

## Exile and Suffering: Reading Psalm 77 in African Context

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Reeling from the collapse of the kingdom and subsequent exile to Assyria and Babylon, the Israelites and people of Judah composed songs and prayers addressed to Yahweh. Disorientation arising from this tragic event gradually gave way to confidence and re-orientation because the focus shifted from a situation of hurt to Yahweh's acts in Israel's history. In the Exodus, Yahweh had demonstrated his power by ending Israel's oppression in Egypt. This event is actualized during the exilic and post-exilic period to assure the disillusioned community of Yahweh's unchanging faithfulness. By bridging the historical gap between the biblical text and the contemporary African context, a comparative reading of Psalm 77 illuminates the darkness of colonialism and post-colonial failure and suffering. This reading yields hope to the despondent multitudes regarding Yahweh's concern for them not only in terms of future involvement but also in terms of his intervention and presence in contemporary appalling contexts.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

Psalm 77 is a lament from deep distress. It depicts structural movement from complaint to a hymn of praise by making allusions to God's omnipotence. This prayer may be used as an introspective meditation on the historical acts of God to gain comfort in difficulties (Terrien 2003:554).

The cry of the victim only appears in retrospect. Psalm 77 comprises the following features that are common to a lament: complaint (vv.3-9), declaration of confidence (vv.10-12) and praise (vv.13-20). This prayer does not contain an actual petition and is only addressed to God indirectly (Aejmelaes 1986:51). Mythological imagery depicts aspects of danger. Motifs of theophany, cosmogony and the primordial fight against chaos underpin the current situation.

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Psalm 77 is a masterpiece of poetic and theological composition. The speaker is not known. The specific situation of danger is also undisclosed (Dahood 1986:224). Yet it is clear that the petitioner is a representative of the community (Birkeland 1959:14; Tate 1990:274).

## **B METHODOLOGY**

Psalm 77 is analyzed using an integrated exegetical approach. Thereafter cursory comparisons are made with the African context. Three junctures define hermeneutical approaches in Africa and the Third World, namely pre-critical literal and allegorical pre-colonial readings, absolutist colonial readings, and both critical and uncritical post-colonial models (Holter 2000:10, 18; Sugirtharajah 2001:31; Fabella 2003:59). Early comparative studies have been conducted for the purpose of denigrating tribal religions and cultures (Fabian 1998:218; Paden 2000:184; Patton & Ray 2000:1; Ray 2000:101). Consequently, comparative approaches have received less attention particularly in the light of pluralistic theory.

In this study a comparative model has been utilized as a construct of diachronic, synchronic and theological aspects. It interrogates the issue of cultural closeness between Old Testament and African societies with regard to exile and suffering. Data from the distinct groups are analyzed comparatively. Central to this discussion is the relatedness of prayer elements in Psalm 77 to African responses to suffering during the colonial period and its aftermath. Resulting from this approach are similarities and differences between Psalm 77 and the African context. Notwithstanding the differences, the findings confirm the applicability of biblical psalms for the purpose of addressing similar disorienting conditions in Africa.

## **C GENRE**

Psalm 77 has been classified as a composite psalm (Terrien 2003:553) consisting of an individual lament and a collective hymn (Goulder 1982:55; Dahood 1986:224). However, form-critically Psalm 77 depicts a mediatory lament set in a collective national frame (Weber 2007:108). Under threat from a national adversary, a representative intercedes against a backdrop of God's dealings in past tragic occurrences (Mowinckel 1962:227; Tate 1990:271). Psalm 77 is therefore a community lament.

## **D LITERARY CONTEXT**

Psalm 77 is an Asaphite psalm (Pss 50; 73-83). These psalms are predisposed to the following historical theology: creation history, exodus through exile, laments over the temple and Jerusalem (Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:4). Other themes include theodicy (Ps 82), 'why' questions (Pss 74, 79, 80, 82), and references to the Northern Kingdom in Psalms 78 and 80 (Crenshaw 2001:23).

Confidence is heightened through the use of reflexive language. Mythological history underpins argumentations and appeals for Yahweh's intervention in the prevailing crisis (Gerstenberger 2001:90; Weber 2007:33). Asaphite psalms are inclined to employing the names of Moses, Joseph and Ephraim (Goulder 1982:55). For that reason their origin in the Northern Kingdom is theological-historically supported (Weber 2007:113).

