

# 'You flood them with sleep' (Ps 90:5): Human transience in the Hebrew Bible and in African indigenous sacred texts



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Death, disturbing as it can be, is an inevitable phenomenon. All cultures must find the right language to explain this reality or at least provide the linguistic tools to navigate it. Among the tools cultures employ for dealing with this phenomenon are texts, the biblical text being an example. This study, using the comparative approach of African biblical hermeneutics, examines Psalm 90 as an example of a text that is used to address the concept of death. It further argues that the ideas and strategies adopted by the biblical text are comparable to those employed by African indigenous sacred texts, such as the *Owuo atwedie* [the ladder of death], the Adinkra textual system.

**Contribution:** Moreover, the parallel reading of these two texts complements our understanding and facilitates our communication about a rather difficult subject in contemporary African contexts.

**Keywords:** death; human transience; African biblical hermeneutics; Adinkra; sacred texts; Psalm 90; *Owuo atwedie*.

## Introduction

The question of death has always been an important reality in the Ghanaian context. This is seen in the elaborate funeral celebrations and rites, ornamental coffins, funeral songs and dirges, and traditional clothing and colours associated with death. A helicopter crash in August 2025, which killed eight persons, including two government ministers in Ghana, was one of those occasions, however, which not only brought back the reality of death to the national consciousness but also the question of human transience (Karikari 2025). All eight victims were relatively young men, some recently married and with young children. The sad event of their tragic demise raised questions in the national discourse about the shortness of human life, the relative value of wealth, and political power, among others.

This article thus attempts to re-engage the question of death and human transience within the contemporary Ghanaian context. The choice of Psalm 90 for this purpose is undergirded by the questions of the shortness of human life and the universality of the experience of death, which appear in the Psalm. This is why it is listed among biblical texts for funeral liturgies in some Christian traditions. The message of the Psalm is also readily received within the Ghanaian contemporary context, because at least 71.2% of the population professes the Christian faith (Ghana Statistical Service 2023). Moreover, the Psalm's view of the universality of death and of human transience intersects closely with similar ideas in Ghanaian traditional knowledge systems, particularly the Adinkra sacred text system of the Akan. The study will thus proceed in three steps: firstly, an exegesis of Psalm 90; secondly an exegesis of the Adinkra text, *Owuo atwedie* [the ladder of death]; and finally, a dialogue between these two sacred text traditions.

## Research methods and design

### African biblical hermeneutics

African biblical hermeneutics has been defined as a method of interpretation that:

[R]eappraises ancient biblical tradition and African world-views, cultures and life experiences, with the purpose of correcting the effect of the cultural and ideological conditioning to which the business *Africa* and *Africans* have been subjected in the business of biblical interpretation. (Adamo 2015a:59)

Ngwa (2022:29) observes that it is an interpretive act 'that resists marginalization and creates new forms of being, belonging and knowing, not from methodological leftovers from so-called

mainstream epistemologies, but from its own constructive resources'. Adamo (2015b:33) admits that this premeditatedly Afrocentric approach does not claim absolute objectivity, but argues that 'there has never been an interpretation that has been without references to or dependent on a particular cultural code, thought patterns or social location of the interpreter'. African biblical hermeneutics thus aims at reaching beyond the ecclesio-theological missionary heritage, to a deeper engagement with 'territorial communities, accepted community mores and a wide variety of issues unique to Africa' (Meenan 2014:268).

Scholars generally agree that the *constructive resources* which Ngwa mentions include a variety of oral literature comprising proverbs, chronicles, historic narrations, and sayings (Mundele 2012:79). Amenga-Etego (2022:8) amplifies this idea, observing that beyond oral resources, material and performative elements such as dance, totems, amulets, charms, shrines, and symbols must be taken into consideration. Parrinder (1968:4) emphasises that these resources, which he calls *scripture*, have for a long time been overlooked by scholars. Mtshiselwa (2016:2) has argued equally for the importance of studying these resources to the contextual readers of the Hebrew Bible, arguing that these contain insights important for unravelling the biblical message and making it relevant for contemporary contexts.

