

## Pregnancy and Psalms: Aspects of the Healing Ministry of a Nigerian Prophet<sup>1</sup>

KNUT HOLTER (SCHOOL OF MISSION AND THEOLOGY, NORWAY /  
STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY, SOUTH AFRICA)

### ABSTRACT

*The essay analyses the healing ministry of a prophet operating within one of the African Instituted Churches in Nigeria, and it focuses on his instrumental use of texts from the biblical Book of Psalms – read “into” olive oil and water – in connection with personal crises in relation to pregnancy. With some theory from glocal studies and postcolonial biblical hermeneutics, the prophet’s use of Psalms texts is related to the development of a contextually sensitive biblical studies.*

In my bookshelves back home, in that particular shelf where I have collected and systematically displayed some critical studies of the Book of Psalms, I have also placed a small bottle with olive oil. The connection between the bottle and its surroundings – including classics such as Sigmund Mowinckels’s *Psalmstudien* and Hans-Joachim Kraus’s *Theologie der Psalmen* – may at first sight be somewhat surprising. Nevertheless, the bottle with olive oil and the books on Psalms have not been placed together just accidentally. As I see it, there *is* a connection between the two, in the sense that the content of the bottle is not olive oil alone, but olive oil that is mixed with Psalms texts, that is, the same texts as those being critically analysed by the surrounding, exegetical studies.

The bottle and its content is a gift from a prophet – let me call him AB – operating in one the large cities in southwestern Nigeria and specialising in healing related to problems of pregnancy, such as infertility problems, miscarriage, delivery problems, and infant mortality. A key characteristics of prophet AB’s healing ministry is that he reads texts from Psalms “into” olive oil or water and uses the mix of the two as a concrete and touchable means of healing *vis-à-vis* those coming to see him.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> It is a privilege to dedicate this essay to Professor Herrie van Rooy, an excellent scholar and good colleague in the Old Testament Society of Southern Africa. The topic is meant as an attempt at drawing some lines between the Book of Psalms – a central field in van Rooy’s scholarly work – and the current academic focus on contextualising the contemporary reader of the Bible.

<sup>2</sup> The presentation of the healing ministry of prophet AB is based on a pilot project on the use of the Bible in African Instituted Churches in Nigeria, with fieldwork – in the forms of qualitative interviews and some participatory observation – in prophet

---

The following pages will reflect on prophet AB and his use of Psalms, in three steps. First, a description of the prophet and his work, particularly focusing on his healing ministry *vis-à-vis* women that face problems related to pregnancy. Then, a discussion of the prophet's ministry in relation to his immediate religio-cultural context. Finally, some interpretive perspectives in relation to the experiences of the prophet and the academic discipline of biblical studies.

## A THE PROPHET AND HIS MINISTRY

Religion is important in Nigeria, and the country as a whole functions as a multi-religious laboratory, where Christianity (mainly in the south), Islam (mainly in the north), and African Traditional Religion (in some areas still being the major religious expression, in other areas providing an important interpretive background to Christianity and Islam) live side by side and influence each other mutually. The Christian segment of the population consists of approximately 80 million out of a total population of approximately 160 million, and it can roughly be divided in three main streams. First, the historical churches, initiated through mission and colonialism; main exponents here are the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. Then, the African Instituted Churches, at first at local and national levels, whereas today some of them have established strong branches in Europe and North America as well; main exponents here are Cherubim & Seraphim, Christ Apostolic Church, and Celestial Church of Christ. And finally, the large number of Pentecostal and charismatic churches, in many cases linked to corresponding churches in other parts of the world; the largest and best known exponents here are Winners' Chapel and Redeemed Christian Church of God, each with enormous assembly halls and their own universities and television channels.

This is the context that prophet AB is operating in. A couple of decades ago he experienced that God called him to a fulltime service, and he has gradually built up a church and a congregation; the latter is now part of Christ Apostolic Church. His congregation is not one of the megachurches, rather, it is quite an ordinary congregation with a few hundred members serving its immediate vicinity. Here AB serves as a prophet – he prefers this title, as the term “pastor” would generally speaking demand a training in a seminary – and he mainly focuses on healing, in particular healing of problems related to pregnancy. This choice is obviously not accidental; problems related to pregnancy – including infertility problems, miscarriage, delivery problems, and infant mortality – are severe in all contexts, and not least in contexts such as that of prophet AB, where a lack of a good health care and a social welfare system

---

AB's congregation in one of the major cities in southwestern Nigeria in July 2010 and June 2011. The interviewees agreed to be quoted, and the study was done according to the rules and regulations of the Norwegian Data Protection Official for Research, <http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/en/index.html>.

threaten the life both of the mother and the baby. In such a context, the healing ministry of the prophet and the social network of his congregation offer a safe haven for mothers-to-be. The prophet meets this particular segment of society with counselling and healing, and then especially a healing that is facilitated through biblical texts that are read "into" olive oil and water.

