

The Love Commandment in Deut 6:4-9 and Its Centrality for Biblical Faith and Evangelisation

Rev. Fr. Dr. Luke Emehiele Ijezie

1. INTRODUCTION

The central formulation of Israel's faith is found in Deut 6:4-5, otherwise called the great commandment or the *Shema*. The commandment enjoins Israel to place its love of YHWH over and above every other consideration. The text is recited two times every day by observant Jews, in the morning and evening prayer services, and it is written on their phylacteries. This is in response to the injunction in Deut 6:7-8 that it be recited "when you lie down and when rise up" and that it be fastened "as a signpost on your hand" and "on your forehead". The text of the *Shema* in 6:4-5 has for long been a subject of much exegetical and theological debate among scholars.¹ The interesting thing here is the definition of the relationship with YHWH in terms of love. The perplexity is why love is emphasized rather than obedience and faith in the human approach to God. In many cultures, the human relationship with the Deity can hardly be expressed in terms of love. This is particularly so of African traditional religion. Generally, the African traditional approach to the Deity is a bit ambivalent. While the gods are recognized as the sources of life and good things of life, the much one can do is to pay tribute and sacrifice to them. There is hardly any place for love in the relationship. African scholars agree that the African approach to the Deity is generally utilitarian and self-centered.² This is often reflected in the attitudes of most contemporary Africans towards the Christian faith. It accounts for much incoherence in the practice of the faith. This makes it particularly interesting to examine how the Bible regards love as the proper approach to the Deity.

The Judeo-Christian religion is based on a personal relationship between God and humanity. Faith in this religious tradition is a response to God who reveals himself through his word. Faith is thus a relationship of response and the response is one of love to an experience of love. In the Old Testament, the love relationship is expressed in terms of covenant relations and this is summed up in the Christ-event in the New Testament. Thus faith is a movement of love. This is encapsulated in the Great Commandment of Deut 6:4-5, which begins with the call to hear and then to enter into a response of love. Without the response of love to this God who speaks, it becomes impossible to speak of genuine faith. The present study examines the various elements of this text of Deut 6:4-5 with the aim of underlining the importance and centrality of the human love for God in the contemporary proclamation of the faith.

2. THE TEXT OF DEUT 6:4-5

Deut 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel! YHWH is our God, YHWH is one! ⁵You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

2.1 Setting of the Text

¹ See, among others, William Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *CBQ* 25 (1963) 77-87; Lucien-Jean Bord and David Hamidović, "Écoute Israël (Deut. VI 4)," *VT* 52 (2002) 13-29; Paul Foster, "Why did Matthew get the Shema Wrong? A Study of Matthew 22:37," *JBL* 133 (2003) 309-33; Jacqueline E. Lapsley, "Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy," *CBQ* 65 (2003) 350-369.

² See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969) 5; E. Ikenga-Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation [Studies in Igbo Religion]* (Ibadan: Claverianum Press, 1985) 95.

The text of Deut 6:4-5 is set within the second address of Moses (5:1b-26:19) in Deuteronomy, as the book is structured mainly as the final instructions of Moses to the Israelites on the plains of Moab before their entry into Canaan, the land of promise. As a matter of fact, Deuteronomy presents the most comprehensive exposition of Israel's faith and the *modus operandi* of that faith. The wide opinion of scholars is that the book actually originated in the later days of the monarchy, its major contents being connected with the reforms of King Josiah of Judah.³ The reform movement sought to purify the cult of YHWH, to rid it of all the prevailing aberrations and unify all aspects of the lives of the greater Israelite people under the common worship of YHWH. Even though the final shape of the book may be situated in the exilic and post-exilic times, its original connection with the Josiah reforms is very convincing. The text of the Great Commandment, particularly, summarizes the whole ideology of the reform movement.

2.2 Analysis of the Text

The present text of Deut 6:4-5 presents both problems of translation and interpretation. All these will be examined in the analysis but with greater emphasis on how the different elements relate to the central theme of love.

Hear O Israel

The Hebrew verb *shema* ' , used here in the Qal imperative form, has the primary sense of hearing a sound with the ear.⁴ In this context, it is an invitation to incline the ear to receive a message. The phrase "Hear O Israel" (*Shema: Israel*) is used in a number of other places in Deuteronomy (4:1; 5:1; 6:4; 9:1; 20:3) as an invitation to the people to attend to the words of the law. The call to hear is an invitation to enter into a relationship. It calls on the people to enter into relationship with God through hearing his word which in the context of 6:4 also means the obedience of faith.

