

THEOLOGISCHE UNIVERSITEIT KAMPEN/UTRECHT

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE USE OF IMPRECATORY PSALMS IN NIGERIAN
INDIGENOUS CHURCHES: CASE STUDY OF CHURCH OF THE LORD, ALADURA

A MASTER THESIS

SUBMITTED TO

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Abstract

The indigenous churches are, without doubt, trending in Christianity in Nigeria. Their uniqueness is found in their contextualization of the Bible in the context of the local people of the land. It considers the people's socio-cultural life. The use of imprecatory psalms is one of the unique features of the system of operation or activities of the church of the lord, Aladura, to solve the problem in all its ramifications, affecting the membership of the church. The mystery surrounding the efficacy of using psalms in the Nigerian Indigenous churches, even though the use could be termed nontheological or biblical and out of context, remains unraveled and stares us in the face. Therefore, this thesis examines the use of Imprecatory Psalms in the Nigerian indigenous churches, the Church of the Lord, Aladura.

The research employed historical, exegetical, and qualitative methods to accomplish this. The study examined various voices, beginning with the Church of the Lord, Aladura, and African and Western biblical scholars to have a constructive interpretation and use of the Psalms. The result of their voices is critically investigated based on the explanation of Psalm 35, which enables the research to establish a dialogue among the voices on specific theological motifs that surface in the interpretation of Psalm 35, such as the angel of Yahweh, enemies, and lament – praise cycle among others.

The findings of this thesis reveal that Psalm 35 is indeed used by the Church of the Lord, Aladura, to address specific situations and solve human problems. However, a critical examination of this Psalm suggests that it has been quoted out of its original historical and religious context. Furthermore, the African contextual reading of Psalm 35 does not fully convey the psalmist's intention, as it tends to emphasize the cultural context over the evangelical approach of the scripture. The Western analysis also provides fascinating insights into her resonate with the psalmist context. However, a hermeneutical analysis of Psalm 35 is done in a vacuum in terms of context.

The research concluded by recommending that even now that there is more knowledge and theological institution, the leaders of the Church of the Lord, Aladura, are encouraged to provide more explanations of the biblical text for appropriate application of the Bible. More so, attention should be given to Christian character formation and spiritual growth of the members in the word of God rather than merciless prayers over enemies. Finally, biblical interpretation should not neglect the context of the reader's then and now and the evangelical nature of the scripture while exegeting Psalm 35.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The struggle for the use of psalms with violent expression in prayer has not gone to rest among the indigenous Christians in Nigeria. The use of so-called “imprecatory psalms” is controversial. It requires attention to the subject, which most significantly applies to the Aladura churches in Nigeria. However, this is not to say that there has not been any academic research in Africa or the West suggesting that scholars have not responded to the subject of imprecatory psalms. Biblical scholars have done profound research on imprecatory psalms. Yet, few have given significant attention to criticizing the magical, symbolic use of imprecatory psalms in the liturgy, worship, and prayer rituals of the Aladura Churches, which is the motivation for this research.

To this, a view of academic work may be traced from African and Western theologians on the issue of imprecatory psalms. The articles by African authors that more directly pursue the issue of imprecatory psalms are the following: David Tuesday Adamo (2015a; 2015b; 2019) and Caleb Ogunkunle (2023), among others. Among the contributors from a Western perspective on the subject of imprecation are, for example, Erich Zenger (1996), Hendrik G.L. Peels (2003), and John Goldingay (2006).

African scholars pay attention to cultural and contextual hermeneutics, giving a hermeneutical lens to the African interpretation of imprecatory psalms. In his work, Adamo discusses how African cultural hermeneutics have been used to interpret the book of Psalms in an African context. Adamo’s interpretation has helped African churches use their Christian faith and the Bible as a concrete and practical substitute for the protective means of African Traditional Religion, which the missionaries denied them. So, they have found ways of reading the Psalm to protect against enemies and evil, heal sickness, and bring success to work, school, and business. In so doing, the indigenous churches of Nigeria have combined specific techniques of African medicine and magic in conjunction with the use of psalms for victory, success, and other purposes.¹ However, Adamo's cultural hermeneutical work lacks exegetical measures to critique the present

¹ David Tuesday Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 9-33; David T. Adamo, ‘Decolonizing African Biblical Studies,’ 7th Inaugural Lecture of Delta State University, Abraka, June 10, 2004:18-26;

use of psalms in Aladura churches, which this research intends to provide. Justin S. Ukpong, Olusola Solomon Ademiluka, Madipoane Masenya, Abe Gabriel, and Edwards Agboada are similar in this respect.²

A significant contribution of Caleb Ogunkunle to the study of imprecatory psalms centers on aligning the psalmist context of enemies with the Yoruba worldview of enemies. Drawing on the psalmist's Semitic context, Ogunkunle emphasizes the one the psalm addresses rather than the purpose or morality of the psalms.³

From a Western perspective, Erich Zenger's⁴ study of Biblical Psalms and its struggle among the church during his era began with a confrontation with the reality of our world, which was full of hostility and violence. His book addresses the moral and theological problems posed by the liturgical use of the imprecatory psalms. Zenger writes from the context of the Catholic debate over reciting these psalms in the daily liturgy. Hence, Zenger wrote to sharpen awareness of the tradition of moral objections against the use and misuse of these psalms and the morally questionable status of that tradition itself. Thus, Zenger emphasizes re-evaluating the liturgical worth of the imprecatory psalms through careful literary and historical analysis of Psalms 12, 44, and 58. However, this differs from what I intend to do in this research.

Regarding Eric Peels'⁵ Peels' systematic theological approach to the use of Psalms as the revelation of God in the Old Testament did not consider the contextual appropriation of the Psalms, which my study seeks to explore in the Aladura churches. Thus, there is still more to be done, and this research has purposed to focus on the imprecatory side of God to whom the petition is directed. God is expected to respond to psalmist prayers by vindicating the Psalmist.

In the work of John Goldingay,⁶ all psalms are considered psalms of praise and prayer, vital to the Christian faith. He explains that Psalms teach us about our response to God in worship and prayer. As such, it correlates to the work of teaching that appears in the Torah concerning

² Justin S. Ukpong, 'Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and hermeneutical directions,' In West, G.O. & Dube, M. (eds.), *The Bible in Africa. Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, (2000): 11-28. Leiden: Brill.

³ Caleb O. Ogunkunle, "A Theological Study of 'the Enemies' in the Psalter and the Yoruba worldview," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, Vol. 9, No 1 (2023): 1-19. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2023.v9n1.a15>. Online ISSN 2413-9467.

⁴ Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 1ff

⁵ Eric Peels, *Shadow Sides. God in the Old Testament*, trans. Hetty Lalleman (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 1ff

⁶ John Goldingay, "Psalms Volume 1," *Bakers Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms*, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 1-21.

God's story with Israel and the response God looks for in terms of worship and everyday life. Hence, Goldingay submits in his commentary that Psalms are not about their seeking God but their response to God's seeking of them. However, its incorporation into the Scriptures suggests the conviction that God accepted these prayers and praises. They become part of God's inspired word, capable of being instructive far beyond the context for which they were written (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

Goldingay makes an essential contribution by stating how the Psalms espouse the reader's spirituality and theology. Goldingay points out that Jesus was not embarrassed by the Psalm and gives no hint of seeing himself as having superseded it, suggesting that the problem is not with the Psalms but with their interpreters.⁷ It is fair to conclude that these scholars overlooked the specific appropriation of Psalm 35 in Africa. They also did not articulate why the psalm has become so crucial among Aladura Churches. Therefore, I will explore these areas using exegesis and empirical methods within contextual theology (in the department of intercultural theology).

Psalm 35 is frequently classified as an imprecatory psalm. It appears to be one of the scariest Psalms because of its various expressions of hate and the author's invoking wrath and death on his enemies. It is not a favorite psalm in the Western context.⁸ However, it is a love book of the Bible in the Yoruba context because it resembles the Yoruba religion and tradition.⁹

In the Yoruba Christian worldview, Psalm 35 is a Psalm of deliverance and victory over enemies. It functions just like *ofo or ogede* (incantation), *ayajo* (mythical allusion), and *epe* (curse) in the Yoruba traditional religion.¹⁰

Aladura churches began in 1981 when an Anglican lay leader, Joseph Shadare, formed a prayer group in the southwest with Sophia Odunlami, a schoolteacher. Aladura means the owner of the prayer. They are called Aladura churches because they reflect the indigenization of Christianity through their use of African symbols, traditional Healing modalities, and worship styles. Churches in the category are the Cherubim and Seraphim Movement (C & S), the Church

⁷ Ibid., 413 -414.

⁸ This is why Western theologians gave different expressions for psalms in this category, especially Psalm 35. For example, Bruggemann calls it the psalm of disorientation in Walter Bruggemann *The Message of Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 52.

⁹ David Tuesday Adamo, "The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutics," *Old Testament Essays*, 28/1 (2015):31-52.

¹⁰ D. O. Ogunbible, 'The Dynamics of Language in Cultural Revolution and African Spirituality: The Case of Ijo Orile-Ede Adulawo Ti Kristi (National Church of Christ) in Nigeria,' *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 10(1)(2001): 72-73.

of the Lord, Aladura, worldwide (CLA), the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), and the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC).¹¹

Our research focuses on the Church of the Lord, Aladura, a branch of the Aladura churches that holds a significant place in history. Founded in 1925 by Ifakoya Dawodu Oshitelu, it emerged during the Yoruba prophet's movement of the 1920s, a pivotal period in the church's development.¹²

The reason for choosing the Church of the Lord, Aladura, is their strong belief in the efficacy of using psalms in both corporal and individual life. More observable is their use of psalms that have similar attachments to the traditional context, how they see Psalms as the weapon of war against enemies, and finally, because of the Aladura in their name, which makes them the first indigenous church to add Aladura to her name.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

As a state of the art, the literature review above reveals some gaps, which are the problems this research intends to address, such as intellectual, population, historical, and ethical gaps. The intellectual gap is the area the above reviews did not cover. The population gap is due to the reviewed literature failing to include a specific class of people in the study. The historical gap implies new developments that have taken place since the conclusion of the reviewed research. Finally, the Ethical gap concerns the moral lessons identified from the study. In a nutshell, the problem statement for this research is the wrong use of imprecatory psalms in the Aladura church.

1.3 Research Objective

Based on the stated gaps, this research will pursue the following objectives:

- I. discuss who the Aladura Church is and her relationship with other Churches in Nigeria
- II. examine the perception of the Aladura Church on the use of Imprecatory Psalms (Psalm 35 in particular) and in the context of African Traditional Religion
- III. consider some selected African theologian's perceptions of Imprecatory Psalms and Psalm 35 in particular

¹¹ Deji, Ayegboyin, "Taxonomy and Revolution in African Christianity: The Nigeria Experience," Inaugural Lecture for the 2016/2017 Academic Session (Ibadan: University of Ibadan, 9 November 2017), 18.

¹² <https://tclpfw.org>articles> link – the church of the Lord, Aladura, worldwide. The Aladura Churches exist worldwide, including in Europe, North America, Australia, and Africa (accessed May 01, 2024).

- IV. consider some selected Western theologians' interpretation of imprecatory Psalms (especially Psalm 35)
- v. engage the perceptions of the Aladura church and some selected theologians from Africa and the West in objectives ii and iii with exegesis of Psalm 35
- VI. examine how Christians can learn from the conversation in Psalm 35

1.4 Research Questions

To deliver on the above aims, this research shall respond to the following questions:

i. Main Question

What can be learned from comparing selected African and Western theologians regarding a biblical-theological understanding and use of imprecatory psalms (especially Psalm 35) and their use in the Aladura Churches today?

ii. Sub-Questions

- i. What is the Church of the Lord (Aladura), and her practices?
- ii. What is the interpretation and theology of Aladura Churches on imprecatory Psalms, especially Palm 35?
- iii. What do African theologians say about the interpretation and theology of imprecatory Psalms, particularly Psalm 35?
- iv. What do the Western theologians say about the interpretation and theology of imprecatory Psalms, particularly Psalm 35?
- v. What is the Biblical-theological understanding of imprecatory Psalms, especially Psalm 35?
- vi. What can Christians learn from a conversation on Psalm 35?

1.5 Research Method

Given the contextual nature of this study, it is framed by a hermeneutical approach that utilizes tools such as historical, exegesis, and empirical research methods. I will compare African and Western exegetical contributions to the original meaning and current use of imprecatory psalms, particularly concerning Psalm 35. Then, I will assess the interpretation of the Church of the Lord, Aladura, and the result of the Western and African biblical theologians with the exegesis of Psalm 35 to provide theological input for the benefit of today's reader.

The historical method implies relevant literature sources that are helpful to the study. These will include books, journal articles, Newspapers, websites, and other information-gathering methods.

The qualitative research method makes it empirically viable to collect information.¹³ I will use YouTube and interviews to source data for this exercise. The questions for the interview will be structured with the help of the Believing, Belonging, Behaving, and Experiencing (B.B.B.E) model.¹⁴ The interviews will be done primarily with the leaders and members of Aladura churches via telephone calls, and the respondents will be asked to answer the same question via email to have enough information or data gathered for the research. The interview questions will be administered to two groups from the Aladura churches. The first group to be interviewed will be leaders of the Aladura churches (prophet and prophetess). A second group is selected members of the Aladura Churches. The total number of respondents was five (5). The purpose is to understand the meaning, use, and practices of the imprecatory Psalms in the church of the Lord, Aladura, with Psalm 35 as a case study.

1.6 Significance of the Research

With this research, I want to contribute to studying imprecatory Psalms. First, this research will bridge the gap between the church and academia by taking the voices of ordinary church members seriously. Second, this research will contribute to intercultural theology or the hermeneutics of an intercultural conversation. Third, this work will shape the use of people's (Aladura) perception of the imprecatory Psalms. Fourth, I also hope to convert this academic impact to a social impact by writing articles and papers at the end of the day. Finally, it will serve as a reference material for future study of imprecatory Psalms in an intercultural context between African and Western theologians.

1.7 Delimitation of the Research

The research falls within the department of intercultural theology, an important branch of Christian religious study. The researcher, therefore, endeavors to refer to these subjects with a strict

¹³ Jan van de Stoep lecture on Empirical Research at Theologische Universiteit Kampen/Utrecht on April 17, 2024.

¹⁴ Johannes Jacobus Adrianus Colijn, "Testing the Waters. Infant Baptism as a Case Study for Doing Reformed Theology Interculturally," de graad van doctor at the Protestantse Theologische Universiteit te Amsterdam – Groningen op dinsdag 24 oktober 2023 om 15:45 uur.

focus on the main topic, imprecation, with references to Psalm 35; of course, the main discussion is the use of imprecatory psalms (Psalm 35) in the Nigerian Indigenous churches, with a focus on the Church of the Lord, Aladura. This research is limited as it cannot answer all the gaps in section 1.2.

1.8 Operational Terms:

- i. Imprecation: The meaning of imprecation is well known.
- ii. Imprecatory Psalms: these are psalms in which the psalmist asks Yahweh to bring judgment, calamity, curse, or evil upon his enemies. According to Daniel Simango, there is no consensus on the number of imprecatory psalms in the Book of Psalms.¹⁵
- iii. Psalm 35: This psalm is used as a case study for the entire imprecatory psalms in the bible.
- iv. Aladura Churches: There are four churches in number, all from the Yoruba land: the Cherubim and Seraphim (C & S), the Church of the Lord, Aladura (CLA), the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), and the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC). These operate in what can be called vernacular.¹⁶
- v. Church of the Lord, Aladura: The first indigenous church to include Aladura in her name. She is one of the Aladura churches and not the only Aladura.

1.9 Chapters Planned / Outlines

The study is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the main subject, the use of imprecatory Psalms, of which Psalms 35 functions as a case study. The introduction will consider what triggered the research, which will result in the formulation of the research questions. This comprehensive approach will further guide the sub-subsequent chapters of the thesis to provide answers to each formulated question. Also, the chapter intends to use historical, exegesis, and qualitative research methods in which Believing, Belonging, Behaving, and Experiencing (B.B.B.E model) will be used to structure the interview questions. Finally, keeping academic distance remains the key to this exercise, so as not to allow my position (i.e., seeing the Church of

¹⁵ Daniel Simango, "An Exegetical Study of Imprecatory Psalms in the Old Testament," Ph.D. Dissertation, North-West University, Potchefstroom, 2021:2. E:/Simango_D_TOC%201.pdf.

¹⁶ Ayegboyin, "Taxonomy and Revolution in African Christianity", 18.

the Lord, Aladura, as unchristian because of their use of imprecatory Psalms that have the element of traditional religion in it) as a researcher to influence the research, to have a balanced understanding that will further enhance the importance of doing the intercultural study.

To better understand the use of imprecatory Psalms, there is a need to understand the subject of imprecation in the socio-religious context of African Traditional Religion in general and among African Christians specifically. This is the concern of chapter two. After exploring the literature on imprecation in Chapter 2, I will discuss the development, origin, and emergence of the use of imprecatory Psalms in the Church of the Lord, Aladura, in Nigeria. This chapter starts with a general look at the literature on African traditional religion and the subject of imprecation. It narrows it down to the Yoruba context and the Church of the Lord, Aladura.

The research question guiding the third Chapter is: What is the perspective of African biblical scholars on the imprecatory psalms? I will explore the interpretative response of some selected African biblical theologians, like David Tuesday Adamo, Solomon Olusola, and Simango Daniel. These scholars have made significant efforts to contextualize biblical interpretation in Africa, validating their perspectives on the imprecatory psalms.¹⁷ I will critically evaluate their approach or theology of the imprecatory psalms, psalm 35 in particular. This critical evaluation is essential to ensure a thorough understanding of the subject.

