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Images of Jesus among Christian Women in Harare¹

INTRODUCTION

Jesus Christ is the focus of the Christian faith. All who belong to this faith have their own images of this Christ determined by their existential circumstances. In Zimbabwe in general and Harare in particular, women form the majority of Christians (Chitando 2004, Togarasei 2004). This is despite the fact that most Christian denominations deny these women positions of influence. In view of this reality, this study seeks to find out what has attracted women to Christianity. In particular, it seeks to find out the existential circumstances and needs of the Harare Christian women that have led them to be attracted to Jesus. What are their images of Jesus Christ, and how do these fulfill their existential needs and aspirations? In apartheid South Africa and the black American movement, for example, Christ was seen as liberator. Who is Jesus Christ then for the Harare Christian women? To address these questions, the paper is divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief discussion of Christology in the New Testament. This is done to show that even the Christology of the New Testament communities was influenced by their existential needs. A second section, which gives a general overview of African Christology, follows this. The third section then focuses on the Christology of Harare women.

The paper is a result of several interviews carried out among Harare Christian women. There are too many Christian denominations with varying Christologies in Harare to study all of them. To capture views from

1. I wish to express my gratitude to the University of Zimbabwe, Faculty of Arts Research Committee for the award of a research grant in 2005 that has enabled the success of this project.

a wide base, this study grouped Christian denominations mainly on the basis of their doctrine, into mainline churches, Pentecostal/Evangelical churches and African Independent/Initiated Churches (AICs). At least five churches in each group were studied. Between ten and fifteen women from different social and economic groups were interviewed. Churches in high, medium and low-income suburbs were studied. Apart from interviews, my two research assistants and I were participant observers in some of the meetings of the church women. The data collected from the field was then analysed in the light of the historical-critical approach to Biblical writings. This was out of the realisation that whatever images of Jesus the women have, the chief informant is the New Testament. Thus this paper begins by providing a background in New Testament Christology.

NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTOLOGY: DEFINITION AND
GENERAL BACKGROUND

Christology, in the words of Oscar Cullmann (1963: 1), 'is that science whose object is Christ, his person and his work'. Christology, therefore, involves a reflection on the work and significance of Christ to humanity. It should then be borne in mind from the outset that it is Christians who formulate Christology. This explains why New Testament scholars have questioned whether Jesus understood himself as a divine being or that the divinity expressed in Christological titles was laid upon him by the believers after his death. In the New Testament it is possible to see that different Christian communities had different christologies. Several examples can be given. First, whereas the Lukan community emphasised a universalistic Christology, the Matthean community on the other hand emphasised a particularistic Christology. Second, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul presented Jesus as the pre-existent Christ who emptied himself and became a servant (Phil 2.5–10). Third, John presents the same Jesus as the divine Logos who was originally with God and was God himself who functioned at the creation (Jn 1.1). Attempts to find reasons for such differences have shown that each community understood Jesus from its own existential needs. Even throughout the New Testament, Jesus is given different Christological titles: Messiah/Christ, Son of Man, Son of God, Lord/Prophet, Son of David, Saviour, Suffering Servant and many others. Each title suited a specific setting and the specific needs of each community. For example, it has been found that Paul preferred the title Son of God because, working among the Gentiles, he saw that it was an easily accepted title since the Gentiles' used it too. Although most of these titles had their own Jewish or Greek meanings, the early church gave them new

meanings that expressed their own understanding of who Christ is. The same has been observed in African Christology. Let us turn to this.

AFRICAN CHRISTOLOGY: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

African Christology (theology) was born out of the realisation that, contrary to the European missionaries' approach of teaching Africans to reject their African cultural values in order to be true Christians, 'African values and customs are often closer to the Semitic values that pervade the Scriptures and the story of Jesus than the European Christian values that have been imposed upon them' (Schreiter 1997: viii). This then gave rise to the attempt to understand Christ and his gospel from African cultural perspectives. From these perspectives, Christ has been understood as Master of Initiation (Sanon 1997), Chief, Ancestor and Elder Brother (Kabasele 1997), Healer (Kolie 1997) and Liberator (Magesa 1997). Closer to home, Ambrose Moyo (1983) describes Jesus as *Mudzimu* because of his intercessory powers. The effects of such an understanding of Jesus are summarised by Y.C. Elenga:

Jesus' person is more concrete, and his presence is better felt in people's lives.

Jesus' person is connected to his relationship with human life.

The authority of Jesus' person is manifested.

Jesus is seen as a bearer of life.

