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An Appraisal of the Use of Psalm 35 as ‘Dangerous Prayer’ in Mountain of Fire and Miracle (MFM) Church

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Abstract

The appeal to God’s justice is basic for understanding the efficacy of Psalm 35 and for comprehending the point of view of the Old Testament man. Like all other individual lament psalms it has unjust accusation behind its lament and it is on this basis that it seeks to be vindicated and no doubt on this platform too, the request gains validity and fulfilment. MFM has gone further than the other African prayer-based churches to target the evil one for annihilation with the verbal spiritual missile of Psalm 35. MFM uses psalm 35 as imprecation for dangerous prayer and it could work so if the contents, intentions, circumstances and the contexts of the prototype passage are similar. For the eligibility of usage of this prayer dangerously and for its efficacy, justice must be on the side of the one praying. The whole thing bothers on the much needed but grossly lacked sincerity, honesty, social justice and good attitudinal behaviour in our society. It is one’s good behaviour, sincerity, justice and faithfulness, as possessed by the psalmist,

that provide the opportunity of having God's listening ear for justice and vengeance in situations of injustice and marginalization. God is justice and a just man is intrinsically in alliance with God's will. The essence of every prayer is to get in tune to God's will not man's own will.

Introduction

Prayer is a phenomenon which exists in one form or the other in all religions. It is "the expression of oneself, in thought or words, to the object of worship" (Ekpunobi and Ezeaku, 1990, p.31). Spinks (1963) explains that human beings pray, "not for material need only but it involves a physical hunger for some higher form of life" (p.115). In traditional Africa, different ethnic groups offer prayers directly to the Supreme Being or through intermediaries. In the pre-Christian African society, prayer was a highly developed activity. Priests of deities were regularly consulted to present prayers to the deities in accordance with the needs of the individuals, families or communities. Such consultations sometimes involved making spiritual enquiries over some mysterious occurrences such as sudden or frequent deaths or even a matter as light as delay in the return of the rains to mark the beginning of the planting seasons. Such enquiries may lead to making some sacrifices to appease the gods and restore their benevolence, and this was done in the context of prayer.

The Old Testament faith speaks to us as much as it also speaks for us. It speaks to us to convey God's will about how life should be handled to the ultimate wellbeing of mankind. It instructs us on a wide range of issues in life, with the expectation that we live by such divine precepts for our own good. Thus we read in Proverbs 3:1-2, "My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare will they give you" (RSV). The Old Testament faith also speaks for us in expressing our feelings to the object of worship, to God. It expresses our thoughts in such ways as we may never be able to do.

Adeogun (2005) affirms this particularly in reference to the book of Psalms, when he says that in the Old Testament literature, the most widely read book is the book of Psalms. This is because the Psalmist speaks to real life situations which humankind is passing through daily. It speaks on almost all facets of life.

When we read the Psalms, we hear our inner thoughts being expressed; our fears, doubts, reservations, our outbursts of rage, repressions, and frustrations; our dismay, dwindling hope, and desperation; and sometimes in the midst of it all, our lingering flicker of confidence that God can still arise to our aid. We find in the lines of the Psalms our inner, sometimes concealed helpless yearning for sudden vengeance wrought on our behalves by a force more powerful than our real or imagined enemies. It is in this light that Adeogun (2005) admits that “Though most Christians have a special passion for the Psalms, yet in their use against life threatening forces, special attention is paid to those which are full of imprecations” (p.180). It is in the fact that the Psalms eloquently express our latent, sometimes vicious thoughts that they seem to provide both the justification and the ingredients for doing dangerous prayer. In fact, whether justifiably employed or not, portions of the Psalms are already being used in some “mystical” form under some conditions to raise spiritual afflictions against one’s real or imagined enemies.

The use of sacred or divine words for mystical afflictions may after all not be new or peculiar to this generation, nor is its observation peculiar to the Christian faith. Grunwald (1890) confirms this statement when he asserts that:

The practice of employing sacred books or words or verses thereof for divination and magical cures is universally alike among pagans and believers in God. What the Vedas were to the Hindus... Homer to the Greeks, and Ovid and Virgil to the Romans ... the Old Testament was to the Jews, the Old and New Testaments to the Christians... (p. 344).

