

Prayer for Protection: A Comparative Perspective on the Psalms in Relation to Lozi Traditional Prayers

LISWANISO KAMUWANGA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

ABSTRACT

A comparative analysis of African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament detects proximity and distance amid the two religions. Microcosmic similarities in prayer for protection between biblical psalms and Lozi prayer traditions confirm closeness in religious experience during times of danger between ancient Israelite society and contemporary African tribal societies. Further, these similarities provide concrete points for dialogue between African Traditional Religion and biblical psalms. Inversely, differences underscore the uniqueness of prayer for protection in each of the biblical and African traditions.

1 INTRODUCTION

Prayer is a primary phenomenon in African religiosity (Mbiti 2004:228). African Christians exhibit similar fervency in prayer as practitioners of indigenous religions. This resemblance is premised by resonances between biblical and African Traditional Religion (Fowler 2003:66). Through comparisons this study is aimed at demonstrating the vitality and fundamental resemblances between Lozi prayers and psalms. Simultaneously it critiques superficial similarities, depicts uniqueness of each tradition and proposes a cautious approach to analysing cross-cultural concepts. Since I have already compared in my doctoral research¹ Lozi prayer texts in relation to selected psalms, an extended analysis is not envisaged in this study. Thematically, the concept of protection embodied in the title is central in this investigation.

Arising from situations of danger and adversarial attacks, victims implore the Supreme Being for protection in both the Old Testament and Lozi society (Mainga 1972:96; Mbiti 1990:14; Crenshaw 2001:50; Bullock 2001:166). Tribal people in Africa and the ancient Near East are perpetually endangered

¹ I have investigated protection in the following Psalms: 28; 64; 77; 91; 140 in my Ph.D. research entitled 'Prayer for protection: A comparative perspective on the Psalms in relation to Lozi prayer traditions'.

by natural hazards, debilitated by diseases and victimised by beasts. Furthermore, they are threatened and brutalised by internal and external man made schemes. Their cultural milieu is replete with spirits, which occasionally perform malevolent acts. Against this backdrop, therefore, a comparative study of Lozi prayer in relation to Old Testament psalms is inevitable.

B METHODOLOGY

This investigation employs an integrated comparative approach. It explicates elements of protection, and other detectable aspects of prayer in the said traditions. In this way analogous concepts are examined simultaneously.

Such an approach is not without critics. Coggins (1990:84), for instance, argues that developmental and existential factors in ancient cultures make them incompatible with contemporary cultures. Similarly, Gaster (1987:180) has stated that ancient Israel is anachronistic and spatially distant to African cultures. Dissimilar conditions have impinged on their developmental process. Thus, Israel's chequered historical experiences cannot be easily reconciled to contemporary accounts (Fabian 1998:215-239). Incongruity is further magnified by editorial points of view obtaining in texts of antiquity. In addition, social institutions, customs and religious experiences derive their meaning from the context in which they occur (Beattie 1966:10). Valid comparisons are therefore corrupted if a segment of the cultural sum total is studied in relation to another segment in a different historical cultural setting.

Comparative analysis is, however, relevant for explicating meaning as a concept and is determined by its similarity and difference with other concepts like or unlike it (Paden 1988:2; Neuman 1997:440-456). It is implicit whenever an investigator addresses cultures other than his/her own. A scholar assimilates new cultures into categories familiar to his/her own background (Beattie 1966:48). Additionally, to the extent that African Traditional Religion is seen as *praeparatio evangelica*, a comparative study may attach dialogical value to missiological processes (Ukpong 2000:11). Although a cross-cultural comparative undertaking is massive, it is not unattainable (Keesing 1958:140,141). Exemplarily, Steiner (1982), Schapera (1982) and Ukpong (1990) have successfully demonstrated the approach.

Given the distinctions between African Traditional Religion and the Old Testament, certain Western scholars, conducted comparative studies aimed at denigrating indigenous religions (Fabian 1998:218; Zahan 2000:3). In response early African scholars countered this position. They undertook studies based on a similar approach in order to appraise their cultures (Ukpong 2000:11-12). While their contributions are commendable such studies were deficient in the area of praxis (Ukpong 2000:11). Presently, the resurgence of the approach is partially informed by the affirmation of indigenous cultures underpinned by postcolonial theory and liberationist epistemological frameworks.

C ELEMENTS OF PROTECTION: GODS

1 God in the psalms

Consistently the psalmists implore Yahweh for protection from their adversaries. God is all-powerful (Pss 77:10, 14-19; 91:1), transcendent (Ps 91:1), all knowing (Pss 64:5-7) and immanent (Pss 77:20; 91-14-20). His characteristics are underscored by epithets such as 'Most High' and 'Almighty' (Pss 91:1-2). Equally metaphorical representations such as 'my rock' (Ps 28:1) exemplify his protective acts. Yahweh protects the victim's head in battle (Ps 140:7), secures justice for the poor and upholds the needy (Ps 140:12). God is their strength, shelter, shadow, refuge, dwelling and a fortress of salvation (Pss 28:8; 91:2, 9). Furthermore, Yahweh destroys the wicked on behalf of the suppliants (Pss 28:4-5; 64:7-8; 91:8; 140:8-11).