In this case an answer to the question, Who is Jesus Christ?, is no longer a catechetical one based on the apostolic creed, but one which expresses one's understanding of Jesus in one's life. Jesus is given specific attributes which suit the specific situation(s) of the believer. This approach to Christology is the one we found among Harare Christian women. Let us then turn to look at the images of Jesus that Harare Christian women have constructed.

CHRISTOLOGY AMONG HARARE WOMEN

The images of Jesus Harare women have depend on a number of variables. The rich, the poor, the educated, professionals, etc. have different christologies. Before we look at some of the images these women have about Jesus let us mention the fact that for most of the women we interviewed, there is no difference between Jesus and God. So in talking about Jesus they often find the name of God interchangeable. They also did not draw any differences between Jesus and the church. All that done by the church or by fellow Christians is interpreted as having been done by Jesus.

One of the most common images Harare women have about Jesus is that of a friend and a companion. To the question, 'Who is Jesus for you?' most women answered by describing Jesus as their friend and companion. They told of how lonely they used to feel until they were introduced to one of the many churches in Harare. Several house women talked of how lonely they felt when their husbands and children were at work and at school respectively. In these times fellow Christian women provided them with company. One, Mrs Nyoni, had this to say about Jesus, 'My husband is a truck driver and sometimes he spends more than a week away on duty. During these times I used to feel so lonely that were it not for Jesus who now provides me company, I would be tempted to be involved in extra-marital affairs.' Many women also talked of how city life destroys traditional ways of relating. In villages where kin live close to each other it is easy to find people who provide care to one's family when a woman is away. In a town like Harare such traditional social ties are non-existent and many women have found friends and 'kin' in church. Jesus therefore is regarded as the friend who can be turned to in times of need. The image of Jesus as friend and companion is also held strongly by widows. Mrs Mugove of the Church of Christ in Warren Park told us of how she was deserted by friends and relatives following the death of her husband. She said that for some time she did not understand the purpose of her existence as she failed to cope with the pressures of losing a loved one and a pillar of her life. She said at one point she even contemplated suicide. It is at this point, she says, she attended a church service where the teaching was on Jesus as the burden bearer. The Scripture passage was Matthew 11.28, 'Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.' She said that from that point on she started developing a close friendship with Jesus. Mrs Mugove was so happy as she narrated to us her friendship with Jesus that she ended by taking us into a singing session, singing the following song;

<i>Jesu ndiye shamwari yangu,</i>	Jesus is my friend
<i>Yakandimutsa,</i>	Who raised me up
<i>Yakandiponesa,</i>	Who saved me
<i>Ndakanga ndafa</i>	I was dead

Many women also see in Jesus the provider of a husband. We found out that this image of Jesus is held mainly by Pentecostal women. Mrs Kamunda of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Warren Park had this to say about Jesus:

Jesus is the one who provided me with a husband. I reached the age of

30 before I was married. I was so worried that I even went to *n'angas* who gave me some medicine to put in my lotion. I was told that this medicine would attract boys to me but unfortunately the medicine did not work. One day I decided to go to church. At church I was taught to pray for my problems. I was told that only Jesus is the answer to all my problems. My usual prayer was, 'God, I want a husband.' It was not long before he answered me and today I am happily married with five children.

Mrs Chimupungu of the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) also confessed that it was Jesus who gave her a husband. She said she went to church because she was attracted by church weddings and so wanted to find a husband to wed in church.

Apart from providing a husband, many Pentecostal women in Harare also believe that Jesus is the sustainer of any marriage. A Kuwadzana Family of God Church woman, who declined to be named, said at one time she nearly lost her husband to a 'small house' (a term used to describe a new practice of polygamy, where men raise other families, away from the matrimonial home, often without the knowledge of the legal wife). She said it was through prayer and fasting with the help of other women that the husband later confessed to the illicit relationship and then abandoned it. Through women's fellowship groups, many of the women also confessed that Jesus sustains their marriages. In these fellowship groups they are taught deportment and how to present themselves as modern women. They are also taught how to relate with their husbands so that they never think of extra-marital relationships. Even sexual matters form part of the 'curriculum'. As Mate (2002) argues in the case of Family of God (FOG) and ZAOGA women's fellowship groups, Harare Christian women's fellowship groups are characterised by discourses of femininity.

