

REVERENCE FOR ANCESTORS IN AFRICA: INTERPRETATION OF THE 5TH COMMANDMENT FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The thesis of this article is that, moral instruction is related to popular wisdom. It is consequently believed that moral instruction serves various functions in an African community, to order the community, to direct the community relationships, to propagate community, tribe, clan, family ideals and bind the community tribe, clan, and family together. It is in this light that the fifth commandment is analysed and interpreted.

1. Introduction

The issue of reverence for ancestors¹ in Africa is a well-known fact.² Many people have some form of reverence for their ancestors one-way or the other. There are many factors that lead to the reverence of ancestors. These range from their role in the family, clan, tribe and the general society and religions. Strictly speaking this reverence is a family affair.³ This explains as to why the reverence continues and persists over the generations.

It needs to be indicated here that I am fully informed of the assertions by Western oriented scholars⁴ including Africans who make a generalisation by suggesting that ancestors are worshipped in Africa. However, to worship a human being in the real sense of the word is foreign to this part of Africa (Southern Africa). Ancestors are human beings and Africans here worship God alone. The issue of ancestors then is a diverse, complicated and delicate matter altogether and unique to a particular community. For this reason, it is always fair that each time the issue is discussed; a worldview of a particular community is taken into consideration. This worldview is complex and presupposes a popular wisdom that can be discerned in moral instruction that is manifested in proverbs for example. Such proverbs, which relate to parents, God/gods, ancestors, community suggest that popular wisdom is a characteristic of an African society.

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1. Ancestors in this paper will be understood as people who due to their status; elders, parents; Kings are revered for their role in life. This reverence goes even beyond the grave-it actually follows them into the grave.
 2. There are many monographs and articles that have been written on the matter.
 3. The term "Family" in this article will be understood in a broader sense as *extended family* to include the clan, tribe. It does not in any way refer to the nuclear family in Western sense of the word.
 4. Gehman 1989, earlier works of Mbiti 1969 overlook the fact that that Africa has diverse and complicated worldviews.

2. Interpretation of the Fifth Commandment⁵

2.1 The context of honouring the parents from the Biblical perspective

It is important to indicate that the Ten Commandments have a unique and significant place in the life of the Israelites as it is connected to the covenant whereby Israel's relationship with God is established (Weinfeld 1990:3). Therefore, since these laws are central to the covenant this explains why the Decalogue occupies a primary place in the ceremony of the covenant renewal that occurred during the feast of weeks (Weinfeld 1990:3). It is in this light that these laws are applied to every individual in the Israelite society (Weinfeld 1990:10). The laws have, as its purpose a task to give some general guidelines in the way the individual in this covenant relationship ought to conduct himself/herself. We agree with Carmichael (1992: 24) that the Decalogue illustrates a process of constructing, in this instance, an artificially unified body of largely, but solely, ethical/legal materials whose purpose is no other than what conduct and nature of the relationship was to be in this environment.

It needs to be indicated also that the Ten Commandments have some parallels⁶ elsewhere in the Pentateuch. Furthermore, the commandment in Deut. 5; 16; Ex.20: 12 and 21:15-16 has been interpreted in various ways by many scholars. This means our interpretation cannot ignore these factors. It needs also to be pointed out that this law stands in a transition between the relationship with God and also that of other members of the covenant community. It in a way makes a balance in these two sets of the law.

The law to honour⁷ parents is not peculiar to Israel alone. Within the general ANE context, to honour parents was one of obligations to young adult. The law is actually a command to able bodied to provide care support for elderly and is to be understood in context of extended family rather than the nuclear family (Meyers 1988:385). It is structured according to the pattern of ancient Near Eastern treaties between a monarch and a vassal state (Harman 1997:514). The family connections in the ANE were important for survival and prosperity of an individual. This is so because the family provided support structures to the individual at all times of one's existence.

The basic issue is the continuity of the covenant. Parents were responsible to teach their children concerning the covenant, by so doing both children and their parents would prosper in the land (Deut. 4:9-10,40) and see the fulfilment of the covenant of the promise of God (Craigie 1976:158). This is why the Decalogue is directed first of to all adults, to the adult male members though younger members of the community cannot be excluded in any way. (Harrelson 1980:93).

This law was important as it provided a solid family structure for the Israelites since Father/son relationship was analogous to the God/Israel relationship (Craigie 1976:158). This consequently became part of popular wisdom and all concerned generally accepted this responsibility. In addition the charge to honour parents was generally applied to all elderly and people of authority.

