

**A COMPARISON OF ATONEMENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND KWALE TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

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**AN ORIGINAL ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIONS, FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE BACHELOR OF ARTS (B.A.) HONOURS DEGREE IN RELIGIONS**

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**CERTIFICATION**

We hereby certify that this research project was diligently carried out by **Ochem Gift**, with Matriculation Number **ART2101155**, in the Department of Religions, University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria. This work represents original effort and was completed under our academic supervision in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of a Bachelor's Degree in Religion.

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## **DEDICATION**

This project is dedicated to Almighty God, whose grace, wisdom, and strength have sustained me through every stage of this academic journey. It is also dedicated to my beloved parents and family, whose love, prayers, and sacrifices have been my greatest motivation and support.

To my lecturers, mentors, who guided and inspired my pursuit of knowledge, I remain deeply grateful for your dedication and encouragement. Most importantly, this work is dedicated to the Kwale people, whose rich cultural and spiritual heritage inspired this study. Their deep sense of community, morality, and reverence for the divine continue to stand as a testament to the enduring wisdom of African traditional values.

Finally, I dedicate this project to all students and researchers seeking to understand the harmony between religion, culture, and human morality. May this work contribute to that ongoing dialogue.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the Comparison of the Atonement in the Old Testament and Kwale Traditional Religion. The background of the study emphasizes that in both systems, sin is viewed not merely as moral failure but as a disruption of social, spiritual, and cosmic order. The research aims to identify points of similarity and difference between the two traditions, with particular focus on the purpose, methods, and outcomes of atonement. The study adopts a qualitative and comparative approach, relying on secondary data from biblical texts, theological literature, and ethnographic sources relating to the Kwale people of the Niger Delta. Data analysis involved thematic interpretation of rituals, symbols, and moral principles central to both religions. Findings show that while the Old Testament grounds atonement in covenant renewal and divine mercy, the Kwale traditional system emphasizes reconciliation, communal harmony, and the appeasement of both ancestors and deities. The research concludes that in both contexts, atonement represents a moral and spiritual process aimed at restoring peace, order, and relationship with the divine. It further recommends that greater attention be given to indigenous perspectives in theological studies, as they provide valuable insights into the universal human quest for reconciliation and moral balance.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **1.0. GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 Background to the Study**

Human societies have long believed that sin or wrongdoing disrupts the relationship between humans and the divine, and that peace can only be restored through atonement. Both the Old Testament and Kwale Traditional Religion place strong emphasis on this idea, though in different ways. In the Old Testament, atonement is central to Israel's covenant with God. Sin separated the people from Him and brought judgment, so God established a sacrificial system, including burnt, sin, and guilt offerings. The climax of this system was the Day of Atonement, when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies and used blood sacrifices to cleanse the nation. Here, blood symbolized life given in place of sin, and only God determined the acceptable sacrifice.

In Kwale Traditional Religion, the indigenous faith of the Ndokwa people of Delta State, sin is seen as an offence against the Supreme God (Oshimili), lesser deities, and the community. Wrongdoing disrupts spiritual and social balance, often resulting in sickness, infertility, or misfortune. To restore harmony, atonement rituals such as animal sacrifices, libations, or offerings of kola nuts and palm wine are performed by priests, elders, or family heads acting as mediators.

Despite their differences, both traditions share the belief that reconciliation with the divine is essential for personal and communal wellbeing. The Old Testament grounds atonement in God's covenant law, while Kwale religion relies on oral tradition and ancestral customs. Comparing them highlights not only their differences but also their common concern with humanity's need for forgiveness and restored peace.

## **1.2 Clarification of Terms**

1.2.1 Atonement: This refers to an act or process carried out to make amends for sin or wrongdoing. It is done to restore peace and repair the relationship between humans and God or other spiritual beings.

1.2.2 Sin: This is any action, word or thought that goes against the laws, will or moral standards set by God or the gods. It can be an offence committed against both the divine and the community.

1.2.3 Kwale Traditional Religion: This is the indigenous religion of the Ndokwa people of Kwale in Delta State, Nigeria. It involves the worship of the Supreme God, lesser deities and ancestors, and it is expressed through rituals, festivals and moral customs.

## **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

Both the Old Testament and Kwale Traditional Religion agree that sin damages the relationship between humans and the divine and that this relationship must be restored through atonement. However, it is important to understand the meaning and practices of atonement. This study seems to examine the concept of sin, atonement and their significance to the adherents of both religions. In essence, this study seems to examine the meaning, purpose and practice of atonement in Old Testament and Kwale Traditional Religion. It will explore how each tradition presents or perceives the issue of atonement in their teachings. Therefore, the problem of this study is on the comparison of the concept of atonement in the Old Testament and Kwale Traditional Religion.

#### **1.4 Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The Aim of this study is to undertake a comparative analysis of the concept and practice of atonement for sin as presented in the Old Testament and within the Kwale Traditional Religion. It seeks to explore how both religious systems understand the nature of sin, guilt, and reconciliation, as well as the various rituals, symbols, and mediating agents involved in restoring harmony between humanity and the divine. The following are the objectives of this study:

- i. To examine the concept of sin in the Old Testament.
- ii. To examine the concept of Sin and Atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion
- iii. To identify the similarities between the Old Testament and Kwale Traditional Religion
- iv. To point out the differences between the Old Testament and Kwale Traditional Religion
- vi. To discuss the relevance of these similarities and differences for religious understanding.

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This study holds significant academic, cultural, and theological value. It seeks to deepen understanding of the concept of atonement by examining its expression in two distinct yet comparable religious systems, the Old Testament and the Kwale Traditional Religion. Firstly, the research contributes to biblical and comparative religious studies by highlighting the shared moral and spiritual principles underlying both traditions. Through this comparative approach, the study reveals that atonement is a universal human response to sin and moral failure, cutting across cultures and religious boundaries.

Secondly, the study is significant to African theology and anthropology, as it provides scholarly recognition of the Kwale people's traditional beliefs. It challenges the long-standing notion that African traditional religions are primitive or inferior by demonstrating their depth, moral structure, and resemblance to scriptural religious systems. In doing so, it encourages a balanced dialogue between Christianity and indigenous African spirituality.

Thirdly, this research has educational importance, as it serves as a resource for students, scholars, and theologians who seek to understand how different cultures perceive sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It can foster intercultural understanding, promote religious tolerance, and contribute to curriculum development in religious and cultural studies.

Finally, the study has practical relevance for contemporary society. By emphasizing the shared values of repentance, forgiveness, and moral renewal, it provides insights into how modern communities can restore peace and harmony amidst moral and social conflicts. It also encourages appreciation of indigenous wisdom as a guide to ethical living and communal harmony. In essence, this work underscores the unity of moral purpose that exists between biblical faith and African traditional thought, thereby enriching the broader discourse on religion, culture, and humanity.

#### **1.6 Scope of the Study**

This study is limited to the concept and practice of atonement for sin as presented in selected Old Testament passages, especially in books such as Leviticus, Numbers and Exodus. Moreover, the scope of the study is also confined to the sin and Atonement as understood within the Kwale people of Delta State.

### **1.7 Methodology**

This research will adopt a qualitative approach. Information on the Old Testament understanding of atonement will be drawn from the Bible. Relevant biblical commentaries, theology books, academic journals and the internet will also be consulted to provide scholarly insight. For the study of Kwale Traditional Religion, Primary Data will be collected through oral interviews with elders, priests and practitioners in the Kwale area of Delta State. Atonement, where possible, will also be included to provide firsthand understanding. In addition, existing literature on African Traditional Religion and the religious practices of the Ndokwa people will be reviewed.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **2.0.**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Concept of Sin**

The concept of sin occupies a central and enduring place in religious and moral reflection, functioning as a key to understanding humanity's relationship with the divine and the moral order of existence. In every culture and religious tradition, sin represents a state of disorder, a deviation from the sacred harmony that connects the human and the divine. It is not merely an act of wrongdoing but a condition of alienation that affects both the individual and the community. The universality of the concept suggests that human beings have always wrestled with the problem of moral failure and the quest for restoration. Within the Judeo-Christian context, sin is understood as a violation of God's holy will; in other systems, it is often viewed as a disruption of cosmic or ancestral order. Regardless of the

theological framework, sin remains the moral fracture that disturbs the balance of existence and calls for divine intervention or moral reparation.

In his profound theological reflections, Brunner (1952) interprets sin as an inward corruption that distorts the moral image of humanity. He rejects the idea of sin as a mere accumulation of wrong actions; rather, he conceives it as a deep-rooted condition of alienation from God, a spiritual disease that affects the very core of human nature. Brunner views this separation not only as disobedience but as a rebellion of the human will against divine authority. Humanity, in its self-assertion, seeks autonomy apart from God, and in doing so, destroys the harmony for which it was created. He emphasizes that sin is relational in essence, it expresses a broken fellowship between the Creator and His creation. In this sense, sin is both vertical and horizontal: vertically, it severs communion with God; horizontally, it distorts relationships among humans and between humanity and creation itself. Brunner's theological concern lies in the recognition that sin is not a superficial flaw but a condition that pervades the entire human experience, intellectual, moral, spiritual, and social. The mind becomes darkened, the conscience dulled, and the will enslaved by self-centered desires. Humanity, having turned inward upon itself, is unable to restore its original righteousness through moral effort alone. This understanding resonates deeply with biblical anthropology, which portrays sin as a pervasive power that enslaves the human heart and corrupts even the best of human intentions. According to Brunner, this alienation leads to existential despair because man, created for fellowship with God, finds himself estranged from the source of his being.

Furthermore, Brunner's view highlights the inadequacy of purely ethical or philosophical systems to resolve the problem of sin. He insists that reconciliation cannot arise from human striving or intellectual achievement, for the initiative must come from God Himself. Divine grace, therefore, becomes the only effective remedy for the inward rebellion of the human heart. Grace restores what sin has destroyed, the bond of communion between God and humanity. In this way, sin is not only a moral category but a relational and existential one, revealing both the tragedy of human fallenness and the necessity of divine redemption. Brunner's perspective provides a foundation for understanding sin as a reality that transcends moral codes or legal definitions. It is the inward turning of man from God toward self, the preference for autonomy over obedience, and the distortion of moral order that results from this rebellion. This conception situates sin not simply as an ethical failure but as a spiritual condition that requires both repentance and renewal. Thus, the meaning of sin, in its deepest sense, is the story of humanity's estrangement from God, and the corresponding need for divine grace to restore harmony, righteousness, and moral wholeness.

The writings of Eichrodt (1961) deepen the theological discourse on sin by firmly situating it within the framework of Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh. His theological approach transcends mere moral abstraction and anchors sin in the lived religious experience of the covenant community. For Eichrodt, the covenant is not simply a legal or political arrangement but a sacred relationship grounded in divine grace and human responsibility. It is through this covenant that Israel comes to understand both its identity and its moral obligations before God. Within this framework, sin is not defined primarily by individual ethical failure but by the breach of covenantal faithfulness, a violation of trust between God and His chosen people. The covenant, as Eichrodt presents it, is the very heart of Israel's theology,

and to sin is to rebel against the divine authority that sustains this sacred order. Eichrodt views sin as an act of spiritual infidelity that threatens the moral and religious cohesion of the entire community. It is not only the individual sinner who suffers but the nation as a whole, for Israel's destiny is collectively bound to its faithfulness to Yahweh. This communal aspect of sin reveals a profound theological insight: moral and spiritual failure in the Old Testament is never a purely private matter. Disobedience to God's law disrupts the entire covenant structure, bringing impurity and disorder into the collective life of the people. Hence, sin in Israel's context cannot be detached from social and historical realities, it is embedded in the nation's story of obedience, rebellion, punishment, and restoration.

Eichrodt emphasizes that while sin provokes divine judgment, it simultaneously becomes the setting for divine mercy. The covenantal framework does not present God merely as a lawgiver and judge but also as a redeemer whose love seeks to restore what has been broken. Thus, sin serves as both the moral failure of humanity and the occasion for divine grace. The recurring cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and forgiveness throughout Israel's history underscores God's enduring faithfulness despite human waywardness. This theological tension, between divine justice and mercy, forms a central theme in Eichrodt's work. It shows that the story of sin is inseparable from the story of redemption. In other words, the covenant does not end with transgression; rather, it is renewed through confession, sacrifice, and divine forgiveness.

The moral and theological insights of Eichrodt (1961) are complemented and expanded by Bright (1953), who situates the problem of sin within the moral history and evolving faith of Israel. Bright interprets Israel's story as a continuous moral drama in which sin is both a theological and ethical reality shaping the nation's destiny. He perceives sin not as an isolated act but as a recurring pattern of idolatry and social injustice, twin evils that corrupt the fabric of the covenant community. For Bright, idolatry represents the spiritual dimension of sin, a turning away from Yahweh toward false gods and self-made ideals, while social injustice reflects the ethical consequence of that spiritual failure, the exploitation of the weak, the neglect of the poor, and the perversion of justice in society. Thus, sin manifests not only in personal rebellion but also in structural and institutional decay. Bright's interpretation is deeply historical. He reads the biblical narrative as a testimony of Israel's moral struggle, a people constantly oscillating between faithfulness and apostasy, judgment and mercy. Through this historical lens, sin is revealed as a dynamic and evolving force that shapes the identity and destiny of Israel. It is not a static theological category but a lived reality woven into the moral and social evolution of the nation. Each prophetic call to repentance, each act of divine judgment, and each renewal of the covenant becomes part of a grand redemptive pattern in which God continuously seeks to reclaim His people from moral and spiritual corruption.

Moreover, Bright insists that divine forgiveness remains central to Israel's experience. The recurring rhythm of rebellion and restoration illustrates a divine pedagogy, God uses judgment not to destroy but to correct and purify. In this way, history itself becomes a medium of revelation, and sin, paradoxically, becomes the means through which humanity comes to a deeper awareness of divine grace. Bright's contribution is therefore both theological and ethical: he presents sin as a moral distortion that affects individuals and societies alike, but he also shows that every act of repentance renews the possibility of reconciliation. The story of sin, in his view, is inseparable from the story of hope, the persistent divine

call inviting humanity back into covenant fellowship. Together, Eichrodt (1961) and Bright (1953) enrich the theological understanding of sin in the Old Testament by framing it not as an abstract moral failure but as a relational and historical reality. Sin disrupts the covenant, distorts community life, and corrupts moral order, yet it also sets in motion the divine response of mercy, judgment, and restoration. Through their insights, sin emerges not only as the mark of human rebellion but as the backdrop against which God's steadfast love and redemptive purpose are revealed in history.

In the field of African theology, Idowu (1973) offers a profound and distinctive interpretation of sin, one that extends far beyond the confines of personal wrongdoing. He conceives sin not simply as disobedience to divine command but as a total disruption of the delicate web of relationships that sustain both human and cosmic existence. In his exploration of African Traditional Religion, Idowu emphasizes that morality is inextricably linked with spirituality; the two form a unified moral-spiritual system where every action carries both social and metaphysical consequences. Within this framework, sin is understood as a rupture in the moral, social, and cosmic harmony that connects human beings with the Supreme Being, the deities, the ancestors, and the natural world.

When an individual commits an offense such as stealing, lying, adultery, or the breaking of a taboo, it is not merely regarded as a violation of social norms but as a direct affront to the spiritual order upheld by the ancestors and deities. Idowu stresses that such acts create disorder not only in the human realm but also in the unseen world, for the ancestors are believed to be the guardians of morality and the custodians of communal integrity. Consequently, sin in the African context has far-reaching implications, it stains the offender, endangers the community, and provokes the displeasure of supernatural forces. The repercussions may manifest as illness, misfortune, or calamity, signaling the disruption of cosmic equilibrium. According to Idowu, this conception of sin explains why African societies place great emphasis on communal accountability and reconciliation. Atonement, in this worldview, is not simply about seeking personal forgiveness but about restoring the moral and spiritual harmony that sin has disturbed. The process often involves confession, ritual cleansing, sacrifices, and public acts of restitution to repair broken relationships and appease offended spirits. This restorative approach underscores the fact that in African Traditional Religion, sin is relational, it is understood within the context of community, rather than the isolated conscience of an individual.

Idowu's theological insights thus reveal a moral system deeply rooted in the awareness of interconnectedness, between people, nature, and the divine. He portrays sin as both ethical and ontological: ethical, because it violates moral expectations; ontological, because it disturbs the very essence of being that links all creation together. Ultimately, Idowu concludes that the goal of religious life in Africa is to live in harmony with all spheres of existence. Therefore, atonement is not a mechanical or ritualistic act but a sacred duty aimed at the restoration of balance, peace, and spiritual well-being within the community and the cosmos at large. Mbiti's work describes African religion as one in which every moral act carries spiritual significance. Sin, therefore, cannot be confined to personal guilt, it disrupts the rhythm of life and the unity of the community. He explains that African societies do not view morality as an abstract code but as a living system governed by ancestral wisdom and divine order. When an individual commits a wrong, rituals of cleansing, confession, and sacrifice are performed to restore balance. Mbiti stresses that sin is both moral and metaphysical, it affects the individual's

conscience and the spiritual harmony of the community. His approach demonstrates that for Africans, ethics and religion are inseparable; righteousness is measured by one's ability to live in peace with both the visible and invisible worlds.

Clements (1992) provides a more theological reading, arguing that sin is fundamentally a violation of divine holiness. He sees sin not merely as wrongdoing but as impurity that contaminates both the sinner and the sacred space where God's presence dwells. Clements' emphasis seems to rest on the idea that atonement must involve inner repentance as well as outward ritual. He points out that the sacrificial system in Leviticus is more than a legal mechanism, it is a moral drama through which the sinner recognizes guilt and seeks renewal. For him, true atonement cannot be achieved through ritual performance alone; it must reflect an inward transformation of heart and will. This interpretation bridges the ethical and spiritual dimensions of sin, revealing it as both a moral failure and a spiritual defilement requiring cleansing.

