SALVATION IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY:
A TYPOLOGY OF EXISTING APPROACHES

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1. Introduction

Although soteriology, or the doctrine of salvation, has always occupied a central place in Christian theology, the 'shape of soteriology' has changed many times as Christianity's centre of gravity shifted to new cultural contexts, from Palestine, to the Hellenic and Roman, and eventually the Celtic and Germanic worlds. The most recent 'shift' from the First to the Third world has been characterised by a similar pattern: Salvation has retained its centrality in African, Latin American and Asian Christian theology, but the ways in which it is being conceptualised in these new contexts are often vastly different from more traditional Western approaches.

One of the characteristics of this rethinking of salvation in Third World theology generally, and African Christian theology in particular, has been the renewed interest in the nature of salvation. Although such interest has never been completely absent from traditional soteriological discussions, one may safely say that the main emphases in those discussions have always been on the agent(s) of salvation, a trinitarian God (Nicea) and a two-natured Christ (Chalcedon), perhaps with the cooperation (synergy) of a free human agent (Pelagian and Reformation controversies), the means of salvation through the cross of Christ (the various 'theories of the Atonement'), mediated by the Church with its sacraments ('means of grace'), and by grace, through faith alone (the justification debate), and the scope of salvation: only those who believe (Luther), or cooperate with grace (Trent), or those in the (true) Church (extra ecclesia nulla salus), or the elect (doctrine of predestination) are saved, etc. That is, while the 'who', the 'how' and the 'whom' of salvation have received much attention, the 'what', in the sense of the 'wherefrom' and the 'whereto', has only seldom been thematised, much less problematised, with the result that the concept of salvation came

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to be characterised by a certain vacuity.\footnote{For a survey of the different confessional traditions of soteriology, which illustrates this point well, see Rienk Lanooy (ed.), \textit{For us and for our salvation: seven perspectives on Christian soteriology}, Utrecht/Leiden: IIMO, 1994. The only contribution to this volume, in which the ‘wherefrom’ and the ‘whereto’ of salvation are explicitly addressed, is the one by Bishop Kallistos Ware, ‘The Understanding of salvation in the Orthodox tradition,’ 1071-32. The absence of a strong concentration on the nature of salvation in the contributions dealing with Western (Catholic and Protestant) traditions, is not the fault of the authors, but reflects the emphases of the traditions on which they are writing. These trends have continued into the present ecumenical debate, with the issue of justification still dominating the bilateral discussions on soteriology. For an in-depth analysis and evaluation of these bilateral dialogues, see Martien Brinkman, \textit{Justification in ecumenical dialogue. Central aspects of Christian soteriology in debate}, Utrecht: IIMO, 1996.} This, at least, was the impression of those in the ‘mission territories’, who had heard the Western missionary preaching on salvation. This sentiment on the part of receiving communities was well expressed by Jonas Ntsiko, a Xhosa poet, writing towards the end of the 19th century, who referred to the salvation proclaimed to the Africans by the Christian missionaries as a ‘fabulous ghost, that we try to embrace in vain’.\footnote{Quoted in A.S. van Niekerk, \textit{God, the powers, and man in the works of some black South African poets of the seventies}, University of Pretoria: Doctoral dissertation 1980, (later published as: \textit{Dominee, are you listening to the drums?}, Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1982, 108: ‘Some thoughts till now ne’er spoken / Make shreds of my innermost being; / And the cares and fortunes of my kin / Still journey with me to the grave. // I turn my back on the many shams / That I see from day to day; / It seems we march to our very graves / Encircled by a smiling Gospel. // For what is this Gospel? / And what salvation? / The shade of a fabulous ghost / That we try to embrace in vain.’} 

The purpose of this article is to provide a survey of the ways in which African Christian theologians have attempted to give ‘flesh and bones’ to the ‘fabulous ghost’ of salvation. This will be done by presenting a typology of the various accounts of the \textit{nature} of salvation that have been put forward by African Christian theologians so far.\footnote{Although I shall show, in each case, how each of these types has its representatives throughout the continent, and in all the different streams of African theology, it will be clear to the reader that Southern African contributions to the discussion are particularly well represented. This is mainly due to the fact that, in the case of Black theology, as one of the four main types of African theology (see note 2), the aims and concerns of that theological movement are so closely linked to the specifically South(ern) African context, that a ‘balanced’ survey of African soteriologies, in the material sense, will necessarily be ‘unbalanced’ in the geographical sense. However, the typology presented here is also partly intended to show that, precisely at the material level, the differences between South African Black theology and other African theologies are not as significant as one would perhaps expect in the light of the fierce mutual criticisms that have been launched by representatives of the two theological ‘camps’. On the Black / African theology debate, see John S. Mbiti, ‘An African views American Black theology,’ in: G. Wilmore & J. Cone (eds.), \textit{Black theology: a documentary history 1966-1979}, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979; Manas Buthelezi, ‘Toward indigenous theology in South African theology’ in: A. S. van Niekerk (ed.), \textit{God, the powers, and man in the works of some black South African poets of the seventies}, University of Pretoria: Doctoral dissertation 1980, (later published as: \textit{Dominee, are you listening to the drums?}, Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1982, 108: ‘Some thoughts till now ne’er spoken / Make shreds of my innermost being; / And the cares and fortunes of my kin / Still journey with me to the grave. // I turn my back on the many shams / That I see from day to day; / It seems we march to our very graves / Encircled by a smiling Gospel. // For what is this Gospel? / And what salvation? / The shade of a fabulous ghost / That we try to embrace in vain.’}