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Even the donkey and the ox know (Isaiah 1:2-3): An appeal to the significance of natural law in biblical interpretation

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Abstract

This article analyses Isaiah 1:2-3 from the perspective of natural law. It argues that natural law, as a theological-ethical concept, is introduced in Isaiah 1:2-3. As such it theorises that natural law can be incorporated as a hermeneutical lens for the theological-ethical interpretation of some Old Testament texts without jeopardising the integrity of theological discourse. This hermeneutical lens, I will argue, is significant for some interpretive communities in Africa. The Tangale ethnic group's traditional beliefs and practices are used as a point of departure for the discourse to argue that moral and ethical values informed by these traditional beliefs are reflections of natural law. Thus, showing heuristic potentials thereof in understanding some of the theology and ethics of the Old Testament.

Introduction

Appropriating biblical text in Africa just like any other reader of the biblical text involves several variables. For instance, in reaction to some past Western missionaries' denigration and demonisation of African culture and religion, some scholars such as the renowned African scholar John Mbiti, consider African culture and tradition as *praeparatio evangelica* (Mbiti 1978:311). Mbiti explains that African religion prepares the ground for the acceptance of the Christian faith. It provided the vocabulary upon which Christian faith was planted and continues to flourish. This reactionary assertion has critical issues worth considering. For example, from an ethical point of view, it leads to

reflection on the issue of so-called natural law, an ethical presupposition that claims that moral duty can be learned from nature and that it is then reflected in cultural norms, values, and practices.[1]

Further questions flow from this assertion, such as, what informs the African Christian ethical and moral values? From the point of view of dogmatic theology, the assertion leads to the reflection on natural revelation and natural theology.[2] Does natural law, via African culture and tradition, constitute the revelation of God and can it be relied upon for moral guidance? Furthermore, what constitutes moral values? In other words, are moral values only those constituted and coded in the covenant laws revealed in the Bible through the ancient Israel community? Can African cultures and traditions be a reflection or repository of natural law?

This article considers the culture and traditions of the Tangale[3] people of Gombe State, Nigeria, from the perspective of natural law. The article proposes that understanding African cultures/traditions from the dimension of natural law might have a heuristic advantage towards a theological-ethical interpretation of the Old Testament in a manner that will be relevant for interpretative communities in Africa and how it may happen. Therefore, the article analyses Isaiah 1:2-3 from the perspective of natural law. It also discusses some Tangale worldviews – a constituent of culture – and how it resonates with the concept of natural law. It then shows the relevance of these worldviews for a biblical hermeneutic. I shall start with a brief explanation of the concept of natural law.

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[1] Nature may be defined as (1) "the phenomena of the physical world collectively including plants, animals, and the landscape, as opposed to humans or human creation…" or (2) "the basic or inherent features, qualities, or character of a person or thing…" (Soanes & Stevenson 2008).

[2] Due to limited space, the aspect of natural *theology* cannot be addressed in detail here. In simplest terms, however, and for the sake of clarity, natural theology may be understood to refer to the presupposition that God is knowable through nature. From the perspective of dogmatic theology, natural theology falls under the concept of general revelation. For more on natural theology see Barr, 1993:1ff. 1999:12ff, 167ff.

[3] Tangale is an ethnic group found in the southern part of Gombe state of Nigeria. It is believed that the Tangale people migrated from Yemen through what is now Borno State (*cf.* Maina, 2013:311; 2014:5; Tadi, 2013:4).

Natural law

First, it is worth noting that the goal of this article is not to outline what is natural or unnatural, for that is not what natural law is meant to do. Natural law does not seek to explain what ethical principles can be derived from nature. Rather, it is the assumption that there are universal laws that apply to all, and this is linked with the design of God as the creator.[4] Natural law seeks to affirm that humanity, universally, knows a body of morally binding laws that shape a common pattern of moral and social behaviour without reference to transcendent revelation[5]. Natural law focuses on general rules of conduct that are embedded in human nature and can be accessed rationally (Kassa 2014:10ff).[6]

Natural law is a controversial concept. The idea has been associated with moral distortions and has been used in some circles to justify opposing courses of moral behaviour (*cf*. Nash 2000:229). It shows that the application or the understanding of natural law is based upon human interpretation – in South Africa, it was often heard with regard to the "laws of creation" that supported the idea of the separateness of races.

