

A Textual Study of Psalm 91 and its Relevance to an African Milieu

Sangotunde Oluyinka¹

¹ Adeyemi College of Education

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Abstract

Psalm 91 has been described as a wonderful Psalm that has been a source of comfort and faith development to many who have faced physical and spiritual challenges prevalent in our contemporary circumstances. It has the distinction of being misquoted by Satan during Jesus' temptation in Matthew 4:6 and Luke 4: 10-11. Jesus Christ also used this Psalm to strengthen his disciples in spiritual warfare in Luke 10:19. This paper has done a textual analysis of this Psalm with an attempt to unveil its language, structural and grammatical richness. The paper has also considered the relevance of this Psalm to the belief system of the Yoruba people of south western part of Nigeria. This will enable the Yoruba reader to possess a better understanding of the Psalm. The study has adopted exegetical, theological, and socio-historical approaches.

Index terms— psalmoi, mizmoi, hermeneutics, therapeutic, el-shaddai, olodumare, boko-haram, religion.

1 Introduction

The Book of Psalms commonly referred to as simply Psalms, is a book in Hebrew Bible that comprises of 150 Hymns which express virtually the full range of Israel's religious faith. The word "Psalm" which is derived from the Greek "psalmoi"; perhaps originated from "music of the lyre", "song" or "sing to a harp" and then to any "piece of music" 1 .

In various Biblical passages, David is usually referred to as "the favorite to the songs of Israel", the one who soothed Saul with music and founder of temple music. As noted by Godfrey (2005:1), the Psalms, otherwise known in Hebrew as "Mizmor", meaning songs or instrumental music; belong to the division of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible and grouped by the Mesoretes as Poetry with the books of Job and Proverbs ?? . The Psalter or the book of Psalms was the first church's Songs Book from the early era of the Christian Church till the present day ?? . Though, the church had lost the original tunes but Joachim (1955:31), had equally observed that the book of Psalms is still intended for singing because individual Psalms have been put to tunes many times ?? . Wilson (2011:1) also agreed with Joachim (1955:31) that the evidence surrounding David's authorship of many of the Psalms is not a contending issue because David is generally believed to be a skilled player of the harp or lyre which makes the Psalm to be commonly associated in the Bible with joy and gladness ?? & 6 .

Dennis (2011:1); in introducing the Psalms opines that the Psalms are not just doctrinal statements, creeds or history but that they are both poetry and prayer ?? . As poetry, Psalms are intended to be set to music and be used as prayers of all forms in worship. The thrust of the matter, as observed by Dennis, is that in the ancient Israel, no less than the modern world, even among the Yoruba people and many ethnic groups in Nigeria; poetry and music are means by which people express the deepest of human feelings and emotions ?? . This is why Wils (2003:2-3) observed that even, when we are in sorrow; the Psalms create opportunities and times to worship the divine as well as when we are full of joy and overwhelmed with intense darkness of life's ugly experiences ?? . From all these; one gathers the impression that the Psalms are some of the most widely read portions of the Bible and that they have a long history of popularity in Jewish and Christian religious traditions. The evidence of

this observation is so profound that often one sees the Psalms bound together with the New Testament in pocket edition and distributed to school children by a non-profitable organization known as Gideon International. Such action expresses the popularity and clear reflection on the importance, relevance and sensitivity of the Psalms to the physical and spiritual needs of the people of all age grades. Most of the times, the Psalms are seen by Christians and Muslims alike as a sort of a relief emotionally, psychologically and mentally, to a troubled soul in this modern world of insecurity and uncertainties ravaging the entire human existence; African and Western worlds alike.

2 II.

he Classification of psalm 91 by the Scholars of Euro-American and African Extractions

As observed by Wilson (2012:4), the twentieth century witnessed various attempts to Biblical Studies by Euro-American scholars through a discipline known as 'Form Criticism' in which efforts are made to classify the Psalms by their structures and forms 9. Wilson (2012:4); who based his assessment on Hermann Gunkel's assertion; further opines that there are five major classifications of the Psalms which are Hymns, Community laments, Individual laments, Royal Psalms and Individual thanksgiving Psalms ??0 .

