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|--------------------------|---|
| O.S. TAIWO: | A Philosopher's Critique of Adamo's Conditions For Biblical Studies |
| S. AWONIYI: | The Development of Pilgrimage Tradition and its moral Implications in our Contemporary Society. |
| A.A. AIZEBIOJE: | Voltaire and His Philosophy of History. |
| A.O. ADENIYI: | Looking at the Theology of Repentance through Luke 15. |
| T. ADAMOLEKUN: | The Strategies Adopted y the Baptists For Planting and Spreading Baptist Church in Kwara State of Nigeria 1900 – 2000. |
| A.R. OGUNLEYE: | African Culture and Modern Nigeria: The Effects of Western Modernity. |
| O.J. IGILI (MRS): | Social Commitment in Ola Rotimi's Commitment Plays. |
| M.O. ADENIYI: | Islam in Conflict with Christianity and the Response of Muslims. |
| S.O. ADESINA: | Prophet Amos and Africa Today. |
| E.O. BABALOLA: | The Scientific Basis of African Traditional Medicine: The Yoruba Example. |
| O.S. EHLABHI: | The New Yam Festival in Uromi. |
| P. IROGBU: | Grounds For Suffering: From Reason and From Faith. |

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P.C. Olatunji teaches Philosophy at Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba – Akoko, Ondo State.	182-196
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AN EVALUATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT PREFERENCE IN AFRICAN INDIGENOUS CHURCHES

BY
ALAMU, A.G.

Introduction

The Christians from the beginning have unequivocally accepted the Holy Bible as the only as the only authentic, indisputable, archetype of the mother of all books which is the undoubted progressive revelation of God to mankind through ages. In fact, the Holy Bible is "the indisputable living and inspired word of the living God"¹ Again, *The Concise Bible Dictionary* aptly depicts that:

The Bible is the work of the one spirit; it contains the record of one progressive revelation of God to man, but at the same time it came into being in many parts and in many modes, by a gradual growth extending over many centuries, and we can see, in the books themselves evidence of the varied conditions of time and place and thought under which they were composed.

Thus, the Christian faith anchors on this divine, absolute and infallible library. Undoubtedly, the Bible had in no small measure sharpened Christian ideas: affected every culture it cuts across and influenced Christian life. In deed, "the greatest single factor in the development of life among English speaking people has been the Bible".²

Admittedly, therefore, the Bible is a miniature library of 66 separate canonized books written by some forty men over a period of 1,600 years of (1513) BCE –96 CE) which culminated into approximately 100 years after Christ's death and resurrection³. The Bible has thus been translated to over 1600 Languages and dialects with handful version in English Language⁴.

The Bible contains the Old and the New Testaments. Thus, the Old Testament contains "Tanak" which is the first 39 books of the Bible, meaning that the "Ta" – Torah, Law, Pentateuch or the five books of Moses; "Na" – Neviim (prophets) and "K" – Kethuvim (writings). While the New Testament contains the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Epistles and some authoritative, inspirational and apocalyptic writings which are the last 27

books. It is interesting to note that in the Old Testament, God stands in relation to the world mainly as the absolute creator, while the Israelites were the chosen object of divine mercy. Thus, the Israelites were under a theocratic government as God truly revealed His identity⁶. The New Testament is the fulfillment and explanation of the old Testament. It explains the historical antecedents of Jesus Christ. It is worthy to note that both the Old and the New Testaments complemented each other. St. Augustine posited that "the Old Testament is revealed in the New, the New veiled in the Old"⁷. In the same development, Graham Scroggie affirmed that "The New is the Old contained, and the old is in the New explained"⁸.

However, in the Church history, emphasis had been laid either on the Old Testament or New Testament over and against each other. There had been periods in the yore when dissatisfactions were obviously expressed towards the Old Testament. For instance, the marcionists expressed their obvious rejection of the old Testament and advanced their theologies. Be that as it may, their views were severely attacked by the early church fathers such as St. Augustine, Irenaeus and Eusebius among others.

Nevertheless, the attitude of the African indigenous churches towards the Old Testament has been overwhelming and encouraging. But there has been special preference for the Old Testament. This paper, therefore attempts to look at an account of the African indigenous churches' preference for the Old Testament.