Mensah (2025:14–15) notes that African scholars have responded to the call to pay attention to these elements of culture. Olojede (2014:1–2) uses narrative and Mtshiselwa (2016:1–3) uses songs to interpret the Old Testament. These are commendable initiatives to use indigenous resources. This study contributes to the conversation by studying engaging the *Owuo atwedie*, an indigenous text from the Adinkra textual system of the Akan of Ghana and la Côte d'Ivoire, to show how this text interacts with the theme of death in Psalm 90.

Firstly, I intend to adopt an exegetic-theological reading of Psalm 90 with a special focus on its internal structure to engage the theme of death and human transience. Secondly, Turner's three-step exegetical approach – the exegetical, operational, and positional analysis – will be used to examine the Adinkra text, *Owuo atwedie* (Mensah 2024:1–2; Turner 1973:1100–1103).

## Psalm 90: An overview

Psalm 90, which begins the fourth book of the Psalter (Ps 90–106), attracts broad interest from scholars. The most obvious reason is its location in the Psalter, marking a shift from the failed Davidic dynasty reflected in Psalm 89 to the invocation of Moses in Psalm 90:1, giving the entire fourth book a Mosaic character (Gosse 2017:42; Mournet 2011:69; Wilson 1985:213). Liroy (2008:90) describes the Psalm as a Communal Lament, although others have emphasised the sapiential nature of the Psalm (Hossfeld & Zenger 2000:604).

Kynes (2020:628–630) observes that scholarly debate around the Psalm focuses on certain elements of tension woven into its fabric, namely the tension between a specific or national lament on the one hand, and a general lament regarding human mortality on the other; the characterisation of God, either as a destroyer, or a deliverer; and the presentation of transient human nature either as the effect of God's wrath, or as grounds for God's mercy. The Psalm further attracts interest from rabbinic scholars who read it as expressing a contrast between the lengths of time God and humans exist (Callan 2022:269). Similarly, the use of the Psalm in the New Testament (2 Pt 3:8) underlay the interpretation in much of Christian Antiquity that the world would have been created in 7000 years, each 1000 years corresponding to one day before the divine (Callan 2022:285).

## The structure of Psalm 90

Several divisions have been proposed as structures for Psalm 90. Schreiner, distancing himself from Gunkel's proposal for two originally distinct psalms (v. 1–12: God and humankind; vv. 13–17: YHWH and Israel), rather suggests a two-fold thematic division of Psalm 90 (vv. 1–11; 12–17; Schreiner 1978:80). Vesco (2006:845) has, however, defended Gunkel's division, arguing for a diptych, with a frame (vv. 1–2.17). Both Van der Lugt (2010:489; Ps 90: 1–6, 7–12, 13–17) and Balentine (2003:467–468; Ps 90: 1–2, 3–12, 13–17) put forward a three-fold division with marked differences in their proposals. Finally, VanGemerren (1991:259) elaborates further on Balentine's proposal, suggesting a six-fold chiasmic arrangement of the Psalm (vv. 1–2, 3–6, 7–10, 11–12, 13–16, 17).

### Strophes I (vv. 1–2) and V (v. 17): The structural frame

There is reason, however, to propose a five-fold division to the Psalm. The frame, composed of an opening and closing strophe (vv. 1–2, 17) as observed by other scholars, forms an *inclusio* around the Psalm (VanGemerren 1991:592; Witczyk 2020:537). This is sustained by the repetition of the references to the divine [אלהים / אל, אדוני] at the opening and closing of the Psalm. Moreover, the reference to the work of human hands [מעשה ידינו] in verse 17 recalls the work of God's hands, namely the mountains [הרים], the earth [ארץ], and the world [תבל], all mentioned in verse 2.

### Strophe II (vv. 3–6): The problem of human transience (אדם)

Strophe II (vv. 3–6) is marked by a root-play between the term *תשב* (שוב), which opens the strophe, and *יבש* (יבשה), which closes it. The internal structure of the strophe consists of a logically ordered reference to intervals of time in decreasing sequence. This is illustrated in Box 1.