Yahweh is not distant from the suffering Israelite. Therefore, the victim clings to Yahweh's approachability and dependability when calamities strike. The appearance of the determinative, 'my', in conjunction with divine appellatives in Psalm 91:1-2 underscores the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

2 *Nyambe*: God in Lozi prayers

The following names of *Nyambe* portray his divine attributes. He is the creator of all (Jalla 1954:2; Mainga 1972:95; Fowler 2003: 66; Mbiti 2004:222). He is all-powerful (Junod 1938:137-138; Muuka 1966:250). God is likened to a glorious awesome king (Coillard 1902:169,170, Jalla 1954:3; Rooke 2006:2).

Traditionally, *Nyambe* is not only transcendent and powerful but a compassionate provider and protector too (Junod 1938:137-138; Coillard 1902:169-170; Holub 1976:320). Hence petitioners approach God confident of his ability to intervene. Although *Nyambe* is generally benevolent occasionally he causes calamities to befall his people for judicial purposes.²

3 Similarities and differences

The aforesaid discourse amply demonstrates that the Supreme Being is approached directly during calamities and difficulties. Areas of commonality include divine attributes: omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, eternal, kindness, mercifulness, benevolence, transcendence, uniqueness and creation acts (Gehman 1989:189-190). Metaphorical representations, petitions and invo-

² Leprosy, for example, is called *mulilo wa Nyambe* (*Nyambe's fire*). The literal translation perhaps means god's curse or punishment as alternatively leprosy is referred to as a curse of the land.

cations embedded in the prayer texts reflect protection in the two religions (Fowler 2003:67).

Contrary to belief that in Africa God is remote and inactive due to the unavailability of visible cultic structures and imagery, Africans recognise his continued involvement in the maintenance and operation of the created world (Ray 1976:51; Gehman 1989:192; Uka 1991:44). Foundational to prayer is God's relationship with his people informed by a common belief that he is their progenitor. *Nyambe's* power and involvement is exemplary in creation myths (Jalla 1954:81). Lozi creation mythology embodies a dialectic between *Nyambe's* remoteness and approachability which resonates with Yahweh's transcendence and immanence in Psalms 139.

Although belief in God is universal there are theological distinctions. Unlike the psalms, Lozi creation mythology, for example, reveals that God has a consort, *Nasilele*. Together they procreated animals and human beings (Bertrand 1899:277). Besides *Nasilele*, *Nyambe* had other wives who bore different tribal groups (Jalla 1954:1-2). Against common belief that *Nyambe* is omniscient and omnipotent he sought diviners and spiders' assistance on his flight to *Litooma* (heaven) (Mainga 1972:100). At any rate an oversimplified reading of myths should be desisted since they are metaphorical.

Lozi people, like other African people, occasionally associate epidemics with God's judicial character (McVeigh 1974:113; Uka 1991:44; Fowler 2003:66-67). In certain cases God appears to be vindictive (Junod 1938:137). Similarly the Old Testament sometimes associates God with destruction (Exod 12:12, 29; Deut 35:35; Hab 3:5-6). Certainly, the identity of the destroyer in the preceding texts is problematical (Goldin 1968:412-424; Fossum 1985:225-226). At any rate the foregoing discussion has demonstrated that there are identical themes pertaining to God found in Lozi prayers and psalms (Amanze 2001:276).

D ENEMIES AND DANGER

1 Enemies of the individual

1a Enemies of the psalmists

Enemies of the individual are identified as the wicked, evil men, evildoers, men of violence and wicked hands (Pss 28:3-4; 64:1-2; 91:8; 140:2, 3, 4). Adversaries are pretentious and they masquerade as friends (Pss 28:3; 64:2). They slander and cause malicious harm to their victims (Ps 140:4). Mowinckel (1962:3) conjectures that in the psalms witchcraft may have been practised through the curse and evil eye. If this allusion is correct apotropaic words may be an attempt to neutralise spells (Pss 107:19; 109:22-24, 28). However, caution must be applied since witchcraft is not clearly attested to in the Psalms.

Metaphorical depictions through hunting imagery (Pss 91:3; 140:6), animal figures and war symbolisms (Pss 28:3; 64:4; 140:2, 3, 4) convey enemy methods of attack. Dark imagery reminiscent of evil spirits signifies the nature of the enemy (Ps 91:5-6). In Psalm 77:16-19 and Psalm 91:13 the adversary is couched in historical mythical figures evocative of ancient Canaanite and Mesopotamian primordial episodes.

1b Lozi enemies

In Lozi prayers danger to individuals emanates from mythic enemies (Coillard 1902:169-170), false accusations and tyrants (Holub 1976:321-322). Malignant spirits are greatly feared in Lozi belief systems. Depending on their disposition they attack, molest, destroy and harm the living through illnesses, such as insanity and epilepsy (Gehman 1989:139).

Another prevalent source of danger is witchcraft (Turner 1952:54; Idowu 1973:195; Mpolo 1990:38). Witches notoriously operate nocturnally, travel with the assistance of magical forces, and are frequently associated with cannibalism (Melland 1923:214-215; Reynolds 1963:42; Parrinder 1968:125). Misfortune, illness and death are commonly attributed to the activities of sorcerers and witches (Mbiti 1975:166; Mitchell 1977:66). Mpolo (1990:41-42) on the other hand contests that witchcraft effects result from the power of thought, fascination and suggestibility.