Thematically, the motif of wonders is common to Psalms 77-78. While Psalm 78 lays emphasis on Israel's rebellion against God, Psalm 77 focuses on the theme of Israel's rebellious enemies. Therefore, Psalm 78 provides a historical theological resolution to the problems in Psalm 77 and the other Asaphite psalms. Its literary context, Psalms 73-83, is framed by royal psalms at the seams (Wilson 1984:337). This collection depicts the following authorial organization:

- Asaphite (Pss 73-83)
- Davidic (Ps 86)
- Korahite (Pss 84-85, 87, 88)

## **E DIVISION**

Psalm 77 can be structurally divided between the elements of complaint and a hymn (vv.1-9; 10-20). These divisions may be indicative of its redaction history and growth out of two originally independent psalms (Tate 1990:271). At any rate, the two genres form a literary unit. Moreover, thematic movement from lamentation to praise is prevalent in laments. Therefore the following structure is proposed:

- **Complaint (vv.1-9) – Stanza I**
- **Confidence and praise (vv.10-20) – Stanza II**

Stanza I comprises an address to God (vv.1-3) and a complaint (vv.4-9). Correspondingly, Stanza II consists of confidence (vv.10-12) and praise (vv.13-20).

## **F DETAILED ANALYSIS**

### **1 Superscription**

The superscription has the following elements: an instruction to the choirmaster, a guide to music performance, allusion to a person associated with Asaphite singers and an attribution to Asaph as well as a description of the genre of the psalm (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005:276). It is addressed to the chief musician, Jeduthun.

## **2 Complaint (vv.1-9)**

### **a Address to God (vv. 1-3)**

From the outset the psalmist complains about the desperateness of the situation (v.1 – I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me). God is addressed indirectly concerning a burden which is either experienced individually or corporately by the community. Simultaneously the petitioner materializes his prayer by stretching his hands out throughout the night (v.2). Such gestures symbolized integrity, candour and persistence (Terrien 2003:554; Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:275).

Because of the enormity of the problem, the petitioner elects to remain uncomforted (v.2). Overwhelmed by anguish and doubt, the suppliant turns inward and gets consumed by self-concern (Brueggemann 1988:137). Not even the memories about God could bring consolation to the victim (v.3). Signs of physical weakness accompany this introspection.

### **b Complaint (vv. 4-9)**

This strophe is a depiction of the psalmist's deepening distress (vv.4-9). This metaphorical night-time experience is diametric to daytime and to God's aid which is symbolised by morning (Limburg 2000:260; Hossfeld and Zenger 2005:275). It is a time of danger and trouble (Pss 20:2; 50:15; 86:7). Insomnia overwhelms the petitioner because of divine silence (v.4). The verbs 'remember', 'complain', 'think', 'search out' and 'seek' appear a total of ten times between verses 3 and 12, indicating the energy that the speaker is expending when turning inward (Tate 1990:274). Despite God's muteness, his presence is still recognizable just as in ancient times (Terrien 2003:555).

God's hiddenness motivates the psalmist to recall historical acts of divine love and protection (v.5). The petitioner reflects on songs of confidence sung in the past in happier times. The interjection of memories demonstrated by Asaphite psalms is not escapism but rather a search for stability in history (Hossfeld & Zenger 2005 275).

Simultaneously, the psalmist muses over the present calamities and formulates contextual theological questions (vv.7-9). In this way the petitioner contends with doubt (Limburg 2000:260). Terrien's (2003:555) argumentation that to doubt the covenant is to break with the traditions of Yahwism is inconsistent with the theology of the Psalms. Constantly the psalmists exhibit doubt and anxiety during crises (Ps 73). To that end Psalm 77:9 is an accusation of God's forgetfulness (v.9). God has broken his word of promise.

God's relationship with Israel is central to the tirade of theological interrogations (v.7-9). Psalm 77:9 poses the question 'Has God finally rejected his people?' Since the object of this rejection is not specified, a historical parallel

points to the exile (Ps 44:24; Lam 3:31). Further, the psalmist's questions indicate a deficiency in God's dealings (v.9). God's steadfast love, a primary concept within the God-Israel relationship, has come to an end. God's graciousness formula in Exodus 34:6 and its functional result are being questioned in Psalm 77:9. God's silence underlies the present questions about his attributes. As the calamity reaches its peak, the speaker is engrossed in doubt and self-concern; as a result he/she questions the character of God. To sum up, God's promise and presence have vanished (Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:278).

