

**TENSION BETWEEN YAHWISM AND
POPULAR RELIGION IN ANCIENT ISRAEL:
IMPLICATIONS FOR SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST CHURCH IN NIGERIA**

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Introduction

THE BIBLE and human history are full of Satan's unrelented efforts to controvert and counterfeit whatever God does. From the war in heaven (Revelation 12:7–9) to the deceit and subsequent Fall at Eden (Genesis 3), the Great Controversy became a recurring theme. While God or most appropriately Jesus Christ represents Truth, Satan stands as the father of falsehood (1 John 3: 4, 8). Given the God-imputed enmity between the serpent and the Seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15), there has always been cold war and tension wherever light and darkness; truth and falsehood meet. As part of this struggle, God called Abraham, the progenitor of ancient Israel out of polytheism to the worship

of Yahweh, the true God. Yahwism or the worship of יהוה YHWH, Yahweh as the only true God was inaugurated at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19, 20) after Israel has been delivered from their Egyptian bondage. But tension between Yahwism and Popular religion, such as is prevalent among the Israelite neighbors, began upon the inauguration of the former at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19, 20, 32). This paper examines the content and requirements of Yahweh's covenant relationship with ancient Israel and the events that followed especially in their interactions and relationship with the Canaanites. This will serve as benchmark for drawing necessary implications for the Seventh-day Adventist Church with reference to the Nigerian situation in the struggle with contemporary 'popular religions'.

Conceptual Clarifications

For the purpose of clarity, three key words that constitute the kernel of the study (Yahwism, Popular Religion, and Seventh-day Adventist Church) will be clarified.

Yahwism

Yahwism is the religion of ancient Israel. Upon arrival at Mount Sinai, יהוה YHWH Yahweh announced His intention to כרת "make" or 'cut' a ברית "covenant" with the children of Israel, having delivered them from their Egyptian Bondage. In this, they were to be His "special possession," a "kingdom

of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5 – 6).¹ Gabriel Abe² therefore notes that by this covenant Yahweh became Israel’s object of worship in a relationship that requires total obedience (Exodus 20: 3 – 5).

Popular Religion

Jacques Berlinerblau³ observes that over the past few decades the term “popular religion” has been applied to diverse phenomena. It is variously defined as the religion of the masses, the religion of the people, the religion of the majority, the religion of the oppressed, the religion of the poor and socio-economically non-privileged strata, magical religion, non-elite religion, or any combination thereof. In William Dever’s viewpoint, popular religion is an alternate, nonorthodox, nonconformist mode of religious expression. It is largely noncentralized, noninstitutional, lying outside state

¹Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Oxford university Press, 2006), p.107

²Gabriel O. Abe, *Yahwism Tradition vis-à-vis African Culture: The Nigerian Milieu* (Inaugural Lecture Series 1: Faculty of Arts and Education, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, March 17, 2004), 6.

³Jacques Berlinerblau, “Official Religion and Popular Religion in Pre-Exilic Ancient Israel” *A Paper Presented at the twenty-third annual Rabbi Louis Feinberg Memorial Lecture in Jewish Studies*, Department of Judaic Studies (University of Cincinnati, May 11, 2000), 3.

priests or state sponsorship. Because it is nonauthoritarian, popular religion is inclusive rather than exclusive; it appeals especially to minorities and to the disenfranchised (in the case of ancient Israel, most women); in both belief and practice it tends to be eclectic and syncretistic. Popular religion focuses more on individual piety and informal practice than on elaborate public ritual, more on cult than intellectual formulations (that is, theology). In relation to Israel's religion, he submits:

Popular religion is less literate (not by that token any less complex or sophisticated) and thus may be inclined to leave behind more traces in the archaeological record than in the literary record, more ostraca and graffiti than classical texts, more cult and other symbolic paraphernalia than Scripture. Nevertheless, despite these apparent dichotomies, popular religion overlaps significantly with official religion (Yahwism), if only by sheer force of numbers of practitioners; it often sees itself as equally legitimate; and its attempt to secure the same benefits as all religion, i.e., the individual's sense of integration with nature and society, of health and prosperity, and of ultimate well-being.¹ (Emphasis mine)

It is on this premise that a closer look at the Hebrew

¹Berlinerblau, "Official Religion," 195 – 196

text will certainly reveal not only the presence but also widespread impact of 'popular religion'. In my view therefore, the term 'popular religion' in this context refers to the worship of various foreign or Canaanite deities which at several occasions became either generally or partially acceptable among ancient Israelites alongside or in place of Yahwism .