In chapter four, I will explore the interpretive analysis of Western-selected biblical theologians on the subject of the imprecatory psalms because the voice of Western theologians remains vital in Africa as they remain the vehicle through which the Gospel came to Africa. I will critically evaluate their approach to the imprecatory Psalm, Psalm 35 in particular. Then, the conclusion will be drawn.

Chapter Five will create an intercultural conversation between various voices, beginning with the Church of the Lord, Aladura, and formal theological voices of African and Western theologians on the relevant theme or theological motifs. I will also critique the outcome of this conversation by offering a theological reflection based on the conventional exegesis of Psalm 35. After this, I will draw the lessons learned from the conversation before summarizing the findings and concluding.

¹⁷ David Tuesday Adamo, "Reading Psalm 35 in African (Yoruba) Perspective," *Old Testament Essay* 32/3 (2019): 936 – 955. Solomon, O. Ademiluka, "Identifying the Enemies of the Psalmist: From an African Perspective," *Theologia Viatorum* 33/3 (2009): 216 – 227.; Simango Daniel. "A Contextual and Canonical Reading of Psalm 35." *Old Testament Essays* 35/3(2022): 433 – 452.

Finally, Chapter Six will conclude and give recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW ON IMPRECATION IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND AMONG THE ALADURA CHURCHES

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into several parts: the first part delves into the literature on imprecation, exploring how the African Traditional Religion imprecates, why they do so, and what the implications of imprecation are for individuals and the community at large. The second section delves into sources of imprecation among the Yoruba people. The third part presents a historical background of the Aladura Churches, highlighting their significant contribution to the development of Christianity in Yoruba land, Nigeria. It is important to note that the Aladura churches are not limited to the CLA, and this distinction is further explored. The chapter also considers the use of imprecatory psalms in the Aladura Churches (especially TCLA), and finally, the conclusion is drawn.

2.2 Imprecation in African Traditional Religion

The concept of imprecation is deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of Africa and carries significant weight in African Traditional Religion. It serves many purposes, one of which is to compel wrongdoers to confess their misdeeds. The fear of Epe (imprecation or cursing) is instilled in the young and the old. As the Yoruba saying goes, '*adura tuni lara ju epe lo*', emphasizing the belief that blessing is more powerful than cursing.¹⁸ Imprecation in African traditional religion is tied to the idea of enemies, and Africans had a conventional way of dealing with such a notion of enemies before the arrival of Christianity in Africa. However, before exploring imprecation in light of the concept of enemies in African traditional religion and how it is being handled or dealt with in the context of African traditional religion, it is crucial to have an overview of what African traditional religion is.

2.2.1 What is African Traditional Religion?

African Traditional Religion is the complex religious beliefs of the African people before the advent of Christianity and Islam in Africa.¹⁹ It deals with African cosmology, ritual practices,

¹⁸ The common expression in the beliefs of Yoruba. It is an oral tradition from the elder to the younger generation

¹⁹ Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-19.

symbols, arts, society, etc. Because religion is a way of life, it relates to the socio-cultural dimension of the people as it affects their worldview. Historically, it has been sustained through practice and oral tradition even until recently. Awolalu, a Nigerian scholar in theology and religion, calls it a religion that Africans today have made their own through practice. It has no written literature but is reflected in the culture of the people through their myths, folktales, songs, shrines, etc. Idowu, a Nigerian theologian, adds that most Africans practice African Traditional Religion. However, because of Africa's religious diversity, this research has limited it to the Yoruba people of Nigeria, a recognized tradition and culture among Nigerians. The essential characteristic of the traditional religion is the recognition of the Supreme Being, a belief deeply entrenched in the Yoruba culture. This recognition prompts the Yorubas to seek to relate with the Supreme Being called Olodumare through their religious practices. In this way, they secure and experience God's divine protection and defense from all battles of life.²⁰ Hence, an African, especially the Yorubas, cannot be separated from worship of the Supreme Being because he is the one they turn to when problems surface.

2.2.2 Enemies in African Traditional Religion

Having briefly discussed African Traditional Religion, I want to discuss the concept of enemies in this section, which Africans tie around the notion of imprecation.

Enemy in the African Traditional Religion means opponent or adversary. It also means someone who does not want the good of another. This is a solid and widespread belief among Africans and is evident in their everyday lives. This is because, in African cosmology, the material and immaterial worlds are mutually porous.²¹ People believed there are ever-present contending forces/human enemies that relentlessly contest one's destiny, which was bestowed on man by benevolent heavenly forces before birth.²² The Nigerian theologians Agwuele and Alanamu describe the enemy as "the unseen yet bitter antagonistic powers or individuals that live in metaphysical realms and the catacombs that disembodied themselves by taking human forms to be

²⁰ Jacob K. Olupona and S. Nyang Sulayman, *Religious Plurality of the African: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993), 69 -70.

²¹ Ogunkunle, "A Theological Study of the Enemies in the Psalter and the Yoruba Worldview,"11

²² Augustine, Agwuele, *The Symbolism and Communicative Contents of Dreadlocks in Yorubaland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 95-150.

able to enter the material world, and also hostile non-human forces, all of whom are antithetical to one's well-being."²³

Among the Yorubas, the enemy means *Ota*. Yoruba belief in the enemy is strong and widespread in their everyday speech. The Yoruba believe that every living human has one type of enemy (*ota*) or another. This is why Yoruba say, *eniken ti ko ba ni ota, o ti ku nigba ti o wa laye*, meaning it is only a dead man that does not have an enemy.²⁴ The belief is that the more responsible a person is in society, the more enemies they have. There are three explained types of enemies in the Yoruba land. The first type is *Ota ile* (household enemies). The second is *Ota idile*, generally associated with polygamous situations, in which case a man has more than one wife. At times, this type of enemy is called *olorogun*. The third is called *Aye* (literally means the world). These are sorcerers, witches, and all inherently wicked persons.²⁵ They are more dreadful than the first group of enemies. Yoruba people have developed supernatural (or mystical) means to counterattack them. One way they neutralize the effect of the unrelenting enemy's power is through potent, powerful words such as *epe* (curse), *asaasi* (bewitchment), *apeta* (evil call), *aransi* (evil message), and *eedi* (enchantment).²⁶ (This will be discussed in the next section 2.2.3).

2.2.3 African Traditional Religion Use of Imprecation to Deal with Enemies

In line with the discussion above, the fact that Africans believed in the permanent threat of enemies and the havoc enemies could cause made the people of Africa take imprecation very seriously to attack or protect themselves against enemy attacks. Hence, Africans deal with their enemies using techniques such as natural materials and potent, powerful words. Natural materials include pigeon, salt, water, sugar, palm oil, cane, etc.²⁷

However, the starting point in dealing with the enemies among the Yoruba is to go to *ifa* priest who prescribes specific sacrifice(s).²⁸ According to Awolalu and Dopamu, there are seven

²³ Ibid., 95; Temilola Alanamu, "Indigenous Medical Practices and the Advent of CMS Medical Evangelism in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland," *Church History and Religious Culture* 93, no. 1(2013): 5-27.

²⁴ A. Oyetade, 'The Enemy in the Belief System,' In N. S. Lawal, M. N. O. Sadiku, P. A. Dopamu (eds.), *Understanding Yoruba Life and Culture* (Trento: Africa World Press, 2004), 81.

²⁵ David Tuesday Adamo, "The Imprecatory Psalms in African Context," *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective*, ed. David Tuesday Adamo (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2006), 142.

²⁶ W. Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems Ifa* (Ibadan: University Press Plc., 2015), 111.

²⁷ K. Johnson, "African Indigenous Healers and Counseling: A Case Study of Babalawo," ospublishers.com/African-Indigenous-Healers-and-Counseling-A-case-study-of-Babalawo.html accessed June 17, 2024.

²⁸ Ogunkunle, "A Theological Study of the enemies in the Psalter and the Yoruba Worldview," 1-19.

types of sacrifices: meal and drink offerings, thanks offering or gift offerings, votive offerings, propitiation or expiation sacrifices, substitutionary sacrifices, preventive sacrifices, and foundation sacrifices.²⁹ Of all the sacrifices, the one that is mainly recommended against the enemy is the preventive sacrifice. It is offered to prevent disaster, misfortune, or calamity. It implores protection against enemies or guarding a village or town against impending doom.³⁰ This type of sacrifice intends to return the enemy's arrow to the sender.

The first way of dealing with the enemy is using imprecatory words called incantation. *Ogede*, *Ofo*, *Epe*, and others mentioned in section 2.2.2 above are potent words used interchangeably in the Yoruba context to mean imprecation. *Ogede* in the Yoruba language means an incantation. Traditionally, when an African identifies an enemy and does not have the potent words or medicine to deal with such enemy, such a person consults an herbalist (*Babalawo* or *Onisegun* or *Ologun* in the Yoruba language) who prepares or teaches them some potent words to chant against the attack of the enemy. An example of such *Ogede* is below:

<i>...Od'oluworo-ji-woro</i>	It becomes <i>oluworo ji-woro</i>
<i>Ki awonota mi lo gbere</i>	so let my enemies be lost forever
<i>Oku ajaniwon</i>	They are dead dogs
<i>Oku agboniwon</i>	they are dead rams
<i>Ewe gbigbeniwaon</i>	they are dried leaves ³¹

The words must be recited at a specific place, at a particular time of the day or night, and for a certain number of times for such words to be effective. Usually, people who want protection at times of traveling or hunting, for protection at home, go to a particular priest called *Babalawo* or *Onisegun* or *Ologun* (in the Yoruba language), who are gifted and disciplined in traditional medicine.³² Medicine in the Yoruba language means concoction or herbal mixture prepared by the priest to secure protection for their client against the enemy.

The second way of dealing with enemies is using charms or amulets. Amulets and charms are usually obtained from medicine men who are healers and diviners. They are called *tira* in the Yoruba Language of Nigeria. They are used for diverse purposes but mainly as protective devices

²⁹ J.O. Awolalu and P. A. Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press & Book Industries, 1979), 133-135.

³⁰ Ibid., 135.

³¹ Olatunde O. Olatunji, *Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry* (Ibadan: University Press Limited, 1984), 140.

³² Adamo, "The Imprecatory Psalms in African Context," 143.

to prevent witches, wizards, and evil spirits who are enemies from entering a house and attacking a person.³³ It is also used to nullify all the attempts of enemies or sorcerers. They are prepared with different ingredients according to the purpose of the charm or amulets. For example, a charm to hang on the doorframe for protection may be made of “seven leaves of some plants, and seven seeds of alligator pepper,”³⁴ Charms to be tied around one’s neck for protection against enemies may require alligator peppers, white and red cola nuts, and the blood of a cock. Charms are wrapped with animal skin and sewn around. Others are wrapped inside cloth or paper and tied with black and white threads. Some also require the recitation of potent words and prayer to go along with the charms for their effectiveness.³⁵ Those words must be recited precisely according to the prescription of the medicine man; otherwise, it may not be effective.

The third way of dealing with enemies is to use “*Madarikan*,” which means “do not turn against or do not knock your head against.”³⁶ The purpose of *Madarikan* is to render the evil forces of the enemies powerless. Explaining *Madarikan* further, Aje says:

“*Madarikan or modarikan* is a powerful charm that will kill all enemies. This charm is believed to be so powerful that it not only prevents one from suffering harm but also turns back the evil intentions of the enemies. It has no boundaries in dealing with people, and as much as they think evil of you, they will surely pay with their dear lives. The Yoruba believed strongly that *Madarikan* could put all kinds of enemies, like witches, wizards, and sorcery, at bay by its great power.”³⁷

Among the three ways Africa confronts enemies, *Ogede* or *Ofo* (incantation) is the most prevalent. *Ofo*, rooted in a profound belief in the potency of spoken words, is aptly named *ogede* or *ofo*, meaning incantation. As Oduyoye, a Nigerian Theologian, asserts, the incantation is not just a mere utterance but a manifestation of unwavering faith, often accompanied by a powerful voice proclaiming: *ase* (compulsory or must).³⁸

³³ Ibid., 144.

³⁴ Ibid., 144.

³⁵ Solomon, Olusola Ademiluka, ‘The Use of Psalms in African Context.’ M.A Thesis (Ilorin: University of Ilorin, 1990),144.

³⁶ P. A. Dopamu, ‘Yoruba Magic and Medicine and Their Relevance for Today,’ *Religions: A Journal of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions* volume 43 (20) (1979):10.

³⁷ Aje Nla, the Ifa consultation and divination, “meaning of Madaarikan/modarikan,” <https://orisa.com.org/2023/05/meanin-of-madaarikan.html> accessed 06/10/2024.

³⁸ Modupe Oduyoye, *Psalms without the Curse Words* (Ibadan: Sefer Press, 1997), 48. *Ase* as a response to prayer means ‘it must be so,’ or ‘it is compulsory,’ or ‘it cannot be changed.’

2.3 Imprecation Among the Yoruba

In line with what has been discussed or described above, the Yoruba emphasize the concept of evil and its associated activities in society, making the idea of imprecation natural. Ajani, a Nigerian theologian, notes that Yoruba cosmology emphasizes the reality of evil.³⁹ About the concept of evil, Abimbola, a Nigerian Yoruba theologian, states that there are eight agents of evil. These include *iku* (death), *arun* (disease), *ofo* (loss), *egba* (paralysis), *idaamu* (trouble), *epe* (curse), *ewon* (bondage or imprisonment), and *ese* (accident or any other evil that affects human beings). These agents of evil are primarily perceived as being responsible for human predicaments.⁴⁰ Moreover, the Yoruba view the cosmos as a realm teeming with malevolent spirits: demons, witches, wizards, sorcerers, and other nefarious influences wielded by heartless magicians and spiteful individuals in the community. These spirits, believed to be the origin or agents of evil in human lives, are a testament to the Yoruba's profound belief in the existence of evil. They believe that while there are different kinds of evil, all are ultimately caused by humans, who are referred to as *Onise ibi* (evil workers or evil-doers). Human beings, the Yoruba believe, can perpetrate evil both naturally and supernaturally, reminiscent of the earlier discussion on witchcraft.

Another concept of imprecation among the Yoruba about the subject of evil is *Esu* (devil). According to Bolaji Idowu, a Nigerian Theologian, in his book titled “God in Yoruba Belief,” has it that *Esu* is a dreadful character in the Yoruba theological worldview.⁴¹ It is believed that even the divinities dread *Esu*. *Esu* is believed to hold the power of life and death over them, as their prosperity or calamity depends upon his report to *Olodumare* about them.⁴² He further explained that Yoruba has several myths that depict *Esu* as a mischief-maker.⁴³ *Esu* undoubtedly has evil elements, so the Yorubas have (predominantly) associated *Esu* with evil things. The Yoruba believed that *Esu's* primary function was to spoil things. Several Yoruba oral traditions reveal that

³⁹ Ezekial A. Ajani, “Enemies of My Father’s House Die By Fire: Reflections on the Response of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries to African Cosmology of Evil,” *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology*, Vol. xvii (3)(2012):34 - 35.

⁴⁰ ‘Wande Abimbola, *Awon Oju Odu Mereerindinlogun* (Ibadan: University, 2004), scribd.com/document/510224343/AWON-Oju-Odu-Mereerindinlogun-W-Abimbola-W-Abimbola (accessed on May 11th 2024).

⁴¹ E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (Lagos: C & A, 1996), 200 -222/published online by Cambridge University Press: **22 January 2009. (Accessed on 5/12/2024.**

⁴² *Ibid.*, 200. The *Esu*, called the devil in the Yoruba language, is a deity.

⁴³ *Ibid.*,200-222

Esu makes mischief his hobby.⁴⁴ This is why when someone does an evil thing, it is often said, *Esu lo tii*, meaning “it was the devil (*Esu*) who prompted the action in the individual.”

Among the Yorubas, ancestral lineage is another factor understood as evil perpetrators that warrant people's imprecation to protect themselves from their evil doing. Ajani explains that ancestral lineage among the Yorubas is said to be of great importance in the formation of an individual's destiny.⁴⁵ This means that the family from which an individual hails can determine his success or otherwise in life. Several Yoruba families have household gods or *Orisa* and divinities. According to Bolaji Idowu, the evil element in *Esu* can also be found to be a reasonable degree in other divinities. Thus, this understanding of Yoruba has resulted in imprecatory prayer for the deliverance from every ancestral lineage evil. This is also called the enemies of my father's or mother's house.⁴⁶

2.4 Historical Background of the Aladura Churches

In this research, I have introduced the Aladura Churches in Chapter One, but the goal is to look at their history concisely below. The Aladura movement began as a praying group in 1918 in Ijebu-Ode by a set of Yoruba people who came together to raise an uproar to God over the outbreak of an epidemic disease over the land.⁴⁷ This eventually moves or metamorphosis from praying groups to Churches called Aladura (i.e., Aladura Churches). Aladura means ‘owner of prayers,’⁴⁸ while the Aladura Churches mean ‘praying churches.’⁴⁹ According to Ayegboyin, a Nigerian theologian and Church historian, Aladura churches are called Aladura because of their unceasing or intense fervor for energetic prayers.⁵⁰ In the same vein, Ositelu, the primate of the TCLA, notes that the Aladura Churches pray more and perform more Church prayer services than any existing Churches. In the morning, they pray at 6 a.m.; at night, they pray at 9 p.m.; the night vigil at

⁴⁴ Ibid., 200-222

⁴⁵ Ajani, “Enemies of My Father's House Die By Fire: Reflections on the Response of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries to African Cosmology of Evil,” *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology*, Vol. xvii (3)(2012):34 - 35.

