

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PSALM 121 IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The interpretation of Psalms has gone through diverse and seemingly strange stages over time. This article deals with a review of the interpretation of Psalms from the beginning to the present in Africa. After a brief review of the history of Psalm study, it critically examines the history and significance of Psalm 121 in an African context. The Euro-American interpretation follows different types of criticism, such as source, form, and rhetorical criticism, amongst others. However, Africentric scholars mainly follow what we may call an “African biblical hermeneutics” type of interpretation. In this case, Psalm 121 in an African context is regarded as a psalm of protection, healing, and success to meet the existential need of African people. The repetitive reading, the chanting, and the writing of this Psalm on door-posts, motor vehicles, parchments, and clothes is seen as taking up the identity of ancient Israel, the first readers, with the expectation that God will repeat the same ancient miracles, of protection, healing, success. Reading and chanting or writing Psalm 121 Africentrically means a re-enactment of events in the life of ancient Israel for the purpose of transformation in readers’ lives. It is considered a reaffirmation of singers’ and chanters’ faith in the God of Israel to protect, heal, and bring success.

INTRODUCTION

According to Johnston and Firth the “book of Psalms is the best loved and most treasured book of the Hebrew Scriptures” (Johnston and Firth 2005:17). It provides “the most reliable theological, pastoral, liturgical resources in the biblical tradition” (Brueggemann 1984:15). According to Crenshaw, the book of Psalms is often called

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the “hymnal of the Second Temple” and “provides the window through which ancient Israel’s response to God’s presence, or absence may be viewed” (Crenshaw 2001:1). Many faithful Jews and Christians all over the world have expressed how precious the book of Psalms is to them, perhaps because it has been fit and used to express their hopes and fears and to inspire and renew their faith and trust in God. It is also of great importance in biblical scholarship perhaps, partly, because “it is the Old Testament book which portrays most clearly the various responses of human faith” (Johnston and Firth 2005:17).

Although the inscribing of passages from the book of Psalms on motor vehicles, door-posts, parchments, clothes, bodies and so on is not new, they are symbols that have deep religious meaning. They truly represent the deep faith of the inscribers.

The purpose of this article is to examine critically the significance of Psalm 121 in Africa. Its importance is demonstrated by reading the Psalms repetitively and inscribing it on motor vehicles, door-post, bodies, and parchments amongst other objects. It examines also the meaning of the chanting, singing, and repetitive reading in African Indigenous Churches. Although there are many inscriptions from other books of the Old and New Testament that are written on motor vehicles, door-posts, bodies, and so on in the three major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba), this article investigates only inscriptions from Psalms 121 that are written in English.

In achieving the purpose of this article, I will employ an African biblical hermeneutic approach, the “biblical interpretation that makes African social cultural context a subject of interpretation” (Adamo 2015:31–52). It rereads the Christian scripture from a premeditatedly Africentric perspective (Adamo 2015:31–52). This method brings real life interest into the biblical text (Adamo 2015:31–52).

PSALM 121 IN EURO-AMERICAN SCHOLARSHIP

It is important to discuss in a summary form the Euro-American interpretation before the Africentric examination of Psalm 121 because I believe that there is no interpretation in complete isolation. That is, the Euro-American interpretation of

Psalms is also valuable to a certain extent. Therefore, the brief summary of Psalms study below can be helpful as a background to the Africentric approach.

Brief summary of Psalms study

There have always been songs.

As long as men and women have used words,

They must have used words with rhythm:

Words with power, words to be repeated;

words with which to recall the heroism of battle,

to bring success to the hunt,

to celebrate the joy of birth and the sorrow of death...

So one may assume that words have been sung as long

as there have been men and women communicating at all (Holladay 1996:17).

Pre-critical scholarship made the assumption that Psalms stemmed from one author and was of one piece (Witte 2012:535). As far as the early church is concerned, the book of Psalms was a “daily bread” and one of the most important books of the Bible (Daley 2003:187). Christians regularly sang the Psalms at worship services, and throughout the second century Psalms was widely considered a prophetic text and used as such (Daley 2003:189). It was also used for family and private devotion. By the fourth century during the meteoric rise of monasticism and ascetical piety, the recitation and chanting of the Psalms became common. In fact, it was considered and recommended as the most effective weapon against “inner demons” and “a medicine for diseased thought” (Daley 2003:190). Origen, Cassiodorus, and Jerome saw the book of Psalms as full of great mysteries to be unlocked by exegetes.