### **3 Confidence and praise (vv. 10-20)**

#### **a Confidence (vv.10-12)**

Strophe three is the central axis of Psalm 77. Functionally, it connects the ascending strophes with the descending strophes. Structurally the strophe marks a shift from distress to praise. The suppliant no longer focuses on God's silence but on his omnipotence. At this stage the psalmist appeals to God's right arm (v.10). Although the community's weakened condition is attributed to God's failure to protect and deliver his people, the experience also underscores God's freedom of choice (Brueggemann 1995:262; Tate 1990:275).

The psalmist's experience is theological-historically premised. A change in God's attitude contradicts his fidelity and constancy (Ps 89:35). An allusion to the exodus event is metaphorically represented by God's right hand. By recalling the exodus event the petitioner mediates on behalf of the community in the Mosaic tradition (Weber 2007:12). In the Song of the Sea God's intervention on behalf of his people is demonstrated (Exod 15:6; Pss 44:34; 78:54). The psalmist reminisces on the historical acts of God by employing his ancient names. 'Most High' is a recollection of the Abrahamic / Melchizedek episode (Gen 14:18ff.).

Whether the monosyllabic name, 'Yah', is anterior to the name Yahweh revealed to Moses or not is uncertain (Exod 3:13-14). Yah may have been a ritual cry during a cultic experience, symbolic to the re-enacting of God's intervention in the choice and salvation of Israel (Terrien 2003:555). At this juncture a change in mood is detected (Brueggemann 1988:138). Either the answer has come or not. In the absence of an answer this shift points to a positive affirmation of intention. By recounting the primordial deeds, the psalmist intends to persuade God to perform similar acts on behalf of Israel (Dahood 1986:229).

#### **b Praise (vv. 13-20)**

This strophe commences with thematically designed statements concerning God (v.13). The psalmist mentions God's way, a reference to the Exodus and the whole course of history (Deut 32:4; Is 55:8-11). In addition, God's holiness

is declared, a quality applied to the temple and to the heavenly city (Gammie 1989:63; Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:279). Yahweh's way is contrasted with the way of the wicked, thus underscoring the uniqueness of God's holy way. In this way the suppliant focuses on God over against the self-centeredness of the first stanza (Brueggemann 1988:138).

The concept 'holy' relates to God in terms of the frightful quality which means, *inter alia*, mystically embracing and dynamically energetic (Ps 77:13). It also probably refers to the uniqueness of Yahweh in terms of his strength among the nations (Terrien 2003:554). In this context holiness is used to emphasize the transcendence of God (Brueggemann 1995:265). God's incomparability among the gods (Exod 15:11; 18:11) and his uniqueness (Pss 47:2; 95:3; 96:4; 99:2) are underlined in Psalm 77:13.

Furthermore, the psalmist declares that God does wonders (v.14). His deeds are public. Exemplarily the Exodus wonder was performed before concrete nations (Exod 15:14-16; Ps 98:2). The victim has completely changed his or her focus from the prevailing problem to God's acts (Limburg 2000:260).

By mentioning the patriarchs, the psalmist founds the text concretely in the Exodus tradition. The identification of Jacob with Joseph is unique. But it is a peculiarity of the psalms of Asaph. For that reason it strengthens the conjecture that Psalm 77 originated in Northern Israel during the Assyrian conquest of 732 BCE. If it did originate in Northern Israel, Psalm 77 was re-contextualised and transformed to fit the Babylonian exile (Brueggemann 1988:138).

