

Reading Psalm 100 from an African (Yoruba) Perspective

David Tuesday Adamo

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8610-4289>

Stellenbosch University, South Africa

adamodt@gmail.com

Abstract

Psalm 100 is one of the most popular psalms of praise and thanksgiving. Almost every scholar accepts this psalm as a hymn commanding the congregation to praise Yahweh in thanksgiving. This song is so vital because to praise and worship Yahweh is to live and to live is to praise and worship him for his majesty and all the things he has done for ancient Israel. Psalm 100 is also called the imperative psalm because of the seven imperative verbs that seem to dictate its structure. The content of this psalm not only resembles ancient Israelite worship but also typical African worship. This article aims to apply an Africentric interpretation to Psalm 100 in order to demonstrate how the praise and worship in African churches reflect the description of Psalm 100 (without saying that they are the same). This article aims to demonstrate how African religion and culture can be used to understand Psalm 100 without condemning Eurocentric approaches.

Keywords: Psalms, protection, imperative; Old Testament; African context; healing

Introduction¹

Psalm 100 is so special and popular a psalm that when I was a child in primary school this was one of the first psalms to be memorised along with Psalm 23 in my village (Irunda, Kogi State, Nigeria). We were made to memorise it in school in our language (Yoruba). In fact, to us, it sounds sweeter in Yoruba than in English. It is quite interesting that I can still recite it from memory.

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While Crenshaw (2001, 1) considers the Book of Psalms as the hymnal of the Second Temple and a window through which the ancient Israelites responded to Yahweh's presence and absence, others consider it instead as the prayer book of the poor (Groenewald 2007, 425; Adamo 2014, 4–14; Prinsloo 1996, 465–485; McPolin 1989, 79–103). Hossfeld and Zenger (2005, 10) consider Psalm 100 as part of “the YHWH is king” psalms. The 150 psalms have their source in the worship experience of both individual and communal prayer and praise (Crenshaw 2001, 1). Singing, shouting, screaming, crying, dancing, bowing and praying are all found in the Book of Psalms. Most of these actions are mentioned in Psalm 100. It is full of a sense of immediacy in its compelling worshippers and readers to take part in the physical activities of praise and proclamation (Brown 2010, 61). Psalms are performative and their power is not in the eye of the beholder but in the mouth of the readers through reciting, chanting, writing and wearing the words. It may be difficult to convince some traditional or conservative Western readers of this magical conception of language in psalms. However, evidence from archaeological discoveries and scholars seems to support this.² The words become the readers' words, whether performed individually or corporately. The readers are compelled to take up the subject position of the speaker (Brown 2010, 61). Psalm 100 is full not only of ordinary emotions but also behavioural and ritualistic emotions as experienced in African indigenous churches. The emotionally laden language of this psalm indicates performative activities: It is full of verbal activities. Confessional speeches in thanksgiving result in a liberation by God from one's guilt (Brown 2010, 63). Praising and proclaiming are the fundamental activities of the psalmist.

There is a tendency to misunderstand the Africentric approach to Psalm 100 (see below) to be a lesson in African tradition or a defence of African indigenous tradition and culture. It is important, first of all, to discuss the contemporary Western interpretation, which I call the Eurocentric interpretation, before the Africentric interpretation.³ This

² Some Phoenician and Punic amulets from the first millennium have been found with the verbs שמר “guard” and נצר “protect” inscribed on them (Schmitz 2002, 818–822; 2010, 421–432; Smoak 2011, 75–92; Adamo 2015a, 2–3). The presence of these two verbs in both West Semitic inscriptions and the Book of Psalms shows some common cultural and religious practices to invoke the Deity's protection or help (Smoak 2011, 75–92). Several eminent biblical scholars believe that spoken words in ancient Israel were “never an empty sound but an operative reality whose action cannot be hindered once it has been pronounced” (Jacob 1958, 127; Eichrodt 1967, 69, 85; Knight 1953, 14–16; Adamo 2015a, 2–3).

³ I prefer the term “Africentric” instead of “Afrocentric” because the word “Africa” is not “Afro-ca.” Africentric interpretation refers to biblical interpretation in an African context. It is biblical interpretation that makes “African social-cultural context a subject of interpretation,” and the “rereading of the Christian scripture from a premeditatedly Africentric perspective.” Specifically, “the analysis of the biblical text is done from the perspective of the African world-view and culture” (Adamo 2015b, 2–3). This Africentric interpretation deals with the interests and concerns of African life. It may be called African Biblical Hermeneutics or African Cultural Hermeneutics.

will further demonstrate that the Eurocentric and Africentric approaches are complementary.

The purpose of this article is not to prove that Yoruba/African religion is the same as Judaism or Christianity because of their similarities. Similarity does not equate to dependence or being the same. The purpose of this article is to examine how African/Yoruba religion and tradition can be used to understand Psalm 100 and to see how Psalm 100 is used in African/Yoruba Christianity.

Contemporary Western Interpretation of Psalm 100

Psalm 100 is regarded as one of the best-known hymns or songs of praise. According to Mays (1994, 64), “were the statistics known, Psalm 100 would probably prove to be the song most often chanted from within the history that runs from the Israelite temple on Mount Zion to the Synagogues and churches spread across the earth.” Psalm 100 is occasionally regarded as an enthronement psalm despite the fact that there is no explicit reference to Yahweh’s kingship (Anderson 1972, 698; Hossfeld and Zenger 2005, 10). While Hossfeld and Zenger (2005, 10) classify Psalm 100 as one of the “YHWH is king” psalms, Brueggemann (1984, 165) classifies it as one of the psalms of orientation. However, the majority of Old Testament scholars agree that Psalm 100 is a hymn (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner 2014, 734–740; Segal 2013, 372; Weiser 1998, 645; McCann 1993, 64 Clifford 2003, 133; Anderson 1985, 698). For many people it is the best example of a hymn in the Psalter (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner 2014, 734–740).

