

The concept of monotheism in the Book of Proverbs and an African (Yoruba) perspective

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The uniqueness of the Book of Proverbs among other wisdom books is incontestable because it uses יהוה as the name of God. Its regular use of the name means that the Book is concerned about God's monotheism. The mention of that proper name (יהוה) 94 times and the generic name אלהים only twice (this generic name still refers to יהוה), emphasises the concept of monotheism. Monotheism in ancient Israel is not the denial of the existence of other gods, but the exclusive worship of Yahweh as the only one true God. The origin and the meaning of Yahweh although debatable, the majority of scholars believe that it is Exodus 3:13–15. The definition of proverbs although debatable, they can be defined as a traditional saying that gives advice and instruction. It is 'a relic of ageless tradition' that contains a pithy structure. Generally, scholars believe that Yoruba religious tradition also holds the fact that Yahweh is monotheistic by the name given to him (*Olodumare*). Unfortunately, the Yoruba translation of the Hebrew word יהוה is *Oluwa* instead of *Olodumare*.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This makes the Yoruba readers of the Book of Proverbs miss this monotheistic context. Can the retranslation of the Book of Proverbs make the monotheism of God in Yoruba be clearer? This article, therefore, emphasises the need for a retranslation of the present translation of the Book of Proverbs in Yoruba. This article will be an eye opener for some readers who are not sure of the concept of monotheism in the Book of Proverbs and in Yoruba religious tradition.

Keywords: monotheism; Yahweh; Africa; Proverbs; Yoruba.

Introduction

Traditionally, King Solomon was regarded as the author of the Book of Proverbs because his name is mentioned in Proverbs 1:1, 10:1; 25:1; and I Kings 3:28. However, the Book of Proverbs also mentions Lemuel and Argur in Proverbs 30:1 and 32:1. From the above, it might be better to consider the Book as originally short collections (although some are long Pr 31:10–31) to summarise the basic values of Israelite society so that they can be easily remembered (Matthews & Moyer 2012:239). These sayings are not unique to ancient Israel because most of their wisdom is borrowed and recycled from their Near Eastern neighbours.

The Hebrew word used for the word Proverbs is משל. The exact meaning is not clear, but it could be related to the word 'rule' or 'to be like' in the form of comparison (Lucas 2015:2).

The uniqueness of Proverbs among other wisdom books is incontestable because it uses יהוה as the name of God. Remarkably, Proverbs mentioned יהוה about 94 times as its primary way of referring to God (Bostrom 1990:33; Lucas 2015:246).

There are similarities between the Israel's Book of Proverbs and that of the other nations. The comparison of the Book of Proverbs with the surrounding nations' proverbs shows how truly international Israel's Book of Proverbs is (Bartholomew & O'Dsowd 2011; Bostrom 1990:34; Lucas 2015:246). The Old Testament Book of Proverbs resembles African (Egyptian) and the Mesopotamian wisdom materials called *Instruction of Amenemope*, *Instruction of Shuruppak* and the *Counsel of Wisdom*. Similarities also exist among the Canaanite wisdom materials called *Ahiqar*, which is regarded as the most important non-biblical Canaanite wisdom text. However, there is no consensus as to the extent to which the borrowing took place. What is certain is that whatever the amount of borrowing from these surrounding nations, it was given a unique Hebrew stamp, that is, Yahwisized.

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That wisdom teaching is theological literature according to Birch et al. (1999:384), it is true because it witnesses to Yahweh and its purpose for the world. What the wisdom teaches, observed, and reflected on is 'a world order that is willed, governed, and sustained by Yahweh'. Wisdom theology is also a theology of creation. Yahweh, the creator intends for the world to be 'whole, safe, prosperous, peaceful, just, fruitful, and productive', that is, for the world to be in peace (Birch et al. 1999:384). However, he set a limitation and builds it into its reward and punishment. That is the reason Proverbs 1:7 becomes the focal point and motto. A true understanding of reality is the recognition of Yahweh who is the creator. Any disregard for the will of Yahweh will surely bring punishment.