An Account of the African Indigenous Churches' Preference for the Old Testament

The twentieth century up to this period has witnessed the evolution and growth of the African indigenous churches as a recognizable new pivot of Christianity. They are pivotal because they are African in their worldview. These African indigenous churches differ widely in style, attitude and organizations⁹. Thus, these indigenous churches did not emerge in the abstract; rather they were necessitated by spiritual, cultural, social, political and circumstantial factors.¹⁰ The African indigenous churches, though distinct in character, are different in outlook from the orthodox churches. However they have some similarities they all share to some extent against the orthodox churches.¹¹

In fact, the common and basic feature of African indigenous churches is the special preference for the Old Testament. While in the orthodox

churches the New Testament is given priority over the Old Testament, the Old Testament has suffered in recent times because there has been relatively wide spread of copies of the New Testament in virtually all institutions, and other human endeavours. This printing and distribution of copies of the New Testament with the exception of the Old Testament compels one to believe that the Old Testament has no authority, or is relatively out of use or without relevance to the contemporary society which the Bible has cut across. Meanwhile, more precedence is given to the New Testament with the partial inclusion of the books of Psalms and Proverbs as if these are only what constituted the whole Bible. It is glaring without contradiction that the Old Testament scriptures have never for once been printed and distributed. Not only that, in many instances, only the New Testament appears in the local language of the people. Also, the seminaries of the mainline churches do not help the matter. They concentrate mainly on the New Testament exegesis at the expense of the Old Testament. Even the western theologians almost killed the interest in the Old Testament, by not supplying a handful of exegetical analysis of the Old Testament scripture compared to the New Testament. Hence, while the Old Testament never enjoyed a prominence in western theology, a serious study of it in Africa was considered irrelevant¹².

However, with the emergence of the African indigenous churches greater preponderance was placed on the Old Testament. "In some quarters, the difference between the Old and New Testament standards are felt as a problem, and where this is so the Old Testament standard is generally accepted"

In fact, K.A. Dickson citing Bengt Sundler asserted that:
*the young churches in Africa did not discard the Old Testament or give it a secondary place, not this but its misinterpretation is the problem of Africa*¹⁴.

Sequel to the above fact Oosthuizen writes:

*... after an extensive study of the texts used for sermons in African independent churches in Nigeria concluded that if there is any truth in the common statement that the independent churches rely much more heavily on the Old Testament, here is the one measure of how far this is true*¹⁵.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that African independent churches'

sermons are hinged on the Old Testament than the New Testament version. The African indigenous churches in fact have an Old Testament understanding and explanation of the whole Bible¹⁶. Therefore, in the beliefs, faiths and practices of the African indigenous churches, the Old Testament is the anchorage, given the fact that most of their prayers, rituals and communions are the Old Testament testimonies.

Reasons for Special Preference for the Old Testament

It is necessary to bring to the fore some reasons adduced for the special preference for the Old Testament in the African indigenous churches. These are presented as follows:

African Worldview

Worldview is the product of man's understanding, interpretation and relationship with the environment, and his continuous struggle to know it, control it, change it, and adopt it for his own purposes.¹⁷ It is also a person's belief by extension in what is real and what is not real.

Africans lay much emphasis on communal life, we-feeling, collegueship, with others of the same nuclear and extended family and clan. They tend to recognize their identity and understanding in life through their environment and large society. This actually has a close knit with Jewish history as recorded in the Old Testament.

Africans also have this holistic worldview of life. Life in Africa is not divided into religious and mundane. Virtually all the forms of life capture a beautify piece. These African credentials found relevance in the Old Testament than in the New Testament.²⁰ The African identity is that of a collection of people known for hardwork, perseverance, diligence, magnanimity, hospitality, intelligence and cheerfulness all of which cannot be separated from the Old Testament.

Religion as a way of life.

In Africa, religion is pervading and co-extension with life. The Africans strongly believe in the religious presuppositions of their environment in accordance with their traditional customs and rites. Similarly, in the ancient Israel, religion was not detached from life. God was actively present with His people making and instructing them after His will so that they can be an epitome of faith for which He intends to use them. In the

Old Testament therefore, sin has both spiritual and physical consequences → sin and sickness are inseparable²¹. For instance, African indigenous churches seem to find affinity with the history of the Israelites as recorded in the Old Testament. In Nigeria for example, the bubonic plague of 1918 made the christians to claim that it was a result of their sin. This seems strong in the African indigenous churches.

Experiential Sympathy for Polygamy

It has been maintained that the culture of the Old Testament and Africans is synonymous with polygamous relationship. In fact, history is replete with the great men in the Old Testament who had many wives, notable among them are Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon among others. African culture permits polygamy also²².