Turning to an ethnographic perspective, Talbot (1969) provides an in-depth exploration of the understanding of sin among the Niger Delta peoples, including the Kwale, revealing the profound interconnectedness between morality, spirituality, and communal life. He observes that within these societies, morality is not an abstract concept but a lived experience that permeates every sphere of existence, social, economic, and religious. Acts such as theft, adultery, falsehood, witchcraft, or the breaking of taboos are regarded not merely as offenses against individuals but as transgressions against the entire moral and cosmic order that sustains community life. Sin, therefore, carries a dual nature: it is both a social disturbance and a spiritual pollution, capable of bringing disorder to the visible and invisible realms. Talbot explains that among the Kwale and neighboring groups, wrongdoing is believed to produce a kind of spiritual contagion, a defilement that affects not only the perpetrator but also their family and, by extension, the whole community. This contamination disturbs the vital harmony between humans, deities, and ancestral spirits, and if left unresolved, it can invite misfortune, disease, barrenness, or other forms of calamity. The community interprets such afflictions as signs of spiritual imbalance or divine displeasure, prompting collective action to uncover the source of impurity. Elders, diviners, or priests are often consulted to identify the nature of the transgression and the specific deity or ancestor that has been offended.

Talbot's research reveals that the process of moral restoration in these societies is highly communal. Confession and public acknowledgment of wrongdoing are central elements of reconciliation. The offender is often required to perform acts of restitution, returning stolen goods, making reparations to the injured party, or participating in purification rituals. Sacrificial ceremonies form an essential part of this restorative process; animals such as goats, fowls, or sheep may be offered to the gods or ancestors to cleanse the moral stain and appease the spiritual forces that guard the community's welfare. The spilling of blood, in this context, symbolizes both purification and renewal, restoring the moral and cosmic order disrupted by sin. Beyond ritual acts, Talbot notes that these practices carry deep ethical implications. The goal of atonement is not only to avert divine punishment but to reestablish moral equilibrium and social trust. The offender, once purified, is reintegrated into the community, reaffirming the collective commitment to moral responsibility and spiritual harmony. This cyclical process of offense, confession, purification, and restoration reflects a worldview in which morality,

religion, and social cohesion are inseparable. In essence, Talbot's ethnographic account highlights the deep moral consciousness embedded in the traditional systems of the Niger Delta peoples, including the Kwale. Sin is viewed as a breach of relationship, between man and man, man and spirit, and man and nature, rather than a private moral failure. Consequently, the community assumes a shared responsibility for maintaining purity and balance. This worldview underscores the African conviction that moral and spiritual order must be continuously guarded and renewed through collective vigilance, ritual action, and moral integrity.

When these various perspectives are brought together, a profound pattern emerges. Sin, across both the Judeo-Christian and African religious traditions, is never treated lightly. Whether as covenantal rebellion in Israel or disruption of harmony in African cosmology, sin is portrayed as a serious violation that calls for reconciliation. Both theological systems affirm that human beings are moral agents bound to divine and communal law, and any departure from this order invites judgment and demands restoration. Ultimately, the reviewed works demonstrate that sin is a universal human problem that transcends geography and culture. It is not merely an ethical lapse but a fundamental disorder that affects both the moral conscience and the spiritual order. The concept of sin, as seen through these scholars, reveals humanity's constant struggle between moral weakness and divine expectation. It also affirms that in every culture, the path to redemption lies in humility, confession, and the search for restored fellowship with the divine.

## **2.2 Atonement of Sin**

The concept of atonement occupies a central and profound place in both theological and moral reflection, standing as one of the deepest expressions of humanity's longing for restoration, forgiveness, and spiritual renewal. It is a universal theme that transcends cultures and religions, embodying the human recognition of failure and the yearning to repair what has been broken between man and the divine. Atonement represents not merely the removal of guilt but the reestablishment of harmony within the moral and spiritual order of existence. It signifies a movement from estrangement to communion, from impurity to holiness, and from judgment to grace. Across various traditions, atonement manifests as a process involving repentance, confession, restitution, and ritual sacrifice, all directed toward cleansing the conscience and renewing the bond between humanity and the sacred. Theologically, atonement reflects a dialogue between divine justice and divine mercy. It acknowledges that wrongdoing has consequences, that sin disrupts the moral fabric of creation, and yet affirms that reconciliation is possible through divine compassion. As such, atonement functions as both a moral necessity and a spiritual mystery, a bridge between divine holiness and human frailty. It reminds humanity that sin not only alienates individuals from God but also fractures the unity of the community and the created order. Through acts of repentance and ritual purification, human beings seek to participate in the restoration of cosmic and moral equilibrium.

In his seminal work, *The Mediator*, Brunner (1952) presents a deeply theological interpretation of atonement, emphasizing its divine rather than human origin. He argues that true reconciliation cannot be achieved by human effort, moral striving, or ritual performance alone; it must begin with God's own initiative. For Brunner, the essence of atonement lies in the self-giving love of God who, in Christ, enters

into the world's brokenness to restore it from within. Humanity's alienation, he asserts, is too profound to be repaired through moral effort; only divine grace can reach into the depths of human rebellion and bring forth redemption. Brunner's reflections illuminate atonement as an event of both divine justice and divine mercy. In his view, the cross stands as the ultimate symbol of this mystery, where God's righteousness and compassion converge without contradiction. It is not merely a legal or transactional act, but an expression of divine self-disclosure, revealing the very nature of God as both holy and loving. Through Christ's suffering and obedience, the power of sin is confronted and overcome, and the possibility of new life is opened to all who believe.

Moreover, Brunner emphasizes that atonement is not confined to a historical moment but continues as a transformative relationship. It restores not only humanity's standing before God but also the integrity of human existence itself. Atonement renews the conscience, purifies the heart, and reorients human will toward divine purpose. It is therefore both an event and a process, a divine act accomplished once and for all, and an ongoing moral and spiritual renewal within the believer's life. Ultimately, Brunner's theology situates atonement at the very heart of the Christian faith. It is not merely a doctrine to be explained but a reality to be experienced, the gracious movement of God toward His creation. Through it, alienation is replaced by fellowship, guilt by forgiveness, and despair by hope. In this sense, atonement stands as the supreme testimony to divine love, a love that does not abandon humanity in sin but reaches into its depths to restore and transform it.

The covenantal understanding of atonement receives detailed attention in the writings of Eichrodt (1961), who situates it within the broader framework of Israel's religious consciousness. He explains that the ritual sacrifices of the Old Testament were not arbitrary ceremonies but sacred symbols of spiritual realities. Each offering of blood, grain, or incense carried moral significance, serving as a physical expression of repentance and dependence on God. Eichrodt argues that the essence of Israel's atonement lay in the awareness that sin disrupted communion with God, and only through the shedding of blood, symbolizing the surrender of life, could purification occur. In his interpretation, atonement was both judicial and relational: it acknowledged divine justice while seeking divine mercy. This balance between law and grace would later shape Christian understandings of salvation. The moral implications of atonement are emphasized by Bright (1953), who traces the prophetic critique of Israel's sacrificial system. He observes that prophets such as Isaiah, Amos, and Micah redirected attention from mere ritual performance to ethical sincerity. For Bright, the prophetic voice called Israel to recognize that true atonement required inner transformation, the turning of the heart toward righteousness. Sacrifices devoid of moral reform, he notes, were considered detestable to God. Atonement, in his view, becomes not merely an act of ritual cleansing but a movement toward ethical renewal and social justice. He argues that repentance and mercy are inseparable, and that forgiveness must manifest in the way individuals treat others. Bright's contribution underscores that atonement, while rooted in divine grace, carries moral obligations that define a person's relationship with both God and neighbor.

The theological depth of atonement reaches its fullest expression in the reflections of Clements (1992). He interprets atonement as the climax of God's redemptive history, realized in the person and work of Jesus Christ. For Clements, the cross stands not only as a historical event but as the ultimate revelation of divine character, a fusion of holiness, justice, and compassion. He explains that the

sacrificial language of the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in Christ, whose death and resurrection transform the meaning of sacrifice from ritual to redemption. Clements also argues that true atonement cannot remain theoretical; it must produce moral change and spiritual renewal within the believer. Forgiveness, therefore, is not the end of atonement but its beginning, leading to a life that mirrors the grace received. His analysis unites theological doctrine with practical ethics, showing that redemption transforms both belief and behavior. A broader cultural understanding of atonement is articulated by Mbiti (1975), whose exploration of African religious thought reveals the deeply communal nature of reconciliation. In his account, African societies view wrongdoing not merely as an individual moral failure but as a disruption of the collective harmony linking humans, ancestors, and spiritual forces. Atonement rituals are therefore communal acts intended to repair relationships at every level of existence. Mbiti describes how confession, cleansing, and sacrifice serve as tangible means of restoring peace between the living and the spiritual world. He emphasizes that African conceptions of atonement integrate morality, religion, and social order, forgiveness is not only spiritual but also social, reuniting the offender with their community. His observations reveal that in African cosmology, life is holistic: physical, moral, and spiritual dimensions coexist, and reconciliation in one sphere affects the others.

Building on this theological foundation, Idowu (1973) offers an illuminating and culturally grounded perspective on the concept of atonement within African Traditional Religion, particularly emphasizing its moral, spiritual, and metaphysical dimensions. He views atonement as a moral imperative, a necessary process for the restoration of balance between the human, spiritual, and cosmic realms. In African cosmology, sin is not perceived merely as a personal moral failure but as a profound disruption of the divine order that sustains life. It disturbs the harmony between humans, ancestors, and deities, thereby threatening both individual well-being and communal stability. Thus, atonement becomes essential not only for the offender's reconciliation but also for the preservation of social and cosmic harmony. Idowu explains that within the African worldview, every wrongdoing, whether intentional or accidental, creates a ripple of spiritual dissonance that demands resolution. Atonement, therefore, is not an abstract theological concept but a lived moral responsibility that involves both spiritual and practical dimensions. It is a holistic process that includes acknowledgment of guilt, confession before the community or spiritual elders, acts of purification, and offerings to the offended spiritual entities or ancestors. Through these steps, the individual not only seeks forgiveness but actively participates in the restoration of moral equilibrium. The emphasis, Idowu notes, is not merely on punishment or appeasement but on transformation and reconciliation, the offender must realign his life with the moral expectations of the community and the divine order that governs existence.

In his analysis, Idowu underscores that atonement within African Traditional Religion transcends the physical act of sacrifice. It is a comprehensive moral and spiritual experience. Rituals such as libations, blood sacrifices, cleansing ceremonies, and symbolic washings are outward expressions of an inward change, a recognition of moral failure and a desire to make things right. Confession plays a critical role in this process, as it publicly acknowledges guilt and opens the way for forgiveness. Purification rituals, on the other hand, symbolize the washing away of moral impurity, restoring the offender's eligibility to rejoin the spiritual and social community. In certain cases, compensation or restitution is also required, particularly when sin results in tangible harm to others or to communal

property. This act of restitution reinforces the ethical foundation of atonement, linking divine forgiveness with human justice. Idowu insists that these practices should not be dismissed as primitive or superstitious. Rather, they represent a profound moral and spiritual logic that affirms the sacred interconnectedness of all existence. Atonement, in this context, serves as a moral pedagogy, a way of teaching responsibility, humility, and respect for divine law. It reflects the African conviction that life flourishes only when lived in harmony with both the visible and invisible dimensions of reality. The rituals of atonement thus express a deep awareness of the sacred unity that binds humanity, nature, and the divine.

Furthermore, Idowu draws parallels between African Traditional Religion and the biblical understanding of atonement. He observes that, in both systems, sin is a force of separation and alienation, while reconciliation represents restoration and renewal. Just as the Old Testament sacrificial system sought to purify and restore the people of Israel to divine fellowship, African rituals of atonement seek to heal the fractures between humans and the spiritual order. Both express a universal moral law rooted in the belief that wrongdoing demands repentance, and that forgiveness, though freely given by the divine, must be met with sincerity and ethical reform on the part of the sinner. In essence, Idowu's reflections elevate African concepts of atonement to their rightful theological significance. They reveal a moral sophistication grounded in the conviction that human life cannot exist in isolation from the divine order. Atonement, therefore, stands not as a mere ritual obligation but as an ethical and spiritual necessity, a way of renewing life, restoring peace, and reaffirming the unity between God, humanity, and the cosmos.

From a more historical and anthropological standpoint, Talbot (1969) provides a vivid description of the atonement practices among the peoples of the Niger Delta, including the Kwale. He notes that when moral transgressions occur, such as lying, theft, or adultery, the consequences are believed to affect not only the individual but also the family and the wider community. Atonement rituals, therefore, become communal events, designed to cleanse the moral atmosphere and prevent spiritual misfortune. Talbot's observations capture the deep social dimension of atonement: it restores harmony, reaffirms shared values, and renews the bond between humans and their deities. He also draws parallels between African and biblical systems, observing that both use sacrifice as a medium of reconciliation, though each expresses it through distinct cultural lenses. Taken together, these authors present a comprehensive understanding of atonement that transcends cultural and theological boundaries. Whether viewed through the lens of Christian theology, Hebrew ritual, or African traditional belief, atonement remains the bridge between guilt and grace. It affirms that reconciliation is both divine and human, a process that involves confession, repentance, and renewal. Each perspective, while unique, converges on a single truth: the need for forgiveness and restoration is universal.

Atonement, therefore, is not confined to temples, churches, or shrines; it is a timeless moral principle that shapes the conscience of humanity. In every culture and age, the desire for reconciliation expresses the same yearning, to mend what is broken, to find peace where there was guilt, and to live once again in harmony with the divine order of the universe.

### **2.3 Book Review on the History of the Kwale People of Delta State**

The Kwale people, who occupy the Ndokwa East and Ndokwa West Local Government Areas of Delta State in southern Nigeria, are a branch of the larger western Niger Delta ethnic groups known for their rich historical heritage, spiritual worldview, and communal way of life. Their history, religion, and moral code are deeply interconnected, forming a holistic system that governs their interactions with both the physical and spiritual realms. The Kwale worldview perceives life as a continuous interaction between humans, nature, ancestors, and divinities. This interconnectedness shapes their understanding of sin, morality, and atonement, making religion an inseparable aspect of their daily existence. The following are some of the books that were reviewed in this study:

The first book reviewed in this section is titled *A History of the Urhobo and Isoko Peoples of the Niger Delta* by P. A. Talbot (1969), a seminal ethnographic work that provides invaluable insight into the cultural and spiritual life of the peoples of the western Niger Delta, including the Kwale. Talbot's study stands out for its comprehensive approach, situating the Kwale people within the broader cultural and historical framework of the region. He traces their origins to ancient migratory movements believed to have occurred between the Benin and Igbo territories, suggesting that the Kwale people share deep cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities with their Urhobo and Isoko neighbors. Through this historical lens, Talbot demonstrates that the Kwale are not an isolated community but part of a dynamic network of Niger Delta societies that evolved through interrelated traditions, intermarriages, and shared cosmological views.

Talbot's exploration goes beyond mere historical reconstruction. He delves deeply into the social organization of the Kwale, examining their kinship structures, clan systems, and political organization. His descriptions reveal that kinship is the cornerstone of Kwale social identity, forming the basis for governance, inheritance, and moral accountability. Within this system, every individual is not only a member of a family but also part of a spiritual lineage that connects the living, the dead, and the unborn. Talbot emphasizes that this sense of interconnectedness defines the Kwale worldview, in which religion is inseparable from every sphere of life. Religion, for the Kwale, is not a compartmentalized activity reserved for ritual occasions; rather, it serves as the foundation upon which all aspects of existence rest. Every social, political, and economic act is understood as having religious meaning, for the divine is believed to be intimately involved in the daily affairs of humanity. According to Talbot, the ancestors occupy a central place in this spiritual framework. They are regarded not as distant figures of the past but as active moral guardians who watch over the living and ensure that communal harmony is maintained. Their presence reinforces ethical conduct and upholds justice within society. When individuals commit moral offenses such as the ancestors and deities who uphold cosmic balance. The seriousness of sin in Kwale religion lies in this dual dimension, it is both moral and cosmic, personal and collective.

Talbot carefully documents the processes by which the Kwale seek to restore balance when this sacred order is disturbed. Acts of atonement, he explains, are essential to the moral and religious life of the community. Confession of wrongdoing, whether before elders or spiritual intermediaries, marks the first step toward reconciliation. This is followed by rituals of sacrifice and purification, which are performed to appease the offended spiritual beings and cleanse the moral pollution caused by sin. Through these acts, the community reaffirms its unity and restores harmony between the human and

spiritual worlds. Talbot's account makes clear that atonement, in the Kwale understanding, is not an individualistic act of repentance but a communal process that reinforces shared moral values and social solidarity.

What emerges from Talbot's analysis is a coherent moral and theological vision in which the concept of sin extends beyond personal morality to encompass the entire fabric of existence. Sin disrupts not only the relationship between individuals but also the cosmic order that sustains life. It creates disharmony that can manifest in illness, misfortune, or social unrest. Therefore, atonement is not simply about forgiveness but about the restoration of balance and the reaffirmation of moral law. Talbot's work provides profound insight into how the Kwale integrate their spiritual beliefs with everyday life, demonstrating that religion functions as the moral backbone of society. Through his ethnographic detail and interpretive depth, Talbot presents the Kwale worldview as one where ethics, spirituality, and community are inseparably bound, a worldview in which to live rightly is to live in harmony with both the seen and unseen worlds.

