

The Biblical Concept of Victory over Evil In the Great Controversy Between Good and Evil in Yoruba Contest

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ABSTRACT—The basis for a theology of triumph or victory in the form of prevention and protection is that there exist two systems: the system of evil, consisting of evil higher beings (the ajogun in YTR or Satan and his angels in biblical teaching) and the system of good, consisting of good higher beings (the Supreme Being and divinities in YTR, or God and His angels in biblical teaching). The opposition between these two systems results in constant conflicts in the universe. While the evil higher beings are there to harm and inflict man with evil things, the good higher beings help mankind in prevention of and protection from evil. Human beings need to offer sacrifices in order to be sure that he/she receives constant protection from the good higher beings. The focus of the discussion in this work is influenced by this theological concept. The major elements for consideration in the discussion include the existence of good and bad spirits, the activities of the evil spirits, and the superior power of good spirits over the evil spirits, the essence of the conflicts in the universe, and the means of triumphing over the evil spirits in Yoruba context.

Keywords: Yoruba, YTR, good and evil, Nigeria, traditional religion, Ajogun, Orisa

I. Introduction

There is constant fear of evil among the traditional Yoruba, hence the desire to overcome evil forces and activities. The questions addressed in this paper are: (1) what is the Yoruba idea of the Great

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Controversy? What is the biblical idea of the Great Controversy? Do they have similarities? How is victory over evil made possible? How relevant is the biblical idea of triumph to the Yoruba People?

II. The Yoruba Concept of the Cosmic Conflict

In Yoruba cosmology, there is a concept of cosmic conflict between benevolent and malevolent spirits. Apart from their belief in the Supreme Being, the Yoruba hold the belief in the existence of other numerous divinities. Yoruba Traditional Religion (YTR) scholars are not unanimous on the number of divinities in the culture. E. Bolaji Idowu notes that the suggested numbers of divinities include 200, 400, 401 and 1, 700 (Idowu, 1996, p. 64). Nonetheless, Wande Abimbola views that the number of divinities in the culture is 601. Based on this view, he presents the Yoruba idea of cosmic conflict and resolution in relation to the need for sacrifice in YTR (Wande Abimbola, 1994, pp. 75-80).

Abimbola reveals that according to *Ifa*, an oracular system, the whole universe is divided into two halves. The 601 supernatural beings that are occupying it are divided into two categories. The first category consists of 200 supernatural beings with the generic name *Ajogun*, while the second category consists of 401 supernatural beings with the generic name *Orisa*. The *Ajogun*, who are totally malevolent in nature, occupy the left side of the universe, while the *Orisa*, who are benevolent in nature, occupy the right half of the universe. In this respect, they form opposing forces against each other (Abimbola, 1994, pp. 75-76). Baba Ifa Karade defines the *Ajogun* as “negating forces” (Karade, 1993, p. 95). Likewise, Segun Gbadegesin identifies them as “the forces of evil which afflict unprotected human beings” (Gadegesin, 1991, p. 102).

Abimbola continues to describe that on the one hand, the wicked *Ajogun*, without any redeeming element, have witches as their allies in causing various problems in the world. On the other hand, the *Orisa* fight the *Ajogun* in order to offer protection to human being. This results in constant struggle between the *Ajogun* and the *Orisa* in the universe (Abimbola, 1994, pp. 76-80). J. A. Omolafe holds the same view (Omolafe, 1990, p. 75). Not only is there a constant struggle between the *Orisa* and *Ajogun*, but the *Ajogun* and their allies are responsible for many of the misfortunes and calamities which human beings experience. Omolafe puts it this way: “Those *Ajogun*

are believed to be terrible enemies that affect the course of human life, working both against man as a person and his handiworks” (Omolafe, 1990, p. 74). J. Omosade Awolalu also asserts that the Yoruba believe that witches and sorcerers are fiendish and would not want to see mankind becoming successful in life. According to Awolalu, “because of such beliefs, the Yoruba come to associate mishaps that befall them, the losses they sustain, the pains they experience and the sudden and premature deaths with the machinations of enemies who use their nefarious deeds to harm men and make life uncomfortable” (Awolalu, 1978, pp.137-38).

