

THE CONCEPT שְׁמָע OF *SHEMA* IN DEUTERONOMY 6: 4-9 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Since the election of Israel as a גוֹיִם בְּרִית (covenant nation) and קְהָל (congregation or assembly)—a chosen race of God, she has been an instrument of God's purpose and revelation among nations; regardless of her frequent failures and disloyalty to Yahweh, her National God. Being a covenant people of Yahweh, there were various modes of guidance employed under the theocratic agency of Yahweh for their daily regulation. Thus, this theocratic governance came to be and aimed at reproving the moral and divine degradation of Israel and as well retaining her loyalty to Yahweh. These modes interchangeably include the legal code in the book of Deuteronomy, which are the commandments, the statutes, the precepts and other legal instructions. These commandments were edicts and decrees, given by Yahweh through His human agents to bind the Israelites to Himself and reveal His character to humanity at large. The paper examines the concept of *shema* one of these prominent decrees for the Israelites or the Jews of today, which deeply inculcate the idea of monotheistic nature of Yahweh in their hearts. It carried out some exegetical and hermeneutical works on the textual excerpt for a more comprehensive form with regard to its practice and implications among the Ancient Israelites and the present Jews. It also looked at, through contextualization, the possible implications of the concept for the contemporary Christians in Nigeria.

Key Words: *Shema*, Deuteronomy, Christians, Nigeria

Introduction

From time immemorial, the law, codes, statutes and commandments have been the legal instruments to regulate the actions of humans, especially with regard to the pattern of living, response to the Creator, mutual peaceful co-existence and for effecting ethical status in the society. Very apparently, these law codes had been in place even before the formation and election of Israel as a people of God. The oriental nations around Israel were people of socio-religious code of laws. Thus, we have the Code of Hammurapi (Schultz 1970) the body of laws or codes of conduct among the Babylonians. After the election of Israel, they were given the Decalogue (The Ten Commandments) and the De-Decalogue (The additional Laws on sacrifices and farming rules). All these were to lure them to the observance of the precepts of Yahweh and to point them to His future manifest as the Messiah in place of His Son.

However, among these several methods is the *Shema*, a creedal code and decree. The concept of שְׁמָע *shema*, which is regarded as imperative (Onomuti, 2003) later became the designation for the law code in Deuteronomy 4:6-9. The *shema* passage goes thus:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates.

The same became engrafted as the Creed or confession of faith for the Jews (Cowels 1984:321) and a fundamental truth of Israel's religion (Hamlin, 2000). These imperative later developed to become a tradition that is part and parcel of their daily life (Butler, 2003), which lingers from generation to generation. Though, in a very simple, but rather a more advance way; it manifests itself among the contemporary Christians too. How and in what forms? These and other related lacunas, this work is out to fill.

The Book Called 'Deuteronomy'

For a better understanding of the concept under discourse, it will be very appropriate to give a little introduction to the book of Deuteronomy before studying the concept therein. However, the name comes from the Greek words *Deuteros* "two or second" and *Nomos* "law", both meaning the "Second Law or Second reading of the laws" (Hamlin, 2003 p.46-47) after the first reading at Sinai/Horeb. This title does in fact describe much of the content of the book as a collection of the law, including the Decalogue. Deuteronomy consists of words spoken by Moses to "all Israel". Thus the book records, "these are words that Moses spoke to all Israel...". However, Leslie Hoppe (Hoppe, 1992) in his view puts the summary in this form:

The book is a document of national reconstruction to people who are trying to find foundation for reforms and renewal in times of political instability, economic difficulties, social collapse and deep discouragement. Such foundations are found in the Ten Commandments and the *shema* (Deut.6:4-5).

Though, there are other purposes the book serves in the Jewish life to this end. But our obligation to the brevity of this work may limit us in that regard.