1c Similarities and differences

In both traditions resemblances are demonstrated by the presence of wicked people. But witchcraft, which is pervasive in Lozi society, is less pronounced in the Old Testament. Although conjectured from prohibitive texts and socio-cultural parallels with neighbouring cultures its prevalence in the Psalms is doubtful (Mendelsohn 1962:213; Aune 1986:216; Black & Green 1992:124,125). The Old Testament and Psalms in particular are unclear and reticent to witchcraft.³ It appears that witchcraft and religion do not co-exist in many societies. Where they occur in tandem one inevitably makes the other redundant (Middleton & Winter 1969:8). For that reason Mainga (1972:40) has argued that witchcraft almost eliminated religion among Lozi people. However, the two have continued to co-exist.

³ Old Testament witchcraft citations include Saul's censure of the practice (1 Sam 28:3) and consultation with the witch at Endor (1 Sam 28:8-19); Mannasseh's divination and witchcraft practices (2 Kgs 21:6, 2 Chr 33:6) and the activities of Jezebel (2 Kgs 9:22). Equally legal texts forbidding the practice may be quoted (Lev 19:26, 31; 20:6).

2 Communal enemies

2a *The Bible and Lozi society*

Danger is represented by various phenomena in Psalm 91:5, 6. Along with war and famine, pestilence is a cause of death on a wide scale in the Old Testament (Del Olmo Lete 1999:231). In numerous texts pestilence is personified (Ps 91:5; Hos 13:14; Hab 3:5). Psalm 91 echoes Habakkuk 3 where pestilence is paralleled with *Resheph*.⁴ In Habakkuk 3 the presence of pestilence and destruction resembles the Mesopotamian epic of Marduk accompanied by plague and pestilence. On the contrary, Yahweh is not accompanied by pestilence and destruction in Psalm 91, rather the psalmist trusts God for protection against the said adversaries.

Belief in spirits permeated ancient Near Eastern societies (Jacobsen 1976:13). Capable of doing evil these spirits caused afflictions during the night,⁵ windstorm,⁶ eclipse, midday⁷ and childbirth⁸ (Riley 1999:236). The exemplar myth of Atrahasis⁹ demonstrates that Pashitu was created to keep the human population down (Riley 1999:236). Earlier Old Testament texts indicate that spirits perform Yahweh's instructions.¹⁰ They are responsible for judgment (Judg 9:24, 56-57) and torment (1 Sam 11:6; 16:14; 15; 16; 23; 18:10). McCarter (1999:318) argues that since these citations do not personalise the 'evil spirit from Yahweh' they may not refer to actual beings. But evidently other references personify spirits under the control of Yahweh (1 Kgs 22:19-22).

In Lozi prayers communal danger arises from drought and crop failure (Junod 1938:137-138; Di Nola 1962:38), tribal enemies (Jalla 1954:9), and war

⁴ In Ugaritic ritual Resheph was an ambivalent deity and his cult was also found in Egypt. The Old Testament Resheph is a demonised version of an ancient Canaanite god now submitted to Yahweh (Xella 1999:701).

⁵ Lilith a lascivious demon haunted men in dreams (Riley 1999:236).

⁶ Pazuzu the Babylonian demon was known to bring disease through the wind (Riley 1999:236).

⁷ Midday demon struck at the height of the sun (Riley 1999:236).

⁸ Lamashtu threatened women during childbirth together with their babies (Riley 1999:236).

⁹ Meier (1999b:241) states: 'When Enlil in council with the other gods in *Atrahasis*, wishes to thin the world's population with a plague, it is Namtar, the god of plague, who goes to work.'

¹⁰ See earlier allusions to the lying spirit from Yahweh (1 Sam 16:14-16, 23), the spirit from Yahweh that oppressed Saul (1 Kgs 22:20-23) and the Satan who was a member of the divine council (Job 1: 6-12; 2:1-7). On the other hand possible late accounts include Satan as a proper name (1 Chr 21:1) compare with the account in 2 Samuel 21:1.

(Coillard 1902:212). Crop failure can easily reduce people to malnutrition and starvation. Correspondingly, war is a costly affair in terms of lost life. Thus, rituals and prayers are conducted in order to secure victory.

2b Similarities and differences

Foreign enemies appear both in Psalms and Lozi texts. While in Lozi texts it is possible to identify specific enemies it is a difficult task in the psalms. Furthermore, it is hard to conclude with certainty that references to war are literal and not metaphorical in certain psalms. Nonetheless, the psalmists experienced danger from foreign enemies (Pss 77; 91:7-8; 140:7). In the same way founders of the Lozi state suffered attacks from foreign adversaries (Coillard 1902:212).

There is no mention of danger related to poor agricultural produce in the selected psalms. At any rate ancient Israelites believed that increase was a blessing from Yahweh (Ps 126). In contradistinction Lozi agricultural prayers embody fervent requests for good crops (Junod 1938:321-322; Jalla 1954:3; Rooke 2006:3).

Therefore, there are similarities in the area of external foes. But differences are noted in connection with agricultural rites and danger related to epidemics.

