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The Distinctive Use of Psalms in Africa

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Introduction

The book of Psalms has a unique place in the Bible. Along with the book of Isaiah, the Psalter is one of the two Old Testament books that have been most frequently quoted in the New Testament.¹ Because of this uniqueness, the early Christians enjoyed quoting the book of Psalms. It is reported that Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it “The Prayer Book of the Bible”.² Throughout the Christian centuries, the Psalms have received special attention among Christians.

B. W. Anderson has testified to the unique place that the book of Psalms has enjoyed in the church liturgy when he says:

Today, in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, especially where the ancient monastic usage is still preserved – the entire Psalter is recited once each week. In the Anglican church, the Psalms are repeated once a month. And, in other churches in the Protestant tradition, the profound influence of the Psalter is evident in the responsive reading of selected Psalms, or in the singing of hymns. Indeed, when one considers the enriching and invigorating influence, which the Psalms have exerted upon preaching, worship, and devotional life, it is no exaggeration for Christoph Barth to say that the renewal and reunion of the church, for which we are hoping, cannot come about without the powerful assistance of Psalms.³

The special place that the book of Psalms has enjoyed in the Bible, and in the Christian churches, has influenced biblical scholars. They have paid special attention to the study of this book, by introducing several methods of approach in order to understand the book.

One approach is the attempt to determine the author, and the date of the book of Psalms, according to its superscription. Other approaches are attempts to

¹ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1974, p. 5.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

determine the literary types and “situation in life” (form criticism), and the theological thoughts of each author, or book, of the Psalms.

The unique place, enjoyed by the book of Psalms, among Christians is not limited to Western Christians. Such is also true among African Christians. This writer remembers that, in his primary-school days, the first passages he learned to read and memorise were in the book of Psalms (Ps 1, 8, 21, and 23).⁴

The unique place given to the book of Psalms in Africa has led some specific African Christians to formulate some unique African methods of approaching the book of Psalms, in an African context.

The aim of this report is to discuss some of these distinctive uses of Psalms in Africa, and the justification for them.

The History of Psalms Research

Evidence of the earliest studies of the book of Psalms can be seen in the ways of dividing the book of Psalms into chapters and verses (150 chapters) and into a fivefold arrangement, or five books.⁵ Further formal arrangement within this fivefold division of the books of Psalms was also evident in the provision of titles in the superscriptions. While some of the Psalms have “of David” (דָּוִד = *l'dāvid*) in their titles, and generally use the divine name “Yahweh” (יְהוָה = *y^ehovāh*), others have the titles “of the sons of Korah” (בְּנֵי קֹרַח = *lib^egēy-qorach*), and “of Asaph” (אֲסָפָה = *l'ācāp*). The Psalms, which use “Yahweh” (יְהוָה = *y^ehovāh*), and “of David” (דָּוִד = *l'dāvid*), are referred to as the “Yahwistic Davidic collection”. Others, which use “Elohim” (אֱלֹהִים = *elōhīm*), with the title “of David” (דָּוִד = *l'dāvid*), are called “Elohistic Davidic Psalms”.

After reading these superscriptions, with the above titles, it became natural for scholars to attempt to date individual Psalms, and try to refer them to specific historical events in the history of Israel, even though these headings were not part of the original text. It is also natural to try to determine the authorship, by the evidence provided by the superscriptions. Thus, the Psalms, with the superscriptions “of David”, were attributed Davidic authorship. Those scholars, who rejected the Davidic authorship of most, or all, of these Psalms, tried to link those Psalms with a later specific historical event. For example, Ps 46 was linked

⁴ This was in 1958, in primary 2, in my village school (Irunda-Isanlu, Nigeria).

⁵ Book I: 1-41, Book II: 42-72, Book III: 73-89, Book IV: 90-106, Book V: 107-150.

with the period of “the deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian in 701 BCE, and Ps 74, with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE”⁶ Some of the religious ideas in a Psalm were sometimes used as the criteria for the date of that Psalm.

As early as the 19th century, the use of the superscription, with the titles, to date, and determine the authorship, of Psalms, had already been regarded as unreliable and “insignificant”.⁷ Serious scholars have realised that such a method will not adequately provide the meaning of Psalms. Thus, the above method was abandoned.

Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) became a member, and leader, of the group called “Religions Historical School”, who were tired of the Wellhausen school of historical-critical method of study.⁸ Gunkel, aiming at retelling the history of Israel’s faith, in the light of the ancient Near-Eastern culture, has made a very important contribution to the study of the Psalter. He tried to establish the fact that “the historical settings of the Psalms” were not in the “historical events but in the cultic life of the community”. Hermann Gunkel classified Psalms according to their literary types (*Gattungen*), and each, with its setting in life (*sitzim im heben*). Five major types, with their settings, were recognised by Gunkel.⁹

1. Festive hymns
2. Individual thanksgivings
3. Communal laments
4. Individual laments
5. The royal psalms

Gunkel also identified some lesser types as pilgrimage songs, Torah liturgies, and wisdom poetry. He believed that the simplest, and shorter, of these

⁶ Gerard W. Anderson, *A Critical Introduction to the Old Testament*, London UK: Gerald Duckworth, 1974, p. 174.

⁷ Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, London UK: SCM Press, 1979, p. 509.

⁸ Albert Eichhorn, W. Wrede, Wilhelm Bousset, and Ernst Troeltsch are members of the group. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, “Psalms”, in *Old Testament Form Criticism*, John H. Hayes, ed., San Antonio TX: Trinity University Press, 1974, pp. 179-224.

⁹ Anderson, *A Critical Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 178.

types were the oldest. Therefore, the communal must be older than the individual. Thanksgiving must also be older than the lament.

The “I” did not represent the community, as previously held, but the individual worshipper, who must be a king, or a leader, of the congregations.

According to Hermann Gunkel, all these Psalms have their sources in the life of the people. Therefore, cult is the setting in life of most of these types. By making the classification, Gunkel was successful in moving the problem of dating the individual Psalm to the types, and their literary history.

Sigmund Mowinckel (1884-1965) was one of the most eminent pupils of Gunkel. According to him, the only way to understand the hymns and complaints songs is to see them in relation to the comprehensive framework of the Israelite celebration of the annual New Year festival of the enthronement of Yahweh. Mowinckel maintains that the “workers of iniquity”, mentioned in the individual laments, are sorcerers, who brought suffering on the people. These Psalms, therefore, “invoked divine power to break their spell”.¹⁰ Mowinckel says, further, that the oracular passages in the Psalms are actually written by the cultic prophets, rather than the canonical prophets. We have seen that Mowinckel has pursued further the work of his teacher, Gunkel. He investigated, further, the cultic setting, and expanded the categories of genre into cultic and historical ones.¹¹

Gunkel’s formulation has been developed along two major lines: the literary genre, and sociological function. Among those who received first-hand instruction under Gunkel, and have made great contributions to the study of form criticism are Hans Schmidt, Emil Balla, and Joachim Begrich.¹²

After the Second World War, there was a change in the interpretation of Psalms. Although Gunkel’s approach was accepted, with some degree of modification, a theological interpretation was added. This is form criticism, governed by a theology of the word of God. At this time, study of the Psalms was guided by the idea of revelation of the divine will. Gerhard von Rad puts Psalms in juxtaposition with salvation history in the Old Testament.¹³ Claus Westermann’s

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1962, I, pp. 29-30.

¹² Gerstenberger, “Psalms”, pp. 180-183.

¹³ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols, New York NY: Harper & Row, 1962.

book, *Praise of God in the Psalms*, is an example of this theological approach.¹⁴ The most important reason for this critical work on this line is to clarify Yahweh's message to His people. The oracles in the Psalms are studied, because the oracles came from God. Another classical example of a form critical study, governed by a theology of "the word of God", is Christoph Barth's *Introduction to the Psalms*.¹⁵

In the 1960s, the influence of Barthian theology of the word of God was actually diminishing. People were more concerned about Gunkel's genres and settings. The feeling to go back, and re-examine his genres of Psalms, and their settings, so as to avoid hasty conclusions, was high. Eventually, the same form of method of classifications was used, with some minor changes. Instead of the concern about the "pious soul", or the "word of God", behind the texts of Psalms, the emphasis was more on the sociological setting of the Psalms. This is sometimes called the "ritualistic approach". The ritualistic approach to the Psalms study was greatly influenced by the result of archaeological work from the ancient Near East. Scholars, like S. H. Hooke, A. R. Johnson, A. Bentzen, L. Engnell, and G. Widengren, took the results of archaeology of the Near East, especially that of the discovery of Ras Shamra tablets, and looked for similar ritual and festivals in ancient Israel. These scholars were quick to recognise some affinities between the Canaanite and Babylonian ritual, and the Old Testament practices. The result is that they assigned almost all the genres in the Psalms to the New Year festival.