In any discussion of biblical faith by scholars, the wisdom books particularly the Book of Proverbs seems to have the greatest difficulty because it seems not to fit into the type of faith expressed in the historical and prophetic works of literature. The Old Testament theology is centred on Yahweh's acts in history and the interpretation of these acts (Wright 1979:103). The questions that arise are whether wisdom theology contradicts or complement and/or supplement other parts of Old Testament theology. The question of whether African (Yoruba) Traditional Religion is monotheistic or not, has been a subject of debate among biblical scholars. In light of the above my question is, can the Book of Proverbs and African (Yoruba) Traditional Religion be monotheistic? This article aims to discuss the monotheistic nature of the Book of Proverbs and African (Yoruba) Traditional Religion. In order to achieve this aim, I will use African Biblical Hermeneutics (a methodology that makes African social-cultural contexts the subject of interpretation. This is a methodology that reappraises ancient biblical tradition and African worldviews, cultures and life experiences).

To achieve this goal, it will be necessary to discuss the meaning of proverbs, the origin of biblical proverbs, the concept of monotheism in the Book of Proverbs, and the African religion. It also discusses the translation of יהוה to *Oluwa* instead of *Olodumare* in the Yoruba Bible.

Definition of proverbs

Despite the familiarity of proverbs all over the world, there is still no unanimous agreement concerning the definition (Olumuyiwa 2012:106–120). Despite the universally unacceptable definition of proverbs, proverbs as a universal phenomenon can still be recognised; although the different meanings given to each proverb may differ from one culture to another.

Proverbs have agitated scholars of different disciplines (Awolalu 1979). According to Wolfgang Mieder (1985:1–12), proverbs can be recognised through the use of common sense. Proverbs can be defined as a traditional saying that gives advice and instruction (Mieder 1989:2). It is 'a relic of ageless tradition' that contains a pithy structure

(Fayemi 2009:2). Olatunji (1984:167) seems to agree with this definition of proverbs when he sees proverbs as 'an inheritance from elders' who have uncountable experiences.

Below are the 'essential features of proverbs' that are acceptable (Fayemi 2009:6–7):

1. Proverbs originate from oral tradition.
2. They pass on from generation to generation, and their meaning can change.
3. They are metaphorical, and can only be understood metaphorically.
4. They are relics of cultural experiences.
5. Human observation, experience, and nature are important bases for proverbs.
6. They are universal and particular, and can make one think.
7. They can establish what life truly is.
8. Proverbs can be applied to almost all situations.

Monotheism

Monotheism is the belief that there is only one true God (Goldingay 1988:443). Ringgren (1978:602) defines monotheism as: 'The belief in and exclusive worship of one god'. Strict monotheism which implies the denial of the existence of other gods is a fairly rare phenomenon represented primarily by Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, and to a certain extent, Zoroastrianism.

According to the evolutionistic school of comparative religion, monotheism is the last and highest stage in the evolution of religion (Ringgren 1978:602–604). Lang and Smidt contend that the origin of religion is primitive monotheism, but Pettazoni thinks that strict monotheism came into existence as a protest against polytheism (cited by Ringgren 1978:602–604). Primitive monotheism is the belief in one God who is high above other gods. He is often identified with the sky. He is the master and controller of man's destiny, and is the most superior to other gods.

Wellhausen first introduced the term monolatry in 1880 and was taken up by W.R. Smith as a necessary evolutionary stage of transition from polytheism to monotheism (Cross 1974:931). According to these scholars, monolatry was Israel's religious condition from Sinai Covenant in the Book of Exodus to the time of the prophets (Cross 1974:931). Some scholars maintain that ancient Israelites originally practiced monolatry or henotheism (Eakin 1971:70, 263). Day (1992:1835), and McKenzie (1990:1287) also believe that monolatry existed in the Old Testament. Heiser (2008:1) also thinks that all the passages cited in support of absolute monotheism (Ps 82; Dt 4:32; 39; Dt-Is 43:10–12; 45:5–7, 14, 18, 21–22) do not make sense because there is the existence of divine plurality. He further says that the view that monotheism means absolute denial of the existence of other gods in the Bible is indeed problematic (Heiser 2008:1–30).

terms of numbers but in historic significance and contemporary influence (Ilega 2000:105–138).

According to Bascom, no other ethnic group in Africa has so much influence as the Yoruba people who spread their influence to the New World-the Americas (Bascom 1969:1). Yoruba people are widely known and called *Aku* in Sierra Leone, *Nago* in Brazil, and *Lucumi* in Cuba (Kilson & Rotberg 1976:7–8).

