

The Idea of Judgment in John 3:17-19 in Relation to Yoruba Belief System

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Abstract

The idea of judgement is common to every religion. While some conceptualize it other-worldly, some believe it is both this-worldly and other-worldly. Generally, it is believed that humans actions on earth is a determinant of the type of judgment awaiting them. This paper attempts a comparative analysis of Yoruba and Johannine concepts of judgement by using a synthesis of translation and anthropological theological models. John 3:17-19 is read as a focal text to represent the idea of judgement in the Fourth Gospel. The reading of the text shows that the choice made to either accept or reject Jesus Christ on earth determines whether or not one will face judgement in heaven. In Yoruba belief on the other hand, man's actions on earth attract judgement upon him both here and hereafter. This therefore implies that judgment is common to the two belief systems and that one's actions on earth determine the type of judgment he or she faces. Humans are therefore enjoined to be careful of their actions on earth because no one will escape God's judgment.

Key words: Judgment, Johannine, Yoruba, heaven, hell.

Introduction

Eschatology: the doctrine of last days and end times is an important aspect of every religion. According to Wotogbe –Weneka (2005:2), man, the only religiously conscious being asks many 'Ultimate questions' about existence. These questions include "who am I?" Why am I here? "Where am I going after here?" etc. The question of where human goes to or what happens to man after this existence is important to man and it is only the phenomenon of religion that can provide "Ultimate answer" to this 'Ultimate question'. The answer to this question is found in eschatology.

Commenting on the importance of eschatology to every religion, Bolaji Idowu argues that "what is constant and unchanging in every religion is that which connects the present with the past and reaches out to eternity". This implies that a living religion is expected to *inta allia* give answers to the questions of the end of the world, life after death or what happens to individuals/ humans after this existence. Eschatology deals with issues like death, resurrection, reincarnation, judgment, eternal life, heaven etc. In Christianity, it examines issues like the *parousia*, death, resurrection, millennial reign of Christ, kingdom of God, judgment, eternal life etc. The first advent of Jesus Christ is believed to have brought about inaugurated eschatology, while his second advent will bring final eschatology.

The Great commission, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19) is meant to prepare

the world for Jesus' second coming. He is coming back to rapture the people he died for and who believe in him (cf Eph 5:25). The message of the gospel is that of the kingdom and the end will not come until it has been preached all over the world as a witness to all nations (Matt 24:14). Hence, the urgency to preach the gospel to the whole world, but a major challenge this attempt has posed over the years is how to make the message relevant to the evangelized that have their own cherished worldviews different from Christian worldview.

The need to make the gospel relevant in Africa gave birth to the academic endeavour called Africa Christian Theology. African scholars of religion like Charles Nyamiti, Ikenga-Metuh, Uzukwu, have made attempts to contextualize Christianity. Among the debated issues are Christology, soteriology, anthropology, doctrine of God etc. The place of eschatology in religion makes it an important issue in African theology. This paper examines the implications of Biblical eschatology for African theology. Using Yoruba worldview as a case study, particular attention is placed on Johannine eschatology in John 3:16-19 which specifically focus on the concept of judgment.

The theological approach adopted in this work is a synthesis of translation model and anthropological model. Translation model though recognizes the place of experience, culture etc., pays much more attention to the content of the scripture and tradition. Anthropological model on the other hand, pays more attention to culture and context than scripture and tradition. This is because it believes that the scripture itself as a product of a cultural milieu.

