

A New Contextual Look at the Place the Lord has Chosen as his Own in Deuteronomy 12:13–19



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ABSTRACT

Deuteronomy 12, stresses the idea of having a central place of worship, where the Lord has chosen to establish his name. Deuteronomy 12:13-19 is a pericope which forms one of the four parallel laws concerning cult centralization. It stresses the benefits and requirements for cult centralization. It prohibits sacrificial worship at random altars (v. 13), stipulates an exclusive single altar of sacrifice for the Lord (vv.14, 18), sanctions secular slaughter (v. 15), prohibits offerings, donations in towns and blood consumption (vv.16–17), inclusiveness of the Levites and the marginalized of the society and one's household (v.19). Cognizance of the proliferation worship centers in Nigeria, where the negative effects of African Traditional Religion, still persist, this essay focuses on Deuteronomy 12:13–19, within the larger context of Deuteronomistic History (Josh–2 Kgs). It translates the texts in English and in Efik where necessary. It examines the passage contextually, historically and theologically provides a verse by verse exegesis in order to discover and highlights its pastoral and spiritual benefits or relevance for religious communities in Africa, using a Nigerian faith community of Ikot Ekpene Diocese as a case study.

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INTRODUCTION

The world today is characterized by multiple approaches to biblical interpretation and its application, including Deuteronomy 12. Similar phenomena of pluralism could be said of religions, worship styles, places and faith practices. Christian faithful, especially the Catholic members living in African countries, Nigeria in particular, are still being confronted today with, some religious problems. These problems include idolatry, and resilience of practices of African Traditional Religions (ATR), incompatible with Christianity. Some of these problems are occasioned and complicated perhaps, by the negative effects of global isolationism, colonialism, individualism, proliferation of worship centers, and the search for material needs.¹ A new contextual look at Deuteronomy 12, especially verses 13–19, as a remedy or reflecting point for religious communities in Nigeria, is the primary goal of this work. Deuteronomy 12, emphasizes the idea of having a central place of worship as the Lord pleases. Verses 13-19, in particular, "constitutes one of the four parallel laws concerned with this cultic

¹ Michael Ufok Udoekpo, *The Limits of a Divided Nation with Perspectives from the Bible* (Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2020), 24-38.

centralization and concentrates on the practical consequences and requirement for cult centralization. It prohibits sacrificial worship at random altars (v. 13), stipulates an exclusive single altar of sacrifice for the Lord (vv.14, 18), sanctions secular slaughter (v. 15), prohibits offerings, donations in towns and blood consumption (vv.16–17), as well as inclusiveness of the Levites, the marginalized of the society and one's household (v.19)."²

It would not be out of place to note that, the importance of this cultic passage within Deuteronomy 12, or as the basis of other historical books (Deut –2 Kgs) has been a delight of many scholars, historically.³ W. M. de Wette and J. Wellhausen, for instance, both assigned the narrative in the book of Deuteronomy to the time of King Josiah's era, largely on the basis of the requirement of the need for *Kultzentralisation*, recorded in Deuteronomy 12.⁴ Similar views were advanced by a good number of the Fathers of the Church, including Athanasius, Jerome, and Chrysostom.⁵ There were many others including, G. Hölscher, T. Oestreicher, A. C. Welch, W. Stäerck, and M. Noth, who participated in this cultic debate concerning Deuteronomy 12.⁶ Gerhard von Rad and A. Alt and their contemporaries were not left out.⁷ This does not exclude what would be called "current research" on the subject, historical details beyond this essay.⁸

With religious communities in Africa in mind, or Ikot Ekpene Diocese of Nigeria as a case study, this essay discusses Deuteronomy 12:13-19 within the broader context of DH (Josh–2 Kgs).⁹ It historically presents a brief overview of Deuteronomy, establishes the structures of Deuteronomy 12, delimits the text, and examines verses 13-19. It provides its verse-by-verse contextual exegesis thereby highlighting the theological and pastoral relevance of the passage to the local Christian churches in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, where proliferation of worship centers and traditional African religious practices persist.

Religious Background and Formation History of Deuteronomy

As noted in the researcher's earlier work, scholarly "views of the religious background and formation history of Deuteronomy often revolves around the circumstances of its dating and issues of worship in Israel."¹⁰ Scholars want to know when, and what brought about the Book of Deuteronomy and its

² Michael Ufok Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," *IJAC* 10, no. 1 (2020): 189–204.

³ Eleonor Reuter, *Kultzentralisation: Entstehung Und Theologie von Dtn 12, BBB 87* (Frankfurt: Anton Hain, 1993), 14-28.

⁴ W. M. L. de Wette, *Dissertatio Critica, qua Deuteronomium a Proribus Pentateuchi Libris Diversum Alius Cuiusdam Recentioris Auctoris Opus Esse Monsratur* (Berlin: Opuscula Theologica, 1830), 149-168 where he identified the book of Deuteronomy, at least its earliest version, with the "book" found in the temple during the reign of Josiah (2 Kgs 22); Julius. Wellhausen, *Prologomena Zur Geschichte Israels. ET Prologomena to the History of Israel. Edinburg*, (Berlin, 1885), 17-51.

