

**A SOCIO-RHETORICAL STUDY OF EXODUS 20:3 AND ITS IMPLICATION ON
SYNCRETISM IN CHRISTIANITY**

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ABSTRACT

This article, “A Socio-Rhetorical Study of Exodus 20:3 and Its Implications for Syncretism in Christianity,” employs elements of socio-rhetorical criticism—historical, cultural, social, and theological—to investigate and analyse the first commandment given to the Israelites and its implications for syncretism. The study employed a qualitative research methodology. The study characterised syncretism as the unconscious inclination or deliberate effort to diminish the distinctiveness of a religion by aligning its components with those of other belief systems. The research primarily utilised secondary materials to uncover several forms through which syncretism has manifested among Christians, including divination and the use of charms, as well as the underlying motivations for such syncretic practices. Moreover, the investigation identified several factors contributing to syncretism, including a deficiency of faith, superficial evangelisation, religious indifference, and the intrinsic essence of the African cosmological perspective. The research recommended several strategies for addressing the issue of syncretism, including re-evangelization and inculturation, among others.

Key Words: Socio-Rhetorical – Syncretism-Faith

Introduction

The Israelites, departing from Egypt, were consumed with both aspirations and apprehensions. They aspired to inherit a "Land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:8). However, they were apprehensive about their destiny outside the borders of Egypt. Nonetheless, with Moses' guarantee, they were compelled to transition from bondage to freedom. During their 40-year desert trek, they encountered numerous tumultuous situations

and engaged with diverse religions and cultures; these interactions led them to consider adopting these religions at times, despite Yahweh's protections and provisions, resulting in the error of syncretism. Consequently, upon arriving at the base of Mount Sinai, Moses was required to establish specific commandments for the Israelites to adhere to in order to inherit the Promised Land and attain happiness therein; thus, the emergence of the Ten Commandments.

Today, syncretism has profoundly infiltrated Christianity, particularly in Africa. The perfect religion is increasingly elusive due to the continual decline from what is ultimate, particularly within Christianity. Similar to the Israelites, numerous Christians today perceive no issue with attending Sunday worship in the morning and participating in 'ministries' in the afternoon and evening (Mokotso 13). Christians who insure their life adhere to the longstanding beliefs of their forefathers. Numerous Christians today succumb to various nefarious practices in pursuit of money or physical cure. A distinct form of syncretism arises from enculturation, wherein aspects of traditional worship are directly integrated into Christian liturgy, resulting in the simultaneous practice of two religions, either consciously or unintentionally.

Exodus 20:3, the inaugural commandment, is crucial for comprehending the impact of syncretism on religious rituals, particularly in relation to Christianity. This paper intends to provide a thorough socio-rhetorical analysis of Exodus 20:3 and examine its implications for syncretism in Christianity. This study will utilise socio-rhetorical criticism to investigate the textual and contextual dimensions of the verse, analysing the social, historical, and rhetorical elements that shape syncretism in contemporary Christianity. It will enhance comprehension of the obstacles encountered by the Israelites, with wider implications for modern religious syncretism.

Translation

לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים לְפָנַי Exodus 20:3 (Biblia Hebraica)

Exodus 20:3 (NRSV): "You shall have no other gods before me."

Working Definition of Syncretism

Etymologically, Syncretism is derived from the Greek word “*synkretismos*” which means “union of communities,” or *synkretizein* “to combine against a common enemy (Ezenweke and Kanu⁷³). According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, the word occurs in Plutarch perhaps the only instance among the writers of antiquity-and is there illustrated by the idea that the Cretans, though frequently at war among themselves, were accustomed to unite their powers against the attacks of any foreign foe. Beyerhaus defines “syncretism as the unconscious tendency or the conscious attempt to undermine the uniqueness of a religion by equating its elements with those of other belief systems”. Viewed from this perspective, syncretism does not only connote the practice of two different religions at the same time; nor does syncretism imply importing the formal elements of different religions into Christianity. Syncretism therefore, parallels varied religious rudiments and in that way changes their original sense without acknowledging such an alteration.