Again, it is assumed that natural law is a source of ethics that seeks to establish an autonomous moral standard. Specifically, the Protestant churches are

[4] One may ask why is "design of God" evoked here. Well, as opposed to the assumptions of some protestants who though that natural law is somewhat deistic, natural law, according to St Thomas Aquinas is "rational creature's participation of the eternal law" (*Summa Theologica*, QQ 91: [A2]). It does not evoke God's name but it is not independent of God's design. According to Murphy (2019:np), God created humanity to act freely according to principles of reason—God's rational plan by which all creation is ordered.

[5] By "transcendent revelation" this refers to Gods special revelation of his law. Aquinas (*Summa Theologica:* QQ94 [A2]) uses "eternal law" or "divine law" to refer to this law received through special revelation.

[6] Central to this argument is the question of epistemology—how we know things and how we are able to know the things we do? Natural law argues that all humans possess common knowledge by virtue of their being. We shall argue below how Isaiah appeals to whole order of life instead of cultic or legal treaty.

suspicious of the natural law tradition as somewhat deistic.[7] "They see it [natural law] pushing God off into a realm where he may be the remote origin of moral obligation, but is not present in his creation as the one who teaches human beings how they should live" (Barton 2002:59; see also Nash 2000:229).

Akin to the above misapprehension, therefore, this article holds that (*cf.* Aquinas, Summa Theologica: QQ91-94 [A2]):

i. Natural law differs from statute law, from eternal law [supernaturally revealed law], and even from so-called laws of nature, but it is a participation in the eternal law according to its own mode – the knowledge of certain general principles.
ii. Natural law suggests that moral law is objective, idealistic, and non-existential.
iii. Natural law affirms that all human beings share a set of ethical norms and imperatives that they commonly perceive without dependence on supernatural disclosure and illumination.

Natural law does not push God into a realm of being a remote origin of moral obligation. The Bible, which is God's revealed law recognises the existence of natural law. For example, prophetic literature seems to be the most revelatory, the most dependent on the direct word of the Lord, hence one would least expect any form of natural law in them (see Barr, 1999:475). It is argued below that Isaiah appeals to the natural faculty of reasoning of the Israelite in his indictment, not the written code in the *Torah.*[8] Thus, natural law as a theological-ethical concept is introduced in Isaiah 1:2-3. Similarly, the Tangale traditional religious laws guiding their daily lives, I would argue, is a reflection of the natural law principles. In the section below, Isaiah 1:2-3 is analysed,

[7] These suspiciousness relate to how the concept transformed into natural theology. Kassa (2014:1) notes that "Natural theology and natural law are two distinct concepts, but are closely related. […] natural theology relates to the attempt to establish some sort of theistic claim through the observation of nature, while natural law deals with the quest to derive or ground some moral norms and ethical principles in nature. Simply put, natural law asks the question whether human morality can be informed by nature, while natural theology asks whether God is knowable through nature […].

[8] For the relationship between the Isaiah appeal to nature in his indictment and written code, see the next section.

using natural law as the interpretive lens. Following this, the culture and beliefs of the Tangale people are discussed, showing their resonance with natural law. Its heuristic potential for the interpretation of the Old Testament is further highlighted.

Natural law in Isaiah 1:2-3? A Close Reading

A 'Close Reading' is a form of criticism that focuses on the text itself. It focuses on a close examination of the literary features of a text without necessarily neglecting the diachronic dimension of the text (*cf.* Lawrie 2005:72ff).[9] A 'Close Reading' is also an approach to a biblical text that involves careful observation, as if with a magnifying glass, of the details of the text.