The Exegetical Exploration of the שמע *Shema*

The shema is the imperative to the Israelites with regard to their religion, which contains the principle of faith and obedience. It stresses that Yahweh our God is the only living and true God (Henry, 1991). Being the central statement of Jewish belief and Old Testament central of faith (Henry, 1991); all the Israelites must adhere to its observance, which invariably reflect their love for Yahweh. The שמע *Shema*, originally meant 'Hear'. It became enlarged to cover the whole of Deuteronomy 6: 4-9. The same idea is also repeated in Deut. 11:13-21 and Num. 15:37-41. All these passages denote the idea of oneness, the uniqueness of Yahweh and that He

alone must be loved against other gods in Palestine and in the whole world. Thus, the first verse of the *Shema* passage reads:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶחָד *Sh'ma yisra'el YHWH Eloheinu YHWH Ehad (Deut. 6:4)*

שְׁמַע *Sh'ma* 'Hear', 'listen' or 'do' but according to the Targum, it reads, *Accept*

יִשְׂרָאֵל *Israel* : this represents the people or congregation of Isreal

יהוה *YHWH* : this is the *tetragrammaton*—the Holy Name, which because of the reference she receives, *Adonai* 'LORD' is used in her place. He is the LORD of the Jews, the people of Israel

אֱלֹהֵינוּ *Our God*: the word *el* or *eloh* represents God and it is with the plural possessive determiner suffix *nu* or *enu* which means *our*.

אֶחָד *One*: this means 'one' in Hebrew. It could also mean, 'alone'. Its root is also *unique*. Hence, this shows that Yahweh is 'one', 'alone' or 'unique'. Besides, this idea of 'one' exhibits the monotheistic nature of Yahweh against the idols and the Canaanite gods.

Thus the theology here is that this "One God" must be loved by all Israel. The love should not be limited to a mere verbal confession but rather, in practical and emotional sense. Therefore, the emphasis is given אַחַד יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ meaning, '*and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart*'. It must be noted here that the first Hebrew word in this clause is in conjunction with *love*. By this love towards Yahweh, it implies and denotes Israel's regular response to Yahweh's first love towards her—for choosing or electing her among many nations of the world and for giving her an exclusive noble name—Israel, a name with eternal covenant. Again, love in this context according to Hamlin is the joining of Israel's life with the will and purpose of God in their daily activities; and it excludes relationship with other gods. This love must come from the depth of the לֵב 'heart', which is also translated, 'mind'. It represents the whole person with regard to his/her thinking, planning, feeling and deciding ability.

Another salient organ of the body that the love for God in the concept must win, is the נַפְשׁ , that is 'the soul', '*and with your soul*'. The key issue here is the soul. The rest are the conjunction and pronominal suffix. The major concern in this phrase—text is that Israel must invest her soul in loving Yahweh. The Israelites must direct their feelings and affection to Yahweh, their God; and never to think of any idol around. And, this must be done with their very 'might'. '*And with your might*'. The root word here is מְאֹד 'very', which suggests that the action must be carried out with the entire abundance of energy. However, one obvious responsibility associated to this is that, the Israelites must teach them to their children. The original Hebrew word used in the passage is correctly translated as 'sharpen' or 'teach again'. It is an active and indefatigable effort to introduce the commandments to the young ones and must be carried out diligently, so that their children could easily recite the *sh'ma* correctly.

Furthermore, the Israelites are to speak the *shema* when they sit. The root word in the passage is דבר which also suggests “talk”, that is, the *shema* is to be talked about anywhere they go. The verb is in *Qal* form—an imperative. This implies that they were to be busy with the commandments instead of chatting them ordinarily. Most of their daily talks or speeches must be on the *shema*. They are to discuss it with their children on a daily basis. Therefore Judy Greenfeld attaches the whole duties around the *shema* to the love for God. He summarizes them in these words:

They are to love God by studying and meditating the shema. The first paragraph enjoins them to study the Torah and the Shema, ‘put these words into your hearing’. Speak them frequently wherever you are. Say them morning and evening (specifically, the shema); teach them to your children, wear teffilin, use the mezubahs on your doors. Surround yourselves with the Torah and you will evoke the love of God that is hidden in your hearts (Greenfeld, 2000 p.86).