The General Concept of Judgment

Judgment is an important aspect of eschatology and at the same time the most debated of all among Christians. Some interpreters see only one judgment sometime in the future where all people whether believers or unbelievers will be judged. Others however divide judgments into several phases. McCain (1995: 195-200) identifies seven judgments in the Bible: judgment of sin on the cross; judgment for sin in this life; judgment of the Jews; and judgment of Angels others are judgment of nation, judgment seat of Christ (Bema) and the Great White throne judgment

In the Old Testament, divine judgment commonly takes the form of earthly blessing for obedience to God's command and punishment (like plagues, earthquakes etc) for disobedience. In the New Testament, judgment presupposes the belief developed in apocalyptic literature. It has the following elements according to Travis (1988:258). One, all people will be judged both the living and the dead, Christians and non-Christians and this is associated with the coming of Christ (Mk 5:38, 1 Cor. 4:5, 2 Thess. 1:5-10). Two, judgment would be according to work done after salvation (Mt 16:27, Rom 2:6, Rev 22:12). Three, judgment will be a moment of separation between those who truly show that they belong to Jesus Christ and those who do not. Final judgment will be determined by self-judgment that is the choice men and women have made in the present world. This self-judgment is prominent in John, but not peculiar to it (John 3:19-20, Matt 10:32-33). The choice people make when confronted with Christ and his gospel bring judgment on them.

Four, salvation and condemnation are best understood in terms of a person's relationship or not to God. The criterion by which people's destinies will be determined is a double one. In

the first place, failure to worship and serve the God revealed in the created order (Rom 1:18-20) and two, their attitude to Jesus Christ (John 3:36). At the final judgment, the difference between those who believe and those who do not will be ratified. The ultimate destination of God's people is a transformed universe a new heaven and a new earth" (Travis 1988:229). Travis goes on to contend that the fate of Christian destinies between death and the final judgment is not clear to some, between death and resurrection the believer is in heaven with Christ in disembodied form. For others, there will be a banquet, a wedding feast in a secured city filled with worship and loving activity (Matt 8:1, Rev 19:9, Heb 11:10 (1988:230). Those who are rejected at judgment go to hell as their final destiny. Hell is from the Greek *Gehenna* derived from Hebrew *Gehinom* the valley outside Jerusalem that became a symbol of condemnation because of child sacrifice that took place there (Travis; 1988:230). In what follows, I examine the Judgment of the Fourth Gospel beginning with the examination of the Fourth Gospel itself.

The Idea of Judgment in the Fourth Gospel

John sometimes relates judgment to the already alone (3:36, 9:39, 17:12) and at other times to "not yet" only (5:29, 10:28). Also, most passages show interaction between the present and future aspects of judgment (3:16-19, 5:2-24, 27:5, 30, 8:15-16, 12:31, 12:47-48). John uses two terms for judgment: *krino* and *apollumi*. *Krino* and its cognates from a root meaning 'separation' or 'to separate' are usually translated as judge or judgment. Most times, they are translated as condemn or condemnation. *Apollumi* and its cognates meaning 'perish' are understood as the opposite of being saved or receiving eternal life (Cook, 1988:10; Thayer, 1889)

Further, Cook records that information on judgment falls into three categories in John, namely, Judge, the judged and the standard of Judgment. As judge, it presupposes that the coming of Jesus brought Judgment, though he did not come to judge, but to save. Here, judgment can be positive or negative (9:39, 3:17-18, 12:47), he acts as judge (5:22,27, 8:16-26) and he does not judge (3:17, 8, 15). As judge, he exercises judgment by the father's authority (now and in the future). His judgment is just because he seeks the father's will and not his own (5:30); he does not judge by human standard and he is true.

The second category is concerned with the judged. Positively, he argues that his sheep will not perish (10:28, 17:12). To avoid perishing is to believe in the Son of God (3:16, 5:24). Negatively his death was a judgment on the world and its Ruler-Satan (12:31-33); this is because rejecting the son of man brings immediate and final judgment. Though perishing is an eschatological concept, it is viewed in 3:16 as something one starts to experience on earth by not believing. Those who do not believe stand condemned (3:18), because his coming has brought judgment (3:19). God's wrath is on those who do not obey the son (3:36); there will be a condemnation resurrection (5:29) to inaugurate eternal judgment in the lake of fire (Rev 20:12-15). The third category according to Cook is the standard of judgment. The standard is his message (12:47-48); refusal to keep his word will not bring judgment now but in the last day (Cook, 1988:19)

From the foregoing, we can see that eschatology *vis a vis* judgment is a well-grounded concept in the Fourth Gospel. Having presented the concept of eschatology and general concept of judgment in the Fourth Gospel, the next section will specifically examine John 3:17-19 in order to elucidate the discussion on judgment.

