

RE-INTERPRETING THE INCESTUOUS CASE IN 1 CORINTHIANS 5: 1-13 IN THE CONTEXT OF THE YORUBA INTERDICTION OF INCEST

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Abstract

This article is a re-reading of 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 which is about a reported case of an incestuous man and how Paul the founder of the church in Corinth handled it. In 1 Corinthians 5: 1-13, Paul rebuked the Corinthian church for harbouring such a despicable act and shielding the culprit. Incest is a universal problem and its understanding varies from one culture to another. Incestuous relationship is discouraged to certain degrees in most cultures of the world. The Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria consider incest as a taboo (*eewo*). In this paper, 1 Corinthians 5: 1-13 is re-read using the Yoruba interdiction of incestuous relationship as the context of interpretation. Doing this reasserts the fact that cultures around the world are unanimous in interdicting incestuous relationships.

Keywords: Incest, Paul, Corinthians, Yoruba, Sexual taboo

Introduction

The impervious attitude of the Corinthian church to the man who had sexual relation with his father's wife and Paul's injunction on the man, as found in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, have been subjected to critical scrutiny by scholars. It is worrisome that such a thing would happen among believers and the church did not take any disciplinary action. Paul himself acknowledged that such an immoral act was not found among unbelievers. Short as the text is, it raises a lot of unanswered questions. What was the social setting in Corinth which permitted such an act? Did the father of the incestuous man report the case to the church or how did the church know about it? Was the story a rumour? Did Paul investigate the case before passing his judgement? Why did Paul not mention the incestuous man's name? As noted above, Paul was astonished that the Corinthians did not punish the culprit. The exact meaning of Paul's judgement on the incestuous man remains ambiguous even though it is a consensus among scholars that Paul wanted the church to excommunicate the culprit.¹

¹ Brian S. Rosner, "Temple and Holiness in 1 Corinthians 5," *Tyndale Bulletin*, TYNBUL42:1, (1991), p.138; Simon J. Kistemaker, "“Deliver this man to Satan” (1 Cor 5:5) A Case Study in Church Discipline" *TMSJ* 03:1, (1992), pp. 33-45; and Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 51

Incest is forbidden in the Old Testament (OT) law. The Israelites were prohibited from having sexual relationship with their mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters-in-law, just to mention a few (Lev 18: 6-18; 20:11; Deut 27:20). In Deuteronomy 27:20 it is under the twelve “curses,” and in Leviticus 18: 29, it is punishable by death. Cases of incest in the OT include Abraham and Sarah (Gen 20:1-13), Lot and his two daughters who lured their father into having sex with them (Gen 19:30-38), Reuben who slept with his stepmother (Gen 35:22) and the case of David’s firstborn, Amnon, and daughter, Tamar (2 Sam 13:1-21). The focus of this paper is the case in the New Testament (NT).

Incest means different things to different peoples. However, sexual relation among members of a nuclear family is universally forbidden. Consequently, incest is defined in this article as forbidden sexual relationships among people of the same blood or people who are related by blood. This covers marriage and amorous relationships among people related by blood.² Relation by blood can be extended to include cousins, nephews, aunts, uncles and in-laws, adopted children, first or second or even third cousins and other distant relatives, depending on the society.

The Yoruba perception of incest is similar to the biblical culture, especially, the NT. The affinity between the two cultures is the basis of this paper’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 in the context of Yoruba prohibition of incest.

The Corinthian church: A divided and weakened church

The first section, 1 Corinthians 1-4, contains Paul’s admonition on division in the Corinthian church.³ It can be deduced from Paul’s message that the division had weakened the church by the time he wrote this letter. In the first instance, one would expect that the leadership of the church would duly inform Paul on the crisis in the church. However, it was Chloe’s people that reported the crisis (1Cor 1:11). The identity of Chloe is not clear due to tacit reference to her. The division was so paramount and obvious which makes Paul to address it before addressing other issues.

Besides, Paul’s emphasis on wisdom connotes that the crisis in the church was probably caused by some members’ claim that they possessed special wisdom which gave them freedom. Contrary to this claim, Paul himself acknowledged that the Corinthians were infants (νηπίους, 1 Cor 3:1). To be precise, the Corinthian church was not in order primarily because of the division. The division revealed other weaknesses of the church which included inability to discipline erring members such as the incestuous man and those who took each other to court. Scholars such as Fee (1988) do not see the importance of the division beyond 1

²David Lester, “Incest,” *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol.8, No. 4, (November, 1972), pp. 268-285; Michael L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2020), p. 17.