The implication of this is that the Yoruba view the world as a precarious place to live and that living in it requires supernatural intervention for every day victory. Benjamin Ray intimates that because of the activity of malevolent spirits, in addition to the activity of human witches and sorcerers, this world is a dangerous and difficult place, it is full of negative forces that hinder, even destroy one’s life” (Ray C, 1993, p. 270). It is this belief which makes any typical Yoruba to treasure prevention of and protection from evil. Hence, the Yoruba never take daily triumph lightly.

III. The Biblical Concept of the Cosmic Conflict

The above picture of the opposition between the *Ajogun* and the *Orisa* somewhat shows a degree of sameness with Satan forming an opposing body against God and His authority as recorded in the Bible. It is revealed in the Bible that an angel, called Lucifer, became a rebel against God and fell (Ezek 28:11-19; Isa 14:12-19). He did not fall alone, but deceived some angels who fell along with him. They became a rebellious group, fighting in opposition against God (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6; Rev 12:3-4, 7-9). Since the first war in heaven, Satan still continues his opposition against God (Rev 12:10-13:18). Also, Satan and his demons are responsible for numerous calamities and problems in this world. For instance, the Bible refers to Satan, who is the leader of the fallen angels, as the prince of this world (John 14:30; 16:11), the god of this age (2 Cor 4:4) and the prince of the power of the air (Eph 2:12). Satan’s activities as presented in the Bible are malevolent in nature. By inference, the same is true of his angels. According to the Bible, Satan accuses (Job 1:6-9; Zech 3:1; Rev 12:10), afflicts (Job 1:12-18; 2:6-7; Luke 13:16; Rev 2:10), traps and puts in bondage (Acts 10:38; Eph 6:i6; 2 Tim 2:26), deceives (Gen

3:1-13; 2 Cor 4:4; 11:13-15; 2 Thess 2:9-10), hinders (1 Thess 2:18), perverts (Acts 3:10), incites (1 Chr 21:1), schemes (2 Cor 2:11; Eph 6:11), steals (Matt 13:19; Luke 8:12), tempts (Matt 4:1-12; Luke 4:1-13; 1 Thess 3:5) and threatens (Heb 2:14) human beings. Because of this cosmic conflict, there is the need for prevention of, and protection from, demonic activities, which is only possible through divine intervention. Therefore, in relation to the cosmic conflict between the systems of good and evil, YTR shares some similarities with the Bible.

IV. Sacrifice as the Means of Meeting the Need for Victory in Yoruba Context

In both YTR and biblical belief, how is triumph secured over the activities of the evil spirits and their allies? In Yoruba belief, the only means to overcome the dangers and difficulties posed by these malevolent beings is through sacrifice. The sacrifice is either made to the benevolent supernatural beings so that they can help to fight the malevolent ones or the sacrifice is made to the malevolent ones in order to prevent their opposition against man (Omolafe, 1990, pp. 74-75; Abimbola, 1994, pp. 76-77). In reference to sacrifice among the Africans, Samuel Olanrewaju observes that, “the protective intent is obviously more dominant than expiatory intent among Africans in general. This is due to the African world view that is much more perceptive of the evil forces (physical and spiritual) that are constantly seeking to destroy him. . . . The African mind-set is more susceptible to the evils that militate against it. . . . Because the African feels more prone to be attacked by evil forces . . . , he finds himself offering more protective sacrifices than expiatory ones” (Olanrewaju, 2003, p. 34). Wherefore, sacrifice is made with the underlying motive for victory in the form of deliverance, protection and prevention.

A. An Illustration from Yoruba Mythologies

Some Yoruba mythologies in relation to sacrifice seem to reflect the above assertion. For example, one myth recounts how *Olomo* was able to overcome the *Ajogun* because of the sacrifice he made. The myth goes as follows:

The Ifa priest name Atata-tanin-tanin

Perform Ifa divination for *Olomo*, the mighty one

All the *Ajogun* surrounded *Olomo*
 In order to kill him.
 He was told to perform sacrifice,
 And he performed sacrifice.
 It happened one day,
 Death, Disease and Loss Stood up,
 And went to attack the house of *Olomo*
 They met *Esu* outside the house
 As they were trying to enter the house *Esu* poured yam-flour
 into their mouths,
 Some of them died and some became sick,
 But none of them was able to enter the house of *Olomo*
 When *Olomo* became happy,
 He started to chant the song of Ifa priest (Abimbola, 1973, p.
 51)