2a	שִׁמְעוּ שָׁמַיִם וְהַאֲזִינִי	Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth!
2a'	אֶרֶץ	For the LORD has spoken:
2b	כִּי יְהוָה דִּבֵּר	I reared children and brought them
2b'	בָּנִים גִּדַּלְתִּי וְרוֹמַמְתִּי	up,
	וְהֵם פָּשְׁעוּ בִי	but they rebelled against me.
3a	יָדַע שׁוֹר קֹנֵהוּ	The ox knows his master,
3a'	וַחֲמוֹר אֵבוּס בְּעָלָיו	the donkey his owner's manger,
3b	יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָדַע	but Israel does not know,
3b'	עַמִּי לֹא הִתְבּוֹנָן:	my people do not understand.

[9] Isaiah is one of the most complex books in the Old Testament. Numerous background and introductory issues remain unresolved (see Barton, 2003:9; Collins, 2004:307) and it is beyond the scope of the article to discuss these issues. However, I shall make some remarks on background matters then proceed to investigate the pericope. It is argued that the book of Isaiah is a composite document and that the inclusios between chapter 1 and 66 show evidences of a redactional unity. This redactional unity is considered a deliberate theological unity (*cf.* Blenkinsopp, 2000:82; Brueggemann 1998:5; Collins 2004:308f; Schmid, 2009:568; Williamson 1995:211). The composite nature of the text also makes the task of dating the pericope complex as there is no clear evidence of the time of composition. Some scholars (Oswalt, 1986:84f) argue for eight Century BCE while others suggest a postexilic period (*cf.* Schmid 2009:568; Sweeney 1988:22, 123; Williamson 2006:10). This article prefers to take the post exilic period as the possible date of the composition. The article concurs with Gerstenberger (2002:314) that "The theologians of the exilic and post-exilic community drew on many sources [('P' and 'non-P' sources)] for their revision of old traditions".

Table 1:Isaiah 1: 2-3 (RSV and Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia)

The first observable literary characteristic of this text (Table 1 above*)* is that it is poetry.[10] Blenkinsopp (2000:79) rightly describes Isaiah's poetry as parallelism patterned not on metre and rhyme but on the balance of thought conveyed by a corresponding balance of sentence. Chapter 1of Isaiah is composed in this pattern, containing short stanzas of individual themes which are further linked in one way or the other by themes such as sin, judgment, deliverance, and choice (*cf.* Blenkinsopp 2000:180; Davies 1981:41).

Isaiah 1: 2 begins with a direct address to the heavens and the earth to hear and listen—שִׁמְעוּ שָׁמַיִם וְהַאֲזִינִי אֶרֶץ. It is followed by a motivation that what they are about to hear and give ear to is from the Lord—כִּי יְהוָה דִּבֶּר. The Lord summons the heavens and the earth to express his concern about his children. He was concerned that the בָּנִים he has raised and brought up have decided to rebel against him —וְהֵם פָּשְׁעוּ בִי.

Verse 3 is a short and powerful parable describing a contrast to the attitude of the בָּנִים in verse 2. It states that the ox knows[11] his master[12] —יָדַע שׁוֹר קֹנֵהוּ, and the donkey also knows his master's crib—וַחֲמוֹר אֵבוּס בְּעָלָיו. The next sentence 3b/b' is antithetically parallel to 3a/a' showing obvious contrast between יִשְׂרָאֵל (further identified as עַמִּי, my people) and the ox and the donkey. The contrast here is that Israel does not understand what an ox and a donkey understand, even though the kind of relationship that exists between the animals and their master and source of livelihood cannot be equated to

[10] There are no serious variations that affect the actual wordings of the pericope from the translation of different ancient manuscripts. One instance is found in the Septuagint's translation of the Hebrew verb גִּדַּלְתִּי (literally meaning: 'to make great'), as ἐγέννησα (literally meaning 'I have begotten'). The Greek verb γεννάω usually renders ילד and God is rarely the subject of ילד. ילד implies fatherhood In the ANE traditions, "father" suggests a pantheon or a family of gods and that goes against monotheism.

[11] 'Know' is the Hebrew verb יָדַע, it has several semantic possibilities. Its use in this passage agrees with the prototypical meaning "to recognise (in the language of treaties, to perceive, to notice, to hear or learn), and to know" (HALOT, 1996:390f).