⁴⁶ Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (Lagos: Longman Nigeria Plc., 1996), 200 -222/published online by Cambridge University Press: **22 January 2009. accessed on 5/12/2024.**

⁴⁷ Ayegboyin, “Taxonomy and Revolution in African Christianity,” 18.

⁴⁸ Rufus Okikiolaolu Olubiyi Ositelu, *African Instituted Churches: Diversities, Growth, Gifts, Spirituality, and Ecumenical Understanding of African Initiated Churches* (Hamburg, London: Lit Verlag Munster, 2002), 67

⁴⁹ Ibid., 67.

⁵⁰ Ayegboyin, “Taxonomy and Revolution in African Christianity,” 18.

Midnight, etc.⁵¹ This prayer lifestyle earned them the name of spiritual Churches (i.e., *ijo elemi*) because of their high emphasis on prayer, which is also a sign of their high spirituality.⁵² The Aladura churches rapidly expanded throughout Yorubaland during a revival of the movement of the 1930s, becoming an essential feature of Western Nigerian society.

The term Aladura Churches is used collectively for the following churches: Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C & S), the Church of the Lord (Aladura), the Christ Apostolic Church (C.A.C), and the Celestial Church of Christ.⁵³ Joseph Ayo Babalola, a Yoruba Anglican and public works employee, became a general Evangelist in the CAC, which would become Nigeria's largest Aladura church. Babalola emphasized healing using the 'water of life' (blessed water). Other essential church leaders in the period were Josiah Olunowo Ositelu of the Church of the Lord Aladura, Moses Orimolade Tunolase of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church, and Samuel Bilewu Oshoffa of the Celestial Church of Christ.⁵⁴

2.5. Contribution of the Aladura Churches

The contribution of Aladura churches came to light as they recognized the vacuum; the missionary churches failed to attend to some specific spiritual challenges and needs of the Yoruba Christians.

2.5.1 Contextualization of Christianity

Contextualization implies having a Christianity they can call their own and present in their own identity. In Barrett's view, a missionary to Africa sees this as a rebellion against the missionary churches. He explains that independence clamored for by indigenous churches in the 1920s reflects a rebellious attitude against Christianity that had become over-Europeanized by Western missionaries.⁵⁵ Several local or indigenous people long to find a mode of religious expression that

⁵¹ Ositelu, *African Instituted Churches: Diversities, Growth, Gifts, Spirituality, and Ecumenical Understanding of African Initiated Churches*, 67.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 67

⁵³ K. Johnson, 'Aladura: The Serach for Authenticity and Impetus for African Christianity,' *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 14(1) (2011):149-165. see also F.O. Komolafe, 'Roman Catholic and Aladura Baptismal Doctrines: A Comparative Study in the Nigerian Context,' M.Th. Thesis, the University of Toronto, (2016),39 accessed May 18th, 2024, online.

⁵⁴ Akinwumi Akindolie, Aladura Churches as Agents of Social Transformation in South-West Nigeria 167-168. DOI:10.4324/9780367823825-12.

D. Barrett (ed.), *African Initiatives in Religion* (Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1971), 161-162. David Barrett was born in Northern Wales, United Kingdom on August 30, 1927. But had a missionary call in May 1957 to Kisii in Nyanza Province, Kenya in Africa; Rufus Okikiolaolu Olubiyi Ositelu, *African Instituted Churches: Diversities*,

is psychologically and sociologically in and for the African context. Ayegboyin and Ishola, the Nigerian theologians and Church historians, note that several independent Clergy members criticized the leadership of these Western missionaries, who put so many obstacles in the way of the African converts by imposing on them European customs, traditions, and ways of worship.⁵⁶ Consequently, the Aladura Church movements, in a bid to correct the foreignness of the Church, took into consideration the indigenous people's culture and religious consciousness. They held that by these, they were breeding their indigenous Church where Yoruba institutions would be recognized and respected. They felt that any religious institution not meeting the African daily life experience would create spiritual hunger and laxity. Therefore, in Aladura Churches, the liturgy was made more locally, as they used dreams, singing, drumming, and dancing, some of which were ingredients of African cultural manifestation. In a nutshell, the Gospel was contextualized to the thought patterns of the converts.⁵⁷

2.5.2 Response to the Needs of Yoruba People

Aladura Churches responded to Yorubas' needs by emphasizing spirituality, prayer, and interest in Divine healing, among other needs.⁵⁸ Discussing all these is not the scope of this research. However, Aladura's contribution to offering a more accessible worship form will be discussed here.

Common to virtually all Aladura is their much livelier form of worship. They enjoy both private and corporate worship. However, because of its participatory nature, worship in these churches is always theatrical and fascinating. The Aladura are known to compose and sing songs that match the emotion-induced nature of their worship. Usually, these songs are sometimes evocative and sometimes spontaneous, accompanied by ringing bells, drumming, and the use of other native musical instruments.⁵⁹

Growth, Gifts, Spirituality, and Ecumenical Understanding of African Initiated Churches (Hamburg, London: Lit Verlag Munster, 2002), 37-38.

⁵⁶ Deji Ayegboyin and Solomon A. Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective* (Ikeja-Lagos: Greater Height Publications, 1997), 85-87.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 87

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-16.

⁵⁹ Deji I. Ayegboyin, "Dressed in Borrowed Robes," *Ghana Bulletin of Theology New Series, Journal for the Department of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon*, vol. 1(1) (2006):37-58 accessed online 06/11/2024.

2.6 Overview of the Church of the Lord, Aladura

The founder of TCLA, Josiah Olunowo Ositelu, claimed he had a divine call on the night of 19th May 1925 in the form of the great light that flashed unto him, and in that light was a giant eye, which reflected as the grand orbit of the sun; he claimed he later began to see visions and received revelations, and that on the 18 August 1925, he heard a divine voice: “as Elijah and Elisha have been anointed, so thou has been anointed and appointed from above.”⁶⁰ These three different divine experiences led to the formation of his religious group in 1925, formally established on 27 July 1930 in Ogere Remo, Ogun state, Nigeria.⁶¹

The rapid spread of CLA has been traced to the Church's two Evangelists, Emmanuel Adeleke Adejobi and Samuel Omolaja Oduwole. They are the pioneers of many CLAs in Nigeria and outside the country. 1947, the CLA was established in the Republic of Liberia and Sierra Leon. Ghana in 1953 and Togo Republic in 1961. In 1964, TCLA was established in London, becoming the first African-Independent church in Europe. Today, TCLA can be found in Australia, Belgium, Benin Republic, New York, France, Luxembourg, Germany, New Jersey, Providence-republic of Ireland, and Spain.⁶²

The TCLA was the first Nigerian indigenous Church to include Aladura in her name. This could be insulated as to the purpose of contextualization for Yoruba-speaking people. However, beyond that, the name changed because of the crisis that split the Church and the subsequent autonomy of the Church from Gbadura-led TCLA to the Church of God/Lord (Aladura) on 6 July 1985. The other split Church was named Jerusalem Church of the Lord International (JCLI) on 20 September 1987.⁶³ The proliferation of CLA is based on the use of migrants. Members of CLA back home automatically become the Church's missionaries, taking the Church's faith traditions to various parts of the world.

2.6.1 Imprecation in the church of the Lord (Aladura) Perspective

⁶⁰ Rufus O. O. Ositelu, *The Journal So Far 1998-2008* (Ogere: TCLAW Publishers, 2009), 115

⁶¹ Ositelu, *African Instituted Churches*, 67/127-135. See also H. W. Turner, *History of an African Independent Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 39-40.

⁶² The Official website of the Church of the Lord Aladura. Accessed June 06, 2024. <http://the-church-of-the-lord-aladura-worldwide.org/forum/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=9&sid=dad3e0183b07a1f6a3c9d8127909fa97>.

⁶³ Gabriel G. Jegede, “The Church of the Lord (Aladura CLA): An Examination of a Charismatic: Movement in Ekiti land (Southwestern Nigeria) 1937 -2005,” *The Social Science* 5,2(2010):90-93.

In line with the definition ascribed to imprecation in the discussion above, “imprecation is an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one’s enemies, or enemies of God.”⁶⁴ Crucial to the definition of imprecation is the invocation of prayer and the request to God to heap curses or calamity on the enemies.

In the same way, one respondent, an Aladura Church prophetess, explains that imprecation in Aladura is “an invocatory prayer, which I pray and lead people to pray as leaders in the church.”⁶⁵ She explains that, as the Aladura Church, we believe in God, angels, the gifts of trance, dreams, prophetic revelation, etc., which are essential elements in the prayer of imprecation.⁶⁶ For instance, she explains that to imprecate, the functional role of the trance seer (*Ariran*) is to receive and give instruction on clients’ problems or where attacks or battles of enemies come from and instruct the individual on what to do. How this relates to imprecation is expressed by another respondent, Ifeoluwa Ogunmodede, a Prophet of Aladura church, who said, “One of his members in January 2024 that came to him suffering an attack, which was clear that it was the work of the enemy. He plucked a leaf after being instructed to read Psalm 35 and gave the leaf to the person. After that, the attack from the enemies returned to the sender.”⁶⁷ This defines imprecation as the invoking instrument and an act of revenge.

According to Olagunju, a Nigerian theologian, imprecation in Aladura's perspective means invoking a being considered higher than them into battle beyond the individual Church member's fight. It is not an everyday thing but is usually done when the need calls for it. He gave an example that for someone in need of victory, the prayers invoked for victory are invoked in the name *Ajagorabulah* (God of victory) and *Ajagomabisau* (God to fight their battle) or *el-urrooja*, with the recitation of the portion of psalms, especially Psalm 35, the victory is certain.⁶⁸ Corroborating with this, Ositelu, the Church's primate, writes in the manual of Aladura Church that as a Church, we believe in angels, holy names, and speaking in tongues.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ J Carly Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Jan-Mar, 1981): 35-36. This research section’s data have been sourced from available literature and some interviews conducted among the members and leaders of the Aladura Church. Thus, this section of the research does not aim to use BBBE.

⁶⁵ Interview with Prophetess Bababola of Aladura Church in Ibadan, Nigeria, on May 24th, 2024.

⁶⁶ Interview with Prophetess Bababola of Aladura Church in Ibadan, Nigeria, on May 24th, 2024; see also, Ositelu, *African Instituted Churches*, 67/127-135

⁶⁷ Interview with prophet Ifeoluwa Adegoke Ogunmodede of Aladura Church Ilorin, Nigeria, on May 29th, 2024

⁶⁸ Olugbenga Olagunju, “The Concept of Invocation in Prayer Focus on the Church of the Lord Aladura,” *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* volume xvii (2) (2012):

⁶⁹ Ositelu, *African Instituted Churches*, 193-194.

Ogungbile, a Nigerian theologian, explains that in Aladura churches, invocation of angels who are addressed as *Maleka* (angels), *ogun orun* (heavenly hosts), and *onida ode-run* (heavenly sword bearers) is a common practice during imprecation.⁷⁰ Another scholar adds that the archangel's names, such as Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael, are also used during imprecation in the Aladura church.⁷¹ Ogungbile further explains how this is functioned as imprecation:

“The angel Michael is believed to be the defender of the saints against enemies and evil. Angel Gabriel is believed to be in charge of the western corner of the universe and controls the west wind. He bears good news from God and comforts the sad-hearted and the depressed. He possesses and bestows the blessings of children to the barren and fortunes to the unfortunate. Angel Uriel, who is in charge of the Northern corner of the earth, is the helper of the saints, a good guide and director of man's ways, channeling him towards God's grace. Angel Raphael is the officer in charge of the earth's southern hemisphere, commanding water and healing all types of diseases. These are invoked by candles and incense to make prayers efficacious.”⁷²

The question is, how is this related to imprecation? One of the respondents, Prophetess Babalola, a leader in Aladura Church, explained that the peak of the invocation/imprecation is the calling of the names of God or angels into the battle. She explains that, in the Bible, angels bear different names and different assignments. She said Michael was sent to Mary, just as another angel was sent to Gideon. Therefore, when imprecating primarily for engaging in battle with enemies, Angel Michael is usually invoked through the reading of psalms, burning of incense, and candles. As this is done, it is generally accorded with the song *Holi Michael wa lo da, baba wa lo da* (holy Michael, use your sword, use your sword) continuously.⁷³ The prayer calls on the angel with the sword to take vengeance on their enemies without showing mercy.

⁷⁰ David Olu Ogungbile, “Meeting Point of Culture and Health: The Case of the Aladura Churches in Nigeria,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 6(1) (1997):100 -101.

⁷¹ J. A. Omoyajowo, *Cherubim, and Seraphim: A History of an African Independent Church* (New York: NOK Publishers, 1982), 144ff.

⁷² Ogungbile, “Meeting Point of Culture and Health: The Case of the Aladura Churches in Nigeria,” 100 -101.

⁷³ Interview with Prophetess Babalola of Aladura church, Ibadan, Nigeria, on May 24, 2024.

2.6.2 Practices of Imprecation in the Church of the Lord, Aladura

This aspect seeks to obtain first-hand information on how the CLA Aladura stands as to their belief, belonging, behaving, and experience (B.B.B.E. model)⁷⁴ regarding the practices of imprecation.

2.6.2.1 Believing

In this aspect, I wish to speak about the Church of the Lord, Aladura's belief in the prayer of imprecation. In the interviews, I asked questions such as: What does CLA believe about prayer of imprecation? What can you say about the use of imprecatory psalms in your church? What happens when an imprecatory psalm is prayed?

2.6.2.1.1 Imprecatory Prayer is a Believing Prayer

The prayer of imprecation is strongly believed in the Aladura Church. One respondent expressed that they imprecate through prayer in their Church. He further explained that imprecatory prayer usually occurs during the victory hourly prayer, which used to be early morning at 5:30 a.m. and evening at 6:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. It is structured in two significant ways: prayer of thanksgiving and prayer of victory or protection.⁷⁵ Another respondent said that the Holy Spirit must direct imprecatory prayer practice. He said that only then can the imprecatory prayers be prayed effectively.⁷⁶ He added that when praying imprecatory psalms, “it must be that Christ has taught you the psalms because Christ teaches one to pray imprecatory psalms.”⁷⁷

Using an imprecatory psalm in Aladura Church, one respondent expressed that “the Bible says that the kingdom of God suffered violence and only the violent can take it by force ...” (Matthew 11:12). Another respondent said imprecatory psalms are used during warfare deliverance or victory prayers.⁷⁸ All these psalms came mainly as a direction from the Holy Spirit.

⁷⁴ Johannes Jacobus Adrianus Colijn, “Testing the Waters. Infant Baptism as a Case Study for Doing Reformed Theology Interculturally,” *de graad van doctor at the Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, Amsterdam – Groningen*, (24 oktober 2023), 18-21.

⁷⁵ Interview with Prophet Ezekiel Oluwaseun Odutola, June 24th, 2024

⁷⁶ Interview with prophet Ifeoluwa Adegoke Ogunmodede, May 29th, 2024.

⁷⁷ Interview with prophet Ifeoluwa Adegoke Ogunmoded, May 29th, 2024.

⁷⁸ Interview with Prophet O. Abiathar Ojeh, June 15th, 2024.

Nothing is done in the flesh, but the Church is ministered to by the Spirit of God. These psalms have been used right from the foundation of the Church, and they are producing results.⁷⁹

Many respondents believed that Satan is the main enemy but operates through human beings whose hearts have been sold to the devil. Most significantly, Pastors are the most targeted by the enemies, so Pastors should use Psalms to pray for themselves.⁸⁰

2.6.2.1.2 Victory after Prayer

Many respondents believed that victory was sure when they prayed using imprecatory Psalms. They thought the enemy would be defeated and put to shame, and miracles, signs, and wonders would happen.⁸¹ Another respondent added that healing and deliverance do follow. The children of God will become victorious and have rest of mind that God has taken over the situation.⁸²

2.6.2.1.3 Life Problems Solved when Using Psalm 35

All the respondents agree that imprecatory psalms such as Psalm 35 are potent words birthed through the spirit's deep groaning. You can't just use this Psalm unless you face complex life problems involving the enemy's hand or a battle beyond what we can handle; we depend on God for our help. Another respondent adds that Psalm 35 is against the enemy of progress and those who want to see our downfall. The noted verse is verses 1, 3, 4, and 5, which stated below: "Plead my cause, O Lord, with those who strive with me: Fight against those who fight against me...etc."⁸³

2.6.2.2 Belonging

This section investigates the belonging aspect of imprecatory practice: What does using curses/imprecatory psalms/Psalm 35 mean to Aladura Church regarding the relationship between the following?

⁷⁹ Interview with O. Abiathar Ojeh, June 15th, 2024.

⁸⁰ All Respondents were interviewed between May/June 2024.

⁸¹ All Respondents were interviewed between May/June 2024.

⁸² Interview with Prophet O. Abiathra Ojeh, June 15th, 2024.

⁸³ All respondents were interviewed between May/June 2024.

