

## DEVELOPMENT OF OLD TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF GOD AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

By

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### Abstract

*The paper is an examination of the concept of God as it evolves and develops following different stages in the history of the Hebrews. It first of all discusses what the Old Testament stands for. Using the Old Testament writings, the paper highlights the understanding of God by the Hebrews. Furthermore, it probes into the development of the concept of God in the Old Testament from the time of Abraham via Moses to its climax in the Hebrew prophets. The paper discusses the challenges the evolved concept of God among the Hebrews pose to the sense of religiosity evident in Nigeria. Finally, conclusions are raised in the paper that indicates the need for religious leaders in Nigeria to rise up like the Hebrew religious leaders and present God in sincerity of heart.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The Old Testament expresses the belief of the Israelites in the existence of one God. He is depicted as the creator of all things. Picturing the Old Testament, it is often imagined that the Israelites who are descendants of Abraham have never held to any belief besides that of one God. However, considering the different names used for God in the Old Testament, there is doubt on the notion that all the Israelites descended from Abraham by blood. There is the feeling that they are different groups of people that were brought together by one historical circumstance. These people probably had different gods that they worshiped. With the unfolding of history, their beliefs went through a process of transformation that ended in the worship of one God (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 96, n.d). This transformation which involves a lot of stages is what is meant by "the evolution and the development of the concept of God in the Old Testament".

### THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Bible is divided into two major sections: the Old and the New Testaments. The designation Old Testament is used in reference to a collection of selected writings composed and edited by members of the Hebrew-Jewish community between the twelfth century B C and the beginning of the Christian era (Laurue, 1968). The term used to reflect a belief of the early Christian Church that the 'New Covenant'

mentioned in Jeremiah 31:31-34 was fulfilled in Jesus. Thus, the Christian scriptures set forth the 'New Covenant' just as the Jewish scriptures set forth the 'Old Covenant' (Heb. 9:1-4) (Larue, 1968).

The Old Testament represents a history of the Jews written in Hebrew by religious devotees, between 1250 and 150 B. C. Therefore, it may contain factual errors, discrepancies and imprecise statements. However, the books of the Old Testament are as reliable as historical records. Most of the literature was written in Hebrew with a few passages written in Aramaic, a kindred language that came into usage among the Jewish during the post-exilic period (after the sixth century B. C). The Old Testament includes materials such as; prophetic oracles, teachings and ancient records of the royal courts. Some materials are historical, legendary, legalistic, poetic and didactic (Larue, 1968).

### THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

**1 Monotheism in the Old Testament:** What separates the religious belief of the Hebrews from the belief systems of Egypt or Mesopotamia was clearly their monotheism. The belief that there is only one God (Deut. 6:4, Isaiah 43:11, 45:5 (Naik, 2012).

**2 Sovereignty of God:** He rules all and He is subject to no laws. Unlike Near Eastern gods, Jehovah was not created – God is eternal and the source of all creation and governor of the universe. He shaped the moral laws that govern humanity (Isa. 5, 40:12, 44:24, 45:7, 44:24) (The History Guide, 2012).

**3 Transcendent God:** In the Hebrew religion, there is no place for a sun god or moon god. Nature was demystified, no longer super-natural, but natural. The Old Testament conceives nature as the handiwork of God. It indicates that worship is to be given to God alone (Exodus 20:3-5, Deut. 5:7-9 (Naik, 2012). Worship of idols would deprive people of the freedom God had given them. This belief is opposed to Near Eastern Polytheism which used images to represent their gods and goddesses. To the Hebrews, God cannot be presented in any form whatsoever (The History Guide, 2012).

**4 Omnipotent God:** The Old Testament presents God as the all-powerful father that defense his people. He does not want his followers to be slaves. Instead, men and women are to fulfill their morality by freely making the choice to do good or evil. God does not control mankind rather; men must have the freedom to choose. Polytheistic gods on the other hand do not respect the free of choice of the people. They are more into finding fault than defending the people (The History Guide, 2012).

**5 Just and Merciful God:** The Old Testament God punishes His people when they turn away from His part and welcomes them back when they seek his mercy, while the polytheistic gods destroy the people at the slightest wrong they commit (The History Guide, 2012).

### EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Different approaches toward the interpretation of the concept of God in the Old Testament (O.T) abound. That which is employed here is a school of thought that tries

to give a natural explanation to events in the O.T through a theory of evolution. According to it, the concept of God as the one, sovereign, omnipotent, just and merciful God in the Old Testament was not automatically inbuilt in the religious believe of the Israelites. It developed through an evolutionary process that started with polytheistic faith expression, via henotheism to the belief in one God. A lot of religious beliefs and practices among the neighbouring tribes to the Israelites in the Ancient Near East contributed to shaping the Hebrews belief in one God.

## 1 Abraham and the Salem Religion

The Salem religion was revered as a tradition by the Kenites and several other Canaanite tribes. This was one of the purposes of Melchizedek's incarnation: That a religion of one God should be so fostered as to prepare the way for the earth bestowal of a Son of that one God. Some scholars argued that this religion was influenced by Egyptian moral teachings, Babylonian theological thought and Iranian conceptions of good and evil before it was adopted by the Hebrews. The Hebrew religion is based on the covenant between Abraham and Melchizedek. It is through the Hebrew religion that much of the morality and religious thought of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Iran was transmitted to the world (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 96, n.d).

## 2 Deity concepts among the Semites

The early Semites regarded everything as being indwelt with a spirit. There is a veritable pantheon of spirits to be feared and worshiped. The teaching of Melchizedek regarding a Universal Creator never fully destroyed the belief in these subordinate spirits or nature gods. From time to time numerous terms were applied to their concepts of God. The titles include: Yahweh, El Elyon, *El Shaddai*, *El. Amid*, and *Elohim*(Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 96, n.d).

Jehovah is a term which in recent times has been employed to designate the completed concept of Yahweh in the Hebrew experience. But the name Jehovah did not come into use until fifteen hundred years after the time of Jesus. Up to about 2000 B.C., Mount Sinai was intermittently ravaged by volcanic eruptions. The fire and smoke, together with the thunderous detonations associated with the eruptions of this volcanic mountain, all impressed and awed the Bedouins of the surrounding regions and caused them greatly to fear Yahweh. This spirit of Mount Horeb later became the god of the Hebrew Semites, and they eventually believed him to be supreme over all other gods (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 96, n.d).

The Canaanites had long revered Yahweh, and although many of the Kenites believed more or less in El Elyon, the super god of the Salem religion, a majority of the Canaanites held loosely to the worship of the old tribal deities. These tribes continued to worship their tribal deities, including Yahweh. The Hebrews passed through henotheism and long believed in the existence of gods other than Yahweh, but they increasingly held that these foreign deities were subordinate to Yahweh(Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 96, n.d).

Abraham was not the racial father of all the Hebrews. His offspring coming up out of Egypt formed the nucleus of the later Jewish people as well as the vast majority

of the men and women who became incorporated into the clans of Israel. These men and women never sojourned in Egypt. They were merely fellow nomads who chose to follow the leadership of Moses as the children of Abraham (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 96, n.d).

The Melchizedek teaching concerning El Elyon, the Most High, and the covenant of divine favour through faith, had been largely forgotten by the time of the Egyptian enslavement of the Semite peoples who were shortly to form the Hebrew nation. But throughout this period of captivity these Arabian nomads maintained a lingering traditional belief in Yahweh as their racial deity. Yahweh was worshiped by more than one hundred separate Arabian tribes. The El Elyon concept of Melchizedek persisted only among the more educated classes of Egypt, including the mixed Hebrew and Egyptian stocks. The religion of the Hebrew captive slaves was a modified version of the old Yahweh ritual of magic and sacrifice (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 96, n.d).