[12] קָנָהוּ is used to describe the relationship between the animal and its master. It connotes the idea of acquiring something through purchase (HALOT, 1996:1970f).

that which exists between Yahweh and Israel, "my people". Thus, the attitude of Israel who is the Lord's בָּנִים (v.2) and עַמִּי (v.3) is considered a rebellion.

This rib pattern has covenant unfaithfulness in its background, focussing on the people's neglect of the covenant law (see Davies, 1981:47, 53; Melugin, 1996:208; Oswalt, 1986:85; Williamson, 2006:27). According to Childs (2001:17) the summon to heavens and earth

> has its closest parallel in the first verse of the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:1–43) […] The Song of Moses calls upon the heavens and earth to witness to God's faithfulness and Israel's corruption (v. 4b). In fact, many of the themes of Isaiah are sounded in similar vocabulary.

However, the text did not follow the technicalities of a system of law or appeals to a covenant obligation (*cf.* Childs 2001:18), rather, it stresses the intellectual side of the moral being. The text did not use notions that are familiar to a covenant treaty in the *Torah,* rather the writer relies upon common reasoning as his epistemological basis. Isaiah draws more on the motif of knowing. Drawing from the motif of knowing, one could argue that the appeal to the heavens and the earth, therefore, is not merely a matter of legality; it is a matter of the whole order of life. It is a general appeal; every rational being (not only the covenant community who has the written covenant code) will agree with the issue that Yahweh is about to address. The appeal to the heavens and earth shows that what Yahweh is about to reveal is an enduring principle for all people. Gerstenberger (2002:263) observes

> Although the ethical orientation is put under the authority of Yahweh …the individual precepts are very often completely neutral in religious terms and have been taken from general norms of societies of the ancient Near East.

Under the assumption that Old Testament prophets rely on the direct revelation from God, it is expected that an indictment such as this uses the revealed word—the *Torah* which is the repository of Israel's religious heritage—as its basis (*cf.* Barton, 2014:95;[13] Lee, 2013:109). On the contrary,

[13] Barton explains that it was a primary belief that "All moral obligation, it was held, flowed from this act of divine grace and mercy: the God who had saved Israel demanded

Isaiah appeals to precepts that are neutral in religious terms. Because of the diverse background of individuals at the time of writing, appealing to the general norms would mean that the indictment is inclusive. Thus, one could argue that the epistemological basis of the indictment is natural law since it is neutral to any religious term and appeals to the common reasoning of the society—drawing upon the motif of knowing.

The natural law principle is introduced in the motif of knowing in the pericope. Israel's behaviour is revealed as unnatural. The passage introduces Israel as Yahweh's children with whom he had had an intimate relationship. The writer reports that Yahweh accuses Israel of rebelling because they showed a lack of knowledge and understanding despite Yahweh's caring relationship. Israel's behaviour is contrasted to that of an ox and a donkey—presumably irrational beings. The kind of relationship between an ox and its master is such that the natural outcome is that the ox possesses a kind of knowledge of its owner and a donkey is said to know its owner's manger.[14] Ironically, Israel did not show that natural tendency despite their intimate relationship with Yahweh, thus a rebellion—presupposing that Israel's knowledge of Yahweh is not instinctive. The unnaturalness of Israel's behaviour hails from the fact that Israel experienced a unique relationship with the Lord, a father-child relationship that is characterised by intimacy. The natural outcome of such an intimate relationship is trust and faithfulness. According to natural law principles, Israel possesses some innate power of the intellect to know certain moral principles. Yet the passage says "but Israel does not, my people do not understand".

A close example of a situation where an animal of instinct is used to shame the behaviour of humans is the story of Balaam and his donkey in Numbers 22. It is quite fascinating that Balaam was portrayed by the narrator as a seer. Ironically Balaam could not see what the donkey saw. The story portrays the donkey as possessing some kind of knowledge of his master and its duty. That very day the donkey senses danger—it saw the angel of the Lord with a drawn

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obedient response. Ethics thus had everything to do with God's communication of his explicit wishes, enshrined in Old Testament law, and nothing to do with the 'orders of creation'.