Blau (1898) further asserts that the desire of man to discern the hidden future, or to obtain the mastery of nature in hours of great anxiety by some superstitious resort to super human forces, is present in Israel. Deut. vi: 8, 9; xi: 18, and Prov. iii: 22-26, vii: 3, which admonish the people to bind them (the words of God) as a sign upon the hand and have them as frontlets between the eyes, and to write them upon the posts of the houses and upon the gate, certainly induce the Jews to use the Old Testament or parts of it, for protective or talismanic purposes. Likewise are the sixty letters of the priestly null blessing (Num. VI: 24-26) called sixty guardian powers of Israel against the terror of the night “a talisman against the evil eye”. So was Psalm 35 perhaps originally composed as incantation Psalms, and known in rabbinical literature as *שֵׁל פְּנְאִים* or “song of the demons”, employed as a

protective measure. In the prayer book of the Church of the Lord, Aladura, Psalm 35 is specifically mentioned as a means of victory over the attack of witches and allied forces. The Psalm has to be read seven times while the reader remains naked, starting from 12.00 midnight, with the use of the holy name, “Jah”.

Psalm 35 really is one of the most popular chapters of the Psalter, often associated with deliverance and vengeance motifs. As a Psalm of lamentation, it contains a lot of imprecations (curses). For this purpose it has been adapted to a wide range of uses, especially in what is commonly called in modern Pentecostal parlance, dangerous prayer. This paper investigates the use of Psalm 35 for dangerous prayers in one of the indigenous Pentecostal churches in Nigeria called Mountain of Fire and Miracle Church. Dangerous prayer, simply put, is the art of raising some scriptural words into mystically activated instruments for inflicting retaliatory afflictions on one’s real or perceived enemies. The paper aims to attempt answers to the following questions. Is dangerous prayer an acceptable Christian practice? Is the use of Psalm 35 in this dangerous prayer enterprise justifiable or is it a negation of the intention of the Psalm? Is dangerous prayer helpful or inimical to the overall aspiration of the Christian Church?

The conditions which are believed to make the use of the sacred word in Psalm 35 effectual in achieving the stated dangerous objectives are seen as special revelation to which only the inside practitioners have privileged access. Sometimes the use of certain elements such as candles of different colours, olive oil and incense, are believed to play their own part in making the prayer achieve its desired objective.

The Psalter

The word “Psalter” is the Septuagint (Greek) rendering (ψαλτεριον) of the title of the book of Psalms. Even the word “Psalms” also derives from the Septuagint rendering (ψαλμοι). The title of the Hebrew Old Testament book of Psalm is תְּהִלִּים meaning praises. This word derives from the verb לָלַח meaning “to praise”. However, some of the Psalms, fifty-seven of them, contain the superscription, מִזְמוֹר which the Septuagint directly translates ψαλμοι , Psalms. This Septuagint rendering derives from the Greek verb, ψαλει which implies to play on stringed instruments. The Septuagint manuscripts of the book of Psalms bear the titles ψαλμοι (Psalms) or

ψαλτεροι (Psalter) as though both words are synonymous and widely interchangeable.

The book of Psalms in its current, most commonly used forms, consists of one hundred and fifty songs and prayers, referred to individually as Psalms, and referenced by chapter and verses. They each have poetic character, with frequent use of parallelism. In addition to the title of the collection which translates as “song” or “hymns” from both Hebrew and Greek, the superscription in using of the Psalms provides musical reference and some direction, in some cases even reference to melodies that would have been well known to the congregation.

The authorship, dating and place of writing of the Psalms remain issues for an ongoing discussion, exploration and debate. A large number of the Psalms contain the superscription לְדָוִד (literally unto David) sometimes alone, or with other expressions. This superscription has been largely responsible for the age long tradition of ascribing the whole collection to David. However, this view has been discredited by modern scholarship. According to Toombs (1983), many scholars now insist that majority of the Psalms were written after the Babylonian exile, and that a large number of them date from Maccabean period (second century BC). Within the last century, archaeological discoveries in the Near East have placed at our disposal the literature of Israel’s neighbours, the Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians and Canaanites. Toombs point out that this new knowledge makes it clear that Israel originated neither the poetic form of the Psalms nor their use in worship. Poetic technique and vocabulary were borrowed from peoples who had attained a high degree of cultural growth before Israel emerged as a nation.

