

**ANCESTRAL WORSHIP AMONG THE ILA PEOPLE OF ZAMBIA:
TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL-CONTEXTUAL APPROACH OF
THE THREE ANGELS' MESSAGE**

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Abstract

Culture is an essential lens through which a worldview is shaped. As such, worldview forms a foundational, sometimes involuntary, perspective through which the belief structure is concretized. Any intentional transformational endeavor must be grounded in an understanding of the fundamentals that shape the people it seeks to evangelize. This paper evaluates the centrality and extent of ancestral worship among the Ba-Ila people of Zambia and establishes the context in which Adventism's core mission can find its place. It assesses the relevance of the three Angels' messages and their implications for broader African cultural and religious diversity. It illustrates the fundamental contrasts and similarities between the worship attitudes espoused in the three Angels' messages and those of ancestral worship among the Ba-Ila people. It develops a discipleship model of biblical mission for transforming worship attitudes among the Ba-Ila people of Zambia.

Keywords: syncretism, worldview, medium, culture, ancestor, three angels, worship.

1. Introduction

Zambia is a place of rich cultural and ethnic diversity. Its people are marked by deep religious reverence for the deity. Religion and its practices are a fundamental part of daily life. Zambians view reality from a religious and spiritual standpoint. Birth has religious connotations. No death is natural and is explained from a spiritual perspective. Business and economic emancipation come from higher, benevolent supernatural powers. Success in politics, science, arts, and other spheres is associated with the power of religion and domineering principalities. John Mbiti's observation that "Africans are notoriously religious and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it,"⁶⁴ appropriately describes the Zambian people.

Zambian culture has a strong historical heritage passed down through villages, clans, and families, and it is associated with the spirit world. This is

⁶⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 1.

evident in annual festivals, when people offer libations at shrines to the gods and spirits for rain, good harvests, soil fertility, and other blessings. Therefore, there is a strong link between the physical and spiritual realms. In fact, the physical realm is largely influenced by the supernatural. To be successful in the physical world, one ought to have the favor of the controlling powers of the spiritual realm. This poses critical missiological and theological challenges for many Christian churches.⁶⁵

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia, like several other missionary churches, grapples with challenging theological and practical issues. These seem to stem from an imbalance caused by a failure to contextualize the biblical gospel within society's social and religious context.⁶⁶ Essentially, theology is contextual.⁶⁷ For it to contribute meaningfully and appropriately to a particular society, it has to engage in dialogue with the real issues affecting people in that society. Theology's mandate is to be attuned to real issues in society.⁶⁸ Doug Priest Jr. observes that theology "must be more than an esoteric exercise that is unrelated to concrete situations of life."⁶⁹

The missionary religion, perceived as Western, seems to conflict with native religious views. To find a place of acceptance, many missionaries

⁶⁵ Ambe J. Njoh makes an important observation when he contends that "Christian missionaries, who worked alongside colonial authorities, were also active in the acculturation and assimilation process. They had moved very early during colonial era to spread the gospel throughout Africa. Prominent amongst the many hurdles they encountered were African traditional practices which they viewed as antithetical to Christian doctrines. If Christian missionaries viewed African culture as a hurdle, they hardly considered it to be insurmountable....it is arguable that African culture was seen as constituting no more than a menace that could/can be eradicated with facility." See Ambe J. Njoh, *Tradition, Culture, and Development in Africa: Historical Lessons for Modern Development Planning* (2006; repr., New York: Routledge, 2016), 4.

⁶⁶ Contemporary missiological challenges seem to be mediated by a certain consciousness about the cultural roots of religion and the perceived sanctity projected by a particular culture in which a religious movement emerges. This is observed in the deductions made by Douglas E. Thomas. He reflects, "All religions are connected to a particular people who venerate their culture as sacred." In his contemplation, it seems, the sanctity of religion and religious teachings are determined by its proponents and affiliates. He asserts, "Christianity has been articulated through a European cultural lens. We can speak of Christianity as a religion dominated by men, who have elevated European cultural forms to the status of sacred. They developed their concept of deity from their cultural myths, and those proselytes who have adopted these religions are, in fact, participating in the veneration of Arab [for Islam] and European cultural forms." As a mirror to his arguments, Thomas comparatively concludes "likewise, African spirituality is rooted in traditional African ways of being. Those practitioners of traditional African cultural forms have also elevated their value system to the sacred realm." See Douglas E. Thomas, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 17.

⁶⁷ Cf. Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 7-49.

⁶⁸ John W. deGruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 9-11.

⁶⁹ Doug Priest Jr., *Doing Theology with the Maasai* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1990), 154.

gravitate toward a syncretic approach.⁷⁰ This is a fundamental contextualization challenge that missiologists and theologians in general grapple with.