Another myth which reveals how the Yoruba uphold the
 importance of sacrifice in overcoming one's enemy is depicted in the
 following:

Ogundaji, Ifa priest of the Gun,
 Performed Ifa divination for the Gun
 When he was living in the midst of enemies.
 The Gun was told to perform sacrifice.
 He was also told to speak always like a brave man.
 And he did so.
 After the Gun had performed sacrifice,
 He started to kill his enemies
 As one kills animals.
 He said '*Ogundaji*, Ifa priest of the Gun
 Performed Ifa divination for the Gun
 When he was living in the midst of his enemies.
 It is the mouth, with which the Gun speaks,'
 That it conquers its enemies (Abimbola, 1973, pp. 105-109).

Also, the Yoruba believe that because of their malevolent activities,
 the enemies could attempt to hinder one's blessings such as the gift of
 children, riches, fame and others. In their belief, offering sacrifice
 could make one to triumph over the attempt of the enemies to prevent

Such blessings in one's life. Here is a myth in poetic form to
 illustrate this belief.

He who sees water in front and dips
 His feet unto the mud,
 Performed Ifa divination for the *Iyalode*

Of the city of *Ipo*
 She was barren;
 Barren like rock
 To the extent that when she saw chicks with hen,
 She burst into tears.
 The *Iyalode* of the city of *Ipo* was
 told that she would have children
 But she was warned to perform sacrifice.
 She performed sacrifice,
 And had very many children.
 She started to dance
 She started to rejoice (Abimbola, 1977, p. 97)

The last example of myth in poetic form which is presented here is the one which shows that though enemies might attempt to bring disaster at anytime, such disaster could be prevented through offering of sacrifice. The poem goes thus:

Ogbe was hunting in the bush
 He was told to sacrifice to avoid disaster,
 but Ogbe would not sacrifice.
 When rain beat hard he sought shelter in a big hole.
 Was it a tree hole? Was it an ant hole?
 No, it was the anus of an elephant.
 The elephant closed his anus:
 Ogbe prayed but could not escape.
 His relatives searched for him in rain.
 Then they went and brought sacrifice,
 The same sacrifice Ogbe had refused.

Then the elephant passed him out with its excreta (Beier, 1970, p. 45).

B. Christ's Earthly Ministry and Victory over Evil

Having identified the importance of sacrifice in having victory over demonic activities among the Yoruba in YTR, the questions are: What is the teaching of the Bible on triumphing over Satan and his angels, and their ill-natured activities in relation to atonement? How does this become relevant in the context of Yoruba culture?

Again, one of the major reasons why the Yoruba offer sacrifice to the divinities is to be protected from their enemies. Abimbola asserts that "the Orisa usually have no protection for any human being who does not offer sacrifice" (Abimbola, 1994, pp. 76-77).

What seems to stand out from the above assertion is that the Yoruba see in the *Orisa* the ones who have power to help them to achieve their desire and protection from their enemies. Since the *Ajogun* and their allies are totally malevolent and are often seen by the Yoruba as mankind's enemies, probably, one could suggest that the *Ajogun* and their allies are the enemies the Yoruba are seeking to be protected from, as they sacrifice to the *Orisa*. Moreover, this implies that the Yoruba believe that the *Orisa* are more powerful than the *Ajogun* and their allies. As such, they seem to believe that the *Orisa* could always secure victory over the *Ajogun* on their behalf.

In the biblical cosmic conflict, Jesus is consistently presented as the Victor over Satan and his allies, and the One who helps man to overcome the same evil powers. It seems evident from the Bible that there were constant conflicts, either directly or indirectly, between Christ and Satan, but Christ remained the Victor. Furthermore, it appears that the victory of all who accept Jesus Christ is based on the victory which Jesus has secured over Satan. It may, therefore, be essential to show how Jesus is the Victor over the evil ones.

It has been suggested that there is a relationship between Christ's conflict with Satan in His earthly ministry and Christ's victory over Satan at the cross and His resurrection, and that the latter climaxed the former (Finger, 1985, p. 321). At the beginning of His earthly ministry, Jesus had encounters with the devil and He overcame him (Luke 4:1-13). In His public proclamation of the nature of His ministry in the synagogue Jesus declared: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord (vv. 18, 19). Somehow, the above declaration seems to reflect the idea of conflict between a deliverer (who must have been the stronger) and the oppressor.

