Lessons for Westerners from Setiloane's Christology

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Why Jesus? Why is Jesus necessary? Necessary for what? The answer to that is what Christians call "gospel", "the Good News". Those two simple words, Good and News, give the basic answer to the question: Why Jesus? From the days of the New Testament onwards the answer, in all its variations, claims that in Jesus something "new" and something "good", yes, "very good", occurs in our world.

Gabriel Setiloane offers a distinctively African answer to the question: Why Jesus? in his theological poem, "I am an African". This paper seeks to read his work for the Christological benefit it offers to western Christians. (Published in *Risk*, 1973, Vol. IX, No. 3).

When I use the term "western Christians", I have in mind the students I teach in the USA in seminary and university contexts. I also have in mind the preaching I hear in Christian congregations in my country. All too often the Christ-picture at the center of the working theology of pastors and theology students is poor. I say "poor" because the Christ being proposed does not constitute Good News. The Christ-picture is insufficiently "good" and insufficiently "new" vis-a-vis the daily lived experience of the people. "The merits and benefits of Christ", as Melanchthon once said, "are being under-used" and in the worst cases "wasted".

Two chronic deficits in western Christians

For this paper I wish to isolate two of those chronic deficits. The first is a "revelationist Jesus". By that term I wish to signal a Christology that presents Jesus as divine revealer, to be sure, but one who is not qualitatively different from other revealers - Moses, Isaiah, or John the Baptist. He is different quantitatively. He does supremely and perfectly what other revealers do less successfully. Had the predecessors done their job (of communicating) and had their audiences done their job (of comprehending), Jesus would not really have been necessary. But because of past human failure in both the giving and the receiving, the divine-human Jesus is necessary to get revelation all the way through to humans, and to make it stick. At center there is actually nothing new in this Jesus.

A second chronic deficit in working Christologies in the West is a Jesus image that reflects our culture's image about our own Western selves. The glory of western civilization parallels a "theology of glory" Christ image. Admittedly this image is a complex composition, rooted not least in the Old Adam/Old Eve still plaguing Christians. But its persistence is inescapable; it even surfaces when Christ's crucifixion is portrayed and the proponents think they are reflecting a theology of the cross. For these two maladies, Setiloane can help us.

He frames his poem as an African's answer to two questions posed by an obviously Western Christian.
The black-white tension is not insignificant in the poem's structure and its substance. It sets the stage for something new and good to come back to the superior, if not even supercilious, white questioner from the black respondent. The posture imposed on the respondent is that of the underdog. Yet it is just this voice from the underside of history that has resources the questioner lacks for answering his own question. The African proclaims to the interrogator an image of Christ according to the theology of the cross.

The Western questioner (not even sure the African has any faith at all; perhaps he lives "like the beasts of the field") begins:

"What of God, the Creator
Revealed to mankind through the Jews of old,
the YAHWEH: I AM
Who has been and ever shall be?
Do you acknowledge Him?"

The African does not hesitate to say yes.

"My fathers and theirs many generations before, knew Him.
They bowed the knee to Him
By many names they knew Him..."

Then he recites some of these names, UVELINGQAKI, UNKULUNKULU, MODIMO, MODIRI, LESA, each one descriptive of a quality also ascribed to the Yahweh of the Hebrew scriptures. Despite these varied names, the deity they were encountering and worshipping was "He the One and only God".

And then comes the African's "But ..." which signals that this history of revelation was flawed and -- for all its patent goodness -- it brought fateful and fatal consequences. "This God of old shone with a brightness so bright it blinded them". And even though "pity flowed in His heart", Uvelingqaki had no traffic with the living; "none should reach His presence... unless they die". The ancestors by dying become "little gods". They alone "come into His presence... bearing the prayers and supplications of their children to the GREAT GOD".

Although these revelations were indeed encounters with the God of the Old Testament, the primal soteriological needs of the people were not met thereby. If anything, they deteriorated as they were "blinded" and left deserted "unless they die". Even the grace-accents signaled in the descriptive terms MODIRI(Creator) and LESA (Life-giver) do not improve the situation. In fact, as we see toward the end of the poem, past graces received from God constitute the "reason", the grounds, why cleansing, peace-making, and forgiving still need to be done after all these past revelations.

The experience of Setiloane's people corroborates the Biblical axiom that to whom much is given, much is required. The more grace one receives in these daily revelations of God, the more human obligation increase. The fact that the benefactor's grace is freely bestowed does not reduce the beneficiary's subsequent obligations -- apart from Christ, that is. Each additional encounter with the "One and