

MATTHEW 18:6-7 AND NNE EWU NA ATA AGBA ...: AN EXEGETICO- CONTEXTUAL STUDY

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Abstract

The world is aghast with crises. Many families are in disarray. Most parents suffer worries, anxieties and depression and some have become physically sick. Cases of suicide are on the increase. Addiction to drugs and other negativities rock our sights daily. Most people believe that the future of our society is bleak. This paper, using an exegetical lens interprets Matt 18:6-7. It sees an interfacial rapport between this text and an Igbo African proverb: “Nne ewu na ata agba, nwa ya ana ele ya anya n’onu”. The study is not a comparative exercise. It is a contextualization of the biblical teaching in African Igbo understanding. The author believes that the findings if hearkened to, would forestall further decadence into irresponsible frivolity amongst our youths. The paper adopts an exegetical method of interpretation with a pragmatic application.

Keywords: Scripture, Family, Igbo, African

Introduction

The dream of every nation is to be great. The happiness of every parent is to see their children successful, fulfilled and happy. It does not take any academic research to see that many nations are in disarray. Many families are broken. Most parents are increasingly concerned as to what their children will turn into. Many peaceful and vision-oriented ones are challenged daily by the strange and debased characters they are confronted with in the open society. It is as if the situation is hopeless. Actually, it is worrisome but the author believes that the solution lies in an understanding of Matt 18,6-7 contextualized in the Igbo all time proverb: “Nne ewu na ata agba nwa ya ana ele ya anya n’onu”.

The text of Matt 18,6-7 reads: *Hos d’ an skandalisē hena tōn mikrōn toutōn tōn pisteuontōn eis eme, sumferei auto hina kremasthē mulos onikos peri ton trachēlon autou kai katapontisthē en tō pelagei tēs thalasēs. Ousai tō kosmō apo tōn skandalōn anagkē gar elthein*

ta skandala, plēn ouai tō anthrōpō di' ou to skandalon erchetai (But the one who causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a millstone of an ass hung round his neck and be drowned in the depth of the sea. "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the man by whom the temptation comes!). Just in a similar sense, the Igbo proverb: "Nne ewu na ata agba nwa ya ana ele ya anya n'onu" is a clarion call and warning to all the seniors to be careful with the life we live because the younger ones learn from us. Problems of drug abuse, alcoholism, suicide, extra marital sex, killings and criminalities of other sorts originated somewhere. The younger ones did not just start it. Some became victims because it is rooted in their family, and others acquired the bad trait from their peers or even from the people they look up to.

Scandal is not limited to the type of life we live. Toxicities in relationship and even in family upbringing are also part of it. Children who were overpampered, or trained with strictness grow up to become toxics to the society. They find it difficult to relate well with others. Most often they exhibit transferred aggression.

The situation has gotten sour. Anxiety is not and can never be the solution. Imprisonment may not be the ultimate solution. Killing the perpetrators has not even proven a convincing deterrent measure. The solution is in the exemplary life we live. The younger learns from the older. Yes, they learn the game but it's not their game -- they inherited it by birth. If the older is able to term himself, the younger will see disciplined life as something worthwhile and will make effort to imbibe it. If all they see is dirty, they will be used to dirty life and will take it to be the norm. Politicians choose to live their lives in the limelight, their offspring have no choice in the matter. But they still must cope with the negative aspects of the job, from bad headlines to sex scandals. Sometimes children in this situation decide they're going to get involved with people who will never be in the public light, or someone who is asexual so the sex drive won't put them at risk. Often the father has greater influence on the daughter and even unconsciously directs the daughter on the type of man she would end up her life with. If the father is involved in scandalous life, naturally, the daughter may end up envisioning the scandal in every man she comes in touch with and so may even decide to avoid all men totally. Children scandalized typically experience a myriad problem, ranging from trust issues to intimacy issues to the painful realization that every adolescent eventually faces what parents screw up to.

This paper is structured to address this pertinent problem from biblical perspective using exegetical lens and then zeroing it into Igbo African veritable proverb. The concern of the paper is not limited to scandalous life in the sense of the life we live out there in the society or in the family. Scandal in the context of this research connotes also thoughtless unconcern

or bad formation some parents give to their children. The research will be of immense help to victims of scandals and also spur to avoid further mishaps.