My impression from participating in some Sunday services in his congregation is that there is an overweight amongst the attendees of women in fertile age. This impression is confirmed by statistics over a longer time. The prophet will certainly say that the congregation is for people of all ages, and he will emphasise that his healing ministry responds to all sorts of illnesses and problems. Nevertheless, the prophet has a reputation in the neighbourhood for being able to help women with problems related to pregnancy, and he himself will also point out that this special ministry is crucial. In one of the Sunday services I attended, I was allowed to invite people to come to me after the service and share with me what God – through prophet AB – had done in their lives. It was a general invitation and I did not indicate that I was looking for something special, such as "pregnancy" and / or "olive oil / water." Nevertheless, as many as seven out of ten who spontaneously came to me afterwards told me stories about problems related to pregnancy, and how the problems had been solved by the intervention of the prophet with Psalms texts read "into" olive oil or water. Let the testimonies of four of these seven serve to illustrate the interaction between the prophet and his confidants.

- (i) A woman (in her thirties) came to witness that she had been pregnant last year. It had been a difficult pregnancy, as she had been pregnant with the same child for nearly one year. When the labour came and there were problems, the doctors at the hospital prepared for a caesarean section. She called for the prophet, who arrived at the hospital at 5:30 in the morning. The doctors had then already started the preparations for the operation, but the prophet was given 30 minutes. He poured water – into which he had read Psalms – over her body, and within 30 minutes the child was born.
- (ii) A woman (in her fifties) came with her teenage daughter to witness about her pregnancy and delivery. She had been pregnant for one and a half year (with the same baby), but she was not able to give birth. Eventually she went to the prophet, who read Psalms into water and gave her to drink. This led to a safe delivery, and the baby – now a teenage girl – is healthy and fine.
- (iii) A man (in his twenties) came to witness about what had happened with his wife. She had been pregnant and about to deliver, but the baby would not come out. She had labour and contractions for seven days, and the doctors at the hospital said that they would prepare for a caesarean section. The husband went to find money for the operation, but he also

made a telephone call to prophet AB. The prophet said that they should avoid operation, and instead he brought water – into which he had read Psalms – for her to drink and take a bath. So they did, and they brought her to church, where they prayed for her a whole day. Eventually the child came, a boy, healthy and fine. However, he was holding a kind of supernatural “thing” in his right hand, and they buried this “thing” together with the placenta.

- (iv) A woman (in her sixties) came to witness about what the prophet had done for her daughter who lives in North America. The daughter had been married for more than ten years without getting pregnant, and the mother went to see the prophet. He read Psalms into some oil, and gave instructions about how the oil should be sent to North America and how the daughter should use it. This happened in December 1999, in June 2000 the daughter got pregnant, and nine months later she gave birth to a healthy boy.

These four testimonies call for some comments. First, we notice that all four have a similar structure: a problem is identified / the prophet is approached / he reads texts from Psalms into olive oil or water and gives it to the confidant / this solves the problem. It should also be noted that two of the four refer to somewhat extraordinary experiences, such as the supernatural “thing” one of the children had in his hand when he was born, and long pregnancies (one year, and one and a half year; another of my interviewees referred to a pregnancy lasting for three years). This similar structure probably reflects the central role testimonies like these have in the Sunday services of prophet AB’s congregation. Every single service invites the attendees to give witness about what God has done in their lives in the last week, and it is quite evident that these testimonies eventually are influenced by each other and form a kind of genre.

Second, it may be seen as somewhat odd that all four testimonies (and also the ones that are not presented here) refer to “Psalms” in general, without quoting the particular Psalms that have been used, or at least give their references. I think this reflects a situation where the congregation trusts the prophet to find the correct text, whereas the prophet on his side is reluctant about sharing details of his biblical knowledge with others. Prophet AB kindly gave me a kind of manual, where he lists which biblical texts fits which situation, and how the text should be used. Moreover, he made me promise not to reveal all the secrets of that manual with others. During one of my interviews with the prophet, he actually asked a young woman who was present in the room to leave, as she was not mature enough – “not yet having given birth to any children” – to listen to what he told me. However, other prophets and pastors think differently about this. A good example is Adedeji D. Tarnner’s booklet *Effec-*

---

*tive Uses of Psalms* (2007),<sup>3</sup> which will be referred to in the next section; here the healing potential of every single Psalm in the Book of Psalms is presented.