The form critics, who worked on the basis of the "word of God" behind the texts of the Psalms, were also influenced by the result of archaeological work in the Near East.

Covenantalism became the focal point for their theological formulation. Scholars, like Eichrodt, Von Rad, and others, tried to demonstrate the fact that the ancient Near Eastern treaty scheme had been adopted by Israelites, in order to express their covenantal relationship to Yahweh.¹⁶ As a result, covenant became the "master key" to the understanding of the Old Testament. Virtually all the genres of the Psalms were attributed to the covenant festival.¹⁷

¹⁴ Claus Westermann, *Praise of God in the Psalms*, Richmond VA: John Knox Press, 1965.

¹⁵ Christoph Barth, *Introduction to the Psalms*, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1966.

¹⁶ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols, Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press. 1967.

¹⁷ Gerstenberger, "Psalms".

Modern scholars of form critical studies have also been influenced by the liturgical use of Psalms. Although we have very little information concerning the early history of the liturgical use of Psalms,¹⁸ the Mishnah (Tamid 7:4), has a list of special Psalms used in the temple for each day of the week.. The tractate *Sopherim* also gives some information about those Psalms used for festivals. The titles of the Psalms probably give an indication of the liturgical use of Psalms, in the early period.

Today, some Roman Catholic, and the traditional Eastern Orthodox, churches still recite the entire Psalms each week.¹⁹ In Anglican churches, Psalms are read every Sunday. In some other churches of the Protestant tradition, Psalms deeply influenced worship in the form of prayer and responsive reading every Sunday. It influenced some of the great hymns of the churches.

Psalms in Africa

Liturgical Use of Psalms

Western scholars, as discussed in the preceding section, have mostly done Psalm research. The works and the methods that have been discussed have been by Western scholars. The few Africans, who endeavoured to involve themselves in Psalm research, followed the Western ways, verbatim, with little attention, if any, to the tremendous effort by African Christians to make use of Psalms, in an African context. Unfortunately, the Western hymns, which were influenced by Psalms, and translated for use in the mainland missionary churches, were sung exactly with the Western tune, and exact phraseology, without any attempt to contextualise them. Psalms were also recited, and read, in the African churches, as it is done in the West.

However, the African Independent churches have devised a distinctive classification, and use, of Psalms, in an African context, which we shall examine in this section of the paper. The churches that were consulted are mostly Nigerian African Independent churches, such as Cherubim and Seraphim Movement, The Apostolic, Christ Apostolic, Celestial church of Christ, and others.

¹⁸ Anderson, *A Critical Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 179. Some words, like הַלְלָהּ = *l'hillāh* (praise), הַפְּלִיחַ = *l'pillāh* (prayer), and תְּדַבֵּר = *tōdāh* (thanksgiving), though they may not be parts of the original texts, may indicate the type of use.

¹⁹ Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, p. 3.

Protective Psalms

African Independent churches, mostly in West Africa, have classified Psalms according to their functions in an African context. Psalms 5, 6, 7, 28, 35, 37, 54, 55, 83, and 109 are classified as “protective” Psalms.

These Psalms, in the Western classifications, are “individual”, and “community lament” Psalms, where the individual, or the community, address Yahweh, then followed by a lament, the confession of trust, the petition, and the vow of praise.²⁰ In the case of the “individual lament”, most of the time, the assurance of being heard, another petition, and praise of God, are added.²¹

These Psalms, in Africa, are called “protective” Psalms, because they are capable of protecting the Christian, who reads them in the form of prayers (according to prescription), or who writes them on parchment, and wears them, or puts them under their pillow. In other words, they are Psalms, used to protect people. Solomon Ademiluka calls the use of Psalms in this way as an imprecatory use of Psalms.²² This method of using Psalms may involve reading them simultaneously, with prayer and fasting. They may have to be read a certain number of times, in a specific, prescribed place, at certain time of the day, or night. For example, according to J. A. Bolarinwa, Ps 35 is used for protection against witches.