³For arguments on the literary and thematic unity of 1 Corinthians 1-4 see Corin Mihaila, *Paul-Apollon Relationship and Paul’s Stance toward Greco-Roman Rhetoric: An Exegetical and Socio-Historical Study of 1 Corinthians 1-4* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), p.10

Corinthians 1-4. The division, according to him, is as a result of Hellenistic influence on the Corinthians who saw their new faith as “an expression of *sophia*.”⁴ Fee’s assertion seems to play down the effect and significance of the division in the church. However, the importance of the division can be seen in the fact that it is the first problem Paul addressed in the letter. My position on the link between chapters 1-4 and 5 is similar to Thiselton’s position in his commentary on 1 Corinthians where he states categorically that,

Although we enter a new major section of this epistle, a link readily emerges with 1:10-4:21 because “the man who committed the act of *πορνείαι* in ch. 5 has contributed to community divisiveness (5:2, 6).”¹ The issue of his expulsion might serve to restore unity, although it also raises questions about community boundaries.⁵

That Paul devoted 4 chapters to the issue also indicates that it cannot be underplayed easily. No other issue in the letter takes such a lengthy discussion. Apart from this, it is also clear from 1 Corinthians that Paul’s authority was undermined because of the division. Paul responded to the Corinthians recalcitrant attitude to his authority in chapter 4. It should be noted that Paul had written a letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 5: 9-13) which neither achieved its purpose nor had any influence on the Corinthians. Then he wrote 1 Corinthians which did not also make any difference. This warranted Paul’s visit during which he was assaulted by a member of the church.⁶

1 Corinthians 5:1: A report of incest

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 marks the beginning of the second section of 1 Corinthians. The report in 5:1 is the second of its kind, the first being the quarrels and division in the church (1 Cor 1:11). It is unclear whether Paul got the report in this from Chloe’s people (1 Cor 1:11) or Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (1 Cor 16:17) or from both groups. However, it is perspicuous that the report was verbal.⁷ Garland (2003) is of the view that the issue of incest was so embarrassing that it was unlikely for the Corinthians to write to Paul about it in their letter.⁸ Two

⁴ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 47-49.

⁵Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapid: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 384

⁶John B. Polhill, “1 Corinthians: a Divided Church” in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, *SBJT* 06:3 (Fall, 2002), pp. 4-5

⁷The verb used, ἀκούεται, which is derived from ἀκούω, implies a report heard or understood from what others say. The report in 5:1 was not part of the letter the church wrote to Paul (7:1)

⁸David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 156.

sins are implicit in the passage: first, πορνεία (incest, fornication) committed by a member and second, the sin of the church (that is, indifference to the immorality committed in the church). The adverb ὄλως in 1 Corinthians 5:1 can mean “actually” or “undoubtedly” or “altogether.” The three meanings have different implications: if it means “actually” it denotes that Paul was shocked that such a thing could happen in the church. If ὄλως is translated “undoubtedly”, or “incontrovertibly,” it suggests that Paul had no doubt about the trueness of the report he got. If it means “altogether,” it indicates that “the whole story has been reported.”⁹ Barrett (1987) translates it to mean “actually” and comments that “actually” must be a late development of meaning for ὄλως.¹⁰ The word ὄλως, meaning “actually,” is an indication that the report was true and not a mere hearsay.¹¹ Ἀκούεται in 1 Corinthians 5:1 which is translated “reported” denotes that the sin reported was commonly known to exist.¹² In other words, the whole church in Corinth heard about it. The report likely got to Paul through members of one of the factions in the church who were surprised that the leadership of the church did nothing to discipline the culprit.

Πορνεία: The sin committed

Πορνεία (fornication, sexual immorality) and its cognates (πορνοις, πορνός) occur five times in this chapter, thus emphasising its importance in 1 Corinthians. Πορνεία appears 25 times in the New Testament, 21 of which are in Pauline epistles. First and second Corinthians account for 15 of the 21 appearances.¹³ Πορνεία means prostitution, unchastity, fornication and every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse.¹⁴ Sometimes it is used for ‘adultery’ (μοιχεία) while sometimes it is differentiated from adultery as used in Matthew 15:19; and Mark 7:21 where μοιχεία is translated adultery separating it from πορνεία (fornication). Πορνεία can also describe various extra-marital or sexual modes of behaviour to the extent that, they deviate from accepted social religious norms, for example, promiscuity, paedophilia, and especially prostitution. In the Hebrew Bible the word-group πορνῆ in the LXX generally stands for Hebrew *zānāh* which means to commit fornication. It is used sometimes metaphorically to describe the relationship between God and

⁹Garland, p. 156.