Although there are scholars who use the word Syncretism *via positiva* owing to the context from which they study, for the purpose of this research, the word shall be used via *negative* as defined by the aforementioned authors, since Yahweh does not share His supremacy with other deities. In like manner, Christ who is the son of Yahweh reaffirms the monotheistic nature of the one-indivisible-Godhead and proclaims that “I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one goes to the father except through me (John 14:6).

Textual Analyses

The socio-rhetorical approach involves the examination of various aspects, including the social, historical, cultural, and linguistic elements, to comprehend the intended meaning and effects of a text; applying this methodology to Exodus 20:3, helps illuminate the strategies employed by the researcher to convey the prohibition against syncretism.

Coherence and Boundaries

The change of setting from *Raphidim* to *Sinai* (Exodus 19) marked the beginning of a new periscope, which opens with Yahweh reminding the Israelites how He brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand, promising them to be his chosen people if they keep his covenant. The people accepted to keep the covenant and purified themselves then Moses went up to the mountain and received the Decalogue. Exodus 20:3 stands in-between verse one which expresses the supremacy of Yahweh and, 4-7 which explains ways of worshiping other gods

that must be avoided. With regard to this research, the periscope must end with verse 7 since verse 8 begins the second of the Decalogue, introducing the law on oath taking, “do not use my name for evil purposes, for I, the Lord your God, will punish anyone who misuses my name.”

Setting

The scenery of the law giving was the foot of Mount Sinai. Provan *et al* opine that “the earliest tradition located Sinai at Jebel Musa in the southeastern portion of the Sinai peninsula” (133). They further opine, based on the arguments of other scholars, however that Sinai is to be found in what is today known as Saudi Arabia” (133). Many significant activities took place at Sinai despite the relatively short period of time spent there (Exodus 19:1-Numbers 10:10). It was at Sinai that God instructed Moses to go and deliver the Israelites from Egypt and bring them to him (Ex 3:1); as soon as the Israelites reached Sinai, God entered into a covenant relationship with them, gave them ordinances by which they were to live (Ex 19-24) and instructed Moses to build a tabernacle (Ex 37) (133).

Rhetorical Strategies

This verse (Ex 20:3), utilizes several rhetorical strategies to emphasize the exclusivity of monotheistic worship. The imperative language of "you shall have no other gods" serves to establish a compelling commandment, while the phrase "before me" highlights the primacy and singularity of the Hebrew God. According to the New Jerome Biblical Commentary, this command is “a strong assertion that Yahweh is the only deity of Israel. Since He defeated their former lord and master, he and no other deity is their God” (NJBC 3:33). The Decalogue is also found in Deuteronomy 5:6-21 with slight changes such as the reasons for the Sabbath observances and the placements of the last commandment, placing Neighbor’s wife before neighbor’s house. However, the first commandment “You shall have no other gods before me” remains the same for both books. This first commandment which spans between Exodus 20:1-6 “indicates the uniqueness of God and of humanity’s relationship to him (connection with history, exclusiveness, lack of images)” (Schmidt 132). Such rhetorical strategies seek to evoke a sense of loyalty and devotion to Yahweh, ultimately discouraging syncretistic tendencies.

Historical Context:

The Israelites having been wondering in the wilderness (Exodus 17:1) for many years had interacted with different cultures and fought some enemies (e.g. the Amalekites 17:8-13), learning about their gods and their ways of worship. Meanwhile, they would not have completely forgotten about the gods of Egypt where they had lived for about 400 years. Therefore, realizing the need to return to the worship of the one true Yahweh with serene hearts, Moses convoked the whole assembly at the foot of the Mount Sinai and gave them the law (Ex 20) as he received it from Yahweh at the mountain top (Ex 19). This law giving began in verse 3 of Exodus 20 after a brief reminder of the primacy of Yahweh in verses 1 and 2. Yahweh does not wish to share his supremacy with other gods.

