

ENGAGING PSALMS AS A MEANS FOR THERAPEUTIC HEALING AMONG AFRICAN INDIGENOUS CHRISTIANS

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Article History

Received: 15/08/2023

Accepted: 23/08/2023

Published: 25/08/2023

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Abstract

People born and raised in African culture will normally interpret scriptures in ways that are unique to them and different from Western interpreters. As Adamo puts it, “reading the Bible in our own eyes.” The result of this is to find other satisfactory ways or methodologies that will meet the need and understanding of African people at home and abroad. In African indigenous culture, the means of dealing with traditional problems like diseases, sorcerers, witches, and lack of success in life experiences, have been developed. The aim of this paper is to examine the use of Psalms for therapeutic healing among indigenous African Christians. Comparative and evaluative methodologies were applied and secondary method of gathering data was employed. This paper is relevant because it promotes African cultural system blended with the Judeo-Christian traditions. The researchers is of the opinion that aside orthodox forms of treatment, Africans engage Psalms as a therapy for sickness and diseases and it has been found to be effective because it suit the needs of indigenous African Christians.

INTRODUCTION

Africa has a culture with its own pre-history, its own language, and its own anthropological and artistic developments, perhaps as old as her existence. The Eurocentric interpretation of the scriptures, although it shares some good things with Africentric interpretation, does not adequately meet the everyday social, physical, psychological, and spiritual aspirations of the African people (Adamo 9). An Africentric interpretation of the Bible is an interpretation of the Bible in the light of African culture. In the past, many African traditional religious rites and rituals were regarded as against the Christian faith and morals. It was also believed that African religion promoted the belief in witchcraft and encouraged people to worship their ancestors instead of worshiping God. African medicine was regarded as unscientific and some of its treatment methods were considered anti-Christian. In this paper, some chapters of the book of Psalms is interpreted in the light of its healing and therapy which are the greatest needs to the indigenous African Christian. This paper will lay emphasis on some of the chapters of the book of Psalms that has been championed by African Indigenous Christians in Africa for healing purposes.

Clarification of Terms

For the purpose of clarity, the following terms applied in this work will be defined.

Therapeutic/therapy: The term comes from the Greek word *therapeutikos*, which means “inclined to serve.” It is the treatment and care of a patient for the purpose of both preventing and combating diseases or alleviating pain or injury (Encyclopedia Britannica). It relates to the healing or curing of disease. The branch of medicine concerned with the treatment of diseases or disorders by remedial agents or methods (Merriam Webster.com).

Healing: The process of making or becoming sound or healthy again.

African Indigenous Christians: Persons born and raised in African culture who interpret scriptures in ways that are unique to them and different from Western interpreters.

African Cultural Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory and methodology of interpretation, especially the interpretation of biblical texts, wisdom literature, and philosophical texts (Wikipedia.org). Terry (16) defines

“hermeneutics as the science of interpretation of a given text”; a method of scrutiny and pursuit of objectivity. Also, Thiselton (5) posits that, hermeneutics explores “how we read, understand, and handle texts, especially those written in another time or in another context of life from our own”. In relation to this discourse, it means “hermeneutics is the science of interpretation of a biblical text” or “how we read, understand, and handle biblical texts, written in another time and context of life (distant in all spheres) from our own.” Resane (19), defined biblical hermeneutics as the art or technique of interpreting the biblical text in order to understand its original context and then find its contemporary meaning. In other words, the aim of biblical hermeneutics is providing the exegete with the tools, techniques, methods, or principles needed in order to adequately extract the actual meaning or intention of the original author to the original audience or recipient.