¹⁰C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), p. 120.

¹¹Thiselton, p. 385.

¹²Note that Paul uses neither the Greek word for adultery nor incest. The case for incest is implied from the last phrase of the verse which says the man was having sex with his father’s wife. Some exegetes prefer sexual union to incest. See Raymond Bryan Brown, “1 Corinthians” in Clifton J. Allen (eds.) *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Volume 10 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 318.

¹³H. Reisser, “Porneuo.” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1982), pp. 497-499 (499).

¹⁴William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 699.

Israel.¹⁵ This is in relations with idolatry. In the New Testament it is used to describe illicit sexual intercourse (John 8:41; Acts 15: 20, 29; 21:25; Gal 5:19, etc).¹⁶

In 1 Corinthians 5:1, *πορνεία* refers to an incestuous act; a kind which Paul claimed was not found or named among Gentiles. The verb *ἔχειν* in 5:1 is present active infinitive of *ἔχω* which means to have or to possess.¹⁷ Present tense always focuses on the development or progress of an event. It basically represents an activity in progress.¹⁸ In this case, the present tense implies continuous possession of the woman by the incestuous man.¹⁹ The identity of the woman is not known as her name was not mentioned by Paul, neither was the incestuous man's name. The Greek word *γυναικά*, feminine accusative singular of *γυνή* translated "wife or woman", is ambiguous because it does not expressly state the marital status of the woman. In the classical Greek, *γυνή* meant "feminine," "mistress," or "lady," "woman", "wife," "virgin" as well, or "mortal woman" as opposed to a goddess. The Hebrew word *ishshah* is translated woman or wife in the LXX.²⁰ This implies that the woman in question was either the step mother of the incestuous man or the mistress of his father. But if Paul was making reference to the passages in Leviticus 20:11 and Deuteronomy 22:30 where "father's wife" is used, then the woman in question could be the mother of the incestuous man.

Corinth was notoriously famous for immorality which made Aristophanes to coin the verb *korinthiazesthai* to signify "a reprehensible form of behaviour characterized by lust and debauchery."²¹ Yet, Paul was sure that what the man did was not found among the Gentiles. Phillips puts it thus:

Both the Greek and the Romans were notoriously unscrupulous when it came to carnal indulgence, but both deplored this degree of vice. Euripides, in *Hippolytus*, tells a story, indeed, of such a crime, one which had as its setting the neighbourhood of Corinth, and records that the feelings of the pagans were shocked by it. Cicero, in his *Pro Cluentio*, denounces a marriage between in-laws as "incredible" and

¹⁵W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Lagos: Challenge Publications, 1977), p. 125.

¹⁶Joseph H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament. International Bible Translator* (Electronic version, 2000)

¹⁷Cleon L. Rogers Jr., and Cleon L. Rogers III, 1998. *The Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), p. 356.

¹⁸Daniel B. Wallace, 1996. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 514.

¹⁹See also Thiselton, p. 386.

²⁰Thoralf Gilbrant, *The New Testament Greek-English Dictionary* (Springfield: The Complete Biblical Library, 1990), p. 656.

²¹P. Patterson, *The Troubled Triumphant Church, An Exposition of First Corinthians* (Fort Worth: Seminary Hill Press, 2011), p. 12.

practically unheard of. Even pagan societies, while often tolerant of all kinds of promiscuity, drew the line at incest.²²

It is not surprising that Paul was startled that the church was arrogant instead of mourning. Πεφυσιωμένοι (5:2) is perfect passive participle. The word is from φυσιώω which means “to puff up” or “to inflate.” The Greek word ἐπενθήσατε (5:2) translated “you did mourn,” is an aorist indicative active of πενθέω. The aorist is used here to express a desired result.²³ As a result of what the man did, Paul expected the Corinthian church to be sad and mourn but the church did not see anything wrong in what the man did.