The issue of polygamy is still brewing a lot of controversy among the African Christians. Africans are of the opinion that the importers of christian religion based their aversion for polygamy not on the Bible, or on plain reason but on the belief that the institution implied sexual immortality and abuse, which in the African view is false²³. In a nutshell, Adrian Hastings buttresses further that in Africa

The imposition of monogamy is seen as essentially an instance of western cultural imperialism condemning the marriage practices of Africa... without any biblical warrant and indeed in contradiction to much old Testament witness...It is true that no word of the Bible certainly condemns polygamy.²⁴

Handful of the leaders of African indigenous churches tolerated polygamy with the Old Testament permission. Some of these leaders have many wives. Notably among them are Josiah Oshitelu of the Church of the Lord (Aladura)²⁵, S.B.J. Oshoffa of the Celestial Church of Christ. In fact, Joriah Oshitelu averred stoutly that God permitted him to have many wives as a way of compensating him for obeying His will before thinking of marriage²⁶. "For he who sees, sees; he who does not see, does not see".

Rituals and Myths in the Old Testament

The Old Testament is replete with rituals and myths. Thus, the traditional religion is strongly ritualistic. Rituals in the traditional Africa is a continuation of an act which began outside man but which he reproduces

at will. The African indigenous churches take more to the Old Testament scripture. Oosthuizen again takes a look at it that

*Old Testament ritual, which is usually no longer adhered to by Christians, has been revived in these churches, as is the case with the use of ashes as a purificant, the slaughtering of animals as sacrifices, and some rites of avoidance*²⁷.

Flowing from the foregoing, it is evidently clear that some of these rites are still common virtually in all African churches especially during naming ceremony of a child, sacrifices in Celestial church of Christ, and some rites of avoidance during funeral ceremony.

Loyalty to Literal Interpretation of Scripture

The Greek and Roman world philosophy has greatly influenced the New Testament understanding and exegesis. In fact, the Greek philosophy for instance found entrance into ideals and thoughts of the New Testament. This is a clear departure from the Old Testament world where great attention is given to allegorical and literal meaning of the scripture. The Africans with their immutable faith tenaciously lean toward the old Testament than the New Testament.

Formalistic Approach to The Gospels By The Missionaries

The early missionaries in Africa imposed on their early converts the necessity for the spread of the Gospel messages seriously, coupled with their own mode of belief and lifestyle which was to be emulated.²⁸ High premium was placed on rules and regulations. This method made Africans to retrace their steps to the pre-christian background. Traditional African practices place great emphasis on rituals, taboos, and other regulations. Thus, African converts coming from a pre-christian background see a semblance between traditional religious prohibitions, rules and regulations and the old Testament rules and regulations of the semitic ancients. In fact, "rituals and other regulations are to be found scattered throughout much of the old Testament, and some of these have their counterparts in African usages". Formalism or legalism comes naturally to the Africans who find it difficult to accept gullibly teaching as binding unless it is supported by sanction.²⁹

Dancing and Singing as Tools in the Old Testament

In the worldview of the old Testament scripture, efforts were made at the use of song. This to our understanding was noticed during the conquest of the city of Jericho (Joshua 6:1-ff). During the retrieval of the ark of the Lord, from the house of Obbedom by King David, (II Sam 6:12-15). Jeshosaphat also employed the same measure in conquering his enemies without doing battle with them (II Chronicle 20:21). In fact, African indigenous churches were almost denied this by the main line churches with their New Testament mentality, which was not part of their worldview. Admittedly, singing and dancing constitute a major portion of African culture and they express it virtually in all things. Indeed, the Africans have been described by Geoffrey Gorer thus:

They dance for joy and they dance for grief; they dance for love and they dance for hate; they dance to bring prosperity and they dance to avert calamity; they dance for religion and they dance to pass the time¹¹.

This description actually has brought out at a glance the contour of the African traditional singing blended with grotesquely brilliant parody of dancing. African musical instruments had been incorporated as the leaders of African indigenous churches argued for a close affinity with that of the Old Testament.

An Evaluation of the Old Testament Preference in African Indigenous Churches

The African indigenous churches have done well by drained attention of Christendom to the relevance of the old Testament scripture. Nevertheless the early church missionaries to Africa had preference for the New Testament to such an extent that today, there is the multifarious distribution of the New Testament Scripture by *Gideon International* to our institutions. It must however, be noted that both the old and the New Testament constitute the scripture, and as such both should be studied together.

The worldview of the Africans which depicts their purposes should be upheld and allowed to stay. Because of the fact that theirs is a common participation in life, a common history and a common destiny. In other words, there should be "africanness" or African interpretation of both the Old and New Testaments.