5. There has been a lot of research that has been done on the Decalogue as a whole and how it can be interpreted and applied. It is not the scope of this paper to enter into that debate, but to give an interpretation of the fifth commandment from an African perspective.

6. The second half of the Decalogue has some analogies in the literature of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia but the first four of the commandments are distinctive of Israelite religious understanding and strikingly different from the views of the neighbouring people (Harrelson 1980:20).

7. According to Harman (1997:517) the verb to honour (*kbd*) has a wider range of meaning. It is used of the response of worship given to God (1Sam 2:30; Ps. 86:9; Prov. 3:9; Isa. 24:15), but also of honouring esteeming human beings.

2.2 Nature of honour to parents

- *Material honour* - Materials gifts (Genesis 27) food is given to an ageing parent, despite the fact that the circumstances under which this command is given, the fact that Jacob was weak (Genesis 27:) suggests to us that the children were caring for him by providing materially for him.
- *Physical honour - obedience and submissiveness* - To be a rebellious son (daughter) means not to have a place in the community of people (Harrelson 1980:92). Weinfeld (1990:11) remarks is worth to quote here “the main object of the commandment to honour parents is to prevent offence or insult as is seen in the various and related laws in other law-collections: beating (Exodus 2:15), cursing and disgraceful conduct (Exod. 21:17; Lev. 20:9; Deut 27:16, rebellion and disobedience” (Deut. 21:18-21).
- *Spiritual honour* - After their death, they are mourned and remembered through places of honour, pillars, plagues, and names; the cave of Machapellah as the burial site, Bethel, Hebron, Moriah (Genesis 12:8; 13:8; 22:9).
- *Propagating honour* - Continuing with the rites of family, for example the circumcision commands (Genesis 17) the descendants are instructed to perform this rite forever.

2.3 Rewards of honouring parents

- Promise of life - pertains to the precepts of the Decalogue (Meyers 1988:385). Elders pass on the traditions of the people.
- Disrespect for one’s parents was a serious offence in the covenant community and a rebellion against them was punished by death. Precisely because such disrespect and rebellion constituted disobedience of Yahweh (Durham 1987:292). This explains as to why there were severe penalties⁸ for disobedience (Harrelson 1980:92). Furthermore, “to curse one’s father or mother means to treat them as of no consequence value, to wish them removed from the scene, to desire their obliteration” (Harrelson 1980:92).
- To give honour to the Father and Mother means more than to be subject to them or respectful of their wishes but to remain in the covenant with God that was established by the parents.

3. Applying the fifth commandment in a cultural setting

3.1 African worldviews

It is important that when we speak of ancestors in Africa that we briefly look at the African worldviews. Most African worldviews have the following characteristics:

- Religiousness of its reality, the whole life is sacred (Nyamiti 1977:1). The social and religious lives are lived together; there is no dichotomy.
- No one stands alone from other people. There is a belief in co-existence-*Umunthu*. To “be” or “belong” is to participate in one’s community. Honour and shame stands out as virtues to be attained for.
- Africans tend to think more in concrete terms rather than abstract (philosophical). Their world is the world they see, touch, feel and interact in.

8. There is death sentence for one who strikes the parent (Father or mother) Ex.21: 15.

- The strong belief in ancestors. Ancestors are as spiritual functionaries, intermediates between God and people, as reminders and symbols of morals and source of blessings in a particular society.

3.2 Ancestors in Africa

Ancestors are believed to be those who have died but continue to exist in the land of the dead. They continue to influence the living, mostly positively. This belief arises from a feeling that the role of parents (or anyone elderly) is crucial to African society. Elderly parents are believed to be the custodian of moral values. Which is why they are highly venerated in life. For this reason, death will not remove this respect for elders/parents in any way. This explains the continued veneration of elders beyond death when they attain ancestor status.

Ancestors in Africa form part and parcel of one's family. This explains why for example among the Yoruba, the family is made up of both the living members and ancestors (Awolalu 1979:61). This is the same also among the Ngoni (Read 1956:161). In all this implies that the lineage is made up of both the living and the dead (Middleton 1960:25).

The most important aspect in this whole belief in ancestors is that not everyone becomes an ancestor after death; it is only people who had a credible life as heads of families, clans or tribes. For example among the Akan people the man who was morally bankrupt is disqualified from being an ancestor; so is the one who dies tragically or through some loathsome disease such as leprosy or madness (Pobee 1976:8).

This belief in ancestors is a complicated and delicate matter. The reverence for ancestors then is a unique and significance context matter. It needs to be pointed out here that there is no indication in this belief that Africans worship the ancestors or the dead.