God's earlier encounter with the waters exemplifies the present catastrophe (v.16). According to Loretz & Kottsieper (1987:87) thematic and colometric distinctions from the earlier part may indicate the presence of Canaanite poetical allusions in Psalm 77:16-20. To the contrary, Yahweh's victory at the Exodus may form the basis of these verses (Day 1990:96-97; Goldingay 2006:65). A similarity between verse 16 and the Exodus 15 account may be deduced. However, while water in the Exodus scene was a medium and Egypt the enemy, in this context the primeval waters are the direct foe.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The suppliant is aware of mythical powers that pervaded society and influenced the activities therein. The enemy is in certain instances pictured this way. There is a tendency to move beyond what is earthly and human to the transcendent and to provide visibility to the supernatural (Kraus 1989:134). Primordial powers were still functioning in the created world. The forces of chaos, which were destroyed by Marduk in the Babylonian epic, are the epitome of hostile powers. These accounts could have been borrowed and taken up by Israel (Kraus 1989:134). In similar form the psalmist wrote about Yahweh destroying the head of the dragon on the waters (Ps 74:13). The floods lift themselves up and bring destruction (Ps 93:3). Israel was aware of these powers which are now metaphorically depicted as hostile activities.

The use of metaphorical language in this text is problematic. Because of the personification of the waters (v.16) it is difficult to associate the theophany with the episode at the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. These allusions bring up recollections of ancient Near Eastern creation mythology (Terrien 2003:556). Accordingly, light and order triumphed over darkness and chaos. Ancient mythology gives a description of the primal ocean. It lies at the bottom of the earth, which it supports with a firm foundation. Consequently, the psalmist may have incorporated Canaanite traditions into the text (Loretz & Kottsieper 1987:89).

Thereafter, the psalmist describes a theophany in a thunderstorm. It consists of rain; thunder and lightning, demonstrating the dominance of God over the waters above the firmament (v.17). There is a relationship with the thunderstorm theophanies in Psalm 18:12, 14, 15 and Habakkuk 3:10-11. God's thunder is heard in the whirlwind, his lightning lights up the world and the earth quakes. A creation motif affirms God's power. Conversely, flashing lightning and thunder form a marked contrast to the wonder of light in the creation narrative (Gen 1:3). By detailing the cosmic combat, myth and history are coalesced and not experienced as diastatic (Weber 2007:117).

In the theophany, God goes before Israel but leaves no trail (v.19). This metaphorical representation indicates the reality of God's relationship with Israel (Bullock 2001:107). It encapsulates an abstract reality in contextual language. God splits open the sea, charting out a way, but his footsteps cannot be traced (v.19). The poet personalizes powers of nature to demonstrate the power of God (Limburg 2000:261).

The final strophe (vv.13-20) is antithetic to the first strophe (vv.1-3). Prayer is founded on the exodus, wilderness and conquest traditions (Goldingay 2006:65). God led his people from Sinai right through hostile nations to Palestine (v.20). Figuratively Israel is compared to a flock of sheep, which is obstinate, easily lost and prone to panic (Terrien 2003:554). This necessitates the function of the mediator illustrated by the roles of Moses and Aaron (Weber 2007:120). Notwithstanding the presence of borrowed ideas this reference to the patriarchs immerses Psalm 77 completely within Israel (Brueggemann 1995:266). Yet, the flock motif may be a remembrance of the shepherd discourses in Jeremiah 23:1-4 and Ezekiel 34. The shepherd theme runs like a thread in the psalms of Asaph (Hossfeld & Zenger 2003:280).

Psalm 77 begins with a call to Yahweh considering a national crisis (v.2). The enormity of the calamity drives the petitioner to near depression and dependency. National enemies are represented metaphorically through allusions to cosmic waters of chaos. Through reflection on God's historical intervention, the victim draws confidence regarding the present catastrophe. Hence the petitioner assumes the role of a mediator after the Mosaic pattern. Yahweh the king

triumphs over the enemy (vv.15; 17). Thereby deliverance is provided for God's people.

## **G SETTING AND DATE**

### **1 Historical**

Psalm 77 may have originated from Northern Israel (Terrien 2003:557). Thus its original historical context could have been prompted by the fall of Israel in 732 BCE (Goulder 1982:3). However, given the role of the Asaphites in later post-exilic traditions and the fixing of the Psalms, this psalm was adapted to a later Babylonian exilic context. Asaphites were a leading Levite group in the early post-exilic era. The Southern Kingdom fell in 586 BCE to Babylon. Conquered people were dispatched into exile. This catastrophic event caused the community to question the promise of God. His covenant was broken. His steadfast love was lost. In spite of their prayers God remained silent. Having experienced a similar destruction, the Asaphite singers adapted and re-actualized the crisis in temple worship with a new meaning deriving from the fall of the Southern Kingdom (Weber 2007:113, 124). Consequently, perplexed and frightful, the petitioner recounts past ethnic histories in order to attain reorientation during the terrible calamity of the exile and its aftermath.