Seventh-day Adventist Church

Founded in 1860 by a group of seventh-day Sabbath keeping Adventists, whose root is traceable to the Millerite Movement led by the Baptist Farmer, William Miller, the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church became organized in 1863 having about three thousand five hundred members found all across the northern United States.¹ Though with a humble beginning; "Today, the SDA Church is a true world Church,"² having established work in about two hundred and six countries of the World.³

Right from outset, SDAs believe they are a special

¹Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers – A History of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church* (Ontario, Canada: Pacific Press, 2000), 91, 94-95.

²Jay Gallimore, "Do we need another Church Organization?" Samuel Koranteng –Pipin ed., *Here We Stand-Evaluating New Trends in the Church* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Adventists Affirm, 2005), 703.

³Babalola, *A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nigeria- At a glance* (n.d and place of publication), 2.

people called and chosen by God for a special mission on earth. The founders and subsequent generations believe the Church is founded upon prophecy. Hence, it is not just one of the Churches, but God's Remnant Church with the commission to spread the Goodnews of salvation in Jesus Christ in readiness for His Second Coming and to warn the world concerning God's final judgment of the inhabitants of the earth. To this effect, the SDAs hold certain Bible-based beliefs¹ that like ancient Israel; tend to distinguish them from the rest of Christendom and indeed other religions. Such convictions also convey the idea of exodus – a call to come out of the idolatry and moral confusion in the world and be separate (2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1, Revelation 18).

History, Meaning and Development of Yahwism

The call of Abraham, the progenitor of ancient Israel (Gen. 11:1f; 20:7) from a mixed multitude who worshipped a variety of gods to the worship of the true and only God, was a call to Yahwism in its embryonic stage.² This call marked a nascent and unprecedented dawn of religious perfection in ancient times. Henceforth the development of

¹See Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe* (Silver Spring: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005). The book contains an exposition of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church which features prominently the Sinaic Covenant with Israel as exemplified in Sabbath observance, absolute Monotheism among others.

²Abe, *Yahwism Tradition*, 6

this unique Divine-human, relationship amidst all the nations of the earth continued to grow and advance throughout the vicissitudes of the wilderness experience until the eventual conquest and occupation of Canaan up to the pre and post-exilic era. Yahwism as evident in the Old Testament is rooted in the Mosaic experience with the God whom called Himself Yahweh in the burning bush on Mount Horeb in Median (Exodus 3:14; 6:2 – 3). Moses later introduced Yahweh to the Israelites with the promise to deliver them from their Egyptian bondage. Having fulfilled His promise to deliver Israel from Egypt and their subsequent arrival at Mount Sinai, Yahweh appeared to them in a theophany which culminated in His covenant relationship with the people.

Lois Fuller observes that Exodus 19 deals with the preparation for covenant with Israel thus: 1) The people arrive at Mount Sinai (v 1-2), 2) God proposes the covenant (v 3-6), 3) The people agree to the proposal (v 7-8), and 4) The people prepare to meet the holy God (v9-25).¹ And having delivered them from Egypt, the covenant required obedience on the part of the people. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1 – 17) are the specific terms that required full and total obedience as they reflected conditions for a healthy relationship and full actualization of Yahweh's promise of full occupation of the Promised Land and enduring peace

¹Lois Fuller, *The Pentateuch: Foundation of God's Message to the World* (Bukuru, Jos: African Christian Textbooks (ACTS), 2004), 78.

and prosperity in it. Exodus 20:22 – 23:33 also contains what scholars refer to as “Book of the Covenant”. These include laws given to Israel as appendix to the Ten Commandments of which instructions on the three annual feasts – Passover, Firstfruits, and Ingathering were intrinsic. The covenant was later ratified in Exodus 24. By setting up a form of government which resembles the suzerainty (rulership) found among the Hittites between kings and the nations they conquered, Yahweh became Israel’s national and personal God in concrete historical experience.

The meaning or essence of Yahwism is rooted in an understanding of the Ten Commandments. Fuller notes that although the law given by God has many similarities to the law codes of the nearby cultures, law in Israel was not so much rules and regulations as revelation of God’s will and nature.¹ Learning the law was to learn about God. Hence, Israel was commissioned to teach this law to every member of their households including children (Duet 6:6 – 9). Prosperity, health and well-being of Israel was tied to their obedience of the law (Duet 28:1 – 14; Joshua 1:8), while disobedience will result in pain, punishment and curses (Duet 28:15 – 68). Much of Israel’s life in Canaan follows this conditionality.