"The fact is that Africans love, respect and honour their parents in a way that is deeper and different from European ways" (Zvarevashe 1987:245). And this respect is not cut off through death but stands out at all times.

3.3 Context of reverence of ancestors in Africa

The context of the application of the 5th commandment is the covenant obligation. The parents had a mandate to bring up the children according to the covenant. This in turn will make the children reciprocate by caring for the parents in old age thus continuing with the covenant community.

The context of reverence of ancestors in Africa is also based on the community principles, which are part of a complex worldview. In this worldview popular wisdom is part of the society order. Proverbs plays a big role to order the community. Through proverbs, moral instruction is discerned. In most African communities, moral instruction serves various functions such as: to order the community, to direct the community relationships, to propagate community ideals, tribe, clan, and family ideals. It is in this context that the fifth commandment is analysed and interpreted.

The proverbs that related to parents, God/gods, ancestors, community all suggest that popular wisdom are a characteristic of an African society. These proverbs give moral instruction on which principles to up hold the community is based on. These principles are manifested through a number of popular wisdom depicted in various proverbs.

It is important also to note that while the Ten Commandments are set up in a communal setting with the implication for the individual family, which is discerned, in popular

wisdom. The reverence in Africa is first encouraged in the families and in so doing applicable to the whole community.

The following selection of proverbs⁹ illustrate the role and function of moral instruction as manifested popular wisdom:

- *Bauso ndi chiuta wako wachiwiri* (Tumbuka/Chewa/Ngoni/Bemba)

Mother and father is your second God (literally). Respect is due to parents since they are likened to one's relationship with God. This explains the honour that is due to parents all the times.

- *Apawo ni mizu ya kachere ikumana pansi* (Chewa/Ngoni/Nsenga)

Relationship cannot be cut, even if people die, they still meet and interact. In short the dead cannot in any way be de-linked from the ancestry.

This proverb underlines the strong belief in ancestors among these people.

- *Galu wamkulu sakandira pacabe* (Chewa)

When parents speak, they do not just say for anything. They always say sensible thing. This proverb underlines the importance of the elderly (parents).

- *Ici nciani kulinga muli awiri* (Chewa)

Two are better than one. This proverb rules out individualism and encourages unity and community life.

Due to the scope of this article it is not possible to include more proverbs. The above illustrates the importance of parents, community and ancestry.

3.4 Nature of reverence

- *Physical reverence* - bowing to them, working for them, building a visible remembrance to the ancestor, i.e. pillars,
- *Material reverence* - gifts of love, take beer mugs to the graves,
- *Propagating reverence* - the descendants continue with the rites of the family as obedience to their morals, values and customs of the family, clan or tribe. Names are given to children and property to illustrate the continuing reverence of ancestors.

3.5 Rewards for reverence of ancestors

- *Blessings/curse* - as ancestors are seen as source of blessing and curse, obedience means a guarantee of their blessings,
- *Land ownership and security* - the fact that one revere one's ancestor guarantees oneself a land ownership since it is through these ancestor that land is passed on to descendants,
- *Genealogy and identity* - the continued touch with others in the lineage makes one to be within the support family structures at all times.

9. The criteria for selecting the proverbs are that they fit in our interpretation of the 5th commandments in relationship to reverence of ancestors. All these proverbs relate to parents, ancestry, and community life, which the interpretation views as crucial in the African community.

4. Summary and conclusions

The fifth commandment charges children (at least young adults) with the responsibility of honouring their parents. This is due to the covenant obligations. The context therefore is the community. This is so because popular wisdom requires them to honour their parents in the context of their covenant relationship with God.

The African reverence for parents goes beyond death and the context is the family and community. It forms part of a complicated worldview that up hold popular wisdom instruction, which can be discerned in some proverbs, which give moral instruction. This explains as to why reverence of ancestors is important in that it the continued allegiance to these principles guarantees the success of the community. It needs to point out that the interpretation and applying the commandments need also to reflect other factors influencing our today's societies:

- The growing number of children being brought up with single parents for various reasons,
- The abusive parents who make it difficult for a child to honour them,
- Human rights/freedom and the growing trend of the independence of a child from parental control,
- The conflict of the African values with the western interpretation of Christianity.

In view of the above the interpretation of the commandments then becomes more and more complicated. Nevertheless, applying the commandments within a context gives one a perspective from which to view the commandments. This interpretation gives a perspective from which the 5th commandment can be interpreted and applied in cultural context such as Africa.

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