

Reading Psalm 109 in African Christianity

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ABSTRACT

Psalm 109 is one of the most problematic psalms in the Old Testament. The majority of scholars are not comfortable as far as the interpretation of the contents is concerned. It is one of the psalms that is classified as an imprecatory psalm dealing with vengeance against enemies instead of forgiveness. It has been given various names among some Western scholars, who link the psalm to hate, vengeance, cursing, and violence. However, when approached from an Africentric point of view in African Christianity, this psalm can be considered as one of the prayers of appeal to God for justice. The purpose of this article is to discuss how this psalm is interpreted differently in African Christianity, for example as a psalm of protection, success, healing and, mostly, as a prayer to God to get up and fight for the righteous and the poor instead of leaving the fight to the sufferer visiting witch doctors, herbalists, or evil ones.

A INTRODUCTION

When our ways of understanding no longer work, it is essential to listen to others and learn from them. It seems to us that Western biblical scholarship suffers most from being 'without context'. It is carried out abstractly and therefore leads to abstract results and truths, which are not related to any context. 'Abstract' is not only understood in the usual sense as being opposed to 'concrete.' 'Abstract' also means: unattached to the life and reading of 'ordinary' people, far away from their questions, developed in the ivory tower of the university.

(Dietrich and Luz 2002:ix – x).

Dietrich and Luz (2002:ix-x) emphasise that what is needed at a time when Western biblical scholarship seems to be without context is contextual hermeneutics. The latter is regarded as interpretation that takes into consideration the life and reading of ordinary people who seek to relate the Bible to their own life situation as it affects their protection, healing and success. In essence, my interpretation of Psalm 109 in this article links up with contextual hermeneutics and the issue of protection, success and healing.

Psalm 109 belongs to a group of psalms called imprecatory psalms. These psalms are called imprecatory because they express a desire for God's venge-

ance on their enemies. For sure, Psalm 109 is generally recognised as one of the most troublesome parts of the Bible because its imprecatory nature (Martin 1972:113).

Benson (in Wenham 1974:149) lists 39 instances of what he calls ‘commi-natory psalms’. However, Alex Luc, basing his argument on the imprecatory psalms, believes that there are 28 psalms that contain one or more verses with an imprecatory element (1999:395-410). We have about one hundred verses of this type in the psalms of the Bible, all involving actual calls for vengeance. The following psalms are widely recognised and classified as imprecatory psalms: 5:10; 6:10; 7:6, 9, 15-16; 9:19-20; 10:15; 17:13; 28:4; 31:17-18, 35, 4-6, 8, 19, 24-26; 40:14-15; 52:5; 54:5; 55:9, 15, 15; 56:7; 58:6-10; 59:5, 11-13; 68:1-2, 30; 69: 22-25, 27-28; 70:2-3; 71:13; 74:11, 22- 23; 79:6, 10, 12; 83:9, 11, 13-18; 94:1-2; 104: 35; 109:6-15, 17-20, 29; 129:5-8; 137:7-19, 21-22; 140:8-11; 141:10; and 143:12 (cf. Day 2002:166-186).

Imprecatory psalms have been branded by different kinds of names such as ‘cursing psalms’, ‘psalms of vengeance’, ‘psalms of violence’, ‘psalms of hate’, and others because of the nature of the contents of these psalms (Zenger 1996:46). The fact that these psalms express the desire for God’s vengeance on one’s enemies and enemies of God, led many Christians, especially Western Christians, to condemn these psalms as un-Christian, and to be avoided altogether (Brug 2005; McKeating 1963:243-45) because Christians are to love their enemies (Matt 5:44), to bless them, and not curse them (Rom 12:14).

Are the imprecatory psalms merely a linguistic style or an ordinary literary device which the authors do not really take seriously? Or do they reflect the theology of the Old Testament only, with no relationship with the New Testament? Is the call in Psalm 109: 9 for the ‘children of the enemies to be fatherless and his wife to be a widow’ in any way compatible with the Christian faith? Although this article will make some attempt to mention some of the Western efforts to answer these questions, the main purpose of this essay is to discuss an Africentric approach to Psalm 109. More specifically, the article will discuss how African indigenous churches have interpreted this psalm in a way quite different from that of the general Western interpretative tradition. Although the emphasis is on the indigenous churches in West Africa, it is believed that this Africentric approach has spread through the African continent and beyond. This interpretation is a reality among African Diaspora all over the world (Yorke 1997:145-164). The article will make use of African cultural hermeneutics in interpreting Psalm 109 in order to reveal how it has come alive in African interpretation.

