

# **Using the Concept of Substitution in African Traditional Religion to Formulate Contextual Theology on Biblical Atonement: The Yoruba Example**

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*ABSTRACT—Like other traditional religions, Yoruba Traditional Religion (YTR) is not dying out. The believers in YTR take sacrifice seriously in solving life problems. Their concept of substitution in this regard is unique. The question is how the concept of substitution in YTR can be used to formulate a contextual theology of biblical atonement for the purpose of reaching potential believers in YTR? This paper examines this issue and seeks to formulate such a theology. It shows the basic and relevant elements in the concept of substitution in YTR, which are compatible with a contextual theology of biblical atonement. In doing so, it focuses on deliverance from transferable death among the Yoruba people of South Western Nigeria. The paper also recognizes that there are elements of substitution in YTR that are not compatible with the idea of atonement in the Bible. The paper concludes that using the suitable elements in YTR idea of substitution can help the Yoruba to understand how Christ substitutionary death has secured victory over both physical death and eternal death.*

*Keywords: Yoruba, substitution, atonement, Africa, traditional religion*

## **I. Introduction**

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The contemporary religion pattern of Nigeria has been described as triadic in nature as it comprises of Christian, Islamic and Traditional religions (Ejizu, 1998, p. 179). Interestingly, none of the three religions enjoys “an overwhelming statistical advantage over the others (Ejizu, p. 186).” For while Islamic religion is dominant in the northern part of the country, Christianity dominates in the southeastern and southern parts (Ejizu, 1998, pp. 182–184). It is not so in the southwest, which is the home of the Yoruba speaking people. Yoruba Traditional religion (YTR) has remained influential in this area. Its influence has even gone beyond its place of origin. Though the religion originates from Western Nigeria, it lays claim to millions of adherents throughout the world. Apart from Nigeria, other countries where it is practiced in one form or the other are the Republic of Benin and Togo in West Africa. Taking a more global dimension, the presence of the religion is felt include Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guyana, Jamaica, Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago and St. Vincent (Emeagwali, 1999, pp. 1–2)

YTR, as an influential religion among the Yoruba and beyond, has a sacrificial system as one the cores of its beliefs and practices (Idowu, 1962, p. 118; Awolalu, 1975, p. 81). There are various needs for sacrifice among the Yoruba traditional worshippers. The basic ones are the need for propitiation, the need for prevention, and the need for substitution (Awolalu, 1978, pp. 143–146). Substitution is frequently practiced in the religion. Hence, this work focuses on substitution in YTR. The questions are: (1) What are the similarities and dissimilarities between the concept of substitution in YTR and the concept of substitution in biblical atonement? (2) Are there elements in YTR concept of substitution that are suitable for contextual theology on biblical atonement? (3) How can these elements be used to do contextual theology on biblical atonement?

In attempts to answer the above questions, the idea of substitution in YTR is presented, followed by the concept of substitution in biblical atonement. Next, an attempt is made to identify the suitable elements in YTR concept of substitution and use them to formulate a contextual theology of biblical atonement.

## **II. The Idea of Substitution in YTR**

Among the traditional Yoruba, it is believed that there are wicked spirits who are determined to torment man. Emiefe Ikenga-Metuh sheds light on the identity of evil spirit in the thought of African people he explains:

Among different African peoples are found other spirits which are believed to be inherently evil. Some of these are disincarnate human spirits, other are non-human spirits. Some are believed to be groups of anonymous spirits who may attack individuals, families or communities. Others have the status of a deity (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, p. 155).

Also, it is held that people may come under the wrath of supernatural beings for one reason or another. Accordingly, the Yoruba believe that the solution to these kinds of problems may require an act of substitution. It appears that there are two main kinds of problems in Yoruba culture that call for an act of substitution. These is (1) the need to alter an agreement or covenant, and (2) the need for a substitute to bear suffering or death which an individual is in danger of suffering (Awolalu, 1978, pp. 122–123).