The poem can be divided into two parts (Psalm 100: 1–3 and vv. 4–5), and the two actually say the same thing. The first part (vv. 1–3) starts with a verb in the plural imperative mood to command all nations to worship the Lord with gladness and singing with a great and joyous noise. They are to come to the Jerusalem Temple to acknowledge Yahweh as the Lord so that they can benefit from his bounty and fidelity (Clifford 2003, 133). Because of the universal nature of the command to praise God, some scholars (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner 2014, 739) believe that Psalm 100 is polemical. Rather than summoning the individual to praise the Lord, it summons the whole earth. It also summons the earth to praise God alone because he is the true God (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner 2014, 739).

In verse 2 there are two important verbs present (עָבְדוּ, בָּאוּ) namely, “serve”⁴ and “enter.” Both are used as imperatives. The first verb is translated in two ways in our English

⁴ The King James Version, Revised Standard Version, and New American Standard Bible translate the verb עָבְדוּ as “serve.” But the New International Version and the New Revised Standard Version translate it as “worship.” I think that they are both correct in the broadest sense according to the context of Psalm 100.

versions, namely “serve” and “worship.” Verse 2 is one of the most challenging verses in the Psalms because serving the Lord is a matter of celebration and joy. Serving the Lord is requisite for one’s existence. This means that to serve or worship God is to live and that to live is to worship God (McCann 1993, 70). The verb באו has different meanings in the Old Testament. It means “go,” “come,” “enter,” or “have sexual intimacy.” However, any of these meanings may be correct in light of the context of Psalm 100 except for having sexual intimacy—come, go, enter. The majority of translators render it as “come,” which I think is correct.

Verse 3 suggests a grand procession with a song that affirms that all the nations present must confess that Yahweh is the Creator and that all of them belong to him. The recognition that we are his sheep is emphasised. This is an idiom which means that Israel is pastured by Yahweh, the Most High God himself, while any other sheep are pastured by “its own divine patron” (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner 2014, 734–740).

Part two of this psalm is parallel to the first part. It is a repetition of the first part with commands and reasons for coming to Zion to worship. The phrase “for the Lord is good” means that Yahweh is reliable and trustworthy toward Israel. The words יִדְּוּ “steadfast love” and אֱמֻנָתוֹ “faithfulness” are important. They express the absolute fidelity of Yahweh toward Israel. Israel is a testimony to Yahweh’s goodness and all nations should take note of this.

The word יִדְּוּ comes from a root which means “to be good” and “to be kind,” and this word is primarily a covenant term descriptive of covenant fidelity (Smith 1984, 30–31). In Psalm 100, it is translated to mean “steadfast love.” Sometimes it is translated “kindness,” “mercy,” “fidelity,” “lovingkindness,” and “affections” (Smith 1984, 30). This is the central quality of Yahweh’s character and nature. Many psalmists see Yahweh’s steadfast love as reliable and trustworthy especially for their salvation (6:4; 13:5; 17:7; 31:16; 44:26). אֱמֻנָתוֹ is a derivative of אָמוּן which occurs about fifty times in the Old Testament with a sense of “faith” and “trust” (Renn 2005, 361). This is the characteristic of the divine nature of Yahweh and Yahweh’s faithfulness is inherently bound up with absolute truthfulness (Renn 2005, 361).

The structure of Psalm 100 can also be described in terms of its seven plural verbs in the imperative mood: “make a joyful noise,” “know,” “come,” “enter,” “give thanks,” “worship” and “bless,” which express an important aspect of worship (Clifford 2003, 133; Segal 2013, 472). That is why deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner see this “central imperatival sequence (come, know, come) as a structural signal to their centrality.” Psalm 100 can also be analysed under three broad categories, namely, who is to take action, the action to be taken and the object of this action (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner 2014, 736). While the one who is to take the action is “all the earth” and those who dwell in it, the very action to be taken is described by the first three and the last three imperative worship actions, that is, “shout,” “serve,” “come”

(twice), “testify” and “bless” (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner 2014, 736). The object of these actions to be taken is certainly the Lord. It is important to note the repetitions of the name of this object.

It is remarkable that many of the activities that are called for by means of the plural imperatives are personally qualified. First, people are to serve the Lord with joy and gladness. Second, they are to come before him with gladness and singing; third, they should enter his gates with testimony (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner 2014, 738). The above means that the worshippers have abandoned the reserved constraints of society and are now giving themselves absolutely to the glad emotion of communion with God. This is the powerful emotion that God draws out of human beings when an encounter takes place and they are gripped by the presence of the Holy One (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner 2014, 738). At this time the thanklessness and hopelessness of the world are transformed by the redemptive power of his presence.

Verse 3 is the centre point. The middle sentence in verse 3 is the focus of the middle imperative verb “know,” and this verse is also set between the two uses of “come.” The central verse indicates that the reason for thanksgiving is the intrinsic relationship with God (Segal 2013, 473; McCann 1993, 65). In Verse 3, McCann (1993, 66) reports Zimmerli as identifying the words “know that Yahweh, He is God” as a “recognition formula” which in many places is followed by Yahweh’s activities.