Third, another obvious question is the role of faith. Does the healing require some kind of faith from the confidant's side? In the last of the four testimonies it is the mother of the woman who had not become pregnant, rather than the woman herself, who approaches the prophet, and although the daughter seems to have followed the instructions of the prophet, the faith is primarily expressed by the mother. Prophet AB proves to have an ambivalent understanding of the role of faith. On the one hand, he repeatedly – in sermons and interviews – emphasises that faith is necessary. On the other hand, however, he also acknowledges cases where the individual does not express any positive faith. The first example can be seen in the several cases where people have kept remains of the olive oil or water – which he has read Psalms texts “into” – in their homes because they did not need all of it, and then gave the remains to people in their neighbourhood or family, who without knowing the background, used it and were healed. Another example is when the prophet is called out to a village to reveal witches; he then reads certain texts – and I have explicitly promised not to reveal which – “into” water, and he demands all the villagers to drink it. This is then an act which is supposed to make clear who the witches are.

Fourth and finally, two of the four testimonies explicitly refer to the prophet's rejection of caesarean sections. Prophet AB repeatedly argues that there has not been a single example of a caesarean section in this congregation since it started in 1989; it is part of his calling and ministry to reject this practice. Now caesarean sections are both frequent, expensive (i.e. lucrative for the doctors), and dangerous in Nigeria, so it certainly makes sense to be critical. Nevertheless, an ideologically based on total rejection may cause severe problems, and one might wonder whose voices are silenced when the prophet proudly points out that this practice is totally absent in their experiences.

In a sum, prophet AB allows healing in relation to problems of pregnancy to play a key role in his ministry, and he uses biblical texts – in particular from the Book of Psalms, somewhat instrumentally read “into olive oil and water” – as a key means of this ministry. Contemporary Western readers of the Bible will probably find such a use of biblical texts somewhat surprising. In the Nigerian context, however, there is nothing special about prophet AB and his healing ministry. He is one of hundreds (if not thousands) of prophets and pastors who do something similar. Let us therefore leave prophet AB for a while and take a closer look at the religio-cultural context of his ministry.

---

<sup>3</sup> Adedeji D. Tarnner, *Effective Uses of Psalms* (Lagos: Great Hound Book, 2007).

## B THE CONTEXT OF THE PROPHET'S MINISTRY

As noticed in the previous section, prophet AB lives and works in one of the large cities in southwestern Nigeria. This means that he and his congregation are part of a predominantly Yoruba religio-cultural context, stretching from quite traditional and rural to more modern and urbanised expressions of religion and culture. In traditional Yoruba religion, healers play important roles,<sup>4</sup> and problems related to fertility, pregnancy and birth are strongly focused. Female fertility is frequently being discussed in traditional narratives,<sup>5</sup> and it is often related to the fertility of the earth.<sup>6</sup> Infertile marriages are generally considered a curse,<sup>7</sup> and the wish to have children is a central aspect of female spirituality.<sup>8</sup> Various divinities and rituals – for example in relation to holy water – are available for solving the problem,<sup>9</sup> and also for securing the safety of the mother-to-be throughout her pregnancy and birth-giving.<sup>10</sup>

Also in the wide spectre of Christian churches, we find a strong focus on healing.<sup>11</sup> So is especially the case in the various African Instituted Churches and Pentecostal churches, but even the historical churches – such as the Roman Catholics and Anglicans – seem to have a stronger focus on healing in Nigeria than what one would normally encounter in their denominational counterparts in Europe and North America. Admittedly, though, the use of concrete and touchable means – such as olive oil and water in the case of prophet AB – may

<sup>4</sup> Mary O. Adekson, *The Yorùbá Traditional Healers of Nigeria* (AfSt; New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Roland Hallgren, *The Good Things in Life: A Study of the Traditional Religious Culture of the Yoruba People* (LSAAR 2; Lund: Plus Ultra, 1991), 90–95.

<sup>6</sup> Marjorie K. McIntosh, *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 190.

<sup>7</sup> J. Omosade Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1979), 171.

<sup>8</sup> McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 198.

<sup>9</sup> McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 192–195.

<sup>10</sup> Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African*, 173.