Background of Research

Psychologists have come to terms with the dependence of the child on the world around him for growth. In fact, it is observed that during the first four months of life, an infant's world is identical with the infant himself (Monte, 1977). Piaget (1954) demonstrates this with the reaction of his infant, Laurent to the disappearance of his bottle. He observes that:

If the bottle disappears from his perceptual field this is enough to make it cease to exist from the child's point of view. At 0;6 (19) (six months, 19 days), for instance, Laurent immediately begins to cry from hunger and impatience on seeing his bottle (he was already whimpering, as he does quite regularly at mealtime). But at the very moment when I make the bottle disappear behind my hand or under the table – he follows me with his eyes – he stops crying. As soon as the object reappears, a new outburst of desire; then flat calm after it disappears. I repeat the experiment four more times; the result is constant until poor Laurent, beginning to think the joke bad, becomes violently angry (p.32).

From this observation, Piaget concludes that the child lacks a sense of object permanence. His perception of the world is egocentric or what Piaget and Inhelder (1969) call magico-phenomenalistic causality. Both Piaget's conclusion and the suggestions of Sullivan (1972) on the prototaxic, parataxic and syntaxic modes of experience all point to the fact that a growing child is vulnerable to the experiences around him. He is open to learn. He can either learn the good or the bad depending on what is immediate. Such experiences once acquired cannot easily be given up. It develops from thought to action; then to character and eventually becomes habit. This underscores the effect of scandals in our society. It could be by omission in failing to do what we ought to do; or commission in showing bad example.

In 2002 Florida Department of Children and Families reported that a five (5) year old child in their custody got missing for fifteen (15) months without the awareness of anybody in the Department. In Connecticut, a seven-year-old child died in the hands of his aunt in 1998. In New Jersey in 2003 it was reported that a couple starved four (4) adopted kids to death (Gainsborough, 2009). The point here is that our society is sick. Most do not find fulfilment again in the life they live. Some cannot brace up to face the challenges of life.

There are cases where teenagers and in some instances adults find it extremely difficult to cope with life because of crisis of ideas between them and their parents. According to Zastro and Kirst-Ashman (2000), in the pursuit of independence, adolescents often rebel against their parents'

attempt to guide them and reject their views as being out of date and stupid. Most parents hardly listen or bend to the opinions of their children. They impose their opinions on their children and force them to accept it. This happens in choice of partners for marriage or course of studies. The result is that they suffer from inferiority complex. This is because they perceive their parents as powerful controllers of their fate, their satisfactions and the very direction their life is to take. In the face of this potent manipulators, the child feels weak, impotent and inferior. The result is that the child "...embarks on a life-long struggle to compensate for his perceived inferiority, to erect a façade of compensatory superiority to conceal his sense of worthlessness" (Monte, 1977:181). Eventually, the child develops a 'Bad-Me Personification'. He hardly accepts responsibilities. He turns to aggression in the face of challenges. He grows into adulthood without maturing into the age. He is never into what Rogers (1961) calls 'innocence'. He does not drop the masks of trying to influence, impress, please others or win applause. He is an actor only when he has audience to try to please. He is never his real self. He is what others want him to be.

The researcher is concerned with the worries of parents about the uncanny behaviour of the youths. Addiction is on the increase. Poor sexual orientation, care free attitude to life, laziness, worldly frivolity and get rich quick mentality coupled with the end justifies the means mentality are some of the nascent evils of the contemporary times. The author contends that the present-day malady is not unconnected with the failures of the past. A heed to Matt 18:6-7 and its connection to the Igbo proverb will go a long way to alleviate the apparent insolvent situation.

Exegesis of Matt 18:6-7

The paper deals with an exegesis of this text under different stages and subheadings.

Textual Orientation

This deals with the presentation of the transliteration of the original text and a working translation. It also covers the textual criticism and delimitation of the text.

Transliteration and Working Translation

A transliteration of the Greek text of Matt 18:6-7 as presented by Nestle-Aland goes thus: Hos d' an skandalisē hena tōn mikrōn toutōn tōn pisteuontōn eis eme, sumferei auto hina kremasthē mulos onikos peri ton trachēlon autou kai katapontisthē en tō pelagei tēs thalasēs. Ousai tō kosmō apo tōn skandalōn anagkē gar elthein ta skandala, plēn ouai tō anthrōpō di' ou to skandalon erchetai (But the one who causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a millstone of an ass hung round his neck and be drowned in the depth of the sea. "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the man by whom the temptation comes!)).

