

Decolonizing Psalm 91 in an African Perspective with Special Reference to the Culture of the Yoruba People of Nigeria¹

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to reread Ps 91 in an African context using the culture of the Yoruba people of Nigeria as a point of reference. It briefly reviews certain Western methods of interpreting the book of Psalms which are referred to as Eurocentric. This Eurocentric interpretation, although it shares some good things with Africentric interpretation, does not adequately meet the everyday social, physical and spiritual aspirations of the African people. An Africentric interpretation of the Bible is an interpretation of the Bible in the light of African culture. In this article Psalm 91 is interpreted in the light of protection, healing and success which are the greatest needs in Africa.

1 INTRODUCTION

The book of Psalms are some of the most widely read books of the Bible.² The reason, perhaps, is because the Christian Church finds this book the easiest to approach personally and directly in every situation in life (joy, sorrow, pain, and confusion). For example, Athanasius likens this book to "a garden containing that entire one finds elsewhere in the Bible..."³ Luther saw the book of Psalm as "Little Bible" in the Bible.⁴ One of the eminent OT scholars, Arthur Weiser,⁵ calls it, "the favourite book of the saints."

¹ This paper was originally presented at the Society of Biblical Literature Meeting in San Francisco, USA in 2011.

² The popularity of the book of Psalms can be dated to the time of the NT where many portions of it were quoted and alluded to. Many Christians all over the world see the book of Psalms as the heart of the OT. See Tremper Longman and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishers, 2006), 237.

³ Quoted in Harry P. Nasuti, "God at Work in the Word: A Theology of Divine-Human Encounter in the Psalms," in *Sounding in the Theology of Psalms* (ed. Rolf Jacobson; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 27-48.

⁴ Quoted in Rolf A. Jacobson, "Preface" in *Sounding in the Theology of Psalms* (ed. Rolf Jacobson; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), ix.

⁵ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (trans. Herbert Hartwell; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 19.

Among Western scholars, this book has received considerable attention, perhaps more than any other book of the "Christian" Bible.⁶ These scholars have paid a lot of attention to what might be the best approaches to the understanding of the book. Some of these approaches include determining, amongst others, the author, the date, literary types and forms, and the basic theological thoughts. In the majority of cases, these approaches to the Psalter are considered universal and become the criteria by which other researchers are judged as scholarly and publishable. This also applies to the scholars of the so-called "Third World."

The old paradigm of historical critical exegesis in the "First World" is becoming a problem in the light of African culture. To a certain extent, it has become an obstacle to African critical thinking in the light of African culture. This is because Western exegesis has subjected the Bible to abstract, individualized and neutralized reading, "characterized by positivism, empiricism or radical detachment" in the name of objectivity.⁷ This kind of reading has undermined other methods such as African cultural approaches. This is the "academic sin" of most Western biblical scholars that are clearly offensive, and have called for unapologetic hermeneutical response.⁸ The Bible and its interpretation must be indispensable for the academy, the church, and our society at large, not only for the West or the academy.⁹

The main purpose of this article is to discuss the ways in which Ps 91 can be decolonized in African scholarship. In other words, to discuss the various ways in which Ps 91 can be interpreted in the light of African tradition and culture using the Yoruba tradition and culture as example. These approaches can be termed "African Cultural Hermeneutics." In addition, this article will lay emphasis on the Bible as "power approach" for the study of the book of Psalms that has been championed by African Indigenous churches in Africa. Before getting into the actual discussion of the decolonization, it is important to discuss first how the book of Psalm has been colonized.

2 COLONIZATION OF THE PSALTER

What immediately comes to mind when one thinks of colonization is the partition of Africa and the eventual physical conquest of the continent. Modern imperialism has to do with market inequality among the Third World and the Western people, foreign aid as weapon for colonization, debt domination,

⁶ Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 237.

⁷ Krister Stendahl, "Dethroning Biblical Imperialism in Theology," in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Helsinki* (ed. Heikki Räisänen et al.; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 62.

⁸ Krister Stendahl, "Dethroning Biblical Imperialism," 62.

⁹ Krister Stendahl, "Dethroning Biblical Imperialism," 61.

political repression and state terror, globalization and others.¹⁰ As far as I understand, colonialism is not limited to the partition of Africa and the eventual domination of the entire continent by the European nations. It includes the colonization of people's thought and the entirety of their ways of life. The concern in this article however, is the discussion of how African biblical studies, especially the Psalter have also been colonized in various ways.