[14] It is not clear what kind of knowledge is being referred here—apparently it could be instinctive but because of what psychologist might call apparent conditioning, a pattern of behaviour was developed (Ref).

sword—and responded appropriately. The writer makes a caricature of the seer. He portrays the donkey possessing the supernatural ability to see while the seer—supposedly the one with the supernatural ability—did not see because his attitude was rebellious—he decided to numb his natural ability and his conscience which tells him about the evil in what he was about to do.

The majority of commentators (*cf.* Brueggemann 1998:13; Kaiser 1963:8; Oswalt 1986:85; Wildberger 1991:15; Williamson 2006:33) agree that Isaiah employed a powerful parable to explain Israel's rebellion, not to be taken in the cultic sense as turning to other gods, but that their behaviour in terms of injustice is unnatural. Isaiah speaks of the order of nature—Israel has transgressed the law which nature has prescribed. This helped the cultic community of Israel understand that religion is also rational.

Blenkinsopp (2000:108) remarks that there is "very little to say about normative Israelite tradition either historical or legal". He further elaborates that the traditions in Isaiah seem to have drawn from Jerusalemite and dynastic traditions rather than from the interventions of the native deity on Israel's behalf in Egypt, in the wilderness, and the conquest of Canaan. As for legal traditions, though things forbidden in the laws in the Pentateuch are often condemned in these chapters (1-12; 28-33), there are no explicit references either to specific laws as known and acknowledged basis for conduct. The familiar terms for legal enactments are either absent or, if present, carry a different meaning. For example, the word תּוֹרַת (Isa. 1:10; 5:24) and מִצְוַת (29:13) should not be taken as the 'law' and 'status' or 'ordinance' as found in the Pentateuch; rather תּוֹרַת refer to the prophetic teaching, while מִצְוַת means either royal decree or conventional religious behaviour. Natural order forms the basis of the approach especially in the first five chapters (*cf.* Blenkinsopp 2000:108f).

The unnaturalness of Israel's behaviour is further nuanced in the following ways in the introductory section of the entire book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-5:

i. Despite יְהוָה previous punishment and captivity (implied in Isa. 1:5–8), Israel persisted in their rebellion (Isa.1:3–4).

ii. Isaiah 1:18 invites Israel to reason with the Lord. Instead of stirring their memory of covenant obligations, reasoning is called to action.

iii. The song of the vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7) demonstrates how Yahweh has been to Israel, yet, instead of giving sweet grapes, they (unnaturally) produce sour grapes.

iv. The motif of knowing brings in the argument of natural theology. The call narrative in Isaiah 6:3 declares that the earth is full of God's glory, but it seems that Israel did not utilise the moral function of nature in their administration of justice. Their knowledge did not produce works proportionate to what they knew.

v. The tradition presented sin as social ills based on a coherent understanding of how society should be. Isaiah 5:20 expresses concern for turning upside down the natural order of a society. "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter."

Having seen how the natural law principle is introduced in Isaiah—his appeal to general societal principles as the epistemological basis of Yahweh's indictment, this article argues that African culture and tradition might have a heuristic function on understanding some of the theology and ethics of the Old Testament. It can serve as a common epistemological framework that an African reader may draw upon for the theological ethical understanding of some of the Old Testament texts. The sections that follow provide an overview of Tangale worldviews—a constituent of culture—to show its resonance with natural law.

Tangale Worldviews

Instructions on ethics and morality in the Tangale community are weaved within the structures of their social life and belief systems. Experts (see Idowu, 1965: 144ff, Kunhiyop, 2008:8) in African Traditional Religions observe that it is difficult to put a sharp line between African social life and religion. Similarly, morality is indistinguishable from African social life. It seems that the laws designed to guide human conduct are deeply rooted and reflected in many

traditional African societies. However, to understand Tangale ethics demands that one should understand its worldviews—its philosophy of life and conception of the world.[15] Tangale worldviews are very broad; I will therefore narrow the scope of this article by focusing on the Tangale worldview on nature as a phenomenon of the physical environment and human nature. I would like to investigate whether nature is capable of informing and indeed do inform ethical decisions independent of external coded injunctions. Focus is placed on Tangale traditional belief systems, which inform their moral behaviour.