Walter Kaiser, Jr. submits that the highest duty of humanity is given in the first commandment. He affirms that it is the foundation for all morality, when defined as our conformity to the character and will of God. In other words,

¹Fuller, *The Pentateuch*, 79.

if God is supreme and without any competitors, then there will be no higher standard or object of pleasure, service, and praise. The ground of all morality begins here.”¹ Hence, Yahweh alone is the Object of Israel’s worship.

When the prophets condemn the Israelites for having worshipped other gods in violation of this commandment, the metaphors of marital and political fidelity are often invoked, sometimes graphically (as, for example, in Ezek 16:23 – 34; 23:5 – 21; Jer 2:23 – 25; 3:1 – 10). Yahweh is a jealous husband (see Ex 34:14, and compare Num 5:11 – 14, 30; Prov 6:34 – 35), and the worship of other gods, or making alliances with foreign powers provokes his rage.

The second commandment prohibits the making of any image of Yahweh, or of any other divine, human, or animal forms (Exod 20:4 – 6). This requires that the worship of Yahweh must be qualitatively different from that of the other gods. Here the mode of worship and ascribing worth to Yahweh is stated. The commandment has two parts thus: the precept (vv. 4–5) and the penalty (vv. 5–6). The prohibition Kaiser notes is aimed at idolatry which can be two-fold: spiritual and internal or material and external. The former is forbidden in the first commandment while the latter is taken up here. There are fourteen words for idols or images but **עֲצָבִים** “idol” or “image” (of stone, clay, wood, or metal,

¹Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 85.

see 2 Kings 21:7). On the other hand, the use of תְּמוּנָה “resemblance,” “likeness” or “form” does not stifle artistic talent since Yahweh also commanded Moses to make many artistic representations on the curtains in the tabernacle.

Instead, תְּמוּנָה applies to any real form or imagined pictorial representations of deities. This is most appropriate since the command is given within the context of religious worship and is only used where worship of foreign deities is forbidden.

The jealousy or zeal of God does not carry the idea of suspicion but rather denotes 1) the quality in His character that demands exclusive devotion in order to properly acknowledge with whom men and women are dealing (Exod 34:14; Duet. 4:24) and 2) the attribute of anger that he directs against all who oppose him (Num. 25:11; Duet. 29:20; Ps. 79:5). To embrace a lesser god is to slight God. Such idolatry is also labeled spiritual adultery (Isa.31: 1- 3; Jer. 3:1 – 5).

The third commandment prohibits any attempt to misuse the name of Yahweh. This is an intentional progression in God’s desire for absolute loyalty and sincerity of heart and purpose in all transactions. In her relationship with Yahweh, Israel must understand that reverence and the fear of God must characterize all religious or civil engagements. Empty or vain promises, vows, witnesses, or affirmations in connection with the name of God constitute irreverence.

This is true because as Kaiser observes, the name of God includes 1) His nature, being, and very person (Ps. 20:1; Luke 24:47; John 1:12; cf. Rev. 3:4), 2) His teaching and doctrines (Ps. 22:22; John 17:6, 26), and 3), His ethical directions and morals (Mic. 4:5).¹ Mark Fountain² notes that reverence for the divine name led to the practice of avoiding its use lest one runs afoul of commandments (see Exod. 20:7 or Lev. 24:16).

Finally, the fourth commandment required Israel to observe the Sabbath day as the day of rest. This command has moral and ceremonial dimensions. Morally, it requires of men and women a due portion of their time set aside for rest, worship, and service of God. Ceremonially, it fixed the day as the seventh day which apart from other Sabbath celebrations as evident in the Old Testament, has constituted our weekly cycle since creation. The latter captures the full reason given in Exodus 20:8 – 11 for memorializing this day: a reference to creation (v. 11) reflecting the theology of rest and second, a future reference to the new exodus and redemption, which like the previous exodus from Egypt will occur (Duet 5:15). Loron Wade argues that intrinsic in the Sabbath command is God's way of consummating His desire for absolute loyalty and worship from Israel as seen in the first three commandments. The act of resting declares to the universe

¹Kaiser, *Toward*, 85.

²Mark Fountain 'YHWH' in Chad Brand et. al. (eds) *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1696.

that the Sabbath is a sign of relationship with God based on faith. It aimed at not only promoting this relationship, but rather to deepen it providing assurance in God's love and peace. By this, the fourth commandment serves as a complement and guarantee of the first three which ordered Israel to worship God and give Him first place in their lives.¹ The rest of the commandments (fifth to tenth Exod. 20:12-17) deal with right relations with one another in the society and find their meaning in the first four.