⁵ Reuter, *Kultzentralisation: Entstehung Und Theologie von Dtn 12, BBB 87*; E. Nestle, "Das Deuteronomium Und II Könige XXII," *ZAW* 22 (1902): 170–71.

⁶ Gustav Hölscher, "Komposition Und Ursprung Des Deuteronomiums," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 40, no. Jahresband (1922): 161–255; T. Oestreicher, "Dtn Xii 13f Im Licht von Dtn Xxiii 16f," *ZAW* 52 (1934): 246–49; Adam C. Welch, *The Code of Deuteronomy*. (London: J. Clarke & Co., Limited, 1924) attempted to prove that Deuteronomy does not demand centralization of cult and that the laws originated in northern Israel in the time of Samue; W. Stäerck, *Das Problem Des Deuteronomiums* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1924); Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: JSOTSup 15, 1981), 145; Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 274 - 289.

⁷ Gerhard Von Rad, *Deuteronomium-Studien: Von Gerhard von Rad* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1947); Albrecht Alt, "Die Heimat Des Deuteronomiums," *Kleine Schriften Zur Geschichte Des Volkes Israel* 2 (1953): 250–75; have led most modern scholars to critique earlier works on Deut 12. For further research on legislative strata of Deut especially 12. These include H. G. Mitchell, "The Use of the Second Person in Deuteronomy," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 18 (1899): 61–109; Georges Minette De Tillesse, "Sections" Tu" et Sections" Vous" Dans Le Deuteronomie," *Vetus Testamentum* 12, no. Fasc. 1 (1962): 29–87; Ernest Nicholson, "The Centralisation of the Cult in Deuteronomy," *Vetus Testamentum* 13, no. 1 (1963): 380–89; Ronald E Clements, "Deuteronomy and the Jerusalem Cult Tradition," *Vetus Testamentum* 15, no. Fasc. 3 (1965): 300–312; Baruch Halpern, "The Centralization Formula in Deuteronomy," *Vetus Testamentum* 31, no. Fasc. 1 (1981): 20–38.

⁸ Other current studies include: Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2004).

⁹ Ikot Ekpene Diocese was established as Catholic Diocese in 1963. It is located in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria and uses Efik Bible (*Edisana Nwed Abasi Ibom*) as its text of worship - Bible Society of Nigeria, *Edisana Nwed Abasi Ibom* (Apapa: The Bible Society of Nigeria, 1985).

¹⁰ Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," 191.

theological contents. They also lay emphasis on several significant themes, including covenant, obedience, law for life, the holiness of life, worship of one God, and a sense of unity. Other popular themes that characterized Deuteronomy are; inclusiveness, universalism, social justice, truth, and humanitarian gestures. Regarding, dating, a good number of commentators argue for the pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic periods, as the proposed dates for its formation.¹¹ Champions of the pre-exilic date for Deuteronomy 12 draw their suggestions from the thesis Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette. He opines that "the 'book of the law' found in the Temple of Jerusalem in the eighteenth year of King Josiah's reign (640-609 B.C.), was substantially the content of the Book of Deuteronomy (2 Kgs 22–23)."¹² Also, in 2 Kings 22–23, "we read that in the eighteenth year of a King Josiah's reign some repairs were being conducted in the temple (22:3), and the God-fearing King Josiah sent the scribe Shaphan on an official trip to Hilkiyah, the high priest, with instructions concerning the financing of the ongoing repair work. Hilkiyah gave Shaphan a "book of the law" which he found in the Temple."¹³

Shaphan not only read it but brought the reading content to the listening ears of King Josiah, who was alarmed by the content of the Book (22:8). As a result, he requested the prophetess Huldah to consult the oracle of the Lord with concern about the seemingly and threatening content of the book (22:10). Responding, the prophetess Huldah prophesied doom upon the community and the land due to their apostasy and idolatrous practices in their various shrines (22:15-17). Since Josiah humbly reacted with penitent to the threatening content of the newly recovered book, Huldah reassured Josiah of safety from the forthcoming disaster (22:18-20). Josiah convoked an assembly where he not only resolved to abide by the covenanted contents of the new book (23:1-3), but inaugurated a reform to implement the demands of the law book (23:4). Notably, "all the cult objects pertaining to the worship of Baal and Asharah and the host of heaven were removed from the temple (23:4), while the paraphernalia of the Assyrian Shamash cult was destroyed (23:11)."¹⁴ In fact, as extensively testified by Nicholson, "the Phoenician, Moabite and Ammonite cult centers which Solomon is said to have built, south-east of Jerusalem (1Kgs 11: 5-7), were destroyed (23:13). Idolatrous priests who had been installed at shrines throughout Judah were deposed (23:5). Cult prostitution (23:7), the Molech cult with its human sacrifices (23:10), and the demon cults (23:8) were rooted out."¹⁵ As if these were not enough, "pagan cults and altars innovated by Ahaz and Manasseh were destroyed (23:12). Indiscriminate sanctuaries throughout Judah were destroyed and their priests brought up to Jerusalem where cultic worship was now centralized (23:8-9)."¹⁶ Those in Bethel, in northern Israel also felt the impact of Josiah's reformation (23:15).