During the patristic period, the book of Psalm was said to be characterised by “sweetness” (Daley 2003:195). The task of the exegete was to read the Psalms as “poems using all the analytical tools and theoretical principles that ancient literary criticism, the art and science of γραμματική has developed for interpreting and judging secular verse ... identifying its peculiar effectiveness in guiding its users along

this path of spiritual growth, as poetry written to be prayed and sung” (Daley 2003:196–200).

According to Witte, the fathers of historical-critical interpretation are Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) (Witte 2012:533). They thought that psalms as ancient songs and prayer should be understood in light of their original intention (Witte 2012:533).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Psalms was considered to be the work of the individual who was the composer of the songs and prayers either in response to a particular historical event or for private devotional use. As a result scholars were determined to find the exact date of each psalm, the historical circumstances of its composition and the actual authors of the psalms (McCann Jr 1993:16).

Gunkel (1862–1932), seeing the inadequacy of source criticism emphasized what is called form criticism and classified Psalms into different types or forms and then tried to find the *Sitz im Leben* in ancient Israel after comparison with ancient Near Eastern literature (Gunkel 1967). Mowinckel (1884–1965) took the next logical step by developing the cult functional method. According to him psalms are actual songs and prayers produced for and use for public worship of Israel (Mowinckel 1962). Although form criticism and the cult functional approach have been refined and extended, they have been the dominant approaches to the interpretation of Psalms in our century.

Without abandoning form criticism entirely, Muhlenberg developed what is called rhetorical criticism (Muhlenberg 1969:18). In order to determine the actual meaning of the Psalms, scholars must take seriously the rhetorical and literary features of each psalm. He thinks that form criticism should be supplemented by rhetorical criticism.

Childs (1976:378) took the next step by insisting that scholars must go beyond form criticism by paying serious attention to the final form of the Psalter for the purpose of determining the meaning of the individual psalms, that is, the canonical form of the Psalter. This is labelled canonical criticism. According to Childs (1976:378), Mays (1987:3–12), and Wilson (1985:204–207), and McCann Jr (1993:19), Psalm 1 is an introduction to the entire Psalms.

Mitchell argued for an eschatological interpretation of Psalms (Mitchell 1997:78–82). According to him the book of Psalms should be interpreted eschatologically because the Davidic kingship forms the basis for the eschatological hope in a messianic figure throughout the collection (Mitchell 1997:78–82; Howard Jr 2005:13–40). Creach advocated for a semantic or thematic approach in the study of the Psalms. In this case, the concept of Yahweh as a refuge is found in the majority of the Psalms (Creach 1996:13).

The interpretation of Psalms today involves the use and application of different hermeneutics. Many critical hermeneutical approaches to the study of the book of Psalms today include sociological, liberationist, ideological or Two-Third World readings, feminist, deconstructive, speech-act theory, discourse analysis, ecological readings, psychological, and African biblical hermeneutic approaches (Howard Jr 2005:13–40). Scholars should be encouraged by the potential for Psalms studies as surveyed above. These approaches may give rise to other methods, leading to a better understanding of the Psalms.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Psalm 121 belong to a group of psalms (Pss 120–134) identified by superscriptions as “Songs of Ascents”. They are considered Songs of Ascents possibly because of the frequent mention of Jerusalem and Zion (deClaisse-Walford 2004:120). These psalms are among the most memorable and popular in the Psalter (Anderson 1981:851). These psalms are songs that are traditionally sung or read at the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths or Succoth) during autumn for the purpose of commemorating God’s protection and care during the wilderness wanderings.

There are varieties of forms in these psalms: individual and community laments; individual and community hymns; wisdom psalms; and royal psalms (deClaisse-Walford 2004:120).