In developing Yahwism as Israel's religion, God commanded Moses in Exodus 25 – 31 to make the Ark of the Covenant, build a tabernacle and inaugurate the priesthood. This Moses accomplished in Exodus 35 – 40. O. Palmer Robertson², Coogan³ and Abe⁴ agree that Israel was unique among peoples of the world in that God himself appointed a priesthood for the nation – with accompanying laws of sacrifice and ritual, which carefully defined the right way to approach God. Robertson notes that the laws of the Levitical priesthood, along with its festival days and

¹Loron Wade, *The Ten Commandments* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2006), 48.

²O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God—Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (New Jersey: P&R, 2000), 53 - 83.

³Coogan, *Old Testament*, 125-137

⁴Abe, *Yahwism Tradition*, 66-69

sacrifices, contained touches of glamour and glory.¹ Through the daily sacrifices Israel will deepen their understanding of Yahweh's deliverance and the need for intimate and sustained relationship with Him, which is the only way to holy living and success. Therefore Aaron and the Levites carried the responsibility of setting forth the conditions for worship and healthy relationship with Yahweh which must be sustained by succeeding generations (Psalm 145:14). From their days in the wilderness to settlement in Canaan, the tabernacle (tent) and latter Temple (with the Ark of the covenant centrally placed as a symbol of Yahweh's enduring presence) served as God's holy of meeting with Israel (Exod 29:43).

Yahwism and Popular

Religion: The Struggle Between Faith and Culture

Life within the Israelite confederacy was a continual struggle during the period of the death of Joshua and the rise of the monarchy. Bernard Anderson and others observe that having won a foothold on Canaanite soil, Israel faced the problem of adjusting to agricultural ways and taking its place among the nations. The Tribal Confederacy, straining under conflict with forces both inside and outside, was severely tested. In part, the struggle was for Israel's physical survival. Although the decisive phase of the occupation took place in the thirteenth century B.C.E., the contest for Canaan went on for many years. Against Yahweh's instruction that

¹Robertson, *Israel of God—Yesterday*, 53
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Israel must not enter into any covenant with the Canaanites but rather to utterly destroy their idols (Judges 2:1 – 2), the people combined a variety of stratagem thus: they waged their offensive by means of war, treaty, and gradual absorption of the Canaanites into the Israelite alliance. However, on a deeper level, an even more important battle was being fought between conflicting religious allegiances of the people's hearts.¹

To appreciate the nature of Israelite's struggle, an understanding of the religion of the Canaan described in the Hebrew Bible as Baals and Astartes (Judges 2:13, 10:6; 1 Sam. 7:4, 12:10) will be useful. According to Anderson and others, the title Baal (meaning "lord" or "owner") in Canaanite religion designated a male deity who owned the land and controlled its fertility. His female counterpart was Baalath ("lady") – also referred to by the personal name Astarte. Because these deities were connected with particular localities and towns, one could speak of many Baals and Astartes, as many as there were towns in the land (Jer. 2:28). Thomas Nelson adds that Baal started out as an average false god believed to have power over bountiful crops and multiplying flocks. Later, he evolved into "Master of the Universe" and was thought to rule over all the other Canaanite gods.² There

¹Bernard Anderson, et. al., *Understanding the Old Testament* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2007), 167.

²Thomas Nelson, *Living Fascinating, Everyday Customs and Traditions from the People of the Bible* (The Everyday Series: Thomas Nelson)

was also the Babylonia god Tammuz and the goddess Ishtar. In Egypt, the Isis-cult was based on worship of the god Osiris (Horus) and his female counterpart Isis (Hathor). There was also the Moabites' Chemosh and the Ammonites' Moloch who later accepted child sacrifices. This similarities between these religions encouraged borrowing back and forth, for they shared a common concern about the relation of human beings to their natural and cosmic environment.¹

Since the land was believed to be the sphere of divine powers, the Baal of each region was the lord or "owner" of the land. Consequent upon such conviction, when the rains came, the mysterious powers of fertility stirred again, and new life was resurrected from the barrenness of winter. This astonishing revival of nature, people believed, was due to sexual intercourse between Baal and his partner, Baalath. More than being mere spectators, farmers engaged in not only telling the story of Baal's love and wars in the temple, but also a ritual of sacred prostitution in which human partners acted out the union of Baal and Astarte.² In the context of the foregoing, Baalism became a practical religion for farmers in their quest for plenty harvest since it is recognized as lord of the earth, owner of the land, giver of rain, source of grain, wine, and oil. To ignore the Baal rites in those days would have

Nelson, 2006), 378

¹*Living Fascinating*, 170 – 171.