Another significant work reviewed in this section is *Nigeria: Its Peoples and Problems* by C. K. Meek (1931), an early ethnographic study that offers deep insight into the cultural, political, and spiritual life of Nigeria's diverse peoples, including the Kwale of the western Niger Delta. Meek's work remains one of the first systematic efforts to interpret indigenous Nigerian societies through sociological and anthropological perspectives. His observations on the Kwale reveal a social order profoundly shaped by religion, where governance, morality, and spirituality form an inseparable whole. In Meek's view, the Kwale make no distinction between the sacred and the secular; every human activity, whether political, familial, or economic, operates under spiritual influence and divine supervision. Meek portrays Kwale society as sustained by a balance between human authority and divine will. Leadership is organized through chiefs, elders, and priests who perform complementary roles. Chiefs uphold justice and maintain order, elders preserve tradition and wisdom, while priests mediate between the community and the spiritual world. Justice, in this context, is not merely social regulation but the preservation of divine harmony. Wrongdoing is thus seen as both a social and spiritual transgression that disturbs moral and cosmic balance. A key part of Meek's analysis is his discussion of religion as the ethical foundation of Kwale life. The community's moral code is guided by reverence for the ancestors, who are believed to reward good conduct and punish moral failure. This ancestral oversight serves as a moral deterrent, promoting honesty, fairness, and self-control. The concept of *ogō* (taboo) defines acceptable behavior and protects the sanctity of relationships and the environment. When a taboo is violated through acts such as adultery, theft, or desecration of sacred objects, the entire community is considered affected by spiritual pollution.

To restore balance, elaborate rituals of reconciliation are performed under the supervision of priests. These rites involve confession, prayers, and offerings of animals or kola nuts to the ancestors and deities. Libations of palm wine or water are poured on the earth as symbols of purification and renewed harmony. The purpose of these rituals is restorative rather than punitive, aimed at cleansing moral impurity and reintegrating the offender into communal life.

Meek further explains that the Kwale moral system functions on preventive and corrective levels. Preventively, fear of ancestral punishment encourages ethical conduct and social discipline. Correctively, when transgressions occur, rituals of atonement prevent guilt from spreading and ensure moral cleansing. This dynamic relationship between the living and the dead reinforces religion as an active moral force shaping personal and communal life.

Ultimately, Meek presents the Kwale worldview as one where religion is the living foundation of society. It governs their laws, values, and customs, binding individuals to both community and the unseen world. Justice and morality are grounded in divine order rather than human decree, reflecting a civilization centered on spiritual integrity and social harmony. Meek's study thus reveals the moral depth of traditional African societies, showing that beneath their rituals lies a profound ethical vision rooted in balance, purity, and reconciliation. Idowu's *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World* (1975) provides one of the most profound interpretations of African religiosity and its moral framework, and his observations apply directly to the Kwale religious system. Idowu explains that African traditional religion, including that of the Kwale, is characterized by an all-encompassing belief in the Supreme Being, the ancestors, and a host of deities associated with natural elements. He notes that the Kwale people, like many West African groups, believe in a Supreme Creator called Osonobruvwe who is distant yet accessible through lesser deities and ancestral intermediaries. According to Idowu, the Kwale understanding of morality is derived from this hierarchical spiritual structure. Sin is regarded as a disruption of harmony between humans, nature, and the spiritual forces. Atonement, therefore, becomes a religious necessity aimed at restoring peace through prescribed rituals. Idowu further explains that the rituals of purification, such as animal sacrifice, pouring of libations, or symbolic washing, are central to their spiritual life. These acts reaffirm communal unity and the dependence of humans on divine mercy. Moreover, Idowu highlights that the Kwale religion emphasizes reconciliation rather than retribution, showing that the ultimate aim of atonement is to heal broken relationships rather than merely punish offenders.

Ajayi's *Ethnographic Studies of the Western Niger Delta* (1980) provided a comprehensive examination of the social and religious life of the Kwale and their neighboring ethnic groups. Ajayi observed that the Kwale people engage in elaborate annual festivals and communal sacrifices to cleanse the land and maintain divine favor. He noted that these rituals are often accompanied by dancing, drumming, and prayers, reflecting the deeply participatory nature of their worship. Ajayi also pointed out that taboos and oaths serve as moral checks within the society. Violating a taboo is believed to bring misfortune not only to the individual but also to the entire community. To avert such calamities, priests and diviners are consulted to identify the cause of the offense and prescribe the appropriate form of atonement. The rituals may include the sacrifice of animals, offerings of food, or purification with herbs and water. Ajayi concludes in his book, that these practices demonstrate the Kwale people's deep sense of responsibility to maintain both moral integrity and cosmic order. In his view, the Kwale religion functions as both a moral code and a means of maintaining harmony between the seen and unseen worlds.

In *Culture and Religion in the Niger Delta* (2007), Nwaezeigwe offers a contemporary and insightful exploration of the Kwale people's religious worldview, situating it within the broader currents of cultural

transformation and religious adaptation in modern Africa. His study demonstrates how the Kwale traditional belief system has not only survived the pressures of Christianity, colonialism, and modernization but has also evolved in dynamic ways that preserve its spiritual integrity and communal relevance. For Nwaezeigwe, the endurance of Kwale religion lies in its capacity for synthesis, its ability to absorb new influences without losing its foundational principles. He explains that the Kwale religious framework remains deeply moral, emphasizing the relationship between human behavior, divine order, and communal well-being. Sin, in this worldview, is not merely a violation of divine law but a disruption of the delicate balance that sustains harmony between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. Wrongdoing affects not just the individual but the entire community, and thus requires a process of atonement that restores both social and cosmic equilibrium. Nwaezeigwe describes the Kwale understanding of sin as one that encompasses both moral failure and spiritual pollution, a transgression that must be confronted through confession, sacrifice, and reconciliation.

A distinctive feature of his analysis is the way he highlights the evolution of Kwale atonement rituals in response to changing times. While traditional practices such as animal sacrifices, libations, and cleansing rites remain vital, there has been a gradual shift toward symbolic and moral forms of restitution. Offenders, for example, may seek forgiveness not only by offering sacrifices to deities and ancestors but also through public apologies, acts of charity, or community service. This development, Nwaezeigwe notes, reflects a broader theological shift from mere ritual performance to ethical reformation, a move that parallels modern interpretations of repentance and grace. The Kwale people's religious thought, therefore, integrates both the fear of divine retribution and the hope of divine mercy, creating a moral system that is both just and compassionate.

Nwaezeigwe draws compelling comparisons between the Kwale concept of atonement and that found in the Old Testament. He observes that both systems share a common moral philosophy rooted in the restoration of relationships, between humanity and the divine, and among members of the community. In the Old Testament, sin is viewed as a breach of the covenantal relationship between God and His people, and atonement rituals are designed to renew that covenant through sacrifices and repentance. Similarly, in Kwale traditional religion, sin is understood as a fracture in the bond between humans and the ancestors or deities who safeguard communal order. Atonement, therefore, functions as a ritual and moral mechanism to mend that breach, bringing the offender back into harmony with the living and the spiritual world. This parallel, Nwaezeigwe argues, underscores the universality of the human quest for reconciliation and moral renewal. Both the Old Testament and the Kwale system regard atonement as a transformative act, a means of cleansing guilt, restoring purity, and securing divine favor. However, while the Old Testament emphasizes an individual's covenantal relationship with a transcendent God, the Kwale framework places greater weight on communal restoration and the maintenance of cosmic balance. In this sense, the Kwale notion of sin and atonement reveals a deeply social theology in which morality is inseparable from community life.

Nwaezeigwe's work ultimately reveals the intellectual and spiritual depth of Kwale traditional religion. He challenges the perception that African indigenous faiths are primitive or static, showing instead that they embody complex moral systems capable of engaging with modernity on their own terms. By situating Kwale religion within comparative theological discourse, he highlights its

philosophical richness and its enduring contribution to the understanding of African spirituality in the modern age. His analysis demonstrates that, even amid the influence of Christianity and modernization, the Kwale people continue to find meaning in their ancestral faith, a faith that binds the human, the moral, and the divine into a single, harmonious whole.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **3.0. THE CONCEPT OF SIN AND ATONEMENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND KWALE TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Human beings across different cultures have always wrestled with the problem of wrongdoing and the need for reconciliation with the divine. Religion provides moral and inspiritual frameworks for understanding transgression, maintaining ethical order, and restoring harmony between humanity and the sacred. In both the Old Testament faith of ancient Israel and the Kwale Traditional Religion of southern Nigeria, the concepts of sin and atonement occupy central positions. In the Old Testament, sin

is regarded as a violation of God's covenant and commandments, while in Kwale Traditional Religion, sin is perceived as an act that disrupts the moral balance maintained by the ancestors and deities. Both traditions understand sin as more than individual wrongdoing. It is also a disruption of communal and spiritual order. Atonement therefore functions as the process through which that order is restored.

### **3.2 The Concept of Sin in the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament, the concept of sin occupies a central place in the moral and spiritual relationship between God and humanity. Sin is portrayed not merely as the violation of divine commandments, but as an act of rebellion that disrupts the covenant bond between God and His people. It is both a moral failure and a spiritual defilement that separates humanity from divine holiness. The Old Testament presents sin as having personal, social, and religious consequences, affecting not only the individual but also the community as a whole. Through laws, prophetic teachings, and ritual systems, the Old Testament reveals sin as a serious offense requiring repentance, confession, and atonement to restore harmony with God.

#### **3.2.1 Meaning of Sin in the Old Testament**

Sin occupies a central place in the theology and moral life of the Old Testament. It is not seen merely as wrongdoing but as a serious disruption in the relationship between humanity and God. Within Israel's faith, sin is understood as rebellion against divine authority, a violation of the covenant, and a distortion of the order God intended for creation. It is both an act and a condition that affects individuals and the community. Several Hebrew words are used to describe sin. The term *ḥaṭṭā'th* means "to miss the mark," showing moral failure to live up to God's standards. *ʿĀwōn*, meaning "iniquity" or "guilt," refers to the perverted nature and lasting effects of sin. *Peša'*, meaning "transgression" or "rebellion," describes sin as a deliberate act against divine will. These words together show that sin is not only a legal or moral offense but also a deep spiritual problem.

The covenant relationship between God and Israel helps explain the seriousness of sin. The covenant required faithfulness, obedience, and holiness. Disobedience was therefore more than breaking a rule; it was betrayal of God's trust and a threat to Israel's identity as His chosen people. Sin carried both personal and collective consequences, often bringing misfortune upon families and the nation. Sin in the Old Testament also has moral, social, and spiritual effects. The wrongdoing of one person could bring calamity to others, as seen in the stories of Adam, Cain, and Achan. This shows the communal view of morality where the people's well-being depended on their shared righteousness. Sin could defile the land, the sanctuary, and the people, requiring cleansing and atonement through sacrifices. The prophets described sin as both internal and external. It arises from pride, hypocrisy, and hardness of heart. Isaiah spoke of sin as rebellion against the Holy One, and Jeremiah compared it to a disease that corrupts the heart. This view led to the call for repentance and inner renewal. Sin also provokes divine anger and brings judgment, but the Old Testament never excludes the possibility of forgiveness. The sacrificial system, especially the sin and guilt offerings, provided a means for reconciliation and restoration. These rites showed both the seriousness of sin and the mercy of God who offers forgiveness.

### 3.2.2 The Nature of Sin in the Old Testament

The Old Testament presents sin as a reality that affects every aspect of human life, moral, spiritual, relational, and communal. It is not just the breaking of divine laws but the disruption of the order God established between Himself and His creation. Sin in Hebrew thought is both ethical and theological, involving guilt before a righteous God and disorder within the covenant community. Several Hebrew words, such as ḥaṭṭā'ah (to miss the mark), 'āwōn (iniquity or guilt), and peša' (rebellion or transgression), show that sin is deliberate, reflecting deviation and betrayal of divine trust.

Sin first appears as moral failure, the inability or refusal to live up to God's standards revealed in the laws of the Decalogue and the Holiness Code. These laws reflect God's holy character, and to violate them is to disrupt harmony with Him. Acts like idolatry, dishonesty, injustice, and immorality are moral failures that affect both individuals and the entire covenant community. The stories of Saul's disobedience, David's adultery, and Achan's greed demonstrate that sin carries serious personal and social consequences. Sin is also spiritual rebellion against divine authority. It results from the willful rejection of God's commandments and the desire for self-rule. The prophets often compared Israel's unfaithfulness to spiritual adultery, especially in Hosea and Jeremiah. This imagery shows that sin is not just legal wrongdoing but betrayal of love and loyalty. It exposes the human heart's rebellion, as Isaiah laments that Israel's children have rebelled against their Father. This inward defiance alienates humanity from God and gives rise to other sins.

In addition, sin is viewed as defilement or pollution that corrupts individuals and the community. The laws of Leviticus link impurity with acts like idolatry, sexual perversion, and bloodshed, which render one unfit for worship until purified. Impurity symbolizes the moral corruption of sin and highlights the need for cleansing through sacrifice, washing, and prayer. Passages such as Psalm 51 and Isaiah 1:16–18 express the desire for renewal and restored fellowship with God. Guilt and accountability are central to the Old Testament view of sin. Guilt represents the debt incurred by wrongdoing and calls for confession, restitution, or sacrifice. The guilt offering described in Leviticus provided a means of restoring fellowship with God. Psalm 32 emphasizes the relief that follows confession, while collective guilt is acknowledged in the prayers of Daniel and Nehemiah, showing that sin is both personal and national.

Finally, sin disrupts relationships and community life. In Israel's covenant society, the sin of one person could affect all. The story of Achan's secret disobedience, which brought defeat to the nation, shows this collective responsibility. Sin weakens trust, destroys harmony, and endangers the covenant bond. The prophets repeatedly urged justice, mercy, and faithfulness as signs of true repentance.

### 3.2.3 Sources of Sin in the Old Testament

The Old Testament identifies several origins of sin, presenting it as a condition rooted both within the human heart and in the surrounding moral environment. Sin arises from the interplay between human freedom, moral weakness, and external temptation. It is not simply the result of isolated transgressions but a profound disorder in the relationship between God, humanity, and creation. The Hebrew Scriptures consistently reveal that sin emerges when human beings deviate from the divine purpose for which they were created.

i. **Disobedience to Divine Command:** The earliest and most fundamental source of sin in the Old Testament is human disobedience to divine instruction. This is most vividly illustrated in the narrative of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Their deliberate act of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, despite God's explicit prohibition, symbolizes the beginning of moral rebellion and the introduction of sin into human history. The event is not merely a story about temptation and failure but a theological exposition of human defiance against divine sovereignty. It shows that sin begins when individuals choose self-will over obedience, asserting independence from God's authority. As Miller (2000) explains, the transgression in Eden represents humanity's conscious rejection of divine order and the desire to determine good and evil apart from God. The consequence of this act was spiritual separation, shame, suffering, and death, conditions that characterize the continuing human struggle with sin throughout Scripture.

ii. **Human Pride and Self-Will:** Pride, or the elevation of self above divine authority, is another significant source of sin in the Old Testament. The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 exemplifies this tendency. Humanity's ambition to "make a name" for itself and reach the heavens reveals a deep-seated desire for autonomy and self-glorification. This prideful attitude is not confined to individuals but can pervade entire nations, leading to moral downfall and divine judgment. In the prophetic literature, pride is consistently portrayed as the root of rebellion, idolatry, and injustice. Kings such as Saul, Uzziah, and even David fell into sin because of pride and self-sufficiency. Human beings, when consumed by arrogance, forget their dependence on God and substitute His authority with their own. Thus, pride becomes the soil from which other sins, such as deceit, greed, and disobedience, take root. The Old Testament repeatedly teaches that "a haughty spirit goes before destruction" (Proverbs 16:18), showing that sin's origin often lies in the self-exaltation of the human heart.

iii. **Societal and Communal Influence:** The Old Testament also portrays sin as a collective reality that affects communities and nations. The prophets often addressed the sins of Israel not just as personal failings but as societal corruption embedded in institutions, leadership, and worship. The national sins of idolatry, oppression, injustice, and moral decay brought about divine judgment and exile. In texts such as Amos 5:7–12 and Isaiah 1:4–15, God condemns an entire people for distorting justice, exploiting the poor, and neglecting righteousness. According to Wright (2010), the prophetic witness reveals that sin spreads through social systems, customs, and collective behavior. When leaders act unjustly or when society normalizes wrongdoing, individuals are drawn into a shared moral decline. In this sense, sin in the Old Testament is both personal and communal, it disrupts not only the individual's relationship with God but also the moral integrity of the nation. Collective repentance, such as that led by Ezra and Nehemiah, thus became essential to restoring divine favor.

iv. **Violation of Covenant Relationship:** Perhaps the most distinct source of sin in the Old Testament lies in the violation of Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh. The covenant was a sacred bond based on obedience, faithfulness, and love. Every act of sin was therefore seen as covenant infidelity, a betrayal of the divine trust that defined Israel's identity as God's chosen people. Disobedience was more than moral failure; it was a spiritual act of rebellion that ruptured the relationship between God and His people. The prophets often described this unfaithfulness as "spiritual adultery," comparing Israel's idolatry and disobedience to a spouse's betrayal (Hosea 1–3; Jeremiah 3). As Douglas (2003) observes, covenant

disloyalty provoked divine anger because it represented a complete rejection of Yahweh's sovereignty and love. The consequences of such violations were severe, loss of blessings, exile, and divine silence, yet the covenant also contained provisions for repentance and restoration through atonement. Thus, sin in this context is not merely the breaking of rules but the breaking of relationship.

v. Neglect of Divine Knowledge and Forgetfulness of God: Another subtle but recurring source of sin in the Old Testament is forgetfulness of God and neglect of divine wisdom. Israel's repeated lapses into idolatry often stemmed from forgetting God's mighty acts of deliverance. Deuteronomy 8 warns the people not to forget the Lord when they become prosperous, for forgetfulness leads to pride and disobedience. When divine knowledge fades from communal memory, sin flourishes. The psalmists and prophets emphasize remembrance as a moral safeguard, remembering God's covenant, laws, and faithfulness keeps the heart aligned with His will. Forgetfulness, by contrast, opens the door to spiritual decay and moral confusion.