To make it effective, the reading of this Psalm must be done between the hours of midnight and three o'clock in the morning, in an open place, and, while the reader is naked.²³ Ps 109 is said to be used against one's enemy. It must be read, by calling out certain holy names of God, with the burning of candles and incense, and mentioning the name of one's enemy. Prophet J. O. Ogunfuye prescribes the above Psalm against an enemy, as follows:

You can go to an open field in the night, or by one o'clock in the afternoon. You should have three candles lighted: one in the north, one in the east, and one in the west, while you stand in the middle. As you read the Psalm, have

²⁰ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, K. R. Crim, and Richard N. Soulen, trans, Atlanta GA: John Knox Press, 1981, pp. 52 and 64.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²² Solomon Ademiluka, “The Use of Psalms in African Context”, unpublished MA thesis, Ilorin Nigeria: University of Ilorin, 1990. Mr Ademiluka went around to interview the members of African Independent churches in Nigeria, as to how they use Psalms.

²³ J. A. Bolarinwa, *Potency and Efficacy of Psalms*, Ibadan Nigeria: Oluseyi Press, nd, pp. 29, 36.

the holy name Eel in mind, as well as the name of your enemy, and that of his mother. Then pray as follows: “Almighty God, (name your enemy), the son or daughter of (name his/her mother), is after me to destroy me. Oh, Lord of hosts, I beseech, in Thy mercy . . . to help me. Arise, for my defence. . . . Let his/her wicked deeds come back to her evil designs. Put him/her to shame.”²⁴

Another way of using Psalms, for protection against an enemy, is the preparation of specific Psalms into amulets, and putting them under a pillow. Prophet J. O. Ogunfuye specialises on this. According to him, Ps 7 should be written on “a pure parchment, and put in a special consecrated bag, and kept under one’s pillow”, for protection against evil people.²⁵ Ps 52 and 83 can be done in a similar way, according to Ogunfuye:

On a pure parchment, with the holy name, *Jah*, and tied up with white thread, and then put in a bag of white cloth, specifically made for this preparation (or amulet), can be carried about wherever one goes.²⁶

Psalms are not only used for protection against enemies, they are also used for prevention of accidents, air crashes, and derailments. For example, Ps 2, which can be classified as a royal Psalm, in the West, is prescribed for that, according to Ogunfuye.

Immediately a traveller boards a car, train, ship, or aeroplane, he should read the Psalm at least once. Whenever the Psalm occurs to him again, as the journey progresses, he should read it again. It is the guardian angel that is reminding him to read it. In case any turbulent storm arises during a voyage, the traveller should read the Psalm, praying in the holy name *Shaddai*.²⁷

Ps 60 can also be used for the protection of soldiers, and policemen, when they carry arms. This Psalm must be read, with the holy name, *Jah*, for effectiveness.²⁸

²⁴ J. O. Ogunfuye, *The Secrets of the Uses of Psalms*, Ibadan Nigeria: Jasmog, nd, p. 66.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 52.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁸ Bolarinwa, *Potency and Efficacy of Psalms*, p. 8.

Therapeutic Psalms

The following Psalms are classified as therapeutic Psalms, in the African context: 1, 3, 9, 41, 103, 107, 119, 126, and 147. These are classified as therapeutic Psalms, because Africans believe that there are healing powers in the words of these Psalms.

The above Psalms, in the Western context, belong to the “lament” and “thanksgiving” categories. However, African Independent churches look at these Psalms very differently, as having curative power, because of the content of these Psalms. These people believe that virtually all illnesses are curable by using one of these therapeutic Psalms, as prescribed. The methods used for these Psalms to be effective involve reading Psalms into water, or into olive oil, for bathing or rubbing on the body. Sometimes, it may be for drinking.