Like other African peoples, the Yoruba people place great value on having children who survive them. As such, life is considered to be tormented if a couple is childless, either as a result of being unable to bare children or through the death of their children. Certain evil spirits are believed to have the basic task of afflicting pregnant mothers. They are identified as wandering, wicked spirits whose main purpose is to make women childless (Idowu, 1973, p. 175; Awolalu, 1978, p. 158; Quarcoopme, 1987, p. 91). The Yoruba call them *Abiku* which is literally translated “born to die” (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, p. 156; Quarcoopme, 1987, p. 91; Idowu, 1973, p. 175). It is believed that these spirits, are in groups or companies (Idowu, 1962, p. 123). Ikenga-Metuh adds that “it is believed that these evil spirits are arranged in age-groups, some are infants of five years and below, others are children between seven and fourteen years. Others are young people not more than thirty years” (1987, p. 156). Moreover, it is believed that the members of each group of *abiku* agree among themselves by covenant to engage in their hurtful tasks in turns. The assignment is to enter the womb of young pregnant woman, then be born, die, and return to the rest of the members of his group at a designated time. This is done repeatedly by the same *abiku* to the same woman, troubling her with the pain of the birth and death of all her children for many years, while she remains childless and frustrated as she passes her childbearing age (Idowu, 1973, p. 175; Idowu, 1962, p. 123; Awolalu, 1978, p. 159). Ikenga-Metuh (1987, pp. 156–157) seems to suggest the reason why these “born to die” spirits are seen to be “the most devilish agents of misfortune.” The reason is that they prevent the victims from becoming ancestors, “since those who die childless cannot reach

their ancestral home and are therefore lost or damned.” Perhaps this is why the *abiku* are the group of evil spirits most feared by young mothers.

Whenever a woman begins to experience repeated death of children, the legitimate question she asks is “why?” In her belief there is nothing which occurs by chance. Every occurrence has a definite cause. Although a medical doctor may see the possibility of such deaths being the result of sickle cell, a traditional Yoruba person will consult an oracle because of her belief in the activities of the *abiku*. If the oracle links the problem to the nefarious activities of the *abiku*, the woman will experience fear, not knowing what to do in order to overcome the problem. According to Yoruba belief, there are two ways to have victory over the *abiku*. First, she can seek to prevent the *abiku* from returning when he dies by mutilating and torturing the dead body. Second, by presenting a prescribed sacrifice as a substitute so that there will be a breach of covenant between the living *abiku* and his group members, which makes him willing to live as a human being on earth rather than dying and going back to them (Idowu, 1962, p. 123). It appears that the need for substitution becomes critical when the person who is considered an *abiku* is sick (Idowu, 1962, p. 123; Quarcoopome, 1987, p. 91). Because of this substitutionary sacrifice, his companions will not be able to require him to join their group again and take him away anymore. There is a need to overcome the evil activities of the *abiku*. The pain they inflict creates a peculiar need for substitutionary sacrifice in YTR.

There is another need for substitution, aside from the need for substitution with the intention of breaking the covenant between an *abiku* and his companions. It is the need to provide a substitute to bear a calamity, especially death, that should have come upon a person. In many African cultures, it is held that many calamities, especially death, are unnatural and preventable (Mbiti, 1979, p. 204). This kind of death is transferable from one person to another victim, so that the victim dies instead of the person.

John S. Mbiti holds that such deaths are caused by certain agents (Mbiti, 1979, p. 204). Similarly, Awolalu notes that there are certain agents that can cause transferable death (Awolalu, 1978, p. 158). These agents, according to him, are witches and sorcerers. Idowu’s identification of such agents seems to be broader than that of Awolalu. In Idowu’s view, the agents can be either *Orisa* (divinity) or certain malignant spirits. When they are angry, they can kill the person against whom they are angry (Idowu, 1962, p. 124). In Yoruba culture, witches are dreaded agents of transferable death.

They are dreaded because in the mind of the people, witches can cause havoc and mysterious deaths. For example, Marc Schiltz relates the experience of a man who ran away from his hometown because of his fear of witchcraft. Later on, he began to suspect his mother-in-law to be responsible for the blood deficiency of his wife (Schiltz, 2002, pp. 343, 347). Mbiti also explains that witches, who are mainly women, are “people with an inherent power by means of which they can abandon their bodies at night and meet with similar people (other witches) to suck or eat away the life of their victims” (Mbiti, 1979, p. 263).