### **3.2.4 Moral and Ritual Dimensions of Sin in the Old Testament**

The concept of sin in the Old Testament cannot be understood solely in ethical or theological terms; rather, it encompasses both moral and ritual dimensions that together define Israel's relationship with God. The moral aspect of sin concerns acts that violate divine commandments and ethical laws governing human behavior, while the ritual aspect involves breaches of ceremonial purity and sacred regulations. Both dimensions reflect the holistic worldview of the Israelites, where religion, morality, and community life were inseparable. In the covenantal framework, sin was not merely an individual failing but a communal disruption that polluted the land, defiled the sanctuary, and provoked divine displeasure. Hence, moral failure required repentance and obedience, while ritual impurity demanded cleansing and sacrifice. The moral and ritual dimensions, though distinct in practice, converge in their ultimate goal, to restore holiness, maintain covenant fellowship, and preserve the moral and spiritual order established by Yahweh.

i. Moral Dimension: The moral dimension of sin in the Old Testament refers to violations of ethical and divine laws. Sin in this sense is an act of disobedience that offends both God and humanity. The Decalogue (Exodus 20:13–17) serves as the moral foundation of Israel's covenantal relationship with Yahweh, emphasizing honesty, purity, justice, and reverence for life. Actions such as murder, theft, adultery, and false witness are considered moral evils because they disrupt harmony within society and defy divine authority. The moral nature of sin thus lies in its opposition to God's righteousness and its corrupting influence on human character. The prophets continually reminded Israel that true religion is not confined to ritual performance but is demonstrated in ethical living. Micah 6:8 clearly articulates this principle, calling on humanity to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. According to Wright (2010), moral sin represents a willful distortion of divine order, showing humanity's inclination toward self-centeredness and rebellion.

ii. Ritual Dimension: The ritual dimension of sin deals with violations of ceremonial or purity laws that govern the people's approach to God in worship. These sins include touching a dead body, consuming unclean animals, or entering sacred spaces while impure (Leviticus 11–15). Such acts were not

necessarily moral failures but breaches of the holiness code that defined Israel's communal and religious identity. Ritual impurity symbolized the separation between the holy and the profane and required specific rites of purification, including washing, sacrifice, and priestly mediation. As Harrison (2005) explains, the system of ritual purification underscored the necessity of holiness and reminded Israel that access to God demanded cleanliness of both body and spirit. These rites served as visual expressions of spiritual renewal and the restoration of order after moral or physical defilement.

iii. Relationship Between Moral and Ritual Dimensions: Although moral and ritual aspects of sin are distinct, they are inseparably connected. Moral integrity provides the foundation for acceptable worship, while ritual purity symbolizes the external manifestation of inner righteousness. In the Old Testament, rituals such as sacrifice and purification were meaningful only when performed with a sincere and contrite heart. Without repentance and moral uprightness, ritual observance became empty and offensive to God. The prophets condemned such hypocrisy, warning that sacrifices without justice and mercy were worthless before the divine. Isaiah 1:11–17 vividly portrays this tension, as God rejects hollow offerings and calls instead for moral reform: "Cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed." According to Douglas (2003), the fusion of moral and ritual obligations in Israel's covenantal faith reflects the holistic nature of Old Testament religion, where holiness encompassed both ethical conduct and ceremonial devotion.

iv. Theological Implications: The moral and ritual dimensions of sin reveal the depth of the Old Testament's understanding of holiness. Sin is not merely a private act but a communal and theological reality that disrupts divine-human fellowship. Moral failure corrupts the heart and society, while ritual impurity defiles the sacred space of worship. Together, they emphasize that holiness in the Old Testament is total—it involves both inner character and external conformity to divine order. The system of sacrifices, purification, and repentance sought to restore harmony between God and His people, teaching that forgiveness and holiness are achieved only through faith, obedience, and sincerity of heart.

### **3.2.5 Consequences of Sin in the Old Testament**

The consequences of sin in the Old Testament are vast and deeply intertwined with the spiritual, moral, and social fabric of human existence. Sin is portrayed not as a mere individual misdeed, but as a pervasive condition that corrupts human relationships, disrupts divine fellowship, and distorts the created order. It carries both immediate and enduring implications, shaping the destiny of individuals and communities alike. The Old Testament thus presents sin as a moral infection whose effects ripple through every dimension of life, leading to alienation, judgment, and ultimately death. Foremost among the consequences of sin is the spiritual separation it creates between God and humanity. This estrangement is vividly captured in the words of Isaiah 59:2: "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you." Sin ruptures the intimate relationship of communion that once existed between the Creator and His creation, resulting in spiritual emptiness and divine silence. The presence of God, which is the source of life and blessing, is withdrawn when sin prevails. As Harrison (2005) suggests, this separation is not only a theological concept but a lived reality, manifesting in exile, divine silence, and the loss of covenantal favor. The sinner becomes spiritually

adrift, cut off from divine guidance and moral clarity. The sense of distance and guilt that follows reflects the moral and spiritual void left by disobedience.

This separation naturally leads to divine judgment and punishment, another recurring consequence of sin in the Old Testament. Sin invites God's righteous response because His nature is both just and holy. Divine judgment is not portrayed as arbitrary vengeance but as the inevitable reaction of holiness against moral disorder. The narratives of the flood (Genesis 6–8), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), and Israel's exile (2 Kings 25) all reveal the seriousness with which God treats sin. Each instance of punishment serves both as correction and as moral instruction to future generations. According to Douglas (2003), divine judgment in these narratives underscores the consistency of God's moral character, He cannot ignore evil without compromising His righteousness. Yet even within judgment, there is often a thread of mercy; punishment aims to awaken repentance and restore moral balance, showing that God's justice is redemptive rather than purely punitive.

Beyond its spiritual and divine dimensions, sin also produces devastating social consequences. The Old Testament frequently portrays sin as a force that erodes communal integrity and justice. When individuals or nations turn away from God's laws, the moral foundation of society begins to crumble. Acts of greed, oppression, and exploitation multiply, leading to widespread suffering and social chaos. The prophets consistently condemned this breakdown of justice, warning that moral decay within leadership or the populace would bring divine wrath upon the entire community. Wright (2010) observes that Israel's collective experience demonstrates how sin, when institutionalized, becomes a national tragedy. The corruption of priests, kings, and prophets often led to famine, invasion, and exile, indicating that sin, once it spreads through social structures, destabilizes the entire covenant community. Thus, sin is not confined to the private sphere but becomes a societal infection that distorts human relationships and breeds injustice. Ultimately, the most profound and universal consequence of sin is death. From the narrative of the fall in Genesis, death is presented as the inevitable result of disobedience to divine command. When God warned Adam, "For in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17), death was not limited to physical mortality but extended to spiritual and relational death, a complete alienation from the source of life. According to Wright (2010), death in the Old Testament symbolizes the full measure of sin's destructive power, cutting humanity off from God's sustaining presence. This condition of death encompasses both the decay of the body and the withering of the soul. Moreover, the Old Testament often links sin with a divine curse, which manifests in barren land, fruitless labor, and generational suffering. The curse represents the reversal of divine blessing, emphasizing that sin disrupts the harmony of creation itself and subjects all of life to futility and decay.

In essence, the Old Testament presents sin as a corrosive reality that infects every level of existence, spiritual, moral, and physical. It separates humanity from God, invites divine judgment, fractures social order, and ultimately leads to death. Yet embedded within this grim portrayal is a redemptive undertone: the possibility of restoration through repentance, confession, and atonement. The prophets and priests continually emphasized that God's justice is balanced by mercy, and His anger by compassion. Thus, while the consequences of sin are severe, the Old Testament equally reveals a God who seeks reconciliation, offering humanity a path back to divine fellowship and moral wholeness.

### **3.3 The Atonement of Sin in the Old Testament**

Atonement occupies a central place in Old Testament theology because it represents the divine means by which human beings are reconciled to God. The Hebrew term *kippur*, meaning “to cover” or “to cleanse,” expresses the idea that sin must be dealt with through a process of purification and forgiveness. Atonement was necessary because sin disrupted the relationship between God and His people. Therefore, the sacrificial system provided a way to restore broken fellowship and reestablish holiness in both the individual and the community (Harrison, 2005).

#### **3.3.1 The Concept and Purpose of Atonement in the Old Testament**

The idea of atonement in the Old Testament is rooted in God’s justice and mercy. Since sin violated divine order, there had to be a means to reconcile humanity with God. Atonement served the dual purpose of satisfying divine justice and demonstrating God’s compassion. According to Wright (2010), the sacrificial system was not about appeasing an angry deity but about restoring harmony between a righteous God and His covenant people. The priest, acting as a mediator, symbolically transferred the guilt of the sinner to the sacrificial victim, whose death represented the substitutionary penalty for sin. Thus, atonement combined the principles of substitution, purification, and reconciliation.

#### **3.3.2 Methods of Atonement in the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament, atonement was primarily achieved through the institution of sacrifices and offerings, which represented the central means of reconciliation between humanity and God. The practice of sacrifice was deeply rooted in Israel’s covenantal relationship with Yahweh and served as both a symbolic and practical expression of repentance, purification, and renewed fellowship. The book of Leviticus provides the most comprehensive explanation of these sacrificial systems, showing that each type of offering had a specific theological meaning and ritual procedure. The act of offering sacrifices was not a mere religious routine but a profound acknowledgment of sin, guilt, and the need for divine mercy. Through these offerings, the Israelites demonstrated their dependence on God’s forgiveness and reaffirmed their loyalty to His covenant.

i. **Burnt Offerings (Leviticus 1):** The burnt offering was one of the most important forms of sacrifice in Israelite worship. It symbolized total dedication to God and served as a general atonement for sin. The entire animal, usually a bull, ram, or bird, was consumed by fire on the altar, representing the complete surrender of the worshiper’s life to God. The fragrance that arose from the burnt offering was described as “a pleasing aroma to the Lord,” signifying divine acceptance (Leviticus 1:9). The act of burning the entire offering illustrated the idea that true atonement required full submission and self-surrender.

ii. **Sin Offerings (Leviticus 4):** Sin offerings were specifically prescribed for unintentional sins or acts committed in ignorance. They were designed to cleanse both individuals and the community from defilement. The blood of the sacrificed animal was sprinkled on the altar or before the veil of the sanctuary, symbolizing purification from guilt and restoring fellowship with God. According to Miller (2000), this ritual emphasized that sin, even when committed unintentionally, created moral pollution

that required divine cleansing. The sin offering therefore revealed the seriousness with which the Old Testament viewed every form of transgression.

iii. Guilt Offerings (Leviticus 5:14–19): The guilt offering, also known as the trespass offering, was required when a person committed a sin that involved material or moral damage, such as deceit, theft, or misuse of sacred items. Unlike the sin offering, the guilt offering demanded restitution in addition to the sacrifice. The offender was required to repay what had been wrongfully taken, often adding an extra fifth to it (Leviticus 6:5). This practice illustrated that atonement was not complete without moral correction and reconciliation with others. It combined both ethical and religious dimensions, teaching that repentance must be demonstrated through just actions.

iv. Peace Offerings (Leviticus 3): The peace offering, also known as the fellowship or well-being offering, expressed thanksgiving and restored communion between the worshiper and God. Unlike the burnt offering, only part of the animal was burned, while the remaining portion was shared between the priests and the offerer during a sacred meal. This meal symbolized harmony and fellowship within the covenant community. The peace offering therefore reflected the relational aspect of atonement, emphasizing that reconciliation with God also leads to restored relationships among His people.

v. Grain and Drink Offerings: Grain and drink offerings were non-bloody sacrifices that accompanied other offerings or were presented independently as acts of gratitude. The grain offering, made of fine flour, oil, and frankincense, symbolized the fruit of human labor offered to God in recognition of His provision (Leviticus 2:1–3). The drink offering, which involved the pouring of wine on the altar, represented joy, thanksgiving, and devotion. These offerings revealed that atonement was not only about cleansing from sin but also about expressing continuous gratitude and dependence on divine blessings.

Each of these sacrifices carried deep spiritual significance and collectively reinforced the principle that forgiveness comes at a cost. Leviticus 17:11 declares, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.” The shedding of blood symbolized life, and by offering life, the worshiper acknowledged the gravity of sin and the holiness of God. As Miller (2000) explains, the sacrificial system was not mechanical or superstitious; rather, it represented a moral and theological transaction in which repentance, faith, and divine grace met at the altar. Ultimately, the methods of atonement in the Old Testament were intended to teach the people of Israel that sin had real consequences and that reconciliation with God required sincerity, humility, and obedience. Through the intricate system of sacrifices and offerings, the Israelites were continually reminded that holiness must be maintained, and forgiveness could only be obtained through divinely instituted means.

### **3.3.3 The Role of the Priest in Atonement in the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament, the priest played a vital role in the process of atonement as the divinely appointed mediator between God and His people. His duty was to restore the relationship broken by sin and to act as both God’s representative to the people and the people’s representative before God. Through sacrifices, rituals, and intercessory prayers, the priest served as the channel of divine

forgiveness and purification. Leviticus repeatedly affirms this mediatory role, describing the priest as one who “makes atonement for them before the Lord.” His actions, performed strictly according to divine instruction, ensured that atonement was acceptable and effective. Without the priest’s participation, no sacrifice or ritual could achieve reconciliation with God.

The priest’s responsibilities were broad and symbolic. He prepared and offered sacrifices, sprinkled the blood of offerings, pronounced blessings, and conducted purification rites for those rendered unclean. His garments, anointed with holy oil and decorated with sacred symbols such as the ephod and breastplate, signified consecration and holiness, reminding all that access to God required purity and reverence. Beyond ritual service, the priest was a teacher and moral guide. He instructed Israel in the laws of God, teaching them how to live righteously and avoid defilement. This educational role ensured that atonement was not just ceremonial but also led to moral renewal and communal harmony.

According to Douglas (2003), the priesthood reflected God’s mercy and His willingness to dwell among a sinful people. The priest stood as a sign of divine accessibility and grace, showing that forgiveness was possible through obedience and faith. The priestly system also pointed to a greater fulfillment revealed in the New Testament. The priest’s mediating role prefigured Christ, the “great high priest,” who entered the heavenly sanctuary to offer His own blood for the redemption of humanity. Thus, the Old Testament priesthood served both a practical function in Israel’s worship and a prophetic one, foreshadowing the ultimate atonement accomplished through Christ.

### **3.3.4 The Day of Atonement in the Old Testament**

The Day of Atonement, known as Yom Kippur, holds a central and sacred position in the worship life of ancient Israel. Instituted in Leviticus 16, it was the most solemn day of the year, set apart for repentance, purification, and reconciliation between God and His people. It addressed both personal and collective guilt, restoring holiness and renewing the covenant relationship. Yom Kippur was not merely a religious ceremony but a profound moral and spiritual event that emphasized God’s holiness, the seriousness of sin, and the need for divine forgiveness. The rituals of sacrifice, fasting, confession, and purification showed that sin affected not only individuals but the entire community and even the sanctuary where God’s presence dwelled. Through this sacred observance, Israel was reminded that forgiveness was an act of divine grace that required humility and repentance.

At the heart of the ceremony were two main sacrifices, the bull and the goat. The High Priest first offered a bull as a sin offering for himself and his household, acknowledging his own imperfection. Afterward, he sacrificed a goat on behalf of the nation, taking its blood into the Holy of Holies and sprinkling it on the mercy seat to purify the people and the sanctuary. This act symbolized that life, represented by blood, must be given for sin to be forgiven. It demonstrated that forgiveness demanded a costly sacrifice and underscored both the gravity of sin and God’s mercy toward His people. A second goat, known as the scapegoat, was used in a powerful symbolic ritual. The High Priest placed his hands on its head, confessing over it all the sins of Israel before sending it into the wilderness. This represented the complete removal of guilt and the restoration of divine harmony. The scapegoat carried away the nation’s transgressions, illustrating God’s willingness to remove sin “as far as the east is from the west.”

This visible act gave the people assurance of divine pardon and renewed moral consciousness. The people themselves participated in Yom Kippur through fasting, prayer, and confession. They were commanded to humble themselves and abstain from all work, dedicating the day to repentance and spiritual reflection. Fasting served as a sign of self-denial and dependence on God's mercy, while confession united the community in shared acknowledgment of sin. This collective act reinforced national solidarity, moral accountability, and covenant renewal.

Another key aspect of the Day of Atonement was the cleansing of the sanctuary. Because the sanctuary represented God's dwelling place among His people, any impurity from sin endangered His presence. The High Priest performed purification rites by sprinkling sacrificial blood on the altar, the veil, and the mercy seat to remove defilement. This act symbolized the restoration of holiness in both the physical and spiritual realms. It showed that sin corrupted not only the heart but the very environment where God's presence rested. The cleansing of the sanctuary reaffirmed divine holiness and restored the moral and cosmic order, ensuring that God would continue to dwell among His people.

In essence, the Day of Atonement represented the peak of Israel's spiritual life. It combined sacrifice, repentance, and purification into a single act of national renewal. Through it, the people of Israel were reminded of their continual need for mercy and of God's gracious provision for forgiveness and restored fellowship.