When Solomon Ademiluka interviewed Prophet J. Abiodun, of Christ Saviour church, Kaduna, Nigeria, he prescribed Ps 9 for a sick person. Such a person should read Ps 9 nine times into olive oil for drinking or rubbing on the body, for healing.²⁹ Prophet Ogunfuye usually prescribed Ps 143 for general illnesses and diseases, with this instruction:

Put some water in a pot, and then put some young palm leaves in water. Add some olive oil to the water. Then read Ps 143 into water seven times. Repeat this process for three days. Then allow the patient to bathe with the consecrated water. . . . His health will be restored.³⁰

J. A. Bolarinwa sees Ps 3 as efficacious for toothaches, headache, and backache. He says:

In order to cure toothache, prepare a tumblerful of lukewarm water, read the Psalm into it three times, and rinse out your mouth until the tumbler is emptied. Repeat the process from time to time, until pain is over.³¹

The above treatment should be followed by the name of *Jehovah-Rophai*. Using the same instruction, Ps 6, 119:17-32 can be used to cure eye trouble, such as, cataract and glaucoma. Prophet J. O. Ogunfuye, prescribes Ps 119:49-56 as a Psalm that would cure brain damage, if good instruction is followed. According to

²⁹ Ademiluka, “The Use of Psalms in African Context”; p. 77.

³⁰ Ogunfuye, *The Secrets of the Uses of Psalms*, p. 94.

³¹ Bolarinwa, *Potency and Efficacy of Psalms*, p. 9.

him, the portion of this Psalm “should be written on a small parchment, with the holy name Raphael, bind the parchment upon the patient, and make a suitable prayer for such patient”.³² The above Psalm can also be used to cure sores, injured arms, and nose.³³ So also, Ps 1 and 126 can be used to cure miscarriages, and infant mortality, respectively. According to Bolarinwa, immediately a woman is aware that she is pregnant, she should read Ps 1, always, both in the mornings, and in the evenings, with prayer, mentioning the name *Eli-Ishaddi*.³⁴ A woman, who has past experience in infant mortality, should read Ps 126, whenever she gets pregnant. This Psalm should be read into water for drinking and bathing throughout her pregnancy period. After the birth of the baby, the woman should continue the same process for the baby until he is fully grown.³⁵

Success Psalms

African Independent churches classified some Psalms as success Psalms. This is because these Psalms are capable of making any person, who reads it, accordingly, be successful in business, in examination, and in securing a job. An example of this Psalm is Ps 119:9-16. According to Ogunfuye, there is a special method of using this Psalm. He gives the methods:

Boil an egg, and remove the shell, deftly and cleanly, so that the inside can remain uninjured. Read on it the eight verses, as well as Deut 33 (Moses’ blessing on the tribes of Israel), and Josh 1:8 (“this book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth”); write Shrewniel and Mopiel. . . . Then write on the egg: Chosniel, “cover me with the spirit of wisdom and knowledge”, Shrewniel, “convert me into a better man”.³⁶

According to our investigation, there are many categories, and use of Psalms, which are yet to be mentioned. This writer believes that further researches will probably uncover these forms of Psalms, in an African context.

Critical Evaluation of the Classification and the Use of Psalms in Africa

The temptation, one faces in reading this paper, is the condemnation of the above classifications and usages of Psalms as unbiblical, syncretistic, or even

³² Ogunfuye, *The Secrets of the Uses of Psalms*, pp. 75-76.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Bolarinwa, *Potency and Efficacy of Psalms*, p. 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁶ Ogunfuye, *The Secrets of the Uses of Psalms*, pp. 72-73.

paganistic. However, with a critical look at the situations, in which Africans found themselves one will understand the African religio-cultural and biblical justification for the classification and usages.

Before the coming of Christianity, Africans had some special ways of dealing with enemies, and evil forces. They attacked evil forces and enemies by consulting the medicine man (*bablawa*), who prescribed medicine, and the incantation to be recited. Sometimes, charms were prepared, to be tied on the neck, or around the waist. It could also be put under a pillow. However, at the coming of Christianity, the majority of the early missionaries condemned all local practices as paganistic, satanic, and, therefore, incompatible with Christianity. African Christians had to worship the Western way. They even had to dress in the Western way, to show that they are Christians. In worship services, the hymns, though translated into the African languages, were still sung with the Western tune and phraseology.

As a result, Christianity appeared alien to the African people. Many African Christians still secretly go to the medicine man for charms, and incantations, and when trouble comes. This is because the Western style of Christianity did not reach the deepest souls of the Africans. There was still a vacuum to be filled.

