

Bible Monotheism in the African Context

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This study explores the complex concept of monotheism in African contexts, where cultural and spiritual traditions are rich and diverse, presenting both challenges and opportunities for meaningful connections and insights between biblical monotheism and African worldviews. African cultures bring new perspectives to ancient texts, emphasizing community, relationships, and storytelling, but translating biblical concepts into African languages and contexts is fraught with challenges, including cultural and linguistic misunderstandings. The study highlights the diversity of African spiritual traditions, such as the Yoruba people's belief in Olodumare, the Akan people's reverence for Nyame, and the Igbo people's belief in Chukwu, and notes the crucial role of African biblical scholars in contextualizing biblical teachings in African cultures. To address these complexities, the study recommends approaching biblical teachings with sensitivity, exploring contextualization, supporting African scholars, and investing in language and cultural studies, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of biblical monotheism in African contexts and fostering greater appreciation between cultural groups through cultural sensitivity, contextualization, and scholarly engagement, with African scholars well-positioned to facilitate this process and promote a more nuanced understanding of biblical teachings and vibrant expression of faith in Africa.

Keywords: Monotheism, Biblical, Contextualization, Culture, Theology.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The term "monotheism," derived from Greek, means believing in one God. This concept has grown to include the idea of a single, personal God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, creating and governing the universe while existing beyond it. Initially, Israel's early religious development allowed for revering one God without explicitly denying others' existence. However, Israel's prophetic tradition firmly asserted monotheism, rejecting other gods (Isaiah 41:21-24, 43:10-13, 44:8). The New Testament's trinitarian concept of God doesn't contradict monotheism, although Judaism and Islam see it as inconsistent with their monotheistic beliefs. Some scholars argue that monotheism may have evolved from polytheism or a primitive, pure monotheism that later gave way to polytheism (Namukoa, Verster & Nel, 2000).

The concept of monotheism asserts the existence of a single, all-powerful God. In contrast to the New Testament church, which largely assumed this belief, ancient Israel's adherence to monotheism in the Old Testament was more complex. They frequently vacillated between monotheism and polytheism, influenced by their polytheistic neighbors. This historical struggle highlights the ongoing challenge of maintaining a

strong commitment to monotheistic beliefs, both in ancient times and today, when faced with various forms of idolatry (Kehrer

Statement of the Problem

Bible monotheism takes on a different flavor in the African context, where cultural and spiritual traditions are rich and diverse. At its core, the challenge lies in reconciling the strict monotheism of biblical traditions with the complex spiritual landscapes of African societies. African Traditional Religions often blend elements of polytheism, ancestor worship, and spiritual practices that may seem to diverge from the singular focus on one deity in biblical traditions. For instance, the Yoruba people of Nigeria believe in a supreme deity known as Olodumare, but also recognize other divinities and spirits, raising questions about the nature of monotheism in African contexts (Adamo, 2022).

Translating biblical concepts into African languages and contexts is also fraught with challenges. The translation of "YHWH" to "Oluwa" in Yoruba Bibles, for example, has been criticized for potentially obscuring the nuances of God's nature in the biblical context (Adamo, 2022). Meanwhile, scholars



continue to debate whether African Traditional Religions can be considered monotheistic, with some arguing that they share similarities with Abrahamic faiths. By exploring these complexities, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how biblical monotheism intersects with African worldviews, and how these intersections shape our understanding of monotheism in African contexts.

Conceptualisation of Monotheism from African Perspective

The concept of monolatry, introduced by Wellhausen in 1880, suggests a transitional stage from polytheism to monotheism, where ancient Israel prioritized one God without necessarily denying the existence of others (Cross, 1974). Scholars like Eakin (1971), Day (1992), and McKenzie (1990) argue that the Israelites practiced monolatry or henotheism, focusing on one God while acknowledging others. However, Heiser (2008) challenges the idea of absolute monotheism in the Bible, citing passages that imply divine plurality, such as Psalm 82 and Isaiah 43:10-12.

Monotheism is defined as the belief in a single, true God, involving exclusive worship (Ringgren, 1978; Goldingay, 1988). Strict monotheism, which denies other gods' existence, is relatively rare and primarily associated with Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Ringgren, 1978). The origins of monotheism are debated, with some arguing it emerged as a response to polytheism and others proposing it evolved from primitive monotheism (Ringgren, 1978).

The Book of Proverbs offers insight into the concept of monotheism, frequently mentioning the personal name of God, Yahweh (Lucas, 2015). This emphasis may highlight God's uniqueness and special relationship with the Israelites (Adamo, 2022). Unlike other ancient wisdom literature, Proverbs consistently uses the proper name of God, underscoring Yahweh's distinctiveness. By exploring monolatry, monotheism, and biblical texts, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the complex evolution of religious thought in ancient Israel.

African Cultural and Religious Context

African Traditional Religions (ATRs) encompass a rich and diverse array of spiritual practices and beliefs indigenous to the African continent. These religions are deeply rooted in the cultural and environmental contexts of various African ethnic groups, preserving a profound connection to ancestral heritage and the natural world. Despite the influences of Christianity and Islam, ATRs remain significant, with over 100 million followers across 43 countries. ATRs emphasize harmony with nature and the supernatural, highlighting the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical worlds (Smith, 2024).

In ATRs, the concept of God is complex and multifaceted. Many African cultures recognize a supreme being, often seen as distant but all-powerful, who delegates duties to lesser gods and spirits. For example, the Yoruba people worship

Olodumare, the supreme creator, while also revering Orishas like Shango, the god of thunder, and Oshun, the goddess of love. This highlights the diversity and richness of African spiritual traditions (Afriklens, 2022).