The central imperatives “know that the Lord, he is the true God” is important. The word יָדָע is a very common and important verb form which occurs about one thousand times in the Old Testament and it has a primary sense of “know,” but with different nuances (Renn 2005, 267). One meaning involves the state of “moral awareness” such as in Genesis 3:5, 22; Exodus 18:20; and Psalm 119:152, which refer to knowing the law and the covenant and their obligations, which leads to thanksgiving and worship (Renn 2005, 507). יָדָע can also refer to knowledge of the ways of God (Psalm 25:4). יָדָע can have the sense of physical awareness or perception, as in Genesis 3:7 when Adam and Eve know that they were naked (Renn 2005, 567). יָדָע can also have a sexual connotation as in sexual intercourse (Gen. 4:1). יָדָע can have the meaning of physical acquaintance as in Deuteronomy 9:24. The imperative “know” refers to far more than mere academic or intellectual knowledge; rather it refers to following the Lord’s commandments and doing his will, including praising the Lord and worshipping him. יָדָע here in Psalm 100 means knowing God with various degrees of intimacy. For example, the prophet Ezekiel says very frequently to both Israelites and Gentiles, “you shall know that I am the Lord your God.” This formula with its variations occurs about 50 times in the book of Ezekiel. Jeremiah desires to know God intimately (Jeremiah 31:34). All these nuances are implied in Psalm 100. It refers to a divine knowledge of God as the only true God.

All these verbs are very common in the Psalter, especially in the hymns of praise. All the above terms indicate that the setting of the poems is corporate worship. It resembles the kind of song expected at the beginning of a worship service for the purpose of moving the worshippers from the physical and mundane realm to the sacred realm (deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner 2014, 737). What appears to be the key term here is “serve,” which can mean “worship.” Broadly speaking, it means “to orient one’s whole life and existence to a sovereign master” (McCann 1993, 65).

The reason for this imperative is Yahweh’s steadfastness יָסִדֵּךְ and faithfulness אֱמֻנָתְךָ. The two occurrences of יָ in verses 3 and 5 in such a hymn give the reason for the worship and praise.⁵ That is also the reason why the psalm opens with a hymnic call to sing the praise of God who is full of grace, mercy and faithfulness. The purpose is to represent God as a living reality and then share this knowledge with the congregation and the world. The important statement of faith in this psalm is that “Yahweh alone is God,” which is regarded as one of the most important statements of faith in the Old Testament (Weiser 1998, 646). When one is in the presence of God one realises one’s creaturehood and that human self-assurance and independence is nothing in the sight of God. Whatever one is and owns is not by virtue of one’s own self, but by the power of the One that created one and owns one. The statement “we are his people and the sheep of his pasture” expresses pride, humility and trust (Weiser 1998, 647). The joy that makes the congregation shout and sing has its source in Yahweh.

“The identity of Israel and all humanity is incomprehensible apart from God” (McCann 1993, 66). The identity of God is the focus. For example, the occurrence of the personal name of God, “Yahweh,” four times in this short psalm with the personal pronouns and pronominal suffixes in verse 3 is striking. The sequence of the pronouns is also striking: “he ... he ... us ... we ... his ... his,” because the chiasmic arrangement suggests that human identity must begin and end with an understanding of God’s identity (McCann 1993, 66). Human identity is incomprehensible without God’s identity (McCann 1993, 66). The concluding imperative in verse 4 means that thanksgiving and praise become the mode of existence for those who know God and also know that they are not self-made (McCann 1993, 67).

The repetition of references to Yahweh with many pronouns and pronominal suffixes makes this psalm a psalm of human–divine relationship (Segal 2013, 473). One would

⁵ It is interesting that the theme of Psalms 100, the pilgrimage of nations to the holy mountain Zion, is also the theme of many other biblical passages such as Psalms 48:1–2; 78:68–69; 11–14. Isaiah 2:1–4, 60–62; 66:18–23; Ezekiel 40:2; and Zachariah 14:10 (Clifford 2003, 1). This steadfast love is combined with other qualities of the nature of Yahweh: mercy and faithfulness.

be correct to consider this psalm as an expression of intimacy with God (Segal 2013, 473).

As stated above, the occurrence of God's personal name, Yahweh, repetitively is very significant. One notices that in this short psalm the name Yahweh occurs four times and pronouns (he, him, his) referring to Yahweh occur eleven times. This indicates the significance of that name and reflects name theology in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word יהוה has its root in הוה which means "to be" or "to breathe" (Jones 1990, 185). The name derives from the phrase in Exodus 3:14 אֶשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה which literally means "I will be who I will be." The name Yahweh "signifies God as Eternal and immutable who will never be other than the same, containing all times future, present, and past" (Jones 1990, 185). This name is so sacred to the Jews that it will never be pronounced during public reading, but instead is substituted with "Adonai."

In ancient Israel, it was believed that the nature of a thing is indicated in its name and "the knowledge of a name does not only mediate a *direct relationship with the nature*, but also an *expression of individual character* of its owner to the extent that it can stand for the owner" (Eichrodt 1967, 40). In fact, it can be used interchangeably with the person. The divine name is used as a guarantee of the divine presence and God's name is an interchangeable term for his presence. It was believed that God as manifested in his name was "permanently present at a holy place" (Eichrodt 1967, 41). It means that a desecration of a holy place where God is amounts to a desecration of his holy name. It is believed that the transcendent God has revealed himself in his name so that the reality of human fellowship with him is assured (Eichrodt 1967, 41). The name of Yahweh becomes the medium of his operation (Psalms 54:3; 89:25; 44:6; 118:10–12). This means that the use of his name becomes a substitute for the manifestation of Yahweh. To sum up, the name of Yahweh includes his nature and all his attributes and power.