<sup>11</sup> As the present study focuses on the particular role of the Bible in healing contexts, there is not space for a discussion of the vast literature on healing in Yoruba, Nigerian or – say – African church contexts in general. For introductory studies into the Nigerian context, see Chinonyelu M. Ugwu, *Healing in the Nigerian Church: A Pastoral–Psychological Exploration* (SIHC 109; Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1998); and Victor N. Onyeador, *Health and Healing in the Igbo Society: Basis and Challenges for an Inculturated Pastoral Care of the Sick* (EUST 23; Theology, 857; Bern: Peter Lang, 2007). Other samples could be Adogame's now classic study: Afeosemime U. Adogame, *Celestial Church of Christ: The Politics of Cultural Identity in a West African Prophetic–Charismatic Movement* (SIHC 115; Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1999); and the more recent, critical voice of Chima Agazue, *The Role of a Culture of Superstition in the Proliferation of Religio–Commercial Pastors in Nigeria* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2013).

vary. On the one hand, typically Pentecostal churches would tend to focus on verbal means alone, such as prayer, biblical texts, and potent words. On the other, some of the African Instituted Churches would include touchable means such as herbs, leaves, potash, egg, butter, the bile of a cow, *etcetera* in their healing practices, in analogy with what one finds in traditional religion. Prophet AB is here situated somewhere in the middle. He legitimises concrete and touchable means like olive oil and water by referring to their use in the Bible, whereas he rejects the use of herbs *etcetera* as syncretism, as such means have no parallels in the Bible, he claims, rather finding their background in traditional religion.

I have visited a number of churches and ministries in southwestern Nigeria: Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, Cherubim & Seraphim, Christ Apostolic Church, Celestial Church of Christ, *etcetera*, and I have seen many practices that remind me of prophet AB and his ministry. Still, I would be hesitant about generalising about his "context" based on my accidental encounters with Nigerian church life. What I will do in this section is therefore to turn to the written expressions of the focus one finds in many of these churches on prayer and healing. The problem of generalising is of course found here too. Still, in the large, Nigerian market for books, booklets and pamphlets that promote praying and healing, some of the literature seems to be found more or less everywhere, and one might assume it to have some general influence. This kind of literature grows out of the experiences and concerns of certain prophets and pastors, and as such it may provide some glimpses into how these religious leaders reflect on their ministries. In my attempt at understanding prophet AB and his healing ministry, I find that the samples of the literature on prayer and healing that I have managed to purchase from street vendors and religious bookshops in southwestern Nigeria draw a picture that to some extent corresponds with what I have seen in his congregation.

First, and generally speaking, the praying and healing literature of this genre tends to include a strong focus on problems related to pregnancy, like what we have seen in the ministry of prophet AB. This focus on problems related to pregnancy is often expressed in the form of a language of spiritual warfare. Pastor Paulinus G. W. Okeke, for example, tells the mother-to-be to pray: "Therefore, mother have to spit fire to the devil and her pregnancy baby shall not be touch by devil, and she have power authority to speak life unto her pregnancy baby [*sic*]." <sup>12</sup> Likewise, pastor Daniel Olukoya sees a fight between God and demonic powers: "Those who have had repeated miscarriages and are struggling with threatening abortion can destroy the enemy's plan through these prayer points," he argues, and continues with a kind of series of curses:

---

<sup>12</sup> Paulinus G. W. Okeke, *Spit Fire Prayer According to God's Spoken Word* (Lagos: Abbachrist Assembly Church, 2004), 39–40.

. . . Every demonic instrument of operation set aside to abort my pregnancy, break into pieces, in the name of Jesus. Every demonic doctor/nurse delegated by Satan to destroy my pregnancy, inject yourself do death, in the name of Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

Also, pastor Daniel A. Ayoola uses a similar language, addressing the phenomenon of barrenness as a kind of spiritual power that eventually will have to submit to Jesus: "I rule over and exercise a divine authority over barrenness and anything responsible for sadness in my life today in the name of Jesus Christ . . . I take authority over barrenness and ask you (i.e. the barrenness) to surrender in Jesus name."<sup>14</sup>

Second, there are also more specialised examples of this genre of praying and healing literature, focusing in particular on pregnancy. An example is a booklet by Tella Olayeri, who allows medical, psychological, and not least spiritual aspects of infertility and miscarriage to interact, and who lets the woman's ability to take control – in the name of Jesus – over those forces that prevent her from becoming pregnant to be a key perspective:

- (i) Now lay your hand on your womb and pray like this: O heaven declare the glory of God upon my marriage for the fruit of the womb. Holy Ghost fire, holy Spirit combine your efforts and repair my womb. Thou power of the Holy Ghost touch my womb and break any yoke holding me captive.<sup>15</sup>
- (ii) Press your navel (*idodo*) and pray like this: My navel you are the source of my destiny refuse to co-operate with the works of darkness. I therefore command paralysis, weakness and death upon any contrary power attached to you through my placenta.<sup>16</sup>
- (iii) Now hold your breasts and pray like this: My breasts hear the word of the Lord. You are meant to form milk for my children to suck. Therefore receive fresh anointing of the living God to produce milk at appropriate times. You shall not be for fancy or decoration, in the name of Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Olukoya, *Prayer Passport to Crush Oppression* (Lagos: Mountain of Fire Miracles Ministries, 2006), 166–167.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel A. Ayoola, *The Prayer Companion* (Lagos: Danad Publishing and Records, 2010), 63–64.