Strophe II is bound by a series of references to time periods. Years [שנים] are composed of days [ימים] and nights [לילות], while days are further composed of mornings [בקר] and evenings [ערב]. More importantly, the human condition spoken of, described with the terms *אנוש* and *אדם*, is essentially mortal

and is gradually drained of time, from years, through days, and finally to minute units of time. Zenger (in Hossfeld & Zenger 2000:610) revisits the debate surrounding the use of the term דָּכָא [dust], referring either to a violent death, or simply to the dust from which humankind was created (Gn 3:19). The use of the term דָּכָא in verse 3 should, however, not be read in isolation from the term אָדָם in the same verse, evoking its cognate אֲדָמָה (Gn 2:7) from which humankind was made. Thus, the withering of the grass (הַצִּיר, v. 6) is metaphorically linked to the demise of humankind [הַצִּיר], both of which find their roots in the earth.

### Strophe III (vv. 7–12): The limits of human intellect and ability [גְבוּרַת]

The opening of strophe III in verse 7 is a matter of consensus for several scholars (DeClaissé-Walford 2014, loc. 632; Van der Lugt 2013:489; VanGemeren 1991:592). There is further reason to affirm this position. The strophe (Box 2) is structured around the repetition of three keywords.

Three terms, כְּלִינֹו (vv. 7.9), אָפֶךְ (vv. 7.11), and עֲבֵרְתֶךָ (vv. 9.11) are repeated in the same sequence in strophe III, creating a structure which holds the strophe together. The terms אָפֶךְ and עֲבֵרְתֶךָ are both expressions of God's wrath leading to human demise (כְּלִינֹו). Significantly, the reason for this human demise shifts from the natural human condition of temporality, expressed in strophe II, to focus on the limits of human achievement in strophe III. Three categories of human action, identified in the strophe, summarise the totality of human achievement (see Box 3).

Not only are human beings physically limited, but human actions and achievements (גְבוּרַת, v. 10) are also temporally and morally limited. Negoitã (1978:321) explains the term הִגָּה as referring to whisperings or muttering (Is 8:19), that is, hardly audible speech. The term is used in verse 9 to express the

BOX 1: Intervals of time in decreasing sequence.

Part of the day	One day	Multiple days	Verse
בִּקְרָ			5–6
	יוֹם		
		שָׁנִים	4
	לַיְלָה		
עֶרֶב			6

BOX 2: Strophe structured on repetition of three keywords.

Keywords	Verse
כְּלִינֹו	7
אָפֶךְ	
עֲבֵרְתֶךָ	9
כְּלִינֹו	
אָפֶךְ	11
עֲבֵרְתֶךָ	

BOX 3: Summary of the totality of human achievement in the strophe.

Category	Keywords	Verse
Verbal	הִגָּה	9
Practical	עֲמַל	20
Intellectual	גְבוּרַת יָדַע	11

emptiness (כֹּלָה) of human endeavour. The term עֲמַל [toil] in verse 10 degrades human achievement to the level of misery and complicates it further by questioning its moral quality (אָוֶן, v. 10). Moreover, humankind's intellectual abilities are challenged with the rhetorical question מִי־יֹודַע [who knows?], which expects an answer in the negative (v. 11). The request in verse 12 for wisdom [חִכְמָה], is an admission of the lack of humankind's intellectual depth, once again challenging human achievement.

### Strophe IV (vv. 13–16): The resolution of human transience

The opening of strophe IV is quite clearly marked by the imperative שׁוּבָה (v. 13). The use of this verb to open the strophe recalls the same verb at the opening of strophe II (v. 3), which reinforces this strophic opening. The confines of the strophe are marked by the *inclusio* עֲבֵדֶיךָ, in verses 13, 16. The internal structure of strophe IV mirrors the same three temporal categories found in strophe II. Here, though, the categories are arranged in increasing sequence as illustrated in Box 4.