In ancient Israel naming animals and human beings was important. For example, the naming of animals by Adam may mean the assertion of sovereignty over them (Genesis 2:19). Human names can reflect people's nature and character. A man may transmit something of his nature to someone through his name. An example of this is when an overlord gives new names to vassals, and when masters give a new names to disciples, it is expected that the recipients should embrace a new pattern in their lives (Eichrodt 1967, 40). It is also believed that when one knows the name of an individual he can transfer divine favour and blessing to that person.

It seems to me that this is what Psalm 100 seeks to declare in praise and thanksgiving and that this is the reason why the name Yahweh and all the pronouns are utilised so many times in such a short psalm as this. As already said above, this is the reason why humankind must praise and worship him—for "to praise God is to live and to live is to praise God" (McCann 1993, 70).

There are two confessional statements in Psalm 100. The first confession occurs in v. 3b: *He made us, and we are his people and the sheep of his pasture*. The metaphor of the Lord as a shepherd represents Israel's intimacy and communal relationship with Yahweh. Psalm 23 uses this metaphor perfectly when the author sees God as the perfect shepherd who provides, protects and heals. The second confession occurs in v. 5: "For the Lord is good, his יְדֹנָהּ endures forever, and his faithfulness to each generation" (deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner 2014, 734–740). The emphasis is on ancient Israel's creed that summarises the heart of Israel's faith. The emphasis is certainly on God's fidelity and character that is always consistent. The proclamation of his trustworthiness and faithfulness has to do with what Westermann calls re-presentation of history to affirm God's acts of deliverance throughout the entire history of ancient Israel, particularly during the exodus from Egypt and the exile (1981, 214–249). This re-presentation of history does not emphasise the fact of history but rather the saving events in his majesty, faithfulness, and grace in the past, which can be repeated in the present and the future (Westermann 1981, 214–249). It is not for the sake of re-presenting a past historical event in order to dwell on it, but for the purpose of re-presenting the One who is active as the Lord of history (Westermann 1981, 214–249). That is what this Psalm 100 and others psalms (especially the historical psalms) that mention the exodus experience do.

Africentric Interpretation of Psalm 100

An Africentric approach to interpretation makes Africa its centre. It is the rereading of the ancient biblical texts from the perspective of an African culture and world-view.

The Africentric reading of Psalm 100 discussed below does not claim to be the only relevant interpretation and therefore the Eurocentric one should not be abandoned. The two perspectives can be complementary. I believe that John Mbiti's opinion that the "Bible in Africa is closely and carefully related to an African way of living and African values" is valid (Mbiti 1998, 141; Mashabela 2017, 3). It is therefore important for African scholars to read the Bible from an African perspective.

A brief discussion of the importance of singing, chanting, dancing in African cultural and religious tradition will help readers to appreciate why Psalm 100 is a favourite psalm in most African indigenous churches, particularly Nigerian churches. In Africa, especially among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, music, singing, clapping of hands, and drumming play a very important role in society. They are means of interacting, celebrating, and relaying important events. They are also a means of communicating important messages (Africa Imports African Business Blog 2010). There is scarcely any important event without dancing, singing, clapping of hands, chanting and another aspect of music such as beating drums. Singing usually accompanies marriage, birth, naming ceremonies, rites of passage, hunting, farming, drinking, and also political activities. In Africa, singing, dancing, and chanting ward off evil spirits. Such actions

are evidence of respect for good spirits, especially of the dead and the ancestors (Africa Imports African Business Blog 2010). In Africa, singing, dancing, and chanting can be used to express deep emotions, whether good or bad. They express the mood of the people and their emotions. Dancing with singing, clapping and chanting is an integral part of African culture. There can scarcely be any important event without music, dancing, singing or chanting.⁶

Thanksgiving is also an integral part of African culture, especially among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. If one does anything for a Yoruba person, when he sees one he/she will bow down/prostrate him/herself for one in thanksgiving, even on the road. Even on a second or third day, he/she will express profound thanksgiving with the words *E seun ana* (thank you for yesterday). Still many days and months afterwards, a Yoruba man will still say *E se ojo* (thanks for that day). The basic belief among the Yoruba people is that if you give thanks for the thing done, it will motivate the person to do more another time.⁷ It is also a sound belief that if one cannot appreciate a living person whom one sees face to face, it is not possible to truly appreciate the unseen God. African indigenous people believe that thanksgiving with songs, chanting, dancing and clapping of hands can also bring healing, protection and success.

A description of a typical African worship service that I witnessed and participated in will serve to illustrate how Psalm 100 reflects typical Yoruba indigenous worship.

On Sunday 24 September 2017, I worshipped in my regular church, Maranatha Baptist Church, in Anyigba, Nigeria. We gathered in the pastor's office for the prayer session preceding the worship of that day. The pastor suddenly announced, "Today I do not know how long the worship service will be. We shall have praise worship for an hour before the preaching." What is called "praise worship" is the singing of choruses led by one of the choir members. Truly, we sang and danced for more than an hour with drums—including Yoruba talking drums—piano, and other musical instruments. We were there more than three hours, but the pastor only preached for fifteen minutes. Some of the following songs were sung during the praise worship:

⁶ Although this could be said of other cultures in South America, North America and Europe, it is more elaborate and more intense among the Yoruba than in those cultures. I know this because I have worshipped in European, North American, and South American churches and on other continents, and there is no comparison.

⁷ As I have said above, I have worshipped in several churches on many continents, including Europe, North and South America, and other rituals of thanksgiving are not as elaborate or intense as in Yoruba tradition. For example, it involves kneeling down or prostrating oneself and bowing down, even on the road as if one is worshipping God, to thank someone who has done something for one, wherever one meets them.