The Tangale notion on the phenomena of the physical environment merely entails seeing nature as created by *Yamba*—God or god.[16] They do not study nature "as the scientist who seeks for the fact and laws of being and life; … Yet the Tangale has much lore regarding the forces [as opposed to the origins] of nature" (Hall, 1994: 6). The phenomena of the environment are viewed by the Tangale as instruments in the hands of the divine being for communication of his pleasure or displeasure for human conduct and character. Nature's elements, weather, seasons, and climate (favourable or unfavourable) are interpreted in terms of *Yamba's* pleasure and displeasure with human conduct and character. For example, Hall (1994: 11f) reports that Tangale people sees a causal relationship between the position of the moon and human conduct—i.e., people look at the moon and see bad omen, so they reflect on what they have done to decide whether it was good or bad. This example, however, only refers to natural phenomena. An equally important aspect of the worldviews is, of course on humanity and human nature.

[15] This article would like to note that there is not much secondary material on anthropological studies on the Tangale ethnic group. As such the writer relies on a book titled *Religion, Myth and Magic in Tangale* written by John S. Hall (1994). Of course, being a Tangale myself, with regards to Tangale culture, I can also speak of personal experience.

[16] *Yamba* is the name of the supreme being. "The meaning of which word, as it does not appear to be derivative or a compound of common Tangale roots or stems, I have not yet discovered" (Hall 1994:32). Although *Yamba* is not exclusively used for the Supreme Being as a mark of distinction, there are other personal uses of the name. for instance, "A man *(sic)* who can do the unusual, without respect at all to the ethical quality of the act, can do it because *anga yamni,* because he has his God (Hall, 1989:35).

It is unquestionably believed that *Yamba,* the Supreme Being, created human beings and set them on the earth and in families (Hall 1994:16). Broadly, from the Tangale view, human beings comprise three essential elements: *Ik* (body)*, shirum* (spirit), and *kebe* (soul). According to the Tangale worldviews, the spirit of human beings does not die, it continues to live in the afterlife on earth. The spirit in Tangale "carries the concept of real self, the indivisible, essential, continuing, basic self" (Hall, 1994: 21). The Tangale worldview about human nature also has a significant implication on how they behave. For example, morality and human conduct are motivated by the belief in the afterlife.[17] One is motivated to do what is morally right not only because of the law governing the community but because of the awareness that the spirit who is the essential being continues living. And good life in the next world is contingent upon a morally good life that one lives while in the body. But why is it necessary to live a good life at all? As Christians we can give many answers: God commands it, it is necessary for a peaceful and secure life, for survival, it is to prevent us from eternal damnation, it is the consequence of our gratitude/love for God and neighbour. But why do Tangale people traditionally believe it is necessary? This article is not oblivious to the argument of cultural relativism;[18] nevertheless, it objects to the relativist denial that moral values exist in a realm outside of human society.[19] Although what is morally acceptable in a particular

[17] This is purely metaphysical. But of course, not all moral principles/beliefs are founded in nature. However, the belief in the spirit nature of humans informs the motivation for good moral conduct.

[18] Cultural relativism is the view that societies create their own traditions, pass them along from one generation to another, and continually reinforce them through rewards and punishment (Fieser, 2001:2).

[19] This denial presupposes that human nature is the product of culture and society. There is no doubt that culture and society have an effect on human development. However, it should be noted also that the relationship is not a one-way relationship. Geertz (1973:89) says culture "[...] denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." Defining culture has been a debate amongst anthropologists. Notwithstanding, the point here is not the definition of culture, but the main concern is the link between morality, culture and natural law. Dearman (1992:2) observes that culture is the social context through which human communication occurs. By implication culture is a medium through which law and morals are communicated in a society.

culture might not be the same in another society, one thing is common to all cultures, namely the awareness of the existence of moral principles that are known naturally.[20]

There is a gross misunderstanding in the assertion by certain scholars that, what Africa possesses as its cultural moral values are nothing to be cherished; at its worst, it is considered evil, because it does not come from God and must be replaced with moral values revealed by God (*cf.* Bediako1989:58). Culture is not synonymous with nature. Culture is a product of nature—i.e., human experience with the phenomena of nature and other humans inform their culture. We shall take the Tangale beliefs as an example and the link between culture and natural law. The Tangale belief system is broad and it is not possible to categorise all under broad headings. As such this article considers only a few aspects of beliefs and practices that affect the Tangale ethics and moral systems.