<sup>15</sup> Tella Olayeri, *Prayers for Fruit of the Womb: I Reject Miscarriage* (vol. 1; Lagos: A Barren Bulldozer Prayer Book, s.a.), 50.

<sup>16</sup> Olayeri, *Prayers for Fruit*, 52.

<sup>17</sup> Olayeri, *Prayers for Fruit*, 53.



- (iv) Touch your back, strike it continuously as you pray like this: You my back, hear the word of the Lord. You are created among other parts of my body to carry my babies.<sup>18</sup>

Third, and here we are quite close to the concepts and practices of prophet AB, is a booklet I referred to in the previous section, Adedeji D. Tarnner's *Effective Uses of Psalms*. Tarnner goes through all 150 chapters in the Book of Psalms, of which eight are explicitly used in relation to pregnancy: Pss 1, 19, 33, 102, 113, 126, 127, 128. One case is Ps 1, he argues, which can be used in prayer for a pregnant woman: "Call Jehovah El-Shaddai 3 times before reading it into water for bathing and drinking by the pregnant person."<sup>19</sup> Another case is Ps 127, which can be used for protection of the baby: "Call Jehovah Lloi Mah 21 times before reading it. You can also read it into water to bath the new born baby."<sup>20</sup>

As noticed above, these examples of books, booklets and pamphlets that promote the praying and healing practices of various churches in southwestern Nigeria draw a picture that to some extent corresponds with what I have seen in prophet AB's congregation. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to argue that prophet AB illustrates a quite general phenomenon. The academic study of this phenomenon, though, is still in its beginning. Apart from being mentioned just briefly in more general studies of religion and church life in Nigeria, it has especially been presented and analysed by one particular scholar, the Nigerian biblical scholar David Tuesday Adamo.<sup>21</sup>

Adamo distinguishes between three thematically different sets of reading the Bible "into" concrete and touchable means, such as olive oil and water. The first set is "reading the Bible therapeutically."<sup>22</sup> Proceeding from the observation that traditional religion and culture have various methods for approaching illness and physical problems – such as indigenous medicine (herbs etc.), potent words, massage, fasting, *etcetera* – African Christians, he argues, look to the Bible for corresponding methods. The second set is "reading the Bible for protection in life."<sup>23</sup> Again, proceeding from the observation that

<sup>18</sup> Olayeri, *Prayers for Fruit*, 54.

<sup>19</sup> Tarnner, *Effective Uses*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Tarnner, *Effective Uses*, 36.

<sup>21</sup> David T. Adamo, "The Use of Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 336–349; David T. Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001); David T. Adamo, "The Imprecatory Psalms in African Context," in *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (ed. David T. Adamo; Lanham: University Press of America, 2006), 139–153.

<sup>22</sup> Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting*, 47–66.

<sup>23</sup> Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting*, 67–84.

traditional religion and culture have various methods for finding protection against evil spirits, enemies, witches, sorcerers, *etcetera* – methods that include medicine (to harm the enemies), potent words, charms, amulets, etc. – he argues that African Christians here, too, look to the Bible for parallel methods. Finally, the third set is “reading the Bible for success in life,”<sup>24</sup> and the approach – here to secure love, employment, wealth, court cases, business, *etcetera* – is the same as in the two others.

The current focus on problems related to pregnancy falls under the first of these three sets, “reading the Bible therapeutically.” Adamo argues that the missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa considered traditional therapeutic methods to be barbaric, and that the alternative that they offered was sets of concepts and practices that somehow were related to a particular book, the Bible. The African converts to Christianity, then, drew the conclusion that there has to be something in this particular book that is equally as strong and powerful as their own traditional methods of healing, and as they started reading the book they discovered texts about miraculous healing through words, herbs and acts. Supposing that the missionaries consciously had hidden the potent power of the biblical texts from them, they therefore set out to find such texts, and they eventually managed to identify some, not least in Psalms.<sup>25</sup>

A couple of Adamo’s examples may illustrate the practice of “reading the Bible therapeutically” in relation to aspects of pregnancy. The first example relates to the problem of infertility, and here Adamo – with no explicit source – writes:

For barren women to have children, Psalm 51, Gen 15:1–5, 21:1–8, 1 Sam 1:9–20 should be read three times into coconut water or raw native egg with prayer and drink the water. The action above should take place very early in the morning while naked and after a woman might have had sexual intercourse with her husband. The following names should be pronounced for effectiveness: *Jehovah Shiklo-hirami* 21 times, and *Holy Mary* 12 times.<sup>26</sup>

A second example relates to the quest for safe delivery. Here Adamo refers a pamphlet written by a prophet in Ibadan, but in Adamo’s own words:

Psalm 126 . . . is efficacious for infant mortality. A woman with a history of past experiences of infant mortality should start reading this Psalm immediately she is aware of her pregnancy. This Psalm should be read into water for bathing, washing and drinking daily throughout the period of her pregnancy. . . . With the reading of this Psalm as instructed, early death of such child is unthinkable. Psalm

<sup>24</sup> Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting*, 85–103.