Yorke (2) sees African hermeneutics as a methodology that reappraises ancient biblical tradition and African worldview and life experience with the aim of correcting the effect of the cultural ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected. Manus, calls it an “Afro-centric Hermeneutics” since all interpretations and theologies are contextual. this has to do with the incorporation of elements from African religious reality into the process of interpreting the biblical text (13). African biblical hermeneutics is rooted in African realities and is accountable to ordinary African interpreters of the Bible. Often, African scholars have argued that the several biblical expressions are explicitly familiar to the proverbial and idiomatic lexis in Africa; in fact, they form significant part of the knowledge systems. In other words, African philosophies, ideas, and world view can be of help in scriptural interpretation and understanding (explicating the biblical truth) of the African people. In fact, they address peculiar issues like; war and violence, African identity, miraculous, abundance of life, oppression, HIV/AIDS, and poverty (Kolawole 38).

The Book of Psalms

The book of Psalms is one of the most widely read books of the Bible (Dillard 237). The reason, perhaps, is because the Christian Church finds this book the easiest to approach personally and directly in every situation in life (joy, sorrow, pain, and confusion) (Adamo 9). Luther saw the book of Psalm as “Little Bible” in the Bible (Rolf 4). Weiser,” calls it, “the favourite book of the saints” (19). Childs, asserts that the Psalter is not a mere collection of the liturgical materials, but has the purpose of being read and heard “a source of torah,” that is, as a source of instruction. As such, they are songs and prayers that originated from the response of the faithful persons to God (513).

Adamo (11) posits that the book of Psalms has not escaped colonization in its history of interpretation. It is important to mention in outline how Psalms interpretation has been colonized by the Western scholars. Traditionally, the book of Psalms was considered to be the book of individual persons who composed it as prayers and songs for either private devotional use or in response to a particular historical event in life (McCann 16). The early interpreters saw David as the paradigm and prototype in the canonical context. He exemplified prayers, praise, and piety for

Israel. Psalms are considered his prayer, praise, and piety, which are useful for instruction and prophecy (James 147-157).

The book of Psalms has been set out universally and in relation to the human-divine context. And has constituted individual, human, social, cultural, national, and religious experience of the writer and the common reader as everyman. It touches the realms that are above, within, and around. Psalms have become a great source of devotion that has invigorated the faculties of man i.e. spirit, soul, and body. And its subjects reflect the individual and social-spiritual conditions prevalent not only in that era but has transcended thousands of generations across the period of time. The psalms are enriched with multiplied values like prayer, praise, devotion, and worship of God, all-round health, and has been elemental in preserving the homeland cultures as well as the foreign.

Healing among African Indigenous Christians

The quest for wholeness has always been the desire of man in every culture. It is a universal concept that exists in all facets of human existence. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health is a state of perfect physical, mental, and social well-being. The ambivalent experience of health and sickness at all these levels beckons us to final wholeness proclaimed by Christ. (Kolie 132). By implication the individual’s health goes beyond his physical well-being, but also with the natural and social order including the cosmic world. The latter is of particular interest to the African who believes sturdily that the physical world of the humans is primarily influenced or dominated by the world of the spirits beyond. This belief impinges on all facets of human existence in Africa. As wholeness is considered as peace within oneself and his environment, therapy in most cases is aimed at restoration of harmony between one and his environment. In the account of Adamo, “healing practices of Africans predated the colonial era.” He stated that before the advent of Christianity and Western medicine, Africans developed some effective ways of rescuing themselves from certain types of diseases. These ways included the use of herbs, mysterious or potent words, animal parts, living and non-living things, water, fasting, prayers, laying on of hands, and other rituals for restoration of harmony between people and the environment (66). The nature and process of healing by African indigenous people is remarkably different from that of the Western world because Africans living in the continent face some peculiar problems due to their perception of the world around them. The African adopts an all-encompassing approach to healing. An illness or disease may have spiritual, psychic undertone as much as it is physical. This is a singular reason why African indigenous churches thrive in these settings because of their claims that individual misfortunes may be traced to ancestral spirits in his or her lineage.