In the light of this Ancient Near Eastern Literature, evidence is provided to lend credence to the feeling that the original version of almost every Psalm was composed in the pre-exilic times for use in public worship and was adapted to the liturgy of Israelite worship in the period of the monarchy. Adaptation and revision however remained an ongoing process, influenced by and reflecting the changing circumstances.

On the themes of the Psalter, Gunkel’s (1967) pioneering form critical work on the Psalms sought to provide a new and meaningful context in which to classify individual Psalms, not by looking at their literary contents within the Psalter (which he did not see as significant) but by bringing together Psalms

of the same genre (Gattung) from throughout the Psalter. For him the main genres are hymns, lament or complaint Psalms, royal Psalms, thanksgiving Psalms, wisdom Psalms and mixed type. Till date this classification is still current and widely upheld in Old Testament field. It is to the first of this typology as stated above that Psalm 35 belongs.

Psalm 35: Exegetical attempt

Psalm 35 represents more of an outpouring of emotions than a coherent, organized piece of writing. The dominant theme is that of prolonged enmity and seemingly endless suffering, a feature common to individual lament Psalms to which category it belongs. Like many Psalms, it contains the superscription לְדָוִד, apparently responsible for the feeling by many scholars (e.g. Motyer 1994) that the Psalm is attributable to David. He has identified three sections in the Psalm. Each section opens up with a call for intervention, prayers for retribution, and the reason for the retribution. Each section closes with a reaffirmation of intention or promise to praise the Lord when the desired victory is achieved.

The sections are verses 1-10; 11-18 and 19-28. The first section of the Psalm deals with the theme of prayer in unprovoked danger. This section, as earlier noted, contains a plea for divine intervention (verse 1-3), a prayer for retribution (verse 4-6) and an assertion that the affliction is without cause, a reason given to justify the call for retribution (verse 7). This section concludes with a promise to praise God for his saving power (verse 9-10). This section opens with a fierce advocacy or demand; אֶת יְרִיבָה לָחֵם אֶת לְהַמִּי - Literally translated; Contend O Lord with those who contend with me; fight (against) those who fight (against) me. The word translated - 'contend' is the Hebrew verb הִבָּחַ. The word applies to law suits. David's first appeal is that what is right should be done. Holladay (1988) traces the word to its 'qal' root הִבָּחַ giving the perfect tense as הִבָּחַ and the imperfect as יִבָּחֵ. According to him, the word means "dispute, quarrel, (in public with words, complaints, assertion, reproaches); to conduct a (legal) case, law suit" (p. 338). This verb is used in Genesis 26:20-21 where it is translated "strive". The verb also appears in Numbers 20:13 where it is again translated "strived or strove", but in this case, the striving was between the children of Israel and the Lord, and the issue in contention was water (מַיִם).

In the second part of the first verse of the Psalm, the verb used is הִלָּחֵם. The qal perfect tense is הִלָּחֵם. According to Vine (1996) this verb means "to fight,

to battle and engage in combat” (p.81). The verb appears in Exodus 1:10, where the Egyptian Pharaoh expresses fear that the Israelite slaves will multiply and join an enemy to “fight” against the Egyptians. In Numbers 21:23, (as in Joshua 1:5, and Judges 11:5), the word is used in relation to armies pitched against each other in battle. In Hebrew etymology, the word *חָרַץ* (fight) is linked to the word *לֶחֶם* (bread), in the feeling that people, *חָרַץ*, (fight, struggle, battle, toil) for *לֶחֶם* (bread).