On the other hand, successors of De Wette, including Oestreicher argue that the aim of the reform was not cult centralization in Jerusalem, but only the purification of all defilement, especially of the Assyrians. Welch argues that the original Deuteronomy did not demand absolute centralization of the cult at Jerusalem but only relative one at several larger sanctuaries. G. Hölscher maintained that underlying the present narrative in 2 Kings 22–23 is an original Elohist source (E) narrative that has

¹¹ Studies on the formation history of Deuteronomy is enormous, but some of them are well summarized in the following works: Julius A Bewer, "The Case for the Early Date of Deuteronomy," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1928, 305–21; Lewis Bayles Paton, "The Case for the Post-Exilic Origin of Deuteronomy," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 47 (1928): 322–57; George Dahl, "The Case for the Currently Accepted Date of Deuteronomy," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1928, 358–79; Ernest Wilson Nicholson, "Deuteronomy and Tradition," 1967; Clements, "Deuteronomy and the Jerusalem Cult Tradition"; Halpern, "The Centralization Formula in Deuteronomy"; Alexander Rofé, "The Strata of the Law about the Centralization of Worship in Deuteronomy and the History of the Deuteronomistic Movement," in *Deuteronomy: Issues and Interpretation Congress Volume: Uppsala 1971*, ed. H. Nyberg (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 97–101; Yoshihide Suzuki, "The Place Which Yahweh Your God Will Choose in Deuteronomy," in *Problems in Biblical Theology: Essays in Honor of Rolf Knierim*, ed. H. Sun and K. Eades (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 338–52; Helga Weippert, "Der Ort, Den Jahwe Erwählen Wird, Um Dort Seinen Namen Wohnen Zu Lassen: Die Geschichte Einer Alttestamentlichen Formel," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 24, no. 1 (1980): 76–94.

¹² Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," 192.

¹³ Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," 192.

¹⁴ Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," 192.

¹⁵ Nicholson, "Deuteronomy and Tradition," 3.

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been reworked over the years by redactors, the last of whom was a Deuteronomist, who re-edited it after 500B.C., and made it appear as if Josiah's book was the Deuteronomy which has been composed a few years before the work of Rd2.¹⁷ In addition, R. H. Kennett held the view that the author of the narrative of Josiah's reign in 2 Kings 22–23 was too far removed in time from the events described to be a reliable witness. He argued that the author must have written this work after the fall of Judah in 586 B.C.¹⁸

However, others have also argued that Deuteronomy is a post-exilic material.¹⁹ However, the most interesting and recent result of criticism fits into our earlier remark borrowed from Ska that the history of the dating of Deuteronomy is like a city rebuilt after several earthquakes. Deuteronomy 12, has experienced a long literary process in which several older law codes have been enlarged,²⁰ edited, and innovated.²¹ Thomas Römer most recently reduced Deuteronomy 12 to three periods of editorial activity: verses 13-18, written about 620 B.C.; verses 8-12 are the outcome of an exilic redaction, while verses 2-7 and verses 20-27 represent the last revision, probably from the Persian period.²²

In fact, recent arguments in this direction include: the arguments for Persian Imperial Authorization and the theory of *Bürger-Gemeinde* (the theory of citizens connected with the Temple). The former approach spear-headed by P. Frei, argues basically, that when the postexilic community was reconstituted and began to organize itself, it felt that a legal foundation was needed. Since Jerusalem was a part of the Persian Empire, it was necessary for this community to obtain some kind of official permission that provided a specific, concrete, legal basis and context for them to function. This has a political dimension that could not be ignored by Persia. The latter approved by J. P. Weinberg, hypothesizes a postexilic community of Jerusalem, organized around the temple as being responsible for the redaction of our literary unit. At this time, especially in Babylonia, temples were like today's banks and commercial centers. They had official status, recognized by the Persian Empire, and this gave them a relatively autonomous position, notably in the financial area, to facilitate the redaction of the texts.²³ No consensus has yet been reached on this matter. This still leaves open, the problem of authorship and place of Deut 12:13-19.

An examination of the rest of the arguments is beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, it is evident in the sketched religious background of Deuteronomy that there was a sincere attempt to discourage random sacrifices to other gods at random places of worship. Put differently, there was an attempt to encourage cult centralization in the place the Lord had chosen to place his name.

Structuring, Delimiting and Translation of the Text

To add to the preceding historical and religious background of the book of Deuteronomy it is worth noting that scholars who study Deuteronomy 12:13-19 usually pursue this in the overall context of the Book of Deuteronomy, which has many structures as there are exegetes.²⁴ Nicholson "proposes six structures: (1) First discourse (1:1-5, 6–3:29; 4:1-40). (2) Second discourse (4:44-49; 5:1-21; 6:4-5;

¹⁷ Nicholson, "Deuteronomy and Tradition," 5-17. This provides a good summary of the views.

¹⁸ Nicholson, "Deuteronomy and Tradition," 5-17. This provides a good summary of the views.

¹⁹ Paton, "The Case for the Post-Exilic Origin of Deuteronomy," 322 – 57.