Psalm 121 contains step parallelism which is characteristic of the series of Songs of Ascents (Clifford 2003:220–221). These step parallelisms are as follows: “my

help”, “not slumber”, “who keeps/keeper”, and “the Lord will keep”. It also contains a theme such as “Zion, the holy city” which is usually found in Songs of Ascents (120–134). The exact meaning of “ascents” is in dispute. Many different meanings such as “approach”, “journey up”, “pilgrim song”, and “steplike parallelism” as its derivative have been suggested (Clifford 2003:217). The word can also mean steps or imaging. The word “ascents” in the superscription in the Hebrew is related to the verb *alah* which means to go on a pilgrimage. Ezra uses the same term to describe his journey from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem. What appears to be the most common view is that pilgrims attending the annual feasts probably sang this song which reminded them of the festivities (Exod 23:14–17; 34:18–24; Lev 23:4–44; Deut 16:1–17) (Hilber 2013:110). The book of Ezekiel used the term to refer to the staircase of the temple. It appears that the first meaning in which the pilgrims looked up to the temple in Jerusalem for help and protection is more appropriate in the light of the African situation. What appears to be the most likely derivative according to the Septuagint, Vulgate, and Mishnah is its derivative from steps or stairs in the temple or a large building (Clifford 2003:217).

These psalms are regarded as a dialogue which is either a poetical device in which the writer asked a curious question and provides the answer. Or it may be a dialogue between a father and a son or between a worshipper (the worshipper represents a group) and a priest (Anderson 1981:851). “From whence will my help come?” There is the idea that this psalm has two different speakers, the officiant and the real psalmist. The psalm presents an anxiety about making a journey and a definite assurance is received.

While some translations divide Psalm 121 into four sections (verses 1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8 NRSV, NIV) others see it and print it without any stanza division (REB and NJPS). However, the step parallelism gives the chapter a good structure: “my help” links 1–2, “not slumber” links verses 3–4, “who keeps” links verses 4–5; “the Lord will keep” links verses 7–8. The opening question also provides the structure which actually necessitates the blessing in verses 2–8. The coming in the final verse forms an

inclusion with the come in verse 1 and it brings the poem to a conclusion (Clifford 2003:221).

Many Western scholars traditionally classify Psalm 121 as a hymn used for worship. It is regarded as part of the pilgrim collection and is admired for its eloquence and poetic beauty which is matched only by a few psalms. It focuses on the universal question of where man's authentic help comes from. According to this psalm there is no other correct answer except from Yahweh in heaven (Allen 1971:421–424). Psalm 121 is also said to function as a psalm of trust and a psalm of lament that ends with a promise (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner 2014:895–898). It was also categorised as “an individual hymn of thanksgiving” (2014:895–898).

Scholars have interpreted Psalm 121 in various ways. The theme of this psalm is God's guarding of the worshipper (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, Tanner 2014:895–898). The word guard (*samar*) is mentioned six times in the eight verses of this chapter. It can be considered as a theme for the chapter. The word *samar* means “protect, guard, watch over, and take care of” and it is always used in reference to God (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, Tanner 2014:895–898). The phrase “maker of heavens and earth” is an important one. Even though the text does not specify the nature and the destination of the journey in Psalm 121, this psalm is regarded as a pronouncement of blessing of a father to his son who was ready to embark on a journey to Jerusalem (Volz quoted by Allen 1983:152). It has been regarded as a collection of cultic dialogue between a priest and a pilgrim on the way to Jerusalem. It was also considered as a priestly farewell liturgy with blessing of an oracle of salvation, or an entrance liturgy (Allen 1971:152) or a blessing to the representative of the people of Israel before God (Allen 1983:153) or as a priestly encouragement to a convert to Yahwism in order for him to stand firm in his new faith (Allen 1983:153).

AFRICENTRIC INTERPRETATION OF PSALM 121

I have defined what I refer to as “African biblical hermeneutics” as the method used in this article which is to be clearly applied in this section. The Africentric biblical

interpretation takes into consideration not only the life interest of the interpreter but also the African worldview. The method of rereading the Christian scripture to suit the African worldview appears to be the best methodology for Africentric interpretation because the life interest or life situation on the continent of Africa is radically different from that of the Western world. Therefore, the Eurocentric methodologies, though complementary, are not actually suitable for this type of interpretation.