A very common noun which is derived from the verb *חָרַץ* is the noun *מִלְחָמָה* meaning battle or war. This noun-form which occurs more than three hundred times in the Old Testament connotes military operation. Motyer (1994) however insists that the Psalmist’s use of the verb *חָרַץ* in that first verse of Psalm 35 does not imply that he wants to take up arms against his enemies (*אֹיְבֵי*). Because even in mortal danger, he still refrains from taking violent steps but presents the matter before God who he believes knows how to handle the situation. This view seems very unlikely because the psalmist lucidly in verses 2 and 3 itemizes weapons of war such as *מָגֵן* (shield), *צָבָה* (buckler) and *קֶּיֶץ* (spear). A closer look at these weapons of war reveals that they are of two kinds, namely, defensive (shield and buckler) and offensive (spear) weapons. The psalmist portrays Yahweh here as *יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת* (the Lord of hosts). The appendage of the word *צְבָאוֹת* to the name *יְהוָה* commonly signifies in Old Testament an atmosphere of war (2kgs 6:8f; Ps24:10). The Lord is called to attack as well as defend; and to deal with the inner need of the soul for reassurance too.

In verse 4, two words - *יִבְשֹׁן* (be ashamed) and *וַיִּכְלְמוּ* (be disgraced) are used to advocate further evil for the culprits of the psalmist’s condition. The words invoke feelings of being worthless; being ashamed and disgraced by the action of another person or one’s own action or by outright panic (2Sam. 10:5; Ps 50:7). Verse 5 summons *מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה* (the angel of the Lord) to drive them away. This could be messenger (of men) or God’s messenger (of winds, priest or prophet or heavenly messengers (Gen.32: 4-7; 21: 17; 16: 7; 19 :1; 24: 7; Isaiah 23: 2; 44: 26; Malachi 2: 7; 3: 1; Ps 104: 4). The imprecation to the heavenly hosts who know fully the plan of Satan is a metaphysical missile against Satan.

Verse 7 states the vital reason for seeking the imprecation. This is summarized in the expression - *כִּי־יֵהָנֵם* (for without cause or for nothing). It amounts to a plea of innocence as used in Genesis 29: 18; 2 Sam24: 24; 1 Sam 19: 5; Ezra 6: 10; !kgs 2: 21; Proverb 26: 2. This declaration of

innocence is a vital characteristic of lament psalms and it is repeated in each of the three sections of psalm 35. Having set the grounds for advocating retribution, verse 8 demands for it and the section like the other two concludes with a promise to

תִּגִּיל בַּיהוָה (rejoice in the Lord) when vindication is obtained.

The pattern in the first section is repeated in the second. It contains receipt of evil for good; a plea for divine intervention and a promise of praise when delivered. The central point here is that the people who were considered friends (כָּרֵעַ) had turned false witnesses (עֲדֵי־הַמָּס). A typical event in the life of David which seems to satisfy the setting of this Psalm, perhaps, is the revolt organized against him by his son and supported by friends and counsellors. Presuming truly that David composed the Psalm justifies the *sitz im leben* for the expression in verse 14 כָּרֵעַ־כְּאָח (as a friend, as a brother to me), yet who turned out to לַעֲגִי־מְעוֹג (be mockers in a feast). As usual this section ends with an expectation and a promise to celebrate victory that was sure to be the outcome of the petition at the altar of יהוה.

Section three brings us to the very cardinal word in the text which first appears in verse 19-28, the second section (verse 11-18) having apparently prepared sufficient grounds for, and made vital allusions to it in seeming synonymous expressions. That word is אֹיְבִי which first appears in verse 19; having a first person singular pronominal suffix attached to the construct form of the noun, אֹיֵב, meaning my enemies. What then is the linguistic and contextual implication of the use of this word?

Vine (1996) explains that אֹיֵב has an Ugaritic cognate. It appears about 282 times in biblical Hebrew and was used at all periods. In form, the word is an active infinitive (or more precisely, verbal noun). This word means “enemy” and is used in at least one reference to both individuals and nations. “In blessing I will bless thee and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore, and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies” (Gen. 22:17).

This word אֹיֵב has many synonyms which include צַר also translated “enemy” (as in Genesis 14:20, 2Samuel 24:13, Psalm 3:1) שׂוֹנֵא translated “hater” in Psalm 44:7; רֹדֵף translated persecutor, as used in Psalm 119:157; אֶרֶץ־אֹיֵב translated tyrant, oppressors as used in Job 6:23. Adeogun (2005) admits that this word אֹיֵב lies at the very heart of the entire Psalm and

asserts that the main issues expressed in this Psalm are about enemies, their power, fear expressed by the Psalmist, and the intervention of יהוה in this situation. He described his enemies as lions.