Psalm 91 belongs to the fifth category known as the thanksgiving or Todah Psalms; though in hymns; but particularly recounts what God has done in the life of the writer. Examples of Psalms in this category are 18,30,32,34,121 and 125. The Euro-American scholars such as Wilson, Childs, Dennis, Godfrey and Michel also grouped Psalm 91 among the Psalms of confidence which are observed as possessing numerous experiences of trust in God's goodness and power ??1 . Adamo (2007:67) an African Old Testament scholar grouped this Psalm among the Success Psalms and asserts that these Psalms are believed by the African Indigenous Churches (AIC) to have the power to bring success if used with faith, ritualistic prayers, fasting, rehearsal of some specific symbols, and a combination of other animate or inanimate materials ??2 . Adamo further opines that the need to look for a way of finding an equivalent power from Bible to the ones Christianity discarded at the inception of the religion in Nigerian nation becomes imperative. Because Nigerian Christians like many of its counterparts in African continent were no longer comfortable with using pure indigenous ways of obtaining successes after the introduction of Christianity to the continent. This is due to the condemnation of such practices by the Western orthodox Christians and Missionaries who brought Christianity to Nigerian shores. Adamo (2007:67) observes that the Nigerian Christians later found in the book of Psalms such as Psalm 91 the equivalent powers for the enhancement of successes or in securing good luck in court cases and for other therapeutic purposes if used with specific instructions as recommended ??3 .

Adamo's approach to the study of the Psalms in African context; which is in line with Mbiti's and Gerald West's, could be seen as an attempt to promote and encourage African Biblical Hermeneutics by interpreting the Bible using African cultural experiences and challenges which are clearly at variance with her Euro-American counterparts ??4 . The thrust of the matter, advocated for by Adamo is that Africans should search the Scriptures to see with an African eye-view whether there could be something that can solve some African problems such as sorcerers, witches, witchcrafts, threats by enemies and lack of success in life in the Scriptures. The success of this exercise could be determined by the noticeable cluster of usages of the Psalms by most of the African Indigenous Churches for protection against all forms of enemies and evils or satanic afflictions(Psalm 5,6,28,35,54,55,83and109);for therapeutic purposes inform of healing from barrenness(Psalm 51) and for the attainment of successes among which the Psalm under this study is grouped ??5 .

By this approach, the attention is shifted from the historical analysis of these Psalms; where the dates, authorship and purposes of writing of the Psalms were the main basis for academic studies, to assessing the use of Psalms such as the one under this study, through exegetical approach, for dealing with spiritual and physical circumstances peculiarly prevalent in African society. This is considered as a need for the African Christians today. This discourse becomes necessary because Liberation and Deliverance Hermeneutics, as a special need of the African people as advocated for in this textual study, is the current trend of Biblical and Theological scholarship in the continent.

According to Catherine (2010:1), Psalm 91 is traditionally accredited to Moses and it is grouped among the Psalms for Protection and Strength for combating the threats of enemies among the Hoodoo's spiritual and magical practices ??6 . The Hoodoo's spiritual system, which grew up in the United States of America in the shadow of the larger culture of Christianity in white society, is not a religion but makes an extensive use of the Psalms, in King James' Version ??7 . In Hoodoo's spiritual practices, Psalm 91 can be recited against someone that is afflicted or distressed by pestilence, danger, or an enemy (Catherine, 2010:2) ??8 . As observed by Catherine (2010:2); this Psalm is used to set a boundary of protection around an individual family. For instance, among the Hoodoos; a woman who is afflicted by a rival for the affection of her husband may also recite this Psalm, keeping in mind the important, powerful and holy name of God, El-Shaddai, which means Almighty, used in this text ??9 .

According to Peggy Joyce (2007:7), this Psalm provides a wonderful sensation of feeling of safety and security amidst of deadly storms of life for it is exciting for one to know that he is being sheltered and protected by an unfailing force, mightier than the storms of life ??0 . This is why Rabbi Benjamin (2011:1) opined that Psalm 91 is often taken to be a single-minded, unwavering expression of faith and the most impressive testimony in the Psalter 21 .

3 III.

4 Textual Study of psalm 91 and its Relevance to Yoruba Milieu

As observed by Walter Brueggemann, this remarkable Psalm speaks with great specificity, and yet with a kind of porousness, so that the language is enormously open to each one's particular experience 22 . This is why this study looks at many contemporary circumstances bordering on human security and safety among the Yoruba traditional society. From verse one of this Psalm 91:1, He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the ALMIGHTY".

