of the *Zamani* period:

> When the last person who knew him dies, the living dead is entirely removed from the state of personal immortality, and he sinks beyond the horizon of the Sasa period. He is now dead, as far as human beings are concerned, and the process of dying is now completed. The living dead is now a spirit, which enters the state of collective immortality. It has 'lost' its personal name, a far as human beings are concerned, and with it goes the human personality. It is now an 'it', and no longer a 'he' or a 'she'; it is now one of the myriads of the spirits who have lost their humanness. This, for all practical purposes, is the final destiny of the human soul. Man is ontologically destined to lose his humanness but gain his full spiritness, and there is no general evolution or devolution beyond that point. God is beyond, and in African concepts, there is neither hope nor possibility that soul would attain a share in the divinity of God. (Mbiti: 1976, 163)

In this scheme, there is a drift from *Sasa* to *Zamani* in which personality is lost as well as power: it is difficult not to conclude that the existence of those in the *Sasa* period is qualitatively better than those in *Zamani*. We might say that this view contrasts a dynamic present with long "past", noting however, that that "past" can have a future aspect (*zamani zijazo*), even if this is virtually absent because it cannot be realised (Mbiti: 1971, 24). This difficulty of realising the future makes such concepts of time "move" backwards (*ibid.*). Existential questions about meaning, existence and history tend to have a focus towards the past, and comparatively little interest in the future, or the end of the world. This is very different from the Western linear concept of time as progress. The Western theory implies that we are progressing forward towards a realisation of truth and existence in the future: teleology. This is to the case in the east African models which can be summarised thus:

- An indefinite "past" (*Zamani*) and an active "present" (*Sasa*) which gives the individual self-definition.
- A limited future period (included in *Zamani*)

- No concept of the "end of the world": a gradual process of movement from *Sasa* to *Zamani*.
- Focus on the past rather than the future

The Overlap of Biblical and East African Ideas of Time

We have already seen that the linear, progressive model of time holds no monopoly over the Bible. Linear theories, either of progress or decline, do not fit with the Swahili and Akamba pattern. Further, the idea of eternal truths is at odds with linear theories as well as the East African *Sasa* and *Zamani*, neither of which can be characterised as eternal or enduring. They also appear qualitatively different, and do not inform each other in the way that myths do. The location of meaning between *Sasa* and *Zamani* is different from the model of mythical time. It is located either in *Sasa*, or in the stories of the past, rather than in the future or in the transcendent (eternity).

This leaves the cyclic model as potentially offering points of contact with Swahili concepts. Let us now turn our attention to Biblical texts and ideas which indicate that overlap with the Swahili pattern. These are found in some of the key themes of both the Old and New Testaments.

The description of *Yom Kippur* in *Lev* 16 outlines rituals central to the concept of atonement (Charlesworth: 1992, 12). Atonement can be described as an action that repairs breaches in the covenant relationship between people and God. Various explanations of how this takes place have been offered. Atonement appears to turn away the wrath of God (*Num* 8:19;16:47; 25:10-13). Some use the language of expiation or propitiation. However, such terms do not appear entirely appropriate. Commentators argue about whether the texts should be interpreted as examples of expiation (Ringgren: 1962, 28- 42), or propitiation (De Roo: 2000, 237). TDNT article III, 316-7 suggests that, by the NT period, the technical terms used could include both understandings. The confusion over the use of the two terms suggests that the modern distinction may not be appropriate to the ancient contexts. They appear to obscure rather than clarify what is going on. Other commentators attempt to explain atonement arguing that it should be set in the context of cleansing and purity. Whilst this approach has the merit of looking at practices within a nexus of ideas, it too may be misleading:

> Terms derived from cleansing, washing and purging have imported into biblical scholarship distractions which have occluded Leviticus' own very specific and clear description of atonement. According to the illustrative cases from Leviticus, to atone means to cover or recover, cover again, to repair a hole, cure a sickness, mend a rift, make good a torn or broken covering. As a noun, what is translated atonement, expiation or purgation means integument made good; conversely, the examples in the book indicate that defilement means integument torn. Atonement does not mean covering a sin so as to hide it from the sight of

> God; it means making good an outer layer which has rotted or been pierced. (Douglas: 1994,117)[3]

This also affects the understanding of atonement:

> The eternal covenant was the system of bonds which established and maintained the creation, ordering and binding the forces of chaos. There are several places in the Old Testament where this older view of the creation is implied at e.g. Job 38.8-10: 'Who shut in the sea with doors and prescribed bounds for it?'; or Jeremiah 5.22: 'I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea, the eternal rule which it may not transgress'; or Psalm 104.9: 'You set a boundary that (the waters) should not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth'. The eternal covenant is more prominent in the non-canonical texts such as 1 Enoch, which describes how this covenant was broken and then restored. The restoration of the covenant is described in terms we recognise as the Day of the Lord, the Judgement, as we shall see later. When the statutes and laws of the eternal covenant were broken, the fabric of the creation began to collapse and chaos set in. Total disregard for the statutes resulted in the return to chaos described in e.g. Isaiah 24.5: 'The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant.' Or Jeremiah 4.23: 'I looked to the earth and lo it was waste and void; and to the heavens and they had no light'. Jeremiah sees the world returned to its pre-creation state. When the covenant was restored, the creation was renewed and returned to its original condition of *salom* and *sedaqah/dikaiosune*. (Barker;1994, 3)