This ethnographic-literary review of the Ba-Ila people evaluates the centrality and extent of ancestral worship among the Ba-Ila of Zambia. Additionally, it employs a biblical and theological analysis to develop a discipleship model by which Adventism's core mission and message can find its place and function in making "disciples of Jesus Christ who live as His loving witness and proclaim to all people the everlasting gospel of the Three Angels' messages in preparation for His soon return."⁷¹ To accomplish this task, the article begins by describing the life and attitudes of the Ba-Ila people toward the ancestors in Shimunenga and Shikaumpa. Furthermore, it discusses the elements in which such attitudes are rooted – as a response to why the Ba-Ila believe and practice what they do. Likewise, an evaluation of the three angels' messages is presented, showing how they distinguish biblically grounded worship from other forms. As such, it profiles significant similarities and dissimilarities between the worship attitudes espoused in the three Angels' messages and those of ancestral worship among the Ba-Ila. Finally, the paper presents a discipleship model that elucidates and pivots Adventist mission among the Ba-Ila people.

2. The Ba-Ila People

The Ba-Ila people are predominantly found in Namwala District of Southern Province, Zambia. However, they are also found in Bweengwa in Monze District, parts of Mazabuka, along the banks of the Kafue River to Itezhi Tezhi, and in the southern parts of Mumbwa District in Central Province. Their main economic activity is agriculture. They are predominantly ranchers. Their communities are concentrated in villages, and they prefer to keep their farms away from these villages.

Among the Ba-Ila, cattle are an important symbol of wealth. Cattle identify one's place in society. Social stratification is based on herd size. The Ba-Ila view cattle as a lifetime investment. The Namwala Cultural and Traditional Trust (NACTT) confirms that "cattle are an asset class and insurance, as a hedge against hardships. They fulfill various social obligations of the family, e.g., in making payments [for] settling disputes..."⁷²

⁷⁰ Michael Campbell identifies syncretism as "the merging or blending of certain ideas, especially within a religious context. [Used in a missiological sense, syncretism conveys a situation that may result, when] in the process of sharing the gospel message other non-Christian elements may become intertwined with the Christian message" cf. Michael W. Campbell, "Syncretism," *Pocket Dictionary for Understanding Adventism* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 2020), 141.

⁷¹ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist Church, "Mission Statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church," *Official Statements*, October 15, 2018, <https://gc.adventist.org/official-statements/mission-statement-of-the-seventh-day-adventist-church/>.

⁷² Namwala Cultural and Traditional Trust (NACTT), "The Ba Ila" (Phoenix, AZ: Namwala Cultural and Traditional Trust, 2017), accessed 20 April, 2023, <https://www.namwalatrust.org/culture>.

3. Ancestors among the Ba-Ila

David Westerlund's observation that "among many African peoples, spirits of ancestors play important roles"⁷³ is true among the Ba-Ila. Two ceremonies demonstrate their veneration and collective worship of the ancestors. These are Shimunenga and Shikaumpa.

3.1 Shimunenga

Shimunenga was a warrior among the Ba-Ila people about 400 years ago. In his mortal state, Shimunenga was a guardian of the people, protecting them from raiders. His burial site in Maala village is considered sacred. The ceremony in his honor takes place over two days. The celebration consists of feasting, drinking, and dancing. As a symbol of homage, "women throw ceremonial sticks into "Shimunenga's bush" in the middle of the sacred ground to bring about good luck."⁷⁴ The head of the celebration, Chief Mungaila, signals for a cattle drive. NACTT narrates that "the cattle are herded past the ceremonial ground so that Shimunenga may look kindly on them and protect them against pestilence in the coming year. With the cattle run a horde of spearmen, making frequent 'attacks' on imaginary enemies to mark a great defeat suffered by the Ba-Ila in ancient times which they must remember so they won't be defeated again."⁷⁵ Importantly, the center of the ritual is the ancestral spirit of Shimunenga and not anyone living, not even the chief.

3.2 Shikaumpa

The ceremony is named after an Ila warrior and chief. Shikaumpa literally means "one who burns," a tribute to Shikaumpa's signature conquests of neighboring tribes. His other name, Mukobela, is attributed to his skill in shielding against weapons. At Baambwe village, the Ba-Ila people celebrate this annual festival in his honor. They believe that Shikaumpa is the spirit that empowers witch doctors, mediums, and sorcerers. As a result, his people continue to consult him for whatever they need and to find solutions to perplexing situations. NACTT explains that this annual ceremony includes "brewing of traditional beer, various exhibitions of girls and women in traditional attire. Songs and dance to sounds of drumbeat...the festival

⁷³ David Westerlund, *African Indegemous Religions and Disease Causation: From Spiritual Beings to Living Humans*, vol 28 (Boston, MA: Brill, 2006), 6.

⁷⁴ NACTT, "The Ba Ila."

⁷⁵ NACTT, "The Ba Ila."

culminates in exhibitions of cattle to show off wealth as well as exhibition of guerrilla warfare and mock hunts ending with ululating and sound bells.”⁷⁶

These are the fundamental corporate tribal ceremonies that display ancestral veneration. Patricia Ann Lynch observes that “the mizhimo—the ancestral spirits of the Ila and Kaonde of Zambia—mediate between humans and the Supreme God, Leza.”⁷⁷ The Ba-Ila people believe that these intermediary spirits are essential for reaching out to God. As such, ancestors play a fundamental role in the spiritual, physical, and socioeconomic life of Africans, including the Ba-Ila people.