YHWH is our God, YHWH is one! (YHWH elōhēnū YHWH ehād)

This statement expresses the exclusivity and singularity of YHWH. Only YHWH is the God of Israel and YHWH is God, not open to local variations. The translational problem can be seen in the variations among the different versions as shown below:

NAB: "The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!"

NAS: "The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"

NAU: "The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"

NIV: "The LORD our God, the LORD is one."

NJB: 'Yahweh our God is the one, the only Yahweh.'

NKJ: "The LORD our God, the LORD is one!"

NRS: "The LORD is our God, the LORD alone."

The problem actually has to do with the translation of the Hebrew word *ehad*, which ordinarily means "one" but which some render as "alone". The ordinary Hebrew word for "alone" is *lebad*. While the two can still express the same idea in some contexts, the understanding of *ehad* as "one" suits the present context. The sense is that YHWH is one and there is no other and no

³ N. Lohfink, *Studien zum Deuteronomium und zur deuteronomistischen Literatur III* (SBA 20; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmGH, 1995) 16-27.

⁴ See K. T. Aitken, "šm.", *NIDOTTE* 4, 175.

duplication or metamorphosis. It may be good to clarify this point because it is the source of the confusion in the translations. It is not only that YHWH alone should be worshipped in Israel but that the worship has to be uniform.

This dogma theoretically rules out any form of polytheism from Israel. But the more important nuance of the formulation is that the YHWH cult is not open to any form of contextual adaptation. While the cult of Baal has many forms, that of YHWH is one and uniform and does not admit of local variations.⁵ As J. A. Dearman comments, “Behind the brief affirmation is the critique of the perception that Yahweh took on many forms, depending on the place of revelation.”⁶ This was a real danger in the social environment where local sanctuaries multiplied and were at the service of diverse social and political interests. In fact, some extra biblical Hebrew inscriptions have shown that the YHWH cult was localized in different forms in the region. For instance, in the eighth inscriptions discovered at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, around the Sinai, there are such references as “YHWH of Teman and his Asherah”, “YHWH of Samaria and his Asherah”.⁷ These inscriptions seem to show that Asherah was worshipped as the female consort of YHWH. This has awakened the debate whether early forms of YHWHism understood YHWH as having a wife just like other gods within the region.⁸ The Deuteronomic reform movement fought against these pluralistic expressions of the YHWH cult, and the account of the Josiah reform in 2 Kings 22-23 shows the dismantling of the localized shrines and altars. According to Dearman, “If Yahweh had many forms, then so could the covenant. Poly-yahwism could lead inevitably to a fragmented Israel, unable to resist the seductions of Canaan and easily tempted to supplement Yahweh’s shifting identity with ‘specialist deities’ whose strengths lay in particular areas.”⁹ This idea is developed in other parts of Deuteronomy. It is the foundation of the law on centralization of worship (Deut 12:1-28). This law stipulates only a single sanctuary for the worship of YHWH, and this eventually came to be the Jerusalem temple, even though it is not specifically mentioned in Deuteronomy. The aim is to avoid the corruption of the YHWH cult with the multiplication of local sanctuaries.

You shall love YHWH your God

The command to love God has raised a lot of discussion in contemporary scholarship. The point of the argument is on the nature of the love which Israel is to render to God. William Moran kicked off the debate by his argument that the love meant here is obedience and loyalty to the covenant stipulations and not that type of emotional or passionate love that children have for their parents.¹⁰ According to him, what is meant in Deuteronomy is covenantal love and this, following the common practice in treaties between suzerains and vassals in the ancient near East, refers to the “duty of the vassal towards his sovereign”. This view has won a lot of adherents, almost a majority, but some scholars have also convincingly argued differently. The contrary argument is that love here implies both obedience and passionate commitment. Jacqueline E. Lapsley argues along this line persuasively while acknowledging the merits of Moran’s

⁵ See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1: The History of Israel’s Historical Traditions (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1975) 227.

⁶ J. Andrew Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1992) 145.

⁷ See “New Light on Israelite Tradition: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” ZAW 94 (1982) 2–20.

⁸ See the discussion in William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 1-344.

⁹ Dearman, *Religion and Culture*, 145.