3 Petitioners

A good relationship between suppliant and God is foundational in the psalms (Pss 91:2; 140:6). Depictions of dwelling and sheltering under God's protection underline this relationship (Pss 91:1, 2, 9). Assurances of Yahweh's assistance also emphasise the relationship (Ps 91:14-16). The presence of an oracle in many of the laments strengthens the victims' trust in the ability of Yahweh to protect and save.

Lozi petitioners depend on God. Victimized by forces beyond their control they respond through prayer to God and ancestors. It is apparent from Lozi prayers that victims' requests are premised by a relationship with God their Creator. Moreover, *Nyambe's* greatness and ability to provide is exploited in these prayers.

Thus psalmists and Lozi suppliants rely on God for protection from their adversaries. Prayer is underpinned by an element of trust in the Supreme Being. Expressions of trust and praises are common in both traditions.

4 Intermediaries

4a *Human intermediaries*

A cultic priest may have officiated at certain rituals where the psalmists sought Yahweh's protection.¹¹ His presence is surmised from the appearance of mediated sayings (Ps 91:14-16). During liturgical prayer at the temple it is likely that a cultic official¹² uttered assurances and generic blessings (Von Rad 1975:245; Berlin 2004:227-232). As an intermediary a priest acts both on behalf of the victim and God.

In Lozi religious experience diviners, medicine men, and rainmakers feature as intermediaries. During a crisis a diviner is consulted. Remedies are provided through divination or obtained with the assistance of either a medicine man or a rainmaker. In the case of ancestral attacks¹³ an elder performs rituals to appease and secure their help. The alleged ancestor(s) is summoned to relent from malevolence and subsequently welcomed to bring good fortune. Royal ancestors are approached regarding community requests.

4b *Similarities and differences*

Mediatory similarities can be adduced from the presence and function of an intermediary in both traditions. Amanze (2001:277) has contended that the role of the priest in the Old Testament resembles his/her African counterpart. But, there is no priesthood except for the royal gravesite custodian in Lozi religious experience. Both ancestral and *Nyambe* worship are conducted primarily at family level. An elderly member of the family or village headman assumes the responsibility of approaching ancestors or *Nyambe* respectively.

The royal ancestral cult attends to calamities suspected to result from an angry deceased king (Mainga 1972:96). In Lozi royal ancestral cult a grave custodian entreats a departed king on behalf of the entire society. Neither in *Nyambe* worship nor in ordinary ancestral cult is the position of an official priest found.

¹¹ For example, before war kings might have sought the will of God through a cultic official (1 Kgs 20:13ff). After offering sacrifices the officiating priest pronounced the blessing in anticipation of triumph.

¹² See 1 Samuel 1.

¹³ Although ancestors are not enemies occasionally they are vindictive, particularly when they are ignored. They may cause disasters in order to mete out punishment on erring members of society. In order to maintain good a relationship and communication the living appease their ancestors through offerings continuously (Taylor 1963:152; Parrinder 1968:59).

5 Other intermediaries

5a Messengers

The psalmists may have believed in the existence of benevolent spirits who provide protection and dispense God's favour (Ps 91:11). Occasionally, in the Old Testament angel (*mal'ak*) designates a human messenger (1 Sam 11:4, 1 Kgs 19:2). But the term is also used in reference to supernatural beings (Mullen 1980:214, 215). Their activities include: revealing mysteries; running errands and participating in eschatological wars (Newson 1985:23-38, 77-78). Psalm 91:11 is a promise to the victim concerning the aid of messengers during tragedy. Inter-textual evidence depicts angels as guardians (Gen 3:24), symbolising God's presence (1 Sam 4:4) and divine judgment (Ps 18:10). They are dispatched by God to protect individuals on life's journey (Gen 24:7, 40; Exod 14:19; Ps 91:11).

There is concentrated angelic activity in late Old Testament and post-canonical periods (Conrad 1997:79; Meier 1999a:47; Gerstenberger 2001:166). During the Maccabean period the patron God was involved in protecting the temple through natural phenomena and work of angels (Van Henten 1999:51). Outside Israel their characteristics are approximated to lesser gods. In Ugaritic texts they serve at El's council (Ringgren 1995:1289). Since High Gods are neither all knowing nor capable of moving to different locations they dispatch lesser gods on errands (Meier 1999a:46).

Creation mythology provides glimpses of ancient Lozi religious system. *Nyambe* had a counsellor *Sasisho* and a messenger, *Kang'ombe* the *lechwe* (Jalla 1954:1, 2). God used these mythical creatures to transmit messages to *Kamunu* (man). Occasionally, other animals were directed to convey messages. When he was moved by the plight of man *Nyambe* sent a chameleon and a hare to inform man that he would be immortal and mortal respectively. The chameleon left first but dawdled and was overtaken by the agile hare. Legend has it that the arrival of the chameleon was not helpful, as man had already been sentenced to mortality by the hare's message. Yet, another messenger is Death (Muuka 1966:250). Death is personalised as *Nyambe*'s messenger who comes to remove man from earth.