In the same vein, Moran substantiates the opinion of Greenfeld as he further opines that the use of the *Mezubah* later turned to be a special spiritual text (9)23, which the Jews read at all times of their meditations.

The Socio-economic Implications of the *Shema* for Israel

It is very obvious that the concept of *shema* carries some socio-economic implications and values. It may be absolutely wrong to say the *shema* is mainly theological and liturgical as a concept; but rather it has a lot to do with the social life of the Israelites. The command to teach, bind, talk and speak, revolve round a socio-educational methodology. The tradition and practice are in social sense. Besides, economically, the condition is that if Israel could keep and observe the commandments (*shema*), then blessings would follow her. This fact is established in the text of Deuteronomy with regard to its socio-economic values on the Israelites. Below is an extract:

And if you will obey my commandments, which I command you this day, to love the LORD, your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give rain for your land in its due season, the early and the later, that you may gather in your grain and your vine and your olive and your oil. And He will give grass in your field for your cattle and you shall eat and be full...you shall therefore lay up those words of mine in your mind and in your soul...bind them..., talk them, teach them to your children when you are sitting...,walking...and lying down. And you shall write them upon thy doorposts...and your gates; that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land...then the LORD will drive the nations greater and mightier than yourselves (Deut. 11:13-17,20-23).

In addition, the above extract enlightens us that the *shema* goes beyond its socio-economic values to the full assurance of security and victory for the Israelites if they diligently keep it.

The Theological Implications of the *Shema* for Israel

The *shema* is a medium of Israel's response to yahweh's command. This is because it creates the awareness of His uniqueness, oneness and portraying Him as the only true God of Israel. It gives daily clarion call to Israel to loving Him, as the means of keeping His commandments. The call is to sensory rather than an intellectual process (Greenfeld 2000:78). The *shema* has apparently had several theological implications for the Israelites, and of which, they have cultivated a sophisticated religious culture and liturgical expressions for coherent and systematized life. Hence, below are few of these implications:

i. The Unity and uniqueness of God: One of the glaring implications the *shema* has had on Israel is the portrayal of God as 'One' and 'Unique' God. He is not to be compared and contrasted with any other gods or idols. He is never to be equated with other nations' gods. He is not to be seen as the first among the gods, as *Ba'al*, among the *ba'als* in Canaanite pantheon; Amon-Re of Egypt or Marduk of Babylon (Craigie, 1976), but He is one and only God, the Omnipotent. He is all-powerful unique God; who is to be acknowledged as one Supreme Ruler. As a result, the letter "ד" of אֶחָד *Echad* meaning 'one' and "ש" of שְׁמָע *shema* 'Hear' are brought together to form "עד" meaning "witness". So reciting the *shema*, means one is regularly bearing witness to the oneness of Yahweh regularly as well.

ii. It Decides the Fate of Israel: Another theological implication the *shema* has on Israel is that God decides the faith of Israel by the measurement of their observance of the *shema*. They could only enjoy the blessings of Yahweh in the agricultural engagement and health wise if they obey the statutes embedded in the *shema*. Thus, reverse is the case, if they disobey the commandments of Yahweh. We have this internal testimony in the text of the Bible:

Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; the blessing—if you obey the commandment of the LORD, your God, which I command you this day; and the curse—if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD, your God but turn aside from the way, which I command you this day to go after gods which you have not known (Deut.11:26-28).