¹⁰ Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” 77-87.

position.¹¹ She avers, “the people’s love for God in Deuteronomy undeniably entails obedience to the law. Yet the legal significance of loving God does not necessarily obviate its emotional connotations.”¹² Lapsley, arguing with others, points out that even the modern together with ancient understanding of “loyalty” carries with it a significant emotional content.¹³ An examination of the Hebrew understanding of “loving” may throw some light on the issue.

The Hebrew verb *’āhab* (to love) occurs 140 times in the Hebrew Bible, and it basically expresses an intense emotional feeling towards a person with whom one seeks for intimate relationship.¹⁴ This experience of an emotional attachment underlies the different uses of the term in the texts.¹⁵ In many of these, it expresses the relationship based on election and covenant. One can then argue, in the light of the immediate context of this command, that love of God in Deut 6:5 involves, altogether, obedience to the covenant, emotional commitment to God and constancy in this commitment. Because YHWH liberated Israel from Egypt, he lays absolute claim to Israel’s allegiance. This allegiance is institutionalized in the making of a covenant. Israel’s benefit from this is that it is to dwell in YHWH’s own land and remain under YHWH’s provident guidance, which expresses itself in manifold forms. This provident guidance requires Israel’s continued fidelity to the Torah. The survival of the people depends on this fidelity. The Torah is seen as a divine gift to Israel, a pledge of YHWH’s love for Israel, and, as a result, obedience to the Torah is supposed to be a response to YHWH’s love. In like manner, the transgression of the Torah is a tacit rejection of YHWH’s love. The Torah is not seen as a merely legalistic document but a compendium of YHWH’s will for the good and survival of his people.

The statement that YHWH is the only God of Israel together with the fact that he is one implies that Israel cannot have any other allegiance. Dearman puts it well: “There is no sphere of human life from which Yahweh’s comprehensive oneness is excluded. One should love Yahweh unreservedly because there is no need for a divided allegiance.”¹⁶ For Deuteronomy, Israel’s commitment to YHWH has to be total, without any compromise. It is YHWH and no other. As John Goldingay puts it, “Deuteronomy is not seeking a mere formal, external obedience. It repeatedly affirms that YHWH’s people are to obey him, to fear him, to love him, to follow him, to conform to his ways, to hold fast to him, to trust him, to rejoice before him, to remember him, to serve him, to worship him, and to take their oaths in his name.”¹⁷ All these activities are possible only if they are unified by the sentiment of love. Without such a sentiment, obedience becomes mere externalism.

With all your heart (lēbāb)

The mention of the heart is an important qualification of the nature of the love meant in the context. In the Old Testament anthropology, the heart is the seat of not only the emotions but of the whole life of the individual. The heart, in Hebrew *lēb* or *lēbāb* (as in Deut 6:5), is conceived as the source of physical vitality and also as the seat of all psychological and intellectual functions.¹⁸ This is why the word is used in the texts in the sense that one feels both joy and pain

¹¹ Lapsley, “Feeling Our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy,” 350-369.

¹² Lapsley, “Love for God in Deuteronomy,” 352.

¹³ Lapsley, “Love for God in Deuteronomy,” 352.

¹⁴ P. J. J. S. Els, “*’hb*,” *NIDOTTE* 1, 278.

¹⁵ See H. Wallis, “*’ahabh*,” *TDOT* 1, 102-103.

¹⁶ Dearman, *Religion and Culture*, 146.

¹⁷ John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids 1987) 147.

¹⁸ See F. Stolz, “*lēb*, Heart,” *TLOT* 2, 639-640.

with the heart (Exod 4:14; Ps 4:8; 1 Sam 1:8; Ps 13:3), desires with the heart (Ps 34:7), wills with the heart (Job 17:11), loves with the heart (Deut 6:5), and even perceives and thinks with the heart (Gen 6:5; Deut 8:5; Job 18:14). The heart thus expresses the whole inner constitution of the human person or the inner core of existence (Judg 16:15,17f; 1 Sam 9:19) and, by extension, the person as a whole.¹⁹ The text of Prov 27:19 expresses it aptly: "As in water face reflects face, so the human (*adam*) heart reflects the human (*adam*) being." The injunction to love YHWH with the whole heart means that this love has to influence all the psychological and intellectual faculties of the person. YHWH demands a wholehearted relationship, one that arrests the whole inner core of the person.