Paul’s disciplinary prescription

Paul’s judgment is that the incestuous man “should be removed” (ἀρθῆ/ι) (5:2) from the church. The word ἀρθῆ is aorist subjunctive passive of αἶρω which also means “take away”. With the use of γάρ in vs. 3, (“for” brings out in this clause the grounds on which the preceding clause rests),²⁴ Paul reiterated once again his adjudication in an emphatic manner using ἐγὼ μὲν (I indeed).²⁵ Since the church refused to discipline the offender, Paul could not wait till he would see the Corinthians before pronouncing his judgment.

The verb παραδοῦναι in vs. 5 is aorist infinitive of παραδίδωμι which means to “hand over”, “give up or deliver a person” (cf. Matt 5:25).²⁶ What did Paul mean by asking the Corinthians to “turn that one over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:5 CBS)? Why did Paul ask them to do so? What did he mean by that statement? Bediako highlights some of the scholarly interpretations of the verse to include expulsion of the incestuous man, physical suffering of the man, secret execution, a self-atoning physical death, a delivery to purgatory, just to mention a few. Bediako notes that scholars who subscribe to the interpretations mentioned above understand ‘flesh’ to mean the physical body. The passage, 1 Corinthians 5:5, according to him, emphasises the need for the church to discipline those who are guilty of sexual immorality among other sins.²⁷ Barth Campbell identifies three popular views about what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 5:5. The first view is that the offender should be handed over to Satan for physical suffering. The second view stipulated that handing the incestuous adulterer over to Satan will help destroy the man’s sinful nature while the last view implies the physical death of the adulterer. Brian S.

²² John Phillips, *Exploring 1 Corinthians, An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002), p. 107

²³ Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1978), p. 17.

²⁴ Barrett, p. 123.

²⁵ Fee, p. 203.

²⁶ Arndt & Gingrich, p. 619.

²⁷ Bediako, n.p.

Rosner argues that Paul wanted physical death for the adulterer. Those who hold Rosner's view believe that Paul made his judgment based on Deuteronomy 23: 2-9.²⁸ Morris is of the view that the phrase "hand over to Satan" is an unusual expression which occurs only in this text and 1 Timothy 1:20. He writes further: "the idea underlying this is that outside the church is the sphere of Satan....To be expelled from the church accordingly is to be delivered over into that region where Satan holds sway."²⁹ This re-echoes Barrett's view who thinks that "it seems that the practical step Paul wished the Corinthian church to take was to exclude the offender from their society, to excommunicate him (though this word must not be taken in an anachronistic way).³⁰In each of the interpretation, the results of the punishment on the flesh and the spirit of the culprit are considered.³¹

The verb *παράδιδωμι* occurs 120 times in the NT; of these 84 are in the Gospels, 13 in Acts, and 19 in Pauline Epistles. The word appears 7 times in 1 Corinthians. The basic meaning of the verb is to deliver up to judgement and death. Most of the passages in which the verb occurs refer to Jesus' announcement of his suffering and to the passion itself.³² It can be deduced that Paul wanted the Corinthian church to pass a judgement on the culprit by handing him over to Satan. This could be by neglecting the culprit and praying to God for him to be disciplined (cf. Job's experience and 1 Tim 1:20). Scholars, as noted above, unanimously agree that handing over the culprit includes discipline. The point of divergence is whether it should be by expulsion, excommunication, suspension or extermination. Paul believed that if the culprit was disciplined his spirit would be saved in the day of the Lord. That is, the salvation of the man should be the concern of Christians. Commenting on this, Phillips notes that:

God uses Satan at times for the discipline and correction of His own. He did so with Job, with Peter (Luke 22:31), and with Paul himself (2 Cor 12:7). God, however, always draws the line beyond which Satan cannot go! He was to be permitted to wreak havoc in the body of this guilty man, but he was not allowed to touch the man's spirit. That was already quickened and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.³³

²⁸Rosner, p. 140.

²⁹ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians, an Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), p. 89.

³⁰ Barrett, p. 126.

³¹ Bell Campbell, "Flesh and Spirit in 1 Cor 5:5: An Exercise in Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament." *JETS* 36:3.1993, p. 334.

³² H. Beck, "Paradidomi" in Colin Brown (ed.) *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), pp. 367-368.

³³Phillips, p. 113.