²*Ibid*, 171 - 172.

seemed impractical and even reckless, as if a farmer today were to ignore current agricultural science in the cultivation of the land. Added to this is the reality that the Baal religion was also part and parcel of the city-state system of Canaan that, under Egyptian hegemony, maintained order and security in the land. From a sociological viewpoint, Baalism functioned to legitimize the existing social structure, with its power centers in Canaanite cities, and to pacify farmers in the countryside who lived close to the soil and who had to pay taxes to the city-state kings.

Given these conditions, Anderson and others affirm that it is not surprising that many Israelites turned to the gods of the land. These people probably did not intend to turn away from Yahweh, the God of the Exodus and the Sinai covenant. Rather they meant to serve YHWH and Baal side by side or to identify YHWH with Baal, like people for whom "God" symbolizes the values of civil religion. The two religions were not seen as contradictory or mutually exclusive; indeed, there must have been a strong tendency for the two faiths to coalesce in popular worship. For instance, archaeological excavation has revealed that the outlying religions of Israel people kept figurines (small structures) of the goddess of fertility, Astarte, indicating that elements of Canaanite ritual mythology were incorporated into the worship of Israel's God.¹ Much of these archaeological findings and especially the use of sociological tools in the study of life in the ancient

¹Nelson, *Living Fascinating*, 175.
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Near East and Israel in particular has led scholars like Philip King and Lawrence Stager¹, Norman Gottwald², Ephraim Stern³, and Jacques Berlinerblau⁴ to conclude that Yahwism was only an assumed “official” or “national” religion, which was either imposed on Israel by Yahweh or at its best a canonical, written religion that functioned only on the pages of the Old Testament books. On the other hand, the real religion, popular religion, was that which acknowledged the various gods of the Canaanite city-states on whom the people depended for ‘survival’ and plenty harvest through the farming seasons.

While there is no doubt Yahwism functioned in Israel, evidences of the continued struggle with popular religion in Canaan abound. A quick scan of the Hebrew Bible presents various mention of private and cooperate worship practices which the children of Israel engaged in apart from their worship of Yahweh. In Exodus 32 they worshipped the ‘golden calf’ which they referred to as the one who delivered them from Egypt. In Canaan, parents began naming their

¹Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (London: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 319 - 353.

²Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible – A Socio-Literary Introduction* (New York: Fortress Press, 1987), 201 – 220

³Ephraim Stern, ‘Pagan Yahwism: The Folk Religion of Ancient Israel’, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June, 200. <http://members.bib-arch.org> Retrieved March 12, 2012

⁴Berlinerblau, “Official Religion,” 6 – 11

children after Baal, apparently with no thought of abandoning God. One of the judges, Gideon was named Jerubaal (“let Baal contend” or perhaps “may Baal multiply”).

During the united Monarchy, Saul and David, both ardent devotees of God, gave Baal names to their children. The divided Monarchy witnessed serious moral and spiritual lapses in Israel’s commitment to their covenant relationship with Yahweh. This was prevalent in the northern kingdom (1Kings 12:25 – 33; 16:29 – 34), but Judah also shared in it (2Kings 21). A closer look at the above instances suggests that Israel’s idolatry was not just intermittent but rather gradually became a way of life. This seems to be the concern of Prophet Jeremiah when he laments: “The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven” (Jeremiah 7:18).¹ Ezekiel 18 also suggests that Baal worship became so prominent that the priests, elders, and those who minister in the temple substituted it for Yahwism. Baal worship or Popular Religion involved prostitution (1Kings 14:24 - as seen earlier), human sacrifice (Jer. 19:5), and self-torture, screaming, and shouting (1Kings 18). Supplicants also would kiss the idol itself (1Kings 19:18; Hosea 13:2).

¹William G. Dever, *What Did The Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 195.

Implications of the Struggle Between Yahwism and Popular Religion on SDAs in Nigeria

Like ancient Israelites, SDAs represent a people called out of a confused and corrupt society and are set forth as God's representatives on earth. Unlike Israel whom Yahweh called to utterly destroy the inhabitants of Canaan and their gods, we believe we constitute a prophetic movement whose task it was, and still is, to prepare the world for Christ's return.¹ This we pursue through health, education, relief agencies, publishing, and the use of foreign missionary endeavors throughout the world. However, one of the major challenges facing the church is that of keeping faith in the face cultural diversities. While SDAs wait for the last lap of the great controversy, the emergence and wide-spread influence of Pentecostalism and its intention to 'conquer' the world has become a major threat, especially in Nigeria.