4. Continued Influence of Ancestral Worship

Among the Ba-Ila people, there are practices at the family and personal levels that illustrate the continued influence of ancestral worship. Birth, death, and burial are fundamental. Sexual cleansing is practiced when one of the partners in marriage dies. The typical ritual is performed about seven days after burial. It begins the night before burial, when a surviving spouse spends the night in a room with the deceased's body and slaughters a cow, whose carcass is also kept in the same room.

Immediately after the burial, the two families meet to settle some loose ends in the marriage.⁷⁸ During the seven days after burial, the woman is required to wear her widowhood attire, especially the headdress. This seven-day period is intended to allow the spirit of the dead to settle (*kutontosha lufu*).⁷⁹ After the seven days, family members of the deceased begin the process of cleansing. The first step is to prepare a concoction of charms, roots, and leaves, which other women carry in the early morning hours of the eighth day to a crossroads, where the woman bathes while chanting the name of the departed and dispelling the spirit of the dead from troubling her. After the bath, the widow is to run back home without looking behind, after throwing the charm and dispelling the spirit

⁷⁶ NACTT, “The Ba Ila.”

⁷⁷ Patricia Ann Lynch, *African Mythology A-Z*, rev. Jeremy Roberts, 2nd ed (New York: Chelsea House, 2010), 11. These are the fundamental corporate tribal ceremonies that display ancestral veneration. Patricia Ann Lynch observes that “the mizhimo—the ancestral spirits of the Ila and Kaonde of Zambia—mediate between humans and the Supreme God, Leza.” The Ba-Ila people believe that these intermediary spirits are essential for reaching out to God. As such, ancestors play a fundamental role in the spiritual, physical, and socioeconomic life of Africans, including the Ba-Ila people.

⁷⁸ These loose-ends would include knowing how, if any, balance on dowry would be settled and who would take responsibility of the surviving family. It is during this time that some would even share the wealth of the deceased, especially in the presence of her family so that if she had things she personally owned, she may not be disadvantaged; and for her family to also benefit from the work of the dead husband.

⁷⁹ It is believed that the widow remains with the ghost of the dead husband with her and she carries it everywhere she goes. This ghost has the capacity to cause harm on her or on any person who would intimate with her before a blood-relative to the deceased do it.

of the dead.⁸⁰ “As part of the sexual cleansing rite, widows are required to have sexual intercourse with one of the male in-laws, ordinarily brothers or cousins of the husband, as a ritual to get rid of the husband's spirit or ghost.”⁸¹ Due to HIV/AIDS, “alternative rituals to sexual cleansing include sliding over a half-naked person or over an animal or cow-jumping; use of herbs and roots. Concoctions or other rituals that were otherwise considered ‘alien’, such as cutting hair and application of some powder, have also been adopted.”⁸² Nevertheless, its connotation remains the same.

5. The Concept of Death among the Ba-Ila

The Ba-Ila's concept of death and dying is shaped by the belief that death itself is not a natural phenomenon. In their thinking, “every death, apart from that of elders, is considered untimely or premature because the hand of one's enemy is presumed to be involved.”⁸³ In this view, death must be appeased by washing away the spirit of the deceased to prevent it from troubling surviving members of the deceased's household.⁸⁴ This is intertwined with the belief that the realm of existence is closely linked to the spiritual, and therefore the spiritual realm influences the physical. This gives rise to the notion that if the inhabitants of the physical realm are to live at peace with one another, they must appease the higher powers of the spiritual realm.

John Mbiti conceptualizes this as “compenetration.”⁸⁵ This compenetration gives rise to the idea that when someone dies, they move from one state of reality to another within the compenetrated world. Therefore, death

⁸⁰ The woman, typically is required to run from the ritual site naked. For some, they are required to stay naked throughout the day in the matrimonial bedroom until evening when one of the in-laws, especially the one who was chosen to take responsibility of the surviving family, comes in the company of maybe two or three other witnesses to enter the matrimonial bed and lie with the widow.

⁸¹ T. M Okeyo, and A. K Allen, “Influence of widow inheritance in the epidemiology of AIDS in Africa,” *African Journal of Medical Practice*, 1(1994): 21.

⁸² J. S. Malungo, “Sexual Cleansing (Kusalazya) and Levirate Marriage (Kunjilila Mung'anda) in the Era of AIDS: Changes in Perceptions and Practices in Zambia,” *Social Science & Medicine* 53(2001): 371, accessed on 15 September 2016, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953600003427.html>.

⁸³ Dominic Umoh, “Death is not Natural: The African Story,” in *Journal of Religion and Society* 14: (The Kripke Center, 2012), 1.

⁸⁴ This is another practice in which after burial of the deceased, the entire family undergoes a ritual bath. for some it includes medicinal scarification. This is usually done by a native doctor.