Paul places the whole disciplinary procedure in three contexts:

- a. The total authority of Jesus Christ as Lord (in the name of Jesus);
- b. The corporate presence of the whole Christian community in Corinth (backed up by his own presence in spirit)
- c. The sovereign control of the Lord over whatever Satan is permitted to do, even to a rebellious Christian.³⁴

Christians have no right to consign anyone to the tentacles of Satan except with the power of Jesus (v. 4). This passage reveals the power the church possesses to discipline her erring members and to settle conflicts among members. Nevertheless, why should the church involve Satan in disciplining members? Are there no other ways the church can discipline erring members? The motive behind Paul's view remains obscured.

The imagery of the Passover and sexual immorality (1 Cor 5:6-8)

In this section, Paul resumed his talk on the attitude of the Corinthian church by using the imagery of the Passover to establish his theological basis for vv. 1-5. The first thing he attacked was their boasting which according to him, "Your boasting is not good" (Οὐ καλὸν τὸ καύχημα ὑμῶν 5:6). What were the Corinthians boasting about? Was it in the sin of incest committed by a church member? Barrett (1987, 132) thinks they were boasting in the sin committed. Fee's answer is also in affirmative. Fee explains further that "the present concern centres not on their boasting in general: rather, it focuses on their boasting as it relates to this sin in their midst."³⁵ Garland, disagreeing with this view, rightly points out that "it is inconceivable for anyone to have been tempted to boast about such perversion."³⁶ Garland believes that Paul's attack on the Corinthians' boasting is a reference to 1 Corinthians 1:29-31. It is not impossible that the whole church was not involved in the boasting. At least those who reported to Paul were not likely to be among the people boasting. It is logical to believe that the boasting people were the members of the faction of the incestuous man who probably was a leader in the group. Such boasting, to Paul, was not good. It could encourage immorality in the church. No wonder Paul referred to the group and the incestuous man as "old leaven" (1 Cor 5:7).

From this point, Paul used rhetorical devices and metaphors to pass his message across to the Corinthians. He used three metaphors to explain his view.³⁷ The first metaphor refers to the corrupting power of leaven. Symbolically, leaven implies arrogance. In Hosea 7:4 it is associated with sexual sin. Garland gives a vivid description of how leaven is made thus: "Leaven...was made by keeping back a piece of the previous week's dough, storing it in suitable conditions, and adding

³⁴David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p. 73

³⁵Fee, p. 215.

³⁶Garland, p.178.

³⁷Garland, p. 178.

juices to promote the process of fermentation, much like sourdough. This mouldy dough could go bad and become a contaminant, which explains why it was a fitting symbol for the infectious power of evil.”³⁸

Paul used this imagery to show the gravity and danger of allowing the incestuous man to stay in the church. The man’s presence and his sin could be contagious and could contaminate others in the church. The second metaphor is the mixing of old and new leaven together. The meaning of leaven here is not of the corrupting nature of the first metaphor but suggests incompatibility of what is evil (old leaven) and good (new leaven). Garland notes that Paul’s command “to cleanse out (ἐκκαθάρατε) the old leaven assumes that the readers are familiar with the Jewish rituals associated with Passover.”³⁹ During the Passover, only unleavened bread was to be eaten; hence, people made sure they removed every crumb of leavened bread in a ceremonial search of their dwellings on the morning when the Passover lambs were sacrificed. Anybody who was found with any leavened bread was to be cut off from Israel, especially, during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (See Exod 12: 15, 19; 13:7; Deut 16:4). The Corinthians were to cleanse out the old in order to become new dough (which is the third metaphor) because they were unleavened (ἄζύμοι).

This passage reveals that Paul did not take sexual sin lightly even though the city of Corinth was known for that. The next passage (1 Cor 5: 9-13) emphasizes this. Paul wanted the Corinthians to disassociate themselves from anybody who is guilty of sexual sin. In fact, they were not supposed to be eating with the man. In other words, anyone guilty of sexual sin was to be excluded from participating in the Holy Communion. The admonition in v. 11, especially the verb συνεσθίειν, is interpreted to mean “to shun the offender at the Lord’s Supper and others” by scholars like Schwiebert.⁴⁰ Paul’s conclusion is that the church should drive away the evil from their midst (ἐξάρατε τὸν πονηρὸν ἐξ ὑμῶν αὐτῶν). Paul’s letter which preceded 1 Corinthians was referred to in the passage. This suggests that cases of sexual immorality were rampant among the church members. Paul reiterated the instruction he gave them in his first letter which emphasised the need to expel the offender.