2.6.2.2.1 Believers to Believers

The respondents know that the Church is God’s family, and their relationship has not broken down. One of the prophets interviewed put it better: “Imprecatory prayers build the relationship among believers and make them realize that you don’t depend or rely on anything other than God.”⁸⁴ Another respondent said believers tended to be more united in prayer and explained that an agreement prayer would defeat enemies quickly. “For two can only work together when they agree.” (Amos 3:3).⁸⁵

2.6.2.2.2 Between Believers and Non-Believers

Some respondents expressed that the use of imprecatory Psalms/Psalm 35 does not in any way hurt the relationship within the church, but it may affect the outsider or environment where such prayers are being conducted; people might not know what led to such prayers, but they might think that the prayers are being directed against them.⁸⁶ Another respondent who appears not to mind the context in which the Church operates said only the evildoer around where the prayer is being made would be affected by the imprecatory type of prayer. At the same time, he asserted that it is where there’s disunity or quarrel that such thinking that the prayer is directed to them will arise.⁸⁷ Another elderly respondent said, “It would make the unbelievers in that vicinity afraid of the believers who are known with such a prayer of imprecation.”⁸⁸

2.6.2.2.3 Between Ordinary Believers and Pastors

The responses from the respondents showed that Church members from Aladura Church have a cordial relationship with their Pastors and pray the Psalmist prayer as directed by their Church leaders. An example is the two respondents who were pastors at Aladura Church; they agreed that there is a cordial relationship between them and their members when using Psalm 35 for worship. They explained that the result of such a prayer session in which Psalm 35 is used draws more Church members closer to them (the Pastors interviewed explained).⁸⁹ However, one

⁸⁴ Interviewed with Ezekiel Oluwaseun Odutola, June 05th, 2024

⁸⁵ Interviewed with O. Abiathra Ojeh, June 17th, 2024.

⁸⁶ Interviewed with Ifeoluwa Adegoke Ogunmodede on May 29th, 2024, and O. Abiathar Ojeh on June 15th, 2024.

⁸⁷ Interviewed with Prophet Ezekiel Oluwaseun Odutola of Aladura Church Nigeria, June 05th, 2024.

⁸⁸ Interview with Samuel Ayinla Ogunsola of Aladura Church, June 17th, 2024.

⁸⁹ Interview with Ezekiel Oluwaseun Odutola of Aladura Church, June 05th, 2024, and O. Abiathra Ajeh, June 15th, 2024.

respondent who was a member said that some members would be afraid of the Pastors and, therefore, called on the Pastor to be careful about cursing Psalms to pray, especially in public Church service.⁹⁰

2.6.2.2.4 Between Ordinary Believers and God

Prayers are a medium of communication between believers and God. All the respondents agree that using imprecatory psalms to pray will draw believers closer to God and enable them to commune with God.⁹¹ This will increase the believer's fear of God and encourage them not to do anything with deadly repercussions.⁹²

2.6.2.2.5 Between those Praying and those ‘Threatened’ with a Curse

All the respondents believe that it depends on motive. If your mind is pure, you would not have a problem with the person praying such psalms. Only when someone has evil intentions will they not be at peace with each other. Another respondent added that it would make them try to avoid each other.⁹³

2.6.2.3 Behaving

Behaving, I will discuss the worship service in which imprecatory Psalms are used in practice.

In Aladura, the respondent remarked that the service is usually held every Wednesday evening and Friday night. When imprecatory prayers are made, we experience a multitude or crowd in such a program, and people always turn up for worship.⁹⁴ In line with the first respondent, another respondent said that, in worship services or prayer meetings where there are going to be imprecatory prayers, people always turn up for such programs because they are going through one challenge or another.⁹⁵ Another respondent added that the worship service usually consists of prayer meetings, Sunday service, and revival service.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Interview with Samuel Ayinla Ogunsola of Aladura Church, June 17th, 2024.

⁹¹ All Respondents were interviewed between Maj / June 2024.

⁹² Interview with Samuel Ayinla Ogunsola of Aladura Church, June 17th, 2024.

⁹³ Interview with Samuel Ayinla Ogunsola of Aladura Church, June 17th, 2024

⁹⁴ Interview with Prophet Ezekiel Oluwaseun Odutola of Aladura Church Nigeria, June 05th, 2024.

⁹⁵ Interview with Revend O. Abiathar Ojeh of Aladura Church Nigeria, June 15th, 2024.

⁹⁶ Interview with Elder Samuel Ayinla Ogunsola of Aladura Church Nigeria, June 17th, 2024.

The effects are enormous. The service usually begins with asking for forgiveness because “if I have iniquity in me, God will not hear me.”⁹⁷ More importantly, another respondent added that praying imprecatory Psalms when one is still having a grudge against another person can make one reap the repercussions of the prayer if the prayer commences without settling the grudges.⁹⁸ However, all the respondents lauded the positive effect it has on believers. The respondents unanimously agree that where imprecatory prayers are made, numerous testimonies have added value, members, and growth to the body of Christ. Another respondent says the positive effect has been excellent; people have been coming up with unimaginable testimonies. And with such testimonies, it has been an addition to the body of Christ. There is nothing to fear, but people enjoy victory in all ramifications of their lives.⁹⁹

Similarly, some respondents believed that praying imprecatory Psalms has some effect on the enemy. They said the angels of death, sickness, diseases, nightmares, and job loss would not visit them. It also makes others desist from doing evil to believers.¹⁰⁰ Another respondent says that imprecatory Psalms affect those threatened because they always experience God's wrath/anger, which brings unpleasant situations into their lives if they attempt to attack the believers.¹⁰¹

2.6.2.4 Experiencing

In this aspect, I intend to inquire into the experience of God’s active presence in the practice of imprecation and the people's feelings or emotions.

2.6.2.4.1 Experience of God Answering Prayers

The respondents' testimonies sound similar, as they see God answering prayers instantly. One respondent shared that his experience has been whelming; when he sees the results of prayers, he also said he always marvels that God is still on the throne answering prayers, just like in the old days. He further stated that his experience has been good because, with faith in God, signs and wonders have been the order of the day. God answers prayers both in his personal life and among the church members.¹⁰² Another respondent shared that he uses imprecatory psalms to protect

⁹⁷ The Holy Bible Psalm 66:18-20.

⁹⁸ Interview with Bolarin Babatunde David, May 22nd, 2024.

⁹⁹ Interview with O. Abiathar Ojeh of Aladura Church Nigeria, June 15th, 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with O. Abiathar Ojeh June 15th, 2024.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Prophet Ezekeial Oluwaseun Odutola of Aladura Church, June 05th, 2024.

¹⁰² Interview with Prophet Ezekiel Oluwaseun Odutola of Aladura Church, June 05th, 2024.

himself and his family as a weapon against an enemy.¹⁰³ Similarly, another respondent said the imprecatory Psalm is essential because he has seen God in action, answering prayers. This gladdens his heart and gives him more confidence in God. It also gave him the boldness to urge the Church to pray because God answers prayer.¹⁰⁴ More so, another respondent explained that every Psalm is essential, but Psalm 35, according to his belief, gives him speedy answers, and whenever he prays with Psalm 35, God answers him speedily. He concluded by saying Psalm 35 is a perfect Psalm to pray.¹⁰⁵

Some respondents shared how the curses/imprecatory Psalms/Psalm 35 have affected their faith in God. One respondent said, “I’ve tasted God and see that the Lord is good. I have used it several times, personally and for others; it builds my faith in God and shows me that he’s reliable and dependable.¹⁰⁶ Another respondent shared that he has used Psalm 35 to pray into the water for people, and they have been delivered from the evil works of the enemy. He said this makes his faith in God more vital than in anything.¹⁰⁷ Another respondent shared that someone who has been to various places to solve his problem came to him with the same challenge. He was led to take a leaf from the Church compound, read the Psalm, and give it to the individual. Such an individual has been delivered. He affirmed that this, among many experiences, has strengthened his faith in God.¹⁰⁸

Some respondents shared how they feel after praying or participating in praying imprecatory Psalms. One respondent said he feels relaxed like a victor, and nothing can prevail over him after participating in such a prayer because he usually experiences peace within his body and spirit.¹⁰⁹ Another respondent states that he is happy and feels relaxed that his prayers have been answered and that God's promise has come to manifestation in his life, i.e., “No weapon formed against him shall prosper, and surely they shall gather, but their counsel shall not stand.” Another says he feels secure, which removes fear; he doesn’t see himself as defeated.¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ Interview with Elder Samuel Ayinla Ogunsola of Aladura Church, June 17th, 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Prophet Ezekiel Oluwaseun Odutola of Aladura Church, June 05th, 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Mr. Bolarin Babatunde David of Aladura Church, May 22nd, 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Prophet Ezekiel Oluwaseun Odutola of Aladura Church, June 05th, 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Prophet O. Abiathar Ojeh of Aladura Church,

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Ifeoluwa Adegoke Ogunmodede of Aladura Church May 29th, 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Prophet O. Abiathra Ojeh

¹¹⁰ All the Respondents were interviewed between May/June 2024.

2.6.3 Use of Imprecatory Psalm in the Church of the Lord, Aladura

Psalms are prolific and influential in the Church of the Lord (Aladura). Therefore, using imprecatory Psalms is essential to the Church's life.¹¹¹ Written below are the various ways imprecatory Psalms are being used in the Aladura Church (TCLA):

2.6.3.1 Imprecatory Psalms as Victory over Witches and Court Cases

Ositelu, the primate and founder of the CLA, explains that imprecatory Psalms have numerous functions but specifically pointed out that Psalm 35 has a dual function or purpose: it is for victory over the witches and court cases.¹¹² He explains that when using Psalm 35 for victory over the Witches, the individual using Psalm 35 should pronounce the holy name JAH seven times before reading the Psalm at noon and midnight naked and repeat the same name when you have finished the Psalm. He believed that "witches will flee from the individual." In case of victory over the case court, an individual should take three days to read Psalm 35, among others, with the holy name JAH at night, and the individual will prevail.¹¹³

2.6.3.2 Imprecatory Psalms for Defense and Protection Against Enemies

According to Adamo, imprecatory Psalms are also helpful for defense and protection against enemies in Aladura. He noted that to them, the book of Psalms has the power hidden to empower them to fight against known and unknown enemies.¹¹⁴ Explaining further, Adeboyejo, a prophet in Aladura Church, is very emphatic in using the Psalm as potent words and shield for Christians when he says:

"Psalm 10, which contains some imprecation, can be used for protection if enemies declare war against them. Such a person must recite the psalm, fast till noon, and pray three times: in the morning, afternoon, and evening. The holy name *Jara ta ajaja momin* should be pronounced seven times."¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ D. O. Ogungbile, "The Dynamics of Language in Cultural Revolution and African Spirituality: The Case of Ijo Orile-Ede Adulawo Ti Kristi (National Church of Christ) in Nigeria," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 10 (1)(2001):78.

¹¹² J. O. Ositelu, *The Secret of Meditation with God with the Uses of Psalms* (Ogere, Shagamu: Publication Department, the Church of the Lord Aladura Worldwide, 1966), 1ff.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹⁴ Adamo, "The Imprecatory Psalms in African Context," 145.

¹¹⁵ T. N. Adeboyejo, *Saint Michael Prayer Book* (Lagos: Neye Ade & Sons, 1988), 116.

However, Ogunfuye, a Nigerian theologian, states that imprecatory Psalms should be recited when enemies try to make one's journey a failure, and one has no defense. Any of these Psalms, for example, psalm 35, must be read with the holy name *Jerora* with the following prayers:

“O God, my savior. I beseech Thee in thy power to come down from Thy heavenly abode and deliver me from all my adversaries who now arise in thy wrath and fight my cause. Scare them away and render them powerless against me. Please save me from their wicked designs and prevent them from blocking my way to success in my proposed travels. Let thy holy angels guard me throughout my journey. Give me thy holy spirit to overcome all obstacles. Give me grace and favor, and let all my wishes be granted for the sake of thy adorable holy name, *Jehovah Jerora. Amen.*”¹¹⁶

2.6.3.3 Use of Imprecatory Psalms to Obtain Power Over the Evil Spirit

Evil spirits are considered responsible for students' forgetfulness after reading and thinking about a particular subject. Ogunfuye further explains that the evil spirit is also the one responsible for miscarriage in pregnant women (loss of pregnancy).¹¹⁷ He, therefore, prescribes that to prevent this from happening, in the case of pregnant women, “the Psalms (Psalms 9, 27,68) should be read with fasting till 9 a.m. of the second day. She should get stream water for the first day and put a three-palm front inside it. She should read Ps. 9, 27, and 101 on the second day and psalms 9, 68, and 101 on the third day. She should put some of the water in a cup. She would bathe with the rest of the water. After the third day of bathing, she should have a bucket of water, call seven or three prophets or even all the congregation to join in the prayer, and light candles on each of the four corners of the room or church for the prayers.

There should be incense burning and singing of seven songs of victory. Immediately they finish one song, they shall pray for victory, healing, redemption, and easy and peaceful childbearing. After seven songs and prayers for her, read Psalms 30, 40, and 70 to bless water for her to drink and bathe at 9 pm.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ J. O. Ogunfuye, *The Secrets of the Uses of Psalms*, third edition (Ibadan: Opcol Occult & Spiritual Centers, 1990), 17.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34

Furthermore, Adeboyejo, in the case of the students who forget things quickly, prescribes Psalms 4, 8, and 28 to be read along with other items like water, sugar, and so on. “Take some well or spring water. Put an unbroken egg and sugar cane inside the water. Read Psalms 4, 8, and 28 with the holy name *Elialaro Faja* sixteen times. Pray for protection over the water, put the egg into the fire to burn off completely, and bathe with the water. If all students fail and if all students die, you will be successful and not die.”¹¹⁹

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that imprecation is critical to the African Traditional Religion and Aladura Church people and is used to secure their protection and deliverance. Also, the enemies and their activities are natural in both contexts, as they intend to destroy people’s lives. Individual contexts have responded differently to every attempt of the enemy to disrupt their well-being. The Aladura responded through the use of imprecatory psalms in prayers. At the same time, the ATR responded by consulting with the *ifa* priest, who gave a protective charm against the enemy. Also, the interview revealed that the pastors and ordinary believers are fighting similar enemies whose aim is to kill and destroy. Therefore, it is found that the pastor uses psalms to imprecate and teach the members to do so. Also, one of the pastors interviewed said that imprecatory psalms are solutions to life’s problems. Therefore, it is used only when there is a life problem. This can be compared to imprecation in the context of African traditional religion.

¹¹⁹ J. A. Bolarin, *Potency and Efficacy of Psalms* (Ibadan: Oluseyi Press, 1997), 37 See also Modupe Oduyoye, *The Psalms of Satan* (Expedition: Indiana University, 1997), 56. ISBN: 9783119591, 9789783119598.

CHAPTER THREE

A CONTEXTUAL AFRICAN READING OF PSALM 35

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a limited overview of the African scholar's interpretation of the imprecatory Psalms and Psalm 35. It concisely presents some significant views on the study of imprecatory psalms, thereby providing a platform for the reader to understand the hermeneutical premises and theological implications of how selected African theologians (such as David Tuesday Adamo, among others) have interpreted the imprecatory psalms. Adamo's choice is based on the fact that he is among those leading the front of the contextualization of the Bible in the African context. He has written so much about psalms and in the Yoruba context. Although Adamo's grid would not adequately encompass the work of every African biblical scholar, it does provide a broadly accurate picture of the trajectory interpretation of the bible in an African context. Several other scholars have used it. Also included in this chapter is a critical assessment of their approach to imprecatory psalms.

3.2 African Theologian's Interpretation and Use of Imprecatory Psalms

The African context presents unique challenges for interpreting the Bible, given the social, linguistic, worldview, and cultural gaps between the authors of the Bible and contemporary African readers. This has led to various attempts by African scholars to make the Bible's message more accessible and relevant to the average African reader.¹²⁰ The work of African scholars in bridging the gap between the time the Bible was written and contemporary African readers is of immense value. Their dedication to this task is evident in their work, which plays a significant role in making the Bible's message relevant to African readers.

Adamo proposed different interpretative grids that can be united to engage the Bible meaningfully.¹²¹ One of these grids is African cultural hermeneutics. According to Adamo, African cultural hermeneutics is the principle of Bible interpretation for Africa's transformation, a concept

¹²⁰ Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 88-95. In Dada O. Adekunle, "Culture in Biblical Interpretation: The Use of Yoruba Cultural Elements in Adamo's African Cultural Hermeneutics," *Old Testament Essay* 34/2(2021): 428 - 444.

¹²¹ David Tuesday Adamo, "The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutic(s)," *Old Testament Essays*, vol. 28 n. 1 (2015):31-52 Africa Biblical Hermeneutic(s) has the following methodological distinctiveness: communal reading and interpretation, Bible as power, Africa and Africans in the Bible, African comparative, African evaluative, using Africa to interpret the Bible and using the Bible to interpret Africa, the promotion of distinctive life interest, and African identity.

that enlightens the interpretation process. This approach brings Africans' real-life interests into the biblical text and assigns a prominent role to these interests.¹²² The interpretation makes the African social-cultural context a subject of interpretation, as described by Adekunle.¹²³

Specifically, it means that the text is analyzed from the perspective of African religion, a particular worldview, and culture.¹²⁴ Pobee meant this when he said, "Biblical scholars should consider African tradition, religion, and culture as hermeneutics in themselves."¹²⁵ In the view of Alabi, it is an enculturation of the biblical texts to its African milieu. Its effort is to integrate the biblical texts into its African settings. Manus says that:

“For African Christians, the Bible may be read as the word of God addressed to African peoples, who must personally receive its message and encounter it in their idioms. God’s message of salvation and liberation must be re-interpreted anew within the African cultural context.”¹²⁶

In line with that, Ukpong uses the term inculturation hermeneutics, which means involving people in interpreting scripture in their socio-cultural setting and indigenous community and, in other words, analyzing the text from the African worldview and cultural perspective.¹²⁷

Other African scholars have argued in favor of using the African Contextual Hermeneutics method to interpret imprecatory psalms contextually. Solomon Olusola Ademuluka and Abe Gaberial, among others, argued that contextual hermeneutics must be relevant and applicable to the African community's social, cultural, and religious experiences where the bible is read and to the Africans who read the bible. The biblical text must meet the human experience and conditions of the Africans for it to be highly appreciated and accepted.¹²⁸ Thus, African theologian's interpretation considers the lives and readings of ordinary people who seek to relate the Bible to their situations as it affects their protection, healing, and success. In essence, the African

¹²² Ibid., 31-52.