African Christians have to find their own unique way to make Christianity more relevant to them. They had to make Christianity authentically African. They, therefore, turned to the same Bible, and their culture, for the answer. The classifications, and the use, of Psalms, in African context, are some of the ways to meet the existential need of the African Christians. As they read the Bible, particularly the book of Psalms, they discovered that some of the words, and contents, resemble the words and content of their incantations they used to get rid of enemies and evil forces. As they search further, to their amazement, they found that water, oil, and herbs were used in the same Bible to attack enemies, to anoint, and to protect. They also found that the prayers in the Bible resemble prayers in African traditional religion. These classifications and uses of Psalms have a basis in the African religio-cultural traditions, the Bible, and the ancient Near East, as will be demonstrated below.

The African Religio-Cultural Basis

The use of the Psalms of laments, for protection against enemies, has, no doubt, been influenced by African use of prayers and incantations against their enemies and evil forces. For example, the reciting of Ps 109 a certain number of

times, with candles, and calling the names of angels, and enemies, to make evil fall upon such enemies, resembles a Yoruba incantation against sorcerers, to make them lose their senses.

Igbagbe se Oro ko lewe (3 times)
Igbagbe se Afomo ko legbo (3 times)
Igbagbe se Olodumare ko ranti la ese pepeye (3 times)
Nijo ti pepeye ba daran egba igbe hobo ni imu bo'nu
Ki igbagbie se labgaja omo labgaja ko maa wobgo to,
Tori todo ba nsan ki iwo ehin mo.³⁷

Translation:

Due to forgetfulness, the *Oro* plant has no leaves (3 times)
Due to forgetfulness, the *Afomo* plant has no roots (3 times)
Due to forgetfulness, God did not remember to separate the toes of the duck
(3 times)
When the duck is beaten it cries "hoho"
May forgetfulness come upon (name the enemy), the son/daughter of (name
the mother); that is, may he lose his senses. The (he/she) may enter into
bush because a flowing river does not look back (and so on).

This incantation should be repeated, either two or three times. Our close examination of the above incantation shows that it resembles the reading of Psalms a certain number of times, and mentioning the name of the enemy.

African traditional prayers, in content and structure, closely resemble that of the Psalms used against an enemy. Below, is an example of African traditional prayer from Duala, of Cameroun:

God, be propitious to me!
Here is the new Moon:
Keep every harmful sickness far from me
Stop the wicked man, who is contemplating my misfortune
Let his wicked plans fall on himself
God, be propitious to me!
Desert me not in my need.³⁸

³⁷ Ademiluka, "The Use of Psalms in African Context", p. 105.

The use of Psalms as charms for protection definitely has its background in Yoruba traditional practices against enemies. Charms, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, are common, and are used for different purposes. Some, for protection against witches and evil spirits from entering a house. Others are used for driving enemies away. For example, seven leaves of certain plants and seven seeds of alligator pepper can be prepared into a charm, and tied above the door frame of one's house. Other charms could be tied around one's neck, for protection against enemies. Alligator peppers, blood of a cock, and some white kola nuts, should be burnt, and tied around one's neck. It may be wrapped with animal skin, or pieces of white cloth, tied with white and black threads.³⁹

The therapeutic use of Psalms (e.g., Ps 103 and 107) does not escape African traditional practices. It is a practice, which has its root in African religio-cultural practices. Before the advent of Christianity, African priests were the traditional healers. They believe that the cause of sickness is not only physical, but also spiritual. Whenever anyone is sick, and cannot be cured by himself, using herbs, the first thing to do is to consult a priest, who will, first of all, find the cause of the sickness, and prescribe a treatment, either in the form of concoctions, and/or performance of sacrifices, and in incantations, depending on the cause. Among the Yoruba society, the use of concoctions involves the boiling, or burning, of the bark of certain trees, leaves, parts of an animal, to be mixed together with palm-kernel oil, honey, water, or palm oil, to be drunk, or rubbed on the body. It may even be used for bathing (*Agbo*).⁴⁰ Incantation for healings is an integral part of Yoruba traditional healing practices. An example of therapeutic incantation involves "chewing seven seeds of alligator pepper", and placing one's mouth on that patient's navel, and then recite: "*Oorun lode la'laamu wonu; Oorun si kuju alaamu jade*" (seven times). This is to say, in English, "When the sun is hot the female lizard disappears; when the sun softens, the female lizard appears" (seven times). This writer remembers, at his own village (Irunda-Isanlu), that, when he was having frequent headaches, my mother invited the chief priest of the village (*Olori-awo*), who chewed some alligator seeds, spat them on my forehead, and began to recite some incantations. This traditional practice, no doubt, influenced the recitation of Psalms several times, with a combination of some herbs for healing purposes. What this writer has been trying to demonstrate is that the

³⁸ Aylward Shorter, *Prayer in the Religious Traditions of Africa*, New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 104.