⁸⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1980), 2. He highlights that “because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life.” To this concept Dominic Umoh, in “Death is not Natural,” (6) augments that “the implications of compenetration means there is no real demarcation between the divine and the contingent, between humans and ghosts, and everything, especially the incomprehensible, must be given a mysterious interpretation – whether rightly or wrongly.”

is considered not just a human exit from this realm of existence but also a rite of passage into the realm of the spiritual world. Among the Ba-Ila, “death is perceived as a beginning of a person’s deeper relationship with all of creation, the complementing of life, and the beginning of the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds. The goal of life is to become an ancestor after death.”⁸⁶ Through this passage, it is believed that the dead, in their spiritual status, are “more powerful than humans and capable of everything and anything – good or evil – depending on their temperament or mood.”⁸⁷ For this reason, primary practices by the surviving relatives are intended to appease the wrath of the dead and lighten their mood.

6. Roots and Implications of Ancestor Worship Among the Ba-Ila People

Seventh-day Adventist converts among the Ba-Ila people grapple with the spiritual question of the place and role of the dead and death in the lives of the living. Coming from a worldview that holds that the dead wield influence over the lives of surviving mortals, Kwabena Donkor observes that among converts to Adventism, ancestor worship may not be a problem per se.⁸⁸ Rather, in the gap left by traditional rites of ancestral veneration,⁸⁹ a practice motivated by the uncertainties of abstaining from such rites emerges among many converts to Adventism.

The Ba-Ila people believe that the dead maintain a spiritual connection with their surviving descendants. They also believe that the dead exert influence over the living in matters of wealth and wealth creation, rainfall and agriculture, human and animal fertility, and life as a whole.⁹⁰ These perspectives raise two

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Onyedinma Ezenweke, “The Cult of Ancestors: A Focal Point for Prayers in African Traditional Communities,” *Religion and Human Relations* (Awka, Nigeria: Nnamdi Azikiwe University, 2008), 3; In the article “Major Religions in Zambia: A Comprehensive Overview,” Centre for Relites argue that “ancestors occupy an important place in traditional belief systems; death is not an absolute end but a transition to ancestral existence, where the deceased continue to influence and safeguard the well-being of the living.” Cf. Centreforelites, “Major Religions in Zambia: A Comprehensive Overview,” August 15, 2025, <https://prep.educom360.com/major-religions-in-zambia-a-comprehensive-overview/>.

⁸⁷ Dominic Umoh, “Death is not Natural,” 7.

⁸⁸ Kwabena Donkor, “Ancestor Worship, Biblical Anthropology, and Spiritualistic Manifestations in Africa,” in *The Church, Culture, and Spirits: Adventism in Africa*, Kwabena Donkor, ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2011), 69-70.

⁸⁹ Whereas many missiologists and anthropologists create a distinction, and genuinely so, between veneration and worship, it is important to observe that both concept have a common undergirding worldview and essence of practice. First, that reverence is the fundamental gesture that underpins both worship and veneration. Second, that in the concept of biblical conception of worship, especially directed to the “spirit world” veneration and worship cannot be distinguished. As such, to draw a distinction would undermine the biblical concept of worship. Especially that the concept of reverence is central in the “fear of God” concept that lies at the base of the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6-12, which is discussed below.

⁹⁰ The observation of the attitudes of the Ba-Ila people to the concept of death, relates to what Laurenti Magesa observes that, “the consciousness of death has informed and shaped the way humans live, love, eat, construct dwellings, pray, play, and generally behave. It has

fundamental implications. First, these attitudes suggest a distortion in the Ba-Ila understanding of death. To the Ba-Ila, death is a transition into the realm of the supernatural, where the transcendent is worthy of worship, especially when that individual demonstrated heroic accolades in his mortal existence. Therefore, because of the undergirding worldview, the deceased, now considered transcendent, continues to exert the same influence among the living. As such, in their conception, to gain the influence of the transcendent, libations are offered as a rite of worship to seek favor. However, this is antithetical to scriptural teaching, which emphasizes the mortality of human beings (Eccl. 9:5-6) and the absence of an immortal component in humanity. Further, these attitudes contradict the ideals of biblical worship. The Bible emphasizes that “God is worshiped for who He is and what He does.”⁹¹ Worship is the very tenet on which creation and human attitudes toward God are based.

The Ba-Ila people regard the dead as intermediaries between mortals and the Supreme deity. Mortals are seen as incapable of communicating directly with God, except through someone who lived among them and is now transcendent through death. However, this raises fundamental questions about the biblical concept of mediation. First, the Bible presents Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5). Second, Christ’s mediatorial work is closely tied to human salvation, not merely to mortal needs. Third, the concept of mediation relates to God’s sovereignty and His rule over His creation.