Africans view everyday occurrences from the perspective of their religion and interprets all of life as a function of same. There is absolute faith in God because the ordinary African looks for the solution to almost all his/her problems in religion. Here too, he/she absolutely depends on God as his/her final refuge (Iwuagwu 20). Since it is assumed that all human problems have spiritual undertone, solutions must therefore include the spiritual. The end

of all religious activities in African religious system is for the individual to live well, have good health, to be prosperous, and to be at peace with himself and his environment. Religion for the African, is utilitarian. African's religious craving to the question of healing encompasses spiritual, social, communal, and material well-being. Africans generally search for solutions to problems within the religious realm; thus, healing is broadly understood here as meaning divine intervention in human crises (Asaomoh 65). Oborji acknowledged that, among the Africans, psychic disturbances are partly attributed to the evil spirits, the devils (demons), and require an exorcism. Belief in the dominance of the spirits over human affairs is pervasive in African cultures (149). Adamo added to this claim that the existence of evil is painfully real in the African indigenous tradition (70). Witches, sorcerers, wizards, evil spirits, and all ill-wishers are considered enemies. The awareness of these enemies is a major source of fear and anxiety in African indigenous society. In many of the African indigenous churches, the reality of the dominance of world of the spirits in human affairs is not only affirmed through preaching but reflected in their songs of praise. In most cases, worship in this context is usually carried out in a mood of celebration because the Lord had obtained victory for His people over the evil wishes and activities of the enemies. Overcoming evil and one's enemies is a dominant theme in the AICs liturgy and accounts for their numerous testimonies, songs, and dance.

Christianity in Nigeria is widely acknowledged to be among the fastest-growing religion in the world and exhibits different strands ranging from missionary established or mainline churches to wholly indigenous (Aladura) prophet-healing churches and a plethora of Pentecostal churches that emerged in recent times (Woodward 12). one chief characteristic of indigenous churches in Nigeria is the emphasis on healing and prayer as actual signs of intervention of God in human affairs. Healing became an emphasis largely because on the one hand, the health and healing process is regarded as an integral part of the African traditional religion, and as such native Christians tend to have the same perception carried over from their former religion into their new-found faith. Secondly, healing is intractably linked to their religious belief and practices owing to historical antecedents as many of the indigenous churches owe their emergence to the healing feats of their founders in the second decade of the twentieth century (Isichei 199).

The Use of Psalms for Therapeutic Healing among Indigenous African Christians

Psalms have become the daily part of our lives. They have been elemental in advocating the spiritual, mental, and physical health issues of the reader. The mind transformations and attitudinal changes are evident in the lives of individuals and the communities. It has greatly appealed to the human faculties. The genres of psalm such as praise, lament, imprecatory, and thanksgiving play a radical role in asserting the therapeutic values. Words and their sounds impart life to the hearer and reader. They sink deep down into the heart and fill our consciousness and stir up the passions and desires within us in a healthy manner. Psychologically, psalms create a positive impact and healing effect

on the minds of the client. Usage of psalms have to be in line with the theological exegesis in order to avoid exegetical contradictions. The use of potent words to heal is not uncommon in African tradition (Sonaji 111-114). Healing in African indigenous tradition is a corporate matter. It involves the totality of the individual person, the family, and the community. The concept of good health in African tradition is remarkably different from that of the West. Unlike the way the World Health Organization defines good health as an absence of disease or infirmity, the African definition has to do with the state of the total physical, mental, and social well-being as a result of maintaining a good relationship and harmony with nature, divinities, spirits, and fellow human beings. Health, therefore, involves the physical, the psychological, the spiritual, and the environment (Ekundayo 14). Adamo (50), explains that in African tradition, lack of good health can be clarified into three categories: the natural or physical, the supernatural, and the mystical. The natural or physical means mere dysfunction of the physical body system and this type of disease will normally respond to ordinary medicine. Supernatural or the mystical diseases are the ones caused by witches and wizards by breaking taboos or neglecting the ancestors, or causing disharmony with fellow human beings. Sometimes this type of disease is difficult to treat. One would normally offer sacrifices or special restoration with God and the divinities, spirits, and the environment. Therefore, ways to treat diseases in African tradition includes herbs, powerful potent words, animal parts, living and non-living things, water, fasting, laying on hands, and other rituals for restoration of the harmony with the offended party. Unfortunately, at the advent of the Euro-American missionaries, these ways of treating diseases were discarded because they thought that such ways were not compatible with Christianity. However, at the separation of the indigenous churches, they found several passages in the Bible with many miraculous healings. A portion of Ps 91 is also classified as a therapeutic Psalm (91:3, 6).