The psalmist calls on יהוה to rescue him from their ravages. He pleaded with יהוה as in the first part to put them to shame and dishonour. This amounts to imprecation or cursing, which means using prayer to spiritually afflict a perceived enemy. It is this point of praying for the destruction of one’s enemies that lies at the very heart of this psalm, a phenomenon that has come to be known as dangerous prayer.

This last section ends as the first two with a promise or expectation to rejoice in the Lord with those who love his well being, when vindication is finally obtained. The two expressions - הַפְצִי-צְדָקָי (literally translated -delighters (in) my righteousness) and הַהֲפִיץ שְׁלוֹם (delighters (in) peace of his servant) approximate to admirers and well-wishers; those who are pleased at one’s well being. The psalmist’s wish and prayer this time is that they will be the ones to יִרְבּוּ וַיִּשְׂמְחוּ (shout and rejoice).

In all, the psalmist is optimistic that his petition at the altar of יהוה would yield a positive result at which he and those who wish him well would be pleased. There are many other expressions left unexplained in the Psalm but we have surveyed the dominant ones which all aggregate to express the psalmist’s anger and the desire for justice and vengeance to be done. For the Psalmist his complaint to God was because he was marginalized for no just cause and he is powerless against these wolves; his powerlessness found strength in Yahweh who is ever concerned for the plight of the less privileged in Israel. The efficacy of this psalm in Israel, to say the least, is dependent on the just nature of the complainant and the evil nature of the act perpetrated against him by his unjust enemies. In other words it is the petitioner’s justice that collides with the injustice of his enemies to spark off fire in that prayer that ultimately would attract God’s avenging and rescuing intervention.

Dangerous prayer of psalm 35 and the Mountain of Fire and Miracle Church

Dangerous prayer, as said before, is the art of using the atmosphere of prayer to mystically inflict retaliatory injury at one’s real or perceived enemies (אֲבִיבִים). It refers to a situation in which a person comes to the conclusion that

he or she has taken enough out of an afflicting ordeal, adversity or adversary (עָלָה, literally meaning limping or stumbling, or טָוֵן literally meaning accuser) and is now willing and ready to wage full war (albeit spiritually) against the persons or powers responsible for that situation. Dangerous prayer stems from the conclusion or assumption that no situation has a natural cause. Every situation is believed to have a powerful person or spirit somewhere behind it fuelling its persistence through some adverse spiritual powers. It is against such person or spirit that this dangerous prayer is targeted, in the realization that unless this underlying force is totally vanquished, this adverse situation will never be corrected.

Mountain of fire and Miracle Church (MFM) was founded by D.K. Olukoya in 1992. He studied Microbiology at the University of Lagos and holds a PhD in Molecular Genetics obtained from the University of Reading, United Kingdom. He states the above matter succinctly when he said that in the deliverance ministry, they had discovered that the lives of many people were ruled by wicked powers from the ancestral line. Many pastors have had their ministerial lives truncated at the prime of their ministry, simply because terrible powers from their father's home decided to strike by burying their ministerial calling. A lot of people who were supposed to enjoy fantastic success and breakthrough had discovered that a lot of things were going upside down simply because the power of their father's house was averse to their goodness. The Mountain of Fire and Miracles Church has actually won an acclaim for this 'kill-and-go' orientation to Christian life commonly called dangerous prayer. It would appear that when a woman has got it up to her throat with her mother-in-law or even husband, or a man has got it up to his throat with his "demonized" wife or landlord, then the place to go is Mountain of Fire and Miracles and the demand to make is a terminal affliction against the enemy (כֹּחַ).

Olukoya himself, clearly aware of this notion has no apologies to render to anyone for this posture. He believes that severe affliction against one's enemy could be a prohibitive and preventive measure. He puts it this way:

The September 11 (2001) attack in New York has changed the whole world. However, if 24 hours before, those who flew the plane to the twin towers had died, nobody would have been killed. The incident would not have taken place. When you are in warfare, you know that your own life is at stake and you have to use the most potent weapons (2009, pp. 6-7).