B WHAT IS AFRICAN CULTURAL HERMENEUTICS?

Although the dominant Western method of interpretation is well-known because the majority of African biblical scholars are thoroughly schooled in

this method of interpretation, it is important to describe briefly what I classify as the Eurocentric method of interpretation. The dominant Western method of biblical interpretation is what I refer to as Eurocentric interpretation.

The most dominant example of Western interpretative methods which have prevailed in biblical interpretation for centuries is the historical critical method with its several subdivisions (Biezeveld 2008:123-139). The historical critical method is regarded as a scientific approach to biblical interpretation by dealing with the text of the Bible rationally like any other book. It critically examines the dates, the texts, the sources, the tradition, the forms and the contents of the Bible, creating a plethora of critical methods under the rubric of historical criticism. Subsequently, scholars employ form critical studies in an attempt to determine the forms and literary types of the text. Tradition-historical studies attempt to determine the actual oral tradition behind the text. Redaction criticism seeks to determine the editorial work behind the text. Source criticism is concerned with the sources which the authors of the Bible had access to and used. Textual criticism is concerned with the identification and removal of transcription errors in the text of the manuscripts. Textual critics seek to reconstruct the texts as closely as possible to the original. Historical criticism also led to canonical criticism, structural criticism, narrative criticism, and rhetorical criticism, to name a few. These methods are dominant methods all over the world, including Africa. They have become the criteria by which books and articles are judged as acceptable and publishable.

But there was another type of Eurocentric interpretation alongside the historical critical method that was at its peak during the days of slavery. Africans and African Americans were considered as 'inferior, fixed to the indefinite status of servitude' by the slave owners (Davis 2001-2005:93). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries African Americans were taught the Pauline text which encouraged the slaves to be obedient to their masters (Davis 2001-2005:94). Davis says (*ibid*),

this Eurocentric biblical interpretation in the South was very meticulous in pointing out what those scholars knew would keep African American slaves docile. We call this 'Eurocentric' because African Americans learned their religion from their slaveholders, which led to their 'misreligion' and exploitation.

According to some interpretations of Genesis 9:25-27 African Americans were regarded as descendants of Ham and therefore cursed. They were taught that whiteness was synonymous with morality and purity while the blackness of African Americans was synonymous with bondage. This kind of biblical teaching was advocated by supporters of slavery. For example, Josiah Priest (1843: 87), an advocate for African American slavery, once said:

Wherefore we come to the conclusion that it is not sinful to enslave the Negro race, providing it is done in a tender, fatherly, and

thoughtful manner, having the fear of God before our eyes in a transaction of the kind, doing no violence....beyond proper and necessary correction.¹

It is important to note that that the majority of African biblical scholars who are educated at African higher institutions are trained and continue to be trained in the Western tradition of biblical scholarship, similar to their counterparts in the West (Holter 2001:27-39). However, there is a realisation amongst those of us who were trained in the Western tradition and who returned to Africa that the very Western methodological tradition in which we are well schooled do not satisfy Africa's needs. Subsequently, one is forced to find other satisfactory ways or methodologies that will meet the needs and match the understanding of African people at home and abroad. In question is relating specific biblical issues to the situation in Africa (Holter 2001:27-39). This method is different from the Western methodology in that the particular focus is not only the historical and literary context of the passage read, but also the African context (Holter 2001:39-40). Although Western critical tools and training are used in juxtaposition with African tools, the context and the conclusion arrived at are always different from that of Western scholarship.

African cultural hermeneutics is not very popular in Western tradition, not because it is incomprehensible and untranslatable to indigenous languages, but because they employ ground rules that differ from the normal Western rules set by the Eurocentric academy (Sugirtharajah 1999: 12-13).

African cultural hermeneutics 'seek to acquire and celebrate their God-given identity by delving into their indigenous resources and rejecting the superintending tendencies of Western intellectual tradition' (Sugirtharajah 1999:12-13). They address issues closer to home of their own people. What they did was that they 'learnt and borrowed ideas and techniques from external resources but reshaped them, often added their own indigenous texture, to meet their local needs' (Sugirtharajah 1999: 108).