Dapo Asaju² notes that in the early twentieth century the Anglican Church witnessed schisms that resulted the founding of the various indigenous churches such as Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Church of the Lord

¹P. Gerald Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 294.

²Dapo F. Asaju 'Noise, fire and flame: Anointing and Breakthrough Phenomena among the Evangelicals', in David O. Ogungbile and Akintunde E. Akinade (eds), *Creativity and Change in Nigerian Christianity* (Lagos: Malthouse, 2010), 101

Aladura and the Christ Apostolic Church. This reaction to the supposed over-Europeanised and over-institutionalized Christianity also paved way for new Pentecostal churches to flourish. As expected, the shift from conservatism resulted in dynamism by the evangelicals who adapted new practices and theologies from Pentecostalism. Today, Pentecostalism in its multi-faceted nature (which includes the African Indigenous Churches) has become not only a phenomenon, but also a popular religion.

Friday Mbon, quoting John Pobee and late Gabriel Oshitelu ¹¹ attempts an outline of the major beliefs of the Pentecostals thus: 1) emphasis on receiving a conscious experience of the Holy Spirit, stressing baptism of the holy Spirit rather than baptism of the water (although the later is not neglected). Quite often, baptism of the Holy Spirit results in glossolalia. 2) a penchant for healing and exorcism, 3) insistence on personal testimonies about one's conversion and religious experience, stressing what the Lord has done for or through one, 4) protest against the model of church imposed upon Africans by Western Mission Churches. Others include 5) joyful and lively worship services characterized by spontaneity involving much drumming, dancing and clapping, 6) emphasis on signs and wonders, miracles, and prosperity¹ While these characteristics might not be found

¹Friday M. Mbon, "The Contemporary Spirituality of African Initiatives in Christianity (AIC): AN Assessment of their Emphasis on Signs and Wonders, Miracles, Healing and Prosperity" in

in one Pentecostal mold, different types assume different molds.

The growth of the Pentecostal church into a popular religion is tied to its appeal to the sensibilities of the Nigerian society. In appropriating the above characteristics or belief system in the Nigerian context, they seek to pay attention to and provide answers and solutions to the daily needs. Aloysius Lugira¹ notes that Africans make no difference between religion and aspects of daily lives. Their beliefs are so closely bound to their culture that religion and culture are one. And Nigerians are very religious. So anything that appeals to such subconsciousness will certainly prevail. Bolaji Idowu² observes that reality for the Nigerian as well as with most Africans is composed of the belief in the existence of God, belief in the divinities, belief in the spirits, and belief in the ancestors and life after death. There is also the belief in unseen realities, reincarnation, the need to know and control the future and contact is usually facilitated by diviners. They also believe that human destinies are determined by forces outside and above them. The latter triggers fear in the

Sampson M. Nwaomah (ed) *Insight: Journal of Religious Studies* vol.1 No. 2 & 3, December 2004/2 (1 -17)

¹Aloysius M. Lugira, *World Religions: African Traditional Religion* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2009), 17

²E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London, UK: SCM, 1973), 139.

heart of an average African.¹ Nigerians also suffer poverty, insecurity – especially from the traditional worldview, where there is a reason for whatever happens.

In its nonorthodox mode, Pentecostalism seeks to liberalize the stronghold of mainline churches and it is succeeding by the day. Even the Islamic religion is not left out. Some Muslim types today could sing “*Winner o-o-o winner (x2) Jesus You don win-o winner, pata pata You go win again-o winner.*” Like popular religion in the days of ancient Israel, Nigerian Pentecostalism has posed a serious threat to Adventist Mission in Nigeria. Some of these perceived threats are discussed below.

Liturgy

One of the aspects of the SDA worship that has come under severe attack is her liturgy. Liturgy is the form or formulary according to which public religious worship, especially Christian worship is conducted. A sample of the SDA liturgy² presents a wholesome approach to worship which could fit into any culture. The SDAs emphasize the need for congregation worship to be holistic, that is, it must be inspiring, joyful, meaningful, experiential, and participatory.³

¹Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 87

²See Ministerial Association, *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Handbook* (Silver Springs, Maryland: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2009), 121–129.

³Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 121–122.