¹²³ Dada O. Adekunle, "Culture in Biblical Interpretation: The Use of Yoruba Cultural Elements in Adamo's African Cultural Hermeneutics," *Old Testament Essay* 34/2(2021): 428 - 444. see C. G. Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 17-47.

¹²⁴ David Tuesday Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 6.

¹²⁵ John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 19ff

¹²⁶ Chris U. Manus, *Inter-Cultural Hermeneutics in African: Methods and Approaches* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003), 1.

¹²⁷ Justin S. Ukpong, "Reading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa* 91 (1995):6.

¹²⁸ Olusola Solomon Ademiluka, "The Use of Imprecatory Psalms in African Context," *African Journal of Biblical Studies*, vol. 23/2 (2006):53-62.

theologian's interpretation of imprecatory psalms links with contextual hermeneutics and the issue of safety deliverance, success, and healing as it applies to the African context.

The use of spoken or potent words is not strange to the cultural context of Africa, but this forms the starting point for obtaining or securing deliverance and liberation from the attacks of enemies. Olatunji explains that in the African cultural context, healing (protection) or relatedness begins with uttering words in conjunction with traditional herbs, sometimes given by conventional doctors. The use of *ofò* (incantation) in the African context (especially among Yoruba) is predicated on the fact that incantation can ward off the influence of demonic powers on the sick. This belief is strengthened because potent words have *ase* (inherent power) to accomplish desired results.¹²⁹

For African Christians, imprecatory psalms imply that, instead of using culturally potent words, they can actualize their protection, liberation, or deliverance from enemies' attacks. In this way, psalms are used for different purposes as needed. Imprecatory psalms, in general, are considered psalms of deliverance and liberation. Sangotunde states that liberation and deliverance are the main characteristics of using imprecatory psalms for Africans.¹³⁰ Liberation has a different meaning for academics and the people of Africa. To academics, liberation means breaking the hermeneutical hegemony and ideological stranglehold that Eurocentric interpretations have long enjoyed.¹³¹ The liberation of the people, as used in the Sangotunde context and to the researcher, is tied to the idea of deliverance from the reality of African cosmology, where the fear of enemy attack is evident. Therefore, imprecatory psalms are interpreted or read and used to defend against spiritual attacks.

3.3 African Theologian's Interpretation and Use of Psalm 35

According to Ugwueye and Uzuegbunam, Psalm 35 is one of the most famous chapters of the Psalter (and among the imprecatory Psalms in Africa). It is often associated with liberation, deliverance, and vengeance motifs. As a Psalm of vengeance or lamentation, it contains many curses. For this purpose or reason, it has been adapted (mostly loved by Africans) to a wide range

¹²⁹ Olatunde O. Olatunji, "Characteristic Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry" (PhD Thesis, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1971), 197.

¹³⁰ Sunday O. Sangotunde, "A Textual Study of Psalm 91 and Its Relevance to an African Milieu," *Global Journal of Human Social Science* Volume 14 Issues 5 (2014): 14. ISSN: 2249-460X.

¹³¹ Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches*, 46-48.

of uses among Africans.¹³² Ukpong sees Psalm 35 as a prayer of lament in which the Psalmist seeks God's help and protection against his enemies.¹³³

Okorochoa believes Psalm 35 is the psalm of war against injustice. The war, in this sense, is not to humans but to the ungodly and evil in humans. He argued that instead of praying for the defeat of enemies, we should pray that they may turn to God and come to live justly and with concern for others.¹³⁴ In a nutshell, Okorochoa is saying that Psalm 35 should lead us to ask not solely for the downfall of our enemies but also for the victory of truth and justice in the world.

However, Simango warns against isolating Psalm 35 from other imprecatory Psalms. This interpretation does not understand the psalmist's context, which can be dangerous to a practical interpretation of Psalm 35.¹³⁵ Therefore, in interpreting the Psalms, Simango argues that the text's historical setting, life setting, canonical setting, and literary genre must be considered before arriving at a practical application of Psalm 35.¹³⁶ To him, Psalm 35 is considered a Psalm of deliverance in Yahweh. He explains that the Psalm sees YHWH as the Psalmist's salvation or deliverance. YHWH alone is a refuge in times of trouble.¹³⁷ Therefore, Simango avers that the Psalmist exhorts or admonishes the followers of YHWH to call on YHWH rather than to rely on themselves whenever their enemies are persecuting them because YHWH is the divine warrior who will fight and defend his people from their oppressors.¹³⁸

Adamo considers the words in Psalm 35 to be "performative."¹³⁹ Performative means "an utterance that constitutes some act, especially the act described by the verb."¹⁴⁰ In this context, it means words and expressions of the Psalmist with action, which is used majorly in Psalm 35. Such words as contend, fight, destroy, etc., are directed to the enemy for the deliverance and liberation of the psalmist who cries out to God for his deliverance. African interpretation of Psalm 35 is closely tied to the use of African culture and worldviews about enemies.

¹³² L. E. Ugwueye and E. N. Uzuegbunam, "An Appraisal of the Use of Psalm 35 as Dangerous Prayer in Mountain of Fire and Miracle (MFM) Church," *An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia* Vol. 7(1), Serial No. 28, (January, 2013):13-33. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrev.v7i1.2>

¹³³ David E. Ukpong, "Exegesis on Praying the Imprecatory Psalms," *Presented During the LCN National Ministerial Conference/Seminar*, June 2023/ctsfw.academia.edu/DavidUkpong. accessed July 03rd, 2024

¹³⁴ Okorochoa, "Psalms," *African Bible Commentary*, 642.

¹³⁵ Simango, "A Contextual and Canonical Reading of Psalm 35," *Old Testament Essays*, vol. 35, n.3 (2022): 433-434.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 433.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 433-435.

¹³⁸ Simango, "A Contextual and Canonical Reading of Psalm 35," *Old Testament Essays*, vol. 35, n.3 (2022): 448.

¹³⁹ David Tuesday Adamo, "Semiotic Interpretation of Selected Psalms Inscriptions (23, 35, 121) on Motor Vehicle in Nigeria," *Scriptura* 114 (2015):5. <http://scriptura.journals.ac.za>

¹⁴⁰ "performative," <https://www.collinsdictionary.com> accessed 04th, 2024.

The performative is present in the dramatic and symbolic ways of praying words of this psalm by Africans. An example is when the leaders of a church in Africa raise a prayer point like: “Pray that anyone in your family who hinders your progress should be destroyed by fire and thunder.” He goes on to encourage the members: “Pray...Pray...Pray...until something happens.” When the leader wants the session to end so that other topics can be raised, he screams “Holy Ghost...” and the people respond with a loud “fire!” so it goes like this: “Holy Ghost....fire!” “Holy Ghost.... Fire!” “Holy Ghost fire!”¹⁴¹

A closer look at Psalm 35 shows that Adamo’s interpretation of this passage is liberational and deliverance. Verse 1-10 are interpreted as statements to Yahweh to instantly get up and kill all the psalmists’ enemies. He challenged Yahweh to take a shield, buckler, spear, and javelin. Let the angel of Yahweh pursue them and put them to shame. It may ruin them, overtake them by surprise, and may the net they hid entangle them. May they fall into the pit, to their ruin (verse 1/8).¹⁴²

Another performative word is written below requesting that enemies should die ordeal. This is stated in verses 4-6:

“Let them be put to shame and dishonor who seek after my life.

Let them be turned back and confounded who devise evil against me

Let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them on.

Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them. (Psalm 35:4-6)”¹⁴³

He tells YHWH what enemies have done to the psalmist, returning evil for good and trying to kill the psalmist. They raised a false witness against him and gnashed upon him with their teeth. He wants God to hear what they have done to him and asks God to rescue his soul from them and keep silent anymore. These statements are uttered before God because spoken words are powerful. Verses 10-28, which mention I am poor and needy and let them not say in their hearts, ah so would we have it, confirm the liberational and deliverance interpretation of Psalm 35.¹⁴⁴

Regarding African culture, verses 1-28 are a defense against enemies. When these verses are read and chanted repeatedly and in the way African incantations are chanted, they are seen as

¹⁴¹ Frederick Mawusi Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng, “Use of Imprecatory Prayer in Contemporary,” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* Volume 1, Number 2 (2015): 86-104.

¹⁴² David Tuesday Adamo, “Psalm 35 in Africa (Yoruba) Perspective,” *OTE* 32/3(2019):950.

¹⁴³ The Holy Bible NRSV Psalm 35:4-6.

¹⁴⁴ Adamo, “Psalm 35 in Africa Perspective,” 949 – 950.

performance words or potent words that will accomplish the purpose of protection. Verses 1-8 and 22 - 27 are a prayer to God to punish the wicked. Reciting these verses (1-8 and 22-27), in effect, becomes a means of protection against enemies' attacks. What is requested in Psalm 35 will happen to the enemies if they are memorized and recited faithfully. It is believed that God will judge the enemies by reciting these verses. This is why imprecatory Psalms/Psalm 35 is recited as a defense weapon.

Verses 9-10a and 18 and 28 confirm that the entire Psalm 35 contains potent and performative words that will surely accomplish the purpose for which it is read.¹⁴⁵ The African believes in the potency and performativity of the words. He praises and rejoices in Yahweh, who has stood with the poor and needy. There was no doubt in his mind that Yahweh would do it. The Psalmist, therefore, praises the Lord for accomplishing what he has requested from him in verses 9-10a, 18, and 28.

3.4 A Critical Analysis of the African Interpretations and Use of Imprecatory Psalms

The African scholars have successfully provided a grip for interpreting Psalms of hostility in the African context. Their hermeneutical theory has strengths and weaknesses. However, this approach tends to have more flaws than strengths.

I will begin with the strengths of this criticism of their interpretative method. The vital point is the ability to integrate Christianity into the African context or make the Bible fundamental to the African context. Africans can relate to it and appropriate it to their life challenges. Commenting on this, Mbiti opines that the interpretation or use of the Bible, especially in the language of Africa, and the integration of the African world with its culture, mentality, spiritual awareness, creativity, and modern challenge are strongly represented and visible in African Christians (or are contribution of the African context hermeneutics).¹⁴⁶

However, the Mbiti commendation has a negative effect, which I consider the beginning of this method's weakness. This has to do with the fact that the technique allows the cohabitation of the African cultural tradition and the interpretation of the Bible. This could explain why Churches like Indigenous Churches are still identified with a system of practice similar to the African Traditional Religion.

¹⁴⁵ Adamo, "Semiotic Interpretation of Selected Psalms Inscriptions (23, 35, 121)," 5.

¹⁴⁶ John S. Mbiti, *The Bible and Theology in Africa Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 228.

A similar concern surfaces in Abogunrin's remark that the African Contextual Hermeneutics approach reintroduces traditional African culture into biblical interpretation. It does not emphasize the Bible's evangelical potential. Therefore, he opposes any hermeneutical method that may erode the evangelical character of the Bible. Even as a scholar who supported contextualization, he was concerned that the traditional context and content should not overshadow the Gospel.¹⁴⁷

3.5 Conclusion

So far, I have explored different perspectives in appropriating imprecatory psalms in the African Christian context. While some advanced the notion that these psalms resonate with the African experience and responses, which involve invoking wrath and death on enemies, others argued that such reading reflects authentic African emotionalism. This way, imprecatory psalms can be recited as a defense weapon. The consequence is the reduction of the Bible to a magic wand to ward off evil by reciting the texts as part of a Christian armory. The practice takes attention away from God, the inspiration behind the Psalms, and places it on fear. The text's lack of rigorous exegetical analysis is underlying these and many other contextual readings of the Bible in Yoruba Christianity. As an original contribution to the study, I shall attempt in chapter five a conversation of the relevant themes with other voices in order to propose an original reading of Psalm 35

¹⁴⁷ Samuel O. Abogunrin, "Situation Theology as a Recipe for African Theological Exploration," *African Journal of Biblical Studies*, XV/2 (2000):2.

CHAPTER FOUR

A WESTERN ANALYSIS OF IMPRECATORY PSALMS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the ongoing interpretations of imprecatory Psalms, emphasizing Psalm 35. The chapter builds on the previous chapter (3) by analyzing how many hermeneutical approaches have produced variegated interpretations of the exact text. In so doing, I aspire to lay a foundation for an intercultural context that brings African and Western voices to stage a conversation on the appropriation of Psalm 35. After critiquing Africans' contextual approach, this chapter critiques Western scholars' reading of Psalm 35.

4.2 Western Theological Views on the Meaning and Use of Imprecatory Psalms

The Book of Psalms is one of the most-read books of the Bible and is often used for devotional readings in the church. However, this is not so with the Psalms with imprecation (35, 55, 59, 69, 79, 109, etc.). The main issues concern the interpretation and use of the imprecatory Psalms.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, imprecatory Psalms have been branded by different names, such as cursing, vengeful, violent, and hateful Psalms, because of the nature of the contents of these Psalms.¹⁴⁹ The fact that these Psalms express harsh judgment and desire God's vengeance on the enemies of the Psalmist and enemies of God has led some scholars and Christian readers from the West to condemn them as un-Christian and to avoid them altogether because Christians are to love their enemies, to bless them, and not curse them (Matthew 5:44; Rom. 12:14).¹⁵⁰

The question will be, what do the imprecatory Psalms mean? Western theologians are divided in their responses to this question. For instance, Geerhardus Vos,¹⁵¹ Carl Laney,¹⁵² and John Day¹⁵³ agree to the term imprecation for Psalms that fall into this category (Psalms as earlier

¹⁴⁸ John H. Walton, "Psalms," in *A Survey of the Old Testament*, ed. Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 341.

¹⁴⁹ Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*. Trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 46.

¹⁵⁰ Carl J. Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 35

¹⁵¹ Johannes Geerhardus Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," *WTJ* 4(1942):123-138.

¹⁵² Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 35-44.

¹⁵³ John N. Day, "The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (2002):166-185.

listed), while on the other hand, some scholars such as Chalmers Martin,¹⁵⁴ Erich Zenger,¹⁵⁵ Eric Peels,¹⁵⁶ argue against identifying such Psalms as imprecatory Psalms, explaining that approach to Psalms like this should be on the imprecation in those Psalms and not on the imprecatory Psalms. To this end, Zenger explains that the term imprecatory Psalms is inappropriate because they do not curse but present passionate lament, petition, and desires before God.¹⁵⁷

In dealing with imprecatory Psalms, Western theologians offer various options for handling Psalms in this category:

4.2.1. Imprecatory Psalms as Expression of the Psalmist's Feeling

Some theologians (like Laney and Vos) view imprecatory Psalms as the Psalmist's expression directed at enemies, an outpouring of personal bitterness and a means of destroying the enemies.¹⁵⁸ This approach is the meaning arrived at as a product of common belief or reflections of the Ancient Near Eastern exorcism. Craigie argues that the imprecatory Psalms express the Psalmist's sentiments before God.¹⁵⁹ This view implies that the imprecations in the Psalms are uttering sentiments from the psalmist's heart and should not be treated as inspired words.¹⁶⁰ The imprecation cannot be applied to someone other than the intended person in their context.

4.2.2. Principle of Inferior Old Testament Spiritual Life

Interpreters of the Psalter sometimes resort to an explanation that puts the imprecatory Psalms under the heading of the Old Testament ethic and draws a line of contrast to the New Testament ethic of Jesus that we should love our enemies.¹⁶¹ Beardslee argues that the Old Testament saints lived inferiorly before the whole light of the truth as taught in the New Testament. Their theology is not as developed, so New Testament ethical teaching and practice should not be

¹⁵⁴ Chalmers Martin, "Imprecations in the Psalms," *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 113

¹⁵⁵ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, viii.

¹⁵⁶ Eric Peels, *Shadow Sides: The Revelation of God in the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 90.

¹⁵⁷ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, viii

¹⁵⁸ Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," 123 -138.; Carl J. Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 35-44.