African cultural hermeneutics is the interpretation that makes the 'African social cultural context a subject of interpretation' (Adamo, 2004:9; Sugirtharajah 1999:5; Ukpong 2002:17-32). It means that this interpretation is contextual since interpretation is always done in a particular context. Specifically, it means that analysis of the text is done from the perspective of African religion, an African world-view, and culture (Adamo 2001:6). When we apply it to biblical studies, it is the rereading of the Christian scripture from a predetermined African-centric perspective. The purpose is not only to understand the Bible and God

¹ Holter (2008a:373-382) refers to this type of Eurocentric interpretation during the colonial period in a research project of the University of Stellenbosch. In another publication he calls for a dialogue between European and African biblical interpreters (cf. Holter 2008b:69-80).

in our African experience and culture, but also to break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Western biblical scholars have long enjoyed (Yorke 1995:145-158). This is a methodology that reappraises ancient biblical tradition and African world-view, culture, and life experience with the purpose of 'correcting the effect of the cultural ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected' (Yorke 1995:145-158).

Similar to Third World biblical hermeneutics, African cultural hermeneutics has two main characteristics: 'liberational, and culturally sensitive' (Sugirtharajah 1999:11). It also has some other methodological characteristics such as narration, orality, theopoetic, and imaginative. What it does is that it uses liberation as a crucial hermeneutics and mobilises indigenous cultural materials for theological enterprises (Sugirtharajah 1999:11). Despite the Eurocentric interpreters' claims to universality, the African cultural hermeneutics is 'post-modern, post colonial in its aim to celebrate the local' (Sugirtharajah 1999:11), and challenges the reigning imported Western theories of interpretation.

A casual glance at the history of biblical hermeneutics will reveal that there has never been an interpretation that is without reference to or dependent on a particular cultural code, thought patterns, or social location of the interpreter (Mulrain 1999: 166-132). There is no individual who is completely detached from everything in his or her environment or experience and culture so as to be able to render one hundred percent objectivity in everything done. The fact is that every interpreter is biased in some ways (Mulrain 1999:116-132). What I am trying to say is that there is what we call *African cultural hermeneutics* because persons who are born and raised in an African culture will normally interpret scriptures in ways that are unique to them and different from Western interpreters. Therefore, to talk of uniform, unconditional, universal, and absolute interpretation or hermeneutics is unrealistic. Such an interpretation or hermeneutics do not exist anywhere in the world. The one who interprets tends to bring, consciously or unconsciously, his or her own bias to bear on the way in which the message is perceived.

The truth is that in Africa, some distinctive interpretation of scripture has emerged and is emerging. In African cultural hermeneutics, there are various methods employed to achieve this purpose. These methods are African Comparative Studies, Evaluative Studies, African Presence in the Bible, Inculturation, Liberation, Black Theology, African Feminist Hermeneutics, the Bible as Power, Bibliographical Studies, and Reading with the Ordinary Readers approaches (Adamo 2001:9-33; Adamo 2004:18-26; Ukpong 2000:11-28). The basic approach that I use in this article is a combination of the *Bible as Power*-approach and *Reading with Ordinary Readers*-approach.

C INTERPRETATION OF PSALM 109

1 Survey of interpretation of Psalm 109 in the Western tradition

In form-critical studies of the Psalter, Psalm 109 is classified as an individual lament psalm (Weiser 1962:690). More specifically, it is a lament of an individual person accused of being guilty of the death of a poor man (v. 16), possibly by some mysterious means such as curses (vv. 17ff). The psalmist feels guiltless and helpless in the face of this accusation. The only hope he has for liberation is a prayer to God for help. Thus, he commences his lament in verses 1-5 by confiding in Yahweh and by sharing his integrity with him. In verses 6-20 he makes his wish known for vengeance from God against his enemies. Subsequently, the psalmist prays to God for deliverance from his enemies who afflict his body and soul (vv. 21-27). He concludes the lament with the belief that he has been delivered and he praises the Lord with a vow of thanksgiving (vv. 28-31).

The section of the psalm that mainly creates a problem in interpretation is verses 6-9. This section begins with an imperative and continues with jussive (cf. Luc 1999:395):

Set thou a wicked man over him; and let Satan stand at his right hand. When he shall be judged, let him be condemned: and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few; and let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow.