Forthwith, distinguishing ancestor veneration from ancestor worship would undermine the very idea of what it means to worship God. In the first and second commandments, God demands attitudes of worship that fully recognize Him as both the subject and the object of worship. In these two commands, God instructs against both syncretism and dual allegiance. In the command against iconoclastic worship, Scripture highlights: “you shall not bow down to them nor serve them” (Exod 20:5). God’s demand to be worshiped is absolute. He sets the terms by which mortals are to worship Him. True worship cannot be syncretic, nor can it rest on the foundation of dual allegiance. Because biblical worship is one in which the worshipper “honor[s] the Lord God” (Deut. 6:13 GNT), or, as the New Century Translators put it, “respect the Lord your God. You must worship him and make promises only in his name. Do not worship other gods as the people around you do” (Deut. 6:13–14 NCT). The reason for the worship of God and human attitudes that honor Him alone is the fundamental distinguishing mark between loyalty to God and apostasy. As such, worship attitudes play a significant role in the cosmic conflict drama.

7. The Three Angels’ Message

influenced their economic planning, political organization, and cultural outlook – their worldview and aesthetics. Some theorists have even surmised that death, or the fear of it, is the origin of religion and morality.” Cf. Laurenti Magesa, *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*, epub ed., (New York: Orbis Book, 2013), 267.

⁹¹ Peter Enns, “Worship,” in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Tremper Longman III, ed., PDF version (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 2294.

Revelation 12–13 provides foundational background and context for God’s end-time people. The scene unfolds within the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan. The two chapters reveal Satanic maneuvers to lure people into an apostate system of worship. The scenes depict God’s intentional provision of safety for the faithful against the machinations of the dark forces. Consequently, in Revelation 14, the mission agenda of God’s people is set.

The tableaux of Revelation 14, like much of the book, is not placed in a sequential chronology of unfolding scenes; it applies telescoping techniques in conveying the scenes.⁹² Revelation 14:6–12 seems chronologically antecedent to Revelation 14:1–5. While the first scene depicts the victorious end of God’s people, the second elaborates on the unique mission that led them to victory.⁹³

In Revelation, there seems to be an important scene of screen-mirroring. The people John describes in chapter 14 appear to be the same as those he reports as sealed in chapter 7. Similarly, the scene’s setting seems celestial. Zion, the mount of God, a biblical expression of God’s rule, is the setting. It is a place of God’s holiness and a secure place for His people (cf. Psalm 48:1-3; 87:1–6). At Mount Zion, God is depicted as exercising the authority of His reign and power. Grant Osborne rightly observes that Mount Zion visualizes “an eternal dwelling of God among his people (Ezek 43:7).”⁹⁴ The pericope echoes the prophetic tones of Joel, in which God’s people are given deliverance and safety at Jerusalem and Mount Zion (cf. Joel 2:32).

The message that precedes the victorious picture in Revelation 14:1–5 is the message of the three angels. Among Seventh-day Adventists, the three angels play a significant role in their theology, self-understanding, and mission.⁹⁵ Ranko Stefanovic makes an essential observation that “preaching the end-time gospel will divide the world into two camps: those who respond and worship God and those who reject that message and side with the satanic trinity.”⁹⁶ As such, the centrality and universal reach of the three angels’ messages are important for the acceptance of orthodoxy and the exemplification of praxis.

The introductory notes to the threefold angelic, end-time themes suggest that the message is eternal. A careful consideration of the phrase *εὐαγγέλιον*

⁹² Sigve K. Tonstad, *Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament: Revelation*, epub ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 681.

⁹³ Cf. Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation*, 673.

⁹⁴ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, epub ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 938.

⁹⁵ Kwanbena Donkor, Laszlo Gallusz, and Ekkehardt Mueller provide fundamental insights into the place of the three angels’ messages on Adventists. They reflect that “the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6-12 acquired a great significance for early Adventists after the Disappointment of 1844, but the theological implications of the messages developed over time and continue to exert an important influence on Adventist thinking and mission to this day.” Cf. Kwabena Donkor, Laszlo Gallusz, and Ekkhehardt Mueller, *Creation and the Three Angels’ Messages* (Silver Spring, MD: Faith and Science Council and Biblical Research Institute, 2021), 5.

⁹⁶ Ranko Stefanovic, *Plain Revelation*, epub ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2013), 465.

αἰώνιον (*euangelion aionion*) suggests three implications. First, the central idea of the message predates creation, implying that before creation it was in effect. Second, the message dates its starting point to the entrance of sin, implying that it is God's remedy for the sin problem in Genesis 3. Third, the effect of the message will continue to have its place in God's new order of things (Rev. 21:5). Primarily, we infer that the central practice in the message predates creation and will continue beyond re-creation.

The phrase ἐπὶ τοὺς καθημένους ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς⁹⁷ (*epi tous kathēmenous epi tēs gēs*) (Rev 14:6) is foundational to understanding the target audience. The use of a rare feminine noun γῆ (gē) in this context is usually indicative of a contrast with heaven.⁹⁸ The description of this phrase appears in Revelation 13:8, in which those “who dwell on the earth” parallel the worshipers of the beast and the dragon, by which they lose their names from the book of life. The idea is first echoed in the Apocalypse in Revelation 6:10, with the plea of divine vengeance on the martyrs at the hands of those who dwell on the earth. Stephanovic observes that “those who dwell on the earth are ones hostile to the gospel.”⁹⁹ Therefore, the primary target audience is the people who live on Earth. Those who dwell on the earth are in contrast to the redeemed saints (Rev 14:4-5), whose task is to minister the gospel. In the end-time, the saints are given a threefold message that prepares the world for the final work.