In some cases the language could be so strong that one doubts whether any consideration is at all given to the possible outcomes of sowing terrible seeds of severe aggression and inveterate vicious savage instincts in young tender hearts. Consider this statement for instance “The agenda of the enemy and some forms of wickedness will not cease unless you kill them. You can’t beg the enemy; the only language he understands is violence. The only thing he respects is power. For your David to manifest, your Goliath must die. It was the death of Goliath that brought David to prominence” (Olukoya, 1990 p.12).

Quite evidently, Mountain of Fire and Miracle Church is a church that has little or no room for reconciliation between two opposing parties. One must invoke the highest potent spiritual weapon against one’s real or perceived enemy. That enemy is obviously acting under the influence of Satan, or is the Satan himself and must die. Yet experience has shown that people who were once enemies had later found common grounds for reconciliation and had become happier friends thereafter, a situation which would not have arisen if one had killed the other with spiritual weapons in the course of the fight. Besides, one who is desperate to kill an enemy with spiritual weapon may in fact resort to use of other more potent physical or magical weapons when the prayer appears to delay in achieving the desired objective, as it often does when it is not in line with God’s plan. The point is that planting murderous instincts in people even has adverse effects on them and tends to awaken the most savage tendencies in them.

Mountain of Fire Church makes use of Psalm 35 fully to achieve its purpose. For instance, verse one is used with a war tone. Yahweh is being directly invoked as a contender, a warrior. The Church turns the whole verse into an aggressive invocation with a forceful repetitiveness to violently drive the force through. Synonymous words with the action verbs are introduced to produce the preferred effect. Names and titles of enemies are substituted in places of the indefinite pronoun “those”, to produce a drastic invocative imprecation. Example “O Lord, contend, wage war, arise, slaughter, destroy, annihilate, kill, murder ‘A’ or ‘B’. O Lord, pursue, scatter, overtake, arrest, plunder, pull, tear down ‘A’ or ‘B’. The next verse of the psalm says ‘Take hold of shield and buckler and rise ...’ The MFM church substitutes in place of these weapons everything that could cause death including accident, thunder, bullet etc.

Verses 4-8 of the Psalm utters direct imprecation against the Psalmist's enemies: Let them be put to shame and dishonour who seek after my life. Let them be turned back and confounded who devise evil against me ... let their way be dark and slippery with the angel of the Lord pursuing. According to Olukoya (1999) these verses are used together with this kind of imprecation

Let the stronghold of every spirit of Korah, Dan and Abiram militating against me be smashed to pieces in Jesus' name. Let every spirit of Balaam hired to curse me fall after the order of Balaam in the name of Jesus. Let every spirit of Sanballat and Tobiah planning evil against me receive the stones of fire in the name of Jesus. Let every spirit of Egypt fall after the order of Pharaoh, in the name of Jesus. Let every spirit of Herod be disgraced in the name of Jesus (p. 34)

Just like we noted above, names of the enemies are substituted in places necessary. While the invocation here makes some room for God's justice, the imprecation in psalm 35 as used by MFM inflicts a direct curse. Every verse of the psalm is used in this way.

MFM church considers justifiable whatever is done to prohibit the enemy from wasting a person's life and fortune. For the church, the task of stopping satanic agents is life's greatest assignment for those who want to experience victory on the field of battle. This pattern of imprecation in verses 4-8 continues in verse 26 where it terminates thus: let them be put to shame and confusion.... MFM is of the view that the application of this psalm indicates that the word of God is potent and it has liberating power to offer mankind.

MFM Church believes that the dangerous aspect of the imprecation of psalm 35 is usually an active, aggressive, forceful invocative prayer that it is. While its efficacy partly lies here, the Old Testament or the Bible provides both its underlying impetus and its operational ingredients. The hour of prayer for the recital of psalm 35 for MFM affects its efficacy. The best time for dangerous prayers involving this psalm are night hours including 12 midnight and early morning when it is believed that the spirit of the intended target is at rest. Perhaps this is why the founder of the Church affirms that the early hours of the morning exerts serious spiritual influence upon human lives (Olukoya, 2004). Sometimes the psalm is recited about seven times depending on the purpose for the prayer.