The main problem is the harshness of the words and the shift of pronouns between verses 5 and verses 6-9. One wonders how the psalmist can utter such words of hatred. It seems as if the different wording of the psalm tends to present it as quotation, yet there is no explicit quotation mark in verse 6 that delimits the section.

Several attempts have been made to solve this problem. The first attempt to resolve this problem is to regard this section (vv. 6-9) in fact as a quotation (cf. Kraus 1989:338; Cherian 1982:115; Egwim 2004). In other words, they are not the original words of the psalmist. The latter was quoting the words of his enemies in order to return their curses to them. In order to support this quotation theory, verse 20 is referred to. Here the psalmist requests specifically that God should return to his accusers the very evils spoken in verses 6-19.

Other scholars (Craigie 1993:4; Zenger 1994:78; Holladay 1995:302, 308) in disagreement with the above quotation theory rather consider the utterances to be the words of the psalmist himself. They believe that since the psalm is a prayer of lament in which the psalmist expresses pain and anger, the curses may not be as offensive as they appear in the text. In other words, they are personal expressions before God and not a direct confrontation against the enemies (Zenger 1994:78). Craigie suggests that these words are the personal words of

the psalmist and are expressions of vindictiveness and hatred; therefore they cannot be purified simply because they are in the Scripture. They are a personal reaction to evil and pain and the sentiments in themselves are evil (1983:41).² Holladay (1995:302 and 308) thinks that this sentiment is a product of a limited perspective of someone who is an Old Testament believer because he exhibits a very different spirit from that of the New Testament.

Another approach is to read Psalm 109 as a prophetic prediction. The psalm is then interpreted as a divine proclamation on enemies and not an affirmation based on personal sentiments. According to Spurgeon (1983:168, 174) the curses in the Psalms are 'prediction' in the 'mode of prediction of the future', and 'a mirror of warning' to the enemies of Christ. Lockyer (1993:446-447) considers the psalm as predictions of the wicked and not as imprecations. St. Augustine, in his commentary on Psalm 109, calls the imprecations in the Psalms in general 'predictions' in 'the mode of predicting the future under the appearance of wishing evil' (St Augustine 1853:5.213). A medieval Jewish commentator, Yefet ben Ali, believes that this psalm is a prediction of the Karaitite-Rabbanite conflict and the imprecations are against the Karaites' opponents (cf. Simeon 1991:94-95).

A fourth attempt at solving the imprecatory section of this psalm is the covenant approach. According to the proponents of this theory, the covenant is the basis for the psalmic curses. Laney (1981:41-42) thinks that the 'fundamental ground' on which to justify the imprecation in the psalm is the Abrahamic covenant and that David had 'a perfect right as the representative of the nation' to pronounce the curses on Israel's enemies.

Another important attempt to understand this psalm is to interpret the imprecations as 'prophetic judgment'. According to Luc (1999), the examination of the prophetic speeches outside the Psalms, and the prior bases of the imprecations make this approach justified.

All these approaches are valuable and seem to be legitimate, but they do not answer the question of the psalm's relevance to the life context of African Christians in Africa. If all the theories put forward to solve the dilemma of whether the words in Psalm 109 originally belonged to the psalmist or his enemies, then so what? What are the implications? An Africentric perspective compels me to be on the side of those who regard Psalm 109 as the actual words of the psalmist. Does this reading meet the existential need of the individual Christian? How? I am of the opinion that this is where the Africentric approach to the study of Psalm 109 comes to life and serves as a supplement to Eurocentric approaches.

² Similarly, C S Lewis holds that their presence in the Bible does not make them 'good and pious', and that 'the reaction of the Psalmists to injury, though profoundly natural, is profoundly wrong'.

2 An Africentric interpretation of Psalm 109: Enemies in African indigenous tradition and culture

Unlike most Western biblical scholars who labelled Psalm 109 as one of violence, hate, darkness, disorientation, other biblical scholars and ordinary readers, for example in Africa, consider psalms like this as psalms of 'protection' and 'defence, liberation, healing, and success' against enemies (Adamo 2001:9-43). Since this particular African interpretation of Psalm 109 is closely tied to the use of African culture and world view it is important to discuss at this stage the concept of enemies and an African attitude to their enemies before the advent of Christianity.