The diversity of ATRs is further evident in the various beliefs and practices across African cultures. The Akan people believe in Nyame, the creator god, and Asase Yaa, the earth goddess, while the Igbo people believe in Chukwu, the Great Spirit. Ancestor veneration is also a crucial aspect of ATRs, where ancestors are believed to guide and protect families, and are often honored through rituals and offerings (Kasim, 2024). The Fon people of Benin recognize Mawu-Lisa, a dual deity, further illustrating the complexity and diversity of African Traditional Religions.

Challenges and opportunities of translating biblical monotheism into African contexts

When sharing the idea of one God from the Bible with people in Africa, there are some significant hurdles to overcome. Many African cultures have a diverse array of spiritual beliefs, often featuring multiple gods and ancestors. This can make it tricky to introduce the concept of a single, all-powerful God. For example, the Yoruba people in Nigeria have a complex spiritual system that includes Olodumare, the supreme creator, as well as other deities and ancestors (Adamo, 2022). Similarly, the Akan people in Ghana believe in Nyame, the creator god, but also have a rich tradition of spiritual practices that involve other gods and spirits (Mbiti, 1990). To effectively share biblical teachings, it's essential to understand and respect these cultural differences.

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for meaningful connections between biblical teachings and African cultures. African cultures can bring new perspectives to ancient texts, highlighting the importance of community and relationships in biblical stories. For instance, the emphasis on community in many African cultures can shed light on biblical teachings about covenant and community (Bediako, 1995). African cultures also have a vibrant tradition of storytelling, music, and art, which can be used to convey biblical teachings in a way that's both authentic and engaging. By embracing African cultures and spiritual traditions, we can gain a deeper understanding of biblical teachings and foster greater mutual respect between different cultural groups (Islam & Islam, 2015).

The key to successfully sharing biblical teachings in African contexts is to take the time to understand the local culture and language. This involves more than just translating words; it's about conveying the heart of biblical teachings in a way that resonates with African cultures. African biblical scholars are leading the way in this effort, exploring ways to contextualize biblical teachings in African cultures while staying true to the biblical text. By engaging with African cultures and spiritual traditions, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of biblical teachings and create a more vibrant expression of faith in Africa (Bediako, 1995; Mbiti, 1990).

African cultures and their interpretations of biblical monotheism

It's fascinating to see how different African communities connect with the idea of one God in the Bible, given their own rich spiritual backgrounds. Take the Yoruba people in Nigeria, for instance. They have this strong belief in Olodumare, their main creator, which seems to make understanding the biblical God a bit easier (Adamo, 2022). Yet, because they also deeply respect other spirits and their ancestors, it might sometimes blur the lines or add extra layers to how they see things. Over in Ghana, the Akan people talk about Nyame as the creator, and they also have Asase Yaa, the earth goddess. This might give them a way to grasp what the Bible says about creation and looking after the Earth (Mbiti, 1990).

Then you have the Zulu people in South Africa, who revere Unkulunkulu, a supreme being. That might feel familiar with the biblical idea of one God. Their strong sense of community and respect for ancestors could also shed light on the Bible's teachings about covenants and the importance of community (Bediako, 1995). Similarly, the Igbo people in Nigeria believe in Chukwu, the Great Spirit, which can be a starting point for understanding biblical monotheism. It really shows how diverse African cultures are and how they each have their own way of understanding this concept of one God in the Bible.

Now, there are these brilliant African scholars who study the Bible, and they're finding ways to really connect its teachings to African cultures. They recognize that the spiritual traditions already in Africa are valuable for understanding this idea of one God in the Bible. These scholars are helping to build bridges between different cultures by finding those points of connection and encouraging respect (Islam & Islam, 2015). For example, when they translate the Bible, using African proverbs and sayings can make the messages feel real and relevant to people in a way that really speaks to their hearts. Ultimately, making sense of biblical monotheism in African cultures requires getting to know the local culture and language deeply. And the African scholars, with their special understanding of both the Bible and their own cultures, are in a perfect position to make this happen, leading to a richer understanding of the Bible and greater appreciation between different groups (Bediako, 1995).

Concluding Remarks

The concept of monotheism in African contexts is complex and multifaceted, reflecting the diversity of African cultures and spiritual traditions. African biblical scholars are playing a crucial role in exploring ways to contextualize biblical teachings in African cultures, highlighting the importance of understanding local cultures and languages. By engaging with African spiritual traditions, we can gain a deeper understanding of biblical monotheism and foster greater mutual respect between different cultural groups.

The intersection of biblical monotheism and African worldviews offers opportunities for meaningful connections and insights. African cultures can bring new perspectives to ancient texts, emphasizing the importance of community,

relationships, and storytelling in biblical stories. By embracing African cultures and spiritual traditions, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of biblical teachings and create a more vibrant expression of faith in Africa.

Finally, making sense of biblical monotheism in African cultures requires a deep understanding of local cultures and languages. African scholars, with their intimate knowledge of both the Bible and their own cultures, are well-positioned to facilitate this process, leading to a richer understanding of the Bible and greater appreciation between different cultural groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the understanding and communication of biblical monotheism in the African context, the following recommendations shall be considered:

- i. Approach biblical teachings with sensitivity towards African cultures and spiritual traditions, recognizing the value of local contexts in understanding biblical monotheism.
- ii. Explore ways to contextualize biblical teachings in African cultures, using African proverbs, sayings, and storytelling traditions to convey biblical messages in a way that resonates with African cultures.
- iii. Support African biblical scholars in their efforts to engage with African cultures and spiritual traditions, promoting a deeper understanding of biblical teachings and fostering greater mutual respect between different cultural groups.

Invest in language and cultural studies to better understand the complexities of African cultures and spiritual traditions, facilitating more effective communication of biblical teachings in African contexts.

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