On the basis of this assumption, a traditional Yoruba is afraid when he suddenly falls sick (Imasoge, 1985, p. 38). His fear escalates if the sickness is not remedied by medications. Instinctively, under the grip of fear and uncertainty, the sick person goes to a diviner to inquire about the cause of the sickness (Imasoge, 1985, p. 38). If the divination confirms that the sickness has resulted from witchcraft and may lead to death, an appropriate solution is sought. This is secured by providing a substitute as a sacrifice to bear the death (Pembeton, 1971, p. 24; Olowola, 1991, p. 6). This is the reason for substitutionary sacrifice in YTR.

It is the oracle that reveals the kind of sacrifice to be offered in order to provide a substitutionary solution to the problem. It seems that the objects to whom sacrifices are directed are either benevolent or malevolent supernatural beings, depending on the particular situation. For instance, Awolalu states in connection with the *abiku* that sometimes his companions require a she-goat, which is taken into the forest and tied to a tree from where they (the companions) will come to take it away (Awolalu, 1978, p. 158; Quarcoopome, 1987, p. 92). The object of substitutionary sacrifice for redemption from transferable death is the agent of the inflicted calamity or imminent death. For instance, Awolalu writes of a father who offered a chicken as a substitute for his child. He concludes the account of the action of the father as follows:

On investigation, we gathered that the one who took this action did so because he had been told by the diviner that his child’s sickness was caused by the witches. In order to appease them, therefore, and make them release the child, the man had to give another life for the child’s life. Thus, for the man’s child, the chicken died (Awolalu, 1978, p. 139).

In this manner, a traditional Yoruba man solves the problems of transferable death characterized by a sickness that cannot be cured naturally. The substitutionary victim dies instead of the one for whom the sacrifice is made.

### **III. The Idea of Substitution in Biblical Atonement**

Having presented the concept of substitution in YTR, it is essential to present the concept of substitution in biblical atonement too. Doing this may help one to notice the similarities and dissimilarities between the YTR idea and the biblical idea of substitution. In the biblical atonement, the problem of sin necessitates substitution. Man sinned. He must die. In the Garden of Eden, God warned man that the penalty of sin is death (Gen 2:17). The same warning that death is the penalty of sin is echoed both in the OT and NT (Ezek 18:3; Rom 6:23; Andreasen, 2000, pp. 331–332; Pink, n.d, p. 38). It appears that this penalty is beyond the capacity of man to pay unless God provides for it.

Aside from death as the penalty for sin which hangs over humanity, we also have become corrupt in our nature which makes us unworthy before God (Ps 51:5). The human race becomes by nature, children of wrath (Eph 2:3; Grudem, 1994, p. 496). As a result of our corrupt nature, humanity is burdened by an inability to please God and produce acceptable righteousness before Him (Isa 64:6). Paul insists that carnal man cannot please God (Rom 7:18). Likewise, Jesus makes it clear that man is incapable of doing anything without Him (John 15:5). According to Paul, man's incapability to produce acceptable righteousness is rooted in the fact that nothing good dwells in man (Rom 7:18). Rather, people becomes enslaved to sin and sinful habits, serving diverse lusts (John 8:34; Eph 2:1-2; Grudem, 1994, pp. 497–498; Wallenkampf, 1998, p. 13). This condition of humanity needs God's intervention. Leon Morris asserts that those who practice sin are a "slave to their sin whether they realize it or not. This means that they cannot break away from their sin. For they need a power greater than their own" (Morris, 1995, p. 406). It appears that a substitute, with a perfect righteousness, must stand in for humanity.

Therefore, the need for substitution becomes indispensable because of the two-fold tragedy under which people find themselves as the result of sin (Dale, 1902, p. 337). In other words, people are faced with both the misery of divine condemnation which requires a suitable substitute, and the misery of a corrupt nature which brings

enslavement to sinful habits, which is a hindrance to producing an acceptable righteousness. Humanity requires a substitute who can make available an untainted righteousness needed for humanity's justification before God.