What Deuteronomy is saying here anticipates what will later be expressed in Jer 31:31-34, where law is now to be written in the heart and no longer on the tablets of stone. In Isa 51:7 YHWH describes his people as "a people in whose heart is my Torah" (*'am tôrātî b'libbām*), and this is in agreement with the text of the new covenant in Jer 31:33, in which YHWH promises to write the Torah in the people's heart.²⁰ This thematic agreement may not be accidental and may support the scholarly position that Jer 31:31-34 belongs to the Deuteronomistic redaction of Jeremiah,²¹ a redaction that is also present in the Isaian corpus. The Torah in the heart in Isa 51:7 is better understood as the internalized knowledge of YHWH, which is produced by his indwelling Spirit. The new covenant in Jeremiah is so interiorized that it becomes unnecessary for a brother to teach a brother, and as in Isa 11:9, the whole land will be filled with the knowledge of YHWH. In a similar vein, Deuteronomy lays emphasis on the circumcision of the heart (Deut 10:16), and in Deut 30:6, Moses foretells that in the future, YHWH will circumcise the hearts of Israel's descendants to enable them love him with all their hearts. Thus the future covenantal circumcision is no longer that of the foreskin but that of the heart. Deuteronomy is a document for Israel's renewal which is actually a reaffirmation of the existing covenantal relationship frustrated by the people's incapacity to produce a genuine response. R. E. Clements sees the basic orientation of Deuteronomy in this light: "Communion with God must embrace thought, feeling and will if it is to be an effective contact between the divine and human realms. Without this personal seeking and loving God there can be no genuine relationship with him."²²

and with all your soul (nephesh)

The text of Deut 6:5 uses the word "heart" in parallel with the word *nephesh*, which is often translated as "soul". The biblical understanding of this term is far removed from what subsequent philosophical dualism has made of it. In the biblical use of the term, which expresses the Hebrew understanding, one does not *have* a *nephesh* but one *is* a *nephesh*.²³ The argument of the present writer is that the Hebrew *nephesh* is better understood in terms of the concept "being", which can be applied on different levels. This translation helps to explain why the Hebrew Bible often speaks of the *nephesh* of God (1 Sam 2:35; Isa 42:1; Jer 51:14; Amos 6:8; etc.), which becomes meaningful as God's very being. Just like the English word "being", the Hebrew *nephesh* can

¹⁹ See F. Stolz, "lēb, Heart," *TLOT* 2, 639-640.

²⁰ See N. Lohfink, "Bund und Tora bei der Völkerwallfahrt [Jesajabuch und Psalm 25]," in *Der Gott Israels und die Völker. Untersuchungen zum Jesajabuch und zu den Psalmen* (by N. Lohfink and E. Zenger; SBS 154; Stuttgart 1994) 47-48.

²¹ See N. Lohfink, *The Covenant Never Revoked. Biblical Reflections on Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (New York 1991) 19.

²² R. E. Clements, *Deuteronomy* (OTG; Sheffield 1989) 52.

²³ Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1973) 26.

have different connotations and metaphorical nuances in context but these do not detract from its basic meaning as “being”. Death does not separate the beingness (*nephesh*) from the body.²⁴ Just as the living person is called *nephesh*, the dead person is also called *nephesh*. The *nephesh* is thus the human person as he or she is, the very being which is called “individual”.

While heart expresses the individual’s inner core, *nephesh* expresses the individuality, the psychosomatic wholeness. In the actual usage, the heart and the *nephesh* often overlap in their functions, showing the close affinity between both concepts. In a number of texts (Deut 4:29; 6:5; 10:12; 11:13,18; 1 Sam 2:35; Ps 84:2), as in Deut 6:5, they are used in parallel to express personal identity, to emphasize the wholeness of the person. Deut 6:5 enjoins that this individual entity in the wholeness of its being should be involved in the act of loving God.

And with all your might (m^e’ōd)

The word m^e’ōd, used for might here, literally means “muchness, force, abundance”.²⁵ The word is used to amplify the earlier statement with the sense that the love for God should be with one’s fullest capacity.²⁶ The word is used as a noun only here and in 2 Kgs 23:25 as it is usually used as an adverb (very, much, exceedingly, etc.) in its other numerous occurrences. The use in 2 Kgs 23:25 is very significant, as it is applied to King Josiah of Judah thus: “Before him there was no king like him who turned to YHWH with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might (m^e’ōd), according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.” The significant feature here is that all the words used in Deut 6:5 are repeated here, showing that the author regards Josiah as the epitome of the obedience to the Deuteronomic Torah, summed up in the Great Commandment.