Hence, one fundamental question that comes to mind here is: was Israel monotheistic? Challenor opines that the words: “you shall have no other gods before me” indicate a polytheistic background. Several passages in the Old Testament make allusion to other gods with some degree of tolerance. Examples can be found in Judges 11:22-24 which speak in one breath of Israel’s Yahweh and Moab’s Chemosh. In Ex 4:26-26 and 12:23, we read of Yahweh being superior to or identified with other gods (Bright ed. 166).

However, several other passages in the Old Testament kick against Syncretism. Deuteronomy 6:13-15 states: “You shall fear only the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name. You shall not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who surround you, for the Lord your God in the midst of you is a jealous God; otherwise the anger of the Lord your God will be kindled against you, and He will wipe you off the face of the earth”.

Several other passages that prohibit syncretism in the scriptures include but are not limited to the following: Exodus 34:15-16; Deuteronomy 7:1-6; Joshua 23:16; 1 Samuel 7:3; Jeremiah 19:4-5; 2 Kings 17:34-41; Joshua 24:14-15; Kings 18:21:

Therefore, the prohibition against having other gods before Yahweh in Exodus 20:3 stems from the historical context in which Israelites encountered various polytheistic practices. The Israelites' exposure to neighboring cultures with diverse deities necessitated a clear commandment against syncretism, reinforcing their unique monotheistic beliefs.

Cultural Significance

The entire account of Israel as defined in the Old Testament is an enormous contest for the legitimacy of the First Law in the Decalogue. Exodus 20:3 reflects the cultural significance of monotheism to ancient Israelite society. The verse highlights the emphasis on an exclusive covenant with Yahweh, fostering a sense of identity, social cohesion, and separation from other nations. Consequently, syncretism would compromise this distinctive identity and present a threat to societal integrity.

Findings of the Research

1. Lack of Faith

Many African Christians find it difficult to believe that God who is all knowing and all loving can allow his followers to suffer. Like the Israelites, Christians murmur in times of calamities such as wars, injustice, corruption and the lack of basic amenities. For instance, during this moment of hardship due to the hike in the price of commodities, particularly food stuff, many Christians seldom believe that God is in the picture, because if he is, he would act. With these thoughts, many have embraced other deities as their gods, yet they proclaim the Christian faith in the community. Therefore the lack of faith leads to syncretism.

2. Shallow Evangelization

Many people are converted to Christianity but they received shallow evangelization. Evangelization means proper proclamation of the gospel message. On the contrary, shallow evangelization refers to the lack of indebt proclamation of the gospel message. Shallow evangelization here entails the shortfall in the efforts of the bearers of the gospel message to firmly root the faith in the hearts of the believers so that they may be able to stand strong in moments of trial. Shallow evangelization consequently results in skin-deep faith like “the seed that fell upon rocks” (Matt 13:5, 20-21).

3. Religious indifference

The Israelites were soaked into syncretism such that the elements of the Canaanite, Assyrian and Babylonian religions were imported into the worship of Yahweh. This was the reason for Elijah’s battle against Baal in 1Kings 18. There was a serious relapse from the worship of the true God and no one seemed to realize it except Elijah. This is the case with many Christians today who say that God is God and he can be worshiped in any form. Therefore such people

combine the Christian life with the worship of other deities without having any issues with it. This has even led to the popular religion known as “Chrislam”. This form of syncretism has become so prevalent and common because many Christians have become so indifferent towards their faith.

4. The Nature of African Cosmology

Most African traditions believe in the existence of spirits and the power of nature. On the one hand, good spirits work with good people in the community making them to do great things that promote the image of their communities. On the other hand, situations arise in most African communities where some people are believed to be possessed by evil spirit such that they behave strangely. Some of such possessed persons are driven to do many evil things such as stealing, prostitution, petty pilfering, killing and spiritual husbands/wives.