Eschatology/Concept of Judgment in John 3:17-19

The Transliteration of the Greek Text

Ou gar apesteilen ho theos ton huion eis ton kosmon hina krine ton kosmon all hina sothe ho kosmos di autou ho pisteuon eis auton ou krinetai. Ho de me pisteuon ede kekritai, hoti me pepisteuken eis to onoma tou monogenous huion tou theou aute de estin e krisis hoti to phos eleluthen eis ton kosmon kai egapesan hoi anthropoid mallon to skotos e to phos en gar auton ponera ta erga

The English Translation

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

Source: NIV

This text is part of Jesus' reply to Nicodemus' question in vs. 9: how can these things be? The puzzle that generated the question was Jesus' assertion that to enter the kingdom of God, one had to be born again (vs. 3). Looking at it from the physical point of view, Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin did not see the possibility of an adult going back to his/her mother's womb and be born again. Jesus now shed light on it, "except a man is born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (vs. 5). Verse 8 presents the supernatural dimension of being born again". Still confused, Nicodemus asked: How can these things be? Then Jesus explained further to him about the kingdom. He would be crucified (v14) and whoever believed in him would have eternal life (v15). Somewhere here the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus turned to a monologue as Nicodemus disappeared from the scene to be seen again in 7:50-52. In v15-21, Brown (2004:342) believes that for the first time Jesus proclaimed the basic Johannine theology of the salvific incarnation.

In verse 16, Jesus turns to his mission on earth. He was given as sacrifice. The word 'for' *gar* also means because. God gave him as sacrifice because of his (God's) love for mankind for which he does not want man to perish but have everlasting life. **Apoletai** used to mean perish in v 16 has its root in *apollumi* and it is the opposite of being saved or receiving eternal life. This

represents the present and anticipates the future. For (gar) is repeated in v 17 and the word *apesteilen* ‘sent’ contrasts *edoken* ‘gave’ in v 16 which indicates that Jesus was not only given as sacrifice for man’s sin, he was also sent. Being ‘sent’ here signifies authoritative commission (Vincent, 2005). His commission in his first advent was not to condemn but as a sacrifice through whom the world would be saved. Clark (2005) records that Jesus’ statement here, that his coming was not to condemn (judge or destroy) but to save the world was for a purpose. The opinion of the Jews had been that in the days of the messiah, the gentiles would be destroyed. Jesus came to save but whoever refused to receive the salvation whether Jews or Gentiles would perish.

However, anyone who believes in him or receives his salvation will not be condemned. The word ‘condemn’ *krinetai* (Judge in ERV) is from the verb *krino* which originally means ‘separate off’. Its use in 7:51 means to hand over for judgment. (Friberg *et al.*). This implies that whoever believes not is separated from the commonwealth of those who have eternal life and will perish. The following sentence confirms this. He that does not believe is condemned (judge) already. To be condemned already *ede kekritai* implies inaugurated judgment which anticipates final judgment. The word translated as ‘already’ *ede* also means ‘now’. To believe not therefore means to be separated from eternal life. The person is already judged. The question is who is the judge here since Jesus submits in v 16 that he did not come to judge or condemn? It is the person’s unbelief that judges him or her.