The book of Psalms have not escaped colonization in its history of interpretation. It is important to mention in outline how Psalms interpretation has been colonized by the Western scholars. Traditionally, the book of Psalms was considered to be the book of individual persons who composed it as prayers and songs for either private devotional use or in response to a particular historical event in life. As such, Psalms interpretation took the shape of finding the authors of Psalms, and the discernment of that very historical circumstance of the authors' composition. Scholars attempted to date each Psalm as specifically as possible. The tendency is to date most Psalms very late, usually to the third and second century B.C.E.¹¹ The Psalms were therefore viewed as an individualized spirituality superior to the corporate worship of early ancient Israel.¹² David and his musicians became the decisive clue to the authorship of the book of Psalms. It was largely read as the expression of the piety of David. The superscriptions in the book of Psalms became the means by which the authorship of the book of Psalms was defined. This kind of interpretation largely controlled the interpretation of the book of Psalms in the early period of this literature. The early interpreters saw David as the paradigm and prototype in the canonical context.¹³ He exemplified prayers, praise and piety for Israel. Psalms are considered his prayer, praise and piety, which are useful for instruction and prophecy.

During the early middle part of the nineteenth century, the authors of the historical critical method began to call the Davidic authorship of Psalms into question. Their criticism was based on some incongruities between the many accounts in the book of Psalms attributed to David and the account of David's career in Samuel as well as the connection between some of the Psalms and the biblical literature of the late period after David's life.

The historical critics examined the individual and the corporate experiences and hymns in the light of the historical rather than the spiritual and theo-

¹⁰ Michael Parenti, *Against Empire* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995), 18-35.

¹¹ J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 16.

¹² McCann, *A Theological Introduction*, 16.

¹³ James L. Mays, "Past, Present, and Future Prospects in Psalm Study," in *The Old Testament Interpretation, Past, Present, and Future* (ed. James L. Mays, David L. Petersen and Kent H. Richard; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 147-157.

logical perspectives.¹⁴ The historical critics considered Psalms as the voice of some historical persons or occasions which do not match the person and the experiences of the person of David. They, therefore, searched through the biblical literature for other plausible people and times for the context with which to interpret the Psalms. The tendency with the historical critical scholars was to locate Psalms later rather than early in Israelite history. The result of this research was largely inconclusive because of the absence of the details that could link the Psalms with the particular historical context.¹⁵

Modern scholars of Psalms owe more to a German scholar, Hermann Gunkel, (1862-1932) than any other scholar.¹⁶ He was convinced what the work and method of the historical critics were. After his recognition of the presence of liturgical materials such as singing, dancing, shouting, sacrifices, prayers, temple, house of the Lord, courts, and others, he concluded that the Psalms were related to the worship in ancient Israel and not the meditation of pious individuals. He then started the classification of the book into different forms and types or genres (*Gattung*) and tried to determine the life setting in ancient Israel. Although he was not satisfied with the historical critical method, he did not completely break from it.

For example, he still maintained that the Psalms were of a later time period. He believed, further, that the composers based their poetic creation on the "prototypes" of that originated in the worship life of an earlier period.¹⁷ According to Gunkel, (1) "Hymns," (2) "Laments of the People," (3) "Laments of the Individual," (4) "Songs of Thanksgiving of the Individual," (5) "Spiritual Poems" are the real treasure of the Psalter. Certainly, Gunkel's form critical approach to the Psalms was the most widely utilized approach in the twentieth century research.¹⁸

Sigmund Mowinckel took the next step in Psalm interpretation. According to him, the Psalms represent the actual songs and prayers produced for and used in the public worship of ancient Israel before the destruction of the temple in 587/586 B.C.E..¹⁹ This is referred to as the "cult functional approach." The main goal of this approach is to, first of all, classify the Psalm literature and then determine the setting of where that particular Psalm functioned in the

¹⁴ Mays, "Past, Present, and Future Prospects," 148.

¹⁵ Mays, "Past, Present and Future Prospects," 148.

¹⁶ James Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 80.

¹⁷ McCann, *A Theological Introduction*, 17.

¹⁸ John H. Hayes, *Introduction to Old Testament Study* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 291.