5b Ancestors

Ancestral veneration is unsupported in the Psalms. At certain junctures in ancient Near East, kings were deified during their own lifetime (Black & Green 1992:62). Likewise Hackett (1998:208) asserts that artefacts dating to Iron Age I indicate a belief system that may have included cults of the dead in ancient Israel. To that end biblical texts, which censure the practice inadvertently, designate its prevalence (Deut 26:14; Ps 106:28; Jer 16:5-9). Amanze's (2001:276) attempt to locate ancestral veneration equivalent to African reli-

gious experience in Exodus 3:16 is problematic. Claims of a belief system and practice parallel to African and Lozi experience in particular cannot be substantiated in the Old Testament and Psalms in particular.

Kings and heroes figure prominently in tribal religion in many parts of Africa. At their death they become objects of veneration. Ordinary people also attain ancestral status at their demise. Ancestors perform a critical mediatory function in African Traditional Religion (Shorter 1983:199). Consequently they are venerated daily and periodically through acts of hospitality and rites of passage respectively. In the course of the mundane, food and snuff offerings and water libations are presented to the ancestors. At more elaborate occasions animal sacrifices and alcoholic beverages are offered and poured out respectively. Lozi people address ancestors during labour, naming rites and sickness. Appeasing angry ancestors involves offerings and invocations. In this manner healing and protection¹⁴ are secured. Unlike the Supreme Being, ancestors may be scolded when answers are not forthcoming.¹⁵

5c Similarities and differences

The appearance of mythical creatures in Lozi mythological histories lends support to an order of messengers who function at the disposal of God like angels in the Psalms (Pss 34:8; 91:13; 103:20). *Sasisho* and *Kang'ombe* are such messengers who perform the bidding of *Nyambe*. Nevertheless they do not appear anywhere as functionaries of protection.

Among the Bantu of southern and central Africa ancestral veneration is more common than belief in lesser divinities (Mbiti 1975:66). The presence of ancestors in Lozi religious experience marks a distinction from Israelite religion. If Hackett (1998:208) is correct about a cult of the dead then early Israelites may have engaged in a form of ancestor cult. At any rate even if proto-Israel had an ancestor cult the advent of absolute monotheism enhanced a break from it. Yet Lozi religious beliefs cannot be adequately appreciated without the inclusion of ancestors. They are first and foremost members of the earthly family involved in daily affairs. Nonetheless, they are intermediaries who possess superior knowledge and are more powerful than humans.

¹⁴ Prior to war on the Ila and Tonga people Lozi warriors, represented by their king, offered prayers at the royal gravesites (Coilard 1902:212). Ironically Ila warriors assembled under the aegis of Shimunenga, patron of war at one of his sacred groves (Fowler 2003:65).

¹⁵ See the following: 'You are useless, you gods. You only give us trouble. For although we give you offerings you do not listen to us! You so-and-so are full of hatred. You do not enrich us' (Smith 1966:25).

E ELEMENTS OF PRAYER

1 Address

Psalms address God in prayer (Pss 64:1; 77:1; 91:2), mention the personal name Yahweh (Pss 28:1; 91:2; 140:1), and the epithets Most High and Almighty (Ps 91:1). They pray directly to God trusting in his power to protect and save.

Lozi petitioners intermittently approach God directly (Di Nola 1962:38; Coillard 1902:169-170; Mainga 1972:95; Holub 1976:320). *Nyambe* is called king, creator, and powerful one, source of help, strength and fertility in recognition of his attributes (Jalla 1954:2; Rooke 2006:2).

In both biblical psalms and Lozi prayers petitions and praises are directed to God. Yet, Lozi people will most likely approach their ancestors and turn to *Nyambe* for certain calamities or dangers.

2 Petition

Against a backdrop of danger the psalmists petition Yahweh for protection. These opening calls demonstrate the point: 'to you I call' (Ps 28:1, 'hear me' (Ps 64:1) and 'rescue me' (Ps 140:1). Although Psalm 77:1 does not include an invocation in the present time it is given in past tense: 'I cried'. Additionally, petitions are embedded in psalm texts depicting urgency for Yahweh's intervention. The words 'Hear my cry', 'I call' (Ps 28:2), 'protect me' (Ps 140:1), and 'keep me' (Ps 140:4) are a case in point.

Lozi petitions are directed at soliciting *Nyambe's* answer to bless, strengthen, provide, protect and relent from wrath (Di Nola 1962:38; Junod 1938:137-138). Faced with danger prayer is sporadically formulated as a wish (Holub 1976:320).

Both psalmists and Lozi people petition the Supreme Being in prayer. Petitions indicate reliance on God and trust in his abilities. Unlike psalms which have a long redaction history Lozi petitions are concise, extemporaneous and focused on concrete material help.

3 Lament / complaint

Due to the overwhelming nature of calamities and distress, victims cry out in lament. Complaints about Yahweh's silence and hiddenness are pronounced (Ps 28). Yahweh's failure to respond promptly compounds the predicament (Ps 77:4, 7-9). At the height of difficulties victims descend into depression. Their experiences resemble one going down to the pit (Ps 28:2). Equally adversarial attacks are causes for complaint (Ps 64:3-4; 140:2-5). Laments about enemy

attacks, danger and the absence of an answer from Yahweh are embedded in prayers for protection.