### **3.3.5 The Theological Significance of the Day of Atonement in the Old Testament**

The Day of Atonement encapsulated the deepest truths about the human condition and the nature of divine mercy. It revealed that reconciliation was not achieved through human effort alone but through divine grace mediated by ordained rituals. The ceremony demonstrated that God's holiness and justice demanded satisfaction, but His mercy provided a way for sinners to be restored. As Douglas (2003) and Wenham (1994) observe, Yom Kippur prefigured the later concept of substitutionary atonement, where an innocent life bore the guilt of the transgressor. It thus stood as a prophetic foreshadowing of the ultimate reconciliation between God and humanity. The event also underscored the unity of moral and ritual purification, while the sacrifices cleansed the sanctuary, the accompanying repentance and confession purified the heart. In essence, the Day of Atonement was a national renewal of faith, a reaffirmation of covenant identity, and a moral purification of Israel before a holy God. It taught that forgiveness was costly, that holiness required continual renewal, and that divine mercy was always available to the contrite. Its enduring message is that sin separates humanity from God, but repentance, sacrifice, and faith can restore the relationship.

### **3.3.6 Moral Implications of Atonement in the Old Testament**

The concept of atonement in the Old Testament extended beyond ritual observance to embody deep moral and spiritual significance. It aimed to transform human character and restore faithfulness to God. The sacrifices, confessions, and purification rites symbolized inner repentance, justice, and holiness rather than mere ritual performance. The following themes highlight the major moral implications of atonement in Old Testament thought.

i. Atonement as a Call to Moral Transformation: Atonement was designed to bring moral change to individuals and the community. Offering sacrifices or confessing sins before God awakened the conscience and inspired repentance. The shedding of blood emphasized the seriousness of sin and the cost of forgiveness, reminding worshippers of their duty to live righteously. Wright (2010) explains that the sacrificial system served as a moral educator, teaching that reconciliation required sincere repentance and obedience, not ritual formalism.

ii. The Prophetic Critique of Empty Ritualism: Israel's prophets warned that atonement was meaningless without ethical integrity. Hosea 6:6 declares that God desires mercy rather than sacrifice, and Isaiah 1:11–17 condemns sacrifices offered alongside injustice, urging the people to seek justice and defend the oppressed. These teachings reveal that true atonement required inner transformation and moral uprightness. Douglas (2003) observes that the prophets redefined atonement as genuine piety expressed through righteous living rather than mechanical ritual observance.

iii. Atonement and Social Ethics: The moral renewal achieved through atonement extended to social life. Reconciliation with God was to be reflected in justice, compassion, and fairness within society. The prophets denounced exploitation of the poor and corruption among leaders, insisting that rituals could not replace social righteousness (Amos 5:21–24). Micah 6:6–8 summarizes this ideal by calling the people to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Thus, atonement served as both a spiritual and ethical foundation for a just community.

iv. Inner Contrition and Repentance: Atonement also demanded sincere repentance and humility of heart. Psalm 51 teaches that “the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” This shows that God values remorse and a willingness to change above ritual offerings. Harrison (2005) notes that repentance was the moral core of atonement, turning external acts of worship into true expressions of renewal.

v. Integration of Moral and Ritual Dimensions: Although ritual and moral elements of atonement appear distinct, the Old Testament unites them in a single vision. Ritual purity symbolized inner holiness, while moral obedience validated ritual worship. Without repentance and ethical conduct, rituals were void. The Mosaic law combined moral and ceremonial regulations to maintain holiness. Wright (2010) affirms that both aspects worked together to sustain Israel's covenant identity and ensure that worship remained spiritually authentic.

vii. The Ultimate Aim: Moral Renewal and Covenant Fidelity: Ultimately, the goal of atonement was to renew covenantal relationship and restore moral integrity. Forgiveness was never meant to excuse wrongdoing but to inspire holiness and obedience. Through atonement, Israel was called to reflect God's nature, merciful, just, and faithful. As shown throughout the Torah and prophetic writings, true reconciliation required not only forgiveness but a reformed heart and mind aligned with divine standards. Atonement therefore functioned as a moral compass guiding God's people toward righteousness and covenant loyalty.

### **3.4 The Concept of Sin in Kwale Traditional Religion**

The concept of sin among the Kwale people of Delta State occupies a vital place in their traditional religious and moral framework. In Kwale cosmology, life is seen as a web of relationships linking the Supreme Being (Chukwu or Oghene), the lesser deities, the ancestors, and the living community. Sin, therefore, is not viewed as a mere personal wrongdoing but as a disruption of this sacred harmony. It is both a moral and a spiritual deviation from the established order of life handed down by the ancestors. The Kwale people believe that maintaining balance within this cosmic order is essential for peace, fertility, and general well-being. Any act that violates this balance calls for restoration through confession, sacrifice, and ritual cleansing.

### **3.4.2 The Meaning of Sin in Kwale Traditional Religion**

In Kwale Traditional Religion, sin is broadly defined as any behavior, speech, or omission that offends the divine powers, desecrates the ancestors, or disturbs the peace of the community. It encompasses moral, social, and ritual offenses. Unlike the codified commandments found in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the moral order in Kwale religion is governed by unwritten customs (*omenala*) and taboos (*nsq*) inherited from the forefathers. According to Mbiti (1990), in African Traditional Religion, sin represents a breach of the spiritual and social order established by both God and the ancestors. This understanding applies strongly to the Kwale worldview, where sin is perceived as both a moral failure and a religious offense. Typical examples of sinful acts among the Kwale include theft, murder, adultery, incest, falsehood, and disrespect toward elders or sacred institutions. Other offenses such as neglecting ancestral rites, desecrating sacred groves, or violating food taboos are also considered grave sins. Each of these acts is believed to offend not only the immediate victims but also the spirits that guard the moral fabric of the community. The seriousness of a sin is determined by its impact on the communal and spiritual equilibrium. As Idowu (1973) explains, sin in African thought is not just an offense against God but also against humanity and nature, which are all interrelated within a sacred continuum.

In the Kwale moral system, intent also plays a role in determining guilt. A deliberate act of disobedience carries heavier spiritual consequences than an unintentional one. However, ignorance of a taboo is rarely accepted as a defense. The offender must seek reconciliation through appropriate rituals. Thus, sin is not viewed as an abstract moral concept but as a concrete reality that manifests in broken relationships, social tension, and divine displeasure. Harrison (2005) notes that such a view reinforces a sense of moral

### **3.4.3 Sources of Sin in Kwale Traditional Religion**

Kwale Traditional Religion identifies several sources of sin arising from human behavior, spiritual influence, and social interaction. These reflect the belief that life is interconnected; what affects one person or element of nature affects the entire community. Sin is therefore not just a personal moral failure but a disruption of divine and ancestral harmony. The main sources of sin include human disobedience, ignorance or negligence, violation of taboos, spiritual manipulation, and breakdown of communal relationships.

i. Human Disobedience and Moral Weakness: The primary source of sin in Kwale belief is human disobedience to divine or ancestral instruction. The Kwale hold that the Supreme Being, Osonobruvwe,

established moral order through the ancestors and divinities who guide righteousness. When an individual defies these sacred laws, sin arises. Acts such as lying, adultery, theft, or disrespect toward elders are seen as deliberate rebellion against both moral and spiritual order. According to Mbiti (1990), the misuse of human freedom leads to sin when individuals act against divine and communal will. In Kwale culture, such disobedience often stems from greed, envy, or anger, all of which destroy personal and communal harmony. The offender must seek forgiveness through confession and ritual purification.

ii. Ignorance, Negligence, and Forgetfulness: Another source of sin is ignorance or neglect of traditional laws. Since moral values are transmitted orally through elders, every person is expected to learn and uphold them. Failure to observe customs, such as ignoring family rituals or breaking food taboos, is regarded as sin. Idowu (1973) notes that ignorance is not an acceptable excuse because moral knowledge is communal inheritance. Negligence shows spiritual irresponsibility and can bring consequences not only upon the offender but also upon their family, as it reflects disregard for ancestral guardianship.

iii. Violation of Taboos and Sacred Customs: The Kwale people uphold many taboos that mark what is sacred or forbidden. Violating them is among the gravest offenses. Examples include entering sacred groves without permission or eating animals regarded as totems. These taboos protect moral discipline and preserve spiritual purity. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) observe that taboos serve as moral boundaries that maintain harmony with the spiritual realm. When they are broken, the gods or ancestors may inflict illness, infertility, or misfortune. Offenders must undergo cleansing rituals, sacrifices, and confession to restore balance.

iv. Influence of Evil Spirits and Malevolent Forces: The Kwale also believe sin may result from manipulation by evil spirits or witches. Such forces can influence people to act wrongly, but individuals are still held responsible. Sin caused by these influences is viewed as a test of moral strength and vigilance. Priests and diviners identify and confront such forces through rituals and prayers. Nwaezeigwe (2007) explains that this belief emphasizes the communal struggle against evil and the preservation of spiritual purity.

v. Breakdown of Communal Relationships: Finally, sin may arise from the disruption of social harmony. The Kwale view the community as an extended family bound by respect, cooperation, and mutual care. Quarrels, hatred, greed, and betrayal disturb this unity and offend both the ancestors and the gods. Reconciliation rituals, public apologies, and sacrifices are performed to restore peace. Mbiti (1990) affirms that sin in African thought weakens the bond of togetherness since moral health is tied to communal unity. In Kwale belief, reconciliation is both a social and sacred duty that maintains the favor of the ancestors and preserves cosmic balance.

#### **3.4.4 Moral and Ritual Dimensions of Sin in Kwale Traditional Religion.**

In Kwale Traditional Religion, sin is understood as a disruption of both moral and spiritual order, reflecting a worldview in which human, ancestral, and divine realms are deeply connected. Transgression is seen not merely as an individual act but as a disturbance that affects the community and the cosmic balance (Mbiti, 1975). Like other African traditional religions, the Kwale people regard

ethical conduct and ritual observance as inseparable, with both serving to maintain harmony between humans, ancestors, and deities (Idowu, 1962).

i. Moral Dimension: The moral dimension of sin includes actions that violate communal norms, ethical codes, or expectations toward others and the spiritual realm. Acts such as lying, theft, adultery, disrespect for elders, and misuse of communal resources are regarded as serious moral offenses (Mbiti, 1975). These actions disrupt social harmony, provoke ancestral displeasure, and bring misfortune to both the offender and the community. Moral wrongdoing is viewed as both personal and communal since it threatens collective wellbeing and spiritual balance. Traits such as pride, greed, and selfishness are also condemned because they show a lack of humility and respect, which are highly valued in Kwale culture (Idowu, 1962). Through proverbs, storytelling, and oral traditions, moral values are constantly reinforced, reminding members that wrongdoing has consequences not only in the human realm but also in the spiritual world. The moral code therefore serves as a guide for personal conduct and as a means of preserving communal harmony and divine favor.

ii. Ritual Dimension: The ritual dimension of sin relates to violations of sacred laws, taboos, or ritual practices that sustain spiritual balance. Offenses may include neglecting ancestral offerings, ignoring ceremonial obligations, entering sacred areas while ritually impure, or disrespecting sacred objects (Mbiti, 1975; Personal communication, 2025). Such actions bring about spiritual contamination, illness, or misfortune and may lead to the withdrawal of ancestral protection. To correct these offenses, cleansing rites, sacrifices, libations, or appeasement rituals are performed by priests, elders, or diviners. These acts remove impurity and restore social and spiritual harmony. By performing them, the community acknowledges the weight of the transgression and seeks reconciliation between the visible and invisible realms (Idowu, 1962). The ritual dimension shows that sin is not just a private or moral issue but a communal concern with spiritual effects.

iii. Interconnection Between Moral and Ritual Dimensions: In Kwale belief, the moral and ritual dimensions of sin are closely linked. Moral wrongdoing often requires ritual purification, while ritual violations are seen as moral failures that affect social peace (Mbiti, 1975). This interdependence reflects the holistic nature of Kwale spirituality, where ethical behavior and ritual observance work together to preserve harmony between humans, ancestors, and deities. Both internal attitudes and outward actions are expected to align with moral and spiritual laws. Acts of atonement such as confession, sacrifice, or cleansing rituals serve to restore equilibrium, repair relationships, and reaffirm community values (Personal communication, 2025).

iv. Theological and Social Implications: The Kwale understanding of sin reflects a worldview where morality, spirituality, and community are inseparable. Sin disrupts both human relationships and cosmic balance, influencing material and spiritual realities alike. Atonement highlights the collective duty to uphold moral and spiritual integrity, showing that reconciliation is both a personal and communal responsibility (Mbiti, 1975; Idowu, 1962). Emphasis on moral discipline and ritual purity strengthens social unity and transmits ethical values across generations. By connecting moral conduct with spiritual accountability, Kwale Traditional Religion ensures individuals are aware of the far-reaching effects of their actions. This comprehensive view of sin and atonement bears resemblance to Old Testament

theology, where sin affects both divine and human relationships, and moral and ritual practices work hand in hand to restore harmony.

### **3.4.3 Social and Spiritual Consequences of Sin**

In Kwale traditional belief, the effects of sin extend beyond the individual, influencing the entire community, the land, and even the ancestors. Sin is seen as contagious, capable of spreading spiritual impurity if not promptly addressed. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) note that in African Traditional Religion, sin is primarily a communal disturbance rather than a personal matter. This is reflected in the Kwale worldview, where moral transgressions are believed to bring calamity not only upon the offender but also on their household and sometimes the whole village. The visible consequences of sin often appear as misfortunes such as illness, barrenness, drought, poor harvests, or mysterious deaths. These are interpreted as signs from the spiritual world, indicating that a moral or ritual law has been broken. When such events occur, elders or diviners (dibia or ebo priest) are consulted to uncover the cause. Through divination, the community identifies the offender and prescribes the necessary rites for purification and reconciliation. This communal approach reinforces unity and moral accountability. Spiritually, sin is viewed as a stain that separates the offender from the ancestors and deities. The Kwale believe ancestral spirits maintain moral discipline among the living, and when a person commits a serious offense, the ancestors may withdraw their protection, leaving the person exposed to misfortune. This separation is a form of punishment intended to inspire repentance and renewal.

As Nwaezeigwe (2007) observes, such consequences reveal that morality, religion, and communal well-being are inseparable in African societies. The collective nature of sin promotes a strong sense of responsibility, as the misdeeds of one person can endanger all. For example, if a taboo is violated, the land (ani) becomes defiled, requiring purification rituals involving animal sacrifices, prayers, and public confessions to restore balance. These rituals not only cleanse spiritual pollution but also reaffirm moral cohesion. Thus, sin and its consequences function as moral regulation, ensuring harmony between humans and the divine realm. In summary, the Kwale concept of sin reflects a relational worldview in which wrongdoing disrupts unity between the visible and invisible worlds. Its consequences serve as reminders that moral order is sacred and must be maintained through obedience to ancestral laws, reverence for the deities, and communal solidarity.

## **3.5 The Concept of Atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion**

Atonement is a central concept in many religious traditions, reflecting humanity's desire to restore harmony after moral or spiritual transgressions. In Kwale Traditional Religion, practiced by communities in southern Nigeria, atonement occupies a crucial role in maintaining both spiritual and social equilibrium. Unlike purely legalistic interpretations of wrongdoing, Kwale understanding of atonement emphasizes relational restoration, between humans, ancestors, deities, and the broader community (Mbiti, 1975). It is not simply an individual matter but a communal concern, as moral and spiritual infractions are believed to affect the well-being of the entire society.

### **3.5.1 Meaning and Purpose of Atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion**

In Kwale belief, sin or wrongdoing disrupts the balance established by the ancestors and deities. Atonement, therefore, is the process by which this imbalance is corrected and harmony restored. According to Mbiti (1975), the spiritual world is highly responsive to human actions; neglecting moral or ritual duties can lead to misfortune, illness, or societal instability. Atonement seeks to repair these ruptures by addressing the spiritual consequences of human actions, demonstrating humility, repentance, and respect for communal norms. The purpose of atonement extends beyond reconciliation with spiritual forces. It also reinforces moral and ethical conduct within the community, serving as a visible acknowledgment that actions have consequences and that wrongdoing must be addressed. Through this process, individuals are reintegrated into the social and spiritual fabric of Kwale society, reaffirming communal values, social cohesion, and adherence to tradition (Idowu, 1962).

### **3.5.2 Agents of Atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion**

In Kwale Traditional Religion, atonement involves several spiritual and communal agents who mediate between humans, the ancestors, and the deities. These agents, priests, elders, family heads, and diviners, serve complementary roles in ensuring that reconciliation is achieved and social harmony restored. Their actions reflect the deeply communal and relational nature of religion in Kwale society.

a. **The Priest as Spiritual Mediator:** The priest occupies the highest spiritual position in the process of atonement. He acts as the intermediary between the human community and the divine world. His authority is rooted in both ancestral lineage and divine calling, making him responsible for conducting sacrifices, purification rites, and other religious ceremonies. The priest ensures that all offerings are performed correctly, symbolizing the community's repentance and desire for restored harmony. According to Idowu (1973), African priests function as custodians of sacred tradition and guardians of moral order. In Kwale culture, the priest's effectiveness is demonstrated by the restoration of peace, the cessation of misfortune, and the reconciliation between humans and spiritual powers. He also interprets divine signs and guides the people on how to live in accordance with ancestral expectations.

b. **Elders and Family Heads as Custodians of Social Harmony:** Elders and family heads play an equally important role in domestic and clan-level atonement. Since sin is believed to affect not only the individual but also the family and community, the head of the household is often responsible for initiating reconciliation rituals. He may lead prayers, offer sacrifices, or convene meetings where disputes are settled and peace is restored. This practice emphasizes the communal understanding of morality in Kwale Traditional Religion. As Mbiti (1990) notes, African morality is deeply social, an individual's wrongdoing brings collective consequences. Therefore, elders and family heads ensure that every offense is properly confessed, compensated, and ritually cleansed to prevent the spread of spiritual impurity or misfortune within the community.

c. **The Diviner as Interpreter of Divine Will:** The diviner serves as a vital link between the visible and invisible worlds. Through divination, he identifies the cause of misfortunes, determines which deity or ancestor has been offended, and prescribes the appropriate form of sacrifice or ritual. His role is both diagnostic and advisory, ensuring that the community understands the spiritual nature of the offense before performing atonement rituals. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) explain that divination in African

religion is a sacred process of seeking truth and restoring moral balance. In the Kwale setting, the diviner's pronouncement is highly respected, as it guides the entire reconciliation process and ensures that the rituals performed align with divine expectations.

d. **Collective Participation of the Community:** Although specific individuals act as mediators, the whole community often participates in the process of atonement. Community members gather during sacrifices or cleansing ceremonies to witness reconciliation, offer prayers, and reaffirm social unity. This participation underscores the belief that sin disrupts not just personal life but also the moral and spiritual equilibrium of society. The communal approach also ensures transparency and shared responsibility. It reinforces values such as accountability, forgiveness, and cooperation, ensuring that atonement restores both divine favor and social order.