¹⁹ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (2 vols.; trans. D.R. Ap-Thomas; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962).

life of the ancient Israelite.²⁰ The form criticism and the functional approach to Psalms are inseparable, and both also became very dominant approaches in the interpretation of Psalms. Both methods continue to be greatly influential in contemporary scholarship, although they are being refined and extended, to include many different settings.

Other scholars, having recognized the limitations of form-critical and functional approaches to the study of the book of Psalms, have called for a totally new direction in which scholarship should travel. Today, rhetorical criticism has joined the form-critical approach to become one of the major forces in biblical interpretation.

Brevard Childs has called for the need to go beyond the form-critical and functional method of the Psalm.²¹ He emphasized that more attention should be given to the final form of the Psalter. This is referred to as "canonical criticism." According to him, the canonical approach will help scholars to determine how the meaning of the individual Psalter may be affected by their titles and their placement in that particular place in the canon. Gerald H. Wilson has also paid serious attention to the canonical shape of the Psalms for many years and concluded that the Psalter is not a random collection of songs and prayers.²² According to Childs, Wilson and others, the Psalter is not a mere collection of the liturgical materials, but has the purpose of being read and heard – "a source of *torah*," that is, as a source of instruction. As such, they are songs and prayers that originated from the response of the faithful persons to God.²³ It is, therefore, regarded as the words of God. James Luther Mays' acceptance of this canonical approach was reflected in his paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) titled "The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter,"²⁴ where he argued that torah Psalms are present throughout the Psalter for the purpose of orienting the faithful to hear the Psalms as instructions of God. Eventually, form-critical and cult-functional approaches became subordinated to the question of content and theology.

Uriel Simon has described four approaches to the book of Psalms: the book of "Psalms as a Second Pentateuch"; the "Psalms as mandatory Prophetic

²⁰ McCann, *A Theological Introduction*, 17.

²¹ Brevard S. Childs, "Reflections in the Modern Studies of the Psalms," in *Magnalia Dei, The Mighty Acts of God: Essays in Memory of G. Ernest Wright* (ed. Frank M. Cross, Werner E. Lemke and Patrick D. Miller Jr.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 378.

²² Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBLDS 76; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985).

²³ Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 204–207; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament as Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 513–514.

²⁴ James Luther Mays, "The Place of Torah-Psalms in the Psalter," *JBL* 106/1 (1987): 3–35.

Prayers"; the "Psalms as Non-prophetic Prayers"; and the "Psalms as Prophetic and Sacred Poetry."²⁵

The truth is that many of the authors of the book on Psalms are Euro-Americans. The methods they used have been imposed on the entire world, including Africa. Up till today the majority of African biblical scholars know no other way to interpret the Psalm except the Eurocentric methods mentioned above.

The approach to the interpretation of Ps 91 varies in the Eurocentric scholarship. Most of the time scholars are preoccupied with the types of the Psalms, the date of composition, and the meter. This particular Psalm is classified as a hymn of praise, a Psalm of trust or Psalms of liturgies of trust.²⁶ Scholarship suggested ways in which Psalm 91 was used liturgically, that is, pilgrims were addressing the temple priest or temple servants who were on duty at the temple gate and the priest replied. However, it was also suggested that vv. 1-3 is a priestly pronouncement. According to Walter Brueggemann, it is a hymn of praise.²⁷ Eissfeldt consider this Psalm as a wisdom Psalm.²⁸ The Broadman Bible Commentary considers Ps 91 as "A Catechism of Trust in God."²⁹ The Babylonian Talmud refers to this Psalm as "the song against evil occurrences and the song against plagues."³⁰ Psalm 91 is also considered as post-exilic Israelite literature and the meter is 3+3. Another way of reading Ps 91 from the Eurocentric perspective is to attempt to find the literary structure of Ps 91. Fredrick Gaiser advocated for such a view in his article by trying to analyze Ps 91 according to stanzas.³¹

The above discussion of various interpretations is what the author refers to as the Eurocentric interpretation of Psalms which became the dominant interpretation in Europe, America and Africa. These approaches were embraced by African biblical scholars who passed them on in their higher institutions,

²⁵ Uriel Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991).

²⁶ W. Stewart McCullough, "The Book of Psalms," *The Interpreter's Bible* vo 4: 493. Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 73-150* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 102.

²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 156-158.

²⁸ Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (trans. Peter Ackrodt; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 250.