Though it is an undeniable fact that because of man's condition, there is a need for substitution, the question is: How is this need for substitution met? Right from Old Testament times, there was an indication that the problem of death as penalty for sin is solvable only through the death of an innocent victim. For instance, the book of Genesis tells us that after Adam and Eve sinned they heard God pronounce the penalty for their sin. Yet God did not send them out of the garden immediately. God made coats of skins for Adam and Eve and clothed them (Gen 3:21). This hints at the idea of substitution, as certain animals were killed in order to provide coats for Adam and Eve. There are scholars who see theological significance in this text. In spite of the absence of the word sacrifice in the text, Angel Rodriguez perceives that this is the origin of the OT sacrificial system (Rodriguez, 2000, p. 376). He argues that when one places Gen. 3:21 in its theological context the implicit death of the animal becomes a sacrificial act. (Rodriguez, p. 376). In reference to the provision of the covering for Adam and Eve, David Atkinson ponders that "one has died, that Adam may be covered. In the sacrifice, is there not a hint of God's way with the world: that new life is given through life laid down" (Atkinson, 1990, p. 98)? J. E. Conant notes that "the first picture of substitution is in the clothing of Adam and Eve" (Conant, 1941, p. 125). The act depicts a victim dying as a substitute to provide solution to the problem of sin.

Likewise, the sacrifice of his son Isaac by Abraham seems to prefigure Christ substitutionary death on the cross for sin (Gen 22). Isaac would have died that day, but God intervened by providing a ram as a substitute in place of Isaac (vv. 9-13). Although some scholars see the above narrative as only a test of faith from God to Abraham (Davidson, 1973, pp. 91-98; Janzen, 1993, pp. 77-81), other scholars see it as both a test of faith and also the prefiguration of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. For instance, D. Stuart Brisco recognizes that Isaac in the narrative is "a type of the suffering Son who willingly submitted Himself unreservedly to the Father's will." Also, Abraham is a "poignant *picture* of the Father who 'did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all' (Rom. 8:32)", and the "ram as a type of the Lamb who died as substitute for sin of the world" (Brisco, 1987, pp. 194-195).

In the OT sanctuary system, a sacrificial victim died instead of a sinner so that he could be free from the penalty of sin, which is

death. As stipulated in Lev 4, if anyone committed sin, he was to bring a clean and unblemished animal to the anointed priest. The sinner was required to lay his hand on the animal and kill it (Lev 4:4, 15, 24). Following this, the anointed priest collected the blood, dipped his finger in the blood, and sprinkled it before the veil separating the holy place and the most holy place (Lev 4:5, 6, 16, 17). Through this process, symbolically, the sin of the sinner was transferred to the animal which died as a substitute (Porter, 1976. 37). It also seems clear that this idea of the substitutionary death of Christ predominates in the prophetic portrayal of Isa 53. It is necessary to note that the OT sacrificial system points to the Lamb of God who would come to die for the sin of the world (Branson, 1933, p. 247).

In the fullness of time, the Old Testament sacrificial system, which were types and shadows, was replaced by the reality of the sacrifice and ministry of Jesus who is the antitype. Jesus came to the world to live a sinless life in order to be the right substitute and to die for the sin of the world. According to Heb 2:9, the purpose of the incarnation of Christ was for Him to taste death for every man (Morris, 1967, p. 278). As a worthy substitute, Jesus was sinless. When tempted by Satan in the wilderness, He did not yield to Satan's temptations (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-14). Jesus Himself challenged the Jews as He asked: "Which of you convinces me of sin" (John 8:46)? As recorded in John 15:10, Jesus testified that "I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love." During Jesus' trial before Pilate, he confessed that he found no fault in Jesus, despite the accusations leveled against Him by the Jews (John 18:38).

Similarly, the apostles attested to the sinlessness of Jesus. In their writings, they insisted that Jesus was not involved in any sin (2 Cor 5:21). He was tempted in all points, yet He didn't sin (Heb 4:15). As the High Priest, Jesus is holy, harmless, undefiled, and separated from sinners (Heb 7:26). He is like a lamb without blemish (1 Pet 1:19). In spite of His sinlessness, Jesus suffered (2 Pet 2:21,22). He is identified as an Advocate with the Father on behalf of humanity (1 John 2:1). Therefore, when Jesus died on the cross, He didn't die for His own sin, but for the sins of humanity (Rom 4:25; 5:6; 2 Cor 5:14,21; 1 Pet 2:24). This will result in deliverance from eternal death of all who accept His substitutionary death on their behalf (John 3:16; Rom 6:23). Thus the need for substitution is fully met through the death of Christ on the cross for sinners.