The nature and process of dealing with enemies in African indigenous tradition is remarkably different from that of the Western world. This is because Africans living in the continent face some peculiar problems due to their perception of the world around them. To indigenous Africans the presence of evil, witches, sorcerers, evil spirits, and all kinds of enemies are painfully real. They believe that they are responsible for all the evil things that happen all over the world. In African indigenous tradition, children and adults are taught the existence and the activities of enemies. The need to be protected from them is taken seriously. They use animate and inanimate objects (e. g. stones, sand, trees, leaves, human parts, animals, water, urine, etcetera) for protection.

Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria there is a belief that every person has at least a known or an unknown enemy called *ota*. The Yoruba people distinguishes between two types of enemies, *orogun* and *aye*. The former is brought about by some perennial quarrels, which come from a variety of circumstances such as land disputes, property inheritance, chieftaincy title disputes, and constant rivalries among wives in polygamous homes. The second type, *aye*, literally means 'the world'. *Aye* consists of sorcerers, witches and all persons who are inherently wicked and malicious by nature. They are more dreadful than the first group of enemies, the *orogun*.

In order to deal with their enemies, people would visit a professional medicine person, who would employ potent powerful words (also known as incantations) that are pronounced on charms, for example *epe*, (curse), *isaasi*, *apeta*, *ironsi* and *eedi* (Dopamu 1987:50-56; 1983: 1-11; Ademiluka 1990: 57). The effect of incantations can be disastrous. It may cause abnormal behaviour, sudden loss of children and property, chronic illness and even death.

The powerfulness and wickedness related to the activities of witches as enemies of society, is manifest in the following confession of a witch (Dopamu 1986: 57):

We drink human blood in the day or night;
We can prevent a sore from healing;

We can make a person to lose a large sum of money;
 We can reduce a great man to nothing;
 We can send a small child to heaven suddenly;
 We can cause a woman to bear born-to-die children (*abiku*)

Before the advent of Christianity, Africans had a cultural way of dealing with the problem of enemies and evildoers. There were various techniques of making use of natural materials and potent powerful words, which they put to defensive and offensive use in dealing with evil. One cultural way of *protection against enemies* consists of the use of imprecatory potent words (incantations) called *ogede* in Yoruba. If a person lacks the potent words or medicine to deal with an enemy, that person would consult a medicine man (*babalawo* or *onise-gun* or *oologun* in Yoruba language). The medicine man prepares the person seeking an incantation by teaching him/her some potent words or by providing a charm for protection or for attacking the enemy. The words thus received must be recited at a certain place, at a certain time of the day or night, and for a certain number of times in order to be effective. People in need of *protection at the time of travelling or hunting*, or in need of *protection at home*, would go to a priest (called *babalawo* or *onise-gun* or *oologun* in Yoruba). These priests are gifted and well disciplined in the art of medicine.

There are three major ways of dealing with enemies in the African (Yoruba) indigenous tradition. They are the use of potent words (*ogede*), the use of medicine (*tira*), and the use of medicine for the body. A perfect example of the type of potent words uttered by the Yoruba when they would approach the enemy, is the following (Agoro 12/1996):

O di oluworo-ji-woro it becomes *oluworo ji-woro*³
Odi oluworo-ji-woro It becomes *oluworo ji-woro*
Oku aja kiigbo, The dead dog does not bark
Oku agbo kiikan the dead ram does not fight
Irawe t' osubu lu odo o di'egbe The dried leaf that falls into the
 river is lost forever
Od'olu woro-ji-woro It becomes *oluworo ji-woro*
Ki awon ota mi lo gbere So let my enemies be lost forever
Oku aja niwon They are dead dogs
Oku agbo niwon They are dead rams
Ewe gbigbe niwon They are dried leaves

Examples of potent words for protection against witches and wizards who are considered arch enemies of society in the African indigenous tradition are numerous. However, it suffices to mention one more (Ademiluka 1990:71-72):

³ The words of *oluworo ji-woro* are not translatable. They are chanting words which reflect noises.