### **2 Cultic**

Psalm 77 is offered by a community representative. Yet it is possible that the community spoke with one voice in approximation to congregational prayer. Through prayer and meditation the frustration arising from a grave experience is expressed to God on behalf of the community (vv. 8-11). Metaphorically, the community is represented as a flock of sheep (v. 21). God's greatness is praised in the anticipated intervention (Gerstenberger 2001:90).

## **H AFRICAN CONTEXT**

### **1 Historical background**

Third World people have been victims of exploitation for resources by the West for centuries. During slave trade, scores of Africans were forcibly removed from the continent to work the plantations of the Americas. Tribal groups and families were decimated. This has resulted in African communities living in a Diaspora, constituted from descendants of slaves as well as those who left by choice. In the aftermath of this holocaust, economic greed motivated the colonization of the nations of the south. Again the continent succumbed to plunder and remained underdeveloped as precious resources were pillaged and transported to Europe. In time, opposition both to slavery and colonialism contributed to the collapse of this systematic annihilation of the Third World. The role of the church in protestations is well documented (Nöthling 1989:312-315). In Latin America economic problems led to liberationist inter-



pretations in contestation against poverty and the concentration of wealth in a few others. Asian approaches originated from political oppression and religious belief systems (Young 2001:308).

After World War II, the liberation of Africa and anti-colonialism became key issues. But the subsequent collapse of colonialism and the emergence of independent states have not reversed the misfortunes of the past. There remain psychological barriers based on racial superiority and capability which haunt the world today (Young 2001:79-80). In some cases emancipation has not been fully realized as colonies have become new exploiters – the oppressed have become the oppressors. Bad governance, economic mismanagement and civil war have become notoriously synonymous with Africa. The latter has caused displacement of multitudes from their homelands to live a life of destitution. Contemporary humanitarian crises have reached their peak in many African societies (Hochschild 1998; Dunn 2003:50, 53).

## **2 Cultural context**

Culturally Africans are resilient, and have remained stoic in adversity based on their communal approach to life. This cultural background, though, has been greatly broken up by the historical past and current economic trends. To that end many are disillusioned since they have no past to centre their lives on. Despite the bleakness that is so pervasive in many African societies, certain religious-cultural practices are common in periods of adversity such as singing and praying. Singing functions in various life situations. Labourers harness its power to motivate themselves, mourners sing in search for comfort and oppressed people alike sing to sooth their pain as well as to mobilize themselves for counteraction. In sub-Saharan Africa, tribal people have responded to distress arising from colonialism through songs. For instance in Malawi and Zambia, subaltern protests have been represented by *vimbuza* rites. Women vent their frustrations on men in song and dance under the guise of spirit possession (Young 2001:358).

## **3 Religious context**

African people are extremely religious (Mbiti 1969:1; Uzor 2003:190). Religion pervades their entire societies. Nowhere is religiosity expressed more vividly than in prayer (Shorter 1975:1; Opefeyitimi 1988:27; Magesa 1997:195). Prayer is the most common rite of worship in Africa (Adeyemo 1979:35; Nyirongo 1997:39). It is considered to be one of the most ancient riches of African spirituality (Mbiti 1975:2). Rarely does a day pass without an expression or recollection of God's power. Occurrences in life motivate prayer whether it is an accident or a gift, good or bad news, morning or evening and health or sickness (Magesa 1997:135).

African people direct their prayers to the Supreme Being who is called differently in diverse societies. Simultaneously, in many societies prayers are addressed to ancestors, spirits and divinities (Mbiti 1975:58; Kalu 2000:54). For that reason some scholars argue that God is hardly addressed directly in prayer. To the contrary, approaching the Supreme Being indirectly is attended by belief that God is too great to be approached directly. Therefore, like a traditional ruler, God can only be addressed through an intermediary (Mbiti 1969:177-178; Zuese 1979:7; Theron 1996:7). Addressing ancestors in prayer is premised by their attained qualities which qualify them to act as guardians and protective spirits of their earthly families (Kalu 2000:54). In any case even when prayers are offered to ancestors, spirits, and divinities, these entities act as intermediaries (Zuese 1991:175; Mulago 1991:123; Theron 1996:7).