### **3.4.3 Rituals and Symbols of Atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion**

Rituals and symbols form the practical core of atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion. They serve as visible and spiritual means of expressing repentance, cleansing impurity, and restoring harmony between the human, spiritual, and ancestral worlds. Every act performed, whether sacrifice, confession, or purification, carries symbolic meaning that connects the physical with the metaphysical. These rituals reflect the deep conviction that sin disturbs not only moral order but also cosmic balance.

a. **Sacrifices and Offerings:** Sacrifices are central to the Kwale system of atonement. They are performed to appease offended deities, ancestors, or spirits depending on the nature of the transgression. Animals such as goats, fowls, or rams are offered, and their blood is seen as a sacred element of purification and reconciliation. The spilling of blood symbolizes life being offered to restore life, echoing the belief that sin brings spiritual death that must be reversed through ritual substitution. As Mbiti (1990) explains, sacrifice in African religion is a profound act of communication with the divine, an exchange that renews relationship and peace. In Kwale practice, the sacrifice may be performed privately by a family or publicly by the entire community, depending on the gravity of the offense. Food items, drinks, and symbolic gifts are also offered alongside the animal to express gratitude and humility before the divine powers.

b. **Libation and Invocation:** Libation is another important ritual act used during atonement ceremonies. It involves pouring water, wine, or palm oil onto the ground while invoking the names of God, deities, and ancestors. This act symbolizes a direct line of communication between the living and the spiritual world. It serves as both prayer and confession, expressing remorse and asking for forgiveness. According to Idowu (1973), libation acts as a bridge between the human and spiritual realms, affirming the presence of ancestors in the moral life of the community. In Kwale land, libation is often performed before any sacrifice, marking the beginning of dialogue with the unseen forces and inviting them to witness the sincerity of repentance.

c. **Cleansing and Purification Rites:** Cleansing rituals are performed to remove spiritual impurity that results from sin or taboo violation. These ceremonies may involve washing the body with sacred water, using herbs, or bathing in a stream believed to have purifying powers. In some cases, the ashes or blood of a sacrificial animal are sprinkled to signify the removal of guilt. As Awolalu and Dopamu (1979)

observe, purification in African religion is more than physical; it represents the moral renewal of both individual and community. In Kwale belief, impurity blocks divine favor, so cleansing rituals ensure that the offender is spiritually readmitted into fellowship with the ancestors and the living community.

d. Confession and Reconciliation Ceremonies: Public confession and reconciliation ceremonies often accompany atonement rituals. The offender may be required to admit wrongdoing before elders or community members, symbolizing moral courage and accountability. This open acknowledgment of sin promotes healing and prevents hidden resentment. After confession, the elders may pronounce forgiveness, and the offender is reintegrated into the social fold. These reconciliation gatherings are often marked by communal feasting, dancing, or exchange of gifts as signs that harmony has been restored. According to Mbiti (1990), such rituals reaffirm the collective identity of the community and the moral values that sustain it.

e. Symbolic Objects and Sacred Spaces: Certain objects such as clay pots, palm fronds, or ritual stones carry deep symbolic significance during atonement ceremonies. They represent purity, renewal, and the continuity of life. Sacred groves, shrines, and ancestral compounds serve as the primary spaces for these rituals. Their sanctity reflects the presence of divine and ancestral spirits, making them ideal grounds for reconciliation between the visible and invisible worlds. Douglas (2003) notes that in many African traditions, sacred spaces embody the intersection between human and divine realities. In Kwale practice, these spaces remind the people that forgiveness and restoration are sacred processes that demand reverence and moral sincerity.

### **3.5.3 The Role of the Priest and Elders in the Atonement of Kwale Traditional Religion**

In Kwale Traditional Religion, the process of atonement is a deeply communal affair that involves more than the individual offender. It calls upon a network of spiritual and moral authorities who guide the people back into harmony with the divine and ancestral world. Among these agents, the priest and the elders play the most important roles. Their combined wisdom, spiritual insight, and moral integrity ensure that the process of reconciliation is not only effective but also acceptable to the deities and ancestors. The priest serves as the spiritual intermediary between the human and the divine realms. He stands at the center of ritual life, performing sacrifices, offering prayers, and communicating directly with the deities and spirits. His authority is both religious and social, as he is believed to possess the sacred knowledge required to interpret signs, prescribe rituals, and handle sacred objects. Before any atonement rite is carried out, the priest must consult the gods through divination to determine the cause of the offense and the appropriate sacrifice needed for forgiveness. Once the sacrifice is offered, he pronounces cleansing upon the offender or the community, symbolizing the restoration of harmony. His role reflects a deep understanding that human beings cannot approach the divine directly without mediation. Much like the priests of ancient Israel, the Kwale priest stands as a representative of the people before the spiritual powers, ensuring that divine justice and mercy are both upheld.

The elders, on the other hand, serve as the custodians of moral and ancestral tradition. They ensure that the moral fabric of the community remains intact by addressing issues of wrongdoing through counsel and discipline. In atonement matters, the elders often sit in judgment to hear

confessions and determine whether an offense is accidental or deliberate. Their role is not punitive but restorative; they seek to reintegrate the offender into the social and spiritual life of the community. The elders' presence during atonement rituals symbolizes the collective conscience of the people and reinforces the idea that sin affects not just the individual but the entire community. Together, the priest and the elders embody the two essential dimensions of Kwale religious life, the spiritual and the social. The priest mediates vertically, restoring the relationship between humans and the divine, while the elders mediate horizontally, healing the relationship between humans and their community. Through their cooperation, atonement becomes not just a ritual act but a holistic process of reconciliation that renews both moral order and spiritual harmony.

### **3.5.4 Rituals and Methods of Atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion**

Atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion involves a series of structured rituals aimed at cleansing offenders, appeasing deities and ancestors, and restoring communal harmony. These rites reflect the belief that sin disrupts both moral and spiritual balance and that reconciliation requires humility, confession, and ritual renewal. Each act of atonement carries symbolic meaning and is performed under the guidance of a priest or diviner who interprets the will of the gods. One of the most common methods of atonement is sacrifice. Animals such as goats, fowls, or rams are offered to the deities or ancestors to atone for wrongdoing. The type of sacrifice depends on the seriousness of the offense. In grave cases such as murder, incest, or violation of taboos, larger sacrifices may be required, sometimes combined with public confession and cleansing. The blood of the sacrificed animal, often sprinkled on the ground or altar, symbolizes life, purification, and renewal. Through this act, both individual and community acknowledge guilt and seek restoration of divine favor.

Libation is another important method of atonement. It involves pouring palm wine, water, or oil on the ground while invoking deities and ancestors. This ritual serves as both a prayer and a plea for forgiveness, establishing direct communication between humans and the spiritual realm. It is usually accompanied by words of confession and repentance, emphasizing sincerity and submission to divine authority. Cleansing rites also form a major part of the process. When an individual or family is spiritually defiled, the priest may perform purification using water, chalk, herbs, or leaves. The washing represents the removal of impurity and the renewal of moral integrity. In some cases, offenders may abstain from certain foods or activities for a period as a sign of repentance and self-discipline.

There are also communal sacrifices performed to atone for collective sins or to prevent calamities such as disease or famine. These ceremonies involve the entire community through fasting, prayer, and sacrifice, thereby reaffirming unity and shared moral responsibility. Ultimately, the methods of atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion are not mere rituals but expressions of moral and spiritual rebirth. They remind the people that sin breaks harmony between humans, nature, and the divine, and that restoration comes only through sincere repentance, purification, and reconciliation.

### **3.5.5 Objects and Symbols of Atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion**

In Kwale Traditional Religion, atonement rituals are deeply symbolic, and the objects used in these ceremonies carry profound spiritual meanings. These symbols express purity, guilt, renewal, and

reconciliation, and they serve as bridges between the physical and spiritual worlds. Every object employed during atonement is chosen for its sacred importance and approved by ancestral authority. One of the most significant symbols is blood, which represents life and purification. The Kwale people believe that life resides in the blood, and when it is offered to the gods or ancestors, it signifies the surrender of life on behalf of the sinner. The sprinkling or smearing of blood on shrines or the ground is believed to cleanse both the offender and the community, restoring spiritual and moral balance.

Water is another vital symbol, representing cleansing, renewal, and life. During purification rites, priests use water mixed with herbs or chalk to wash the offender. This act signifies the removal of impurity and the restoration of spiritual favor. White chalk, known locally as nzu or orhue, is also important in Kwale atonement rituals. It represents purity, peace, and truth. The priest often marks the offender with chalk on the forehead or chest to show acceptance of forgiveness and reconciliation. During communal rites, participants may rub chalk on their bodies to signify collective cleansing and rebirth. Animals and sacrificial items also serve as symbols of substitution. When a goat, ram, or fowl is offered, it stands in the place of the sinner, bearing the burden of guilt. The act of sacrifice signifies the removal of sin and the restoration of moral order. Kola nuts, palm wine, and food offerings express gratitude and reconciliation. When shared among the participants, they represent restored peace and renewed social bonds.

Fire and smoke are also symbolic elements. The burning of offerings or incense produces rising smoke believed to carry prayers and petitions to the spiritual realm. Fire represents purification and the destruction of evil, while smoke symbolizes divine communication and acceptance of the sacrifice. Altogether, the objects and symbols of atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion reveal a deep understanding of the connection between the material and the spiritual. They show that reconciliation is not an abstract idea but a lived experience expressed through visible signs of renewal. Through these sacred symbols, the Kwale people affirm their sense of moral responsibility, divine justice, and the continuous need for harmony among humans, nature, and the gods.

### **3.5.6 The Purpose and Significance of Atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion**

Atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion serves as a vital process aimed at restoring balance, harmony, and moral order within the community and between humanity and the divine. The Kwale people believe that life is governed by a sacred equilibrium, a delicate relationship between human beings, the ancestors, and the deities. Whenever this equilibrium is disrupted through wrongdoing or negligence, the peace and prosperity of the entire society are threatened. Thus, atonement becomes necessary to mend the broken bond and reestablish divine favor. Here are some purposes and significances of Atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion.

1. **Restoration of Harmony and Reconciliation:** The foremost purpose of atonement in Kwale Traditional Religion is the restoration of harmony between humanity, the ancestors, and the deities. Sin is viewed as a disruption of this divine and social balance. Through acts of atonement, such as sacrifices, confession, or ritual cleansing, the offender seeks reconciliation with the spiritual forces that govern life. These rituals reaffirm the sacred relationship between humans and the divine, showing remorse and a

renewed commitment to moral and spiritual order. Atonement therefore restores peace both within the individual and the community, allowing divine favor to return.

2. Maintenance of Social Order: Atonement also plays a crucial role in maintaining social order within the Kwale community. Sin is not considered a private matter; it affects families, clans, and sometimes the entire community. Acts of wrongdoing are believed to invite collective misfortune such as sickness, infertility, or poor harvests. The performance of atonement rituals thus serves as a communal act to remove guilt and restore social harmony. When the community gathers for reconciliation, unity and moral accountability are reinforced, strengthening the social fabric of Kwale society.

3. Moral and Educational Function: Beyond reconciliation, atonement has a strong moral and educational significance. It serves as a reminder of the moral codes that guide daily living, honesty, purity, respect for elders, and adherence to customs. The fear of spiritual punishment or ancestral displeasure encourages individuals to act righteously. Through participation in atonement rituals, younger generations learn the values of responsibility, humility, and respect for communal laws. Thus, atonement becomes a form of moral education that preserves ethical values across generations.

4. Spiritual Cleansing and Renewal: The spiritual significance of atonement lies in its power to cleanse and renew. Sin is viewed as pollution that defiles both the individual and the land. Through ritual acts, such as blood sacrifice, washing, or the offering of sacred items, spiritual impurity is symbolically removed. The people believe that such cleansing restores purity, allowing blessings, fertility, and prosperity to flow again. This process reinforces the idea that forgiveness and renewal must come through divine acceptance mediated by priests or diviners.

5. Interconnectedness of the Physical and Spiritual Realms: Atonement in Kwale thought reflects the belief that the physical and spiritual worlds are inseparably linked. Every moral or ritual action in the physical realm has a corresponding spiritual consequence. Therefore, atonement is not merely a religious duty but a means of restoring the total balance of life, encompassing health, prosperity, fertility, and peace. The performance of atonement rituals ensures that the cosmic order is maintained and that divine forces continue to bless human endeavors.

6. Cosmic and Theological Significance: Finally, atonement has deep theological meaning in Kwale Traditional Religion. It expresses the belief that while human beings are prone to error, reconciliation with the divine is always possible through repentance and proper ritual observance. Each act of atonement renews the covenant between humanity and the spiritual world. It teaches that sin, though destructive, is not beyond repair, and that divine mercy remains available to those who seek forgiveness. Through this process, the moral and cosmic balance of the universe is preserved, ensuring the continued well-being of both the individual and the community.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 4.0. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

#### 4.1 Introduction

Religion, throughout history, has provided humanity with frameworks for moral order, reconciliation, and restoration between the divine and the human. Within this framework, the concept of atonement occupies a central position, acting as the bridge between sin and forgiveness, impurity and purity, guilt and pardon (Morris, 1983). Both the Old Testament religion of ancient Israel and the traditional religion of the Kwale people of Delta State share deep concerns about the disruption that sin causes within the relationship between human beings and the divine. Although their cultural settings, theological foundations, and ritual expressions differ significantly, both traditions recognize that moral failure or sin necessitates a form of reconciliation. This reconciliation is achieved through prescribed rituals, sacrifices, and moral reforms that seek to restore broken harmony (Idowu, 1973; Mbiti, 1990). The comparative study of atonement practices in the Old Testament and the Kwale traditional religion is significant because it sheds light on the universality of humanity's quest for forgiveness and divine favor. It also helps to establish a better understanding of how indigenous African religious practices parallel and differ from Judeo-Christian theological systems. By examining both traditions side by side, one begins to appreciate that while their outward forms may differ, their underlying goals, restoration of peace, purification, and renewed fellowship, are remarkably similar (Parrinder, 1969).

Atonement in both religions is not merely a ritual performance; it carries social, ethical, and spiritual implications. In the Old Testament, the notion of atonement (Hebrew kippur) involves cleansing from sin through blood sacrifices, prayer, and repentance, symbolizing the covering or removal of guilt before God (Leviticus 16:1-34; Wenham, 1979). The sacrificial system outlined in Leviticus, particularly the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), reveals a deep theological conviction that sin creates a barrier between man and God, and only through divinely instituted means can that barrier be removed (Milgrom, 1991). In contrast, the Kwale traditional religious system understands sin as an offense not only against the gods but also against the community and the ancestors who serve as intermediaries between the living and the spiritual world. Atonement, therefore, involves restoring both cosmic and communal balance (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). Sacrifices, libations, confessions, and cleansing rituals are used to remove the spiritual impurity caused by wrongdoing and to reestablish harmony between humans, ancestors, and deities (Mbiti, 1990). This chapter seeks to compare the two systems, focusing on both their convergences and divergences. The comparison will be carried out under three major

headings: the similarities in atonement practices, the differences between Old Testament and Kwale atonement, and the implications of these findings. Each of these subheadings will be examined in depth to show how the two traditions reflect different theological orientations yet converge in their recognition of sin, sacrifice, and reconciliation as core religious realities.

The discussion that follows is not intended to judge or prioritize one religion over the other, but to provide an academic and theological understanding of how two different cultures interpret and respond to the problem of sin. This comparative analysis will also reveal that despite geographical and historical separations, humanity's quest for moral purity and divine acceptance remains a universal theme (Idowu, 1973; Mbiti, 1990).

## **4.2 Similarities in Atonement Practices of Both Religions**

A careful comparative study between the Old Testament and the Kwale traditional religion reveals several striking resemblances in their approach to the problem of sin and reconciliation. Though separated by culture, geography, and time, both traditions share similar religious logic in their understanding of atonement, sacrifice, and purification. Their practices express the universal human desire to overcome guilt, appease the divine, and restore broken moral harmony.