Adekunle Alalade argues that the present SDA Church liturgy is an import from western culture and does not represent Nigerian realities. To him, the contemporary modern culture of the community is the most important.¹ One problem with Alalade's proposition is that it does not provide a template of what he thinks should be done. His appeal to Pentecostal churches as model for incarnation ministry is somewhat worrisome because most of such models are lopsided targeted to fulfill only the emotions of her members and giving less time for the Word of God. Out of the two or two and half hours that some Pentecostals spend in worship, over an hour is spent in the so-called praise and worship characterized with heavy noise and theatric dance. Many splinter groups in the SDA Church in Nigeria present the liturgy as a problem. For instance, Onongha submits that the Victory Sanctuary is vehemently opposed to forms and methods used in regular Adventist churches.²

Music and Emotionalism

Congregational singing is an integral part of SDA worship experience. Most of the singing derives from the Hymns and choruses. The church also appreciates the place

¹Adekunle Alalade, *Limiting Factors to the Success of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa: The Nigerian Case Study* (Ibadan: Agbo Areo, 2008), 173.

²Kelvin O. Onongha, *Pentecostalism in Nigeria: Phenomenon, Prospects and Problems to Mainline Churches* (Ilishan-Remo: Babcock Consulting, 2011), 140–141.

of cultural diversities in the selection of music to serve the interest of different groups. However, music chosen should reflect biblical teachings.¹ In fulfilling the above task Ellen White counsels: “Music was made to serve a holy purpose, to lift the thoughts to that which is pure, noble, and elevating, and to awaken in the soul devotion and gratitude to God.”² Today, however, the Church in Nigeria has been greatly challenged by the Pentecostal types of music which appeals more to emotion than reason – a continuation of its theology. Femi Adeniji observes that music constitutes an integral dimension of Pentecostal worship and the Nigerian gospel music scene which is largely controlled by Pentecostals “is widely patronized by Christians and non-Christians alike.”³

Onongha quoting Rotimi Taiwo, a professor of music, having great understanding of Nigerian Pentecostal music observes that there has been a shift of focus from pure praise and worship songs to the socio-cultural setting and values of the people in contemporary gospel music. Some of these new themes include financial success, prosperity, competition, challenge, and assertions. The foregoing presents both theological and emotional challenges. First, the

¹Ministerial Association, *Ministerial Handbook*, 124.

²Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Coldwater, Michigan: Remnant, 2000), 464

³Femi Adeniji, “Classification of Nigerian Gospel Music Types,” *Africa Revista do Centro dos Estudos Africanos*, USP, Sao Paulo 24-25-26: (2002/2003/2004/2005), 225-246.

so-called gospel song expresses secular and material cravings of the society. Second, it promoted the importance of dance which is a vital aspect of Yoruba social (not religious) fiber as an expression of 'gratitude' to God. Although they attempt to distinguish *ijo Jesus* (Jesus' dance) from the worldly dance, Taiwo observes that it is difficult to draw a fine distinction.¹

If there is anything that has threatened love, unity, trust, and brotherhood among Adventist ministers in some parts of Nigeria, especially in the West and South West Conferences, it is the tilt toward Pentecostal music. In some churches, the worldview and the position of the church pastor determines the worship atmosphere. So you can have many churches in a given locality with different styles. Many church sessions are characterized by tension as those with upper hand prevail leaving the rest murmuring and disgusted. This has resulted in crises of identity leaving the congregation confused. Sampson Nwaomah² also listed the quest for ecstatic worship, as a reason for the rise of splinter groups in the Church.

Prayer and Exorcism

Adventists believe in and emphasize the need for prayer. However, the church encourages that tiresome petitions be

¹Onongha, *Pentecostalism in Nigeria*, 100–103.

²Sampson M. Nwaomah, *The Gospel of Wholeness: Biblical Reflections on Anointing, Healing and Prosperity* (Ibadan: Positive, 2012), 96.

left for the closet.¹ Apart from the different prayers said during Sabbath worship (Invocation, Thanks after Offering, Pastoral Prayer and Benediction), Wednesdays are set aside every week for Mid-week prayer. Adventists believe in solemnity and reverence during prayers and so noise and unnecessary repetitions are discouraged as members are encouraged to believe that God's answer to prayers is no rested on many words but rather on the faith expressed (1Kings 18:36 – 39). The church also acknowledges the presence and manifestations of demonic powers (Eph. 6:12 – 13). In dealing with such issues however, Jesus' method in Mark 5:1–20 and Luke 11:14; Paul's approach in Acts 8:7 are presented as models in dealing with such issues.²