#### 4 Response to colonialism

Post World War II Africa, like many Third World countries, experienced the commencement of emancipation. During this period Africans protested against colonialism and its offshoots of exploitation and poverty. Songs and prayer-songs were composed for the purposes of dissemination of subversive<sup>3</sup> information and mobilization of the masses. In South Africa the Methodist inspired hymn *Nkosi Sikele' iAfrica* is one of the explicit political performances (Sundkler 1961:196). The following Mau Mau hymn exemplifies anti-colonial prayer songs:

*God makes his covenant shine until it is brighter than the sun so that neither hill nor darkness can prevent him coming to fulfil it, for God is known as the conqueror.*

*He told Kenyatta in a vision 'You shall multiply as the stars of heaven, nations will be blessed because of you'. And Kenyatta believed him and God swore to it by his mighty power....*

*Kenyatta made a covenant with the Kikuyu saying he would devote his life to them, and would go to Europe to search for the power to rule, so as to be a judge over the house of Mumbi. I ask myself 'Will we ever come out of this state of slavery?'*

*He went, he arrived there and he came back. He promised the Kikuyu 'When I return M\_\_ shall go in order to arrange for the return of our land'. May Hod have mercy upon us.*

*When the day for his return comes he will come with the decisions about our land and the building which he said he would come to*

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<sup>3</sup> Through drum music Ashanti people played an old war song, 'surely we shall kill Adrianti' honorifically to the British governor in 1900. Similarly Somalians employed love poems to conceal their message for independence struggle (Finnegan 1970:284-285).

*erect at Githunguri ya Wairera shall be the one in which our rule shall be established.*

Mau Mau, a part political and part religious movement employed secret songs for propaganda in Kenya in the early nineteen-fifties (Finnegan 285). These songs occasioned meetings held in churches, schools, homes, villages on European farms and kitchens of European homes. Like many anti-colonial songs the foregoing song could be sung safely in the presence of the colonizers since it was composed in Kikuyu.

The song sets off with a theological declaration of God's covenant and ability to intervene on behalf of the oppressed. God is acknowledged as the giver of a vision to Kenyatta. Subsequent lines are narrative descriptions of the hero's mandate to represent his people and secure their freedom.

While the Mau Mau song commences by articulating God's role on behalf of the oppressed, some songs focus on praising struggle leaders. Leaders like Sékou Touré (Guinea), Harry Nkumbula (Zambia), Luthuli (South Africa) and Kwame Nkuruma (Ghana) were inundated in praise compositions (Finnegan 1970:284-286). This feature is overtaken by a strong emphasis on Yahweh in the Psalms. Yahweh is praised through ascription to his attributes and focusing on his deeds.

The literary-historical political contexts identify the adversary as the colonizers. Thus while the contestation motif is common in these songs, in certain cases hate speech underlies composition. Demands include land claims, jobs, shelter, equity and wealth. Being oral people, Africans composed and transmitted song texts verbally. A few songs were written. Besides the level of literacy on the continent at that point in time subversive material could be easily retained in this form without danger.

## **I ANALYSIS**

In the multiplicity of responses to suffering in Africa, a religious perspective is owed space. Such a response is not new. Being notoriously religious, Africans persistently seek the Supreme Being during adversity. History bears witness to activities of religious leaders in the struggle of humanity in Third World countries (Ferm 1987:4ff). To an extent the establishment of African Independent Churches is an outcome of protestation against exploitation (Banana 1996:69-76; Daneel 1998:27-72). Protestation is nuanced in Africa, a fact demonstrable by emphasis of anti-slavery in West Africa, anti-Apartheid in South Africa and protestations against colonialism on the rest of the continent (Thompson 1987:107-130).