Delimitation of the Text

Matt 18:6-7 is part of larger pericope dealing on temptations to sin. It is delimited from the preceding pericope which deals on the greatest in the kingdom. The immediate pericope after is the parable of the lost sheep.

Textual Criticism

In v. 6 some manuscripts have alternative readings. Instead of *peri* W Q^f.¹³ Ū has *eis* while D 565. 1424 al read *epi*. Many other and much older manuscripts like a B L N Z 0281. 579.892 *pc* have the same reading with the text used in this study. The researcher considers the text used as closer to the original text on the ground of *lectio difficilior* and because it is testified in much older manuscripts. The alternative readings seem to be attempt to correct the text.

In v. 7 a D W f¹³ Ū inserted *estin* while B L N Q 0281^{vid f} 33. 700. 892. 1241. 1424 *pc* aur g¹ have the same reading with the text used. Insertion of *estin* before *elthein* makes an easier and more grammatically correct reading. Probably therefore, the text adopted in this research is closer to the original since it gives a more difficult reading.

Structural Analysis

v. 5 refers to 'one such child' (*hen paidion toiouto*), and so it could be interpreted to be the end of the preceding pericope. However, the verse moves away completely from the theme of 'the greatest in the kingdom' discussed in the pericope. The opening construction of v. 6 *hos d' an* shows a correspondence with the opening of v. 5, *kai hos ean* which actually contrasts with the structure of v. 4 (*hostis*). Hagner (1995) argues that the shift in terminology that produces *tōn mikrōn toutōn* is a deliberate one, intended to show that now, indeed beginning in v. 5 where the transition takes place, those in view are not little children but disciples, the believers in the church who are now likened to little children. The author, talking about life in the kingdom of God on earth or church, emphasizes the importance of not causing others to stumble or fall away from the faith or commitment to the gospel. This idea continues until v.14.

Syntactic Analysis

The verb *skandalisē* is a verb in aorist tense, third person singular subjunctive mood active voice from *skandalizw*. Its subjunctive mood gives it a causative force. It means cause to stumble or sin', or 'be an occasion of sin to'.

The verb *pisteuontōn* is a participle, genitive case masculine plural in the active voice from *pisteuō*. Its present stem and participial form give it the force of continuity. It talks of the ones who believe and still believe in him, not the ones who have fallen already.

Sumferei is present indicative active voice third person singular. In relation to the impersonal pronoun *tini* it gives a comparative nuance. It means ‘it is better for one’.

Hina means ‘in order that, so that’. It is a particle used to express the finality of an action. It usually takes subjunctive mood. In this passage, it simply replaces the construction with infinitive (Zerwick-Grosvenor, 1996) and maintains the subjunctive as seen in the immediate verb in the subordinate clause, *kremasthē*, an aorist subjunctive third person singular passive voice from the verb *kremannumi* meaning ‘to hang’.

Katapontisthē is a compound verb in aorist passive third person singular from *katapontizomai* meaning to *submerge* or to *drown*. The passivity shows the inactive participation of the victim. It carries the force of a punishment.

Semantic Analysis

Hos d' an skandalisē hena tōn mikrōn toutōn tōn pisteuontōn eis eme is connected with v. 5: *kai hos ean dexētai hen paidion toiouto epi tō onomati mou, eme dechetai*. In v. 5 Jesus demands and emphasizes the care for the little ones. *Paidion* (child) suggests all, young or old, who have simple faith in Jesus. He therefore passes to the duties of the twelve towards the least sophisticated of the faithful. Such care becomes a devotion if given for the sake of Jesus. The seriousness of this care is underscored by its opposite – scandal, mentioned in v. 6. It could be by one’s own bad example or direct seduction (Alexander, 1965). Jesus in this v. 6 presents a contrasting treatment of disciples in reference to causing them to stumble. The verb ‘skandalizein’ occurs here and also in vv. 8 and 9. Its cognate noun is also seen in v. 7. Giesen (1993) gives a detailed explanation of this verb. It is a catchword in the NT especially in the gospels. It occurs 29x in the NT, 26 of which are in the gospels (14 in Matt., 8 in Mark, 2 in Luke and 2 in John) and 3 in the Pauline epistles. In pre-Christian times, it occurs only figuratively in the LXX to signify an offence that results in the loss of salvation either by rejection of the faith or falling away from the faith. It is used in the passive form to mean that a person does not come to faith at all as seen in Mark 6:3 and Matt 13:57. It can also mean in the passive ‘to fall away from faith’. This is the nuance one sees in the parable of the Sower, referring to the seed that on rocky ground; those with no root in themselves who go astray to their own ruin when persecuted on account of the word (Mark 4:17; Matt 13:21). In John’s understanding, the verb is not just endangering of one’s faith (Schnackenburg, 1986) but rather falling away from the faith entirely from