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dwelleth"= yaw-shab which means "to sit down" Also, the word ??? ????? ? ?????? ??? "say-ther", as noted by Bob Deffinbaugh (2013:3) implies "a cover " and by implication, it means " covering shield or hiding place, protection or covert" 24 . The phrase "the place of the Most High ????? ?? ????? ??? ????? -"el yo vn" is very important and germane to our study of this Psalm because it is a reference to the "high" name of Yahweh, God of Israel 25 . Bob Deffinbaugh (2013:3) noted that this word el yovn originated from "alah" which means an elevation which is a Hebrew adjective commonly used to qualify Yahweh's strength and primacy in the universe 26 . It also means "lofty" which is used to give a comparative analysis or expression of Yahweh's Most High position and sovereignty amongst all heathen gods. It is a title that expresses Yahweh's supremacy as in Most High that defines Him as the Highest and Upper most God or Deity among all. This corresponds with the Yoruba concept of Olodumare as the Supreme Deity of all gods known among the Yoruba people of South Western part of Nigeria. The Olodumare concept is parallel to the Hebrew concept as expressed in this Psalm because any one whose affairs is over seen by Olodumare has reached the highest level of comfort, security and protection. Infact, all cases are permanently closed because no matter what or how, no issue goes beyond Him. Olodumare sets a standard limit to how far issues can move. This is why in this Psalm, it is expressed clearly that: ? ????? ?????? ??? ??? ?????? ??? ?????? ?????? ??? ??? "lwn tsale shaddahee", which means that such person "shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty" which finds a parallel expression in Yoruba concept of the power of Olodumare 27 . This is because it is believed among the Yorubas that Olodumare alone has an unchallenged role or power to supervise all human affairs and authorizes events in the universe. Olodumare only occupies a permanent place in the Universe. Therefore, anyone who puts his trust in Him alone enjoys a peace that is higher, mightier and permanent as long as he continues to put his trust in Him. By implication, it means to enjoy a good health coverage and security that is unshakeable, unchallenged and that could stand the test of life's storms and challenges, the only defense, shade and assurance is to lean on El-shaddai, the Olodumare of the Yoruba people ??8 .

The Nigerian situation generally is opened to so many dangers on daily basis. The present security challenges reached its alarming stage with the sudden appearance of Islamic fundamentalists, known as Boko Haram; meaning "western education is evil"; in the political terrain of the country but with a religious pretence. More than HIV/AIDS, this deadly group has killed innocent people that include children, women, military officers, traders, Muslims and Christians alike. We in Nigeria do not really know what their demands are. The government finds it difficult to enter into negotiations with them because they are faceless and would not even accept dialogue or amnesty. The recent abduction of more 200 girls who were writing their final examinations in a secondary school in Borno by this Islamic sect is another event that reveals that the members of the sect have defiled military threats. Further to the security challenges be-devilling the nation and be-littling her international image is the issue of kidnappings of her citizens for ransom. Tribune of Monday 9th, September, 2013 reported the kidnapping of an Archbishop of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) who was later released after nine days of holding him hostage in the custody of the kidnappers who denied the senior cleric from attending the highest Council of the Church that took place within the period of his sudden disappearance to only God knows ??8 .

Aside of this, the Punch Newspaper of 9 th September, 2013 published a Report enumerating the dangers of travelling on Nigerian water ways. This report was a reflection on some of the problems confronting water transportation in Lagos which is a sample of such similar situations or cases in almost all other part of the country where water transportation must take place because of their God giving geographical potentialities and blessing which have been turned to woes due to government carelessness or negligence and poor or bad engine, competence in swimming techniques and other factors 29 .Therefore, the relevance of Psalm 91 to water travellers cannot be under-estimated. With the little safety devices put in place, the travellers through this medium must be in tune, more than any safety measure; with the Psalmist's experience of the "secret place of the Almighty" in Psalm 91.

According to Bayo Olupohunda (Punch, 2013:24), travelling on any of the Nigeria's treacherous roads can be compared to the Biblical walk through the valley of the shadow of death 30 . He narrated his ugly experience during his trip on the famished road called the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway and he presented a chilling scenario on the dreadful road. The thrust of the matter is that travellers and everybody should realize the high degree of the

presence of dangers in a typical African society and all of these make the Psalm under this study; praying for safety and protection; to be relevant to the Nigerian situations more than any nationality in the world. Therefore, this study will continue to put it categorically that the only surest safety from all the available dangers and disasters imminent in our society could be found in Yahweh or Olodumare; the Supreme Deity of the Yoruba people. It is clear that no government agencies, no matter how well equipped, trained, vigilant and strong they may be, they can never be compared with God in the provision of safety and protection. For instance, with the strong orders rolled out to the Joint Military Task Force to combat the Boko Haram insurgency, this Islamic sect continues to snuff out lives, intermittently, from the innocent Nigerian citizens in forties, fifties and sixties, the accumulation of which has made their heinous activities to be considered the greatest evil that has ever befallen the country after independence and the declaration of Nigeria as one of the unsafe countries of the world. This is because there is no week the Nigerian Newspapers will not report the heinous activities of this deadly group. Except by the "Dwelling in the shadow of the Almighty", there is no safety anywhere in the world for no military strength or intelligence could be comparable with the Yahweh's "shadow", "shield", and the "secret place".