1. *Atewo ni a fi a mo bi o ba more* (It is clapping of hands that will show that you are thankful)
2. Jehovah Jehovah, Jehovah
3. Jehovah *na* God (Nigerian pidgin English meaning “Jehovah is God”)
4. *Kabi o kosi* (No one can question you)
5. *Mi o se ni jo, ore ti Oluwa se fun mi* (How will I not dance for what the Lord has done for me?)
6. Yahweh, You are Glorious
7. *Alaaye ni yio maa yin o, oku ko le yin o* (Only those who are alive can praise you, the dead cannot praise you)

My evaluation of the praise worship described above reflects Psalm 100 and obedience to what it commands. During this praise worship, people clapped their hands, danced and chanted songs until they were tired or worn out. Some would jump up and down. Others would jump to the front of the congregation and shout and dance. Two people would face each other while dancing, as in a dance competition. Others would prostrate themselves in front of the pulpit. This is as a result of the African tradition of dancing and singing before the divinities.

Verses 1 and 2

From the content of Psalm 100 which commands the worshippers to dance, sing and chant in praise of the Lord for what he has done, for creating us and for owning us, African Christians know and regard Psalm 100 as a thanksgiving psalm. In Africa generally, especially among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, it is compulsory to bless, thank and worship God/the gods. Unfortunately, the translation of verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 100 in the Yoruba Bible appears incorrect because it translates these verses as an invitation and not a command or imperative.

E ho iho ayo si Oluwa, eyin ile gbogbo (Psalm 100:1).

E fi ayo sin Oluwa: e wa ti eyin ti orin si iwaju re (Psalm 100:2).

Translation

“Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands” (Psalm 100:1).

“Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing” (Psalm 100:2).

In verses 1 and 2 there are three commands or imperatives in the Hebrew Bible:

הָרְעוּ, עֲבֹדוּ, בְּאוֹ

I strongly believe that the *E* in the Yoruba translation is incorrect. *E* makes the verses read as an invitation. Rather, the beginning of the psalm should read: *Ho iho ayo si Oluwa, eyin ile gbogbo. Sin Oluwa pelu ayo: wa ti eyin ti orin si iwaju re*. The omission of *E* makes the two sentences imperatives in Yoruba, and they should be translated as such. *Sin Oluwa pelu ayo* brings the imperative across perfectly.

The situation in most African countries, especially in Nigeria, makes it a duty or an imperative to thank, worship, and bless God. In Nigeria, there is no certainty in life, as in many other countries in Africa. A popular Nigerian newspaper, the *Nigerian Tribune* of 24 September 2017, describes the Nigerian situation correctly:

In Nigeria today, bloodshed and murders are normal in the land. Our humanity is frozen and replaced by a cold animalism that is beyond compare (Adebayo 2017, 3).

One travels with fear of thieves and armed robbers. Unlike in the Western world, where access to hospitals is taken for granted, in Nigeria, the majority cannot have access to hospitals. Those who have access to hospitals find out that eighty or ninety percent of the medicines are fake. Food is scarce for the majority. When one wakes up in the morning or embarks on a journey successfully, one has no option but to obey the commandment of Psalm 100 to thank and bless the Lord.⁸

If one is able to go through the above situation everyday unhurt, God is worthy of praise and thanksgiving. That is why the majority of African indigenous churches (including many of the mainstream missionary churches) make a loud noise in praising God.⁹ Perhaps this indicates that gladness and singing characterised Israelite worship, as is the case in African religious and cultural tradition. This is not to say that there were no worship situations in ancient Israel other than singing, dancing and others like lamenting and crying, but no true biblical scholar can deny that singing, dancing, thanksgiving characterise Psalm 100.¹⁰

⁸ Imperative in Hebrew can be used to express direct commands, permission, requests, and invitations (Steinmann 2009, 137–138). However, the imperative in Psalm 100 is a direct command that must be obeyed for one’s well-being and existence.

⁹ Unfortunately, these churches have been accused of making too much noise and their worship has been characterised as mere emotionalism by those who do not understand the reason behind these methods of worship.

¹⁰ As in the African situation, there are scarcely any songs and acts of thanksgiving without dancing (Brueggemann and Bellinger, Jr, 2014, 427–430).

Verse 3

Know that the LORD is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;

we are his people, the sheep of his pasture (NIV).

Unfortunately, the Yoruba translation of this verse also appears incorrect because it, too, has lost the imperative, as is the case in verses 1 and 2. “Know that the LORD is God” is translated *Ki eyin ki o mo pe Oluwa oun ni Olorun*. The correct translation would be *Mo pe Oluwa oun ni Olorun* without the *Ki eyin ki o*. This correctly brings out the imperative in Yoruba.

Just as the imperative “know that the LORD is God” was an important command for the people of ancient Israel because there were many gods but the only true God is Yahweh, it is also important for African/Yoruba Christians. Yoruba religion has uncountable divinities called Orisas. The Yoruba religion alone has about 400 divinities (Oduyoye 2008, 17–20). Originally, these divinities competed for superiority with the Supreme Being, Olodumare. But Olodumare eventually demonstrated his superiority to the divinities (Oduyoye 2008, 17–20). The result is that Yoruba Christians see Olodumare as the Supreme Being and all other gods as non-existing.