The first angel speaks of two important attitudes and provides the foundational premise on which they rest. The two attitudes are “fear God” and “give Him Glory.” First, it is noteworthy that humanity is in a covenant relationship with God. In this covenant, “God claims His rightful position as Creator and King (Isa 43:15; 44:2); whereas, humanity as the creation and subject (Isa 41:8; 44:1; Jer 30:10; 46:27).”¹⁰⁰ Siegfried Horn further observes that this covenant relationship is “not a covenant between equals, but between the infinite God and finite man. God Himself determine[s] the provisions of the covenant.”¹⁰¹ This provides a fitting foundation for understanding the first angel's call.

Seventh-day Adventist scholars offer different interpretations of the concepts of “fear God” and “give Him glory.” Sigve Tonstad argues that this concept “means to speak well of God, rejecting the adversary's slander.”¹⁰² Ranko Stephanovic adds that “to fear God...conveys the idea of taking God

⁹⁷ Michael W. Holmes, *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition* (Lexham Press; Society of Biblical Literature, 2011–2013), Re 14:6.

⁹⁸ James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 125.

⁹⁹ Ranko Stephanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 246-247.

¹⁰⁰ Brian Sinyangwe, “The New Covenant and the Ten Commandments with Implications for Remnant Theology” (MABTS Thesis, Adventist University of Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, 2020), 53.

¹⁰¹ Siegfried H. Horn, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* (SDABD), rev. ed. (1979), “Covenant,” 243.

¹⁰² Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation*, 686.

seriously in life by following him and obeying his commandments.”¹⁰³ Therefore, the human attitude of fear of God entails reverence,¹⁰⁴ respect, and loving obedience, born of a relational connection between God and humanity. When this connection is missing, it is evident that professors may restrict themselves to lip service (cf. Matt 7:21-23; James 2:14-19).

Fearing God is closely related to giving God the glory. Stephanovic rightly observes, “giving God glory is the aftereffect of fearing God.”¹⁰⁵ It entails practical, Christ-like living in which God’s commands become part of the believer’s lifestyle. Brian Sinyangwe assesses that “principally, the human response [lies] in co-operating with the will of God [who] pledges His being as a guarantee for His eternal will for humanity (cf. Mal 3:6; Heb 13:8).”¹⁰⁶

These two attitudes are key characteristics of God’s people living in a time of God’s judgment.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, the angelic appeal is to worship God. Scripture presents a universal paradigm that constitutes the church’s primary mission, including proclaiming His word (cf. Matt 28:18-20; Luke 24:48; John 15:27; Acts 1:8), celebrating salvation (Luke 1:77), and worshiping God (John 4:20-24; Rev 14:7, 9-12; cf. Rev 4:5-11). Worship is a linchpin that holds together the character of God’s people. Gregory Beale’s assertion is fundamental: “people resemble what they revere, either for ruin or restoration.”¹⁰⁸ As such, reverence, or veneration, becomes a fundamental element in the whole act of worship. It is precisely to note that the object of veneration is the subject of worship.

As a reflection of true conversion, God’s people “defend their allegiance to God and demonstrate true worship according to the principles of His trustworthy and unfailing word. For them, total commitment to the commandments of God is an act of worship (cf. Josh 24:14-17).”¹⁰⁹ The second angel (Rev 14:8) warns of a looming counterfeit worship system built on apostasy. This message bridges the first and the third. The difference between the worship espoused by the first and third angels’ messages is the counterfeit

¹⁰³ Ranko Stephanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 451.

¹⁰⁴ For those who argue for a distinction between ancestor worship and ancestor veneration, they contend that veneration does not carry the same depth of attitude as worship. Accordingly, they justify ancestor veneration as acceptable. However, it is noteworthy that reverence for the supernatural is a preserve of God alone.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 451.

¹⁰⁶ Sinyangwe, “The New Covenant and the Ten Commandments,” 54.

¹⁰⁷ The time of judgement is herein associated to the concept of assessment on the basis that the text does not use the Greek *κρίμα* (*krima*) which has a connotation of the point in time of Judgement, the passing of sentence by the judge as with the evidence suggested in Revelation 17:1 and 20:4. Rather, the text uses *κρίσις* (*krisis*) which denotes the process over a period of time. This assessment is made profoundly fitting in Revelation 16:7; 18:10, and 19:2. See James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, 360; Ranko Stephanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 451-452.

¹⁰⁸ Gregory K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 284.

¹⁰⁹ Sinyangwe, “The New Covenant and the Ten Commandments,” 90.

doctrines warned against by the second angel. The focus of the three messages is to call people back to *bona fide* worship of God.