#### **IV. Substitution, Sacrifice and Victory in Yoruba Context**

There is an assumption that the effect of sin is felt on all aspects of creation, including man's culture (Gnanaken, 1992, pp. 68–69). This may explain the reason for the distorted ideas of God, man, and the plan of salvation in every culture, when not enlightened by the Gospel. However, it is also correct to assume that certain elements exist in every culture. Though they are often clouded by distorted concepts and practices, they show traces of God's eternal truth. Therefore, it may not be justifiable to discard all the elements present in a given culture, without investigating whether there are certain elements through which the gospel could be made more understandable and concrete to the people of such a culture. This understanding is very applicable to the Yoruba culture in relation to the teaching of biblical atonement.

Based on the above understanding, identifying and using appropriate cultural elements to formulate and communicate biblical truth in a cultural context becomes significant, as it minimizes the potential for truth to look abstract and foreign in a particular culture, such as the Yoruba culture. Ken Gnanakan rightly notes that God does not bypass culture in His redemptive program (Gnanaken, 1992, p. 70). He observes further, that this was why Jesus became incarnate. He took upon Himself a particular culture and was able to communicate the plan of salvation to humanity in that context (Gnanaken, 1992, pp. 72-73; Bevans, 1992, p. 8; Kraft, 1975, pp. 173-178; Inch, 1982, pp. 171-180). This is the essence of contextual theology. The above observation seems to suggest that to pronounce every element in a culture as demonic is not God's method.

It becomes imperative to identify appropriate cultural elements, practices, principles and thought patterns in Yoruba culture in relation to sacrifice and substitution. Then one can formulate and present a theology of substitution in biblical atonement in the context of Yoruba culture. This is, in a sense, a continuation of the incarnation. Such contextualization can enhance the process of making the biblical truth about substitution more understandable and concrete to the Yoruba traditional people (Bevans, 1992, p. 8).

A major theological fact which seems to underline the concept of substitution in both the Bible and YTR is that there is a problem which leads to death. This problem is sin, in the Biblical teaching. In YTR it is a kind of incurable sickness from which man seeks deliverance. In the biblical teaching, everyone has sinned, hence everyone must die unless there is a substitute. It is this theological fact that sets the tone for the discussion in this section as we

examine the following elements: (1) sickness or sin and death which is transferable death in YTR and eternal death in the biblical teaching; (2) the oracle, as the voice of authority; (3) object(s) of sacrifice; and (4) articles of sacrifice.

As has been noted earlier in this work, one of the needs for sacrifice in the Yoruba culture is the need for victory over transferable death. J. Pemberton notes that in the Ifa writings the greatest number of verses are concerned with death either directly or by implication (Pemberton, 1971, p. 24). Also, Awolalu relates that he once witnessed a father who wished to save his child from an incurable sickness. The father consulted a diviner, who revealed to him that his child's sickness was caused by witches (*aje*) (Awolalu, 1978, p. 139). Thus in the YTR, there is an awareness of the need to be saved from transferable death. This need focuses on the need to have victory over physical death. It also reflects an acknowledgement of the need for victory over the fear of both physical death (the first death) and eternal death (the second death) which are common to the human race.

What is the origin of the death over which man seeks victory? In Yoruba belief, no event, such as death, occurs without a spiritual/metaphysical cause (Imoasogie, 1985, p. 67). Therefore, the Yoruba believe that transferable death is traceable to the wrath of divinities or the activities of malignant spirits (Idowu, 1962, p. 124; Awolalu, 1978, p. 158). That means the Yoruba believe that death is traceable to a cause. Likewise, the Bible teaches that death is traceable to a cause. The origin of death is traceable to sin (Gen 2:16,17; cf. 3:19; Rom 5:12, 6:23; 1 Cor 15:21). Millard J. Erickson notes that "one of the most obvious results of sin is death." (Erickson, 1994, p. 611). Likewise, Louis Berkhof agrees that scriptural expressions certainly point to death as something introduced into the world of humanity by sin, and as a positive punishment for sin (Berkhof, 1988, pp. 669–670).

Erickson points out that the death which the Bible refers to, in connection with disobedience has three aspects, namely, physical death, spiritual death and eternal death. He further identifies physical death as the "termination of human existence in a bodily materialized state," spiritual death as the "separation of a person from God" and eternal death as the "extending and finalizing of" spiritual death (Erickson, 1994, pp. 661, 613). In contrast, Jemison note that "the Bible pictures two deaths: the first death, ... [and] the second death" (Jemison, 1959, p. 137). Though it is not unbiblical to recognize "physical death," "spiritual death," and "eternal death," for the purpose of this work, we have chosen to use the terms

“physical death” or “first death” and “eternal death” or “second death.