Incest in a divided community

It is clear from the foregoing that Paul was not happy with the incestuous man and the way the case was handled by the Corinthian church. Attempting to identify the culprit, Richard A. Horsley suggests that the man who committed the act was not a Jewish Christian who could have been familiar with the dictates of the OT law prohibiting incest. Since the church was a mixed church and there was a

³⁸Garland, p. 178.

³⁹Garland, p. 179.

⁴⁰Jonathan Schwiebert, “Table Fellowship and the Translation of 1 Corinthians 5: 11.” *JBL* 127, No. 1, (2008), pp. 159-164 (164).

number of Gentiles who had listened to Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew, Horsley asserts that the culprit was a Gentile Christian who belonged to the enlightened group in the church. Paul addressed this group in 1 Corinthians 8-10.⁴¹ Horsley's assertion points to the fact that the Corinthian church was divided. The division weakened the church which was blessed with all speech and knowledge (1 Cor 1:4) to the extent that Paul branded them as "men of the flesh...babies in Christ" (1 Cor 3:1).

The division in Corinth was not racial. It was not between the Jews and Gentiles. It was ideological and theological. There were those who pledged loyalty to Paul (with Jewish flavour in his message) and Apollos (a great orator, an attribute commended by both the Greeks and Romans). There were those who went to court to settle their scores with members of their church (1 Cor 6). There were members who believed that it was lawful for them to visit prostitutes (1 Cor 6: 12-18). On the other hand, there were those who believed that "it is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor 7:1). There were members who believed that they possessed knowledge which gave them freedom to eat whatever they wanted (1 Cor 8-10). Almost all the chapters in 1 Corinthians deal with division. There were divisions about covering of head and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11), spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12-14) and resurrection (1 Cor 15). To be precise, the Corinthian church was riddled with conflict of interests and beliefs. The story of the Corinthian church is that of division.

Incest among the Yoruba

The Yoruba consider sexual relationship between members of the same family as incest. The traditional Yoruba people did not consider a nuclear family as their main family. Family was understood in a compound sense. Extended family was the real family and communalism was adopted as a way of life.⁴² Family members served as guards against incestuous relationship because of its repercussion and attending shame and stigmatisation on the family. Moral upbringing and education of children was also a collective responsibility of every member of the extended and nuclear families. Children were taught history of their families and were familiar with the nucleuses of their family roots. Before young men were allowed to marry, it was the duty of their families to gather information about the families where their wards intended to take spouses. One of the major reasons for doing so was to avoid getting married to relatives. Consequently, there was no room for getting married to a distant relative, a third cousin, much less a second or first.⁴³

⁴¹Richard A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 83.

⁴² William B. Schwab, "Kinship and Lineage among the Yoruba," in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 45, No. 4, (Oct. 1955), p. 357.

⁴³ N.A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970), p. 95.

If a member of the family was caught having sexual intercourse with another member of the family, both of them would be severely punished. The culprits could be summoned to a family meeting where the *baale* (head) of the family would oversee their flogging. Serious incestuous cases were taken to the king's palace. Culprits in such cases were sometimes banished from the community.⁴⁴ For example, a man who slept with his mother could be banished for bringing shame on the family. The Yoruba believed that such a man had been cursed and should be expelled from the lineage so that he would not have any right in ancestor communion.⁴⁵ In a case where two siblings were involved and resulted in pregnancy, the pregnant girl could be sent to her maternal family to forestall the indignity that would be brought to the family.

That the Yoruba were conscious of incestuous relationship is evident in some Yoruba proverbs. One of such proverbs implicitly states that “oko ko mo ibatan” (that is, penis does not recognise relation).⁴⁶ Another one is: Sise sise lo mu obuko ba iya re sun (that is, It is a spell that instigates a he-goat to sleep or have sex with its mother). The former highlights the possibility of incestuous relationship in a family setting while the latter suggests the cause of son-mother incestuous relationship. Nevertheless, the two proverbs indicate that there were cases of incest in the Yoruba society. In a research Caldwell, Orubuloye and Caldwell carried out among Ekiti women, they discovered that married women engaged in sexual activities with relatives of their spouses. Although this is regarded as inappropriate, it shows that incestuous relationship is not limited to children and young adults.⁴⁷