Clarke’s (2000) comment on this is instructive: the person is under condemnation already passed upon all sinners by divine justice. This is because he has not believed in God’s son; he is guilty of the grossest insult to the divine majesty, for rejecting the salvation offered through infinite mercy. Clarke’s assertion above is confirmed by the next verse (19). And this is the condemnation”: they refused to accept the light and willingly embrace darkness. The ‘light’ in John 1:4 here is Jesus while darkness signifies Satan. John uses *krisis* for condemnation (judgment) here. It appears 47 times in the New Testament and 11 times in John. It connotes the decision of the judge. It is used specifically in 3:19 to mean “the basis on which the judgment is passed or reason for judgment”. The unbeliever in Christ is condemned already and he will finally perish or be finally destroyed not because he came to this world with a perverted and corrupt nature or because he lives for many years in the practice of sin, but because of his refusal to receive the salvation sent by God to man. His refusal now puts him under judgment and this judgment will consummate in the future (Rissi, 1990; Clarke, 2000)

According to Rissi (1990) in John, judgment consists in the fact that the prince of the world is driven from his hitherto position as the Lord of the cosmos. John does not present Satan as the conquering power but he is the prototype of unbelief (8:44) and the prince of the world of unbelief. In Jesus’ death, dominion has been taken away from him (12:31). So, the world has been freed to be drawn to its Saviour (12:32). Everything is therefore determined by one’s relationship to Christ Jesus. So whoever believes in Jesus does not await condemnation and has passed from death to life (5:24). Revelation of salvation has become the separation of humanity.

Good work is made manifest in faith in Jesus and rejection of the revelation shows the evil works of humanity. Unbelief makes revelation of salvation a condemnation.

From the forgoing, it has been established that in the text judgment has both present and future dimensions. Also, the standard for this judgment is acceptance or not of the salvation of Jesus. In what follows, the view of eschatology in relation to judgment in African Traditional Religion with particular reference to Yoruba eschatological belief is presented.

The Yoruba's Idea of Judgment

Judgment is an act of judging or deciding a case. In Yoruba religion, judgment is received in two ways: the one received on earth and the one received in heaven. The earthly judgment is sometimes called ancestral judgment. This is visited upon anyone who goes against the morals of the society or disobeys the orders of the ancestors. Ancestors are believed to be intermediary between their earthly survivors and God and also have the duty to monitor the keeping of the society's rules and regulations. Hence, any misfortune that befalls a man or his family or if a person dies prematurely or by accident, drowning etc., is believed to come from either ancestors, the divinities (who are also the moral agents of the society) or Olodumare.

There is another judgment in heaven. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979:157) record that after the necessary burial rites have been observed for deceased, his/her soul goes to the Supreme God, where it will kneel down and give account of all his/her deeds on earth. Among the Yoruba, it is commonly said that "all that we do on earth we shall give account in heaven and we shall state our case at the feet of Olodumare kneeling down". This final judgment is incomparable to the usual sufferings in the life of a man while alive. God is impartial in his judgment.

After the soul of man had presented its case before God, of which God himself is not ignorant, God then will pronounce his judgment. It is on the basis of God's verdict that the deceased will be assigned to either good heaven or bad heaven. The foregoing shows that both immediate and future judgments are present in Yoruba's idea of judgment. Also, it is realized that judgment in heaven is for both the good and the bad. In the next section, we will present the implications of these beliefs on African Theology.

Comparison of Johannine and Yoruba's Ideas of Judgment

African theology or African inculturation theology argues that any theology applicable to Africa must take account of the Africans to whom the faith is addressed and take note of African cultures, religion and civilization (Ikenga- Metuh, 1996:3). The task here therefore is to make biblical eschatology, in this case Johannine idea of judgment relevant to African religion and culture. Since the two views are already presented, the next task is to point out their areas of convergence and divergence with a view to coming up with an idea of judgment that is true to the Bible and African religious beliefs. The areas of convergence of the two beliefs include: One, the idea of immediate and final judgment. In Johannine idea, it is called inaugurated and anticipated judgment. Two, in the two beliefs, it is implied that without repentance, immediate judgment presupposes the final one. Three, in the two, more than one personality is recognized

as the judge: The ancestor, the divinities and God in Yoruba belief, Jesus and God in the Johannine belief.