¹⁵⁹ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1- 50. Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books, 1983),41.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶¹ Hassel C. Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 229.

expected of them.¹⁶² In a similar vein, Scofield Reference Bible writes that “imprecatory Psalms are the cry of the oppressed in Israel for justice, a cry appropriate and right in the early people of God, ... but a cry unsuited for the church, a heavenly people who have taken their place with a rejected and a crucified Christ (Luke 9:52-55).”¹⁶³

4.2.3 Imprecatory Psalms as the Prophetic Revelation

John Calvin adopts a prophetic revelation approach in his interpretation of imprecatory psalms (for example, Psalms 35 and 137) when he says that the Psalmist (Prophet) is speaking of future events, discerning God's coming judgment. Hence, the prophet commits the preservation of his life and his reputation to God.¹⁶⁴ This implies that imprecatory Psalms are divine announcements, not personal sentiments or expressions. The Psalmists were more than poets; they were also prophets. Substantiating the assertion, Luc opines that in Acts of Apostles 2:30 and 4:25, David, who is connected to many of the imprecatory psalms, is called a Prophet.¹⁶⁵ According to Laney, this view seems to put the responsibility for the imprecation on God and relieves the Psalmist of speaking from a vindictive and vengeful spirit. The New Testament affirms the prophetic role of the Psalmists. For example, Psalms 35:19 can be seen in John 15:25.¹⁶⁶ More importantly, Bullock argues that the New Testament writers quoted from these Psalms have contributed to the view that the imprecatory Psalms should be seen as Messianic. An example is Psalm 35, quoted in John 15:25; Psalms 69:9, quoted in John 2:17 and Romans 15:3; Psalms 69:22-23 predicted the blindness of the Jews toward Christ's messianic mission in Romans 11:9-10.¹⁶⁷

4.2.4 Imprecatory Psalms as Covenant Curse

Covenant curse is among the ways interpreters have dealt with these Psalms. The term covenant curse implies that the covenant involves promises and warnings that will be fulfilled

¹⁶² J. W. Beardslee, “The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms,” *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 8(1897):496online

¹⁶³ Scofield Reference Bible (NY: Oxford University Press, 1945), 599. /imprecatory prayers.pdfhttps://static.calvarypandan.sg/images/resources/article/prayer/imprecatory%20prayers.pdf accessed June 12th, 2024.

¹⁶⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. By James Anderson, vol. 1, xxx (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, M. DCCC, XLV), 575 on the internet achieve.

¹⁶⁵ Alex Luc, “Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42(1999):398

¹⁶⁶ Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” 39.

¹⁶⁷ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 230-231.

through future blessings and curses. Through this approach, imprecatory Psalms are not evil but the fulfillment of the blessings and cursing, depending on an individual's life disposition, as either justice or injustice was done to the covenant people of Yahweh.¹⁶⁸

This is why Gracie argued that imprecatory Psalms derived their impetus from Covenant theology.¹⁶⁹ According to Laney, the curses involved are brought out in the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis) 12:1-3. Having called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees, the Lord promised, “And I will bless them that bless, and curse him that curseth thee...”¹⁷⁰ This implies that the imprecatory Psalms are the curses promised within the Abrahamic Covenant. In other words, imprecatory Psalms call the Lord to remember His promise to Abraham.¹⁷¹

4.2.5 Imprecatory Psalms as Prayer of Christ

Adams agrees that all the imprecatory Psalms are the prayers of the Lord Jesus Christ. He says: “The Lord Jesus Christ is praying these prayers of vengeance. The prayers that cry out for the utter destruction of the Psalmist’s enemies can only be grasped when heard from the loving lips of our lord Jesus. These prayers alarm all who are still enemies of Christ because His prayers will be answered! All the enemies of the Lord need to hear these prayers of Christ proclaimed today; they are not the prayers of a careless and compassionless tyrant but the effectual prayers of the lamb of God who bore the curse of God for the sins of all who bow their knee to Him. The wrath of the Psalms must be preached as the wrath of the lamb of God. God’s kingdom is at war!”¹⁷²

On the other hand, Adam cautions anyone praying these Psalms for their prayers, never to pray so out of a spirit of personal vengeance against their enemies. There is a need to be reminded again of the New Testament teaching to love and pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44). However, without the assistance of the spirit of Christ, how can we ever righteously pray this prayer? In Adams’ opinion, we never can! We cannot pray this prayer alone, not because we are too good,

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 581-600.

¹⁶⁹ James Gracie, “The imprecatory Psalms and their use Today,” In *Journal of the Seminary of the Free Church of Scotland (continuing)* volume 6 (Westhill, Inverness: Free Church of Scotland (continuing), 2022): 73.

¹⁷⁰ Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” 41-42.

¹⁷¹ Gracie, “The imprecatory Psalms and their use Today,” In *Journal of the Seminary of the Free Church of Scotland (continuing)* volume 6 (Westhill, Inverness: Free Church of Scotland (continuing), 2022): 73.

¹⁷² James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1991), 33-34.

but because we are too prone to evil! Yet we must learn to pray Psalms with imprecations in them.¹⁷³

4.2.6 Distinguishing Between Sin and the Sinner

Distinguishing between sin and the sinner's approach is another meaning some theologians have come up with in interpreting imprecatory Psalms. McKenzie espouses this position and says, "Now the hatred of the Psalmist is certainly directed against a hateful quality: sin."¹⁷⁴ He further elucidates that the sinner must be saved from the Psalmist's hatred of sin: first, the hatred must not be directed at the sinner's person but only at the quality of sin. Second, the Psalmist may desire that divine justice be accomplished against the sinner, but it must be divine justice, not the Psalmist's revenge. Third, there must be allowance for repentance, and when that occurs, the desire for divine justice must be relinquished. Fourth, it must be accompanied by love for the sinner: "In a word, the sinner may lawfully be hated only when he is loved."¹⁷⁵

4.3 Western Theologians' Views on the Meaning and Use of Psalm 35

Psalm 35 is a lament that expresses a desire for God's vengeance on the enemies. The Psalmist begins by pressing YHWH with his ardent desires that God will execute merciless judgment on his enemies (Ps. 35:1-6). Repetitively, he restates his violent wishes: "contend, fight, pursue, frustrate, shame, disgrace, rise, cut unaware."¹⁷⁶ Schaefer explains that the repeated verbs in verses 1-10 illustrate the law of retribution (v.1): May those who sue and oppose me meet with commensurate justice. May the unjust accusers and false witnesses be convicted and punished as intended for the innocent (vv. 1, 4., 7,8).¹⁷⁷

The Psalmist becomes more urgent as he moves from the thrice repeated: let them be ashamed, humiliated, and disgraced in Psalm 35:4. Saleska observes that Psalm 35:1-6 is dominated by simile and metaphor.¹⁷⁸ According to Craigie and Boice, the metaphor portrayed

¹⁷³ Ibid., 56.

¹⁷⁴ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 232; John L. McKenzie, "The Imprecations of the Psalter," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 111 (1994):84.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 92-92.

¹⁷⁶ Benjamin J. Segal, *A New Psalm* (Jerusalem: Green Publishing House, 2013), 161.

¹⁷⁷ Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms. Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry*, ed. David W. Cotter, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993),88.

¹⁷⁸ Timothy E. Saleska, *Psalms 1- 50. A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), 562-563.

YHWH as an advocate and Warrior. As an advocate, the petitioner wants to defend his case in a court of law. And a warrior, the suppliant asks YHWH to fight for him.

In verses 1-3, the Psalmist asks YHWH to use defensive and offensive weapons against his pursuers.¹⁷⁹ According to Goldingay, while it is hard to imagine YHWH taking all four weapons, the shield, buckler, spear, and pike, the Psalmist asked him to take to defend the Psalmist, this explains that YHWH is capable of bringing deliverance to the Psalmist.¹⁸⁰

In verses 5 -6, it is as if the Psalmist is trying to think of the worst possible fate for his foes. The simile in verse 35:5, “may they be like chaff before the wind and the angel of YHWH driving them,” and he uses the metaphor again in verse 6 to add that “may their way be darkness and slippery and the angel of YHWH pursuing them.”¹⁸¹ No wonder some Western scholars have described Psalm 35 as troubled, hateful, angry, disoriented, negative wishes, violent, and unforgiving.¹⁸²

In verse 7, the source of the Psalmist's anger is clearly stated: “For without reason they have hidden their net for me; without reason they have dug a pit for my life.” The “without reason” is repeatedly used to urge God to act because of the Psalmist's innocence. The purpose of repetition is to emphasize to the reader that the petitioner is innocent and that the attackers had no valid reason for trying to harm him.

Saleska suggests that the metaphor implies that the hunters do not regard the psalmist as human beings but as animals. Thus, he is the hunted, the victim.¹⁸³ Instead of continuing the harsh plea, as in 35:1-6, the Psalmist shifts from a request for vengeance to a promise that he will praise YHWH when his vindication comes in verses 9-10. According to Mays, this points to the incomparability of Yahweh, who rescues the lowly and the needy and declares Yahweh's greatness, whose pleasure is to bring peace to his servant.¹⁸⁴

In verses 11-18, “witness of violence rise; they ask me what I do not know,”¹⁸⁵ In verse 11, he suggests that his foes are liars, proving them to be malicious accusers. Saleska explains that

¹⁷⁹ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50: Word Biblical Commentary*, 286.; J. M. Boice, *Psalms: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 302.

¹⁸⁰ Goldingay, *Psalms 1-42. Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, Wisdom and Psalms*, 491.

¹⁸¹ Saleska, *Psalms 1- 50. A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture*, 563.

¹⁸² Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms (A Theological Commentary)* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 63-64.; James L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 65.

¹⁸³ Saleska, *Psalms 1- 50. A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture*, 563.

¹⁸⁴ James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: Knox Press), 154 – 155.

¹⁸⁵ The Holy Bible of Psalm 35:11

they publicly make him out to be something he is not. They lie because they want others to identify him as an evildoer. His statement that he does not know the answers to their questions reinforces the Psalmist's (our impression of his) innocence and their (enemies) ruthlessness. He is like a lamb led to the slaughter in Isaiah 53:7 and Acts 8:32.¹⁸⁶

Then, in verse 35:12-16, the Psalmist describes the difference between him and the accusers or enemies. He says: they repay him evil for good, and this grieves his soul (verse 12), but the Psalmist does the unthinkable; instead of paying evil for evil or heaping a curse upon them, the Psalmist in verse 14 still walks around for a friend as I would for my brother.... In light of how they treat him when the situation is reversed (35:15-16), his goodness contrasts their wickedness.

In the last section of Psalms 35: 19-28, the Psalmist turns his attention to his attackers, but not as in verses 1-8, the Psalmist describes what he does not want to happen:¹⁸⁷ Let my enemies not rejoice over me verse 19, do not be silent, ... Do not be far from me. Verse 22: let them not rejoice over me (35:24). In verse 25, let them not say in their heart: Aha! Our desire. Let them not say: we have devoured him! (verse 25).

But the Psalmist suddenly moves from jussive sense, “Let them, let them...” In verse 25, Like someone who cannot hold his emotion in verses 26: “Let them be ashamed and humiliated altogether – those who rejoice in my trouble; let them dress in shame and humiliation -those who want themselves over me. (Timothy, 565) in verse 27, the suppliant then turns his attention to those who are for him: “May they shout and rejoice -those who delight in my righteousness – and may they say continually: “May YHWH be magnified, the one who delights in the peace of his servant (verse 27). The Psalmist ends on the note of what he would do when his desire in Psalm 35: 27 is realized. In 35:28, with sentiments similar to 9-10, he draws our attention to the joy of YHWH’s salvation.

4.4 A Critical Analysis of Western Theologian Meaning and Use of the Imprecatory Psalms

4.4.1. Personal Expression

Drawing from the various meanings given to the imprecatory Psalms, personal expression or human emotion holds that imprecatory Psalms are an expression of the full humanity of the

¹⁸⁶ Andrew Gloatly, *The Language of Metaphor* (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997),149 -212 in Saleska, *Psalms 1- 50. A Theological Exposition of Scared Scripture* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), 564.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 564-565.

Psalms who love God, or Jerusalem, or an attribute of God, and who hate God's enemies passionately, to the extent that they wish that those enemies children be dashed against the rocks (psalm 137:8-9). Thus, Bright asserts that such a curse is unworthy and sub-Christian but a record of the frustration of the man who needs comfort in Christ.¹⁸⁸ Although this view offers a New Testament understanding and application to believers today, it disrupts the inspiration of scripture. This approach denies the divine authority of the imprecatory Psalms by distinguishing between the human author and the sacred. Such a dichotomy rejects Scripture's teaching of the mysterious, unfathomable unity between the divine and human authors of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16).

4.4.2. Inferior Old Spiritual Life

Beardslee argues that the principle of inferior Old Testament spiritual life results in a stilted understanding and eventual rejection of the imprecatory psalms for today's believers. This is incorrect because the Old Testament does provide adequate guidelines for ethical conduct comparable, if not equal, to those taught in the New Testament.¹⁸⁹ As Laney aptly states, "Christians enjoy the benefits of progressive revelation, but that progress is not from error to truth; instead, it is a progression from incomplete revelation to a complete revelation or divine disclosure."¹⁹⁰

4.4.3 Prophetic Views of Imprecatory Psalms

Advocates of this view often argue that some of the imprecations in the Psalms are quoted in the New Testament, such as Psalm 69:25, 109:8 quoted in Acts 1:20, and Psalm 69: 22-23 cited in Romans 11:9-10. More so, Psalm 35:19, quoted by Jesus in John 15:25 to explain the world's hatred, does not make all the imprecatory Psalms prophetic.¹⁹¹ Furthermore, when an imperative precedes the imperfect form of the verb, the imperfect is often translated as a jussive (ps. 69:25-26). The imprecation in such cases becomes a wish or prayer that it may happen rather than a declaration of a future event. Also, a futuristic approach does not necessarily seek the fulfillment of the imprecations in the New Testament. God's justice calls for fulfillment even in the Old Testament and even more during the lifetime of the suppliant. More so, if the imprecatory Psalms

¹⁸⁸ John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 238.

¹⁸⁹ Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 39.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁹¹ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 401.

are taken to be prophetic, what would happen or become the personal nature and the historical circumstances that the whole Psalms validate to the readers?

4.4.4 Covenant Curse

As advocated for by this view, appealing to the covenant as the basis for the Psalmic curses strongly identifies the connection between the imprecation and a prior Biblical framework that provides them a basis. Laney suggests that the covenantal basis offered by the Abrahamic covenant is the fundamental ground on which one may justify the imprecations in the Psalms and that David had a perfect right as the nation's representative to pronounce the curses on Israel's enemies.¹⁹² This view fails to answer the question: What becomes of the other Psalms in which David is not the king? More so, it serves as a general framework that is only relevant to dealing with the curses on Israel's national enemies. Still, many imprecations are against the people of the Psalmists' circle. In this sense, the Psalms lack explicit appeals to covenants for the curses. The point is that covenant should be examined beyond the general framework or teaching.

4.4.5. Imprecatory Psalms as Prayer of Christ

The interpretation of the imprecatory Psalms as a prayer of Christ is an argument of James E. Adams. This has much to commend. However, this idea may be contrary to the context in which these Psalms were written. It is tantamount to committing the error of spiritualizing the text. How can the prayers of David suddenly become the prayers of the Lord? When David wrote Psalm 59, he said it was “when Saul sent men to watch his house to kill him.”¹⁹³ If Adams's approach is accepted, this historical context of the psalm will have to be ignored. This approach implies a redefinition of inspiration for the imprecatory psalms, where human writers become no more than typewriters.¹⁹⁴ However, divine inspiration involves human authors and may be defined as “the work of the Holy Spirit of God in causing the writers of scripture to give forth the word of God without error. The writers were inspired because the Holy Spirit worked through them. The writings are inspired because they are the product of the Holy Spirit's work through the writers.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” 41-42.

¹⁹³ The Holy Bible, Psalm 59

¹⁹⁴ *Psalms/imprecatoryprayers.pdf* <https://static.calvarypandan.sg/images/resources/article/prayer/imprecatory%20prayers.pdf> accessed June 12th, 2024.

¹⁹⁵ James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 184.

4.4.6 Distinguishing Sin and the Sinner

Furthermore, approaching the imprecatory psalms with the view of the sin and sinner, that is, directing the cursing or hatred of the psalmist to the injustice of the enemy and not the enemy's personality, has a robust approach. However, how to separate one's hatred for sin from hatred for the sinner is the issue this interpretation fails to address.¹⁹⁶

4.5 Conclusion

Having explored the various perspectives advanced by Western-based scholars on Psalm 35, this chapter prepares the ground for a critical dialogue to enrich the reading of this psalm. In this chapter, I have argued that each voice responds based on its presuppositions. For example, Vos contends that imprecatory psalms are the emotional feelings of the psalmist. On the other hand, Beardslee's ethical reading views imprecatory psalms as a source of inferior ethics from a Christian theologian perspective. Alex Luc's prophetic prediction of the imprecatory psalms finds NT support. Still, it turns against personal sentiment or emotion—this negation of emotionalism challenges what many African readers validate hermeneutically and endorse theologically. Lockyer aligns with the view that curses in Psalm 35 should not be viewed as imprecation but as predictions of the wicked.¹⁹⁷ This position suggests that the Psalmist has taken the future pronouncement on the wicked more seriously than his contemporary lived reality.¹⁹⁸ Given this, the following chapter will draw on the relevant theme to converse with the other voices and propose an original reading of Psalm 35. This approach will be based on the conventional exegetical approach.

¹⁹⁶ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 232.

¹⁹⁷ Luc, "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms," 298.

¹⁹⁸ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 230.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERCULTURAL CONVERSATION ON PSALM 35

5.1 Introduction

This chapter draws on the conclusions of chapters 3 and 4 to create a conversation on the intercultural hermeneutics of Psalm 35. Based on the methodology already explained in Chapter 1.5, I seek to demonstrate how the various contexts can complement each other. Beginning with the communal reading of Psalm 35 by ordinary members and clergy of the church of the lord Aladura (CLA) in conversation with formal theological voices of African and Western theologians. I shall design an intercultural theology based on the relevant theme or theological motifs. These include 1) the angel of Yahweh, 2) enemies, and 3) lament praise. I will also critique the outcome of this conversation by offering a theological reflection based on the conventional exegesis of Psalm 35. Finally, I will draw the lessons learned before summarizing the findings and conclusions.