It is believed in Yoruba culture that transferable death is traceable to a cause. Likewise, the origin of death as indicated in the Bible is traceable to a cause, which is sin. Nevertheless, the death which the Bible talks about goes beyond the physical death feared by the Yoruba people. It includes eternal death too, which is more serious. What indication is there that in Yoruba culture, transferable death, requiring substitution threatens people? As was noted earlier, the indicator of such death is any sickness which can't be remedied. For instance, Idowu tells the following story:

There was for example, a popular stilt-dancer who became grievously ill. When the oracle was consulted about him, it was revealed that he was so ill because the witches were jealous of his popularity and therefore wanted to make a feast of him! A substitutionary sacrifice was therefore prescribed (Olodumare, 1962, p. 125).

This illness prompted the affected person to consult the oracle to ascertain the reason for the sickness.

Likewise, sin could be seen as a sickness which serves as an indicator of eternal death. It may not be inappropriate to use sickness as metaphor for sin. Teachings on sin may need to be presented in a more concrete and conceptual manner by using metaphors like sickness for sin, as this paper is attempting to do. It seems that abstract thought about sin predominate western theology. As such, western theologians often understand sin through legal and commercial metaphors. It becomes imperative for Bible scholars in every culture, including the Yoruba culture, to be more culturally sensitive in their theological presentations. Therefore, this paper will put more emphasis on sickness as a metaphor for sin in relation to substitution in an attempt to help the typical Yoruba to see the seriousness of sin in concrete terms and understand the need for deliverance from eternal death which results from sin as sickness.

For instance, Isaiah refers to the nation of Judah as a sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters, who have forsaken the LORD, and have provoked the Holy God to anger (Isa 1:4). Further, Isaiah asks why they should be punished more. He then gives a colorful description of their sin: “the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores” (verses 5-6). Thiessen,

in reference to v. 5, points out that in so far as sin is a transgression of the law, it is guilt; in so as it is a principle, it is pollution (Thiessen, 1977, p. 24). He adds that here we deal with it as pollution, caused by an evil nature. The whole head is sick and the whole heart faint” (Isa 1:5)(Thiessen, 1977, p. 244).

Ellen G. White seems to have the same passage in mind as she wrote about the people of Judah and the God whom they had been claiming to serve, but whose character they had misunderstood. Ellen G. White saw that in this Bible passage God is portrayed as the great Healer of spiritual disease. In this context White uses the phrase “spiritual diseases” as a metaphor for sin. (White, 1943, p. 315).

In Matt 9:12, Jesus stated that those who are well don’t need a physician, like those that are sick. Craig L. Blomberg explains that the focus of the passage is spiritual health and sickness” (Blomberg, 1992, p. 156). Joseph S. Exell also mentions, in connection with this statement of Jesus that there is moral disease in the heart and character of man (Exell, 1978, p. 159). Patrick McCormick, who attempts to build a disease model of the theology of sin, argues that sin as illness is coherent with notions of sin as state and power as both sorts of models points to the fact that sin pervades the human experience. Sin is not merely something one does, an act performed or a crime committed. It is also, even primarily, an orientation toward disintegration and death. Sin permeates the totality of human experience, contaminating everything by its noxious presence and influence (McCormick, 1989, p. 132). Therefore, using humanly incurable spiritual sickness as a metaphor for sin in the teaching of atonement in Yoruba culture may help the people of that culture to see the enormity of sin. This may lead to the desire to know what should be done to overcome death, which may result from such spiritual sickness.

At this point, it needs to be made clear to the Yoruba that every person is spiritually sick, meaning that everyone is a sinner. It is a kind of sickness that is more terrible than physical sickness since it leads to eternal death. Certain Bible passages indicate that every man is a sinner. In his prayer of dedication of the temple, Solomon recognized and stated that there is no man who does not sin (1 Kgs 8:46). Psalm 143 insists that no one living is righteous, in God’s eyes (Ps 143:2). The writer of Prov 20:9 challenges: “Who can say, ‘I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin’”? Isaiah, in his prophecy on the suffering Servant affirms that we are all like lost sheep, having gone in our own direction. (Isa 53:6). In another place, Isaiah further portrays the deplorable condition of the human race as

follows: “But we are all as an unclean thing. And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away” (Isa 64:6). Paul contends that both Jews and Gentiles alike are sinners (Rom 3:9-19) and he finally declares that “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God”(Rom 3:23; Fowler, 2000, p. 255–256). Therefore, if humans want to avoid eternal death, resulting from the sickness of sin, there must be an intervention. That means that man needs victory over death.