### **4.2.1 The Nature and Purpose of Sacrifice**

In both traditions, sacrifice is viewed as the heart of atonement. It serves as the visible sign through which forgiveness and reconciliation are achieved (Morris, 1983). In the Old Testament, sacrifices were not random acts but were divinely ordained through the Mosaic Law. For example, the sin offering and the burnt offering were specifically commanded by God as the proper means of restoring broken fellowship between the Israelites and their Creator (Leviticus 1–7; Numbers 15:22–29). The sacrificial system in the Old Testament is detailed in the books of Leviticus and Numbers, where each type of offering had a unique purpose and procedure. The blood of the sacrificial animal symbolized life, and its shedding was believed to bring cleansing from sin (Milgrom, 1991). This symbolism reflects the Hebrew understanding that life belongs to God, and thus only the surrender of life through the sacrifice could satisfy divine justice and remove guilt (Wenham, 1979). The offering of a spotless lamb or bull also reflected the principle of moral purity, only that which is unblemished could be offered to a holy God (Leviticus 22:19–25). Similarly, among the Kwale people, sacrifice occupies a sacred place in the process of reconciliation. When a taboo is broken or an offense is committed against the gods or ancestors, sacrifices are offered to appease the offended spiritual beings (Idowu, 1973). The choice of sacrifice depends on the gravity of the sin. Smaller offenses might require a chicken, goat, or libation of palm wine, while greater transgressions could demand the sacrifice of a ram or a cow (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979; Mbiti, 1990). In both contexts, sacrifice is not merely ritualistic but highly symbolic. It signifies repentance, humility, and dependence on divine mercy (Parrinder, 1969). Furthermore, in both religions, sacrifice is not an end in itself but a means of achieving spiritual transformation. It communicates to the worshiper that forgiveness comes through divine mediation and that the cost of atonement is never light. The act of giving up something valuable mirrors the moral seriousness of sin and the sacredness of

reconciliation (Morris, 1983). Thus, sacrifice functions as both a theological and ethical statement about the holiness of the divine and the necessity of human contrition.

#### **4.2.2 The Role of the Priest or Mediator**

Another major point of similarity between the Old Testament and the Kwale traditional religion is the recognition of an intermediary figure who bridges the gap between the human and the divine. In the Old Testament, the priest was chosen, consecrated, and sanctified to stand on behalf of the people before God (Exodus 28:1–43; Leviticus 8:1–36). The priest performed sacred duties such as offering sacrifices, burning incense, making intercessory prayers, and pronouncing blessings upon the people (Wenham, 1979). His most important role was clearly seen during the annual Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial animal on the mercy seat as an act of national reconciliation (Leviticus 16:11–17; Milgrom, 1991). This ceremony demonstrated that forgiveness and reconciliation required divine authorization and human representation. The priest thus acted as the mediator through whom God’s mercy and the people’s repentance were brought into harmony (Morris, 1983).

Likewise, in Kwale traditional religion, the priest or diviner serves as the mouthpiece of the gods and the ancestors (Mbiti, 1990). He is spiritually endowed with wisdom, discernment, and sacred authority to communicate with the supernatural realm (Idowu, 1973). When sin, misfortune, or calamity strikes, it is the priest who interprets the cause through divination, identifies the offended deity, and prescribes the necessary sacrifices or rituals for reconciliation (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). His office is viewed not merely as a profession but as a divine calling, often inherited through family lineage or spiritual revelation (Parrinder, 1969). The people depend on him for spiritual direction, and he occupies a respected position within the community as a moral and religious leader. Both systems, therefore, share the theological conviction that human beings are limited in their direct access to the divine and require a divinely sanctioned mediator to perform sacred functions. Without such mediation, the rituals of atonement would lack efficacy, and the communication between humans and the divine would remain incomplete (Milgrom, 1991; Mbiti, 1990). Furthermore, both traditions emphasize the moral and ritual purity of the priest. In the Old Testament, priests were required to maintain strict ceremonial cleanliness and moral uprightness before officiating in worship (Leviticus 21:1–15). Similarly, in Kwale traditional practice, a defiled or immoral priest was regarded as spiritually unfit to intercede for others; such impurity could invalidate the atonement ritual and bring further misfortune upon the community (Idowu, 1973). The shared emphasis on priestly purity underscores a universal religious truth, that spiritual leadership carries profound moral responsibility. Both the Israelite and Kwale priestly systems highlight the necessity of integrity, holiness, and obedience as prerequisites for mediating between the divine and the human. Thus, the priestly office in both traditions stands as a sacred vocation that embodies humility, discipline, and reverence for the divine order.

#### **4.2.3 The Concept of Purification and Cleansing**

The emphasis on purification and cleansing is another major similarity between the two religions. In both cases, sin and impurity are viewed not just as moral failings but as spiritual pollutants that must be

removed before one can have communion with the divine. In the Old Testament, purification rituals were necessary to restore individuals who had become unclean through contact with death, disease, or sin. For instance, the use of water for washing, the sprinkling of blood, or the burning of incense symbolized cleansing and renewal. The Day of Atonement itself was both a sacrificial and a purificatory ceremony where the sanctuary, the altar, and the people were purified from defilement. These acts had theological meaning: they symbolized that sin contaminates not only the individual but also the community and even the place of worship. In the Kwale traditional religion, impurity is also believed to result from wrongdoing, contact with taboo objects, or violation of sacred laws. The cleansing process involves both physical and spiritual rituals. A priest may use water mixed with herbs, symbolic washing, or sacrifices to purify the offender. In some cases, the offender is made to publicly confess before purification is administered. After the ritual, it is believed that the person is restored to spiritual cleanliness and that any curse or misfortune is lifted. Both religions thus connect purification with forgiveness. Cleansing symbolizes the washing away of guilt and the renewal of life. It marks the transition from defilement to holiness and from alienation to divine acceptance.

#### **4.2.4 Communal Participation in Atonement**

Another important similarity is the communal nature of atonement. In both traditions, sin is viewed as something that affects not only the individual but also the entire community. In the Old Testament, communal participation in atonement is clearly illustrated during the national observance of the Day of Atonement. On this day, the whole nation of Israel fasted, confessed, and humbled themselves before God. The priest offered sacrifices on behalf of everyone, emphasizing the collective responsibility of the people. Even individual sins were believed to have social consequences. The story of Achan in the book of Joshua shows how one man's disobedience brought defeat upon the entire nation. Similarly, the Kwale traditional religion views sin as a communal disturbance. When a serious taboo is broken, it is believed that the gods withdraw their blessings from the entire community, resulting in sickness, famine, or misfortune. To restore balance, the elders, family heads, and priests come together to offer communal sacrifices. The offender may also undergo purification rituals before being reintegrated into society. This communal approach underscores the interdependence of individuals within the community and their shared moral responsibility. In both systems, therefore, atonement is not only a personal matter but a collective act of moral and spiritual restoration. It reinforces unity, strengthens social bonds, and renews the covenant between the people and the divine.

#### **4.2.5 The Role of Confession and Repentance**

Atonement in both the Old Testament and Kwale traditional religion requires confession and repentance as visible evidence of genuine remorse and moral restoration. These two elements represent the inner transformation that accompanies outward rituals of sacrifice and purification. In the Old Testament, confession served as a central aspect of repentance and reconciliation. The sinner was required to openly acknowledge wrongdoing before God, sometimes individually and at other times collectively, depending on the gravity of the offense (Leviticus 5:5; Numbers 5:6–7). Confession was not merely a verbal admission but an act of faith, recognizing the holiness of God and the need for divine forgiveness (Wenham, 1979). It was often followed by offerings of restitution or sacrifice, symbolizing

the restoration of right relationship with God and the community (Milgrom, 1991). Public confession was a communal act that reaffirmed Israel's covenant identity. The prayer of Daniel in Daniel 9 provides a notable example where confession went beyond individual sin to embrace national repentance. Daniel's prayer demonstrated humility, faith, and recognition of divine justice, illustrating that true confession is rooted in a sincere desire for renewal (Morris, 1983). Similarly, the Psalms often contain penitential prayers that highlight the connection between confession, forgiveness, and renewed fellowship with God (Psalm 32:5; Psalm 51:1–4). These passages reflect the consistent biblical theme that forgiveness is inseparable from repentance and that verbal acknowledgment of sin opens the path to divine mercy.

In Kwale traditional religion, confession is also a critical component of atonement. When a person violates moral codes, taboos, or sacred injunctions, acknowledgment of the wrongdoing is necessary before any ritual of reconciliation can be performed (Idowu, 1973). The offender must confess to the priest, elders, or directly to the offended deity through ritual declaration. Silence or denial is interpreted as arrogance and disrespect toward the gods and ancestors, which can bring further misfortune or illness (Mbiti, 1990). The confession process is thus both moral and spiritual, it restores the integrity of the offender and reaffirms the community's trust in the process of divine justice (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). Repentance in the Kwale system extends beyond words. It requires a genuine resolve not to repeat the offense. The offender may undergo ritual cleansing, offer sacrifices, or participate in communal rites of reconciliation to demonstrate sincerity (Parrinder, 1969). These acts symbolize a fresh moral beginning and the restoration of cosmic harmony. Both the Old Testament and the Kwale systems share the conviction that confession must be sincere and repentance must be followed by a change in conduct. In both contexts, forgiveness is not automatic, it depends on genuine contrition and a deliberate effort to realign one's life with divine and communal expectations (Milgrom, 1991). Thus, confession and repentance serve as moral and spiritual mechanisms for healing relationships. They bridge the divide between guilt and grace, human frailty and divine forgiveness. Both traditions recognize that atonement is incomplete without an inward transformation that manifests through honesty, humility, and renewed obedience. The significance of these practices lies in their power to purify the heart and restore peace within the moral and spiritual order.

#### **4.2.6 The Role of Symbolism in Atonement**

Symbolism plays a profound and indispensable role in the atonement practices of both the Old Testament and Kwale Traditional Religion. In the Old Testament, symbols serve as visible expressions of invisible spiritual realities. The shedding of blood, for instance, is not merely a ritual act but a representation of life itself. Blood, regarded as the essence of life, becomes the medium through which cleansing and reconciliation are achieved. When the blood of a sacrificial animal is sprinkled upon the altar, it signifies the transfer of guilt and the restoration of purity before God. Likewise, the fire that consumes the offering symbolizes divine acceptance, the upward ascent of the sacrifice reflects humanity's renewed relationship with the divine. A particularly striking symbol in the Old Testament is the scapegoat ritual of the Day of Atonement. In this rite, one goat is sacrificed while another is released into the wilderness, bearing the sins of the people away from the community. This symbolic act captures the essence of forgiveness, the removal of sin and the renewal of moral order.

In Kwale Traditional Religion, symbolism carries similar theological depth, though expressed through culturally distinct practices. The spilling of animal blood is seen as the transference of guilt from the offender to the sacrificial victim, restoring spiritual balance. Libations of palm wine or water are poured to the earth as offerings to the deities and ancestors, symbolizing communion and communication between the physical and spiritual realms. White materials such as chalk or cloth are often used to represent purity, peace, and the washing away of impurity. These symbols do not exist merely for aesthetic value but as tangible reminders of moral truth. They help participants internalize the spiritual meanings of atonement, guiding them toward reflection, repentance, and renewed faith in divine mercy.

#### **4.2.7 The Ultimate Goal of Harmony and Peace**

The underlying purpose of atonement in both the Old Testament and Kwale Traditional Religion is the restoration of harmony, harmony with God, with one's community, and with the created order. In the Old Testament, atonement is tied to the idea of shalom, a Hebrew term meaning peace, wholeness, and right relationship. When sin disrupts the covenant relationship between God and His people, it causes both spiritual and social disorder. The act of atonement, therefore, is not merely about forgiveness but about the reestablishment of covenantal peace, ensuring that divine favor and blessing once again flow to the community. Similarly, in Kwale Traditional Religion, peace (udo or onyeoma) is viewed as the highest expression of divine approval. Sin or taboo violations create spiritual disharmony that manifests in sickness, famine, or communal strife. Through acts of confession, sacrifice, and purification, this disturbed equilibrium is restored. The people believe that only when the ancestors and deities are appeased can true peace return to the land. Thus, atonement is both a spiritual and social institution that maintains order and prevents chaos. Both systems ultimately view peace as the culmination of divine-human reconciliation. Beyond the ritual act, atonement transforms moral conduct, promotes justice, and strengthens communal solidarity. It teaches that genuine peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of divine order, where every being, human, natural, and spiritual, exists in harmony with the Creator's will.

#### **4.2.8 The Role of Faith and Obedience**

Faith and obedience form the spiritual backbone of atonement in both traditions. In the Old Testament, God repeatedly rejects sacrifices performed without genuine faith or moral integrity. The prophets remind Israel that external rituals are meaningless without inner repentance. Faith, therefore, is the foundation upon which atonement stands, the trust that God is merciful and willing to forgive those who turn to Him in sincerity. Obedience, on the other hand, is the visible expression of that faith. It is through obedience to divine law that reconciliation is maintained. The story of Abraham exemplifies this union of faith and obedience, as he trusted in God's promises and acted in accordance with divine instruction.

Among the Kwale people, this same principle governs the practice of atonement. Faith in the gods and the ancestors' willingness to forgive is essential for any ritual to be effective. When individuals approach a priest or diviner to seek reconciliation, they must do so with full confidence in the spiritual

process. Disbelief or insincerity is thought to render the sacrifice ineffective. Moreover, obedience to communal norms and ritual instructions is paramount. Offenders who repeat the same sins or neglect prescribed taboos are believed to invite renewed punishment. Thus, both systems insist that atonement is not a mechanical act but a spiritual discipline requiring faith, humility, and steadfast obedience to divine order.

#### **4.2.9 The Concept of Covenant and Relationship with the Divine**

The concept of covenant and relationship with the divine provides the theological framework for understanding atonement in both the Old Testament and Kwale Traditional Religion. In the Old Testament, the covenant represents a binding moral and spiritual contract between God and His people. Sin is a violation of this sacred covenant, while atonement serves as its renewal. Through confession, sacrifice, and repentance, Israel reaffirms its loyalty to God and renews the promises that sustain divine favor. Every act of atonement is, therefore, a reestablishment of relationship, a reminder that God's mercy continually invites humanity back into fellowship. In Kwale Traditional Religion, though the concept of covenant is not codified in written form, it exists through the continuous interaction between the living, the ancestors, and the deities. The people perceive themselves as bound to the spiritual world through ancestral covenants established in the distant past. When sin or taboo breaks this spiritual harmony, atonement rituals serve as a means of reaffirming the bond. The ancestors function as intermediaries, ensuring that divine order is maintained. Offerings, sacrifices, and libations are performed not simply to appease but to reconnect, to restore communication and mutual trust between the human and the divine. In both traditions, therefore, atonement is relational rather than transactional. It is an act of renewing the sacred bond that defines human existence. It reminds believers that divine favor depends not only on ritual observance but on ongoing loyalty, reverence, and moral uprightness.

#### **4.2.10 The Transformative Power of Atonement**

At the heart of both the Old Testament and Kwale Traditional Religion lies the belief that atonement possesses a transformative power that extends beyond ritual purification. It does not merely erase guilt but renews the entire being, spiritually, morally, and socially. In the Old Testament, forgiveness is often followed by joy, renewal, and renewed intimacy with God. The Psalms vividly capture this transformation, portraying the sinner's journey from guilt to praise. Atonement, therefore, is not an end in itself but a means toward moral and spiritual reformation, enabling the individual to live rightly within God's covenant. In Kwale belief, the effects of atonement are equally holistic. When an individual is cleansed of wrongdoing, the restoration is not only personal but communal. The community regains its sense of order, the land becomes fertile, and peace is reestablished. Atonement brings about healing, both physical and spiritual. It reintegrates the offender into society, reaffirming the person's moral worth and restoring dignity. Ultimately, both systems see atonement as a process of transformation, a divine-human collaboration that renews life, restores hope, and sustains moral order. It teaches that forgiveness is not a passive act but a dynamic force that rebuilds relationships and reshapes human destiny. Through atonement, believers encounter the profound reality of divine mercy, experiencing not only pardon but renewal of the self and the world around them.

### **4.3 Differences between Old Testament and Kwale Traditional Atonement**

While there are notable similarities in the understanding of sin and the practice of atonement between the Old Testament and the Kwale traditional religion, the two systems differ significantly in theology, ritual expression, and moral interpretation. These differences arise primarily from the contrasting worldviews that shaped each system. The Old Testament is rooted in the monotheistic worship of Yahweh, while the Kwale traditional religion operates within a polytheistic and ancestral framework (Mbiti, 1990). The following sections discuss these major differences in detail.

#### **4.3.1 Theological Foundation**

One of the most profound differences between the two systems lies in their theological foundations, which shape their conceptions of sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In the Old Testament, atonement is grounded in the covenant relationship between Yahweh and the Israelites. Yahweh is presented as the one true God, the Creator, Lawgiver, and sustainer of all existence who demands holiness and obedience from His chosen people (Deuteronomy 6:4–6; Leviticus 19:2). The entire sacrificial and priestly system flows from this covenantal relationship, where atonement serves to restore the moral and spiritual bond between God and humanity after sin has disrupted it (Milgrom, 1991). Sin in this context is not a mere mistake or social error but a rebellion against divine authority, a violation of God’s holiness that incurs guilt and requires divine forgiveness (Wenham, 1979).

The Old Testament theology of atonement also emphasizes divine initiative. God Himself prescribes the means by which reconciliation is achieved, primarily through the shedding of blood, repentance, and obedience to His law (Leviticus 17:11; Morris, 1983). Forgiveness is therefore not a humanly negotiated act but a gift that comes through obedience to God’s revealed will. The covenantal structure ensures that atonement has both a moral and spiritual dimension because it restores the individual’s relationship with God and the community’s relationship with its covenant Lord. The theological focus is vertical, directed toward one supreme deity who alone has the authority to forgive sins (Leviticus 4:20; Psalm 51:4). In contrast, the Kwale traditional religion functions within a polytheistic and ancestral cosmology. While it acknowledges a Supreme Being known as Osonobruvwe who is believed to be the ultimate creator and source of life, He is considered distant from daily human affairs (Ekeh, 2007; Idowu, 1973). Worship and atonement practices are directed primarily toward lesser deities, divinities, and ancestral spirits who serve as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and humanity (Mbiti, 1990; Parrinder, 1969). Sin in this worldview is not necessarily a direct rebellion against a universal moral code but rather an offense against the moral and social order upheld by these spiritual entities. Wrongdoing can therefore be an act of disrespect toward the ancestors, a violation of taboos, or disobedience to communal norms (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). Atonement within the Kwale system seeks to appease these offended forces through sacrifices, rituals, and confessions. The goal is to restore balance and harmony, not necessarily to seek forgiveness from a single divine authority (Ekeh, 2007). Unlike the monotheistic framework of the Old Testament, which focuses on personal sin before a holy God, the Kwale religion emphasizes a collective sense of responsibility and reconciliation within a web of relationships involving humans, ancestors, and spiritual powers. This difference highlights a fundamental theological divergence. The Old Testament presents sin as a moral and spiritual rupture in humanity’s

relationship with one transcendent God, while the Kwale religion interprets it as a disturbance in the cosmic and communal order. In essence, the Old Testament theology of atonement is primarily vertical, centered on divine-human reconciliation, whereas the Kwale theological orientation is horizontal, focusing on harmony among spiritual beings, the living community, and ancestral forces. This distinction demonstrates how the understanding of divinity influences each system's conception of sin, forgiveness, and moral responsibility.