In the Yoruba Bible (Bibeli Yoruba Atoka 1980), *Oluwa* is considered the dynamic equivalence of יהוה by the translators and that of אלהים is *Olorun*. There are three main names that refer to the Supreme God in Yoruba (Olodumare, Olorun, Oluwa). The translators of the Yoruba Bible and Yoruba Christians, without question, accepted the above translation and consider Oluwa as the equivalent of Yahweh, instead of Olodumare, and Olorun as Elohim. I do not know why the translators of the Yoruba Bible prefer Oluwa to Olodumare as the correct translation of Yahweh. What I can suggest to be the reason is that the original translators of the Yoruba Bible were European people who did not actually understand Yoruba perfectly, though they claimed to do.¹¹ Moreover, perhaps, they used the idea of Judaism not pronouncing “Yahweh” but “Adonai” (master) so as not to profane the holy name. This was probably transferred to the translation of the Bible into Yoruba.

I would prefer Olodumare for Yahweh instead of Oluwa, which means Lord, because of the meaning and attributes of Olodumare. Oluwa simply and literally means “master,” “Lord.” But Olodumare has a deeper meaning similar to Yahweh in his attributes and

¹¹ The Yoruba speakers who were translators were still supervised by the Europeans.

nature. The word *Olodumare* consist of three words joined together, *Ol-Odu-mare*. While *Ol-* is a prefix which means “owner of,” or “lord of,” *Odu* literally means “very large,” “very extensive,” “very full,” “of superlative quality and worth,” or “superlative in greatness, size, quality, and worth” (Idowu 1960, 34). Taken together, *Olodu* means someone who is a supreme head, one who possesses the sceptre or authority; or one who “contains the fullness of excellent attributes, one who is superlative and perfect in greatness, size, and quality and worth” (Idowu 1960, 34). *Mare* is a descriptive adjective meaning “that does not go,” “that does not move or wander,” “that remains” and it implies that *Olodumare*, the supreme Deity who possesses superlative qualities also has the “attribute of remaining stable, unchanging, constant, permanent, and reliable.” Thus, the meaning of *Olodumare* is “one who is supreme, superlatively great, incomparable and unsurpassable in majesty, excellent in attributes, stable, unchanging, constant, reliable.”¹² Lucas also defines the word *Olodumare* as follows:

The word *Odu* means “a chief”, “an exalted personage”. *Olodu* is its intensive form, indicating completeness (e.g *obiri* “woman”; *olobiri* “a woman in the full bloom of womanhood”). *Mare* means “I shall go or I must go”. The meaning of *Olodumare* then is “the Chief or the Exalted One to whom I must go or return” (Lucas 1948, 40).

Some Western biblical scholars who may not be very familiar with Yoruba religion and tradition may have problems accepting the fact that *Olodumare* refers to Yahweh, God of Israel, just as one Western scholar and anthropologist, Emil Ludwig, was perplexed and puzzled when he was told that missionaries were teaching Africans about God and he asked, “How can the untutored African conceive of God? ... How can this be? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing” (Quoted in Idowu 1960, 30). Perhaps, the meaning of the words and attributes of *Olodumare* may help to convince some scholars.

After a closer look at the attributes of *Olodumare*, perhaps, one may be convinced that Yahweh and *Olodumare* are the same God since they mostly share the same attributes. The attributes of *Olodumare* are omnipresence, omnipotence, transcendence, omniscience, and immanence (Mbiti 1970, 31–41; Idowu 1960, 38–47). These attributes include faithfulness, pity, mercy, kindness, goodness, holiness, and the roles of protector, ruler and creator, as described in Israel’s praise and thanksgiving in Psalm 100 (Mbiti 1970, 31–78; Idowu 1960, 38–47; Gehman 1989, 189–194). In Yoruba religion and in African Christianity, *Olodumare* is described as *Oba Orun* (King of Heaven), *Oga Ogo* (Lord of Glory), *Atererekariaye* (The One who spread to the entire

¹² *Olorun* is the other name for *Olodumare* and is self-explanatory. It contains *Ol-* which is a prefix meaning “owner of” or “lord of,” as stated above. The other part is *Orun*, which literally means “heaven.” *Olorun* therefore means “the owner or Lord of heaven.”

world), *Oba Arinurode* (King who sees inside and outside), *Oba Olumoran Okan* (King who knows one's thought), *Alewilese* (King who does what he says), *Oyigiyigi* (Big one), *Oba Adekedajo* (King who judges in silence), *Oba Airi* (Unseen king), and *Oba Awamaridi* (Incomprehensible king), *Alaaye* (The owner of the world), *Olojo oni* (The owner of the day), *Elemii* (The owner of life) (Daramola and Jeje 2014, 164; Awolalu 1979, 10–12)

One important fact is that the majority of scholars of African religion and the majority of African Christians believe that *Olodumare* is the same as the God of Israel (Mbiti 1970; Idowu 1960; Gehman 1989; Parrinder 1961; Oduyoye 2008, 17–20). The authors cited above are authorities on African traditional religion. Although the majority opinion may not necessarily be the correct one, authorities, professionalism and expertise in African indigenous religion, and particularly in Yoruba, should be respected and be given the benefit of the doubt instead of readers being blindfolded by prejudice and ignorance.

Psalm 100 has only five verses and in these verses, it is significant that the name Yahweh is mentioned four times and the pronouns (he, him, his) referring to Yahweh are mentioned eleven times (see above). The name is just as important in African/Yoruba tradition and religion as it is in the Old Testament. The name is a reflection of the totality of what a person is, including all his attributes, power, and might. In African indigenous religion and tradition, the name *Olodumare* in the Yoruba language refers to the One with whom human beings may enter into covenant or communion anywhere and at any time. It means the One who is “supreme, superlatively great, incomparable and unsurpassable in majesty, excellent in attributes, stable, unchangeable, constant and reliable” (Idowu 1960, 36). African (Yoruba) Christians do not regard churches as the place where *Olodumare* dwells to the extent that they cannot be destroyed (cf. the inviolability of Jerusalem). It is remarkable that African (Yoruba) people do not use any image to represent *Olodumare* in the way they make images of the divinities. Among the Yoruba people, it is believed that a person's name can be used to destroy his nature. It is also believed that a person can use a name to bless and to curse. In other words, if a person who knows somebody's name, he/she knows the essence of that person.