It is very obvious here that either success or failure is associated with the *shema*. This thereby inculcated the fear of God in their heart and to keeping His command for the avoidance of punishment; and as well as exposing them to the fierce anger of God if they fail to observe the *shema*.

iii. It is Israel's Religious and Liturgical Expressions: Ever since Moses promulgated the *shema*, it has been regarded as the central of faith and religious expression (Mcknight, 2004). It brings them closer to Yahweh and equally invites His presence into their gathering. It creates

cordiality between them and Yahweh, their God, which in turn brings God's blessing on them. It also brings about the revelation of God's Lordship and character to their memories.

iv. It Serves as Godly Instruction in the Home: The *shema* is strongly believed to serve as a means of the introduction of the standard of God in the homes of the Israelites; as boys are required to memories the laws of God, as soon as they begin to speak. These would fascinate the upbringing of good religious children of the Jewish homes. The leaders of each clan, village, community or town are to write the *shema* on the city gate for the passers-by to read. Here, God is bringing Himself and His Laws to every nook and cranny of the nation, Israel for both the young and old in knowing His desires and statutes, which in return, they are to observe.

v. The Shema serves as a Creed of Courage: The Jews recite the *shema* each Sabbath day. It gives them courage in times of persecution. For instance history reveals the fate of Rabbi Akkiba during the Nazi slaughter of six million Jews in the 2nd World War. He was being tortured to the point of death. He continually recited the *shema* till he gave up the ghost. But before he gave up the ghost, he was asked why he chose the recitation of the *shema*, and firmly adhered to it. At the point of death, he replied:

All my life I have recited this verse, and I have hoped for the hour when I could fulfill it. I have loved Him with all my heart...and all my fortune. Now I have the opportunity to love Him with all my soul (Hamlin, 2000).

VI. The Shema Enhances the Formation of the Religious Culture for Loving God in their Daily Life: The *shema* also requires that each family in Israel is to be acculturated with the concept. It must be recited in the family at times of marriage, birth, joys, sickness and death. Besides it definitely requires that it should be recited both days and nights: '*when you lie down, and when you rise*'. In Hebrew usage, to **lie down** can refer to "sleep", "sexual relations" or "death". Likewise, the verb "rise" can refer to getting up in the morning, recovering from illness, beginning a piece of work or rebelling against oppressive power (Hamlin, 2000).

VII. Towards Self-control and Moral Living: The instruction is that the *shema* inscription should "be as frontlets between your eyes". For the conceptual idea among the Hebrews is that the eye represents the whole person, showing pride or humility, greed or modest desires and selfishness or generosity. By the standard of the *shema*, those who keep it very strictly and love God would control their desires and ambitions, so that their seeing, watching, desiring and as wanting would be without self-seeking. Thus their desires would be limited and their wanting modest.

The Implications of the *Shema* for Christians in Nigeria

1. Belief in One God: One vital, general and significant fact about the *shema* is the idea about one God (the LORD our God is one). It aims at presenting God as one and unique, who is incomparable with the pantheon of gods among the oriental nations around Israel. Besides the

primary objective of the *shema* is to make Israel aware of this fact, and in response to it, should observe and keep the stipulations therein. However, examining critically the attitude of Nigerian Christians and their activities today, they equally believe and emphasise one God. Though, Nigeria is a nation with various religions, majorly: Christianity, Islam and Traditional religions. (But since our scope is limited to Christianity, thus, Christian adherents become our focus). Nigeria is a country of multi-denominational churches. In spite of these myriads of church denominations, the Bible, where the *shema* is written is still the common book of God's Law for all the Christians in the country. Besides, they believe in the oneness of God which the Bible emphasizes, though with myriads of doctrinal differences; yet all these doctrinal differences are said to shoot towards one God— one God the indivisible truth of reality and the common denominator (Adelowo 2006:22).

2. The Writing of the *Shema* for Individual Recitation and its Nigerian context:

Indisputably, writing in different places for recitation is part of Israel response to God in the observance of the *shema*. The writing of the commandment (*shema*) on conspicuous places for viewing, sighting and reciting are religious and an obligation to them. Thus, “*And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on the gates*”. The Christian activities in Nigeria, in this regard agree with these in the sense that the Christian ways of writing the *shema* in this Christian era are very obvious. It has been noted that the *shema* nowadays is best articulated and written for every individual and to the general public through stickers, tracts, calendars, tags, printed handkerchief, dailies, badges, signboards, liturgical books, Christian publications, Christian words on doorposts, the Decalogue on the doors of churches and banners everywhere. In these writings and printings, the idea of God's supremacy, sovereignty, uniqueness and man's positive response of love to God is evident in them.