Such approaches to atonement and covenant are more similar to the Swahili concept of time that the linear progressive model. The end point is no longer at the far end of a line, but is actually the starting point from which time starts. In these interpretations of covenant and atonement, the endpoint is not separate from the starting point. Rather, they are the same. Meaning and value are found not in teleology, but in aetiology. Meaning is located in creation, the starting point., and in the present. *Sasa* is a location of meaning in the east African systems, just as in the NT context. This much is borne out by the concept of "correspondence in history" used in Jewish interpretation of the time.

> The important point about correspondence in history is that the text is not used up by a single event…
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> We have not interpreted a text appropriately until we have determined how it corresponds or does not correspond with our own situation. (Snodgrass: 1994, 37-8)

In neither the New Testament nor East African thought is the search for meaning a purely archaising exercise.

This connection of meaning and creation is also expressed in liturgical symbolism. The Temple was the focus of the cult, the place where the atonement rituals were performed. It was the place where God was considered to be present with his people. This presence was illustrated by the design of the Temple. Its design is a representation of the Garden of Eden. Thus the bronze basin in the

Temple courtyard represented the waters or sea from which the creation was drawn (Barker: 1991, 65-7). The Temple represents Eden (ibid,., 68-70) complete with its rivers [*Gen* 2:10, *Ezek* 47, *Zech* 14:8-9], and the Tree of Life. The Tree was symbolised by the *menorah*, the seven branched candlestick [*Zech* 4: 10,14]. This symbolism was not restricted to Judaism, but also adopted by some Christians. *Rev* 11 picks up the symbolism of the *menorah* in 11: 4-6 (ibid., 86-95). It further depicts the City of God with its rivers and trees [*Rev* 22:1-2], using symbolism culled from the cult and the prophets. Such symbolism expresses key hopes and faith:

> Nor must there be a crude historical understanding of the Eden myth. The prophets looked forward to a time when the End would be like the beginning, and everything would be restored to its original state, but this was not so much their view of linear history as an expression of their belief that the material creation was perpetually out of harmony with the divine original, and that it was constantly necessary to re-establish the correspondence. The future and the past were perpetually and potentially present. (ibid., 68)

This is not identical with the East African patterns. *Sasa* and *Zamani* are not "perpetually and potentially present". A second difference is the hope that everything will return to the way it was in the beginning. This cyclic, even if it happens only once, pattern is not found in the Swahili and Akamba theories. Also absent is the idea that the two zones are out of harmony: the difference between *Sasa* and *Zamani* is not expressed in such terms. There is, however, one major point of contact. This relates to the location of meaning and value. Both this understanding and the East African ones have an aetiological bias: to an extent, they place meaning and values in the past.

The placing of meaning and true existence in the creation myth echoes the pattern of Akamba thought described by Mbiti:

> To Akamba and other African peoples, history moves 'backwards', and cannot therefore head towards a goal, a climax or a termination…..
>
> The centre of gravity in History lies in the past and not in the present or the otherwise very short future. Any sense of historical depth is in what has happened rather than in what will yet happen. The whole thinking and expectation of the people is directed towards the 'past' dimension of time which, consequently, is rich in mythology, shines with a brightness of explaining what otherwise puzzles man today, and takes pride in its national pillars and heroes. (Mbiti: 1971, 31)

Implications of these Findings

The fact that all these theories locate meaning in the past does not obviate many of the difficulties noted by Mbiti. It does, however, give a point of convergence. There is a similarity in the shape of time, in which the past provides keys to the future. To that extent, the use of Biblical passages that work on such

understandings of time might provide a more familiar way to discuss theological points for some East African readers. At least it may remove one source of confusion.

There are wider implications, however, for those who have persisted in using linear theories, usually progressive, to analyse the Scriptures.

First, there is a timely reminder that such a theory may be at odds with the theory being used by a particular author or within a text. There a re a number of different theories of time which may underpin a particular text. They cannot, and should not, be conformed to the one model of linear progression.

Second, it reminds us that thought about the Christian *eschaton* does not depend on speculation about the future. Much information about such hopes can be found by reference to the past. For, "newness in Christ", to use Mbiti's phrase, must not be confused with novelty. Hopes about new life in Christ and the Kingdom of God were rooted in the experience of previous generations. Jesus is the means by which such hopes come to pass. This is the novelty. Theories of time, like so much else, in theology are rightly Christocentric, because much of their meaning depends on the person and action of Christ. *He makes the difference*. But this difference does not mean that the past is rejected, or loses value and meaning. Rather, it provides valuable insights to help us understand the hopes and promises which we hold. What, however, theories about time to do not alter are the radical differences which incarnational theology introduces into the relationship between God and humanity. Mbiti notes this as an obstacle for Akamba believers: their myths of meaning do not allow for this kind of contact. This is not a new problem. It is found also in the collision of Christianity and much Greek philosophy, in which matter and spirit were considered mutually exclusive. The answers found there were developed over hundreds of years. Scholars still debate whether they distorted or affirmed the Gospel[4].