The African indigenous churches with their preference for the Old Testament scripture have brought new awareness to the Christian society. Initially, some of the missionaries diametrically rejected and out rightly condemned African music. The drum which had been thought pattern of Africa was no longer heard in most churches but only the harmonium accompanying carefully translated European hymns sung to the tunes of the west was accepted. This tendency brought about deplorable result and dissatisfaction in the act of worship as African languages could not give way to European hymn tunes. But thanks to the indigenous churches that pioneered the creation of African Christian hymnology which makes use of the traditional patterns of African singing and a variety of instruments³². African musical instruments had been integrated as they are kith and kin with the Old Testament. No doubt Africa musical instruments and native songs have long ago been incorporated into the mainline churches. Kudos to the Africa indigenous churches for their protest against lackadaisical and cold worship

The preference for the Old Testament actually led to the emergence of African Christian theology. Christian theology defines the "way of ordering, developing and discussing Christian revelation in the context of the world of the theologian"³³. Thus, Christian beliefs, revelation, and doctrine are far from abstract ideals, rather they can only be an approach in the context of time and place. The church has got various schools of theological activity. Some of them are western and eastern theologies; The special preference for the old Testament by African indigenous churches has ushered in African Christian theology and theologians. Hence African way of life and worldview came to be appreciated.

Furthermore the literal interpretation of the scripture by the African indigenous churches came to be appreciated and accepted because Christianity is faith, for without faith, there is no church. This doctrine has long been promoted by the Africans. However, the literal misinterpretation of the scripture by the African indigenous churches, which sometimes leads to erroneous explanation comes as a result of the exigencies of time. Also, the formalistic approach to the gospels has been relegated to the background. But outward formalism takes precedence. This has been promoted by the African indigenous churches. Not only that, Christianity is seen as a belief in order to obtain salvation. But in Africa indigenous churches, it goes beyond salvation, rather Christianity is anchored on grace, works, humanness

and expression of gratitude, some of which are foreign to the Christian missionaries. These are incorporated because of the African way of life.

In essence, some leaders of African indigenous churches give exegetical meaning to the preference for polygamy in the Old Testament scripture. In actual fact, they are justified by the rendition of it in the Old Testament. In the light of the Old Testament, polygamy could not be condemned since there was no biblical warrant and it was not resisted in the old Testament witness. No wonder, some African indigenous churches' leaders justified their actions and encouraged their faithful to follow suit. For instance Josiah Oshitelu reiterated that as a *primate*, "God allowed him to have multiple wives as a compensation for obeying God's order to enter the ministry first before thinking of marriage"¹⁴. From the foregoing, it was still obvious that God was still dealing with him and he never lost touch with Him. However, the New Testament scholars have argued that monogamy must be adhered to strictly by Christian ministers as opposed to the polygamy on the ground that it is a cardinal qualification for the appointment of church leaders¹⁵. (See 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1). They further stated that monogamy should be tolerated in all ramification especially the church leaders who must *show example by strict morality*¹⁶ to their congregations. Be that as it may, the African indigenous churches' leaders have not erred by their preference for the Old Testament exegesis. And again they have not interpreted the Old Testament in isolation in order to justify any shortcoming. After all, *it is true that no word of the Bible certainly condemns polygamy*¹⁷.

In actuality, the ritualistic and mythological nature of the old Testament are still held in high esteem, however, they have been refined to suit the contemporary trend. Virtually in all churches, some rites are performed especially during naming ceremony of a child. This phenomenon is one of the African indigenous churches' credentials and they are known for it. Yet, it should not be misunderstood that some of the practices which observers or some New Testament scholars could consider as fetish are actually events that are symbolic and at the same time assist the adherents spiritually especially with regard to relationship with God¹⁸.

Conclusion Remarks

As it has been observed the African indigenous churches' preference for the old Testament comes handy as a result of a close affinity between the

African culture and the Hebrew race whom God had chosen to follow His will with obedience. The Old Testament preference by the African independent churches came about as a result of the preferential treatment bequeathed to the New Testament by the early missionaries to African and those printing and distributing the New Testament scripture at the expense of the old Testament, thus making it irrelevant. Also, the preference has, as well, brought about some awareness on the one hand and the need to study it is the light of the world it was written on the other hand. Both the Old and New Testament complement each other and therefore the two should be studied together as a volume without separation. The New Testament unveiled what has been concealed to mankind in the old Testament. To this end, the Bible as a whole is the revealed inspired word of God and the archetype of the mother of all books.

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