8. Reflections and Implications

Among both the Ba-Ila people and the people of God, the concept of worship is central. Among the Ba-Ila people, the worship of the ancestors takes precedence, whereas for believers it is the worship of God. The Ba-Ila people worship by pouring libations at shrines of their prominent ancestors, a practice intended to pacify the spirits of the ancestors. However, among the Ba-Ila people, the focus of worship is the intermediary spirits of the ancestors, whereas for biblical worshipers the Creator God is the center of worship. As a result, when converts come from among the Ba-Ila people, they struggle to find physical fulfillment in a faith-based expression of worship. That vacuum, in turn, gives rise to dual allegiance. As such, an integrated missiological model is necessary to minister among the Ba-Ila.

9. Discipleship Model of Biblical Mission for Transforming Worship Attitudes among the Ba-Ila People

Given the missiological challenges evident among the Ba-Ila people, there is a need to move toward a biblical mission strategy that offers a practical approach to ministering to the Ba-Ila. Such a strategy should involve the proclamation of the gospel to make disciples of Christ, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, drawing people from the world of sin into His light and helping them participate in the ministry God has entrusted to the church. Here is a proposed model. This model makes five fundamental assumptions. First, Christ is the creative power for discipleship (John 15:5; 5:39). Second, a Christ-centered worldview (John 14:6). Third, Christ-centered discipleship is missiological (John 20:21). Fourth, Christ-centered discipleship is transformational (2 Corinthians 5:17). And fifth, Christ-centered mission is Spirit-driven (John 16:13). As Gordon Fee observes, “the key to worship is the Holy Spirit. The Holy is responsible for all other expressions of Christian worship.”¹¹⁰

Christ-centered Discipleship: Grounded in the convert’s new identity in Christ, Christ-centered discipleship reflects a transformation of worldview. Paul reasons: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). Kelvin Onongha observes, “Conversion is synonymous with change or transformation, and Christianity is a religion premised on this experience. A sign that initial change has occurred is the commitment of a believer’s life to the lordship of Christ.”¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 884.

¹¹¹ Kelvin Onongha, “Towards a Missiological Model for Worldview Transformation among Adherents to African Traditional Religion in Yorubaland,” *Dissertation* (PhD Dissertation, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, 2014), 60.

The foundation of Christ-centered discipleship is recognizing that salvation and the call to Christian faith are divine initiatives. Acts 2:47b affirms: "...the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." Thus, at its core, discipleship is Christ's initiative. He calls people to join the faith and empowers those He calls to live godly lives (cf. 2 Peter 1:3). For this reason, Scripture affirms that Christians overcome through the power of Christ.

The Christ-centered discipleship model stems from the biblical teaching that Christ's disciple-making mission was ultimately for His followers to reflect His character. As Paul writes, "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son..." (Rom. 8:29). The work of making disciples involves the presence of all three members of the Godhead (cf. Mat. 28:19-20).

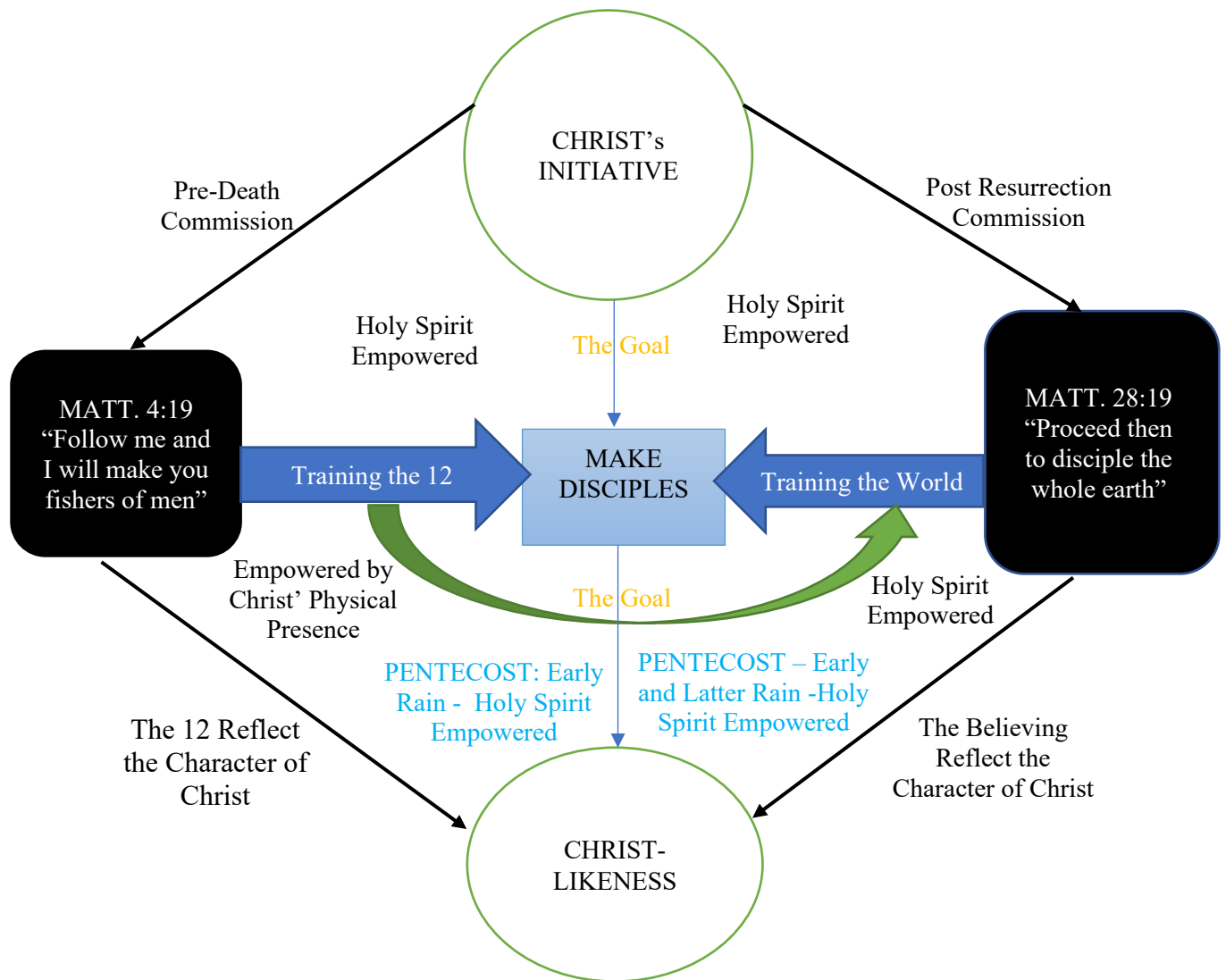
The discipleship-making template can be expressed in two perspectives. First, the pre-crucifixion period. During this time, humanity was blessed with Christ's physical presence (Isaiah 9:6-7). During His earthly ministry, Christ chose twelve disciples to train them for mission and to pass on His ethos for ministry. He made them His disciples (Matt. 4:19; Mark 3:14) and commissioned them to do as He had done to them (Matt. 28:16-20), under the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), as He was empowered by the Holy Spirit as well (Luke 4:4). For the disciples, Christ instructed, before you start making other disciples, "Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:49; cf. Acts 1:4). The disciples obeyed the instructions and received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), only then did they begin to do the works Christ had taught them (Acts 2:40-45).