One may be right to consider the first two verses of this psalms as the voice of an individual believer speaking out of the devotion of his/her heart when his/her faith has been well established and quickened by participation in the celebration of the festival feast of the temple worship. He/she has experienced the helplessness of being alone in the journey of life and the affirmation of the need for divine help to overcome the difficulty of everyday life to which he/she will shortly return, having discovered in this holy mountain where Yahweh dwells in his temple the creator of the heavens and the earth. After the writer rediscovers that the whole world lies in Yahweh's hands, he responds with a renewed faith in Yahweh's claim that he never sleeps or slumbers. In verses 3–8, the confirmation message resembles the priestly blessing bestowed at the end of the worship in the Jerusalem temple (Num 6:24–26). At the end of the worship service he or she is given a confirmation of his faith to take home. In all the dangers of life's journey, he is given the assurance of "the ever-vigilant protection of God", of his "constant presence, ever living, never sleeping", and as he wards off the threat which beset "his daily life, that would stop life fulfilling its positive potentials" such as the sun and the moon, armed robbers, and other threats in African daily life such as witches and wizards in African belief (Allen 1983:154). Day and night, there is assurance that Yahweh stands and guards the psalmist (vv. 3 and 6).

The mention of the sun and moon reflects the scorching heat of the sun as a common human experience (Isa 49:10; Jonah 4:8). The sun and the moon could cause some sicknesses for those who travelled bare-footed to Jerusalem. In the same way some Africans trek to the farms and nearby villages and eventually contract some diseases such as skin cancer. In Africa, the only help is to look for divine healing from God since many in Africa still do not have access to standard healthcare.

The references to the hills appear to invoke images of dangers, difficulties, and trouble in a rugged terrain of the hill country when approaching Jerusalem. Like some parts of Nigeria, armed robbers seemed to inhabit these hills. In that case, any pilgrim going to Jerusalem had no choice but to look to Yahweh who could send help. The hills could also be a figure of speech for the location of Jerusalem on the hill top where Yahweh dwelt in his temple. Looking up to the hills means searching for divine help, like the ancient Israelites who travelled to Jerusalem for pilgrimage looked up to the abode of Yahweh for protection and safety. In this case it reflects the doctrine of inviolability of Jerusalem when the people in the days of Jeremiah believed that nothing could happen to them or to Jerusalem because the temple of Yahweh is located there in Jerusalem.

In the Africentric use of Psalms, psalms are classified mainly into three categories – protective psalms, therapeutic psalms, and success psalms. This classification has to do with the content of the Psalms. While Psalms 5, 6, 28, 35, 37, 54, 55, 83, 109, and 121 are considered protective psalms, Psalms 1, 2, 3, 16, 27, 28, 29, 100, 102, and 126 are example of therapeutic psalms. Psalms 9, 23, 24, 46, 51, 119:9–16 and 134 are example of success psalms (Adamo 2005:49–108). Although these classifications reflect the use of Psalms in African Indigenous Churches, it has spread into the mainline missionary churches in Nigeria.

Psalm 121 is classified as both a protective and a success psalm. As discussed above the assurance of protection is the theme of this psalm. It is a psalm of protection and success because in Africa, particularly Nigeria, where no one is sure of safety on the road, traveling and returning back safely from a journey is also considered success.

In Nigeria, Psalm 121 is not only written on motor vehicles but is written on parchments, on doors, on clothes, even on the body as a talisman. It is believed that if this psalm is recited repeatedly it means one is participating in the events that took place in the ancient biblical time. It is believed that reading, reciting, and wearing the portion of psalms of protection means prayer asking God for the miracle that happened to the original writer to be repeated to the present persons who recites this psalm. The

recitation of this psalm is the participation in ancient biblical events that may motivate God to repeat that miracle of protection, healing, and success.

It is not unusual to see this psalm inscribed on a motor vehicle or door-post or even clothes worn as “Psalm 121” with the sole purpose of protection and success. The drivers and the passengers in the vehicle on which Psalm 121 is inscribed believe that Yahweh will guard them. Yahweh will be their escort. Yahweh will be with them. Traditional Africans who wear this inscription, whether on a parchment or on their body, believe in the power of this psalm to protect them, and bring success on a dangerous journey. This is equivalent to saying “Yahweh is a match” for all of life’s dangers. He is able to keep his own safe in his loving care. Just as the pilgrim leaves the Jerusalem festival with the message of the potent promise, Yahweh’s words “I will be with you” are not only for the heroes of faith like Moses, Joshua, and Abraham, but for everyone who trusts in him and holds that promise. The Lord is their escort.