²⁰ Reuter, *Kultzentralisation: Entstehung Und Theologie von Dtn 12*, BBB 87, has recently and diachronically engaged in this. But her critics argue that such confident approaches raise more questions since the *Temple* criteria for differentiating pre-exilic- deuteronomic material from another is still not very clear.

²¹ Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation*, 1-53.

²² Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 56-65; Nibert Lohfink, *Lectures on Deuteronomy, 12–14* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1983), 101-105, holds even the law conventionally deemed the earliest, Deut 12:13-19, has already been reworked in light of the final stage of the redaction.

²³ Jean Louis Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Indiana, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 217 - 233 provides a concise analysis of these theories which of course has many advocates as well as many opponents.

²⁴ Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch*, 16, reminds us that book of Deuteronomy has 34 chapters, 955 verses and 71 pages in BHS; Hugo Wilhelm Paul Kleinert, "Das Deuteronomium Und Der Deuteronomiker," *Untersuchungen Zur Alttestamentlichen Rechts- Und Literaturgeschichte*, 1872, 167; Norbert Lohfink, "Der Bundesschluss Im Land Moab: Redaktionsgeschichtliches Zu Dt 28, 69-32: 47," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 6, no. 1 (1962): 32–33; Ska, *Pentateuch*, 38-39 divide Deut into four structures, using key titles such as "Words" (1:1), "Laws" (4:44), "Covenant" (28:69) and "Blessings" (33:1)..

9:7b–10:11). (3) Legal section (12–26). (4) Curses and blessings (27–28). (5) Moses insistence on faithfulness to covenant (29–30) and (6) Moses’ last words, blessings and death (31–34).²⁵

These six structures "can be reclassified as:

1. Historical review and notices (Deut 1–4)
2. God’s commandments (5–11)
3. Deuteronomic Laws/Code (12–26)
4. Curses, blessings and God’s favors (27–30)
5. Final notices and death Moses’ death (31–34)."²⁶

Evidently, within the above structure, Deuteronomy 12: 13-19 is proximately situated in the third structure of the Deuteronomic Laws (12–26). This is of course, literally stitched together with features and repetition of “statutes and ordinances...be careful to observe...” (12:1 and 26:16). In this structure, Deuteronomy 12 serves as its immediate context, with a very extensive statement on the need to worship God in one central place. It is further woven with what precedes and links with what follows.

The two chapters, Deuteronomy 12 and 26, bracket the rest of the law code with a focus on bringing offerings to the central place of worship. Furthermore, internal structuring elements create links between verses 1 and 28 (“be careful”), between verses 8, 25 and 28 (“doing what is right in the Lord's eyes”), and between verses 13, 19 and 30 (“be careful less...”). It follows through a chiasmic structure (11:31-32) and a bridging structure (12:30–13:1). A close examination of these second person plural verses both seem to conclude the parenthesis of chapters 6–11 and the episode for the law code that follows (Deut. 12).

Literary and interestingly, a significant point of contact to the following text (Deut. 12), is the "introductory “when”, (*kî* "kini" in Efik), in Deut 11:31, which states the time and the place for worship and obedience to the law in the book of Deuteronomy."²⁷ Importantly, this same “when”, (*kî*), a particle of connection links the entire parenthesis (Deut 5–11), to the law text (Deut 12:1), in a fashionable chiasmic form. The passage reads, “When (“*kî*,” "kini") you are about to cross the Jordan to enter and occupy the land which the Lord, your God, is giving you....” (11: 31), be careful to observe all the statutes and decrees that I set before you (v. 32). Then “these are the statutes and decrees (12:1) and “every command that I enjoin you...” (13:1-4)."²⁸

A Polemic of purification (vv.2-7)

B Temporal conditions for centralization (vv. 8-12)

C Centralization/secular slaughter and practical consequences (vv.13-19)

B¹ Geographical conditions for secular slaughter (vv.20-28)

A¹ Polemic for purification (vv.29-31).²⁹

It further unfolds in a logical pattern and lays emphasis on where to sacrifice (vv. 2-7) and when to sacrifice to the Lord (vv.8-12). It also stresses innovation of former practices (vv.13-19), as well as updates the limits of cultic purity (vv.20-31).³⁰ Unequivocally, the text of focus, Deuteronomy 12:13–19, draws a contrast between "the merely human perception of sacred places of worship with divine

²⁵ Nicholson, “Deuteronomy and Tradition,” 18-19; Udoekpo, “First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene,” 193.

²⁶ Udoekpo, “First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene,” 194, discusses this extensively.

²⁷ Udoekpo, “First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene,” 194.

²⁸ Udoekpo, “First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene,” 194.

²⁹ Georg Braulik, *Die Deuteronomischen Gesetze Und Der Dekalog: Studien Zum Aufbau von Deuteronomium 12-26* (Verlag Kath. Bibelwerk, 1991), 23 - 30.

³⁰ This logical order was observed in Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 150-151.

choices and explores some practical considerations of central worship (cultic centralization)."³¹ In fact, what follows is the translation from the MT into English, familiar to many readers. Its analysis advances a theological contrast between what is to be done in the sanctuary (vv.13-14, 18-19) with what is locally forbidden or permitted in the community (vv.15-17).³²

Translation of Deuteronomy 12:13-19

Let us read the following MT translation into English and Efik with slight variations.