<i>Igbagbe se oro ko lewe (3 times)</i>	Due to forgetfulness the <i>oro</i> (cactus plant) has no leaves (3 times).
<i>Igbagbe se afomo ko legbo (3 times)</i>	Due to forgetfulness the <i>afomo</i> (mistletoes plant) has no roots (3 times)
<i>Igbagbe se Olodumare ko ranti la ese pepeye (3 times)</i>	Due to forgetfulness, god did not remember to separate the toes of the duck (3 times)
<i>Nijo ti pepeye ba daran egba igbe hoho ni imu bo 'nu</i>	When the duck is beaten it cries, <i>hoho hoho ni imu bo 'nu</i>
<i>Ki igbagbe se lagbaja omo lagbaja Ko maa wogbo lo</i>	May forgetfulness come upon (name the enemy) the daughter of mother; that is, may he loose his senses that he or she may enter into bush
<i>Tori t'odo ban san ki iwo ehin moo</i>	Because a flowing river does not flow backward (and so on)

It is believed that these words when recited over and over would make the witches – as the enemies who attack – get lost in the bush or in the cities. The incantation will make them forget all the evil actions planned against a person reciting the potent words.

I have referred previously to the use of charms (amulets) as a way of obtaining protection against enemies in African societies. Amulets or charms (*tira* in Yoruba) are usually obtained from medicine men who are healers and diviners. They are used for diverse purposes but mainly as protective devices to prevent enemies in the guise of witches, wizards, and evil from entering a house or from attacking a person. Charms or amulets are also used to nullify any attempt by these enemies as sorcerers to harm a person in any way. The charms and amulets are prepared with different ingredients according to the purpose for which they will be used. For example, for protection a charm would be hung on the doorframe in order to protect the house. It will be made of 'seven leaves of some plants, and seven seed of alligator pepper' (Ademiluka 1990:71-72). Charms to be tied around one's neck for protection against enemies may require alligator peppers, white and red cola-nuts and the blood of a cock. Some charms are wrapped with animal skin and sewn round. Other charms are wrapped inside pieces of cloth or paper and tied with black and white threads. In order to be effective, some charms also require the recitation of potent words

and prayer (Ademiluka 1990:71-72). These words must then be recited exactly according to the prescription of the medicine man in order to be efficacious.

3 Psalm 109 as protection and defence against the attack of the enemies

One of the main reasons why the leaders of African Indigenous Churches separated from the mainline missionary churches was their belief that the Psalms are more powerful and effective than the potent words or incantations in the African tradition. They wanted to exercise their freedom to put this belief into practice.

The book of Psalms became the most favourite books of the Bible believed to be more powerful than any other books. They used it for protection, healing, and success. This can be illustrated by the following popular song in the early days of African Indigenous Churches (Ogunkunle 2000:217):

<i>Ayanga si Oloogun (2x)</i>	Away with the medicine man (Ifa Priest) 2x
<i>T'owo mi bate Psaamu</i>	When I lay my hand on Psalms
<i>Ayanga si Oloogun</i>	Away with the medicine man

A song similar to the one just mentioned calls for the use of the Psalms incantations against evil (cf. Oshitelu nd:14):

I challenge the juju men, once I lay hold on my Psalms
 Praying with Psalm is a staff of victory
 Praying with Psalm is a great protection
 Praying with Psalm is a staff of provision
 Praying with Psalm is a virtue of healing
 Praying with Psalm is a staff of peace.

Here are a few examples of the use of Psalm 109 as protection and defence within African Christianity in Nigeria:

- When one looks at the use of a specific psalm as an incantation it is sensible to argue that within the Anglican Church in Nigeria Psalm 109 is used for God to bring vengeance on one's enemies and for deliverance. For example, Bolarinwa (nd:55), the former registrar of the Anglican Diocese of Ibadan, illustrates how each chapter of the book of Psalms can be used as potent words for deliverance, protection, healing and success in life. Accepting the authorship of David, he (Bolarinwa nd:55) proposes to read Psalm 109 generally as a daily prayer for three consecutive days in order to wreak vengeance on those who are unreasonably hostile to someone. Currently many Anglican Church members and leaders read Psalm 109 in this way. In fact, they would sometimes go secretly to the prophets and pastors of the Aladura churches who specialise in using psalms as incantations.