Strophe IV resolves the earlier tension created in Strophe II, regarding the finitude of human nature. The same categories, morning [בִּקְרָ], day [יוֹם], and year [שָׁנוֹת] return in this strophe but with a different emphasis. As noted, the arrangement in an increasing sequence is the first indication of an unwinding of the negative image of temporality. Human existence must not only be seen as a countdown to mortality but also as an increase in the expression of human experience. Two imperatives, שְׁבַעְנוּ (v. 14) and שְׂמַחְנוּ (v. 15), summarise the import of strophe IV. In the face of human temporality, the most important attitude to human existence is contentment [שְׁבַע]; this is what leads to the experience of joy [שְׂמַח]. Human fulfilment is thus not about the length of days, but about the option for love (חֶסֶד, v. 14) and the rejection of evil (רָעָה, v. 15).

## The language of death in Psalm 90

Wahl argues that Psalm 90:12 contains the Hebrew Bible's first instance of a 'hermeneutic of death' (Wahl 1994:123). Interestingly, the Hebrew word for death [מֹוֹת] never actually appears in the Psalm. Nonetheless, several terms found in the Psalm evoke the idea of death. Lioy observes that the sentence of death seems to hang over everyone and finds expression in the directive to 'return to dust' [דָּכָא] in Psalm 90:3 (Lioy 2008:99). The term כֹּלָה (v. 7) denotes something which is consumed, or wasted away, failed, or perished, and thus equally expresses death (Lioy 2008:100). Similarly, the metaphor of the drought-stricken plant which withers (יָבֵשׁ) in the heat of summer, completes a sombre image of death, which is at the same time inevitable.

BOX 4: Strophe IV shows categories arranged in an increased sequence.

Day	Increasing sequence	Verse
Part of the day	בִּקְרָ	14
	שְׁבַעְנוּ	
One day	יוֹם	14.15
	שְׂמַחְנוּ	
Multiple days	שָׁנוֹת	15

Positively, however, the mysterious origin of death is clearly explained. As Vesco (2006:847) notes, God holds the ultimate responsibility for human mortality. He is the One who definitely commands humankind to return to the dust (cf. Ps 103:14; 104:29; Witczyk 2020:545). The use of the metaphor of sleep [שנה] in verse 5 further demystifies death. Everyone is acquainted with sleep, and death is merely 'another aspect of sleep' (Tsevat 1985:116). This euphemism for death simultaneously underlines the universality of death while effectively demystifying the phenomenon.

## Human transience in Psalm 90

Another important aspect of the Psalm relates to the question of human transience. The question of human transience is underlined by the psalmist's effective use of the concept of time in the Psalm. The vocabulary for time spans years [שנה], days [יום], morning [בקר], and evening [ערב], and even night watches [אשמורה בלילה]. Interestingly, the terms of *day* [יום] and *year* [שנה] are each used six times in the Psalm, falling short of seven, the amount of completeness. This is particularly interesting, for the Psalm's definition of a ripe age is 70 years.

An effective contrast is created in the Psalm through the insistence on God's eternity (עולם, v. 2; Müller 1984:270). Humankind, on the contrary, has limited time, which is numbered (מנה, v. 12), evoking also the element of accountability. This notwithstanding, it is ultimately possible to find joy [שמחה] and contentment [שבוע] in life. The quality of human life does not depend on its length but on the covenant relationship with God (חסד, v. 14) and the rejection of evil (רעה, v. 15).

## Death and human transience in African indigenous sacred texts

The conversation about the concept of death in African indigenous sacred texts begins with the debate about whether Africa has sacred texts in the first place. Ramantswana (2017:6) frames the conversation within the context of decoloniality when he warns against a 'colonial mindset, which tends to privilege Euro-Western knowledge systems' to the detriment of those initiated on the continent. Battestini (2006:9–10) objects to what he describes as an ethnocentrically driven and prejudicial perception that Africans do not have written texts, arguing that such positions are scientifically unacceptable and only betray traces of intellectual laziness, irresponsibility, and a blindness to the continent's history.