There are biblical examples which show that Jesus delivered people from satanic attack. During one evening, He healed a multitude of people from diverse diseases and cast out devils from those who were possessed (Mark 1:32-34). The healing of the demoniac of Mark chapter 5 appears to unfold an existing conflict between Jesus and the devils, and that Christ's power is superior to theirs. He commanded that the demons should come out of the man who was possessed, resulting in his deliverance from demonic possession (Mark 5:7-9). Recognizing that the woman who had a

spirit of infirmity for eighteen years was afflicted by Satan, Jesus set her free from her bondage (Luke 13:10-17).

As Jesus approached the time of His death on the cross, He made a statement which seems to have the undertone of battle in the context of His atoning death. Christ revealed: Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And, I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me (John 12:31, 32). In the next verse, it is pointed out that this he said, foreshadowing his death (v. 33). Perhaps Jesus was also predicting that his death on the cross would deal a death blow to Satan and his kingdom.

C. Christ's Atoning Death and Victory over Evil

It appears that Christ, by His death on the cross, secured victory over Satan. Paul seems to link the cross to Christ's victory over Satan as he maintains that "ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power" (Col 2:10). He says further that having spoiled principalities and powers he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them (v. 15). Ironically, it appears that as Christ died openly on the cross, He defeated Satan and his kingdom. Morris notes that Paul insists that Christ is supreme over principalities and powers. "Through the cross, Christ stripped off the principalities and broke their dominion and routed them" (Morris, 1967, pp. 228-229).

Another theologian who discusses the relationship between Col 2:15 in connection with the cross is Millard J. Erickson. He observes that "Paul is asserting that Christ has gained victory over the powers, nullifying them and their ability to dominate humans" (Erickson, 1985, p.651). He suggests three ways by which Christ has accomplished this: (1) by disarming the powers; (2) by making open example of the powers; and (3) by triumphing over them (Erickson, 1985, p.651). Albert Barnes is more direct in his commentary on the passage. He asserts that "The terms used in this verse are all military, and the idea is that Christ has completely subdued our enemies by his death. A complete victory was achieved by his death, so that everything is now in subjection to him and we have nothing to fear" (1979, p.450). Richard R. Malick insists that Christ, by his death on the cross, has victory over "power and authority" (Col 2:15). He maintains that "power and authority" in the passage must be referring to "evil spirit beings" (Malick, 1991, p.265).

Likewise, a significant emphasis seems to be placed on the victory Christ has gained through His death on the cross in the eleventh

fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as follows: By His death on the cross Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made certain their ultimate doom. Jesus' victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seek to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy, and assurance of His love (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist, 2005, p.149). Thus, through the cross, Christ has secured victory over satanic forces for those who believe in Him.

D. Christ's Resurrection and Victory over Evil

Christ's resurrection and ascension seem to affirm the victory which He secured over evil forces on the cross. Through these, He reigns over principalities and powers (Robinson, 1962, p. 50). Leon Morris signifies that "this resurrection triumph includes a victory over 'the principalities and power,' a victory God won in Christ (Col 2:13-15)" (Morris, 1967, p. 59). Morris seems to connect the statement in Rom 8:37 that believers are more than conquerors to the fact that Christ has arisen and ascended to heaven where He occupies a place of exaltation and authority. He notes that as a result, "whatever foe confronts the believer; he has no need to fear. Paul gives no ground for apprehension. The fighting Christian is victorious, even though the foes confronting him are formidable" (Morris, 1967, p. 354).

One might wonder about the reality of the victory secured by Jesus through His death on the cross, His resurrection and His exaltation in heaven. It appears that the reality of this victory was already evident in the ministry of Christ's disciples. Before His ascension, Jesus proclaimed to His disciples that all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth (Matt 28:18). Perhaps, it is on this basis He sent them forth to preach the gospel to the whole world, assuring them that "lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matt 28:20). In Mark's version of the great commission, Jesus seems to intimate that believers would be given power over devils: "In my name they shall cast out devils" (Mark 16:17). This implies that Christ's triumph over satanic forces would not cease during His physical absence from the world. Instead, the triumph would continue in the lives and ministries of those who would believe in Him (Morris, 1967, p. 59).