- 13a. השמר לך פן תעלה עלתיך בכל מקום אשר תראה
(Take care lest you offer your burnt offering at any/all the place that you see)
- 14a. כי אם במקום אשר יבחר יהוה באחד שבטיך
(But only at one of the places that the Lord will choose in one of your tribes)
- 14b. שם תעלה עלתיך ושם תעשה כל אשר אנכי מצוך
(There you shall offer your burnt offering, and there you shall do all that I commanded you)
- 15a. רק בכל-אות נפשך תזבח ואכלת בשר כברכת יהוה אלהיך אשר נתן לך בכל שעריך
(Yet whenever you desire you may slaughter and eat the flesh according to the blessing which the Lord your God has given to you within any of your tribes)
- 15b. הטמא והטהור יאכלנו כצבי וכאיל
(The clean and the unclean may eat of as they would gazelle or deer)
- 16a. רק הדם לא תאכלו
(Only the blood you must not eat)
- 16b. על הארץ תשפכנו כמים
(Pour it out on the ground like water)
- 17a. לא תוכל לאכל בשעיך מעשר דגנך ותירשך ויצהרך ובכרת בקרך וצאנך
(Nor must you eat within your tribes the tithe of your grain, and your wine, your oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flock)
- 17b. וכל נדריך אשר תדר ונדבתיך ונתרומת ידך
(And any of your votive offering which you vow and your freewill offerings, and the donations of your hand)
- 18a. כי אם לפני יהוה אלהיך תאכלנו במקום אשר יהוה יבחר אלהיך בו אתה ובנך ובתך ועבדך ואמתך והללוי אשר בשעיך
(But only in the presence of the Lord your God you shall eat, and in the place which the Lord our God, you and your son, daughter, male and female slaves, and the Levites who are at your gates)
- 18b. ושמחת לגני יהוה אלהיך בכל משלח ידך
(You shall rejoice in the presence of the Lord your God in all the deeds of your hands)
19. השמר לך פן תעזב את הלוי כל ימך על אדמתך
(Take care lest you neglect the Levites as long as you live in your land)

In Efik the text reads:

Kpeme Idem mbak afo ediwa edifop uwa fo ke kpukpru ebiet eke afo okutde (v.13). Edi ke ebiet emi Obong Abasi edimekde ke esien fo kiet, do ke afo ediwa edifop uwa fo, do nko ke afo edinyung anam kpukpru se ami nwukde fi (v.14)

³¹ Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," 195.

³² Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation*, 24, provides an impressive study of thematic structure of the centralization laws of Deuteronomy into 4 laws; cultic unity against Canaanite plurality of altars (12:2-7), condition for centralization (vv.8-12), requirement for centralization (vv.13-19) with concession for secular slaughter (v. 18), and conditions for inauguration of secular slaughter.

Edi nte ofuri ima esit fo edide, afo eyekeme ndiwot nnnung ntaunam, nte ememde ke ufok ek Obong Abasi fo fongde fi, ke kpukpuru obio fo; owo eke edehede ye owo eke asanade ekeme ndita enye, kpa nte edop ye okoyo (v.15)

Edi mbufu edudia iyip; mbufu eduok enye ke isong nte mmong (v.16)

Kuda oyoho ubak ibokpot fo duop, mme eke obufa wine fo, mme eke aran fo, mme eke akpa eyen enang ye erong fo, mme eke aganga fo baba kiet eke afo edikangade, mme eke uwa imaesit for, mme eke edimenere uwa ubok fo, udia ebiet fo (v.17).

Edi ke iso Obong Abasi fo ke afo edidia enye ke ebiet emi Obong Abasi fo edimekde, afo ye eyen-eren fo, ye ofin-anwan fo, ye mme Levite emi edungde ke obio fo' ndien date sit ke iso Obong Abasi fo ke kpukpru nkpo eka afo anyande ubok fo ke esit (v.18).

Adanga ini nte afo edidude ke isong fo, kpeme idem fo mbak afo ediduok me Levite (v.19).

Obviously, with a careful reading of the above passage, especially in English, one notices the following chiasmatic structure:

A. v.13a: השמר לך פן תעלה ("take care lest...")

B. v.14a: כי אם במקום אשר שם תעלה עלתיך ("but only at the place...you shall offer")

C. v.15a: תזבח ואכלת בשר בכל שערריך... ("slaughter and eat within...towns")

D. v.16a: רק הדם לא תאכלו ("only you shall not eat the blood")

C^I.v.17a: לא תוכל לאכל בשעריך ("you shall not eat within your towns")

B^I.18a: כי אם לפני יהוה אלהיך תאכלנו במקום ("instead you shall eat at the place")

A^I. v. 19a: השמר לך פן תעזב ("take care lest you neglect...")

This structure forms the basis of the outline for the rest of our exegesis.