Faulkner et al. (2006:44) define text as 'a set of symbols collected to convey meaning, not the more traditional definition of a written, verbal text only'. Barber (2003:326–327) testifies to the variety of 'text-objects that flourish in sub-Saharan Africa', including bead messages, gold weights, umbrella finials, and several material repositories and memory-prompts, which serve as strategies of entextualisation by creating a 'examinable, quotable, repeatable text' subject to exegesis. Kuwornu-Adjaottor,

Appiah and Nartey (2016:25) observe that in Ghana, these texts are 'primarily a usual translation of thought and ideas, expressing and symbolizing the values and beliefs of the people among whom they occur'.

Interpreting these texts comes with its own challenges. Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al. (2016:25) note that some of these texts have meanings arbitrarily imposed on them; others have definite explanations, while the interpretation of others is a matter of opinion. It is for this reason that Turner's (1961:1–10) method of interpretation which involves the exegetical, namely recovering what the indigenes understand by the text; the operational, that is, the independent verification of the said claims by the researcher, and the positional, based on the researcher's observation of the use of the text in context, is recommended for the analysis of such texts.

## Adinkra as African sacred text

Adinkra is a textual system of the Akan culture of the people of Ghana and la Côte d'Ivoire. Its origins, although contested, are traced either to the Gyaman kingdom in present-day la Côte d'Ivoire, to the Denkyira Kingdom in Ghana, or to Mohammedan influences (Adom 2016:1153; Owusu 2019:47). Wilson (2021:203) describes them as ideographic symbols 'embedded in the social, religious, economic, and political philosophical concepts and ideologies of the Asante', used to communicate pieces of advice, warnings, and taboos, as the case might be. The texts ascribed to divine origins also play an important role in the ancestral cult, serving as a vehicle for invoking favour and conveying the deep religious character of the Akan (Adom, Asante & Kquofi 2016:45). Quite well known among the repertoire are the *Gye Nyame* [the omnipotence of God]; *Nyame dua* [God's Tree (an altar to the sky god)]; *Nyame biribi wo soro* [there is a god above]; and *Nyame nnwu na mawu* [I won't die because God does not die].

The text, *Owuo atwedee*, as shown in Figure 1, is an abbreviation of the proverb, *Owuo atwedee, baako mforo*, literally meaning: one person does not climb death's ladder. Nsiah (2024:5) explains that the proverb expresses the inevitability of death. It is the necessary and ultimate end of humankind on earth. Amissah and Letcher-Teye (2018:81) further observe that the text is a reminder that people need to live modestly because death is no respecter of persons.

The term, *owuo* [death], is used in several other proverbs to express the idea of universality. The proverb, *Owuo begya hwan?* [Whom will death spare?], underlines the indiscriminate nature of death. The rhetorical question which should be answered in the negative, is a reminder that no one, whether young or old, is exempt from the reality of death. Similarly, *Owuo adare nna faako* [death's sickle does not reap in one place], re-emphasises the unavoidable nature of death. The terrible nature of death is captured in the proverb, *Owuo see fie* [death ruins the home], an expression of the devastating effect it can have on family life. Ultimately, sleep as a

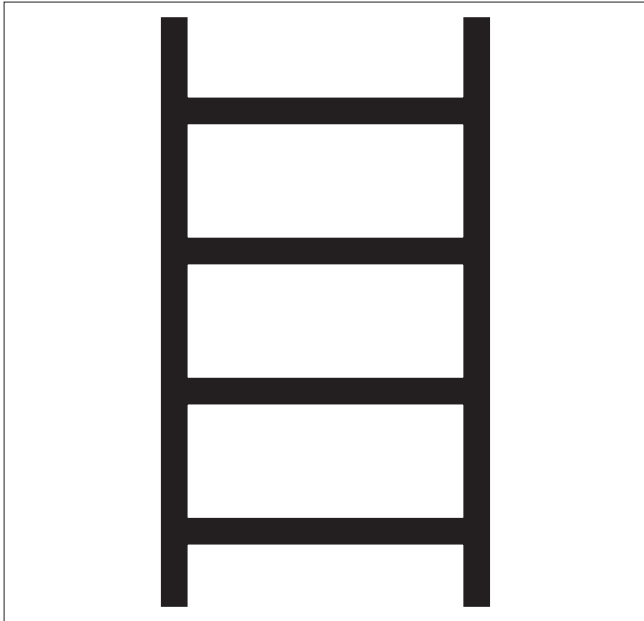


FIGURE 1: *Owuo atwedee* [the ladder of death].

metaphor for death is also found in Akan proverbs. The proverb, *Se wo nnim owuo a, hwe nda* [if you are ignorant about death, observe sleep], suggests that sleep gives a peek into the mystery of death. Death is not such a great mystery after all.