In Lozi prayers laments are illustrated by graphic representations of impending grievous harm on the victim. Danger arises from lynching mobs (Holub 1976:320), destruction by mythic adversaries (Coillard 1902:169-170), and *Nyambe's* wrath (Junod 1938:137-138). It is not uncommon for ancestors to cause hardships too.

Laments are found in both psalms and Lozi prayers. Petitioners rehash their displeasure with either the Supreme Being or their foes. These fatalities also complain about difficulties (Coillard 1902:169-170; Holub 1976:320). Where lament is not obvious in a prayer text, it is alluded to in the literary context.

4 Apotropaic sayings

Imprecatory words have a protective function. Words have either malevolent or benevolent power. Hence curses are uttered counter-offensively. Apotropaic functions are represented in the priestly blessing (Num 6:24-26). In the Psalms imprecations are effected by Yahweh's power. God metes out judgment through a reversal of fortunes (Pss 28:4, 5; 64:8; 140:8-11). At other occasions destruction is set off by the adversaries' iniquities (Weiser 1962:610). Therefore, the wicked receive what they deserve (Prinsloo 2003:408).

Apart from negative words, positive words are also employed for apotropaic functions such as the formulaic 'You will not fear' (Gerstenberger 2001:166; Prinsloo 2003:408). It appears that these utterances are more than mere encouragement. They may have functioned as blessings which endowed the victim with protection from the enemy and the ability to succeed. In later Qumran traditions Psalm 91:11 functioned as a prayer for angelic assistance from harmful evil spirits (Eshel 2003:71). Biblical blessings and curses are removed from magic since the power to revenge is vested in God (Westermann 1978:22).

Lozi people like many in Africa, believe in the power of spoken words (Adamo 2004:28). Tambiah (1968:176, 178) states that words are only effective in the ritual. An attempt to distinguish between magic and religion underlies this argument. Hence, he reduces performative words to a psychological dimension. But Tambiah's Melanesian people incidentally pronounce words over their fields with the aim of enhancing their crop. This act negates his psychological interpretation. Ray (1973:17, 22, 29) has contended that exertive words derive their power from the sacred and corporate authority of the ritual context. Thus, he assigns potent words to a sociological, ritual context comprising divinities, ancestors and the community.

Lozi people do not restrict the power of spoken words to the ritual, cultural authority and linguistic dynamics as suggested by Ray (1973:17-29). Pre-battle cursing words over the Illa and Tonga were imbued with magical power (Coillard 1902:212) outside the confines of communal rituals. Moreover, in certain African societies reverence is accorded to people of low station due to belief that they too can cause harm through curses (McKenzie 1997:335-340). Potent words can be uttered with or without charms and still be effective (Adamo 2004:27, 28).

In the Psalms imprecations are rooted within certain prayer texts but they appear independently in Lozi prayer traditions. Theologically, later Yahweh worship placed the power of vengeance in God. Likewise, Lozi people believe that the Supreme Being is the ultimate source of power. But magical elements and reverence owed to certain individuals indicate a belief that imprecations derive their effect from the speaker's latent power, charm and ancestor. Another profound difference is the use of archaic language when uttering war curses and blessings among Lozi people. This phenomenon is shared by many tribal people (Tambiah 1968:180). Positively, imprecations have protective functions in both experiences.

5 Thanksgiving

The realisation of protection through prayer is confirmed through thanksgiving and anticipated thanksgiving. Thereby a petitioner acknowledges salvation from God. In such instances the catastrophe has either passed or is relenting. Given the certainty of answered prayer the psalmists burst forth in thanksgiving (Pss 28:6-9, 64:11; 77:10-20; 140:12, 13). Anticipated thanksgiving is motivated by confidence in God's declared promises.

Thanksgiving is missing from the examined Lozi prayers. However, it is not possible to deduce that thanksgiving does not appear in any Lozi prayers. Prayer and praise are constantly offered to God in African societies. Accordingly, thanksgiving may be ejaculated most likely spontaneously at the appearance of an answer at particular junctures.

6 Praise

Psalmists evoke divine epithets to praise God. God is called Most High and Almighty (Ps 91:1-2). Through metaphorical representation Yahweh is praised as rock, strength, fortress of salvation and shield (Ps 28:1, 6-8). Furthermore, Yahweh is praised for his past deeds, such as his creation and victory over Israel's enemies (Ps 77:14-20).

Lozi petitioners praise God by citing his attributes. *Nyambe* is creator and possessor of all power (Di Nola 1962:38). Cognisant of lurking snakes, beasts and natural hazards the suppliant acknowledges *Nyambe* as supreme

over all. Lozi mythology articulates *Nyambe* as the creator of every living thing (Mainga 1972:38). At the appearance of the sun *Nyambe* is praised as king over creation, incomparable, compassionate, provider, teacher with whom everything is possible (Junod 1938:137-138; Jalla 1954:3; Rooke 2006:2). Like an African tribal leader *Nyambe* is inundated with praise interspaced by ejaculations of petitions.

In both psalms and Lozi prayers, victims praise *Nyambe* for his acts in the past. Praises are fore grounded in creation, previous demonstrations of power and salvation. Resulting from such praise is a confidence in the ability of the Supreme Being to perform and answer prayer at present and in the future. Distinctively, there is a salient desire to manipulate God in Lozi prayers. Like before a chief petitioner rarely approaches God without gifts.