What is the solution to the problem of transferable death which confronts people in Yoruba culture? It seems that the offering of a sacrifice, as prescribed by the oracle, averts the death that threatens them. The Yoruba traditional people attach great importance to what they consider to be the voice of divine oracle when it comes to sacrifice. This seems to explain why they consult a diviner called *Babalawo* whenever they are in trouble. Mostly, sacrifice is prescribed. Babalola seems to be right when he insists that sacrifice can never be separated from divination among the Yoruba” (Babalola, 1992, p. 84).

Concerning the solution for solving the problem of transferable death in YTR, Premberton cites a myth about the importance of providing a substitute in order to have victory over pending death as follows:

If a says that death is now ready to kill the person; but if he can make plenty of sacrifices, he will wriggle out of danger . . . Exchange, exchange. The Ifa priest of the household of Elepe cast Ifa for Elepe. He was told to exchange an animal for his life on account of death (Babalola, 1992, p. 84).

In relation to the biblical atonement, there seems to be a better divine oracle through which the solution to the problem of humanity, including the solution to the problem of overcoming death, is prescribed. This divine oracle is the Bible. The origin of the Bible is traceable to God and therefore is the most dependable authority from which to find the truth about the human predicament. It provides the means for victory over transferable death. It has been noted that the entire Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation, was “given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim 3:16). Erickson concurs that “the uniform testimony of human authors of the Scriptures” affirms that “the Bible has originated from God and is his message to man” (Erickson, 1985, p. 203). Jemision also upholds the Scriptures as

God's message to man. He shows that God's instruction through the prophets covers every aspect of human's life (Jemison, 1955. 77–79).

What does the divine oracle, the Bible, say concerning the solution to the problem of spiritual or eternal death which has resulted from the human disease of sin? The traditional Yoruba believe in substitutionary death. In fact, this belief is reflected in the mythological story of Odunmba the son of Agbonirekun, who was instructed to sacrifice to prevent imminent death. According to the mythology, he sacrificed a hen for that purpose and he was able to escape death. This led to Odunmba's poetic statement, "The year I would have died/Death took away my hen. My own hen. My *irana* hen/Which I offered for sacrifice was taken away by death" (Abimbola, 1977, pp. 24–25).

Likewise, the Bible teaches that a substitute has been provided to die instead of sinners. The substitute is Christ who died for the sin of the world (Isa 53:5,6,10,12; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:15; 1 Tim 2:6,1; Heb 9:28; 1 Pet 2:24). Bible scholars maintain that Christ died a substitutionary death as substitute for sinners (Ryrie, 1986, p. 290; Morris, 1967, p. 175). In the Yoruba culture people provides their own substitute, which could be any kind of animal sacrificed to either divinities or malevolent spirits. But God operates differently. He is the object of worship and sacrifice in biblical atonement. And He is also the One who gave His sinless and only Son to die as a substitute for sinners, saving them from eternal death (John 3:16).

The objects of and articles used for sacrifice in YTR don't seem to be compatible with Bible teaching on atonement. To be sacrificing to divinities or malevolent spirits seems to amount to worshipping of idols. It needs to be noted that these divinities are represented by idols or certain emblems. Idowu admits that each of the divinities in YTR "has his own emblems according to people conception of him." He explains further that the emblems and images are visible objects to represent the invisible divinities (Idowu, 1962, pp. 63–66). The Bible is against idol worship (see Ex 20:3-7; Deut 9:12-16; 16:21-2; 1 King 14:22-24; Ps 106:19-23; Isa 42:8; 2 Cor 6:16; Gen 35:2-4; Exod 23:24,32; Deut 4:23; 7:2-6; Josh 24:14, 23; 1 Sam 7:3-4; 2 King 23:4-7; Ps 81:9; 1 Cor 10:7; 1 John 5:21). It is God alone, the One the Yoruba people identify as the Supreme Being (*Olodumare*), that is worthy of our worship. E. Dada Adelowo intimates that "the Yoruba never made the mistake of putting God, *Olodumare*, on the same pedestal with divinities (*orisa*) and the ancestors. In their belief, *Olodumare* is unique, incomparable" (Adelowo, 1990, p. 168). Also, sacrificing any kind