A very important piece of evidence supporting the use of the words of Psalms this way during the biblical time is the existence of a handful of Phoenician and Punic amulets from the first millennium with the same verbs “guard” (*smr*) and “protect” (*nsr*) inscribed on their surfaces (Schmitz 2002:818–822; 2010:421–432; Smoak 2011:75–92). The presence of these two verbs in both West Semitic inscriptions and the book of Psalms shows some common cultural and religious practices and common purpose for invoking the deity’s protection or help (Smoak 2011:75–92). Inscribing words on metal and apotropaic magic in ancient Israel is not uncommon as uncovered by archaeologists (Smoak 2011:72–92). Several seventh to sixth century Punic gold bands which were discovered in the excavations at Carthage are also inscribed with the same two verbs as part of the protective formula as those in these Psalms (Smoak 2011:72–92; Barnett and Mendelsson 1987; Krahmalkov 2000:471–472).

The understanding of the culture of the ancient Near East makes one believe that the words of the Psalter were memorised and recited not for fun, aesthetic, or scholarly purposes, but there was a faith behind the recitation or singing of the psalms with the expectation that they would achieve a desired effect. In ancient Israel, the words of the psalms were potent and performative and invoked particular results.

There are some advantages to using Psalm 121 Africentrically. It helps to bridge the temporal distance between the events in the past and present. The past is made present by reading, singing, chanting, and writing the words of Psalm 121 on the doorpost, body or clothes or on motor vehicles. Such reading, writing on a parchment, door posts, or singing Psalm 121 is a re-presentation of history or God events with the expectation that God can and will repeat those same events in the life of the chanters, singers, and others.

According to Nasuti, “One of the most important sources of the peculiar power of the Psalms lies in their ability to situate those who used them in a relationship with God. Because worshippers appropriate the words of the Psalms as if they were those Psalms first person speakers” (Nasuti 2001:144). This way of viewing Psalms resembles trends in modern literary theory, especially speech act theory (Nasuti 2001:144) which affirms that words are performative. Those who use this psalm take on certain role with regard to those narratives.

Those who recount Palm 121, and of course, some other specific psalms, by writing, singing, chanting, and wearing the words of this psalm on the body take up the identity of ancient Israel who were the first receiver of God’s miracles and actions. This brings out the possibility of receiving the same action of God in history.

Those who recounted, chanted, sang, placed this Psalm on their bodies take on the role of witnesses to God’s past action with the expectation that such action of God will be repeated in their lives.

Those who read, chant, or sing Psalm 121 Africentrically do not only take up the identity of those on whose behalf God has acted in history, but also receive the transformative power of God’s words in Psalms. This is the re-experience of God’s salvation history. This recitation has the power of transforming the one who speaks it into a participating community.

As ancient Israel reaffirmed her faith in Yahweh’s power to save his people so also reading, singing, and writing Psalm 121 Africentrically reaffirms Christians’ faith in the power of God to protect, heal, and grant success

CONCLUSION

There is a temptation for some scholars who are not familiar with the simple biblical faith of Africans to dismiss this Africentric interpretation above as fetish and unscholarly, but a closer examination of the African context shows that care must be taken before dismissing the approach. This writer believes that there is the likelihood that ancient Israel actually interpreted and used the words of psalms in their worship for healing, protection, and success according to the archaeological discovery referred to above.

Like the ancient Israelites who were the original authors of the Psalter, many biblical scholars including the author of this article and members of African Indigenous Churches, see the Psalter as divine, potent, and performative. Psalms can be used to protect, heal diseases, and bring about success in the same way as words of incantation (*ogede*) are used in Africa. Apart from the archaeological finding mentioned above, a few eminent biblical scholars such as Jacob, Eichrodt, Prockesh, von Rad, Knight, and Bultmann would agree with African biblical scholars that the spoken word in ancient Israel was “never an empty sound but an operative reality whose action cannot be hindered once it has been pronounced” (Jacob 1958:127; Eichrodt 1967:69; von Rad 1969:85; Knight 1953:14–16).

As magical as it may sound, it is very likely that such was the belief of the ancient Israelites and the people of the ancient Near East generally.

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