F OTHER ASPECTS

1 Charms

Phylacteries and tassels may have developed from apotropaic functions of words in the Old Testament. Amulets were worn for protective purposes in Egypt (Weiser 1962:612). Mesopotamians erected monumental statues, and placed reliefs in palaces and temples for protection from evil spirits. Small images of magically protective figurines were buried in building foundations (Black & Green 1992:63).

Amulets might have been used for protective functions in the Old Testament (Wiseman 1980:46; Gaster 1987:245). Jacob's ornaments buried at Shechem may have been amulets (Gn 35:41). In the same way the crescents that Gideon took off the camels' necks (Judg 8:21) resemble those worn by men (Judg 8:26) and women (Is 3:18) as decorative amulets in the Near East (Yamauchi 1983:196). In later Jewish periods amulets were used against the evil eye, evil spirits, imprisonment and sword. Amulets served the purpose of intelligence to instruct people in the Torah. They also functioned against diseases and loss of property (Yamauchi 1983:197). Parchments containing scriptures which were worn on hands and foreheads may have been intended for protection from danger. Correspondingly mezuzahs have protective use (Davies 1979:637; Harrison 1979:119). Against this backdrop the psalmists ultimately placed their faith not in a charm but in Yahweh (Ps 91).

Lozi people use charms to expel the works of their enemies. When consulted a medicine man prepares an appropriate remedy. Charms are believed to protect people from witchcraft, snakebite, and dangerous animals, against misfortunes and lightning. Lozi people wear amulets, plant medicine in the spoor of dangerous animals and throw medicine on the water before fording a river to ensure protection from crocodiles (Betrand 1899:277). Such medicine is empowered magically through the repetition of certain words (Gehman 1989:71).

Unlike ancient Israelites the Lozi practice good magic openly. It is widely employed for manipulation of weather conditions, protection from aversion and influencing the future (Gehman 1989:69).

2 Sacrifices, offerings and libations

Old Testament Levitical sacrifices consist of domestic animals and birds (Lev 1:2; 5:7, 11). Israelites offered from their harvest products composed of barley and wheat (Lev 23:10-14). Libations consist of cereal offerings accompanied with a generous amount of wine. In the ancient Near East libations were poured to gods and the dead (Black & Green 1992:117). Old Testament concept of God precludes worshipping the dead and other gods (Engelhard 1979:122).

Lozi people pour libations to God and ancestors. Libations comprise water, milk and honey poured out at royal burial sites and set places for ordinary ancestors (Arnot 1889:71; Coillard 1902:217-224; Mbiti 1975:59). Offerings and sacrifices in the royal cult are constituted of domestic animals, seeds, cloth, honey and foodstuff. Seeds are offered to *Nyambe* at the start of the agricultural season. Ordinary ancestors are commonly offered foodstuff, snuff, and water libations.

Both Lozi and Levitical systems use domestic animals. Similarly the use of wine in biblical traditions resembles alcoholic libations among Lozi people. Unlike the Levitical sacrificial system Lozi sacrifices and offerings are devoid of harvest products. Moreover, Lozi people do not have elaborate agricultural festivals. According to Arnot (1889:71) the Lozi may have performed human sacrifices in certain cases. This practice is prohibited in the Israelite sacrificial system.

3 Metaphor and myth

Mythical adversaries appear in the Psalms (Pss 77:14-20; 91:13). Psalm 77 may have a reflection of the primordial battle between order and chaos (Pitard 1998:69-70; Stolz 1999:708). Similarly according to the LXX Psalm 91:13 portrays a mythical creature, the dragon. Belief in dragons was common in the ancient Near East (Black & Green 1992:71).

Although there are underlying similarities between ancient Near Eastern mythological history and water depictions in Psalm 77, cross-cultural data must be used cautiously (Pitard 1998:73). Psalm 77 for example could be ostensibly related to Israel's passage from Egypt across the Reed Sea (Exod 15:1-18). It is a depiction of Yahweh's triumph over the Egyptian enemy (Hackett 1998:212).

Metaphorical language is used extensively in the Psalms. Hunting images, war symbols and animal figures are descriptive of the adversary. Both human and spirit enemies may be presented figuratively. Unlike Israel in ancient Mesopotamia evil spirits are mentioned by their names in magical incan-

tations. They are agents and executors of the purposes of the gods causing diseases and calamities (Black & Green 1992:63).

Lozi petitioners allude to dangerous mythical creatures (Coillard 1902:169-170). When crossing Matome rapids¹⁶ Coillard's entourage was struck by fear. A paddler prostrated on the ground imploring *Nyambe* to desist from his wrath and secure safe passage across the falls. Lozi cultural environment is permeated by belief in apparitions which possess semi human forms, magical creatures like mystic snakes and many magical and witchcraft related objects. Lozi people also use metaphorical language extensively. For instance, God is exemplified symbolically as the sun.

The use of metaphor and myth is common in both traditions. However, the occurrence of mythic language in Israelite traditions is veiled and appears to be either a recollection of ancient legends or an incidence of borrowed traditions. In Lozi belief system, mythic representations are vivid. This is possibly due to a strong relation with magic and witchcraft practices. Both the censuring of witchcraft and promotion of monotheism in Israel may have led to a break with magic and the regression of mythical beliefs.