- In the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) Prophet Dr. Olarewaju, (the pastor and coordinator of the CAC Churches in Abuja areas) reads Psalm 109 with the belief that there is power in the psalms. Olarewaju declared boldly that the Lord told him that ‘we Christians should not leave the psalms to the manipulation of occultists’ (1998:ii). To him Psalms are his sword of the Spirit to combat Satan and his hosts. As a result he implores Christians to use them according to his direction from the Holy Spirit to engage the wicked people of this dark world in a battle (Olarewaju 1998: iv). He emphasises that Psalm 109 is a powerful psalm to confront the wicked enemy one knows. He warns that if anyone is engaging another person for evil purposes, those curses mentioned in this psalm will be visited upon the one who pursues evil. There is assurance that God will fight for any Christian who uses Psalm 109 for prayer (Ogunkunle 2000: 217).
- The founder and first Primate of the Church of the Lord in Aladura (J O Oshitelu nd: 28) prescribes in his book *The book of prayer with the uses and power of Psalms*, the use of each of the 150 psalms. According to him Psalm 109 is a psalm of revenge. The psalm is to be read for three days with the name El (God) in order to bring God’s revenge on the wicked enemies.
- Another indigenous church, the Celestial Church of Christ, has introduced a worship service every Friday of the week called ‘Power Day Service’. Believing strongly in the power of the word of God, especially the psalms, the service is meant to pray for spiritual power to overcome evil. In this service imprecatory psalms, including Psalm 109, are read in order to deliver individuals from the power of Satan and his agents.

A closer look at Psalm 109 shows that the African interpretation of this passage is liberational. Verses 1–5 are interpreted as statements to God of what the enemies have done to the psalmist returning evil for good and trying to kill the psalmist. He wants God to hear what they have done to him and he asks God to kill them. These statements are uttered before God because spoken words are powerful. Verses 21–29 which mention ‘I am poor and needy and my heart is wounded within me’, confirms the liberational interpretation of Psalm 109.

In terms of African culture, verses 6–20 are understood as a defence against enemies. When these verses are read and chanted over and over again and in the way African incantations are chanted, they are seen as performance words or potent words that will accomplish the purpose of protection. Verses 6-20 are a prayer to God to discipline the wicked. Reciting these verses in effect becomes a means of protection against enemies’ attacks. What is requested in

the following verses of the psalm will to all intents and purposes happen to the enemies if they are memorised and recited faithfully:

Set thou a wicked man over him: and let Satan stand at his right
When he shall be judged let him be condemned
and let his prayer become sin.
Let his days be few; and let another take his office
Let his children be fatherless and his wife a widow (vv. 6-9).

It is believed that God will bring death upon the enemies by the recitation of these verses.

Verses 30–31 confirm that the entire Psalm 109 contains potent and performative words which will surely accomplish the purpose for which it is read. The psalmist believes in the potency and performativity of the words. That is why he rejoices and praises the Lord for the Lord has stood with the poor. There was no doubt in his mind that God has done it. The psalmist therefore praises the Lord for the accomplishment of what he has requested from him.

D CONCLUDING REMARKS

Comparing what is believed to be a Western interpretation with an African interpretation, it is evident that the basic difference between a Western interpretation and African interpretation is that while the former seems to be abstract and without context (Dietrich & Luz 2002: ix),⁴ the latter seems to take the context of reading within African culture seriously. It is only in our contextual situation that there are ‘a meaning’ and ‘a value’ in the way we read the Bible, in our research and in our hermeneutical efforts (cf. Dietrich and Luz 2002: ix).

Another main difference in African reading is *communality* (West 2000:29-53), or what West and Ukpong call reading with the community (West:1994:152-170; Ukpong 2002:22). It makes a difference with whom we read. African scholars cannot afford to neglect the poor or ordinary people in their biblical interpretation. African scholars read the Bible in the context of *suffering* and *poverty* (Holter 2005:149-163; West 1999). The majority of African biblical scholars belong to poor families and cannot afford buying most modern books or subscribing to most prestigious journals published in the

⁴ Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz’s remark (2002:ix) is important: ‘It seems to us that Western biblical scholarship suffers most from being “without context”. It is carried out abstractly and therefore leads to abstract results and truths, which are not related to any context.’ Biblical interpretation does not seem to be related to the day to day life of the western people. Most seem to do biblical scholarship for the sake of it or as an exercise. This is different from African biblical interpretation which is always related to the suffering of the people. It must try to answer some questions that are related to healing, hunger, success and protection from evil forces.

West. They cannot attend academic professional international conferences outside their own countries (Holter 1998:240-254). In contrast, most Western scholars are not as poor and undergoing suffering like African scholars (Holter 1998: 240-254; 2005: 149-163).⁵ Thus the text is read liberationally, i.e. liberation from suffering and poverty.

Another major difference between genuine serious African scholarship and most of the Western scholarship is that the former reads the text within the context of *faith*. With a strong belief in God who can perform miracles, the miraculous is not doubted. Moreover, his word is regarded as a means of performing miracles because his word is believed to be powerful and sharper than a two-edged sword (Heb 4: 12).