Consequently, the quests to ward-off such evil spirits drive many Christians to fall prey to syncretism. When faced with such problems they find themselves in the webs of fake prophets who drive them into what in disguise seems to be Christianity; but in the final analyses, they are not Christians at all. Others, instead of approaching God in his throne of grace, they go straight to diviners to cleanse them of such possessions.

Application

To be a Christian entails that one believes in the entire scripture as inspired and revealed. Therefore the scriptural laws that apply to Christians are general no matter where they come from. However, in modern day Christianity, syncretism which stands against the first commandment, has taken various forms of manifesting itself. These manifestations are not limited to the members of the worshiping community but even some clerics are entangled within the webs of syncretism.

The Mixture of the Use of Charms with the Christian Faith

It has been observed that so many Christians today are obstinately cringed to the use of charms alongside their Christian faith. Many prophets of God today are alleged to tenaciously believe in the practice and the use of charms and amulets in their ministries. They do so fundamentally to perform signs and wonders. It is alleged that these prophets of God found or establish Healing Ministries deeply rooted in believed in the efficacy of the use of charms

and amulets. These prophets do not only use these charms and amulets, but they also produce them for their followers. These charms are given to these gullible followers in forms of rings, handkerchiefs, bottled water, stickers, and other spiritual objects for various uses such as healing, protection, destroying one's enemies, fruit of the womb, success in business, lifer partners and miracle money (Anizoba and Aande 13).

On the part of the lay members of the Christian community, many of them go into many diabolic activities in order to 'make it'. After several hours in church service and worship sessions, they still hang charms in their shops and in their homes for protection and still go to their traditional village shrines to insure their lives.

These practices stand in contrast to the teaching of Exodus 20:3; and also against the injunction of Christ "I am the way and the truth and the light; no one goes to the Father except through me" (John 14:5).

Reasons for the use of Charms

Usually, people do not act for no reason, as such, those who combine the use of charms with the Christian faith do so for myriads of reasons which may include but not limited to the following: security, remedy against infertility, protection from death, prevention of illness and misfortunes, enhancing one's business opportunities and progress, as well as attracting God's immediate intervention and other useful mystical powers of the universe.

Practice of divination among some Christians

Owan writes:

"Cases abound where Catholics and other Christians who found no ready answers to their petitions and problems from the channels of the sacraments, come to testify to having found solution to their problems by the instrumentality of traditional medicine-persons and diviners generally known as Babalawo (Yoruba), Dibia (Igbo). Some confess to having done nothing really diabolical such as offering pagan sacrifice, so they have no problem visiting those places again (19)

Many African Christians live in the shackles of syncretism without finding anything wrong with it. During naming ceremonies, many African parents consult the diviners to know the

future of the child and they choose names accordingly, and after this, they then take the child to church for christening. Since many African traditional religions believe in reincarnation, the diviners are responsible for telling the parents of the new born child whose spirit reincarnated to as to give the child an appropriate name. Such name may include Laijanu (voice of the gods in Kona); Tyav (war in Tiv); *Vaaze* (corn of the gods). This does not in any way mean that it is wrong to give children native names. However, in giving these names, they ought to be Christian oriented names such as *Kurumamyarei* (God's gift); *Laapele* (Godswill); *Msendoo* (prayer is good).

Reasons for Divination

For the African, life is full of uncertainties because of the fear of the unknown. They are faced with hunger, sicknesses, deaths, wars and several other calamities which threaten their lives in the community. Therefore the role of diviners is paramount to the Africans in terms of foretelling of future occurrences. Diviners in Kona land are called "*Akaru*" and their role is indispensable to the Kona traditional religion. Those who had practiced this act of divination prior to the advent of Christianity find it difficult or even impossible to deviate from it. This is because they see the Christian God as weak and not answering their prayers when they desire (Anizoba and Aande 14). Therefore, Christians with this mindset need to be disabused from such thought and given a strong reassurance that the Christian God is powerful will grant their human and spiritual needs if only they are committed to him with one mind and one heart intent upon serving him alone.