On the other hand, their areas of divergence include: One, the basis of judgment in Yoruba belief is societal norms and ancestors' order, whereas in Johannine idea, it is acceptance or rejection of the salvation freely given to man through the death and resurrection of Jesus. In other words, man in Yoruba belief procures the good heaven or bad heaven by his efforts or behaviour. Whereas, in Johannine idea it is one's belief and not in Jesus' work of salvation that determines judgment. Three, both the good and the bad in Yoruba belief are judged, though the good receive good judgment, in Johannine judgment it is only the one who refuses the salvation that is judged. This implies that judgment in Yoruba belief does not totally have negative connotation, but in John, it does connote something bad. Also in Johannine idea, judgments mean loss of eternal life, which culminates in destruction or punishment in hell. In the Yoruba belief, it includes both physical suffering on earth and in hell. It is important to note that Christianity does not 'always' attribute sin to physical suffering. This raises the question of theodicy. Many people suffer from HIV/AIDS today, not because of their immoral past, but because of ignorance or carelessness.

The implication of these for African theology is that judgment is inevitable both immediate and anticipated. Jesus died to bring mercy and eternal life. Daily or periodic sacrifice to atone for sin is no more necessary: he atoned for the sin of humanity once and for all. His first coming was meant to save and not to be a judge who punishes for any wrongdoing but accept with mercy whoever comes to him. Believing in Jesus Christ now is an escape route from ancestral judgment. This will exonerate one from facing another judgment in heaven. This is because anyone who believes in him already has eternal life because he/she is not under any judgment whatsoever. Divine justice has exonerated him.

Further, it is belief in Jesus and acceptance of his sacrifice and not one's past moral lives that exonerates him/her from both immediate and future judgment. This however does not mean that belief in Jesus is a license to continue in immoral lives. Jesus Christ by his death saves and the Holy Spirit that believers receive after belief enables them to live in the light of their daily lives. As Rissi (1990, E.E) opines that in Jesus' death the dominion of Satan who is the prince of this world has been taken away. As Christians daily obey him and keep his commandment (for which his grace is available), they live a good moral life and also serve as light to their society. First, John 3:8 states that whoever is born again does not continue to willingly commit sin for he is born of God and the seed of Jesus dwells in him. Man therefore is not acquitted from judgment because of his moral life (the power for which is given by the Holy Spirit), but he is expected after believing to live a good moral life. However, when he falls into sin, forgiveness is available for him. This is because in John, faith in Jesus is good work already.

Also, believing in Jesus stops daily and periodic sacrifice to atone for sin. This is because Jesus did it once and for all. The African Christian therefore does not need to kill animal or whatever traditional cultic functionary recommends as sacrifice; Jesus' sacrifice has done it once.

The blood of his sacrifice is ever flowing to cleanse from any sin. Jesus' sacrifice makes the difference.

Conclusion

In this paper, attempts have been made to present the eschatological notions of the Fourth Gospel and Yoruba religion with reference to their notions of judgment. It is found out that the two notions believe in both immediate and future judgment, while it is the wicked who receives ancestral judgment in Yoruba belief, it is both the righteous and the wicked that will receive judgment in heaven though the righteous will receive good verdict. John however reserves judgment (which in it connotes separation from eternal life) to the one who does not believe in Jesus Christ. The implication of this for African theology is that the sacrifice of Jesus makes the difference. The African who believes in Jesus Christ has many benefits before him. He is given grace to live a good moral life. Also, his belief has freed him from any judgment whether immediate or final judgment in heaven. This is because the basis of judgment is acceptance or otherwise of Jesus Christ. Johannine judgment does not play down the morality attached to judgment in Yoruba belief, but sees the triumph of Jesus and his sacrifice who has been sent by God to save but not to condemn. He will still judge, but this will be based on whether or not man believes in him or not. Of course believing in him implies continuous obedience to his commandments

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