So, Psalm 91 is very relevant and familiar to us in Nigeria; and particularly, in Yoruba land. This may be the reason why it is used as inscription on motor vehicle such as "Allahu lakuwata" which means "God is my refuge" or simply "Psalm 91". The undeniable presence of evils, disasters, diseases, attacks from the evil forces and enemies in Yoruba society has made this Psalm to be very familiar to the general situations of safety and well being in Yoruba land, Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. Jeremy Smoak (2011:75) observes that one of the common features in the so called prayer of petition in the Psalms is the presence of a petition to YHWH for protection against evil, wickedness, maleficent words, or enemies and that in a number of Psalms in the same category with this psalm, the petition is reformulated as a statement of confidence or affirmation that YHWH will provide protection against such ills 31. As a people the fear of enemies and spiritual attacks parade our belief system so much that Africans do a lot of things to appease these enemies such as sacrifices and rituals before the advent of Christianity.

Even with the introduction of Christianity, the presence of evils has not been disproved. This is evidenced by the strong prayers of Christians in the churches to disarm the evil forces in all their religious centers during any of their gatherings. Their activities have been suspected as the reason for retrogression and underdevelopment of individuals and diseases among the people. This Psalm is less familiar to the Christians in the Western world because; as observed by Bob Deffinbaugh (2013:2), the poetic portrayals of dangers in this Psalm are not common to them in many parts of Europe and America as they are to us in Africa and in Nigeria in particular 32. One of the reasons for Bob Deffinbaugh's position is probably because they never fear snakes and wild animals on their streets in America and neither arrows flying in the day nor pestilence stalking at night are a common dread, such as they are in Africa generally. This is why the new trend of ministration in churches in African continent has been tied, if not entirely but mostly, to deliverance service and little time is allotted to scriptural interpretation. Even, in the Orthodox Churches in Nigeria, the Priests draft their liturgies to align themselves with this new trend of deliverance and casting out of evil spirits in order not to lose their members who believe so much that Pastoring is no longer about the ability to preach theological sermons anymore but the ability to bring to submission these evil spirits and spiritual attacks parading themselves in Nigerian society.

Furthermore, the fowler's snare and the Pestilence mentioned in the Psalm finds its relevance in the challenges of food security and general safety facing the Yoruba people of Nigeria. This is a metaphor referring to dangers from enemies. As fowlers in their snares, it is a symbolic expression telling us of the dangers we may suffer unexpectedly from those enemies of our life who pretend to be our friends. They can spring surprises because their snares will not be easily discovered due to the fact that they are pretentious. Whereas, the deadly pestilence mentioned by the Psalmist in verse three finds a great relevance among the life of the Yoruba people and many Nigerians in general. This talks about the dangers to life that we are prone to as a people by the reason of diseases that are deadly which are rampant in Africa due to the high level of poverty. Poverty is a pestilence and corruption is a disease, bad leaders are fowlers and their arrows are the maladministration and security challenges facing the Nigerian nation. It is pertinent to know that diseases that many African countries are prone to are mostly poverty striking diseases and this is why war against HIV/AIDS is difficult to be fought to a halt because of the poverty level of the African nations.

However, the Feathers of our supreme "Mother Bird" is there to protect us. This is why verse 4 of this Psalm gives a clearer and succinct expression that is very familiar to us in Africa since hens and their children are allowed to roam the compound among the African people and the scene is perceived with more clarity than the western counterparts whose hens are probably caged. Verse 5 talks about "terror" which includes brutality of all sorts. Terror is anything that threatens peace, joy, happiness and promotes fear and deaths in almost at frequent intervals. It is paired with arrow that flies by the day and the plague at the mid day in this Psalm. As for terror, it is a current English grammar on the pages of Newspapers in Nigeria in recent times and in a few other countries in African continent. The terrorism suffered by Nigerians has reached an endemic proportion that it has been classified as the second largest terrorism in the globe. It defiled military competences most of the time as Police Headquarters, Military Churches and UN building had been burnt at different times. Bombings and shootings of worshippers and destruction of church buildings in the day, at night even on Christmas and New Year days had made the contents of this Psalm relevance and familiar to situations of people in Yoruba land and Nigeria in general. This is perhaps why Bob Deffinbaugh (2013:3), observes that the western Christians know