³⁹ Ademiluka, "The Use of Psalms in African Context", pp. 71-72.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

classifications, and the use, of Psalms, in an African context, have been greatly influenced by African traditional practices. The recognition of the power of words and nature, as demonstrated, in the use of incantations and herbs, before the coming of Christianity, has been transferred to Christianity.

The Biblical Basis

From the research this writer has done, he is convinced that the classifications, and the uses, of Psalms, in an African context, do not only have their basis in African religio-cultural practices, before the advent of Christianity, they also have their basis in the Bible.

One important example of the biblical basis for the classifications, and uses, of Psalms, in an African context, is the actual content of Psalms themselves. The classification of Psalms as protective Psalms, and using them as protection against enemies, by Africans, is justified by the content of Ps 5:10 and 6:10. The Psalmist, who recognises the power of prayers and words, prays that his enemies will be destroyed, and be put to shame.

Destroy Thou them, O Lord;
Let them fall by their own counsels;
Cast them out in the multitude of their transgressions;
for they have rebelled against Thee.
Let all my enemies be ashamed and sore vexed:
let them return and be ashamed suddenly (Ps 5:10, 6:10, KJV).

Other passages invoked death on their enemies.
Let death seize upon them
and let them go down quick into hell:
for wickedness is in their dwellings, and among them.
But thou, O God, shalt bring them down into the pit of destruction:
bloody and deceitful men shall not live half their days;
but I will trust in Thee (Ps 55:15, 23, KJV).

Since missionaries condemned African incantation as incompatible with the Christian faith, when African Christians discovered the resemblance of some of the Psalms with African incantations, used against enemies, they changed to the Bible, as a substitute, believing that the words of the Bible are equally effective.

The use of Bible passages, or the power of the “Word of God”, to deal with enemies and Satan, was demonstrated in the Christian scriptures. When Satan tempted Jesus Christ, several times He quoted the Bible to overcome him. Christ said during his first temptation. “It is written, ‘man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God’ ” (Matt 4:4, KJV).

During the second temptation, Jesus also used the Bible, saying, “It is written again, ‘thou shall not tempt the Lord thy God’ ” (Matt 4:7, KJV).

During the third temptation, Jesus continued to use the “word”, “Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, ‘Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve’ ” (Matt 4:8, KJV). There are several other passages, where Jesus used the “word” to cast out demons.

Paul, the apostle, also used words to rebuke, and blind, an enemy, a sorcerer, and a “child of the devil” (Acts 13:9-11), when he was obstructing him.

The use of medicine and words to heal, in the Bible, justifies the African classifications, and the therapeutic use of Psalms. The Old and New Testaments are full of examples of the use of medicine, in conjunction with words or prayers, and the holy names of God and Jesus Christ, as the Africans use Ps 41, 103, 107, and 143.⁴¹

In 2 Kings 4, the prophet Elisha⁴² healed the Shunammite’s boy with words of prayer. He also healed those who ate poisonous herbs (2 Kings 4:38-41) by casting a “meal” into the pot to be eaten. Elisha prescribed water from the Jordan for Naaman. After Naaman dipped himself into the water seven times, he was healed (2 Kings 5:14). Isaiah prescribed “a lump of figs for Hezekiah”. After Hezekiah’s words of prayers, he laid the “lump of figs” on his boil, and he was healed (2 Kings 20: 1-11). Fifteen years was added to his life after his “sickness unto death”.

In the New Testament, Jesus healed a leper with the pronouncement of the words “be thou clean”, and with a touch (Matt 8:3). He healed those possessed with devils with the mere word, “Go”. Jesus healed the blind man with His saliva, clay, water, and words. According to John 9:6-7, he spat on the ground, anointed

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Some Western biblical scholars may doubt the historicity of Elisha, and other miraculous events in the Bible, most African Christians take them seriously, for their resemblance with their experiences.

the eyes of the blind man with clay, and commanded him, “Go wash in the pool of Siloam”, and he was healed.