²⁹ Clifton J. Allen, *Esther-Psalms* (The Broadman Bible Commentary 4; Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 358.

³⁰ *b. Šebu. 15b.*

³¹ Fredrick Gaiser, "'It Shall Not Reach You': Talisman or Vocation? Reading Psalm 91 in Time of War," *WW* 25/2 (2005): 191-202.

churches, synagogues and other places, often forgetting the fact that their religion and culture could also form a more valuable interpretative tradition.³²

The truth is that biblical interpretation is changing. More readers, both inside and outside the academic guild are discovering that the Bible can be approached in the most practical way so that it can affect the lives of people. These changes provide an "exciting opportunity for all who seek contemporary meaning in the ancient texts."³³ Hence the urgent need for the decolonization of biblical studies in African context, especially, the books of Psalm.³⁴

3 DECOLONIZATION OF PSALM 91

Many authors of texts and articles are Euro-Americans. Even during the early missionary period African biblical scholars interpret the book of Psalms like the Euro-American scholars. However, unlike most Western biblical scholars who considered Ps 91 as Psalm of trust and protection alone, African biblical scholars go beyond that to consider Ps 91 as not only a protective Psalm but also a therapeutic and success Psalm. Since the Africentric³⁵ interpretation of Ps 91 is closely tied to the use of African culture and world view it is important to discuss first the concept of obtaining protection, healing and success in African indigenous tradition. This will enhance our understanding of reading Ps 91 Africentrically.³⁶

3a Protection in African Indigenous Tradition

The nature and process of protection by African indigenous people is remarkably different from that of the Western world, because Africans living in the continent face some peculiar problems due to their perception of the world

³² Knut Holter and others have demonstrated how Africa can be used to interpret the OT and how the OT can be used to interpret Africa. See Mary Getui, Knut Holter, Victor Zinkurature, ed., *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa* (Biblical Studies in African Scholarship; New York: Peter Lang, 2001); David T. Adamo, ed., *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006); David T. Adamo, *Explorations in African Biblical Studies* (Eugene: WIPF and Stock Publishers, 2001).

³³ Walter Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment, Psalms, Modernity, and the making of history* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1999), 8.

³⁴ This is not to deny the foundational role the Western interpretative tradition has played all over the world, but biblical studies should not be taught and interpreted verbatim in African institutions the way it is taught and interpreted in Euro-American institutions. Knut Holter has discussed this issue.

³⁵ The word "Africentrically," is deliberately used because it is closer to the word Africa than the word "Afrocentric" which has been used in Western world sometimes derogatorily. The latter word carries some racist connotations.

³⁶ David T. Adamo, "Reading Psalm 109 in African Christianity," *OTE* 21/3 (2008): 575-592; David T. Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches* (Benin: Justice Jeco Press and Publishers, 2005), 48-108.

around them. To indigenous Africans the presence of witches, evil, sorcerers, evil spirits and all different kinds of enemies are painfully real. Therefore, all means are used to protect children, young and adult. Protection includes the use of human parts, animals, water, and whatever can be mentioned to help in safeguarding people. There are three major ways of protection in African indigenous tradition: (i) the use of potent words called *ogede* among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, (ii) the use of a talisman, and (iii) other medicine for the body. In the Yoruba tradition, every person is believed to have an enemy, known or unknown. This enemy is called *ota*. These enemies may be witches or sorcerers. These enemies could also be one's friends. One of the ways of protection against enemies is the use of imprecatory potent words (the so-called incantation-*ogede*). There are many examples of imprecatory potent words for protection against enemies in the Yoruba tradition. One example is:

Igbagbe se oro ko lewe (3 x)
Igbagbe se afomo ko ni lewe (3 x)
Igbagbe se Olodumare ko ranti la ese pepeye
Njo ti pepeye ba daran igbe hoho ni imu bo 'nu
Ki igbagbe se lagbaja omo lagbaja ko maa wo gbo lo
Tori todo ban san ki i wo ehin mo.

Translation

Due to forgetfulness the oro (cactus) plant has no leaves (3 x)
 Due to forgetfulness the afomo (mistletoes) plant has no roots (3 x)
 Due to forgetfulness god did not remember to separate the toes of docks (3 x)
 When the dock is beaten it cries, hoho
 May forgetfulness come upon (name the enemy) the daughter of (mother)
 So that he/she may enter into the bush
 Because a flowing river does not flow backward.