Rites of initiation into adulthood

After a child has been given a Christian name, between the age of 7 and 12, the child is again taken back to the shrine for the rite of initiation into adulthood. Again, there are Africans who pay for their life insurance according to their traditional believes. They usually renew this contract annually or by-annually depending on the tradition. The same people who go to church and practice the Christian faith in their daily lives are the same people who wear the masquerades of the traditional religion to perform got the gods. These, among other practices are carried out simultaneously with the Christian faith.

Reasons for Initiation

Young men in the African communities are usually initiated into adulthood in order to make them strong enough to withstand the challenges of life. During this period, the initiates are thought the way to live peacefully in the community and how to respect those who are older than them. Like military training, they are thought how to endure hunger and to be resilient in the face of challenges. This practice did not just come from the bloom. African women are very stubborn and as such this practice of secluding young men for initiation and eventually incorporating them into masquerades was initiated as a means of social control.

Pleasant as this may sound, these young men are usually baptized Christians and the process of initiation here involves the acknowledgement of gods other than the faith into which the individual has been baptized, therefore syncretism abounds.

Contemporary Relevance:

The implications of Exodus 20:3 on syncretism continue to resonate in modern times. In a globalized world characterized by cultural exchanges, the commandment against syncretism still holds significance for adherents of monotheistic faith, reminding them to maintain the purity and fidelity of their religious traditions. Furthermore, this passage challenges individuals today to critically examine any syncretistic tendencies in their own religious practices.

Recommendations

Re-Evangelization

There is dire need for re-evangelization among African Christians so as to boost their faith. Evangelization is the efforts by missionaries to “preach the gospel to all men” (*Ad Gentes* 1). Re-evangelization therefore means that there is a need to strengthen the faith of those who have already received the faith initially. The effort is not to preach the gospel anew, but to reemphasize the supremacy of the gospel of Christ over any other religion. Those who had believed but later relapsed to syncretism need to be re-evangelized as it is the “duty of the successors of the apostles of Christ to carry on his work so that the word of God may run and be glorified...and the kingdom of God proclaimed and renewed throughout the whole world” (*Ad Gentes* 1).

Proper Inculturation:

The Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* concerning inculturation has this to say:

On several occasions the synod fathers stressed the particular importance for evangelization of inculturation, the process by which Catechesis takes flesh in various cultures. Inculturation includes two dimensions, on the one hand; the intimate transformation of authentic values through their integration into Christianity and, on the other hand, the insertion of Christianity in various human cultures.

Inculturation is an urgent necessity in the life of the church for a firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa. For a successful evangelization or re-evangelization as the case may be, inculturation is a very vital tool. However, improper inculturation also poses a great challenge on the African process of inculturation.

Catechesis:

“Catechesis is an education in the faith of children, young people and adults which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine impacted, generally speaking, in an organic systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life” (CCC5). Catechesis is not something that is only to be done within the confines of the church. It is to be done within the family setting, schools and indeed everywhere the Christian folk could be found. By so doing, there will be better understanding of the way God wants his followers to live and this will go a long way in curbing the menace of syncretism among Christians.

Conclusion

The foremost concern of this seminar was to excavate syncretic practices among Christians which stands against the biblical injunction of Exodus 20:3. The basic question this paper sort answer was: how committed have the African Christians been to the faith they received amidst the milieu of African traditional values and Islam? In this this research, lack of faith, shallow evangelization, religious indifference and the nature of African cosmology have been viewed as the causes of syncretism. Despite the fact that the Christian faith could only be meaningful to the Africans if it is incarnated into the African culture, such culture ought to be baptized and Christianized to avoid the error of Syncretism. However, if the strategies

propounded by this research are adequately put to use, the menace of syncretism shall be cubed to the barest minimum.

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