The multiplicity of divinities or Orishas in the Yoruba pantheon has led many scholars to conclude that African Traditional Religion (Yoruba) is polytheistic, rather than monotheistic. There are three categories of scholars with three different opinions about the concept of God in Africa. The first category is the scholars who think that the idea of God is philosophical and therefore, Primitive Africans can't comprehend him (Ludwig 1950:1; Baudin quoted by Awolalu 1979:vii; Kato 1975:56). Scholars who think that what is called the Supreme Being in Africa is too remote to Africans, are the second category. In order words, though Africans believe that he exists, the creator of the world, and God of gods or divinities, he is too remote from the Africans. He is in heaven to rest and has no direct dealing with Africans. The third category is the scholars who think that the idea of a monotheistic God does not exist in Africa. What is called the Supreme Being in Africa is not the same universal God of the world or (Israel).

Ludwig (1950:1), an anthropologist, and sociologist represents the first category. Baudin, a French Roman Catholic Priest and scholar who was writing in 1884 can be a representative of the second category (quoted by Awolalu 1979:vii). The third category of scholars can be represented by Kato (1975), who by criticising Idowu, Mbiti, Awolalu, believe that:

[T]he traditional idea of God in Africa is defective, inferior, and unworthy of his Divine Supremacy because it is only the gifted Semites of the first century that had a clear vision of the concept of God. (p. 56)

Kato (1975:56, 69, 91–158) accuses Idowu, Awolalu, and Mbiti, and others of Hellenising the African God.

From the above, one may summarise that the foreign writers did not credit Africans with any kind of knowledge of the true God or Supreme Being (Bewaji 1998:1–17).¹ According to Olupona (2014:19–26), the Yoruba religion combines elements of both monotheism and polytheism.

According to Idowu, there is what he calls 'implicit monotheism' or 'diffused monotheism'. It means the existence of one God who is Supreme and also the divinities who are his representatives on earth (Idowu 1960:49).

The above review of these scholars shows that most of them do not understand the actual nature of the Yoruba religion and tradition. They do not understand the Yoruba idea of

¹This is not to deny that few Africans deny Africans of their true God. Kato is one of them as mentioned above.

monotheism *Olodumare*. To achieve the real concept of the monotheism of *Olodumare*, one needs to examine the various names and the meanings of *Olodumare* the Supreme Being (Johnson & Oyinade 2004:3).

Translation of the Book of Proverbs into the Yoruba Language

An unfortunate thing is that even though the Book of Proverbs prefers to use profusely (94 times) the proper name of God, יהוה throughout the Book, except in few occasions (twice only) when the generic name אלהים is used to refer to יהוה (2:5; 3:4), the Yoruba translators did not translate this unique name of God to the exact equivalence in Yoruba language-*Olodumare*. Instead, יהוה was translated as *Oluwa*, which means 'Lord' throughout the Book. The reason is perhaps, the translators may not be very good in the use of the Hebrew language or they are misled by the English translators (KJV, RSV, NIV, and others) who were probably the basis of the translations. However, no one seems to know why the translators do that, more so if they could translate the Hebrew word אלהים appropriately to *Olorun* which is also a generic name in the Yoruba language. For example, Proverbs 2:5 in the Yoruba language Bible יהוה was translated *Oluwa*, while אלהים is translated *Olorun* in *Bibeli Mimo Atoka*. Proverbs 3:4 also read *Bee ni iwo o ri ojurerere, ati ona rere loju Olorun ati eniyan* (*Bibeli Mimo Atoka* 1980) ('So you will find favor and repute in the sight of God and of people' NRSV). Since the Yoruba language has an equivalence of God's proper name יהוה, the translation should be *Olodumare* and not *Oluwa*.

I would like to discuss why *Oluwa* is not the appropriate translation of יהוה. The name *Olodumare* alone is the Supreme Being and is never given to any other Deity or person among the Yoruba people. His uniqueness is not contestable. But *Oluwa* means *oga* (master) and can be applied to any person who is more superior to another person. The essence of divinity is absent in the word *Oluwa*. The very uniqueness in the proper name *Olodumare* is also absent.