At a glance, the temptation is to condemn an Africentric interpretation of imprecatory psalms as fetishist, magical, unchristian and uncritical. However, a closer and critical examination of an Africentric interpretation of imprecatory psalms will reveal some facets that make it legitimate, important, and Christian.

The use of imprecatory psalms with the names of God shows the recognition of the power in names within African tradition quite similar to the power attributed to names in the Hebrew Bible. African Christians revere the names of God and believe that these names in the Bible are powerful when recited. The recitation of such names will achieve whatever result is desired.

The use of the imprecatory psalms for protection against enemies and evil spirits is based on the recognition of a fundamental belief in the power of words. The belief in the potency of words within African tradition is transferred to the belief in the power in the words of God in Scripture when they are memorised, recited, sung and read. The contents of these imprecatory psalms resemble the potency attributed to words (incantations) in African tradition and culture. They have the power to achieve whatever is recited against the enemies, especially those who are unrepentantly wicked.

African Christians use imprecatory psalms not for the sake of their aesthetic value, but as an expression of God's righteous indignation against injustice. Praying the imprecatory psalms is a platform from which oppressed people can request God's fulfilment of his righteousness and justice. Although

⁵ This may sound judgmental, however, a comparison of the average salaries of biblical scholars teaching in universities and pastoring in churches in most African countries and those in Europe, America, Canada and even South Africa, one will agree with the above statement. For example the present highest salary of biblical scholars who teach in Nigerian universities is not more than two thousand five hundred American dollars. It is less in many African countries. While in the West most senior professors of biblical scholars earn no less ten thousand American dollars per month. Most African biblical scholars cannot attend international conferences, have no houses and just try to survive (Holter 1998:240-254).

these psalms truly express our humanness, to use them in prayer becomes acts of faith because despite the injustice suffered, every injustice suffered is left for God to respond to rather than the sufferer taking the law into his or her own hand. This action confirms a Yoruba wisdom saying, *fi ija fun Olorun ja fi owo leran*, which means: 'Leave everything for God to fight for you.' The saying confirms what is found in the New Testament (Romans 12: 19): 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord"'. The psalmists addressed the problem to God who is the 'final judge' (Brueggemann 1984:52). In fact, most African Christians will concur with McCann (1993:114), when he says that the imprecatory psalms which expressed vehement violent-sounding prayers are actually 'an act of non-violence'.

Another closer look at the imprecatory psalms teaches us something about ourselves, that we are 'vengeful creatures' (Brueggemann 1984:113-115). These psalms are indeed a reflection of what we are. To most African Christians, there is nothing morally inferior or unchristian in the imprecatory psalms. Praying the imprecatory psalms is an expression of the 'desire for an oppressor to be punished in proportion of the crime committed' and that there is nothing morally wrong in praying these psalms (Brueggemann 1984:114). To believe that the praying of imprecatory psalms is wrong is hypocritical. Anyone seeing an enemy trying to kill him or her will respond with equal force. Christians go to court in an attempt to punish the offender. Without pretension, it is better to pray to God to act rather than doing the acting ourselves. When Africans pray the imprecatory psalms, they believe that they are taking the offender or the enemies to the court of God.

The efficacy of this practice is never doubted among African Christianity and most churches in Africa. I am strongly convinced that it is better for African Christians to read the imprecatory psalms than going to the native priest for harmful medicine to destroy their enemies. In an intensive study on the use of imprecatory psalms, Ogunkunle (2000: 217) made the following important finding:

The analysis of the result of the questionnaire shows that 97.4% recognized Satan and his agents are the main object of imprecation as spiritual enemies while 84.6% believed that Biblical imprecation can be used against both spiritual and human enemies. To this latter group, imprecation is an essential part of everyday prayer in order to live a successful life. In congregations where healing and deliverance take place, imprecation constitutes 99% of the prayers offered. In the orthodox churches, however, not more than 45% use imprecation though they believe it occupies its rightful place in scriptures

Admittedly, care must be taken in the use of the imprecatory psalms for evil intention. It should only be used for God's vengeance. It should not be read

as a hobby. All things must be submitted to God with humility and understanding that God is a righteous God and that He is also a God of vengeance who will do justice when justice is necessary, no matter how long it takes.

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