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

The author did not mention the type of specific danger he was facing and alluding to. However, the reference to "pestilence" in verse 3 and 6 and to the high mortality rate of the afflicted in verse 7 have been thought to be a disease of epidemic proportions as usually happens in the Third World, especially in Africa. Oesterley believes that Ps 91 is intended to show how to meet the malevolent spirits, that is, by placing oneself under the protection of Yahweh. It is therefore observed that reading Ps 91 does not only guarantee protection but also heals physical and mysterious diseases, including the offence against the spirits. In the time of chronic diseases, this Psalm can be recited over and over again with steadfast faith in Yahweh and recovery will surely come as assured in Ps 91. The converts from the traditional religion and the many African Christians believe that it is the same God who is demonstrating his power in African tradition and in Christianity. Leaders in some of the Aladura churches are known to recommend the use of imprecatory or therapeutic Psalms as a potent weapon to

dislodge the activities of the enemies or bring about healing. Such practices they justify as appropriate since it is an Old Testament practice, but some theologians see it as a carry-over from the African traditional religious practices (Adamo 24-27).

The following Psalms can be used for healing and recovery; Psalm 6:2-4; 16:1-2; 31:9; 14-15; 34:19-20; 41:4; 73:26; 107:19—20; 147:3; These Psalms becomes a vehicle for emotional expression which can lead to the restoration of physical and spiritual health. They are therapeutic as well as powerful means for self-understanding and healing.

Implications for our Contemporary Society

Africans already had a cultural way of dealing with the problem of enemies and evil ones long before the dawn of Christianity. With the arrival of Christian missionaries all these were forbidden and forsaken; other than prayer, the missionaries did not meet the need of the people, unlike the African religion. The issue of sicknesses and diseases cannot be isolated from Africa; hence an appropriate measure on how to create therapy to bewildering diseases led African Indigenous Christians to embrace a Christianity that is embedded in African culture such that they can use some chapters in the Psalter to bring about necessary healing or therapy to sickness and diseases. This is chiefly done by reciting some chapters of Psalms that are regarded as efficacious to water or chanting them. Today, it is observed that many Christians partake in this method rather than relying solely on prayers as taught by the European missionaries. The African continent has its peculiarities, it is therefore important to understand the nature of the sickness and diseases and apply the Bible as it is best understood by the African man in order to bring about the desired healing. The fact that missionaries from the West helped in the African evangelization and gospel movement does not imply absolute truncation of the African culture. How can Africans cope when the things given do not commensurate with the ones that are taken away? In short, the kind of Christianity introduced to Africans did not meet the needs. The subjugation and oppression given to African culture by Western missionaries resulted to the African convert's inquisitive search of power and knowledge in the Bible which the missionary seems to have hidden. Later, they found out that there must be secret power in the Bible when they read of the miraculous healings and the imprecatory psalms (Kolawole 36). This paper posits that African biblical hermeneutics is relevant and cardinal to the African comprehension of the Bible. The marginalization of African biblical hermeneutics as clamored by African scholars endangers and ensnares Africans' adequate biblical understanding. Proper application of African cultural hermeneutics will promote African culture, tradition, and identity. It will also correct the effect of the cultural ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected in the business of biblical interpretation.

Conclusion

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

the Bible in the light of Euro-American tradition and culture. Africentric interpretation of the Psalm may be labeled magical, but Christianity is not magical in its manifestation when we examine the Christian Bible and the experiences of Christians with many instances of miracles. God can still perform miracle through the use of any instrument especially when it appears as if there is no other way. To many of the Euro-American scholars, Psalms is an eloquent poem on the security of a person who trusts on Yahweh (Peggy 104), but to the majority of Africentric biblical scholars and ordinary readers it is more than a poem, it is also an incantation, that God has given for divine protection, healing and success.

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