Paul, the apostle, also demonstrates the power of words of prayers to heal. He healed Publius, who was sick of fever, and “bloody flux” (Acts 28:8). Peter also healed Aeneas, by the use of words, and the name of Jesus (Acts 9:34).

Ancient Near-Eastern Basis

African classifications, and uses, of Psalms, as protective and therapeutic Psalms, not only have a basis in an African religio-cultural, and biblical background, but also the ancient Near Eastern cultural background. The Egyptian Execration text is one example. The name, or names, of the enemy, or enemies, and what should happen to them, were written on the back of a pot. The names of the enemies, and what should happen to them, would be recited as one breaks the pot. There is evidence of a medical prescription of a raisin plaster to heal a horse, in an Ugaritic text, discovered at Ras Shamra.⁴³ Thus the use of medicine in the ancient Near East is not a strange phenomenon.

Conclusion

The above research should not, in anyway, be misunderstood as saying that all African culture is good, and, therefore, be adopted. This is, in no way, a call to return to African traditional religion, but, what this writer has done, in this paper, is an attempt to examine the African contribution to biblical Christianity in Africa. The classification, and the use, of Psalms, in an African context, is, indeed, a perfect example of the contextualisation of Christianity in Africa, in order to make Christianity more relevant to African people. This is because God’s revelation, at all times, has not failed to take the culture of the people very seriously, in order to convey His message. In the Old Testament, the Near-Eastern culture was taken seriously, as a medium of communication. During the Greco-Roman period, the Greco-Roman culture was used. So also, the Christian revelation (Bible) must take African religio-cultural tradition very seriously, in communicating Christianity to Africans, since the aim of the Christian mission is not to make Africans into Western Christians, but into authentic African Christians. Zablon Nthamburi is certainly right, when he emphasised:

⁴³ J. Robinson, *The Second Book of Kings*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 194.

The gospel must be made to speak to the life and thought of the people, in languages and images that are comprehensible. . . . It must be able to make sense of African religiosity, its customs, traditions, arts, metaphors, and images.⁴⁴

This brings into the open, not only contextualisation at work, but also affirmation by African Christians of the belief in the “power of words”, as affirmed by the Bible. By the spoken word, the world was created (Gen 1-2). By the spoken words of Jesus, of the prophets, and of the apostles, many miracles were performed.

This method of using the Bible is also legitimate, not merely for the sake of contextualisation, but because of the fact that African religio-cultural tradition is closer to the biblical, and ancient Near Eastern culture, than Western culture. D. B. Barrett convincingly affirms this:

Africanism is not only good in itself, but is also a culture, closer than the European, to the biblical way of life, and, therefore, more suitable for building a Christian society.⁴⁵

The result of this method of using the Bible, particularly Psalms, legitimises it. The African Independent churches, which are using the Bible this way, are growing at a geometrical rate, compared with the mainline, missionary churches. Ironically, while the authorities of the mainline, missionary churches condemn this method as paganistic, many of their members join the African Independent churches. In fact, other outstanding church members of the missionary churches, who prefer to keep their membership intact, do frequently visit the pastors and prophets of the African Independent churches, who use the Bible this way, to meet the everyday needs of their members. Above all, there are several testimonies as to the effectiveness of the use of the Bible, especially Psalms, to heal and drive away enemies and evil forces.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Zablon Nthamburi, “Making the Gospel Relevant Within the African Context and Culture”, in *African Ecclesial Review* 25-3 (1983), p. 194.

⁴⁵ D. B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 166.

⁴⁶ This writer witnessed Professor Adeboye of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ilorin, Nigeria, giving a testimony at the university chapel (Chapel of the Light), on how he used Bible passages to drive away enemies and evil forces. Several prophets and pastors, whom we interviewed, also gave the same testimonies.

Admittedly, care must be taken, so that African Christians would not conclude that all African religio-cultural traditions are good, and, therefore, must be used, in making Christianity relevant to Africans.

This work is preliminary, therefore, there is a need for further research along this line.

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