It is believed that when the above imprecatory potent words are recited many times, the enemies wishing to attack will get lost in the bush or in the city, forgetting all the evil plans they planned against someone.

Another way is to wear a charm or what one may call a talisman or an amulet (*tira* in Yoruba of Nigeria) which can be obtained from a medicine man. They can be used for diverse purposes, but mainly for protection. Some ingredients or potent words could be wrapped in animal skin or white or red cloths for wearing around the waste, neck or arms. This will drive away the supposed enemies willing to harm a person. In traditional Africa, hunters will usually wear charms or equip himself with potent words to protect oneself from attack from dangerous and ferocious animals such as snakes, lions or even some dan-

gerous supernatural spirit beings called *iwin* or *aanjonu* (spirit). All of these in African tradition are called medicines. Others could be prepared as a protection against vehicle accidents, plane crashes and all kinds of threats.

When one asks the traditionalists, who prepare those potent words and the talisman, where such power against enemies comes from, the common answer is that it comes from God. This is contrary to the expectation. One expects them to say that the power comes from the Orisas such as Ogun, Osun, and Ifa.³⁷

3b Psalm 91 as Protective Psalm

When the Euro-American missionaries arrived and converted many Africans, it was an abomination for the converted Christian to continue the use of the above means of protection in African traditions. More unfortunate is the fact that the missionaries did not teach them what exactly could be a substitute. But the African converts, especially in the indigenous churches, found out by reading the Bible that there are many miraculous events they could revert to and through the use of various means, such as the laying of hands, prayer and the mere pronouncement of words of God they were able to find a substitute.³⁸ They therefore use the words of God in Psalms as substitute and even came to believe that the words in the Bible are more powerful, quick and sharper than a two-edged sword.

Africentric interpretation of Ps 91 sees this Psalm as a Psalm of protection against enemies, against all kinds of evils that may threaten the reader. When one is about to embark on a journey Ps 91 can be read over and over again for divine protection.

In Africentric reading, this Psalm seems to be saying, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" It teaches us an act of looking and behaving triumphantly upon one's foes (Ps. 91:8). The poem contains three main promises of assistance (vv. 1-8, 9-13, and 14-16). It assures one who seeks divine protection that such protection enables one to say that the Lord is "my refuge and fortress." Firstly, this is an act of genuine faith. Verses 3-8 give the grounds for the assurance and the genuine faith. God protects the poor and the endangered clients by bringing them to a safe place when they read, recite, write and wear the portion of the Psalm on the body. Verses 7-8 gives a concrete and memorable description of a person who was wonderfully protected by Yahweh as fel-

³⁷ Orisas means the Yoruba gods. It is surprising that despite the fact that missionaries attribute all the potent words (so-called incantations) and talismans to the devil or gods, no single traditionalist or Babalawo does so but to the Supreme Being. They always pray that the Supreme Being will make them work.

³⁸ Jesus used the word of God to obtain victory over Satan. Elijah and Isaiah healed through the use of herbs.

low warriors fall on both sides.³⁹ No one should deny that these verses speak of one whose genuine faith is honoured and he or she witnessed such a miraculous and inexplicable deliverance.

Verses 1-8 speak of having shelter in the Most High which assures true security. The assurance is not didactic but still confessional. These verses combine majestic transcendence of God by using the phrases "the Most High, the Almighty." It is the emphasis on the awesome power and presence of Yahweh which has been made available to a committed traveler who must go in dangerous places that are so many in Africa. It is about a safe journey when one is exposed. The traveler is not scared in the midst of the threats of day and night, darkness and noon. The metaphor of a dangerous journey is indeed remarkable here even though it is remote from the Euro-American guarded highways and well-ordered society. However, there can be journeys with chaos where there is no guarantee of safe conduct. The Psalmist is saying God is an escort who makes a safe passage possible for those who put their trust in Yahweh, not only in Africa but all over the world. No wonder, Africentric biblical scholars who believe in the power of words and African tradition, see Ps 91 as having unlimited power more than their potent words (incantation and *ogede*). That is why, similar to African traditions, any portion of Ps 91 could be written in a parchment or recited over and over with the majestic transcendent name of Yahweh ("Most High, the Almighty," Ps 91:1) to guarantee protection. In vv. 9-13 an angel is sent to those who made God their refuge. It is still an extended reassurance of divine protection. The metaphor for that protection is an angel. It reflects an Exodus tradition (Exodus 23:20).