which the disciples and Christians are to be kept (Stählin, 1995). Paul in 2Cor 11:29 also understands the term in the sense of falling away.

The term still has further connotation. In the active voice it has the signification of causing one to fall away from or reject the faith. This is the sense one sees in Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2 and Matt 18:6. Thus, in the text under study, the term is to be understood in the serious sense of causing someone to stumble or fall into sin, or perhaps even to lose their faith in Jesus and the gospel. It is thus to hinder in some fundamental sense and not simply in the giving of mere personal offense as in Matt 17:27 (Hagner, 1995).

The term *tōn mikrōn toutōn* need not be taken literally to refer to infants. Other passages in Matthew show that the author appreciates the phrase in reference to the disciples (Matt 18:10.14; 10:42). In Matt 11:25, the author uses the same expression though with different terminology. In fact, the first pericope of Matt 18 is about the disciples, not children. The adoption of the word *paidion* in vv. 1-4 is only for the purpose of encouraging childlikeness in the disciples. The expression *tōn mikrōn toutōn* therefore refers to disciples. The modifier, *tōn pisteuontōn eis eme* (the ones who believe in me) makes this understanding indubitable. If it is a literal reference to infants, then this modifier would be meaningless because infants would not be said to believe since they are yet to understand. They still follow the faith of their parents or care givers.

The expression *sumferei auto hina kremasthē mulos onikos*, demonstrates the seriousness of scandals. The verb *sumferei* gives a comparative nuance (it would be better). Similar use is seen also in Matt 5:29-30. The author teaches that it is better for one to have an abrupt end of his life than cause another to fall from the faith. The term *mulos onikos* (large millstone) is the revolving upper millstone drawn by a donkey, hence *onikos* (patterning to a donkey). The throwing of a millstone into the sea as a convincing image of sinking, may have been a common idiom (cf. Rev 18:21). The verb *katapontizein* (sink, drown) is a *hapax legomenon* seen earlier and only in Matt 14:30 to depict Peter as he begins to sink in the water. The phrase *en tō pelagei* (in the depth) is added for effect.

In v. 7, the Master was sure that temptation is bound to come probably because of the nature of the world. This view is opined by the word *anagkē* (necessary, compulsion). The verbal form *anagkazō* occurs 9x in the NT and all are in narrative texts. The substantive *anagkē* has 17 attestations in the NT and Matthew has just once in Matt 18:7. Its adjectival form *anagkaios* has 8 occurrences while the adverbial form *anagkastōs* is a *hapax legomenon* and is seen in 1Pet 5:2. Strobel (1993) notes that a majority of the uses of the term are concerned with the life of the primitive Christian Church, whose members were exposed to physical and mental tribulations. The verbal form has the sense of compelling someone to

something either internally or externally, or by human or divine will as in Acts 26:11; Gal 2:3.14; 6:12. The substantive has a stronger force of fateful, divinely ordered necessity. It is a technical concept wherever primitive Christian eschatology was dominant (Strobel, 1993). It is an abstract designation for necessity and always appears in the singular. In Matt 18:7, therefore, the expression *anagkē gar elthein ta skandala* is another way of saying that eschatological vexations must come, since they are part of God's plan.

However, the pronouncing of woe (*ouai*) emphasizes the gravity of causing others to fall, whether of the world or an individual. The world will experience misery because it is the cause of stumbling blocks and enticements to sin and apostasy. Despite this, the culpability of the individual agents not lessened (Matt 13:41). Similar tension is found in the divine necessity of the death of Jesus (Matt 16:21; 26:54) but the it does not lessen the culpability of the betrayer (Matt 26:24).