The Tangale ethnic group believes that supernatural beings and forces exist and that these beings and forces may have direct or indirect contact with human beings in the spiritual realm and sometimes in the physical. Most often the activities of these supernatural beings are the determinant factors of the Tangale social and moral life. Beliefs in supernatural beings range from the belief in the supreme being—*Yamba*, tutelary spirits, and malignant spirits. These supernatural beings are responsible for dispensing evil and good as tools for punishment and reward respectively. Moral and ethical guidelines are built-in in the belief of the activities of these supernatural beings (*cf.* Hall, 1994:32-62).

[20] There is a distinction between natural law (singular) and natural laws (plural). Pertaining to natural laws, this relates to precepts of natural law and in this sense, they can be culture specific and, in this sense, cultural relativists are right. But natural law as defined is based on the first precept of law (see Aquinas, *Summa Theologica:* Q[94], A[2]) thus the *awareness of the existence of the moral principle is universal and natural.*

An account of the truce between *Shongwom*[21] and *Borak*[22] provides an interesting ethical sidelight. Being neighbours (*Shongwom* and *Borak*), there was frequent strife between them. At a certain time, both parties decided to bring an end to the strife; so, they made a treaty, but the Shongwom people did not keep to the terms. The historic account says: "That was the beginning of calamitous years for Shongom in their dwelling place. Every evil thing came upon Shongom" (Hall 1994:43). The Tangale believe that calamities and evil are shreds of evidence of the displeasure of the gods with humanity because of failure to keep ethical and moral codes. Kunhiyop (2008:9) concurs and adds that "In Africa, ethical principles and rules of conduct have been preserved over the ages in various customs and traditions that provide explanations of the moral code and indicate 'what the people must do to live ethically'" (*cf*. Adegbola, 1972:116).

Resonance of the Tangale culture with natural law

From the above discussion, it has been demonstrated that the Tangale culture (specifically its worldviews) provides some motivations for the general rules of conduct which are not dependent upon its social convention nor upon transcendent revelation. Culture and social conventions are vehicles through which these universal principles are preserved and made significant for a community (*cf.* Kunhiyop, 2008:9). The discussion of the Tangale worldviews shows that moral values exist in an objective realm that is external to human society. Customs and traditions are not the sources of the law themselves, the universal basic principles for human conduct are the embedded innate quality of every human being. Although, the Tangale appeals to divine rule for its moral values, these cultural moral values were not given to them through biblical means—special revelation. Appeals were made to the divine, but 'reason' is the epistemological basis of such appeals, not the written or revealed covenant code or injunctions. Thus, the assumption that moral values and ethics are only those constituted and coded in the covenant laws revealed in the Bible through the ancient Israel community, may be termed a lack of

[21] Shongom is a tribe in the southern Tangale. They are Tangale, but preferred to be identified as Shongom.

[22] Borak belong to another tribe (not part of the Tangale) about eighteen or twenty miles south of Shongom.

proper understanding of the principle of natural law. Customs and traditions provide explanations and indicate what the people must do to live ethically. And because they are not rooted in the coded covenant laws revealed in the Bible, one would say that these customs and traditions are a repository of natural law. It, therefore, suggests that the laws designed to guide human conduct within the Tangale culture resonate with the idea of natural law.