No wonder, Ps 91 is among the Psalms the Prophet Adegboyejo prescribed for protection with special instruction and in conjunction with other Bible passages.⁴⁰

Perhaps, because of the protective power of this Psalms the Prophet S. I. Owoeye compiled a book of Psalms without any curses ("*Atunko Ti o yo Epe ati Egun kuro ninu Orin Dafidi pelu Orin Emi*" *Compilation of Psalms of David without Curses*) by removing all the imprecatory Psalms, including Ps 91.⁴¹ Modupe Oduyoye also compiled a book titled, *The Psalms of Satan*, but Ps 91 is not included as part of Psalm of Satan, because it is considered a psalm of success.⁴² Clement Ekundayo emphatically implores

³⁹ Clifford, 73-150, 104.

⁴⁰ Other passages includes Pss 14, 24, 28, 34, 50, 110, 114. T. N Adegboyejo *St. Michael Prayer Book* (Lagos: Neye Ade & Sons, 1988), 28.

⁴¹ S. I. Owoeye, *Atunko Ti o yo Epe ati Egun kuro ninu Orin Dafidi pelu Orin Emi* (Ibadan: Alleluyah House, no date), 74-75.

⁴² Modupe Oduyoye, *Psalms of Satan* (Ibadan: Sefer, 1997).

Use this psalm to pray when you are about leaving home for a trip. Read it often before leaving home and commit your journey or mission to the hands of God.⁴³

3c Psalm 91 as a Therapeutic Psalm

Healing in African indigenous tradition is a corporate matter. It involves the totality of the individual person, the family, and the community. The concept of good health in African tradition is remarkably different from that of the West. Unlike the way the World Health Organisation defines good health as an absence of disease or infirmity, the African definition has to do with the state of the total physical, mental and social-well being as a result of maintaining a good relationship and harmony with nature, divinities, spirits, and fellow human beings. Health therefore, involves the physical, the psychological, the spiritual and the environment.⁴⁴ In African tradition, lack of good health can be clarified into three categories: the natural or physical, the supernatural, and the mystical. The natural or physical means mere dysfunction of the physical body system and this type of disease will normally respond to ordinary medicine. Supernatural or the mystical diseases are the ones caused by witches and wizards by breaking taboos or neglecting the ancestors, or causing disharmony with fellow human beings. Sometimes this type of disease is difficult to treat. One would normally offer sacrifices or special restoration with God and the divinities, spirits and the environment. Therefore, ways to treat diseases in African tradition includes herbs, powerful potent words, animal parts, living and non-living things, water, fasting, laying on hands and other rituals for restoration of the harmony with the offended party.

The use of potent words to heal is not uncommon in African tradition. An example of this is the potent words used for healing scorpion sting:

Oorun lode talamu wonu
Oorun kuju alamu jade (7 x)

Translation

When the sun rises, the female lizard disappears
 When the sun sets the female lizard appears (7 x).

John Akinwumi confirms the efficacy of the indigenous medicine:

The main objective of any art of healing is the ultimate achievement of a lasting cure. In fact, there have been cases where orthodox

⁴³ Clement Ekundayo, *The Uses of Psalms* (Ibadan: Intercel Christian Publications, 1995).

⁴⁴ Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches*, 50.

medicine failed and the traditional medicine proved useful in treatment of chronic disease.⁴⁵

Again, and unfortunately, at the advent of the Euro-American missionaries, these ways of treating diseases were discarded because they thought that such ways were not compatible with Christianity. However, at the separation of the indigenous churches, they found several passages in the Bible with many miraculous healings. A portion of Ps 91 is also classified as therapeutic Psalm (91:3, 6).

For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper,
And from the deadly pestilence.
Of the pestilence that stalks in darkness
Or of the destruction that lays waste at noon.

The author did not mention the type of specific danger he was facing and alluding to. However, the reference to "pestilence" in vv. 3 and 6 and to the high mortality rate of the afflicted in v. 7 have been thought to be a disease of epidemic proportions as usually happens in the Third World, especially in Africa. It was also suggested that the allusions have to be the world of demons. Oesterley believes that Ps 91 is intended to show how to meet the malevolent spirits, that is, by placing oneself under the protection of Yahweh.⁴⁶ It is therefore observed that reading Ps 91 does not only guarantee protection but also heals physical and mysterious diseases, including the offence against the spirits. In the time of chronic diseases, this Psalm can be recited over and over again with steadfast faith in Yahweh and recovery will surely come as assured in Ps 91.