#### **4.3.2 Nature and Purpose of Sacrifice**

Another major distinction can be observed in the nature and purpose of sacrifices. In the Old Testament, the sacrificial system was strictly regulated by divine instruction. The laws in Leviticus clearly defined what animals were acceptable, who could offer them, and under what circumstances they were to be offered. The purpose of these sacrifices was not to feed God but to symbolize repentance, cleansing, and reconciliation. The blood of the animal served as a substitute for the sinner, representing the idea that sin brings death but that God accepts the life of another as atonement for human guilt. In the Kwale traditional religion, sacrifices are more flexible and vary from one clan or shrine to another. Offerings may include animals, food, palm wine, kola nuts, or other local produce. The purpose is to appease angry spirits or restore peace between humans and supernatural beings. The emphasis is not substitutionary death but reconciliation through symbolic gestures of respect and submission. Whereas the Old Testament sacrifices are deeply theological, grounded in covenantal symbolism and divine holiness, the Kwale sacrifices are communal and practical, focusing on restoring social and spiritual equilibrium.

#### **4.3.3 Role of the Mediator or Priest**

In both systems, mediation plays a key role, but the function and authority of the mediator differ considerably. In the Old Testament, priests from the tribe of Levi were divinely appointed to serve in the temple as intermediaries between God and the people. They performed sacrifices, offered prayers, and maintained ritual purity. The high priest, in particular, held a unique position during the Day of Atonement when he entered the Holy of Holies to make expiation for the sins of the nation. His role was sacred and strictly governed by divine law. In the Kwale traditional religion, however, mediation is performed by priests, diviners, and elders who act on behalf of individuals or families seeking reconciliation. These priests are often chosen through ancestral inheritance, spiritual revelation, or community consensus rather than through divine command. They consult the deities through divination and carry out sacrifices prescribed by the spirits. While their role is respected, it lacks the same hierarchical structure and ritual precision found in the Old Testament priesthood. The Kwale priest is more of a spiritual consultant and custodian of tradition, while the Old Testament priest is an ordained minister of divine covenant.

#### **4.3.4 Concept of Sin and Moral Accountability**

The understanding of sin and moral accountability also varies between the two traditions. In the Old Testament, sin is essentially a moral and spiritual offense against God. It involves disobedience to His commandments and a violation of the covenant. Sin brings divine judgment and disrupts fellowship

with God. The moral dimension of sin is deeply personal, and individuals are held responsible for their own actions. Even though collective guilt sometimes applies to the nation, individual repentance remains crucial for forgiveness. In the Kwale traditional religion, sin has a more communal and relational meaning. It is viewed as an act that disturbs the balance between humans, the spirits, and the community. Wrongdoing is not only personal but collective because it affects the wellbeing of all. A single person's offense can bring misfortune upon an entire family or village. Consequently, atonement is usually communal, involving the family or clan of the offender. The emphasis is not moral guilt before a holy God but the restoration of social and cosmic harmony. This shows a clear difference in moral orientation: the Old Testament stresses divine law and personal repentance, while the Kwale system focuses on relational peace and communal restoration.

#### **4.3.5 Nature of the Rituals**

The rituals of atonement in the Old Testament and Kwale traditional religion differ greatly in structure and formality. In the Old Testament, atonement rituals were highly organized and performed under strict divine instruction. Each step, from the selection of the sacrificial animal to the sprinkling of blood, was carefully prescribed by God through Moses (Leviticus 4:6–7; 16:14–19). This precision reflected Israel's deep reverence for the holiness of God and the sacredness of the worship setting (Milgrom, 1991). The shedding of blood symbolized the surrender of life as payment for sin, emphasizing that forgiveness required both divine mercy and human obedience (Leviticus 17:11; Wenham, 1979). In contrast, Kwale traditional rituals of atonement are less formalized and more communal. They take place at shrines, family compounds, or sacred groves depending on the nature of the offense (Ekeh, 2007). The ceremonies may include libation, chanting, drumming, and cleansing with water or herbs. Offerings of animals, food, or palm wine are made to appease the gods or ancestors (Mbiti, 1990). Unlike the rigid order of Old Testament rites, Kwale rituals are flexible and allow for emotional and communal participation. Their purpose is not only to remove guilt but also to restore social and spiritual harmony within the community. Thus, while the Old Testament system stresses divine holiness and covenantal obedience, the Kwale system emphasizes reconciliation through communal engagement and ancestral intercession. Both, however, express humanity's deep desire to reestablish peace with the spiritual realm.

#### **4.3.6 View of Forgiveness and Cleansing**

Forgiveness in the Old Testament comes directly from God after the prescribed acts of atonement have been carried out. It is both a spiritual and moral cleansing, allowing the sinner to regain right standing before God. The forgiveness is considered complete because it is granted by the supreme moral authority who alone has the power to absolve sin. In the Kwale traditional religion, forgiveness is achieved when the offended spiritual entity or the ancestors are appeased. The priest or diviner confirms forgiveness through signs or revelations during the ritual. The cleansing that follows is both physical and spiritual, often symbolized by washing or purification ceremonies. However, unlike the Old Testament, there is no clear assurance of permanent forgiveness; repeated offenses may require repeated rituals. This reveals that the Old Testament places emphasis on divine grace and covenantal mercy, while the Kwale system focuses on continual maintenance of balance through ritual observance.

#### **4.3.7 Eschatological Implications**

Finally, the two systems differ in their understanding of the ultimate consequences of sin and the role of atonement beyond this life. The Old Testament introduces the idea of divine judgment, resurrection, and the hope of eternal fellowship with God. Atonement is not only temporal but also carries eschatological significance as it prepares believers for future redemption and peace with God. In contrast, the Kwale traditional religion views existence in a cyclical manner. The afterlife is closely connected with the ancestral world, where the spirits of the dead continue to influence the living. Atonement ensures that the individual remains in good standing with the ancestors and gains acceptance into the ancestral realm after death. The focus is therefore on continuity of life rather than final judgment. This shows that while the Old Testament projects a linear progression towards ultimate redemption, the Kwale system emphasizes the ongoing cycle of life, death, and rebirth within the community of the living and the dead.

#### **4.4 Implications of the Findings**

The comparative examination of atonement in the Old Testament and Kwale traditional religion provides profound insights into how human societies interpret the concepts of sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Despite existing in distinct cultural and historical contexts, both systems reveal that human beings are deeply conscious of moral order and the consequences of transgression. Atonement, as understood in both religious systems, is not merely a set of ritual acts but a reflection of the human desire for restoration and peace with the divine. This study demonstrates that both the Old Testament and Kwale traditional religion perceive sin as a disturbance that affects not only the spiritual state of the individual but also the moral and social fabric of the community. The process of atonement therefore becomes a means of reestablishing balance, order, and purity. The findings of this comparative study carry significant implications that extend beyond the boundaries of theology. They touch on moral, social, and cultural dimensions of human life, showing that religion serves as a powerful instrument for regulating human behavior, maintaining social harmony, and fostering community values. These implications are discussed under four main perspectives: theological, moral and ethical, cultural and social, and interreligious implications.

##### **4.4.1 Theological Implications**

From a theological standpoint, the findings affirm the universal awareness of the reality of sin and the need for reconciliation between humanity and the divine. In the Old Testament, the theology of atonement is built upon the concept of covenant. God entered into a sacred relationship with Israel, and any violation of His commandments was seen as a breach of that covenant. The rituals of atonement, particularly the sacrifices prescribed in Leviticus, were instituted to restore this broken relationship. The shedding of blood was a powerful symbol of life being offered in place of the guilty, expressing both divine justice and mercy (Leviticus 17:11; Milgrom, 1991). Through these sacrifices, forgiveness was not only obtained but also reaffirmed the holiness and sovereignty of God over His people. The entire process communicated that sin was not to be taken lightly, and reconciliation could only be achieved through divine provision and sincere repentance (Wenham, 1979). In the Kwale traditional religion, the

theological foundation of atonement is built around the belief in a Supreme Being, known as Osonobruvwe, and the veneration of lesser deities and ancestral spirits. Offenses against the divine order are viewed as violations that affect not just the individual but the community at large. The atonement rituals are therefore directed toward the restoration of both spiritual and social harmony. Unlike the centralized and covenantal focus of the Old Testament, the Kwale theological system operates within a pluralistic framework where gods, ancestors, and spiritual forces collectively maintain the moral order of the universe (Ekeh, 2007). Both systems affirm that reconciliation involves divine-human cooperation. While the Old Testament emphasizes divine initiative, God providing the means of forgiveness through ordained sacrifices, the Kwale tradition emphasizes communal participation in restoring peace. This comparison suggests that humanity, irrespective of culture, recognizes its dependence on higher powers for moral and spiritual restoration. The theological implication is therefore that atonement represents a universal response to the human need for renewal and reconciliation with the divine order (Mbiti, 1990).

#### **4.4.2 Moral and Ethical Implications**

The moral and ethical dimensions of this comparative study are equally profound. In the Old Testament, the moral foundation of atonement is grounded in the concept of holiness. God's command, "Be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 19:2), underscores that moral purity is not optional but a requirement for maintaining fellowship with God. The process of atonement reinforces the moral lesson that sin leads to separation from the divine and that repentance and restitution are necessary for restoration. Confession, as seen in passages such as Psalm 51, reflects genuine remorse and a turning away from wrongdoing. This moral consciousness shapes personal character and promotes justice, honesty, and humility among the people (Wenham, 1979). In the Kwale traditional religion, morality is also central to religious life. The ethical code is embedded in the community's customs, taboos, and ancestral laws. Wrongdoing is not viewed solely as an individual matter but as something that affects the entire community. When a person commits an offense, it is believed that the ancestors and gods are displeased, leading to misfortune or sickness. Atonement rituals are therefore carried out to cleanse the community and restore moral balance. This moral system encourages respect for elders, obedience to community norms, and the pursuit of integrity in interpersonal relationships (Mbiti, 1990). Both systems reveal that religion functions as a moral compass that guides human conduct. The Old Testament teaches moral responsibility before a holy God, while the Kwale religion enforces morality through communal accountability and ancestral oversight. Together, they illustrate that ethical living is integral to spiritual life. The implication is that atonement, in both contexts, is not simply about forgiveness but about moral renewal and the transformation of character.

#### **4.4.3 Cultural and Social Implications**

Culturally, the comparison between Old Testament and Kwale practices highlights how religion influences identity, community life, and social organization. In the Old Testament, the system of atonement established a collective identity for Israel as the people of God. Through the observance of festivals such as the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the Israelites reinforced their unity and their dependence on divine grace for purification and renewal. These communal rituals fostered social

cohesion and transmitted religious values from one generation to another (Milgrom, 1991). Similarly, in Kwale society, atonement is a social affair that strengthens community ties. The rituals involve not only the offender and the priest but also family members and elders. The ceremonies may include songs, prayers, and shared meals, symbolizing reconciliation and restored fellowship. This communal approach ensures that the moral and spiritual well-being of the society is collectively maintained. Religion thus serves as a unifying force that promotes peace, cooperation, and solidarity within the community (Ekeh, 2007). Another cultural implication lies in the preservation of traditional values. The Kwale rituals express a worldview that honors ancestors, respects nature, and values social balance. Even though the Old Testament context differs historically and geographically, both traditions show that religious practices are deeply intertwined with culture. They teach that spiritual and social life cannot be separated, and that moral transgressions must be addressed through communal responsibility and spiritual reconciliation.

#### **4.4.4 Interreligious and Contemporary Implications**

In the contemporary world, where diverse religions coexist, this comparative study contributes to interreligious understanding and dialogue. It reveals that beneath the surface of cultural and theological differences, there exists a shared human longing for forgiveness, peace, and moral purity. Recognizing these shared values can promote tolerance, respect, and collaboration between adherents of Christianity and African traditional religions. Scholars such as Idowu (1973) and Mbiti (1990) have emphasized that African traditional religions, far from being primitive, contain deep spiritual insights that can enrich global religious discourse. For African Christians, understanding traditional concepts of atonement can enhance contextual theology and promote deeper appreciation for indigenous spirituality. The similarities between Old Testament and Kwale practices show that divine forgiveness and moral renewal are universal themes that transcend culture. Furthermore, acknowledging these parallels encourages mutual respect and helps to reduce religious prejudice, particularly in societies where traditional beliefs and Christianity coexist. From a practical perspective, this study also implies that religious leaders, theologians, and cultural scholars can draw from both systems to promote peace, reconciliation, and moral discipline within their communities. The principles of confession, repentance, and restitution found in both traditions remain relevant to modern ethical and social challenges. Ultimately, the comparative understanding of atonement in these two systems reveals that religion, regardless of its form, remains humanity's deepest attempt to overcome moral failure and restore fellowship with the divine.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### 5.0. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 Evaluation

Throughout history, humanity has struggled with questions of moral failure, divine judgment, and forgiveness. Every religious system has developed mechanisms through which broken relationships between humans and the sacred can be restored. In the Old Testament, this mechanism is anchored in the sacrificial system of Israel, founded upon the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people. The ritual of atonement symbolized divine forgiveness through the shedding of blood, repentance, and obedience to divine commandments. In Kwale traditional religion, atonement takes on a communal and ancestral character. Wrongdoing is viewed not merely as a personal moral failure but as a disturbance of the spiritual and social equilibrium that binds the community, the ancestors, and the deities together. The rituals of sacrifice, confession, and purification serve to mend the broken ties between the offender, the community, and the spiritual world. By placing these two systems side by side, this study has provided insight into how religion serves as a moral and theological framework for reconciliation. It has revealed that despite differences in doctrine and ritual, both traditions articulate a shared human yearning for restoration and divine favor. This chapter, therefore, consolidates the key lessons learned, draws conclusions that summarize the comparative insights, and offers recommendations for theological reflection and cultural engagement.

The comparison between Old Testament and Kwale traditional atonement shows both shared and unique features. In both, sin is seen as a serious offense disrupting harmony with the divine and the community, requiring repentance and public ritual. Sacrifice is central, symbolizing purification and forgiveness through the shedding of blood or offering of animals. Both traditions also recognize a mediator: the priest or diviner, who bridges humans and the divine. Confession and repentance are key,

expressing remorse and moral renewal. Overall, atonement in both systems aims to restore spiritual and communal harmony.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

From the findings of this study, it is clear that the concept of atonement represents one of the deepest expressions of religious consciousness shared by humanity. Whether in the covenantal theology of ancient Israel or the communal cosmology of the Kwale people, the desire for reconciliation reveals a universal truth: human beings recognize their moral imperfection and seek restoration through divine or spiritual means. In the Old Testament, atonement is defined by divine holiness and covenant loyalty. The rituals serve as tangible expressions of repentance, faith, and obedience. The entire sacrificial system points to the seriousness of sin and the necessity of divine grace. In the Kwale traditional religion, atonement reflects an interconnected worldview where moral, spiritual, and social harmony must be maintained. The rituals emphasize not only the restoration of divine favor but also the healing of relationships among people and their environment. This study demonstrates that both systems, though developed within distinct theological frameworks, converge in their moral purpose. They both affirm that forgiveness is attainable only through humility, repentance, and sacrifice. The ultimate goal is the restoration of peace, peace with the divine, peace within the community, and peace within the human heart. Thus, the comparative analysis underscores the unity of the human religious experience. It reveals that while expressions of atonement may vary across cultures, the inner yearning for reconciliation is timeless and universal. The Old Testament and Kwale traditional religion both testify that genuine atonement brings about renewal, moral discipline, and social stability.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

In the light of the conclusions drawn from this research, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Promotion of Interreligious Dialogue:** There should be deliberate efforts to encourage dialogue between adherents of Christianity and African traditional religions. Such dialogue can enhance understanding, reduce prejudice, and foster cooperation in addressing moral and social challenges that affect contemporary society.
2. **Integration of Indigenous Wisdom in Theology:** The moral and spiritual insights found in Kwale traditional religion should not be dismissed but rather studied and integrated into African Christian theology. This will promote a contextualized faith that respects cultural identity while affirming universal moral truths.
3. **Strengthening Moral Education:** Religious institutions should emphasize the importance of repentance, restitution, and moral integrity as integral aspects of atonement. Both the Old Testament and Kwale traditions teach that genuine reconciliation requires ethical transformation, a lesson that can guide modern moral education.

4. Documentation and Preservation of Oral Traditions: The rich oral and ritual heritage of the Kwale people should be systematically recorded. This will safeguard indigenous knowledge systems and provide valuable resources for future theological and anthropological research.
5. Encouragement of Comparative Studies: Scholars should continue to conduct comparative studies between biblical and African traditional beliefs. Such research can contribute to the development of intercultural theology, deepen our understanding of religion as a universal phenomenon, and bridge gaps between faith traditions.
6. Application to Community Development: The communal nature of atonement in both traditions highlights the importance of unity, reconciliation, and mutual support. These values can be translated into social programs aimed at promoting peace, justice, and collective responsibility within local communities.

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