of animal is not even in tune with the Old Testament sacrificial system that pointed to Christ, the real and perfect sacrifice. Whereas unclean animal can be used for sacrifice in the YTR, only clean and unblemished animal was allowed for sacrifice in the Old Testament (See Isa 1:13-15; Exod 12:5; 29:1; Lev 1:10; 4:3,23,28,32; 5:15; 9:2,3; 14:10; 23:12,18-19; Ezek 43:22,23; 45:18,23; 46:4,6,13; Mal 1:8). Therefore, it may not be right to use these elements for contextual theology on atonement.

God Himself sacrificed His Son for the salvation of humanity. This is an indication that substitution in biblical atonement is superior to the substitution in YTR. This seems to be further demonstrated by Jesus conquering death through His resurrection. Death couldn't keep Him in the grave (Matt 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-14; Luke 24:1-41; John 20:1-20). Erickson observes that the inability of death to hold him symbolizes the totality of his victory (Erickson, 1994, 776). This victory is victory over death. The resurrection of Christ, who is our Substitute, is the guarantee of the resurrection of all those who have accepted His substitutionary death (John 5:28, 29; Acts 4:2; Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 15:12-58; 2 Cor 4:14; 1 Thess 4:14). Because He lives, having been resurrected from the dead, Christ has secured victory over death (John 11:25). This is a basic need of every culture, including Yoruba culture.

What is the relationship between the victory over the second or eternal death and the first or physical death? What is its relevance to Yoruba culture? It appears that the victory which Christ has secured over the second death has resulted in the possibility of the victory over the fear of the first death that is being experienced by humanity. Those who have accepted the substitutionary and atoning death of Christ know that even though they may die the first death, they will rise again. They, therefore, experience victory over the fear of the first death which is temporary (1 Cor 15:54-57). Erickson points out that believers, while still subject to physical death, do not experience its awful power or its curse (Erickson, 1994, p. 1172). Thus the dread of death may be removed through the work of Christ, and any one who believes in Christ may face death with calmness and peace (Hagner, 1990, p. 56). Believers now see death as sleep. Andreasen recognizes that the Bible favors the metaphor of sleep to describe death (Deut 12:2; 1 Kgs 2:10; Job 14:12; Dan 12:2; Matt 9:24; 27:51,52; John 11:11; Act 7:60; 1 Cor 15:18,51; 1 Thess 4:13). He writes of the importance of this metaphor of sleep for death, as follows:

“Of all the biblical metaphors for the state of the dead, that of sleep is the most important, enabling us to speak gently and naturally about death in a way that does not frighten the survivors” (Andreasen, 2000, pp. 235, 325).

This becomes relevant to the Yoruba culture, since Christ’s victory over death has met the need for the fear of the first death which sometimes is seen as transferable death among the Yoruba. Thus, by His substitutionary and atoning death, Christ has adequately met the need for the substitutionary sacrifice, which leads the traditional Yoruba to sacrifice either to malevolent spirits or divinities .

## V. Summary and Conclusion

In the course of the discussion in this paper, an attempt has been made to outline the concept of substitution in both YTR and biblical atonement. Attempt has also been made to identify the elements that are appropriate for contextual theology and those that are not in YTR. While it has been suggested that there are elements (objects of and articles for sacrifice) in the religion that may not be appropriate for contextual theology, there are elements (incurable sickness and transferable death) in the religion that are appropriate for such theology in the context of Yoruba culture. Therefore, it has been further suggested that incurable sickness, as an element, is an appropriate metaphor for sin in teaching biblical idea of substitution in Yoruba context. Further, transferable death which can be transferred to another victim, seems to reflect to some extent, the idea of the eternal death experienced by Christ on the cross. It is then affirmed that Christ, as the substitute, has afforded the Yoruba the opportunity to have victory over transferable death, which is eternal death, and peace in the face of physical death.

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