<sup>25</sup> Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting*, 54–55.

<sup>26</sup> Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting*, 56.

---

126 could also be written on four pure parchments with the holy names *Sinni*, *Sinsunni*, and *Semanflaf*. Keep it in the four corners of a house whenever a person with the history of born-to-die children (*abiku* in Yoruba and *ogbanje* in Ibo of Nigeria) is pregnant.<sup>27</sup>

In both examples, we notice how a reading of certain biblical texts "into" a concrete and touchable means is combined with the pronunciation of a potent word / name and some instructions concerning the performance of the ritual. The parallels between these two examples and what we have seen in the healing ministry of prophet AB should be obvious.

In a sum, there is sufficient material to claim that prophet AB does not stick out as an odd example; rather, the religio-cultural context of southwestern Nigeria offers clear parallels with regard to his prayer and healing practice. The academic study of this phenomenon is still in its beginning, but a Nigerian scholar, professor David Tuesday Adamo, has raised some key questions.

### C SOME INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVES

How, then, are we to interpret the way prophet AB uses texts from the Book of Psalms – read "into" olive oil and water – in his healing ministry? Let me first, once more turn to Adamo, and then add a couple of theoretical perspectives.

A basic premise to much of Adamo's work with African biblical hermeneutics, is the damage made by early Western missionaries in that they rejected much of Africa's religious and cultural heritage as pagan and barbaric. Adamo is not entirely negative to the missionary endeavour *per se*; on the contrary, he repeatedly comes back to positive aspects of what missionaries have done. Nevertheless, their negative interpretation of Africa's religious and cultural heritage is historically a disaster and it still poses a challenge. One example of how this challenge may be countered today, Adamo argues, is found in the African Instituted Churches, which deliberately interpret the Bible in relation to the value systems of traditional religion and culture in Africa. Doing so, the African Instituted Churches are able to resolve the identity crisis engendered by Western missionaries – being African versus being Christian – and they are able to do so where it really counts, at the grassroots level.<sup>28</sup> In consequence with this, Adamo is very much concerned about how the experiences of the African Instituted Churches with the Bible can be integrated into academic biblical studies in Africa. His own interpretive model – African cultural hermeneutics – is then thought to do such an integration of the experiences of the African Instituted Churches, and he thereby hopes that it will be possible to ". .

---

<sup>27</sup> Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting*, 58.

<sup>28</sup> Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting*, 3.

. break the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Eurocentric biblical scholars have long enjoyed."<sup>29</sup>

I will soon come back to the question of how and to what extent the experiences of the African Instituted Churches with the Bible – and then also those of prophet AB – can be integrated into academic biblical studies, but I will first make a brief detour via a couple of theoretical perspectives. The first is so-called glocal theory, a terminological and theoretical newcomer in the contemporary discourses on globalisation and globalism. From a rhetorical perspective, the term “glocal” seems good, as it combines the contrasting terms “global” and “local” in an apparently self-evident way, creating a third and independent room.<sup>30</sup> Whether the term is good also from an analytical perspective remains to be seen; it will obviously have to be filled with a certain content. What nevertheless seems clear within the glocal theory we see emerging today, is that globalisation and globalism do not necessarily result in uniformity or McDonaldsification; rather, the simultaneity of global and local concerns creates new and different expressions.<sup>31</sup> I think this conceptual perspective may serve as a response to Adamo’s quest for breaking “the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold” of Western biblical studies.<sup>32</sup> The hegemony and stranglehold he talks about are indeed still being experienced, but at the same time, they clearly belong to the past. Today’s biblical studies is – or at least should be – a glocal enterprise, located at the interface of global and local interpretive experiences and concerns. African biblical studies has an obvious obligation to reflect critically about the relationship between the classical texts and the experiences and concerns of the wide range of contemporary reading communities of the Bible in Africa. These experiences and concerns include those of prophet AB, of the African Instituted Churches, and of all the other reading communities of the Bible in Africa. Glocal theory might help us understand and express this interface between global and local interpretive experiences and concerns with the Bible, and it may provide a rationale for continuing to develop a biblical studies that is contextually sensitive.