The history of Nigerian Pentecostalism reveals the role of and its emphasis on prayer. Pentecostalism introduces the advent of "Prayer Houses" and "Prayer Mountains" where intercessory and personal prayers are offered round the clock on behalf of those in trouble. These prayers present a perfect synchrony of traditional beliefs. Such prayer are repetitive, long, dramatic, or violent akin to Baalism in (1Kings 18: 26 – 29). Most of these prayers are accompanied with 'speaking in tongues'. Common phrases that accompany the do-it-now prayers repetitively include "the blood of Jesus" and "in Jesus

¹The Secretariat, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald, 2010), 123.

²Ministerial Association, *Minister's Handbook*, 193–194.

name”. As I have always argued in meetings and where the opportunity calls, Pentecostalism is a package; you do not take some and leave the others. So it is not a surprise that many Adventist pastors and lay persons in Nigeria manifest some of the above Pentecostal characteristics. What many need is the right atmosphere and it is done.

Prosperity and Health and Anointing

The SDA Church believes in the scriptural injunction that prosperity and wealth are blessings that come from God. Such wealth we believe comes through obedience to the will of God (Deut. 28:1–14; Josh. 1:8; 3 John 2). The Church is also known for her contribution in medical ministry in Nigerian and around the world. However, the Church also believes that because we are in a world of sin, those who believe in and follow Jesus Christ will share not only in His glory, but also in His suffering (Matt. 5: 11–12).

In consonant with James 5:14 – 15) the Church conducts anointing services not only to the sick but also for forgiveness. It is the position of the Church that the sick or his friends (or relatives) when such individual can no longer place the request; or the sinful who desires anointing that makes the request. For the Church: “Anointing service is an intensely personal event, addressing the specific needs and request of one person. The purpose of anointing and prayer, stated in the Epistle of James, is not designed for attracting large

audiences. This is a distortion of the truth.”¹

Nwaomah² observes that woven with traditional beliefs and practices, Pentecostal preachers practice anointing for healing, breakthrough, and prosperity. Following the African practice of pouring libation, the pastors and ‘men of God’ anoint houses, cars, household items among others. Mass anointing is also a regular feature. He further observed with dismay that some Adventist pastors, possibly because of insufficient understanding of biblical teachings on this practice or a response to the Pentecostal package have adopted the popular but unbiblical practices of anointing for breakthroughs, anointing homes and business premises to dispel malevolent spirits, cars and other items.³ It is not out of place today to find mass anointing services advertized one or two weeks in an Adventist Church. Because of the need to be ready to war against the spiritual forces of darkness and other purposes some pastors carry anointing oil as they move. Most Adventist preaching only emphasizes prosperity against sound and holistic biblical teachings.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study examined the struggles of ancient Israelites to keep faith amidst Canaanite religious practices. Having

¹Ministerial Association, *Minister's Handbook*, 190.

²Nwaomah, *The Gospel*, 64–93.

³Ibid, 93.

delivered them from their Egyptian bondage, Yahweh established a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. In this covenant, Yahweh functioned as Israel's King. As a people bound in a covenant relationship, Israel was to be faithful in their relationship.

However, the study revealed that upon settlement in Canaan, Israel met a Waterloo as they accommodated and subsequently mingled with the natives. Such association resulted in their gradual absorption of Canaanite religious worships of Baal and Artartes whom the natives believed were in charge of fertility and rain. From that point, Israel became heavily immersed in paganism that it has become somewhat difficult for many scholars today to believe that they once practiced Monotheism. Such syncretistic attitude led them into prostitution, child sacrifice, and other practices forbidden by Yahweh in the covenant relationship.

The evaluation of the experience and response of SDAs in Nigeria to the wide influence of Pentecostalism shows that some SDAs in Nigeria – pastors, elders, lay persons and young people have succumbed to Pentecostal influences. This is manifested in the appropriation of Pentecostal theology into the liturgy, music, prayer, and preaching of the Church. It is no longer strange to hear that the Church is cold or boring, too legalistic, prayerless, or lacks the Holy Spirit. While such manifestations seem less harmful on the surface, the problem lies in the fact that Pentecostalism is a synchrony with certain traditional beliefs which are incongruent with the Bible. The

paper therefore recommends that SDAs in Nigeria, especially church leaders should learn from the Israelite experience that only prosperity, healing, security, and freedom from divine punishment comes only as we remain faithful to the Bible and not to the culture.