2.3 Synthesis

The formulation of the Great Commandment in Deut 6:4-5 begins from a statement what YHWH is for Israel and then moves on to express how Israel should relate to YHWH. This it does in a carefully crafted parallel structure, the form of a synthetic parallelism. It begins with loving with the heart (the inner being), moves on to the whole person (*nephesh*) and ends up with might (the force that drives the whole action).

The text presents the act of loving as the highest expression of faith in YHWH. A genuine act of love begins from an understanding of the implications of the covenantal relationship between YHWH and Israel and what this means for Israel’s religion and life. One metaphor that captures the relationship between is the metaphor of marriage. YHWH belongs to Israel and Israel’s whole life belongs to YHWH just as a wife belongs entirely to her husband. Thus the best way Israel can relate to YHWH is by love which expresses the movement of the whole being. Israel’s faith can only be a response of love, as that is the only form of relationship that involves a complete giving of the self. The total loyalty that Deut 6:4-5 asks for is a difficult one, and the biblical story shows that Israel found it difficult to live up to that standard. The attractions of the surrounding cultures, steeped in polytheistic cults, were difficult to resist, and almost throughout its history, the people combined the worship of YHWH with other cults. Of course, the social, political and religious consequences were disastrous. The text thus remains a great challenge to

²⁴ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel. Its Life and Institutions* (ET; London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961) 56.

²⁵ F. Brown – S. R. Driver – C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Hendrickson, 1907) no. 3966.

²⁶ See Samuel Dean McBride, “Yoke of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Deuteronomy 6:4-5,” *Int* 27 (1973) 304

all generations of YHWH's people on the type of committed faith required to belong genuinely to YHWH.

3. CENTRALITY OF THE GREAT COMMANDMENT FOR FAITH AND EVANGELIZATION

The Judeo-Christian religion is a religion of faith and proclamation. The one who believes must proclaim the faith. This is the basis of evangelization. In the Christian context, it takes on an added responsibility. Preaching the gospel is the vocation of every baptized Christian, and this is done in diverse ways all of which are different forms of witnessing to Christ. Faith itself is a response to God's love, and the proclamation of the faith is thus a proclamation of love. One can thus see the centrality of the Great Commandment in all these. The points can be further elaborated.

3.1 The central theological point of Deut 6:4-5 is that YHWH is the only God of Israel and since YHWH is one, Israel's relationship with this single God is to be a relationship of total commitment, which is a relationship of love. Deuteronomy makes it clear that YHWH loves Israel and Israel's response has to be in love as well. One may interpret this love from any perspective but what is paramount is that the relationship is defined by love. It is a love that involves the whole person. Israel's whole life is to be defined by this love. Love is the movement of the whole being towards God. Bernard Lonergan describes the religious experience as being in love with God, and as he says, "All love is self-surrender, but being in love with God is being in love without limits or qualifications or conditions or reservations". This expresses adequately the type of love relationship that Israel is called upon to enter into with YHWH. The point of Deut 6:4-5 is that Israel's whole life is by vocation theocentric. Every aspect of the people's daily life must have its link with the fundamental vocation of loving the one God, YHWH, otherwise, one would not be loving with the whole heart and whole being and whole might. Without this total orientation towards God, the faith of Israel cannot stand the test of time. Pope Francis, in his recent encyclical, *Lumen Fidei* (The Light of Faith), underscores this point by seeing love as the basis of faith. As he puts it, "Faith knows because it is tied to love, because love itself brings enlightenment."²⁷ Elaborating this further, the Pope affirms: "The truth we seek, the truth that gives meaning to our journey through life, enlightens us whenever we are touched by love. One who loves realizes that love is an experience of truth, that it opens our eyes to see reality in a new way, in union with the beloved."²⁸ In this the Pope draws attention to the philosophical ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein who likens believing to the experience of falling in love. To believe is to fall in love in an extraordinary way.

3.2 One must, however, acknowledge that the demands of Deut 6:4-5 are very difficult to realize. The demand of total adherence to YHWH with everything at one's disposal demands extra power and confidence. The biblical accounts of the faith of the Israelite people show that they were found wanting in the commitment. With the attractions of other props to life, it was humanly difficult to rely only on YHWH for the solution of all life's problems. The same problems are encountered in modern evangelization. The problem of double allegiance remains a great obstacle to faith.

3.3 While the Great Commandment in Deuteronomy leads to authentic faith, there is also the extreme of a rigid interpretation of the adherence to YHWH to the extent that all other aspects of

²⁷ Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* (Encyclical Letter, *The Light of Faith*) no- 26.