The second theoretical perspective I would like to relate to Adamo’s concerns about the interpretive experiences of the African Instituted Churches

<sup>29</sup> Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting*, 44.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Beyer, “Globalization and Glocalization,” in *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (ed. James A. Beckford and Nicholas J. Demerath III; London: Sage Publications, 2007), 98–118.

<sup>31</sup> Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time–Space and Homogeneity–Heterogeneity,” in *Global Modernities* (ed. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson; London: Sage Publications, 1995), 25–44; Jan A. Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction* (2nd ed.; New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005); David Held and Anthony McGrew, *Globalization/Anti-Globalization: Beyond the Great Divide* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting*, 44.

– and those of prophet AB – is some insights from postcolonial biblical hermeneutics. It is a key concern of postcolonial theory that the relationship between what counts as “centre” and “margins” is a question of power. Exponents of the centre have interpretive power to define their own (political, economic, cultural, etc.) agendas as crucial and to marginalise the corresponding agendas of the margins. As far as the academic discipline of biblical studies is concerned, some colleagues have used postcolonial theory to analyse the relationship between the universalising claims of traditional Western scholarship and the more consciously contextual claims of African, Asian and Latin–American scholarship.<sup>33</sup> This calls for a decolonisation of biblical studies, in general,<sup>34</sup> but indeed also of its various local expressions. When the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies a decade ago put decolonisation of biblical interpretation in Africa on the agenda of its annual meeting,<sup>35</sup> there were various suggestions for how such a decolonisation can be performed. Justin S. Ukpong points out the need for a biblical studies that is sensitive to inculturation hermeneutics.<sup>36</sup> Gerald O. West argues that a decolonised biblical studies will emphasise social–historical interpretive interests.<sup>37</sup> Dorcas O. Akintunde points out the need for allowing women perspectives to play a role.<sup>38</sup> And, again, David Tuesday Adamo argues that the interpretive experiences of the African Instituted Churches in relation to Psalms and other biblical texts *vis-à-vis* healing, success and protection should be included.<sup>39</sup>

Now, back to the question raised in the beginning of this third section: to what extent can the experiences of the African Instituted Churches in general

<sup>33</sup> Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (BPCol; London: T & T Clark International, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Fernando S. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> Samuel O. Abogunrin, ed., *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa* (BSS 4; Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, “Inculturation as Decolonization of Biblical Studies in Africa,” in *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa* (ed. Samuel O. Abogunrin; BSS 4; Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005), 32–50.

<sup>37</sup> Gerald O. West, “Decolonizing (South) African Biblical Scholarship: The Bible in (South) African History and Culture,” in *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa* (ed. Samuel O. Abogunrin; BSS 4; Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005), 60–84.

<sup>38</sup> Dorcas O. Akintunde, “Decolonizing Biblical Studies in Nigeria: Women Perspective,” in *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa* (ed. Samuel O. Abogunrin; BSS 4; Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005), 95–120.

<sup>39</sup> David T. Adamo, “What is African Biblical Studies?” in *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa* (ed. Samuel O. Abogunrin; BSS 4; Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005), 17–31.

and those of prophet AB in particular – with Psalms and other biblical texts – be integrated into critical biblical studies as we know it from academia? What we can learn from glocal and postcolonial theory, is that there is no innocent way of doing – for example – biblical studies. Still, the power of defining what biblical studies should include or not include does not any longer belong to traditional Western centres of the discipline. Biblical studies is not any longer performed by Westerners alone, it is a global enterprise where the performers are found all around the globe and should develop their own, contextually sensitive versions of the discipline.

When it comes to prophet AB's use of Psalms, water and olive oil in relation to healing, this means that his concerns – as well as the experiences of his congregation – have an obvious role to play in surrounding versions of biblical studies. A critical analysis of how the biblical texts are used – by whom and for what purposes and interests – is an obligation of an academia that wants to take its responsibility *vis-à-vis* church and society seriously. When Adamo and other Nigerian scholars do this, they realise that many of the assumed characteristics of African Instituted Churches have their counterparts in the Book of Psalms and other biblical texts, as these ancient texts not surprisingly reflect experiences and concerns of ordinary human beings.

And then we are back where we started, in my bookshelf back home in Stavanger, with a bottle of olive oil provided by prophet AB placed together with Sigmund Mowinckel's *Psalmenstudien* and Hans-Joachim Kraus's *Theologie der Psalmen*. For prophet AB it is self-evident that his biblical interpretation should reflect the life experiences and spiritual concerns of the members of his congregations. Such experiences and concerns, however, are not new to biblical scholars like Mowinckel and Kraus; they have already encountered them in the Book of Psalms and they have therefore devoted much energy into analysing Psalms texts on for example blessing, curse, and spiritual powers.<sup>40</sup> The very existence of textual echoes in Psalms of such experiences and reflection from the times of ancient Israel and Judah is why ordinary people – in prophet AB's congregation, in the African Instituted Churches, and everywhere – continue to read these ancient texts. And that is also why the variety of contemporary reading experiences with these texts should be taken seriously by academia and integrated into its discipline of biblical studies.