Detailed Exegesis of Deuteronomy 12:13-19

Take Care ("kpeme idem,") Lest You Offer (השמר לך פן תעלה, v. 13)

This verse 13 begins by inviting the people of God to be very prudent, truthful, humble and careful in making a choice of the place and the manner to worship the Lord. This message resonates today among Christians in different parts of the world, including Africa and Nigeria in particular. This exhortation falls in line with the traditional and typical Deuteronomic genres, such as a homily, exhortation, sermon, reflective speeches and pieces of advice. In fact, verse 13 "Take care/be careful, lest you offer burnt offering at any place, that you see/kpukprue ebiet emi afo okutde" (השמר לך פן תעלה עלתיך בכל (מקום אשר תראה), is advisory, imperative and exhortative language from Moses. Anyone who goes around Christian churches in Nigeria today could hear many pastors preach in this verse, forbidding random, non-Christian sacrifices, both at individual homes, town halls, village squares, and at African Traditional shrines.

Granted that verse 13 has minor textual issues, they do not affect drastically the theological meaning of the text. As has been noted somewhere, "apart from the MT text of the Hebrew Bible, a few other variants such as the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Targum Jonathan reads בכל מקום ("in all places," or "at any place") with a definite article—that is, as בכל המקום ("at all the places")."³³ Jean-Louis Ska notes that "this reflects an older text of Exodus 20:24 that has undergone Deuteronomic redaction and innovation since laws in ancient Israel were constantly reread and corrected in the light of present-day circumstances and needs."³⁴ The "LXX's εν παντι τοπω, translates the Latin *omni loco* (in all places)."³⁵ But "when אשר תראה ("which you see," "kpukprue ebiet emi afo okutde") is added, it becomes clearer that בכל מקום in verse 13 is in reference to the Canaanite shrines and places described in Deuteronomy 12. The Israelites, "demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you

³³ Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," 196.

³⁴ Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch*, 188; Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation*, 27-28.

³⁵ See HALOT 2:626-27, where *māqôm* is described variously depending on the context as a location, place, site/place, room, locality and sacred site (Deut 12; 14:23-25; 1 Kgs 8:29; Isa 60:13; Ps 24:3; Ezra 9:8). The latter is most relevant to our places of first Sunday worship in Ikot Ekpene Diocese of Nigeria.

are about to dispose serve their gods, on the mountain heights, on the hills and under every leafy tree” (v.2).³⁶

Verse 13, truly "discourages Christians from worshipping or making sacrifices or burnt offerings at African traditional shrines, or carry out abuses at various worship centers, in Africa."³⁷ It is an improvement on older traditions (Exod 20:24) on behalf of Christians everywhere. It also fosters unity, synodality, and solidarity among believers. It manifests a prohibition of random sacrifices, as well as fosters unity and inclusiveness among believers. Verse 13, anticipates the divine choice of a worship place (v. 14), non-sacral slaughter (v.15), and foregrounds, for example, the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of Masses, and central worship of God in African communities and churches.

In the Place Chosen by the Lord Place (במקום אשר יבחר יהוה, v. 14)

Randon worships and sacrifices to deities are forbidden in verse 14. It rather encourages a central worship of the true one God and Lord of Israel, at a place chosen only by the Lord and his inspired agents:

14a. כי אם במקום אשר יבחר יהוה באחד שבטיך

(But only at one of the places that the Lord will choose in one of your tribes)

14b. שם תעלה עלתיך ושם תעשה כל אשר אנכי מצוך.

(There you shall offer your burnt offering, and there you shall do all that I commanded you).

Verse 14 is a true reminder of the Christian faith, and those of the early missionaries in Africa, and Ikot Ekpene Diocese in Nigeria. It teaches all that God is the one that inspires those good pastoral choices made by the Church and instituted authorities. Just "as verse 13 prohibits sacrificial worship at random places and altars, verse 14 intensifies this prohibition by stressing that worship, sacrifices, and offerings must be made exclusively at a designated place chosen by God (*ke ebiet emi Obong Abasi edimekde*), through his inspired human agents, out of all the tribal communities and villages."³⁹ Parishes, Dioceses, and places of worship in Nigeria are lawfully established with a profound sense of holiness and pastoral needs. The verse is exegetically and theologically significant, in that, it is often compared with verse 5 ("but you shall seek a place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation").

Noticeable, in verse 5, "the law concerning cult centralization of worship is formulated in plural, while in verse 14 it is formulated in the singular."⁴⁰ Whereas verse 5 has "from or out of all your tribes," (מיכול-שיבתיכם) verse 14 has "in any one of your tribes" (באחד שבטיך).⁴¹ Many scholars

³⁶ Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," 196.

³⁷ Michael Ufok Udoekpo, Re-thinking the Day of YHWH and Restoration of Fortunes in the Propohet Zephaniah: An Exegetical and Theological Study of 1:14-18; 3:14-20 DATID Vol 2. (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2010),288-291; Mchael Ufok Udoekpo, *Rethinking The Prophetic Critique of Worship in Amos 5 for Contemporary Nigeria and the USA* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017),114-136, where some of these have been discussed.

³⁸ Michael Ufok Udoekpo, *Rethinking the Prophetic Critique of Worship in Amos 5 for Contemporary Nigeria and the USA* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016).Michael Ufok Udoekpo, *Rethinking the Prophetic Critique of Worship in Amos 5 for Contemporary Nigeria and the USA* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 291;

³⁹ Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," 197.