A final word should be given to the concept of climbing (*foro*) in the text *Owuo atwedee*. Several Akan proverbs engage the concept of climbing. The proverb, *wontumi nforo nkoanim ntwenedee na wo nsa hye wo kotoku mu* [you cannot climb the ladder of success with your hands in your pocket], uses the concept of climbing as a metaphor for personal progress. Similarly, the proverb, *woforo dua pa a na yepia wo* [the one who climbs a good tree deserves a push], advocates encouraging a person who tries to succeed. *Foro* [climbing] is thus often used in proverbs as a metaphor for progress or success. Its use in the proverb for death is at least interesting. Death is presented not as a pit into which one descends, but as a ladder which one climbs. While, on the one hand, the Akan expresses the inevitability of death, the use of the metaphor of the ladder is euphemistic. Death is terrible, but the language used to describe it, can soften its blow.

### Communicating death in contemporary Ghanaian contexts

While the occurrence of death, particularly in tragic circumstances, can be heart-wrenching, a parallel reading of Psalm 90 and African indigenous sacred texts, particularly *Owuo atwedee*, provides important resources for speaking about death in Ghana today. At least two lessons can be learned from both texts. Firstly, death is universal and the reality of human transience. Psalm 90 complements this position by placing the responsibility of human mortality on God, who commands man back to the dust. Neither text denies the reality of death, nor downplays its destructive character.

Secondly, both texts find ways of navigating the concept of death, using euphemisms to soften its blow. Both Psalm 90 and Akan proverbs use the concept of *sleep* as a metaphor for death as a means of demystifying the phenomenon. Psalm 90 emphasises joy and contentment in this life, rather than dwelling on the inevitability of death. The Adinkrah text rather uses the idea of *climbing a ladder* as a euphemism for human transition from this earthly existence. These images provide useful ways of engaging persons faced with the reality of death in contemporary Ghanaian contexts.

Finally, there is the question of longevity, which is important in both Psalm 90 and in the Akan indigenous worldview. Psalm 90 understands the ideal lifespan of the human being to be 70 or 80 years for the strong. That said, the Psalm prioritises the importance of joy and contentment over longevity. In the Akan indigenous worldview, on the contrary, longevity is non-negotiable. In this regard, scholars point out the Akan concept of a good death and a bad death. Adinkrah (2022:697) describes good deaths as ‘those that occur in older age, such as when the deceased is 70 years or older’. Bad deaths on the contrary, could refer to the death of a child, or during childbirth, death from a stigmatised ailment or a curse, deaths caused by homicide, suicide or accidents, death of a childless adult or of a criminal, or untimely deaths (Adinkrah 2022:698–700; Brookman-Amissah 1986:78). The following creates a real dilemma, especially for pastoral ministry, especially when Akan Christians seek explanations for sudden or unexplained deaths. That said, Psalm 90 does become an important resource for engaging and accompanying the bereaved, especially in situations of untimely death. While fullness of years is desirable, the Psalm shifts the focus to a life well lived, an interpretation that could help make meaning out of situations of tragic death.

### Conclusion

Death is a universal reality. When it strikes in tragic circumstances, however, it becomes important that the right language is found to engage those who are most struck by its effects. In both Psalm 90 and in African indigenous sacred texts, language reveals the theologies and traditions which have been used to explain and make sense of the reality of human transience. While death is not to be denied, the language that is used to express it, can make a difference to those who experience its effects. Reading these two sacred text traditions helps to uncover the strategies preserved in them, while showing the importance of a complementary study of these texts in contemporary Ghanaian contexts.

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## CRedit authorship contribution

Michael K. Mensah: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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