---

<sup>40</sup> Sigmund Mowinckel, *Segen und Fluch in Israel's Kult un Psalmdichtung* (vol. 5 of *Psalmenstudien*; Kristiania: Jacob Dybwad, 1924); Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theologie der Psalmen* (BKAT 15/3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979).

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Abogunrin, Samuel O., ed. *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa*. Biblical Studies Series 4. Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005.
- Adamo, David T. "The Use of Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria." Pages 336–349 in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*. Edited by Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube. Leiden: Brill, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "What is African Biblical Studies?" Pages 17–31 in *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa*. Edited by Samuel O. Abogunrin. Biblical Studies Series 4. Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The imprecatory Psalms in African context." Pages 139–153 in *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective*. Edited by David T. Adamo. Lanham: University Press of America, 2006.
- Adekson, Mary O. *The Yorùbá Traditional Healers of Nigeria*. African Studies: History, Politics, Economics, Culture. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Adogame, Afeosemime U. *Celestial Church of Christ: The Politics of Cultural Identity in a West African Prophetic–Charismatic Movement*. Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity 115. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1999.
- Agazue, Chima. *The Role of a Culture of Superstition in the Proliferation of Religio–Commercial Pastors in Nigeria*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2013.
- Akintunde, Dorcas O. "Decolonizing Biblical Studies in Nigeria: Women Perspective." Pages 95–120 in *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa*. Edited by Samuel O. Abogunrin. Biblical Studies Series 4. Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005.
- Awolalu, J. Omosade and P. Adelumo Dopamu. *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1979.
- Ayoola, Daniel A. *The Prayer Companion*. Lagos: Danad Publishing and Records, 2010.
- Beyer, Peter. "Globalization and Glocalization." Pages 98–118 in *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Edited by James A. Beckford and Nicholas J. Demerath III. London: Sage Publications, 2007.
- Hallgren, Roland. *The Good Things in Life: A Study of the Traditional Religious Culture of the Yoruba People*. Lund Studies in African and Asian Religions 2. Lund: Plus Ultra, 1991.
- Held, David and Anthony McGrew. *Globalization/Anti–Globalization: Beyond the Great Divide*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.
- Kraus, Hans–Joachim. *Theologie der Psalmen*. Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament 15/3. Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979.
- McIntosh, Marjorie K. *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
- Moore, Stephen D. and Fernando F. Segovia, eds. *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections*. The Bible and Postcolonialism. London: T & T Clark International, 2005.
- Mowinckel, Sigmund. *Segen und Fluch in Israel's Kult und Psalmdichtung*. Volume 5 of *Psalmenstudien*. Kristiania: Jacob Dybwad, 1924.

- Okeke, Paulinus G. W. *Spit Fire Prayer According to God's Spoken Word*. Lagos: Abbachrist Assembly Church, 2004.
- Olayeri, Tella. *Prayers for Fruit of the Womb: I Reject Miscarriage*. Volume 1. Lagos: A Barren Bulldozer Prayer Book, s.a.
- Olukoya, Daniel. *Prayer Passport to Crush Oppression*. Lagos: Mountain of Fire Miracles Ministries, 2006.
- Onyeador, Victor N. *Health and Healing in the Igbo Society: Basis and Challenges for an Inculturated Pastoral Care of the Sick*. European University Studies 23: Theology, 857. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Robertson, Roland. "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity." Pages 25-44 in *Global Modernities*. Edited by Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Roberson. London: Sage Publications 1995.
- Scholte, Jan A. *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.
- Segovia, Fernando S. *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000.
- Sugirtharajah, Rasiyah S. *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Tarnner, Adedeji D. *Effective Uses of Psalms*. Lagos: Great Hound Book, 2007.
- Ugwu, Chinonyelu M. *Healing in the Nigerian Church: A Pastoral-Psychological Exploration*. Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity 109. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1998.
- Ukpong, Justin S. "Inculturation as Decolonization of Biblical Studies in Africa." Pages 32-50 in *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa*. Edited by Samuel O. Abogunrin. Biblical Studies Series 4. Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005.
- West, Gerald O. "Decolonizing (South) African Biblical Scholarship: The Bible in (South) African History and Culture." Pages 60-84 in *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa*. Edited by Samuel O. Abogunrin. Biblical Studies Series 4. Ibadan: Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005.
- Professor Knut Holter, MHS School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, Norway; e-mail: knut.holter@mhs.no. Extraordinary Professor Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.