This understanding and development have significant value in the theological-ethical interpretation of the Old Testament. It implicitly leads to the notion that a reader plays an inevitable role in the interpretation of a given text. According to Lawrie (2005:110), "The reader does not merely discover meaning, but plays an active part in the creation of meaning […] Meaning arises in the interaction between texts and the reader who deal creatively with the texts". Readers do not read texts as isolated individuals. There is a social dimension to reading. "Many aspects of reader's context play a role: cultural and religious values and believes, social conventions and customs, the reader's experience of interaction with other people and so on" (111). Thus, natural law as reflected in one's cultural context provides a point of departure for reading some biblical passages. The question one might ask then is, does the reader-response theory not confirm the fear that the concept of natural law might push God into being the remote origin of moral obligation? Agreeably, the reader-response theory is complex and problematic (114). But at the same time, it would be unrealistic for one to claim to read a text objectively—without distortion. Now to respond to the question, the answer is nay. Natural law does not push God into a realm to become the remote origin of moral obligation. Rather, it acknowledges and affirms God as the ultimate source because he is the creator of all humans. And by virtue of one's being, as created by God, one has inherent dignity to be preserved as well as innate (rational) ability to preserve others' dignity. Thus, this article opines that natural law and culture can be used as the context in the reception of a particular text just as shown in the interpretation of Isaiah 1:2-3.

Again, understanding that customs and tradition explain moral and ethical living, has significance in biblical interpretation. For example, the Bible came in a particular context. Any attempt to indigenise the Bible in any other context rather than its ancient Israeli context may jeopardise the integrity of the biblical text. Culture impacted the process of the formation of the Bible and

impacts even our contemporary reading of it. This article invites African scholars to engage meaningfully in the quest for contextualisation. Hermeneutics in the African perspective is not synonymous with being resentful toward the Western philosophical/analytical approach to the biblical text. Rather it is a call to use what is available from their culture and tradition for a meaningful contribution in biblical hermeneutics and biblical Christianity in the world. It, therefore, suggests that cautions should be taken against an approach that is bent on looking for continuity between the Bible and African traditional religions than is warranted. For example, the search for Africa in the Old Testament by certain scholars tends to lead to uncritical hermeneutic of resonance. [23] Lovik (2001:50) concurs and expresses concerns that there are dangers that (1) some of the approaches have the potential to divorce us (readers) from the original historical setting of the text. She says "If the texts are considered mainly as theological messages for people of today, can this not lead to a situation of misunderstanding or over-interpretation?". (2) That the texts of the OT do not need to be read as historical facts because nothing is known on how Africans related to the Israelites at the time of the events in the texts and the time of the writing of the texts. (3) Not every text that speaks of Africans in the OT portrays Africa and Africans as playing important roles. (4) Consideration should also be given on negative images of Africa found in the OT (example, Ezk 30:5, 9; 2Chr 14:9-15).

In the light of the above, this article opines that the concept of natural law provides a useful point of orientation towards the resonance of biblical tradition and many African cultures and traditions. It is therefore important that caution be taken to guard against a hermeneutic of superficial resonance. Readers should maintain a critical approach towards both Western worldviews and African culture and religion. This approach presumably will give room for the appropriate and relevant incarnation of the Bible into what is truly African, rather than employing uncritical comparison especially because of the presence of Africa in the Bible or because of the resonance of many African cultures to the Old Testament.

[23] Lovik (2001:43-53) x-rayed four African scholar "E. Mveng (Cameroun), G.A. Mikre-Selassie (Ethiopia), S. Sempore (Benin), and D.T. Adamo (Nigeria)".

Conclusions

This article has shown that natural law theory is rooted in the Bible. Isaiah 1:2-3 shows that even the donkey (illustrated in Numbers 22) and the ox possess some knowledge. It argues that natural law is not a move to push God away into a remote source of moral obligation. It does not equate the authority of the Bible with cultures and traditions. Rather, it still allows for the uniqueness of biblical revelation. However, the uniqueness of biblical revelation does not lie in its ethical and moral teachings,[24] but rather in the salvific work of Jesus Christ, through whom God's grace culminates (see Bonhoeffer 2005:356). The African culture and traditions thus have heuristic potential toward theological-ethical engagement with the Old Testament such that it honours the dignity inherent of all humans—knowing that even the donkey and the ox know.

[24] This assumption was what informs most Western missionaries' denigration of *all* African values as evil.

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