### **3 The time of Moses**

The evolution of the Hebraic concepts and ideals of a Supreme Creator dates from the departure of the Semites from Egypt under Moses. At the time he was formulating his plans for the eventual freeing of his father's people, the Bedouin captives hardly had a religion worthy of the name; they were virtually without a true concept of God and without hope in the world. While Moses comprehended the more advanced Egyptian religious philosophy, the Bedouin slaves knew little about such teachings, but they had never entirely forgotten the god of Mount Horeb, whom their ancestors had called Yahweh. Moses was educated an El Shaddaist; through the influence of his father-in-law he became an El Elyonist; and by the time of the Hebrew encampment about Mount Sinai after the flight from Egypt, he had formulated a new and enlarged concept of Deity (derived from all his former beliefs), which he wisely decided to proclaim to his people as an expanded concept of their olden tribal god, Yahweh (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 96, n.d).

Moses had endeavoured to teach these Bedouins the idea of El Elyon, but before leaving Egypt, he had become convinced they would never fully comprehend this doctrine. Therefore he decided to adopt Yahweh their tribal god as the one and only god of his followers. Moses did not specifically teach that other peoples and nations might not have other gods, but he did maintain that Yahweh was over and above all, especially to the Hebrews. It would have been difficult for Moses to establish his advanced ceremonial worship and keep his followers intact for a quarter of a century had it not been for the violent eruption of Horeb during the third week of their worshipful sojourn at its base. The mountain of Yahweh was consumed in fire, and the smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. Moses used the opportunity of this disaster to impress upon his brethren the teaching that their God was mighty, terrible, a devouring fire, fearful, and all-powerful. Moses made a heroic effort to uplift Yahweh to the dignity of a supreme Deity when he presented him as the 'God of truth and without iniquity, just and right in all his ways' (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 96, n.d).

#### 4 After the Death of Moses

Upon the death of Moses, his lofty concept of Yahweh rapidly deteriorated. Joshua and the leaders of Israel continued to harbour the Mosaic traditions of the all-wise, beneficent, and almighty God, but the common people rapidly reverted to the older desert idea of Yahweh. This backward drift of the concept of Deity continued increasingly under the successive rule of the various tribal sheiks, the Judges. When the Israelites reached the fertile lands of Palestine, they evolved from nomadic herders into settled farmers. This evolution of life practices and change of religious viewpoint demanded a complete change in the character of their conception of the nature of their God, Yahweh (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 96).

Desperately Joshua sought to hold the concept of a supreme Yahweh in the minds of the tribesmen, causing it to be proclaimed: 'As I was with Moses, so will I be with you; I will not fail you nor forsake you'. Joshua found it necessary to preach a stern gospel to his disbelieving people, people all too willing to believe their old and native religion but unwilling to go forward in the religion of faith and righteousness (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 96).

#### 5 The Psalms and Job

The Psalms are the work of many authors. It is the record of the varying concepts of God entertained by the believers of the Salem religion throughout the Levant and embraces the entire period from Amenemope to Isaiah. In the Psalms God is depicted in the crude idea of a tribal deity to a loving ruler and merciful Father (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 97).

The picture of Deity presented in the Book of Job was the product of Mesopotamian religious teachers extending over a period of almost three hundred years. The concept of divinity found in this compilation of Mesopotamian beliefs, shows that it was in the neighbourhood of Ur of Chaldea that the idea of a real God was best preserved during the dark days in Palestine. The Yahweh of these times 'sends evil spirits to dominate the souls of his enemies'; he prospers his own and obedient children, while he curses and visits dire judgments upon all others. 'He disappoints the devices of the crafty; he takes the wise in their own deceit' (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 97).

#### 6 The Hebrew Prophets

Samuel sprang from a long line of the Salem teachers who had persisted in maintaining the truths of Melchizedek as a part of their worship forms. Amidst opposition, he turned all Israel back to the worship of the supreme Yahweh of Mosaic times. Even then he was partially successful; he won back to the service of Yahweh only the more intelligent half of the Hebrews; the other half continued in the worship of the tribal gods of the country. The contribution which Samuel made to the development of the concept of Deity was his pronouncement that Yahweh was *changeless and* forever an embodiment of perfection and divinity. Samuel reiterated the Melchizedek covenant with Abraham and declared that the Lord God of Israel was

the source of all truth, stability, and constancy. But Samuel did not progress very far beyond the concept of a tribal god. He proclaimed a Yahweh who made all men but was occupied chiefly with the Hebrews, his chosen people (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 97, n.d).