Recently, reports from Nigerian newspapers signify that incest has assumed a patent position in the contemporary Yoruba society.⁴⁸ Cases of fathers having coitus with their daughters or step daughters and siblings engaging in sexual escapades have increased tremendously, a confirmation of postmodernism influence on sexuality in Nigeria.⁴⁹ Nigeria interdicts incest under civil and criminal law. The civil law prohibits marriages between persons of certain consanguinity and affinity while the criminal law prohibits sexual relationships between certain family members.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Fadipe, p. 45

⁴⁵ Schwab, p. 358.

⁴⁶ J.O. Ojoade, “African Sexual Proverbs: some Yoruba examples” in *Folklore*, Vol. 94, No. 2 (1983), p.203

⁴⁷ John C. Caldwell, I.O. Orubuloye and Pat Caldwell, “The Destabilization of the Traditional Yoruba Sexual System” in *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 1991), p.242

⁴⁸ See the report by News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) published in major newspapers on February 23, 2020 through <https://guardian.ng/news/why-incest-is-becoming-rampant-in-nigeria-experts/> accessed on April 19, 2020.

⁴⁹ A.J. Adelakun, *A Theological Study of Sexuality in 1 Corinthians 5-7 and Its Contextual Implications for Nigerian Pentecostal Spirituality*, a PhD Thesis submitted to the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 2014.

⁵⁰ Oluyemisi Bamgbose, *Legal and Cultural Approaches to Sexual Matters in Africa: The Cry of the Adolescent Girl* 10 U. Miami Int'l & Comp. L. Rev. 127 (2015) available at:

Section 33 of the Marriage Act forbids sexual relations and marriage among people who are related by blood. It is captured as “Prohibited degree of Consanguinity.”

Conclusion: Implications of 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 and Incest among the Yoruba

Incestuous relationship in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 and among the Yorubahas implications which are important for ethical purposes. It can be deduced from 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 that religious communities tend to protect sexual predators. The Corinthian church understood the gravity of the incestuous man’s offence but did nothing until Paul was informed about it. As permissive as both the Roman law and culture were, the Romans did strongly condemned incest and would not have tolerated a man sleeping with his father’s wife. Keener describes incest among the Romans thus, “Roman law punished incest with banishment to an island. Although some philosophers regarded incest as unobjectionable, most people viewed it quite harshly, and laws treated it accordingly.”⁵¹ Paul was probably referring to this when he said that even unbelievers would not tolerate such an act. Yet, the church tolerated it and left the offender unpunished. It is not clear why the church tolerated it but it is an indication that religious communities tend to protect and harbor sexual offenders. In the recent time, the Catholic Church and other religious groups have been frequently accused of protecting priests who harass their members sexually.⁵²The traditional Yoruba, on the other hand, frowned at incestuous relationship and put in place measures to curb it. One of the measures was to educate children on importance of sexual purity. Moreover, men were allowed to marry more than one wife. Hence, having sexual relationship with family members was not necessary.

In addition, Paul’s punishment for the offender is similar to the Yoruba punishment. Paul wanted the incestuous man to be excommunicated from the community of believers. As noted above, the Yoruba’s punishment for a man who slept with his mother included banishment from the community. The only difference is that Paul’s injunction has a caveat which the traditional Yoruba interdiction did not have – redemption of the culprit’s soul. Paul hoped that after excommunication, the culprit would repent and be saved or be restored back to the church. However, the Yoruba could ask the offender to offer sacrifices when necessary to avoid banishment. This underlines the differences between Christian and Yoruba

<http://repository.law.miami.edu/umiclr/vol10/iss2/13>

⁵¹Keener, p. 49.

⁵² Mary Gail Frawley-O’Dea, *Perversion of Power: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007).

understanding of repentance and atonement. The Christian understanding of atonement and repentance is more pronounced and codified, probably because of its written scriptures and more than two thousand years of theologizing.

Religious and cultural beliefs on sexuality have a significant role to play in order to curb incessant cases of incest in Nigeria. As seen in this study, both the biblical and Yoruba cultures condemn incestuous relationships and other sexual immorality which has become a problem in the society. Ignoring religious and cultural interdictions on sexuality in the name of secularism and civilization will further compound erosion of Nigerian positive values.