Igbo-African Contextualization and Pragmatic Application

The Igbo people of Africa has a proverb that most contextualizes Matt 18:6-7. It says: *Nne ewu na ata agba, nwa ana ele ya anya n'onu* (Just as a goat chews fodder, the kid goat keeps a close watch at the movement of the mother's mouth). This simply means that the parents are the initial teachers children have. As the parents act, so the children learn. Parents in this context includes by extension teachers, priests, pastors, caregivers and indeed all seniors. No matter how we complain or lament, the undeniable fact is that the remote cause of the greater percentage of the societal ills today is not unconnected with hand-ons from the older to the younger ones. It could come by word or by action. The action could be by omission or commission.

The researcher explained already that scandal from the context of Mathew's Greek does not just mean bad example. It also connotes coercion or even seduction. The border line is that there is a transmission from those who ought to or who are believed to know to the younger ones around them. It is even also true about peers. This is why the greatest problem with youths is peer group syndrome. Iton (2021) submits that if one allows toxic people to surround him to the extent that they make him start doubting his self-worth, it will not be long before he convinces himself that he does not worth much. The feeling translates into actions and inactions – the person stops doing some of the things he used to do, the things that made people see his value and worth. It could begin with an act as simple as coming late to work or appointment. There is no exclusivity. Any level of corruption, bad example, imposition of one's will against another's view, suppression of another's idea, coercion or seduction of any sort is covered by Matt 18:6-7 and by the Igbo proverb. Social networks, thoughtless unconcern in the discharge of our duties is all part of it. Addictions have proven

to be generational issues in some families. If, for instance, the father is an alcoholic, the likelihood of having it in his children is more certain than families without history of alcoholism.

Scandals can lead to non-realization of dreams for the scandalized. The effects are obvious. It can lead to amalgam or confluence of drives. The drives could be transformed and displaced from their original form and goals into new channels of expression.

- i. A particular drive could be transformed to its opposite. For instance, the unconscious drive to eat, becomes the conscious refusal to eat.
- ii. A drive could be displaced to another goal. For example, an unconscious love for father becomes a conscious love for a teacher or other authority figure.
- iii. The drive could be directed to one's own person. The unconscious repressed drive to see can transform into a conscious exhibitionism.
- iv. There could be a displacement of accent on a second strong drive, in which repression of a drive enhances expression of another. Thus, for example, the blocking of sex drive's expression may increase the drive to watch pornographic images.

Children like cuddling. They want to be fondled, loved and praised. Manipulation of child's drive for affection by parents could be a powerful tool for educating the child for the good of the society. By satisfying the child's love needs, his behaviour can be shaped in the direction of social interest, concern for his fellow beings. By partially denying them, he can be taught healthy independence. Being over strict with them and denying them totally can lead to aggressive or sadistic behaviours later in life. Adler (1927) as cited by Monte (1977) believe that when adults treat their children as passive toys to be guarded as valuable property, or dismiss them as worthless freight, the child learns that there are only two things in his power: the pleasure or displeasure of his elders.

Scandals can lead to emotional trauma. The victim may end up becoming aggressive, manipulative, domineering, envious, nerdy or narcissistic, opportunistic, sadistic and unsympathetic personality. Some end up losing their focus, depressed and finally addicted to one bad habit or the other.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The Greek word 'skandalizein' involves a much deeper meaning than the English word 'scandal'. It means 'to cause to stumble' or be a stumbling block. In its eschatological connotation it goes far to include making one lose faith. From the discussions above, it is not a sole vice of the elders, parents, teachers, priests, pastors or care givers. Peers are not

excluded. The result is loss of the real person for a toxic person. The normal becomes an abnormal for all victims of scandal. Addiction to one or more bad habit is often the result. The victim gets so shortchanged that for him nothing works. The result is catastrophic for the victim, the family and the society at large and this is exactly what we are experiencing in our world today. The ultimate solution is to hearken to the veritable words of Matt 18:6-7 and the Igbo proverb: Nne ewu na ata agba ... and then take a decision to lead by good example in words and actions.

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