In the tenth century before Christ the Hebrew nation became divided into two kingdoms. In both of these political divisions many truth teachers endeavoured to stem the tide of spiritual decadence that had set in. These efforts to advance the Hebraic religion did not prosper until Elijah began his teaching. Elijah restored to the northern kingdom a concept of God comparable with that held in the days of Samuel. He carried out his reforms in the face of opposition from an idolatrous monarch. When Elijah was called away, Elisha, his faithful associate, took up his work and, with the assistance of Micaiah, kept the light of truth alive in Palestine. But these were not times of progress in the concept of Deity. The era of Elijah and Elisha closed with the better classes returning to the worship of the supreme Yahweh and witnessed the restoration of the idea of the Universal Creator near the place where Samuel left it (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 97, n.d).

Amos was not merely a restorer or reformer; he was a discoverer of new concepts of Deity. He proclaimed much about God that had been announced by his predecessors and courageously attacked the belief in a Divine Being who would countenance sin among his so-called chosen people. For the first time since the days of Melchizedek the ears of man heard the denunciation of the double standard of national justice and morality. Amos envisioned the stern and just God of Samuel and Elijah, but he also saw a God who thought no differently of the Hebrews than of any other nation when it came to the punishment of wrongdoing. This was a direct attack on the egoistic doctrine of the "chosen people," and many Hebrews of those days bitterly resented it. Amos proclaimed Yahweh the "God of all nations" and warned the Israelites that ritual must not take the place of righteousness (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 97, n.d).

Hosea followed Amos and his doctrine of a universal God of justice. He resurrected the Mosaic concept of a God of love. Hosea preached forgiveness through repentance, not by sacrifice. He proclaimed a gospel of loving-kindness and divine mercy. But the Israelites regarded it as cruelty. He continued to preach repentance, hope and forgiveness. The burden of his message ever was: "I will have mercy upon my people. They shall know no God but me, for there is no saviour beside me" (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 97, n.d).

Isaiah preached the eternal nature of God, his infinite wisdom and his unchanging perfection. Isaiah was followed by Micah and Obadiah, who confirmed and embellished his soul-satisfying message. These two brave messengers boldly denounced the priest-ridden ritual of the Hebrews and fearlessly attacked the whole sacrificial system. Micah taught of a day of freedom from superstition and priest craft. (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 97, n.d).

Jeremiah took the next bold step in the internationalization of Yahweh. He fearlessly declared that Yahweh was not on the side of the Hebrews in their military struggles with other nations. He asserted that Yahweh was God of all the earth, of all nations and of all peoples. The concept of Yahweh during Jeremiah's time ascended to a Deity level of planetary and even cosmic dignity. But many of Jeremiah's associates found it difficult to conceive of Yahweh apart from the Hebrew nation (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 97, n.d).

Isaiah the second was a convert to the elder Isaiah's God of justice, love, righteousness, and mercy. He also believed with Jeremiah that Yahweh had become the God of all nations. He preached these theories of the nature of God with such telling effect that he made converts equally among the Jews and their captors. No prophet or religious teacher from Machiventa to the time of Jesus attained the high concept of God that Isaiah the second proclaimed during his days of the captivity. Like Isaiah the first, this leader preached a God of universal creation and upholding (Melchizedek of Nebadon, Paper 97).

### **THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY**

The concept of God kept evolving among the people of Israel based on the ills that visited the society from one generation to the other. Nigeria is a country that is religiously inclined. The sense or religiosity in the country is questionable because there seems to be advancement in the birth of temples of worship without a corresponding growth in the moral life of the people (Ojewale, 2003). Some of the vices in the nation are:

**Looting and Embezzlement of Public Funds:**Some government officials sometimes embezzle and divert money for the provision of light, water, maintenance of roads, payment of workers and the education of Nigerians to private accounts (Usman and Abba 2002). The collapse of some companies and banks is a living testimony to the pen rubbery and fraud evident in our polity. The constant raids of houses, business organizations and roads by armed men in order to trap money shows the extent the accumulative appetite controls the lives of some people.