The second aspect is experienced in the absence of Christ's physical presence, yet with the ever-present empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. The second is the fulfillment of Christ's charge to the disciples: "go and make disciples of all nations..." (Matt. 28:19).

In both discipleship-making experiences, one witnesses the essential work of training that accompanies this task. Christ spent three and a half years actively training the disciples to become what He had envisioned them to be. Likewise, the book of Acts is replete with instances in which apostles spent time training recipients of the gospel (cf. Acts 2:46-47). This is a reminder for contemporary disciples that discipleship-making does not end with baptism; rather, continued training of new converts is necessary. As shown in Figure 1.0 below, disciples are made through careful training, and that training results in disciples reflecting a Christ-like character.

CHRIST-CENTRED DISCIPLESHIP MODEL IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GREAT COMMISSION

Figure 1.0. Christ-centered Discipleship Models



10. Conclusion

Ancestral worship is central to the Ba-Ila worldview, shaping their understanding of life, death, spirituality, and social bonds. Rituals such as Shimunenga and Shikaumpa, along with family rites for death and purification, reflect a deeply held belief that ancestors continue to influence the living and serve as mediators between humans and the deity. These beliefs pose significant theological and missiological challenges for Christian mission among the Ba-Ila, particularly regarding biblical teaching on death, mediation, and worship.

This study demonstrates that although both the Ba-Ila and the biblical worldviews acknowledge the spiritual realm and the significance of worship, they differ significantly in their objects, foundations, and purposes. The three

angels' messages in Revelation 14:6-12 exhort humanity to revere, glorify, and worship the Creator God exclusively. Conversely, ancestral worship emphasizes reverence and devotion to the deceased, whom it considers transcendent and therefore possessing supernatural powers. Consequently, from Scripture's perspective, questions arise about the theological basis for ancestral veneration. Scripture points humanity to exclusive devotion to God. Further, Scripture points to Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity.

As such, the study argues that effective missionary work among the Ba-Ila people requires more than doctrinal preaching; rather, it demands intentional worldview transformation through a Christ-centered discipleship approach. This model addresses, in precept and practice, the underlying fears, uncertainties, and spiritual concerns that lead converts to maintain dual allegiance. Therefore, believers among the Ba-Ila people need to be grounded in a biblical understanding of Christ's lordship over the created order, helped to understand the biblical teaching on the state of the dead, and enabled to experience authentic worship. It is therefore the duty of the church to nurture mature disciples whose identity and life are rooted in Christ rather than in ancestral intermediaries.

Consequently, a Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered discipleship model provides a biblical framework that is practical for engaging the Ba-Ila people. Through sustained teaching, mentoring, and spiritual formation, converts can experience genuine transformation and cultivate a worship experience that is exclusively devoted to God. In this way, the three angels' messages become not only a proclamation of truth but also a contextualized call to faithful discipleship.