⁴⁰ This shifting phenomenon is called Numeruschwechsel, a frequent change from singular to plural between second person in verbs and nouns and pronominal suffixes in the book of Deuteronomy. It is not only found in chapter 12. But in other places like chapters 4 and 18. It is a grammatical issue that must be evaluated in each context. On one hand, it shows different redactional processes and layers of the final text. On the other hand, it serves as a rhetorical device to highlight certain elements in the text. I can also be caused by insertion of traditional or quotation formula from other passages. In fact, Deuteronomy according to... "uses collective singular to address the entire community, but shift to plural to focus on the individuals who make up the community in order to stress personal responsibility." For additional studies on *Numeruschwechsel* see Georges Minnette de Tillesse, "Sections 'tu' et sections 'vous' dans le Deutéronme," in *VT* 12(1962): 29-87, and Christopher Begg, "The Significance of Numeruschwechsel in Deuteronomy," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 55, no. 1 (1979): 116–24.

⁴¹ Similar phrase of v. 5 is found in 1 Kings 8:16; 11:32; 14:21; 2 Kings 21:7, as "from all the tribes of Israel."

who debate these expressions agree that "both phrases aim at prohibiting worship at shrines and places (כי אם במקום) other than those specifically sanctioned or chosen (אשר יבחר יהוה) by the Lord."⁴²

In the context of churches in Africa, especially my home Diocese of Ikot Ekpene, that composed of various tribes, villages, and station communities, the choice of the central place of worship has "always been divinely inspired through our successive bishops and pastoral leaders. This divine choice is also decorated with divine blessings for all."⁴³

According to God's Blessings

This is a verse of divine blessings, to all, in terms of permitting secular slaughter. He also permits the eating of meals outside the central place of worship. To every rule, there is always an exception. Again, the verse reads:

15a. רק בכל-אות נפשך תזבח ואכלת בשר כברכת יהוה אלהיך אשר נתן לך בכל שעריך.

(Yet whenever you desire you may slaughter and eat the flesh according to the blessing which the Lord your God has given to you within any of your tribes)

15b. הטמא והטהור יאכלנו כצבי וכאיל.

(The clean and the unclean may eat of as they would gazelle or deer)

McConville observes that "what governs this exception is the word ("only" or "yet" "edi") known as "restrictive *raq*."⁴⁴ He believes that "it is assumed that meat (i.e. of clean animals, fit for human consumption) can be consumed only if slaughtered as part of a sacrificial ritual (Lev 17:2-9). The permission given here is new since Deuteronomy is humanitarian and meant to correct and update earlier laws.⁴⁵ Verse 15 "allows people to eat meat without first offering it in sacrifice."⁴⁶ That is to say that verse 15 "treats ritual cleanness as immaterial so that the larger social circle can share in the Lord's blessings by eating meat (v. 15b)."⁴⁷ In Ikot Ekpene Diocese, first Sunday worship is also marked with altar gifts of food-items, including livestock animals, such as, goat, for the upkeep of the priest, catechists, other than the sacrificial offerings led on the altar. These gifts are also shared in charity for the less privileged members of the community who normally come to worship in one central place, the parish or the diocese.

Do not Eat Blood (רק הדם לא תאכלו), v.16

Additionally, 16 prohibits blood, thus consumption upholding the sacredness of life.

Significant in verse 16a: רק הדם לא תאכלו ("only the blood you must not eat", "edi mbufo ekudia iyip"), and in verse 16b; על הארץ תשפכנו כמים ("pour it out on the ground like water"), is also the already discussed particle, "restrictive *rag* (only)".⁴⁸ This article serves as an introduction, not only to the sanction but to the blood which must be treated respectfully. It teaches that those handling blood must avoid pouring it on the ground as they would usually do with water. Clearly, it moves away from the older rituals (Lev 17:8-9), to an updated one. Later in Acts of the Apostles 15:20, the council of Jerusalem ruled that Christians were to distance themselves from eating blood. Of course, Christians who worship, or attend Holy Masses in Nigeria, especially in Ikot Ekpene Diocese, are not only aware of the once and for all, sacrifice of Christ on the Cross for all, stressed in the Letter to the Hebrews, but of the sacredness of life as a gift from God.

⁴² These scholars include, De Tillesse, "Sections 'tu' et sections 'vous' ,66-68; Welch, "The Two Descriptions of the Sanctuary in Deuteronomy," 442-444; Oestreicher, "Dtn xii 13f im Licht von Dtn Xxiii 16f," 246-249 and Ronald E Clements and Leander E Keck, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Abingdon Press, 1998), 386 - 397.

⁴³ Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13-19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," 198.

⁴⁴ J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy, Apollos Old Testament Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2002), 226.

⁴⁵ McConville, *Deuteronomy, Apollos Old Testament Commentary*, 226.

⁴⁶ McConville, *Deuteronomy, Apollos Old Testament Commentary*, 226- 227.

⁴⁷ Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation*, 31; Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13-19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," 199.

⁴⁸ Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13-19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," 200.