The meaning and attributes of *Olodumare* make it more appropriate to be the translation of יהוה in the Yoruba Bible. Although there are many names for *Olodumare*, two names stand out *Olodumare* and *Olorun* (Yahweh, Elohim).

According to Idowu, the name has three parts. The first one is *Ol*; the second word is *Odu*, and the third word is *Mare*. According to Idowu, the *Ol* is a prefix that means 'ownership'; the *Odu* means 'largeness', 'very full' and 'extensive', and 'superlative greatness' in size and quality. *Mare* means 'does not change or move' or 'stable' (Adamo 2017:13–16; Idowu 1960:34).

These names below are very important because they represent the totality of what the Supreme Being, *Olodumare* is:

- *Olorun*: The owner of heaven.
- *Eleda*: The one who creates.

- *Alaaye*: He owns the earth.
- *Elemi*: He owns Life.
- *Atererekariaiye*: He spreads and covers the entire universe.
- *Olojo Oni*: The owner and the controller of the day.

A closer look at some of the attributes of *Olodumare* demonstrates his monotheistic nature: (Awolalu 1979:vii, 12–18; Idowu 1960:38–47; Mbiti 1979:31–41). All power belongs to him – Omnipotent; all knowledge belongs to him – Omniscient. He is transcendent and immanent. That is the reason why the Yoruba people gave him the name *Olorun* – owner of heaven, and *atererekariaiye* – the one who spreads over all the earth.

An examination of other tribes in Africa also shows that the oneness of God is affirmed not only among the Yoruba people of Nigeria but among others throughout Africa. African people refer to the name of God as ‘One and separate Deity’ because he has both the heavenly and the earthly aspects (Adamo 2014:47–62; Mbiti 1979:30). Ndebele believes in God the Father, the Mother and the Son, and yet One (Mbiti 1979:30). The Gikuyu tries to emphasise the unity and the oneness of God by saying that ‘God is all alone’ without parents or companions (Adamo 2014:47–62). To the Lugbara of Congo and Uganda, God is not only transcendent and immanent, he is of one essence and that is why they refer to him as ‘One but many’ (Adamo 2014:47–62). The Shilluk of Sudan believes that God is One Spirit but is also of a plurality (Mbiti 1979:30). The Vugusu people of Kenya also believe in the plurality of God headed by the Supreme Being (Adamo 2014:47–62; Mbiti 1979:29).

Conclusion

This article discusses the meaning of the monotheism of God in the Book Proverbs and Yoruba Indigenous Religion. It argues that Proverbs proclaims monotheism by using very frequently the personal divine name יהוה. In other words, the Book is monotheistic in nature and theology. To support the monotheistic nature of Proverbs, the origin and the meaning of the word יהוה is critically discussed. In African (Yoruba) context, the article discussed how the translation of the Book of Proverbs does not represent the Hebrew original and the monotheistic nature of the Book of Proverbs by translating יהוה to *Oluwa* in Yoruba when there exists the most appropriate Yoruba equivalent word that means יהוה. While one appreciates the good effort of the translators of the Book of Proverbs into the Yoruba language, it is not acceptable. Therefore, the need for a re-translation of the Book of Proverbs into the Yoruba language is important. Perhaps, the entire Yoruba Bible needs a re-translation because the translation of יהוה to *Oluwa* exists throughout the Yoruba Bible. Such translation of יהוה into *Oluwa* obscures the strict monotheistic nature of God in African (Yoruba) context.

It should be emphasised that it will be difficult to find an African indigenous person, particularly the Yoruba people of Nigeria, who is an atheist. If such a person exists at all, he or she must have been exposed to the non-African influence (Johnson & Oyinade 2004:1–8). The Supreme Being is responsible for the creation and directing this entire creation. He alone is supreme. His proper name is *Olodumare* and he is acknowledged and worshipped by all Yoruba divinities. He is no one among many and his status of supremacy is not disputed among the Yoruba and the divinities. The Yoruba owe him their ultimate, first, and the last daily allegiance (Awolalu 1979:53; Bascom 1969:53). As Meiring (2007:733, 744, 748) has said, Western Christianity has a lot to learn from African Traditional Religion especially their emphasis on the sense of community.

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D.T.A. is the sole author of this article.

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