Besides, for the Christian Good News (*shema*) to be made available for public consumption in this Christian generation in Nigeria; air broadcast system, radio, other internet facilities and technological gadgets take the place and modes which the Ancient Israelites used to pass across the concept of the *shema* to the pious audience; just as it is with the Gospel today. It is apparently evident that Christians in Nigeria still practice the writing of the Law of God (*shema*), even in a more advance modes as emphasized above.

3. Love for God: To a certain degree, from a general assessment, Christians in Nigeria show in their reactions and worship life, the vacuums in their hearts for the love of God. Undoubtedly, a very high percent would personally admit that they believe in God. However, there are variable opinions as regards the original love for God with all their strength! Akponorie avers in his research that this may be difficult, considering the fact that Nigerian situations are full of tensions, political unrest, kidnapping, social injustices, economic struggles and challenges, religious doctrinal diversity and disputes all over (Akponorie, 2012). These entire factors have in one way or the other intermingled to share and decentralize the strength of believers, which ought to be directed to God in totality. Thus the percentage of those who may be said to love God with their strength may be very few.

4. Teaching and Recitation: These aspects of the *shema* have been noted to be handled with levity; when compared with the degree of their observances among the Jews. Statistics had shown that the attitude of the Nigerian Christians towards these aspects may not be more than (Akponorie, 2012). With Nigeria situations generally, there are no enough private times for the children to be taught or to recite the *shema* or Bible passages. The only areas where kudos and credit can be accorded Nigerian Christians are with regard to Sunday school in various churches—where verses of the Scripture are recited. More so, when children are being prepared for quiz competition and camping activities. Therefore, generally, the recitation of the *shema* Law of God is not taken very seriously. The failure may be coming from parents who are not ready, or who have no time to impress the Law of God, that is, the *shema* of today on their children. On the other hands, the children of this day are not religiously concerned with the things of God; or rather, avail themselves for the study of God's Law as of old. These are noticeable factors which are responsible for the poor teaching and recitation of the *shema*—the law of God.

5. The Shema As a Daily Liturgical Creed: It is very obvious that the observance of the *shema* occurred both in the morning and evening among the Isrealites as noted earlier. There—at the service centers in the synagogue, the *Kohen* (priest) stood to lead the *shema* prayers and recitation during the corporate worship. Likewise, this practice is found in most of the orthodox churches during the *Matins* (morning service); *Eucharistic* (communion service); *Evensong* (evening service) and *Compline* (the night prayer often said to round off the day preparing Christians for a quiet and restful sleep). All these prayers are said in corporate worship as being influenced by the Ancient practice. At the front of the people either in the church or at any worship centre, the presiding minister stands to declare the Law and the blessings of the Lord on the worshippers. These prayer times especially the matins are serious periods among the pious Christians in Nigeria. These are absolute reflections of the *shema* stipulation. Thus the *shema* influences the daily lives of the Christians and make them pious—minded people. These observances have as well become their daily routine all over to this day.

Conclusion

No doubt, that the *shema* is a living concept among the people of living faith in Nigeria, especially the Christians. It is the command of God and a religious obligation. It is taken to be the rigid creedal confession of the Ancient Israelites, which actively and liturgically lingers on to date. It becomes a religious ideal to all and sundry in the Christian community, being a canonized Bible text. For this reason, some of the Orthodox Church adherents recite it during the Eucharistic service to affirm the oneness of God and to re-dedicate their commitment in the service of God. However, it will be my earnest pleasure to scholarly inform all and sundry that the concept of *shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is still an active and a living faith, of which observances, Yahweh, the God of Israel demands from believers—not from the Traditional Jews or Messianic Jews alone, but rather, all Christians inclusive. Also, the concept, being an existential phenomenon of faith is recommended to the academic world for further study and research.

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