**Bribery and Corruption:**It is sad to note the level of bribery and corruption in our nation. Recruitment into the armed forces and Government parastatals require huge amounts of money to be paid as bribe. Issuing of money to security men on the roads has replaced showing of driving license and vehicle particulars. In the court of law, justice has become the advantage of the wealthy (Popkin and Stroll 1981).

**Debasement of Human Life:**The most baffling of all practices in the nation is the debasement of human life. Many a times, the streets are littered with half bodies of people. These are often remains of humans used for money making rituals. The constant cases of children and female trafficking in the Nigerian borders show the apex of the entrenchment of a monetary culture that demeans human life. Religion is manipulated to commit murder in large scale. From the maitatsine period in the 1980s, there has been intermittent spill of human blood in the name of religion. The mere

mention of the phrase 'Boka Haram' in any public gathering in the county will generate a stampede because of the gruesome killings of the group.

**Dislocation of Cultural Values:**In some cultures, bride prices are very expensive to the extent that marriage has become an affair of only the rich. Mourning for the dead is replaced with mourning for what is to be used for the burial of the dead. The commercialization of sex through prostitution signals the degradation of the human body and the excessive lust for money. Respect for the elderly has shifted to respect for the rich and wealthy. Money seems to be the tangible ticket for acquiring traditional chieftaincy titles today. In some families, parental love for children has shifted to parental love for their wealthy children.

**False Worship of God:** Sincere worship of God in Nigeria is suffering neglect at the altar of lust for money. That is why Ehusani (2003) branded the sense of religiosity in Nigeria as fake because it is devoid of moral responsibility. Onuh (1999) described this ugly trend as 'religious hypocrisy'.

**False Religious Teachers and Teachings:**The emphasis of many religious leaders on economic prosperity shows clearly the pre-occupation with economic excellence. The axiom 'the more you plant the more you reap' in Christianity has been employed to filter out money from people during break through financial crusades by pastors (Obiora, 1999). Commenting on developments in the Christian circle, Ilo and Okafor (1998) observed that, Nigeria appears to be a haven of false prophets who draw many helpless people who want to "see beyond" and discover the causes and solutions to their problems in their prayer houses.

## CONCLUSION

The development of the concept of God in the Old Testament, has raised the following as conclusion:

The spiritual leaders of the Hebrews de-anthropomorphized their God concept without converting it into an abstraction of Deity comprehensible only to philosophers. Even common people were able to regard the matured concept of Yahweh as a Father, if not of the individual, at least of the race.

The concept of the personality of God, while clearly taught at Salem in the days of Melchizedek, was vague and hazy at the time of the flight from Egypt. However it gradually evolved in the Hebraic mind from generation to generation in response to the teaching of their spiritual leaders.

The perception of Yahweh's personality was much more continuous in its progressive evolution than was that of other Deities. From Moses to Malachi there occurred an almost unbroken growth of the personality of God in the Hebrew mind.



The preoccupation of many Nigerians with economic gains is destroying sincere worship of God and putting in place beliefs and structures of worship that are at variance with the teachings of the religions that are commonly professed in the nation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

At this juncture, it is important to make the following suggestions as the way forward.

The religious leaders like those of Israel have to present in clear and sincere terms the concept of God and what it entails to worship him in sincerity of heart. This is to be drummed into the ears of every generation, using new symbols and techniques that are intelligible to the people at any given time.

Most of the sincere teachers of truth in Israel were killed because of their fearless stand. Sincere religious leaders in Nigeria should make a sacrifice that entails the risk of their lives in order to see that religious precepts are translated into the daily lives of the people.

Persistence in teaching sustained and upheld the Old Testament concept of God. Religious teachers who are knowledgeable and are interested in the integrity of life in line with the demands of God should use the pulpit, the media and the schools to teach people about the God of Justice, Mercy, Love and Kindness as suggestive of the Old Testament concept of God.

Ecumenical fora should not just end at prayers only. False teachings and practices by some pastors should be challenged, corrected and denounced.

Religious leaders are given high recognition in the political discussions of the country. The privileged ones should use such opportunities to correct and denounce the vices identified with the political class.

Finally, the Nigerian Inter-religious Council (NIREC) should encourage preachers in the two faith to preach peace, love and sincerity.

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