A typical example which illustrates that believers have been given authority over demons was the encounter of Paul with a demon possessed girl at Philippi (Acts 16:16-18). During the encounter, Paul

turned and said to the spirit, “I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And he came out the same hour” (v. 18). Again, there seems to be an indication that Christ’s triumph through His believers is superior to magical power. The superiority of Christ’s power over magical power can be seen from the experience of certain Jewish exorcists who attempted to cast out an evil spirit out of a man. While doing so, hypocritically using the name of Jesus, they were wounded by the evil spirit (Acts 19:13-16). Though the evil spirit reckoned with the power working in Jesus and Paul, it disregarded the authority of the exorcists. Scriptures report: “‘And the evil spirit answered and said, Jesus I know, and Paul I know but who are ye?’ And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked, and wounded” (Acts vv. 15, 16). What was the effect of this on the people of Ephesus, the city, where this took place? They became afraid. The name of Jesus became magnified among them and they discarded their books which appeared magical in nature (Acts v. 17). According to the biblical record, many of them also which used curious arts brought their books, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver (v. 19).

E. Understanding Christ Victory in the Context of the Great Controversy

Although it has been shown that Christ has secured victory over devils and their activities, it needs to be noted that in the context of the great controversy, God may permit Satan to bring calamity upon believers. For instance, God permitted a series of disasters to befall Job (Job 1; 2). He also allowed Paul to experience the messenger of Satan, which was probably an infirmity in his body (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

How could these experiences be seen as victory? In considering the experience of Job, perhaps the purpose of Satan in afflicting him was to cause him to deny God (Job 1:6-11; 2:3-5). Notwithstanding, Satan’s destructive activities, Job still held on to God, trusting Him (1:21, 22; 2:9, 10). This is a form of victory over Satan. Likewise, Paul prayed three times so that God might remove his infirmity (2 Cor 12:8), yet in spite of his desire, God answered him that my grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness (v. 9). Paul submitted to God’s will, confessing that most gladly therefore

will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me (v. 9). Again, this is a form of victory.

The nature of the victory which Christ has secured over devils and their activities as taught in the biblical atonement may be summed up as follows:

1. That Christ, through His life, death, and exaltation, has the devils and their activities under His control. As such, on the one hand, Christ can prevent satanic activities from happening; on the other hand, He can remove the already existing satanic activities

2. That even when God permits people to experience affliction, Christ can grant them the grace to continue to trust in God rather than becoming separated from Him. Thus in the same manner, because of the victory that Christ has secured over devils and their activities, humans may be delivered from the fear of demons and the calamities they may bring.

F. Christ's Victory: Its Relevance for the Yorubas

What relevance does Christ's triumph over Satan, his allies and their activities, have in the context of Yoruba culture? The traditional Yoruba look unto, and sacrifice to, the *Orisa*, whom they believe to be stronger than the *Ajogun*. They expect the *Orisa* to fight the *Ajogun* and either remove or prevent the calamities they may bring. As it has been shown earlier in this work, Christ has demonstrated His consistent triumph over Satan and his allies through His life, sacrificial death, resurrection and exaltation. In addition, it has been shown that Christ's triumph continues in the life and ministries of His followers. For this reason, the triumph of Christ over demons is obviously relevant in Yoruba culture which is often dominated by the fear of demons and their activities. The Yoruba may see in Christ the One who has power over demons and can remove, prevent and protect them from the domination and activities of devils. Moreover, the availability of grace from Christ to endure affliction, without denying God becomes relevant for the Yoruba.

To sum up, as the Yoruba accept the victory of Christ, they may be free from the fear of demons and their nefarious deeds, knowing that the demons are under the control of Jesus who died a sacrificial death, rose again and He is now ministering His grace in Heaven on man's behalf. And they could become calm in the face of affliction because they have the knowledge that no affliction will befall them without

God's permission. They are also assured of God's grace to go through such affliction.

V. Conclusion

In this paper the attempt has been made to show the idea of the conflict between the *Orisa* and *Ajogun* in Yoruba belief that is seen to partially depict the idea of the Great Controversy which exists between God and Satan. It has been shown that while traditional Yoruba seek victory over the activities of the malevolent spirits by sacrificing to the *Orisa*, Christ, through His encounter with Satan in His earthly ministry, death on the cross, and resurrection, remained triumphant over Satan and his host, and has secured authentic and lasting victory over demons and their activities. As such, the Yoruba can find their authentic victory in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Victor over demonic activities.

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