The converts from the traditional religion and the many African Christians believe that it is the same God who is demonstrating his power in African tradition and in Christianity.

3d Psalm 91 as a Psalm of Success

For a clearer understanding of Ps 91 as a success Psalm, it is also necessary to discuss the nature of success in African indigenous tradition. In African indigenous tradition success goes beyond mere accumulation of riches or education. Success has to do with the totality of life endeavours. It concerns getting a job, and obtaining promotions in the work place. Success includes accumulation of riches, multiplication of wives and children in African tradition. Traveling on water, land and air without accident are also regarded as success. In marriage, a good relationship between husband and wife is success. Divorce is lack of suc-

⁴⁵ John Akinwumi, "Research in Native Medicine," *Daily Times*, 25 September 1975, 8.

⁴⁶ Oesterly was cited by W. Stewart McCullough, "The Book of Psalms," *Interpreter's Bible*, 493.

cess. Inability to find a wife is lack of success. Victory over bad habits is success. Winning court cases is success. Passing examination is success. Finding favour before God and humankind is success. To live a long life is success in African tradition. Apart from working hard, potent powerful words, prayer and all kind of means are used to enhance success.

It is quite remarkable that the same methods used to achieve protection and healing are used to enhance success in African indigenous tradition. Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, a medicine called *awure* is used for securing good sales and for successfully completing a journey. *Awure* literally means something that activates or enhances success. This type of medicine may be in the form of potent words, soap for bathing or washing hands or a mixture of herbs and other ingredients for concoction. Below is an example of potent words for success or good luck in whatever one is doing:

Ori mi o se rere fun mi
Eleda mi o se rere fun mi
Ori oka ni saanu oka
Ori ere ni saanu ere
Afomo ope ni saanu ope
Ori mi o se rere fun mi.

Translation

My destiny, give me fortune
 My creator, give me fortune
Oka's destiny has mercy on *oka*
 The destiny of a python has mercy on a python
 Parasite of a palm tree has mercy on a palm tree
 My destiny, give me fortune.

These words are to be chanted several times every morning before going out for any business. The belief that one will have great success and fortune is never doubted in African tradition. What is quite remarkable is the fact that in African indigenous tradition, despite all the means that are used, it is still believed that God is the author of success in life.

When members of the African indigenous churches, who separated from the mission churches, discovered several passages in the Bible which mentioned success, they adopted them and classified such passages as success passages or success Psalms.

A close examination of Ps 91: 14-16 will reveal that as a response to prayer the one who trusts in him is given an assurance of rescue (14-16) and success in life. Note the accumulation of the verbs, seven in numbers. This accumulation of verbs intensifies the divine kindness and generosity in readiness to protect, rescue and the granting of honour, long life and prosperity.

Because he has loved me, therefore I will deliver him
 I will set him securely on high, because he has known
 My name.
 He will call upon Me, and I will answer him
 I will be with him, in trouble,
 I will rescue him, and honor him.
 With a long life I will satisfy him,
 And let him behold my salvation. (Ps 91:14-16).

Psalm 91 enables many modern Christians who pray with this Psalm to hear the assurances of the Lord's protection in the most depressing and dangerous moments of life such as it is common in Africa. This remarkable Psalm speaks with specificity and yet with a kind of piousness so that the language will march each person's experience. Psalm 91 assures someone who is unsure of what is coming. It is a personal testimony of someone whose own experience makes the assurance of faith convincing and authentic and believable.⁴⁷ Only someone who has experienced danger and has trusted and was rescued can utter such words with such confidence.

Because of the words and the power inherent in Ps 91 the Prophet Adewole recommends Ps 91 as success Psalm. According to him Ps 91 should be read three times with other passages such as Pss 9, 27, 51 and 109, Genesis 11:1-9 and Matt 15:29-38 while one is on his or her knees and praying directly to God for ability to save money.⁴⁸ Samuel Adewole also recommends Ps 91 as a medicine against extravagance.⁴⁹

4 CONCLUSION

Readers can be tempted to think that the purpose of the Africentric approach is to advocate a displacement or a dismissal of Eurocentric approach. But the purpose of this paper is to discuss how to decolonize Ps 91. In other words, how to interpret Ps 91 in the light of African tradition culture using the Yoruba tradition and culture as point of reference. The purpose is not to condemn or say that the Africentric method is the only legitimate method, but that it is one of the methods.