4 Expression of confidence

In the psalms confidence in Yahweh foregrounds requests during periods of danger. Metaphorical terminologies such as the shield convey assurance of protection (Pss 28:7; 91:4). A motif of confidence in God's protection accompanies petitions (Keel 1978:222-224).

Lozi people place their confidence in *Nyambe* through prayer. It is apparent that victims hinge their confidence on God's ability to answer positively. Although *Nyambe* appears to be remote he participates in human affairs.

While the psalmists pray directly to Yahweh Lozi people sometimes seek assistance from ancestors. At any rate ancestors ultimately transmit requests to *Nyambe* (Muuka 1966:xx). Equally Lozi people accompany their requests with the solicitation of aid from medicine men.

5 Expression of humility

In the Psalms sentiments of lowliness are concentrated in sin related texts. This quality does not interfere with the psalmists' boldness and freedom in prayer. In Psalm 77:4-9 the victim charges Yahweh with failure to act in defence of his people.

¹⁶ Local people believed that the rapids were inhabited by a snake like creature. Paddlers were exposed to danger if they proceeded without appeasing it.

Lozi petitioners, like their counterparts in many African societies, offer their requests in humility. God is acknowledged as greater, powerful and wholly other, while the suppliant is a lowly creature comparable with a worm (Di Nola 1962:38; Coillard 1902:169-170; Mbiti 1975:16-21).

Like the psalmists Lozi victims pray to an almighty God. They are humble in prayer. Psalmists do not necessarily condescend themselves except in texts that dwell on sin and repentance. The fact that Lozi victims embellish their prayers in humility does not mean that they lack boldness. Therefore, humility is commonly practiced by petitioners in both religious experiences.

6 Gestures

Prayer gestures are common in the psalms. Lifting hands to God during prayer is widespread (Pss 28:2; 77:2). It signifies receiving, urgency, candour and persistence (Keel 1978:319; Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:275). In the ancient Near East suppliants stretched their hands as a symbol of aversion or veneration (Keel 1978:313). Other gestures are bowing, kneeling and prostrating.

When approaching *Nyambe* a petitioner bows, kneels, stretches arms and claps while uttering requests (Jalla 1954:3-5; Mainga 1972:96). Similarly, prayers to ancestors are offered by an elder while kneeling and facing the west. The rest of the group faces the east. Aversions include spitting water to the ground in the western direction.¹⁷ In addition good is invoked from the east where the sun rises.

Both psalmists and Lozi petitioners lift their hands when praying. This gesture signifies surrendering to God. Equally, other postures like bowing, kneeling and prostrating are accounted for in both religious systems.

7 Places and times of prayer

Psalms are inter alia a product of the temple worship system. Even where psalms originated at an earlier date and were transmitted orally they were fixed in the postexilic period. It is, however, unnecessary to attach different psalms to centralised single annual festivals such as Mowinkel's (1962:219) New Year festival, Weiser's (1962:35) covenant festival and Kraus's (1988:88) enthronement festival. The tendency to approach psalm setting from single festival is elusive (Craigie 1983:48; Tate 1990:25). Based on the suggested cultic, historical and literary settings selected prayers may have risen at different times motivated by the need for protection from danger. These prayers were offered to Yahweh at the temple. Moreover, they were used during celebrations and

¹⁷ This gesture is symbolic to casting evil into the direction of the setting sun believed to be where evil goes.

festivals in later periods. But their original setting, even though difficult to determine, may be outside the official cultic system.

Among Lozi people prayers to *Nyambe* and ordinary ancestors are often offered at the homestead. When the village is in participation prayers may be conducted at the village square by the headman. In the royal ancestral cult prayers are offered at a royal burial site by a grave custodian. More importantly, African people pray anywhere since God is constantly on their minds (Turner 1952:49; Zahan 2000:16). Usually prayers are offered in the morning but any other time may suffice (Mainga 1972:95, 99; Mbiti 1975:2).

Israel's worship is distinguished by the presence of a centralised system. Lozi religious system is decentralised. Even in the royal cult where national cohesion is experienced, royal burial sites are multiple. There are designated places for both *Nyambe* and ancestral worship at family and village level. Nevertheless, such space is determined by either each family unit or village.

G FINAL REMARKS

A comparative approach has a place in biblical and religious studies. Its contribution to research, promotion of dialogue, quest for authenticity and rediscovery is crucial. Differences in Israel and Lozi conceptualisation serve as caution against rushed conclusions and applications of ancient Israelite beliefs without due consideration of her historical cultural setting. A simplistic reading that glosses over differences of compared texts is problematic. Religious beliefs must be explicated in their contexts in order to realise a fuller understanding. Prayer for protection performs a vital role in Old Testament and African religious experience. However, these results do not infer an equilibrium of biblical and Lozi traditions. At any rate prayer for protection is critical to the resolution of situations of calamity in said groups. Suppliants seek redress and assistance from the Supreme Being.

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Liswaniso Kamuwanga is a research associate at the Department of Old Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria. *E-mail*: lkamuwanga@gmail.com.