5.2 Intercultural Conversation on Turned-out Motifs in Psalm 35

We now turn our attention to those turned-out motifs that are the most important for the respondents: angel of Yahweh, enemies, lament, and praise. I listen to the voices from the research contexts, the CLA ordinary believers/pastors, the African theologians, and the Western theologians. I bring these into a conversation and conclude this section with personal reflection.

5.2.1 The Angel of Yahweh

Many names ascribed to angels can be found in the Bible. This conceptualization by the Church of the Lord, Aladura, is rooted in extrabiblical and esoteric sources and strongly believes in the ministry of angels. Believers in the CLA believe that angels have different names and functions. Consequently, they do not hesitate to call on an angel's name in prayer and invocation, especially when life problems are high and unbearable.

Believers in the CLA express that the ministry of angels began with the founder of the church, who knew angels by name but never prayed in angels' names. What we do is call them into battles that are beyond any member of the church. Respondent X, a prophetess in Aladura Church, adds that belief in the angel is the second essential element in the Church of the Lord, Aladura, among

other components such as God, trance seer, dreamer, and prophetic revelation in the use of Psalms.¹⁹⁹ Another respondent, an elder in the Church of the Lord, Aladura, says that using angels or holy names in Psalms is the church's tenet. Corroborating this claim, the primate and founder of the Aladura Church writes in the CLA manual that the church has held its belief in angels, holy names, and speaking in tongues.²⁰⁰ The function of angels is crucial to the practice of the Church of the Lord, Aladura. Respondent Y, a prophet, explains that the leader and the follower are taught to invoke the angels' names, especially in difficult situations. Another respondent, Z, a prophetess in Aladura church, explained that the peak of the invocation is calling the angel's or God's name in such a battle. This is done by reading Psalm 35, among others, and burning the candles and incense while the invoking process is ongoing.²⁰¹ The angels are considered ministers and servants among the believers of the Aladura Church. That is why they can be called upon to fight and defend us. The angels in this category are Michael, believed to be the defender of the saints against enemies and evil, and Gabriel, who is in charge of the western corner of the universe controlling the wind. He is known for goodness from God and comfort. Uriel is the helper of the saints, a good guide and director of man's ways, channeling him towards God's grace. Raphael is the officer in charge of the earth's southern hemisphere, commanding water and healing all types of diseases.²⁰² Next, we listen to the formal voice of the African and Western context. From an African perspective, besides the supreme God, traditional African religion distinguishes between the ancestors, minor spirits, and evil spirits. Among the minor spirits, numerous categories are evident (e.g., nature spirits); stories and legends frequently feature such beings, and offerings and sacrifices are directed to them.²⁰³ The African view that spirits other than God himself do exist results in a new awareness of angels when scholars approach the Old Testament using African perspectives. In this case, the view of the angel of Yahweh in the contextual reading of Psalm 35 recognizes and believes in the angel (as a minor spirit) that can help secure deliverance. An instance of this is the expression of most Yoruba Christians: *angeli mi* (my angel or guarding angel). And in prayer, some would say, "My angel, do not sleep in heaven. Or, my angel, you are sleeping; that is why this calamity has befallen me." Thus, Ezeanya stresses that this emphasis on angels would replace

¹⁹⁹ Section 2.6.1 and 2.6.2

²⁰⁰ Section 2.6.1 and 2.6.2

²⁰¹ Section 2.6.1 and 2.6.2

²⁰² Section 2.6.1

²⁰³ John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975),66.

belief in minor divinities, especially African Christians. The two are separate categories of beings.²⁰⁴

Then, in a Western context, Burgos avers that the angel of Yahweh is a figure who possesses full deity but is distinct from God.²⁰⁵ He asserts that it denotes the function of someone and is not a taxonomic category in the Old Testament. According to Heiser, the angel of Yahweh means a ‘messenger,’ and his being regarded as a messenger does not imply ontological inferiority because Yahweh himself is identified as the *Mal’ak* (messenger).²⁰⁶ In line with the functionality of the angel of Yahweh, Calvin contends that the angel of the Lord is an instrument of God’s judgment against the psalmist’s enemies.²⁰⁷ When quoting Calvin, Warfield is correct in saying that angels are the instrument through which the entire work of God’s providence is administered.²⁰⁸ Advancing the discussion, Calvin acknowledges that in the scripture, the angels function in dual ways as devils and holy angels. However, God’s sovereignty reigns above the two. He asserts that Yahweh uses the fallen angels for his disciplinary assignments. This was the case of the evil spirit coming from God that bothered King Saul in 1 Samuel 16:14. But the function of the holy angel is to protect, which is also from Yahweh. However, the enemies must be punished for the sacred angel to make deliverance possible for the righteous.²⁰⁹

In conclusion, the outcome of this aspect of the conversation shows that CLA’s belief in angels is the basis of their various uses of the names of angels as influenced by the African spiritual cosmology of the many spirits. Similarly, the formal voices of African and Western on the angel of Yahweh do not succumb to the multiplicity of the angels, probably because they come from an academic perspective. However, the African interpretation is not far from the performative result of Psalm 35 because it is more of a contextual approach. In the case of the Western voices, the angel of Yahweh is discussed more in terms of function as an instrument of God of Judgement, God’s providence is administered through the angel, and the sovereignty of God.

²⁰⁴ S. N. Ezeanya, *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (London: Lutter Work, 1972), 1965:45.

²⁰⁵ Michael R. Burgos, “The Angel of Yahweh: A Biblical Appellation for the Second Person of the Holy Trinity,” *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* volume 22(31)(2021): 1-24.

²⁰⁶ Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism and the Language of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible and Dead Sea Scrolls,” *TynBul*, 65.1(2014):91.

²⁰⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms Vol. 1*. trans. By James Anderson (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, M.DCCC.XLV), 578.

²⁰⁸ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 319.

²⁰⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms Vol. 1*, 579.

5.2.2 Enemies

Drawing on African Indigenous belief, enemies are both physical and non-physical. These two categories are united in the African conceptual framework, representing spirits as beings and human agents as spiritual enemies. For example, a witch is both a person and a spirit based on their manifestations, confession, and the experience of Africans.

As indicated in chapters 2, 3, and 4, trained theologians and ordinary believers in the research contexts express that enemies are the basis for imprecation. However, in the CLA and African contexts, the activities of enemies appear more accurate than the others. This was evident in the CLA Pastors' and theologians' interpretation or approach to Psalm 35 in the context of the enemy's reality. Therefore, this has proved essential for ordinary believers and pastors of the CLA to pray Psalms 35.

In the CLA, the concept of an enemy has been observed to be essential for both individuals and communities of the church. From the respondents' perspective (Pastors and ordinary believers), the main enemies people search to be protected against is the devil. They also share another view on who the enemies are; however, all respondents, the Pastors and members, stress that the enemy's identity goes beyond the devil alone. Others are considered enemies, such as members of the family and world (this includes witches, wizards, sorcerers, etc.).²¹⁰ Another respondent, XX, a member of Aladura Church, mentioned that one's enemies are people of one's own family. They said these enemies could also be someone they are not related to. They told me these enemies could be in one's church, school, office, cars, markets, and recreational centers. They are the contending forces that every member must strive to free themselves from using Psalm 35.

CLA Pastors' opinions are not different from those of church members. Most members believe that Pastors are the people who even need to use Psalm 35 to protect themselves than the members because they are the ones leading the battle of the kingdom of God here on earth, and they are the target of the greatest enemy, Satan. This is also reflected in the voice of the pastors who listened to that Psalms are the book they do not take for granted. In the response of one of the respondents, Y, a prophet in Aladura church, stressed that God had instructed him to keep reading and using Psalm 35 from the beginning of this year until the interview was conducted with him. He said he has not stopped utilizing this Psalm and has recorded several testimonies.

²¹⁰ Chapter 2 discuss the ideal of enemy in details than we have it here in the section.

They are taking the formal voices of Africans and Westerners on the identity of enemies in Psalm 35. They show a homogeneous picture of who the enemy is and what enemies are willing to do. The image of enemies is described as an army, hunters, false witnesses, brothers or friends like enemies, etc., whose activities are not meant to do good but evil. This is more applicable to the African context than to the Western context. For example, an African Christian would understand the army in Psalm 35 as evil or invisible enemies. At the same time, friends or brothers in Psalm 35 are enemies close to one another. This is traceable to the background African Christians are coming from, which holds tightly to the reality of the existence of enemies. In the view of African Christians, the enemy is identified as both physical and spiritual. They believe that the enemies of Christians range from the world (devil), members of one's family, people outside the family, and one's self. Some think physical enemies should be treated with common sense to avoid physical confrontation. However, the spiritual enemy is stubborn and would not go out quickly without a forceful prayer, and Psalm 35 is the weapon to end the enemy's activities.²¹¹

According to Frimpong and Harriet, the physical enemy is believed to exist so long as we live in the flesh; we would never stop attracting people who, for one reason or another, hate us with or without a cause. They can be found everywhere and at any time, and no matter how hard we try to live in peace with all men, we will never get everyone to love us. There will still be those who will wish for our downfall, and since they are not known, psalm 35 becomes a defense weapon, as discussed in Chapter 3.²¹²

Concerning enemies being both physical and spiritual, the typical example is witches, and is the most feared by most African Christians. Frimpong and Harriet opine that Africans believed that the spirit of witches operates physically through human beings, and this makes people possessed by witchcraft tend not to be at peace with Christians because their spirits cannot be in harmony with each other, and that no level of education can eliminate the fear of witches except the use of the word of God.²¹³

For Western theologians' motif of enemies, the notion of enemies is not seen in the way Africa sees it, probably because of their scientific worldview. The Western concept of enemies is the

²¹¹ Frimpong Wiafe and Harriet Clotey, "Ghanaian Christian Understanding of the Concept of Enemy with Reference to Psalm 35:1-10: A Case Study of Some Selected Churches Under the Neo-Prophetic Strand of Ghanaian Christianity," *The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention* Volume 2 issues 11 (2015): 1707-1713.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 1709

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 1709-1710.

individual or nation with a gun or destructive weapon to attack another country. Unlike in the African context, it is more of a physical thing or combat than spiritual. In Peels's view, Western theologians identify enemies as the people who arise as enemies of God because they grasp threateningly at the people of God's covenant.²¹⁴ However, how does the Psalmist conceive the idea of enemies?

In conclusion, the aspect of enemies emerges in their hermeneutical readings of Psalms 35. However, the CLA concept of enemies is influenced by traditional African beliefs in which the physical and spiritual realities are combined as entities. In their perspective, the existence of spirit is genuine and not abstract. This is not so true of the formal voices of African and Western voices because they come from academic perspectives. The African voices resemble the CLA in the interpretation of Psalm 35 with the result of deliverance, which shows a consciousness of the context. However, the Western concept of enemies does not merge the physical with the spiritual. They do well to separate them. Thus, the perspective of Western voices of the enemy is physical and not spiritual.

5.2.3 Lament and Praise

The lament and praise motifs from all the voices present a different understanding from the formal and espoused theologies and between the normative understanding of the psalmist.

In CLA, the concept of lament and praise is clearly or broadly accepted: pastors and many congregation members believe that lamenting prayer means crying out to God over your situation or feeling attacked by the enemy. The distressing situations call for concerted prayer, but in practice, traumatized people often battle to express themselves adequately to find release and comfort. CLA has a lament prayer structure that the church usually follows, and this is well spelled out in the manual and practice of the church of the Lord, Aladura. Their energetic, emotionalism, and unease prayer lifestyle make them named Aladura (prayer owner). This is the very vital vacuum in the indigenous people's lives. The Pastor and members stress that their Wednesday victory prayers usually host a population double the church's regular worship service. The victory hour goes along with a different title. However, the Prophet, in one of the church interviews, said each of the titles takes along its psalm. He explains that Psalm 35 is the Psalm of liberation, victory,

²¹⁴ Hendrik G. C. Peels, *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* (E.J. Brill, Leiden: The Netherlands, 1995), 207.

defense, and deliverance. One respondent, a member of the lord's church, adds that during this moment, a song like “*ayangasi ota mi..*” is being sung, accompanied by the drums. He adds that it used to be at night most of the time, and they usually exceed the average service time. Most of the respondent express that the experience after the prayer is healing and joy that they feel their lament has been answered or heard.

The formal voice of the African scholar stresses that lament is healing to lamenter, and the need for healing is paramount.²¹⁵ In chapter 3, the prayer in which Psalm 35 is used is followed up to see people expressing their pain and not releasing only their emotions. It is a language for dealing with suffering and not only to solve the problem of suffering. When people lament, they express raw emotions that arise from intense pain that word of mouth cannot express. What only happens to the sufferer in this context is to ask questions in lament. This is what characterized Psalm 35 as interpreted by the formal voice of the Africans. The question sounds like a Psalmist when the lament is offered to God: if God is God and God is all-powerful and good, how can evil and enemies torment the world?²¹⁶

The Western theologian's formal voice lacks what can be called the lamenting culture of the lamentable. This is because the Western context lacks context for the lament. There is more expression of praise in the appropriation of psalms than praying the Psalm. Also, the Western voice does more exposition of the teaching on lament and praise from Psalm with imprecation but lacks context to appropriate it. They ascertain that Psalm 35 achieves tremendous significance in its lament genre. Its profound message is communicated through different contextual interpretations based on lament as fundamental. The praying process moves from contending and fighting to vowing to praise Yahweh three times.²¹⁷ The entire pericope consists of appeals to YHWH, elements of lament, and descriptions of the enemies. Coonghe avers that,²¹⁸ Lamentation in ps. 35 is an expression of a double wish of lament and imprecation simultaneously. An example

²¹⁵ Frances Klopper, “Lament, the Language of our Times,” *OTE* 21/1(2008): 124-135.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124-135.

²¹⁷ Psalm 35:9-10,18,28. The Holy Bible.

²¹⁸ Michael Jegankumar Coonghe, “Cursed are You!!! An Exegetical Reading of Ps. 35, and Its Uniqueness as an Individual Lament,” *A paper submitted as a Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Seminar on Psalms* (Roma: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2015-2016), 3ff.

is verse 3 of Psalm 35: “Say to my soul, I am your salvation,”²¹⁹ and “Draw the spear and Javelin against my pursuers;”²²⁰

According to Coonghe, the vow to praise is the hallmark of the spirituality of the Psalms, especially in lament psalms.²²¹ This is the reason why Christians cannot avoid imprecatory Psalms. At every conclusion of the division of the psalmist lament is the movement to praise Yahweh. In another way, we could say that it is to glorify God that the psalmist is asking for intervention and vengeance on their enemies. Verse 18: ‘Then I will thank you in the great congregation; in the mighty throng I will praise you.’²²² Psalm 35 brings this spirituality of thanksgiving; indeed, it becomes a structure breaker (vv.9-10, 18, 28). In the Hebrew psalter, lament and trust cannot be separated. Lament is a spirituality in the Psalter. Kolarcik argues that confidence in the Lord motivates the psalmist to praise Him.²²³ It is also possible to argue that a lament psalm never leads to doom in the Psalter, but it does give birth to more confidence in overcoming struggles.

Turning to the New Testament opens another contextualization of Psalm 35, which shows that lament is not absent in the New Testament. According to Menken, verse 7: They hate me without cause (also in ps.69:5), is cited frequently in the NT in the context of Jesus's suffering so that John can be taking the image from either of the Psalms.²²⁴ In addition, John 15:25 could allude to hatred, persecution, and fighting without cause in Psalms 109:3 and 119:161. The motif of the suffering of the righteous one being persecuted without reason stands in the background of John 15:25.²²⁵ Keil and Delitzsch state that lamentation and vow to praise are the two corresponding elements of the cross and resurrection of Christ.²²⁶ However, this is embodied in the prophetic pronouncement of Psalm 35 as messianic. For the psalmist, psalm 35 opens with the lament of a suppliant and ends

²¹⁹ Psalm 35:3b is the petition part of the double wish of the psalmist.

²²⁰ Verse 3a is the wish/imprecation part of the double wish. The point is that this double wish is synthesized and concluded in a single verse.

²²¹ Coonghe, “Cursed are You!!! An Exegetical Reading of Ps. 35, and Its Uniqueness as an Individual Lament,” *A paper submitted as a Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Seminar on Psalms* (Roma: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2015-2016), 17.

²²² Psalm 35:18. The Holy Bible.

²²³ Michael F. Kolarcik, *The Psalms, Lecture Note* (Roma: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2015-2016) in Coonghe, “Cursed are You!!! An Exegetical Reading of Ps. 35, and Its Uniqueness as an Individual Lament,” *A paper submitted as a Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Seminar on Psalms* (Roma: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2015-2016), 17.

²²⁴ M.J.J. Menken, “Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel. Studies in Textual Form,” *Contributions to Biblical Exegesis & Theology* 15(Kampen,1996):145.

²²⁵ Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John. A Theological Commentary* (Cambridge, 1997), 526.