The temptation is also to condemn this Africentric method of interpreting the scripture as fetish, magical, uncritical and therefore unchristian as Gaiser and Luther Mays have attempted to do in their examination of Ps 91.

The psalm itself poses a danger. Because its assurance of security is so comprehensive and confident, it is especially subject to the misuse that is a possibility for all religious claims, that of turning faith

⁴⁷ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 156.

⁴⁸ Sam A. Adewole, *Awake Celetians! Satan is Nearer* (Lagos: Celestial Church of Christ, 1991), 42.

⁴⁹ Adewole, *Awake Celetians!*, 41.

into superstition. In Judaism and Christianity, bits of the text have been worn in amulets that were believed to be a kind of magical protection for those who wore them.⁵⁰

Gaiser calls the use of the Bible like this superstitious and misuse of the Bible.⁵¹ Before readers of this essay join them in such an outright condemnation perhaps, it might be fruitful if they consider the answer to these questions: With such vivid description of assurance of protection, healing and success, does Ps 91 not reflect a testimony or confession of someone who has experienced troubles and trials? Is it not likely that the author wants us not only to believe in his testimony, but to claim that very testimony of security? Does the author not expect such security to happen to those who trust God and read Ps 91 over and over again?

In the history of Christianity, especially in Africa, did miracle, protection, healing and success never take place in the life of the readers of this Psalm with fervent faith? Effectiveness of the use of Psalms in general can be illustrated in the songs of the early Christians in Africa:⁵²

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

Another popular song that calls for the use of Psalm as potent words (incantation) against evil spirit says:

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.⁵³

The truth is that the efficacy of the use of the Psalms Africentrically is never doubted not only in African indigenous churches but also in most other churches in Africa, especially in Nigeria.

⁵⁰ James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 297.

⁵¹ Gaiser, "It Shall Not Reach You," 191-202.

⁵² Caleb O. Ogunkunle, "Imprecatory Psalms: Their Forms and Uses in Ancient Israel and some Selected Churches in Nigeria," (Ph.D. diss., University of Ibadan, Nigeria, 2000), 217.

⁵³ Josiah O. Oshitelu, *The Secret of Meditation with God with the Uses of Psalms* (Ogere: Publication Department, the Church of the Lord Aladura World Wide, nno date), 14. See Adamo, "Reading Psalm 109 in African Christianity," 575-592.

Euro-American biblical scholars need to recognize that there is a difference between Eurocentric and Africentric interpretations of the Bible.⁵⁴ African biblical scholars interpret the Bible in the light of African tradition and culture while Eurocentric interpreters read the Bible in the light of Euro-American tradition and culture.

Africentric interpretation of this Psalm may be labeled magical. But after all, is Christianity not magical in its manifestation when we examine the Christian Bible and the experiences of Christians with many instances of miracles? What this writer sees as different is the method of using Ps 91 to achieve that divine protection, healing and success. Africentrically, Ps 91 is read repeatedly, memorized and chanted, written in parchment, worn and put under the pillow or hanged at the four corners of the house for divine miracle of protection. God can still perform miracle through the use of any instrument especially when it appears as if there is no other way. To many of the Euro-American scholars, Ps 91 is an eloquent poem on the security of a person who trusts on Yahweh,⁵⁵ but to the majority of Africentric biblical scholars and ordinary readers it is more than a poem, it is also an *incantation*, and *talisman* that God has given for divine protection, healing and success. Among the majority of African biblical scholars and ordinary readers, Ps 91 is a covenant, that is, a spiritual contract during difficult days. There is a uniqueness in Ps 91 because there are many promises of protection throughout the Bible, but in Ps 91 all the promises seems to be brought together in one collection and forming a covenant.⁵⁶

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⁵⁴ Gerald West, "Difference and Dialogue: Reading the Joseph Story with the Poor and Marginalized Communities in South Africa," *BibInt* 2 (1994): 152-170.

⁵⁵ Allen, *Esther-Psalms*, 358.

⁵⁶ Peggy Joyce Ruth, *God's Shield of Protection, Psalm 91* (Lake Mary: Creation House, 2007), 104.

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