One of the problems that often threaten the break up of families is the wife's failure to conceive. In many traditional African societies, including the Shona who are the majority ethnic group in Harare, lack of children in a family is often attributed to the wife. Many Harare women in AICs have ended up in these churches in search of children. Having gone to doctors and to *n'angas* to no avail, many have testified that prophets in AICs have saved their families from break-ups. A forty-year-old African Apostolic Church woman said her marriage was saved from the verge of collapse when she conceived after she was given oil and *miteuro* (a prayer prescription) by a church prophet who specialises in *kuuchika*, the ritual to enable barren women to conceive. She had spent seven years of her marriage with-

out a child and her husband was now being persuaded by his relatives to divorce her and marry a fertile woman. Other women understood Jesus' provision of children differently. Mrs Luvinda of the Roman Catholic Church said that although she does not have a biological child of her own, Jesus provided her with many children. She and her husband welcomed their childless condition and through counselling by the church priests they adopted many orphans whom they brought up and who now treat them as their own biological parents. She attributed her husband's acceptance of their condition to none but Jesus.

In Pentecostal churches, the idea that Jesus provides children is so deeply embedded that most of the members were attracted mainly by the founders' ability to deal with childlessness. Ezekiel Guti of the ZAOGA was initially known for his ability to pray for conception. Many in this church have confessed that they were called to Jesus through Guti's gift (Guti 1997). Mai Chaza of the Guta RaJehovah Church was also known for this gift. In fact many churches claim the ability to pray for women to get children, so much so that Mate (2002: 559) has talked of women's wombs as 'Godly laboratories out of which miracles are produced' in the ZAOGA and FOG churches. Not only does Jesus provide children, he can also change the sex of the child. Like childlessness, having only children of one sex can create problems for a woman in a marriage, particularly when the children are all girls. Mrs Gava of the African Apostolic Church in Dzivarasekwa said she had problems when she bore girls only. Her husband wanted a boy child. Even her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law started urging her husband to marry another woman to bear him a boy child. Troubled by this, Mrs Gava started to go to church to seek help. She was referred to a prophet with a gift of *kuchinja nyoka* (to change sex). But for her to get his services she was urged to get converted and be baptised. This she did and in a short time she conceived and bore a baby boy. When we interviewed her she now had two boys and praised Jesus for saving her marriage by providing her with baby boys.

Harare women also believe that apart from giving them children, Jesus also protects the children from the ills of city life. Their children are at risk of drug abuse, prostitution, HIV/AIDS infection and general delinquency. A woman we interviewed at a bus terminus in the city centre, but chose to remain anonymous, said for her Jesus is the protector of her children. She said nowadays if some one thinks she can teach her children good manners on her own, she would be fooling herself. Rather, she said, it is only when you invite Jesus to protect your children that whatever you teach them they can uphold.

Another very common image of Jesus among Harare Christian women is that of a material provider. This image is mainly found among those women with poor backgrounds. Zimbabwe's ever-deteriorating economic situation has left women at the mercy of things. Widowed housewives have been worst affected. During the interviews we heard a heart-rending story of one woman. The woman, who belongs to the African Apostolic Church, said after the death of her husband she started to face problems of getting money to pay her rent, to pay school fees for her children and to buy food for the children. She said she was left with no option but to get into prostitution. This, however, did not solve her problems. Although she got some little money sometimes, she also often contracted sexually transmitted diseases. It is only when she was invited to church by a neighbour that her life started to change. Once she accepted Jesus, he started providing her with ideas to raise money. Learning from scriptures like 1 Thessalonians 4.11, 'That you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you', she said she started working with her own hands and in a short time she could now make enough money to look after her family. When we talked to her she was now a proud owner of a house.

Many from main line churches also saw Jesus as a material provider. They mentioned how Jesus has provided them with jobs and with education and employment for their children despite the high rates of unemployment in Zimbabwe. Most of the main line churches have programmes that cater for the material needs of their members. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe and the Roman Catholic Church run programmes that cater for the old and the orphaned. Women have interpreted these as Jesus' intervention in their material needs.

Most women in business have seen Jesus as a business partner and marketing manager. A cross border trader told us of how Jesus helps her in smuggling goods through customs officials. She said often when she runs out of money to pay duty for her goods at the boarder, she prays to God who allows her to miraculously pass without being detected by the customs officials. The woman did not consider this to be a crime. Instead she took this as the miraculous working of God. That Jesus is a business partner is emphasised by Pentecostal women. The gospel of prosperity preached in these churches has led women to form an image of a Jesus active in members' business ventures. Mrs Kondowe said she decided to join the Hear the Word Ministries church when she started running her hair saloon. She believed that if her business was to be successful it was to be blessed by Jesus whom she believed can be invited as a partner. She

confessed that after her acceptance of Jesus in her life, her business boomed as many people started coming to her saloon. Some women even told of how, through Jesus, their small businesses survived Operation Murambatsvina, a clean up programme implemented by government in May to June 2005 to stop business operations in undesignated areas.