²⁸ Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 27.

life are undervalued. This was a real danger in the Israelite context, and it often brought about a dichotomy between the social life and the religious life. It led to extreme exclusivism and xenophobia, as found in the texts. This is seen in a number of Deuteronomic legislations that smack off stark intolerance of other religions and cultures. In accordance with the law on the sole worship of YHWH, Deuteronomy does not show any scruple in ordering the total elimination of anything or person that comes into conflict with that single cult. Some of the legislations, thus, encourage the death penalty, holy war, ethnic cleansing, etc., all in pursuance of religious purity. One finds this, for instance in Deut 20:16-17: “But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them – the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – just as the Lord your God has commanded.” For Deuteronomy, the paramount thing is Israel’s full dedication to YHWH, and whatever brings about the obstruction of that dedication is to be summarily eliminated (see also Deut 7:1-5).²⁹

3.4 The type of rigid monotheism and rigid monolatry that the Deuteronomic text provokes is often the cause of religious conflicts in many parts of the world. African societies have had an unfair share in these conflicts. The paradox is that the traditional approach to religion in most African cultures is very tolerant of plurality and diversity. As Elochukwu Uzukwu puts it, “Wars, jihads and crusades are never fought in the name of God as is common in the Jewish-Christian and Islamic traditions”.³⁰ Uzukwu argues that the African approach to religion does not have a “clash of gods” but espouses human liberation at all levels. This is reflected in the West African indigenous brand of Christianity with its emphasis on the Spirit and human wholeness. “Instead of the collision course between absolutist claims, of God or gods that are on our side against others, the ideological ‘clash of civilizations’, it inspires relationship based on flexibility, transparency, and dialogue; and it inspires the enhancement of human dignity and the fulfilment of human needs and longings”.³¹ The tension between this African cultural approach to religion and the regimented rigidity of the received religions of Christianity and Islam has continued unabated. Sometimes, some forms of evangelization and evangelism have tended to demonize genuine African approaches to the Deity simply because they differ materially from the approaches of the received religions. In the Catholic context, this problem has provoked greater awareness of the need to inculturate the received Christian faith. The challenges are immense as one is ever confronted with the responsibility of preserving the genuine values of monotheism as well as preserving the authentic African approach to these monotheistic values.

3.5 Jesus confronted the problem of rigid monotheism and monolatry by balancing the love of God with the love of neighbor in his reinterpretation of the Great Commandment:

Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31; cf. Matt 22:37-40; Luke 10:27-28)

²⁹ See Luke Ijezie, “The Bible and Religious Intolerance: The Problem of Deuteronomy,” *BIRD* 2 (2011-2012) 1-17,

³⁰ Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness. Appropriating Faith and Culture in West African Style* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012) 2.

³¹ Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 3

The Jewish law also enjoins the love of neighbour (see Lev 19:18), but the term neighbour was narrowly understood as a member of the Israelite or Jewish community. Jesus creatively widened the interpretation of neighbour by extending its boundaries to all humanity. That is why, the Apostle says in 1 John 4:20: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother". While God remains the *ultimum bonum* and the greatest object of desire, the human person is also seen as God's image, as one who reflects the glory of God. The love of God is thus balanced with human solidarity. The Church stresses this in the Vatican II document on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, which focuses mainly on solidarity with humanity.³² Today, this love is extended to all creation. This implies a greater sense of ecological responsibility as it brings humanity back to the original divine vocation of being the custodian of God's own creation. Thus the love of God that Deuteronomy enjoins implies the love of all that God created.

4. CONCLUSION

The text of 6:4-5 is central to the faith of Israel. It contains the greatest affirmation of the law, which is, the oneness of God, and the greatest commandment, which is, the command to love God. The love of the One God is the ground of Christian faith and faith proclamation. In John's Gospel, the love of God for humanity is summarized in the divine gift of Jesus Christ to humanity. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. The response to God has to be the acceptance of the Son he has sent. Thus the total love of God expressed in Deuteronomy 6 now takes form in the total acceptance of Jesus Christ, who is the only One who reveals God. Christian faith and evangelization are responses to God's love made manifest in Jesus Christ.

³² See recent discussion in Uzochukwu J. Njoku, "The Second Vatican Council as Solidarity with Humanity," *Oche-Amamihe: Wisdom Journal of Theology and Philosophy* Vol 2 no. 5 (2013) 1-23.