What is also remarkable among the Yoruba people of Nigeria is the use of theophoric names given to their children as part of praise and thanksgiving, as in the Old Testament, such as *Oluwole* (God has entered), *Oluranti* (God remembers), *Oluwayiopese* (God will provide), *Oluremilekun* (God has stopped my cry), *Olumayowa* (God has brought joy), *Oluwatobi* (God is great), *Iyin* (Praise), *Opeyeoluwa* (God is worthy of thanksgiving), *Olutosin* (God is worthy of worship), *Olufemi* (God loves me), *Olaolu* (Thank God), *Modupe* (I thank God) and others.

Although Yahweh started life as a desert God, he later developed to be not only the one true God but also the God of the whole earth, and all its fullness belongs to him (Psalm 24). This same God is seeking humankind's response to him according to its native capability. Idowu (1960, 31) expresses this as follows:

It is this God, therefore, Who reveals Himself to every people on earth and whom they have apprehended according to the degree of their spiritual perception, expressing their knowledge of him, if not as trained philosophers or educated theologians, certainly as those who have had some practical experience of Him. It would be looking at facts through the spectacles of cultural pride and affected superiority to deny this; it would be blasphemous to say that while the loving God cared for a particular section of His world, He had nothing in a clear, unmistakable way, to do with the rest.

The statement we are his "sheep," to me, is also not correctly translated. In Nigeria, there is an ethnic group in the northern part of Nigeria called the Fulanis who are traditionally nomadic people tending cows with very few sheep. They drive and protect mainly cows with their sticks or rods. Today, they constitute many problems because they have moved from their northern territory to the south where there are green pastures. Their cows eat farm crops and whoever dares to challenge them will be molested or even killed without regret. I therefore think that the translation of the first sentence in verse 3 in a Nigerian or African context is misleading because shepherds in Africa, unlike in ancient Israel, keep mostly cows and very few sheep. I suggest that it should be translated "we are his cows" instead of "sheep." It is unfortunate that the Yoruba Bible translators rendered it *Agutan papa re* (keepers of sheep) instead of *maalu papa re* (cows of his pastures).

Verse 4

Verse 4 is, indeed, a repetition of the theme of the entire Psalm 100, that is, a command to praise God with thanksgiving. Praising his name is a substitute in line with the name theology in the Old Testament, where his name is a substitute for the person of Yahweh as mentioned above. However, there seems to be a mistranslation in the Yoruba version in verse 4. It reads as follows in the Yoruba Bible (Bibeli Yoruba Atoka 1980):

E wo enu ona re pelu ope ati si agbala re pelu iyin;

E maa dupe fun un; ki e si maa fi ibukun fun oruko re (Bibeli Yoruba Atoka 1980).

Translation

"Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise:

be thankful unto him, and bless his name" (Psalm 100:4).

What I would suggest as the correct translation reflecting the imperative is the following:

Wo enu ona re pelu ope ati si agbala re pelu iyin;

Dupe fun un, fi ibukun fun oruko re.

This translation eliminates all the occurrences of *E* in line one and two. In line two, it also eliminates the word *maa*. It seems to me that there is a need for a new translation of Psalm 100 from the Hebrew original to reflect the imperatives in the text.

Verse 5

Verse 5 is the climax of the short poem. The author decided to give the reasons why praise and thanksgiving are imperative and are the key to the survival of any human being. These reasons are God's steadfast love and his faithfulness. As discussed above, while his steadfast love refers to his covenant loyalty, his unending faithfulness is his dependability (Anderson 1985, 702). As stated above, the situation in Nigeria is dangerous to the extent that if anyone is supposed to praise Yahweh with thanksgiving it should be not only the Yoruba but all Nigerians because of the peculiar situation in which we find ourselves.

I lived in America for about eleven years, I have lived in Europe (Edinburgh), I have also lived and travelled in other countries in Africa (South Africa, Kenya, Uganda), but there is no other country that is as ferociously dangerous as Nigeria. When one travels by car from my place of work (Kogi State University, Anyigba) it is with fear and trembling, especially from Anyigba to Okene, because of the fear of being ambushed, kidnapped, robbed or killed. One travels with so much uncertainty. If one is fortunate enough to travel without incident, one has no choice but to recognise the steadfast love of God and his unending faithfulness.

The Use of Psalm 100 in African/Yoruba Christianity

The repetition of Yahweh's name and the pronouns that refer to him so many times in a very short text is what many Western scholars may not be able to appreciate or fully comprehend. To Africentric scholars and Yoruba traditionalists, there is a potent (magical?) power in the repetition of words and the name of Yahweh/*Olodumare/Oluwa*, as is the case in the repetition of African potent words (so-called incantation). It is strongly believed that the repetition of the verses and chapters of the Book of Psalms in the form of singing, chanting, reading, and writing repeatedly may bring about God's miracles of healing, protection, and success. For this reason, African Christians, particularly the Yoruba, inscribe as prayers portion of psalms on their bodies, on doorposts, on clothes, motor vehicles, and parchment, with the

expectation that Yahweh will listen to their prayers and perform the miracles that he performed in ancient times for the ancient Israelites.¹³

As one writes Psalm 100 on a parchment, clothes, the walls of a house, or chants, sings or reads it repetitively, one acknowledges that one is a human beings and not lord of one's life. In fact, the good things that are in one's possession are not completely and even primarily the result of one's own doing. One needs the guidance, grace, mercy, and love of God (Adamo 2017, 33–34).