Despite living in a modern city, traditional world-views still persist in the minds of many Harare women. Contrary to Rudolf Bultmann, who thought it impossible for those living in an age of electricity to continue believing in the power of spirits (Baker 1964), many still believe in supernatural forces like ancestral spirits, *zvikwambo/tokoloshis* (goblins), avenging spirits and the power of witches. Mrs Mutasa, a nurse by profession and a member of the Johane Masowe church, attributed her five miscarriages to the power of evil spirits. She said despite seeking help from doctors, she continued losing her children through miscarriages. It was only through the power of God that the evil spirits were cast away by prophets from the Johane Masowe church. For her and others who shared similar stories, Jesus is a soldier and watchman who protects his followers from evil spirits.

Harare women have many other images of Jesus, but because of limitations of space we shall discuss last, the image of Jesus as a physician/healer. This is by far the most common image of Jesus among Harare Christian women. Almost 90% of all the women we interviewed saw Jesus as healer apart from the other images they have of him. This is not surprising considering the fact that in the gospels Jesus attached great significance to healing and exorcism. As C. Kolie (1997: 128) correctly observes, 'Were we to remove from the Gospels the passages dealing with cures of all kinds, little would remain. ...' Healing as a principal activity of Jesus indeed must have influenced Harare women's understanding of Jesus as healer, but, for sure, their existential circumstances have also contributed much in shaping this Christology. Harare women are reeling under several diseases both physically and spiritually. There are no medicines in hospitals. Pharmacies are beyond the reach of many. Many of the women are infected by the HIV by their promiscuous husbands and their children are not spared by the virus too. They have been left with no option but to see Jesus as their healer. A Mrs Moyo of the Seventh Day Adventists said, she once fell ill and was told by the doctors that to recover she would have to undergo an operation of the intestines in South Africa. She could not raise the required money and so, in her words, she started waiting for her final day. Fellow Christians, however, asked her to put her faith in Jesus who can heal every ailment. She started praying and when she went to the

doctor after a month she was told that she was totally cured and that there was no longer any need for an operation. Mrs Paradza of the Anglican Church even believes that Jesus cured her of her HIV positive status. She said before she became a Christian she was a prostitute and had suffered from so many sexually transmitted diseases that she was convinced that she was HIV positive. She said she even developed all the symptoms associated with HIV infection. It was during this time that the Mothers' Union of the Anglican church came to share with her the word of God. She accepted the word and was baptised. Through counseling she determined to find out her HIV status and so decided to go to a testing centre. But before she went she asked the congregation to pray for her. She was tested on three different occasions and found to be negative. She was convinced that Jesus had healed her. There were many other healing stories told by the women, which space does not allow us to include.

CONCLUSION

'The understanding of who Jesus is mirrors in many ways the challenges that Africa faces today' (Schreiter 1997: ix). Schreiter's observation is not only true of Africa in general but also of Harare in particular. The understanding of who Jesus is by Harare Christian women, mirrors in several ways the challenges that the women face in this city. Although the current problems the country is facing are affecting every citizen, women are worst affected. Whether the father brings home food or not, at dinner children sit around the table waiting for the mother to present something. When a child fails to come to the newly wed couple, the husband together with his relatives put the blame squarely on the wife. When a child suffers from HIV/AIDS and is abandoned by his/her partner, the mother is expected to take care. With little education and training, when the husband dies, the wife is left with no option to raise children but prostitution. It is in the face of these challenges that Harare Christian women have developed christologies that cater for their existential needs. For them Jesus is therefore the husband provider, child provider, protector, business partner, healer and so on.

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- Mrs Chimupungu (39), Dzivarasekwa, 12/9/05.
- Mrs Gava (38), Dzivarasekwa, 10/09/05.
- Mrs Kamunda (40), Warren Park, 9/09/05.
- Mrs Kondowe (age not known), Sunningdale, 14/09/05.
- Mrs Luvinda (58), Mount Pleasant, 12/09/05.
- Mrs Moyo (43), Harare, 05/10/05.
- Mrs Mugove (52), Warren Park, 13/09/05.
- Mrs Mutasa (about 45), Harare, 19/09/05.
- Mrs Nyoni (32), Mufakose, 28/09/05.
- Mrs Paradza (57), Braeside, 18/09/05.

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