In Psalm 77 the victim responds by addressing and recollecting Yahweh's acts in the past. Given significant Christian representation on the continent of Africa coupled with historical participation of certain church leaders similar

strategies have been utilized. The above Mau Mau song indicates such a response to God. God identifies with the suffering masses, raises a leader, Kenyatta, and empowers him with a vision for liberation. Elsewhere reactions by African Christians have in certain cases resulted in eschatological sects. Disillusioned by the oppressiveness of their life conditions these communities tend to focus on escapist beliefs. Lenshina, the Zambian sect leader who led many of her followers to unprecedented fits before her arrest, serves as an example. On the other hand, Yahweh's concern for the oppressed and his orienting function to the hopeless is a resource for the believing community in Africa. Contrary to pacifist and exploitative misuse of the Bible, Africans utilize it to mobilize the marginalized, mine it for equality and as ground for engaging power structures for the benefit of all. However, caution must be taken as biblical texts are cast in social cultural classes of ancient Israelite society. At any rate in both traditions God is not only addressed but praised too.

In view of the depressing conditions, the psalmist raises his voice in complaint against God. God's silence leads to insomnia, he is charged with breaking his promise and acting out of wrath. To the contrary, African victims of colonialism direct their complaints to their oppressors. Certain songs from this period encourage hatred of Europeans (Finnegan 1970:286). To be sure, other exilic psalms direct imprecation to their conquerors (Pss 109; 137). Such songs do not only foster catharsis but are actually intended to incite the masses against the injustices of the colonial system. This point must be tempered by forgiveness, peace and equity. The psalmist acknowledges that vengeance is God's responsibility.

Like the psalmist in Psalm 77, many African societies have histories – no matter how varied – regarding the golden age. These traditions point to multiple points of reflection, for instance, mythological histories about an age when God dwelt with man, accounts concerning aboriginal rulers and founders of clans, and tribes. In addition there are pre-colonial tribal figures who have wielded kingdoms together under their strong leadership. During the anti-colonial struggles leaders emerged who were inspired with a goal for liberation. Such leaders may function as models for the present search for regeneration. Thus societies which undergo tumultuous times are able to recollect the admirable past without succumbing to escapism, arouse regeneration based on past values and reorient victims by seeking the authentic and a projected destiny (Smith 1999:263-265). However, caution must be taken not to esteem and symbolize the past uncritically as it is burdened by injustices in certain cases.

There are, however, marked differences between Israelite and African traditions regarding historical cultic and literary aspects. Israel's historical process like many ancient cultures can not be easily paralleled to contemporary African societies. However, this historical distance does not remove the comparability of religious cultural aspects. Similarly the centralization of the cult in

Israel is different from the democratization of the twentieth century. African Traditional Religion is also a familial religion, hence it is largely decentralized to clans and homesteads. Another distinction concerns the fact that while Israel is a literary society most of Africa has employed oral music due to the levels of literacy in the past. At any rate during the colonial period with the increase in literacy, numerous songs were in print (Finnegan 1970:286).

## **J FINAL REMARKS**

African society is currently replete with suffering. Ironically the continent is a repository of wealth. In spite of her potentialities, Africa has been ravaged in the past by slavery, colonialism, war and corruption, and is ravaged by civil wars and bad governance at present. The milieu of these vices has reduced the majority of the countries to unprecedented poverty and the citizenry to peasantry and suffering. In many African places multitudes live in squalor without access to social amenities.

Indeed the situation in post colonial Africa is sombre and dire. However, the wealth of retentive memory can assist contemporary generations in the quest for the authentic. Like the psalmist who recalls the acts of Yahweh in the past, Africans can evoke ethno histories regarding their ancestral heroes who overcame adversities. The exemplary Mosaic and Aaronic leaders in Psalm 77 resonate with African tribal founders and heroes who sacrificed their lives for their people. Qualities like humility and dependence on the Supreme Being should be promoted. Inversely, abuse, hatred and corruption must be eschewed.

Furthermore, the theological disposition of the believing communities in Africa fosters the applicability of Psalm 77. Motivation and encouragement can be drawn from the victim's example when overwhelmed by a crisis. The psalmist's confidence reaches its height as the petitioner perceives God's favours in the past. When displaced from their homeland and cast into Exile, the Israelite community masticated on Yahweh's historical acts. In the above Mau Mau song, the words of confidence are illustrated by the position accorded to God. He raises a leader and equips him with a vision for the liberation of the marginalized. Equally through petition and meditation the African believing community can reach out to God for reprieve, protection and redress.

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