As indicated above, this use of Psalm 100 for protection, healing, provision, and success may possibly reflect the way it was used in ancient Israel as attested by archaeological discoveries of a handful of Phoenician and Punic amulets from the first millennium with the following verbs: שמר “guard” and נצר “protect” inscribed on them (Schmitz 2002, 818–822; 2010, 421–432; Smoak 2011, 75–92, Adamo 2017, 33–44). The presence of these two verbs in both West Semitic inscriptions and the Book of Psalms indicates 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 were not uncommon in ancient Israel as has also been discovered by archaeologists (Smoak 2011, 72–92). Several 7th- to 6th-century B. C. Punic gold bands were discovered in excavations at Carthage with the same two verbs (שמר “guard” and נצר “protect”) as part of a protective formula like those in this psalm (Smoak 2011, 72–92; Barnett and Mendleson 1987; Krahmalkov 2000, 471–472; Adamo 2017, 33–44). Brown (2014, 7–8) attests to the fact that psalms were performative when used orally, chanted, or recited as divine prayers by the Christian church as early as the third century C.E. for the purpose not only of guidance but also of drive away the evil ones, demons:

The performative, oral roots of many biblical psalms can be inferred from the dynamic language of the psalmic rhetoric and from ritual literature found throughout the ancient Near East which has greatly expanded our understanding of the possible use and setting. They were chanted, and sung on a regular basis by the early third century C.E. The dramatic rise of monasticism in the fourth century, moreover, gave the psalms additional attention: ascetics recited and chanted the psalms as daily prayer not only for personal guidance but also for spiritual warfare against demons. Much of the early Christian exegesis was, in fact, aimed at enabling the clergy, particularly monks, to sing and recite the psalms.

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. Apart from the

¹³ In Africa, there is a firm belief that it is not the parchment, or the words, or the chanting that performs the miracles. God is the one who performs the miracles, having seen the faith behind all these actions. God uses these actions for his miracles.

archaeological findings mentioned above, some biblical scholars also emphasise how the power of 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, 85; Knight 1953, 14–16; Adamo 2015b, 31–52 Adamo 2017, 33–44).

African Christians read, sing, chant and inscribe Psalm 100 with a view to being protected on dangerous journeys by road, air or sea. African Christians who wear the psalms expect to be healed while asleep at night, and they also do this for provision in the time of need and for achieving success in life.

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” (2001, 132–154; Adamo 2017, 33–44). This is because “worshippers appropriate the words of Psalm 100 as if they were those Psalms’ first-person speakers” (Nasuti 2001, 132–154; Adamo 2017, 33–44).¹⁴ The repeated writing, chanting, and singing of Psalms 100 is for the purpose of reminding God of his former actions and to motivate him to act in this way once again in the present (Westermann 1981, 217).

An example of the effectiveness of such reading and singing in the testimony of early Yoruba Christians is attested in the song bellow:

Ayanga si Oloogun (2x)

T’owo mi ba te Psaamu

Ayanga si Oloogun

Translation

Away with the medicine man (Ifa Priest) 2x

When I lay my hand on Psalms

Away with the medicineman (Ogunkunle 2000, 217; Adamo 2008, 575–595)

¹⁴ This way of viewing Psalms resembles trends in modern literary theory, especially speech act theory (Nasuti 2001, 144). Those who use the psalms that contain historical narratives take on a certain role with regard to those narratives.

J. O. Ositelu also has a song in his book that is similar to the one above:

I challenge the juju men, once I lay hold on my Psalms

Praying with Psalm is a staff of victory

Praying with Psalm is a great protection

Praying with Psalm is a staff of provision

Praying with Psalm is a virtue of healing

Praying with Psalm is a staff of peace (Ogunkunle 2000, 217; Adamo 2008, 575–595)

It should be stated that what brings about miracles is not the paper or the Bible per se but the response of God to the cry of the reader/chanter or writer who puts him/herself in the position of the original writer. God is the one who responds to the cry of the reader/chanter or writer and then performs the needed miracle of healing, protection, and success.

The Bible, particularly the Psalms, then becomes a talisman or amulet, medicine or potent words (so-called incantation) for protection, healing, provision and enhancing success when inscribed on parchments, bodies, vehicles, doorposts, and recited, chanted, and sung with unwavering faith or trust in God (Adamo 2015a, 1–13; 2017, 33–44).

Conclusion

Psalm 100 is a strong reassurance and abiding trust in God despite the reality of the threat of evil or even death. It is a declaration of how the God of Israel acts decisively to counter all circumstances at any time.

African indigenous churches are accused of too much emotion and noise. But I think this is due to a lack of understanding of the people and their mode of worship, which I think is closer to ancient Israelite worship, as described in Psalm 100, than Western worship. There is a temptation for some scholars who are not very familiar with the strong biblical faith of Africans to dismiss this African reading, chanting repetitively and writing it on parchment, wearing it around the neck and placing it in clothes' pockets, as an unscholarly fetish. However, a closer examination of the African context shows that care must be taken before dismissing the approach discussed above. I believe that Mbiti (1998, 142) is right when he says that “[f]or the traditional Africa, the world of the Bible is not a past world of two to three thousand years ago, but a real world of yesterday, today and tomorrow.”

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