little about danger of any kind, and so the safety of which this Psalm speaks is rather abstract to them 33 . For instance, the issue of arrow by night is pertinent to the Yoruba belief system which has been proved right in many cases through confessions during deliverance sessions of many churches in all over African Cable network stations. Cases of people who slept peacefully but who woke up in the morning with wounds of spiritual gun shots are examples of such spiritual arrows one could be attacked with. This is why this Psalm intimates us with safety implications relevant to us as a people from the Yoruba extraction. The subject of our safety from all of these things is not Ogun; the god of iron, it is not Sango, god of thunder but it is Olodumare, the Supreme Deity of the Yoruba people and the Yahweh of the people of Israel and the El-Shaddai of the writer of this Psalm. The adoption of two metaphors used for El-Shaddai as a mother bird and as a metal armour like shield that provides care and strong protection against calamities in this Psalm caught our attention mostly in this textual study of the Psalm. This expression finds relevance with the Yoruba bullet proof charm known as Okigbe which is string of charms worn in the waist and the arms of warriors in the native Yoruba settings to prevent the penetration of cutlass cuts and gun shots. However this charm has failed to provide a complete safety and protection for the users all the times because enemies have been able to also neutralize its efficacy through other charms as well. But the reliance on the safety and the protection of the El-Shaddai has been limitless in history.

According to Mbiti (1977: 29), God is the origin and sustainer of all things and He is personally involved in all that He created including their safety and security challenges 34 . Mbiti, who collected information about the African concepts of God from more than 300 different people of diverse cultural backgrounds all over Africa, opined that the Africans have a notion that God is the Supreme Being. This, according to Mbiti, is the most minimal and fundamental idea that the African societies possess about God. Therefore he noted further that the Supremacy of God is usually expressed in proverbs, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies 35 . As opined earlier by Bolaji Idowu (1960:38), Olodumare is the owner of life, He gives and collects it as it pleases him to do so 36 . Idowu further observed that among the Yoruba people of south western part of Nigeria, Olodumare, the Hebrew El-Shaddai, is the one whose works are wondrous and mighty. As the King, Olodumare possesses a unique and incomparable majesty. He is the King whose habitation is in heaven above. This concept finds an equivalent expression in the name of the God of the Hebrew people "El-Shaddai" which means one who lives on the Mountains as it is used in this Psalm. Idowu (1960:53) also made it clear that Olodumare as perceived by the Yoruba people is the Author and Giver of all the good things of life including children, wealth, possessions, safety and protection 37 . This finds some parallelism in the concept of the Hebrew God whose name is given in this Psalm as the El-Shaddai whose secret place provides man with unfailing safety and protection.

IV.

6 Conclusion

This Psalm from verses 1 to 13 has been observed to be an extended assurance which poses a rhetorical pause after verse 8 that could be taken as the first rhetoric unit that combines the intimacy of personal faith with the metaphor of the majestic transcendence of God 38. Therefore, the claim of this Psalm is that the awesome power and presence of Yahweh is made available to and is committed to the traveller who must go in dangerous places with the images of a safe place to hide him from the threats of his enemies 39 . This is why Clifford (2003:103) asserts that this Psalm assures one who seeks divine protection that such protection enables one to say truthfully of the LORD "my refuge and my fortress" 40 . The profession of the writer's solid decision has spurred Yahweh's responsiveness with an overriding commitment that "I will deliver, I will Protect, I will answer, I will be with him, I will rescue, I will honour, I will satisfy and I will show him my salvation" 41 .

In this textual study of Psalm 91, we are able to establish how relevant and familiar it is to the Yorubas and, of course Nigerians and at large, the Africans in their security situations or challenges. It is established also that the topmost urgent need of a Yoruba man, a Nigerian and of course an African is safety or security in all ramifications. This is why Adamo (2007:66) observed that Africans need the means for successfully dealing with so many problems confronting them from the Bible 42 . Since the Western Missionaries had taught African Christians to discard the indigenous ways of handling problems, this need becomes imperative and urgent. The use of Charms, medicines, incantations, divinations, sacrifices and other cultural ways of protection, healing and deliverance from the spiritual and physical attacks from enemies have been completely discouraged by the missionaries who brought Christianity to the shores of African and yet the Euro-American way of looking at the Bible has not really helped enough to see whether there are areas to be used to combat many African peculiar problems. This is why this study is an attempt to interpret this Psalm from the context of African perspective for healing all pestilences and dreadful diseases and deliverance from super-human enemies, satanic powers and forces common in African societies like the Yoruba society of the South western part of Nigeria.

7 Notes

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