²²⁶ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, Vol. 5. Psalms in Three Volumes (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1867), 416.

with vows to praise the Lord as a result of God's deliverance of the suffering one. This movement from lament to praise is also followed in the African context, in which praise follows when the deliverance is given. For Theodoret and Augustine, the psalm contains the themes of Christ's passion and resurrection, which correspond with the themes of lament and praise. For Theodoret, darkness and dawn are comparable to lament, thanksgiving, and correspondence with the cross and resurrection. While preaching on the psalm on Good Friday, Augustine reminds his audience about the integral link between the passion and resurrection of Christ as occasions of sorrow and celebration.²²⁷

In conclusion, we can conclude that lamentation is more pronounced in the voices of Africa and CLA than in Western voices. This speaks of the context of each voice and what informs their interpretation. The CLA and most African contexts are poor and suffering contexts in which many questions are raised parallel to Psalmist in Psalm 35. The reason why churches are full of prayers in the African context is not only because poverty or suffering is brutal on the land but also because of the belief that failure comes from evil powers that believers have to fight absolutely. The practice of deliverance has become the reality of African church spirituality.²²⁸ The CLA praise and lament structure parallels Psalm 35's petition, lament, and praise structures. The point at which they parted is in the theological meaning of each structure. The Yoruba cultural theology says, "*eni ba dupe ore ana, yio ri omiran gba,*" meaning that when you appreciate God for what He did yesterday, you will receive another. This seems to be the idea. However, this is not what the psalmist intends to convey. Later, the psalmist did not even ask before vowing to praise God. The theology of the psalmist structure is not what to get but an expression of deep trust in Yahweh, which he repeated three times to explain the extent of his faith in Yahweh.

Also, the consideration of the contextualization of lament and praise in the New Testament as the cross and suffering/resurrection pattern of Jesus will share with the Western view of the Christological view of Psalm 35, but not in the same direction as the African view of psalm 35 as discussed in chapter 3. The African context found the lament dimension of the psalm a potential religious and theological resource to articulate their grief and agony in the light of the psalm's content of enemies and not about Christ's suffering on the cross and his resurrection, as explored

²²⁷ Augustine, Saint. *Exposition on the Book of Psalms* Vol.1 (Oxford: J. H. Paker, 1847), 149-150.

²²⁸ Victor L. Budha, "Intercultural Criticism of Spiritual Warfare (Ephesians 6:10-20)," *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (2022):1-7.

in the New Testament. As discussed in Chapter 3, African Christian lament is very helpful as it takes different forms that resonate with their situation. This further shows that Christians are not wrong to express themselves with psalms 35. God allows them to grieve in prayer the grief they experience on account of his delay in correctly judging.²²⁹ A Christian can use lament psalms, perhaps not for self-advancement or victory over private enemies but for advancing God's kingdom and dethroning the enemies' kingdom.

5.3 A Critique of CLA Intercultural Hermeneutic of Psalm 35

Given that the CLA has tapped into African spiritual cosmology as an interpretive lens for appropriating Psalm 35 and that the African Western theological perspective has produced the following narrative on the following theological motifs earlier discussed in sections 5.2.1 to 5.2.3, I shall argue that contextuality, by its very mode, does not abdicate the original meaning of the Bible. This is not a normative interpretation of the text but a perspective that moves closer to the intention of the writer of Psalm 35.

5.3.1 Angels of Yahweh

In section 5.1, the outcome shows that CLA's interpretation of the angel of YH in Psalm 35 is considered one of the angels influenced by African spiritual cosmology. This makes belief in the names of angels speak volumes in CLA practice and usage. African spiritual cosmology believes in spirits/angels as created entities, separated from divinities and described as non-descript, immortal, and invisible. Still, they can incarnate into material bodies to be visible for specific purposes. Thus, the African narrative portrays them in human form, activities, and personalities.²³⁰ However, how does the psalmist conceive this?

In Hebrew, the angel of Yahweh is called a messenger of Yahweh, and his identity is difficult to pin down. For example, in Genesis 31:11/13, the angel of Yahweh speaks and acts as God manifesting Himself in person. At another time, He distinguished from God Himself (Exodus 32:34; 33:2-3). Similarly, In the context of Psalm 35, the psalmist moves from Yahweh in verse 1 to the angel of Yahweh in verse 5/6. The phrase *mala'k yhv* (angel of YHWH) refers to God's

²²⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms vol. 1, 590-600.*

²³⁰ Dirk J. Human, "Portraits of 'angel': Some Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament Perspectives in Relation to ATR Belief Systems," *Pharos Journal of Theology* volume 102 (2021):1-9.

heavenly messenger. This angel cares for and protects God's people (Exo. 23:20; Joshu 5:13-15). Some scholars argue that the angel of YHWH is a creaturely messenger who acts in the name and on the commission of God.²³¹ Other scholars say that the angel of YHWH is the pre-incarnate manifestation of the second person of the Trinity, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is first mentioned in Genesis 16:13 to Hagar in the wilderness and Abraham in Genesis 22:11, where he stops Him from sacrificing Isaac.²³² Therefore, in Psalm 35, the angel of Yahweh is identical to God's self and works in a subtle appearance. The appearance of an angel of the Lord is important because it demonstrates God's compassion and salvation for the afflicted.

Given this, the CLA hermeneutical consideration or approach of Psalm 35 with the notion of many angels can be criticized because this is not what the psalmist intends to convey. The psalmist moving from Yahweh to the angel of Yahweh does not connote two personalities but makes his cry to the personality of God in God in Himself. Thus, psalm 35 addresses God in God. thus, it is not wrong to say that Psalm 35 is a Psalm of God's theodicy. The idea of arrogating Yahweh to be other angels will create theological damage by casting aspersions on the holy image of the angel of Yahweh, and on the other hand, reduces Yahweh to God, who can only act when there is a need for deliverance and liberation of the members of the Church.

Also, reading Psalm 35 in a magical way, in which the reader burns incense and a candle, needs to be discouraged as it does not fit into the Psalmist's intended meaning. The exegesis above shows that the angel of the Lord appears or manifests and is not brought down by any human mechanism. This, therefore, makes it an unbiblical character.

5.3.2 Enemies

In section 5.3, I conclude that the realities of enemies are influenced by the CLA hermeneutic of Psalm 35. In section 3.4, the Pastor's voices representing the faith community interpreted Psalm 35 as a Psalm to secure protection, deliverance, victory, and liberation from enemies. This is because of the close affinity of the CLA context to Yoruba indigenous religion and tradition.²³³ In this context, the enemies are the devil, witches, wizards, sorcerers, etc. Thus, Psalm 35 is considered an incantation word to use against the attack of the enemies to free oneself. However,

²³¹ R. Ficker, "Mal'ak (messenger)," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, eds. E. Jenni, & C. Westermann) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 671.

²³² J. M. Boice, *Psalms: An Expositional Commentary. Vol 1: Psalms 1-41* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 303.

²³³ Chapter 3:4

when using the Psalm of Psalm 35 in CLA, is this what this psalm intends to convey? Are the enemies in CLA the same as in Psalm 35?

Verses 1, 4, 7, 11-13, 19, and 23- 24 of the chapter demonstrate the Psalmist's embodiment of adversaries whose appearance was not mentioned. In verse 11, the lawsuit is in progress, and the Psalmist is being attacked by *'ēdē ḥāmās* (a false witness) and *rēa' k' 'āḥ* (friend or brother). He speaks of individuals who hid their net for him without cause and dug a pit for him. However, verses 12-13 were shocking because the Psalmist was still good to those enemies. The Psalmist's attitude toward the enemies is hard to comprehend: "When they were sick, my clothing or garment was sackcloth; fasting and praying for them in verses 13-14.²³⁴ However, when he stumbled, the attackers did not do the same for him. They surrounded him and continually tore him apart with unwarranted, slanderous accusations (verse 15). They ruthlessly expressed anger and hatred toward him (verses 15c -16). In verse 19 of Psalm 35, the Hebrew word *'yebi'* attached to the construct form of the noun *'yeb'*, meaning enemies, is the cardinal word in the text. Adeogun admits that the word *'yeb'* lies at the heart of the entire Psalm and asserts that the main issues expressed in this Psalm are about enemies, their power, the fear expressed by the Psalmist, and the intervention of YHWH. He described his enemies as lions whose function is to devour their prey, which, in the context of Psalm 35, the prey is the Psalmist.²³⁵

Considering the CLA and first readers' voices on the enemies, the CLA concept does not align with the original mind of the Psalmist. In the exegesis above, the Psalmist indeed had enemies around him who never meant good for the Psalmist, yet the identity of such enemies was never disclosed. The Psalmist's case is generic, and the enemy is not known. Therefore, I will say it is wrong to use the idea of the Psalmist's enemies to mean the enemies of the CLA as being named with the Aladura people.

More so, in section 2.6.3, the use of Psalm 35 in war with the enemies, which exists in the CLA context but not in the context of the Psalmist, has the exegesis above explaining the request that such practice be criticized. However, if the superscription and correspondence, as argued by some scholars, can help to have an idea of the enemies referred to in Psalm 35, it does not still justify the magical use of Psalm 35.

²³⁴ The Holy Bible Psalm 35:12-13

²³⁵ J. O. Adeogun, "Psalter: A Tool of Liberation in Aladura Churches," In S.O. Abogunrin (ed.). *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa* (Ibadan: Nigeria Association for Biblical Studies, 2005),180.

5.3.3 Lament and Praise

Section 5.2.3 outcome shows that the CLA hermeneutic of Psalm 35 has a structural pattern that also defines the victory hours of prayer, usually performed by Psalms with imprecation. The structure is praise and lament. The service usually opens with praise from the Psalm and proceeds to lament from Psalm 35.

The verses 2-3, 8-10, 14-18, 20-22, and 25- 28 of Psalm 35 demonstrate the psalmist's cycle of lament and vow to resolve to praise Yahweh, the center of the Psalm. Psalmist petitioned Yahweh to 'take up shield and buckler and rise to his aid' (vs 2) and 'draw out your spear and pike' (vs. 3); parallel to the first appeal of Psalmist, verses 17-18 'My lord, how long will you look on?'; 'rescue my soul from their devastation' and just as the first end with vow to praise Yahweh, verse 18 also in parallel ends with vow to praise God. The Psalmist then asks God to prevent his enemies from rejoicing over his misfortunes because his enemies are hostile and deceitful people in verses 19-21. The petitioner makes a renewed petition to YHWH to save him from his enemies (Psalm 35: 22-23). He wants YHWH to execute justice by defending and declaring him innocent of all charges according to his divine righteousness (v. 24). The Psalmist prays that his enemies who have been rejoicing at his misfortune would experience the shame and humiliation that they planned for him (inversion of roles) (v. 26). The Psalm ends with the suppliant's call to his friends, who want to see him declared innocent, to praise YHWH for his greatness because he loves to set things right by giving peace to his servants who are suffering and are in a vulnerable situation. YHWH sets them free from their oppressors (Psalm 35: 27-28).

Therefore, the CLA on the lament and praise motifs share more resemblance than critique with Psalm 35. First, CLA usually encourages their members to pray loudly and clearly, as though the louder you are, the faster God will answer your prayers. An example is that "you will pray; anyone that says you will not see the end of December should fall and die," as the people are praying, the Pastor will say, "Fire, fire, fire." This is the type of prayer they pray with energy and emotion. This is similar to the psalmist's lament in Psalm 35. Second is to whom the lament is directed: God. Third, the CLA is similar to Psalmist in terms of the structure of Psalm 35. The CLA structure moves from praise to lament, while the Psalmist moves from petition, lament, and praise. However, the theological involvement between the two can be criticized.

The lament and praise in the Psalmist context share the same theology by recounting God's past faithfulness and proclaiming His righteous character. But after affirming God's goodness, the laments provocatively ask how this good God allows the current experience of suffering. In the CLA perspective, influenced by the Yoruba context, open with praise before prayer to attract God to their side and know that when praise goes before, it will attract or make God listen to them.

5.4 Lessons from the Intercultural Conversation

Having created a conversation between various voices, looking at the voices from the formal, normative, and espoused theologies in Psalm 35, I will then draw the lessons for the Christians today. This will then answer the main research question: what can be learned from the conversation of the various voices or the intercultural discussion on Psalm 35 for Christians today?

5.4.1 Personal Lessons

5.4.1.1 Learning as a Researcher

In the first place, as an outsider to the Aladura churches, how would the acceptability be, most especially since I will be doing the interview online? However, the attention I received, especially from those who granted attention, taught me a new research experience.

Second, the relationship this research built with the prophets and respondents interviewed may not be given if I were to do this in Nigeria. To the extent that one of the respondents could get me material that talked about the worthy use of psalms right from the founder of the CLA.

Third, this has broadened my horizons, including interviewing and analyzing voices. However, the challenge is that most CLA leaders find it more convenient to speak the local language than English, which adds to the translation difficulty.

5.4.2 Lessons for Christians Today

5.4.2.1 To study Psalm 35 not in Isolation

In the conversation, the bringing together of the normative, formal, and espoused voices has given a new understanding that shows that the literal and isolation of Psalm 35 from other psalters suggest the risk of hermeneutical fallacies, which could possibly result in the wrong use of Psalm 35. Therefore, since Psalm 35 and other imprecatory Psalms form or occupy an intricate part of

the Psalter, they must be interpreted along with other Psalms and within the Old Testament covenant theological framework to have a more balanced grasp of their theology.

5.4.2.2 Approaching Psalm 35 with Justice Belongs to God

The conversation shows that when reading Psalms of imprecations, the reader should remember that the lamentations in Psalm 35 are not calls for revenge but appeals to the God of justice to act decisively as sovereign Lord of all creation.

5.5 Summary of Findings and Conclusion

The chapter creates a dialogue between various theological motifs along the exegesis of Psalm 35, with themes such as the angel of Yahweh and enemies, among others. The focus is on criticizing the use and interpretation that contradict the author's original intention and in the light of the New Testament. The discussion follows this way to have a theological thought well grasped in line with the author's original intention to have a meaningful understanding of the pericope. The African experience of the angel of YH's meaning fails to convey the psalmist's intention. The research finds that African and Western contexts show a homogeneous picture of who the enemy is. It is also found that Christians can also use imprecatory psalms today if they are not to be used with identification against any individual. More importantly, God must instruct the use of such psalms. In terms of function, it is gathered that it is functioning as an appeal to the just of Yahweh, and it offers us a biblical form through which to express our yearning for justice, anger against injustice, and our trust in God's righteousness. Also, the CLA's interpretation and use of Psalm 35 were evaluated based on its explanation (exegesis of Psalm 35). It is also found insufficient to convey the Psalmist's original intention to the worshipper. Having assessed these voices, the research concludes that more exegetical and hermeneutical study is required to help them effectively view Psalm 35.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

The research has answered the primary research question: what can be learned from comparing selected African and Western theologians for a biblical theological understanding and use of imprecatory psalms (esp. Psalm 35) in the Aladura Church today? The study determined that the African contextual reading of Psalms 35 is inadequate because its reader-centered approach allows the voice of the community or context to ring louder than the voice of Scripture. Repercussions can include a limited role of Jesus Christ and a heightened role of magical practices or the use of Psalm 35 in Churches in Nigeria and especially the Church of the Lord, Aladura.

Also, Western voices are shaped by Western culture and ideology. However, multiple approaches of the Western voices in chapter 4 can be united with the explanation of Psalm 35, especially when they fuse as a method in the Christological interpretation. Thus, to have a reliable tool to explore Psalm 35, the research argues for incorporating the voices, namely ACH, emotionalism, prophet readings, etc, into a single approach, which is the basis of intercultural conversation. Thus, it becomes the proposed method with which the different views can be accomplished to make the message of Psalm 35 effective to today's readers.

The study aimed to critically reflect on using imprecatory Psalms in the indigenous Churches in Nigeria (CLA). Various Biblical (African and Western) voices have been engaged to do this. A survey was conducted on selected participants across the CLA in Nigeria through the Internet using qualitative methods, allowing data collection from leaders and members of CLA. Findings reveal that using additional aids or means to read Psalm 35 is a practical experience for the Aladura church. This is critically reflected using the explanation of Psalm 35 in chapter 5, which identifies the CLA use of Psalm 35 as unbiblical because it misrepresents the metaphorical language and symbolism in the Psalms. In this way, such practices result in an anti-gospel. On the other hand, the research found that the harmoniousness of the various views can help CLA arrive at a practical interpretation as construed by the first readers, which puts revenge and imprecation into the hands of the Lord. Therefore, African Biblical scholars should take adequate steps to create a more Biblical-centered and exegetical interpretation of Psalm 35 and other imprecatory Psalms.

The research demonstrates that using imprecatory Psalms in CLA affects relationships with other Churches around them. In addition, it is valuable to Churches to help them correct their interpretation and use/practice. It informs biblical scholars of their research responsibility to the context and text. The research highlights the need to interpret Psalm 35 by paying attention to the original intent of the Psalm and recognizing the difference between the Old and New Testament context and application.

The study is subject to some limitations, such as not having the privilege of engaging in complete exegesis of Psalm 35, a small sample size of respondents, and a limited scope of data collection. Moreover, due to time constraints, this research did not address the potential implications of using imprecatory psalms in the Aladura Church in other areas, such as the therapeutic use of Psalm 35, a Psalm for preparation, theological motifs like fear, fight, Yahweh, body language in Psalm 35, etc. Future studies could explore these topics more in-depth to understand better their effects on the Church's interpretation and understanding of the Bible.

6.2 Recommendations

The research provides several implications for academics, Churches, and leaders. For leaders, the result can guide in understanding how to preach and appropriate the imprecatory Psalm. Academics can appropriate these findings to inform their research on critical assessment of using Psalm 35 in the Aladura Church. Church members can develop a desire for knowledge of the theological material by using Psalms in this manner and to guide their practical appropriation of Psalm 35. Furthermore, future studies should:

First, explore other potential implications of exegetical consideration, with a Christological focus on interpreting imprecatory Psalms for the local readers or their context.

Second, we can also consider the complete explanation of Psalm 35, which research cannot undertake because it is not undertaken in the biblical studies department.

Third, instead of relentless prayers over enemies, the church leaders should work more on character formation and spiritual growth of the members in the word of God.

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