Whilst a comparison of Biblical and East African theories of time may seem esoteric, or even pointless, this can be disputed. For this study shows that approaching what is familiar from a different direction may provoke fresh reflection. It also shows how ideas that remain unexamined, or even unconsidered, may have a damaging effect on the theological and missiological process. In this case, the different theories have prompted and examination of a familiar hermeneutical principle (that is, the linear theory of time) and suggest that it be used more cautiously. Further, the discovery of a wide number of theories of time within Scripture opens up new possible interpretations, and reminds us that eschatological reflection must also look to the past.

They also show an important missiological point. For the use of linear theories has distorted the reception of the Gospel among the Akamba (Mbiti: 1971, 56-7). It shows that the missionaries transmitted an understanding of the Gospel fixed in their own cultural expressions and thought forms. Their stress on the linear,

without recourse to the eternal and cyclic theories, marked a diminution of Scripture rather than a full expression of its riches. For Scripture contains within itself the raw material for engagement with linear, cyclic and eternal theories of time which may be held by a people or culture. It has the potential to speak to any culture familiar with one or more of these different theories. This does not automatically magic away difficulties in communicating the Gospel, but potentially removes one obstacle, namely, being forced to think of the events of Scriptures in an alien time-scale. It provides an introduction to this area of theology in terms which are more familiar. A full analysis will need at some point to introduce and deal with all the different theories represented in the scriptural tradition. It will, thus, provide challenges of this kind, but at a different point. It might be worth our asking whether the exponents of linear progressive theories have actually taken this step themselves.

The automatic and unreflective assumption of the missionary's own theory of time shows a disregard for the value of the thought and culture of those on the receiving end. This disregard increases the chance of the message being misunderstood or not understood. It is a reminder that an unreflective use of presuppositions may not only blind theologians to the riches of Scripture, but also damage the mission of the church. For it places unnecessary epistemological burdens on those who would follow Christ. It is a course of action lampooned in a different context by Frank Weston, then Anglican Bishop of Zanzibar and Tanga, in his reflections on Higher Critics. He argued that life had given an experiential basis for knowing Christ which was denied by liberal theologians:

> You will bear me out that Gethsemane and Calvary are most real in Africa; that Christ is brutally crucified here, crucified in the person of Africans, by his professing followers…God in manhood, God on the Cross, God of the empty tomb.
>
> Now into the glory of our Calvary breaks the voice of prelatical and priestly liberalism. And its message, what is it?
>
> It is that Africans cannot possibly understand the Gospels, Church or sacraments until they re-interpret them in the light of modern European thought! Poor Africans: not yet among the wise of European thought.
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> (Weston:1919, 68-9)

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[1] This development within Johannine and later theology is described by Schweitzer: 1998, 334-75) as the "Hellenisation" of Paul's mystical theory. In my current research at UNISA, I include arguments that the division of eschatological and other theological themes (e.g., sacrifice) is not as clear-cut as Schweitzer suggests, and that these, indeed, overlap.

[2] The *Sasa* and *Zamani* periods overlap with the Akamba *Mituki* (= *Sasa*) and *Tene* (= *Zamani*) described in much greater depth in Mbiti: 1971, 26-32. There Mbiti initially stresses that *Tene* is past in emphasis without a future dimension, though this is qualified on p.30. The qualifying terms from Swahili suggest that such positions may be given different nuances. Motluk: 2002,38, notes Gleitman's findings that "we can be taught very

easily to think of time in different ways". Perhaps exposure to Biblical understandings of time and Western culture has produced such changes (Mbiti: 1971,31-2).

[3] However, it is possible that the ideas outlined by Douglas do not need to be exclusive of the language of cleansing. It is possible to describe cleaning, or the removal of marks as a restoration of original purity.

[4] Thus we can note Hood's thesis that this process made God "Greek" (Hood:1990, 5). However, the theological struggles of the early period do not show a blind swallowing of Greek ideas. In the controversy between "heresy" and "orthodoxy", "heresy" is often more Greek in flavour than "orthodoxy". Marcionism, whose founder rejected much of the OT and the NT in favour of Greek thought forms, is a case in point. The idea of the Demiurge (often found in Gnostic speculation), the second-rate Neo-Platonic god instrumental in creation, with its concomitant degradation of the value of creation, is a second.

There is also an important point about contextualisation within this. If a Greek contextualisation is wrong, is this on methodological or cultural grounds? If methodological, the same *caveats* apply no matter which culture is providing the stuff, terms or thought forms. If the criticism is on the grounds of its Greek-ness, this raises questions about the attitude of the theologian to a different culture. On what grounds is a particular culture seen as distorting? Sensitivity is needed to issues of race even in an historical study.