Offerings and Sacrifices Demanded in vv. 17-19

In a rhythmic and chiasmic manner, verses 17-19 somehow repeat verses 13-15:

17a. לא תוכל לאכול בשעריך מעשר דגןך ותירשך ויצהרך ובכרתך בקרך וצאנך

(Nor must you eat within your tribes the tithe of your grain, and your wine, your oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flock)

17b. וכל נדריך אשר תדר ונדבתוך ונתרומת ידך

(And any of your votive offering which you vow and your freewill offerings, and the donations of your hand)

18a. כי אם לפני יהוה אלהיך תאכלנו במקום אשר יהוה יבחר אלהיך בו אתה ובנך ובתך ועבדך ואמתך והללוי אשר בשעריך

(But only in the presence of the Lord your God you shall eat, and in the place which the Lord our God, you and your son, daughter, male and female slaves, and the Levites who are at your gates)

18b. ושמחת לגני יהוה אלהיך בכל משלה ידך

(You shall rejoice in the presence of the Lord your God in all the deeds of your hands)

19. חשמר לך פן תעזב את הלוי כל ימך על אדמתך

(Take care lest you neglect the Levites as long as you live in your land).

Beginning with verse 17, this passage offers a list of sacrifices, as well as grain, wine, oil, and firstborn of herds and flocks. They serve as a continuation of divine blessing to his people Israel (cf. v.15). These offerings are to be brought to the place chosen by the Lord for the common good. This once again conforms with the entire theology of Deuteronomy, that emphasis among other things, "Love, oneness, justice as well as promotes a greater and deeper sense of social responsibility to fellow Israelites."⁴⁹

These include, "their sons and daughters, male and female as well as slaves and Levites (vv.18-19)."⁵⁰ Finally, it can be said that, Deuteronomy 12: 13-19 not only demonstrates and calls for exclusive worship of God in one central place, "it brings joy and a sense of inclusivity to a divided, broken, corrupt tribes and families of Israel, by extension, African societies including Nigeria."⁵¹ It encourages fair distribution of food and resources among members. Faithfulness to God and the grace to overcome the worship of other gods and deities are among the major priceless lessons that the text of Deuteronomy 12:13-19 offers readers, both within and outside countries in Africa.

CONCLUSION

In what precedes, Deuteronomy 12:13-19, vehemently prohibits sacrificial worship at random altars (v.13) to idols. It underscores exclusive offerings of sacrifices at designated places or altars, chosen only by the Lord and his viceroys (v. 14). The analyzed passages sanction secular slaughter of domestic animals, not meant for sacrifice, wherever and whenever they are needed as regular meals and food in the communities, towns and villages (v.15). Deuteronomy further warns against eating, spilling and abusing of blood, since they are signs of life which is sacred in every culture, including Africa (vv.16-17). Deuteronomy demands unequivocally, that worship activities be done in one central place without discrimination to male, female, slave, and eunuch. This is to protect and demonstrate not only Israel's relationship with God, but a projection of a sense of national unity and patriotism that is elusive to many Nigerians, or Africans today (v.18-19).

Additional relevance of this discussed text Deuteronomy12:13-19, to the Church in Nigeria, especially Ikot Ekpene Diocese, cannot be over-emphasized. Religious communities, parishes, and dioceses in Africa or outside Africa, today are plagued with pluralism of socio-political, economic and

⁴⁹ Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, 10.

⁵⁰ Udoekpo, "First Sunday Worship in the Place the Lord Has Chosen as His Own: Reading Deuteronomy 12:13–19 in Honor of His Eminence Cardinal Dominic Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene," 200.

⁵¹ For the nature of Nigerian families and culture address by vv.13-19, see Michael Ufok Udoekpo, *Corruption in Nigerian Culture: The Liberating Mission of the Church* (Enugu, Nigeria: Snaap Press, 1994); Michael Ufok. Udoekpo, *Family Function & Children's Education in Modern Society*. (Ikot Ekpene,: Patom Graphics, 1997).

religious problems. This includes, as already discussed, the proliferation of shrines, churches, worship and miracle centers, competing deities, divisiveness, tribalism, poverty occasioned by effects of colonialism, global isolationism, relativism, and selfishness. This study "serves as a measure and provides the faithful with a renewed sense, or desire for oneness, trust in divine providence, fidelity in their one and true God who is ever-present in the midst of a joyful people, despite daily challenges."⁵² It offers above all, a sense of hope, solidarity, and synodality with one another, particularly the poor, the weak, foreigners, the homeless, immigrants, and the less privileged (male, female, foreigners and their priests), irrespective of class, village and town. It invites everyone irrespective of color, gender worship location to choose obedience, unity, and oneness in the worship of God in a place that he chooses, espoused in the Book of Deuteronomy 12:13-19

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⁵² For additional list of these challenges see Michael Ufok Udoekpo, "Hearing and Reading the "Rebuilding" voice of the Prophet Haggai (1:1–11) in the Context of African Christianity" in *Bible, Interpretation, and Context: Reading Meaning from An African Perspective*, eds. Ferdinand Okorie and Mark Enemali (New York: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2023),111-126.

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