In the MFM there is extensive use of other words of the Bible apart from psalm 35 for imprecation otherwise called dangerous prayer. Such words of the Bible are believed to provide the impetus for the very fact of releasing retaliatory afflictions or imprecations against one’s enemies. In addition, the words of the Bible, being divine words (דְּבָרֵי יְהוָה) are believed to be loaded with divine power (כֹּחַ) such that when correctly invoked for the stated objectives are guaranteed to have very high efficacy.

Psalm 35 has had a long history of use in imprecation against one’s enemies (אֲבֹנִים) especially in Africa. This history dates back to the onset of the Aladura churches, which are believed to be the first of the African Initiated Churches in Africa, as well as being the foundation of the Pentecostal churches in Africa. It is not surprising therefore that MFM and other Pentecostal churches in Nigeria and other parts of Africa maintain that tradition of using psalms, especially psalm 35 for imprecation against enemies.

Dangerous prayer as justifiable Christian values

The question has often been asked as to whether dangerous prayer is a justifiable activity within Christian operation. The fact remains that if similar experiences were not shown in the Bible; perhaps there would have been no biblical basis for the practice in the first instance. One of the most commonly quoted Bible texts by the operators of dangerous prayer is 2 Kings 1:7-15. Here, Ahaziah king of Israel sent an army commander with a regiment of fifty soldiers to go and arrest Elijah the prophet of God who was at a retreat on the mountain. When they arrived and ordered the prophet to come down and be matched to the king, the prophet ordered fire to come down from heaven and consume them and it happened. A second commander with his regiment of fifty soldiers was sent to the prophet and the same thing happened.

So dangerous prayer consumed one hundred and two soldiers and because it happened in the Bible it is seen as justifiable. A similar event occurred in Acts of the Apostle chapter 5, where a Christian couple, named Ananias and Sapphira brought an offering to the Lord of the proceeds of the sale of their item of property, but they lied that it was the entire proceeds that they brought, whereupon Peter the Bishop prayed a dangerous prayer and the couple perished. The question is do these incidents justify the practice of dangerous prayer on a Christian platform? Christianity is a religion of love in

which love is enjoined and advocated even for one's enemies. These injunctions are specifically given in the Bible: Love your neighbour as yourself (Matthew 22:39); Do unto others as you want them to do unto you (Matthew 7:12); Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. (Matthew 6:12); Judge not and you will not be judged; condemn not and you will not be condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven. (Luke 6:37); Love your enemies; bless those who curse you (Matthew 6: 44) etc.

These injunctions reflect the broad aspirations of Christianity as a means of promoting greater interpersonal relationship. The early Christians practiced this to the full, and although they were persecuted and killed by their enemies, yet God who was not unaware of it still achieved his objective in it all. Being a Christian implies fully accepting the will of God in life and beyond it, although it does not imply foolishly submitting to the whims and destructive caprices of the enemy. This is why all genuine Christians are fervent in spirit and vibrant in prayer to be able to dislodge all the network of the enemy, but in doing that, still wilfully submit to the will of God, as Jesus the Master of the Christian faith wilfully submitted to divinely approved death on the cross and prayed for the forgiveness of those that nailed him to the cross; wilfully restraining himself from praying dangerous prayers against them.

The above assessment of employing dangerous prayer against enemies would readily be given by many roadside preachers, many other Christians and Bible scholars alike but the matter is much more complex than we think. It is a fact that no one likes to be killed by an enemy, no matter how modest or godly such a person may be. The enemy can be variously defined because he comes and manifests in different ways but ultimately he is the evil one. The physical man that hacked another down in his prime and the sickly cancer that destroyed another have behind them the spiritual evil that manifested through them. To fight them effectively, the ultimate cause should be the target. At least the understanding of Christendom across the globe to a very large extent bears eloquent testimony to this understanding of humane problem. The book of Ephesians epitomizes this much – cited and much-cherished stance concerning Christian problem thus “for we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (6: 12).

Every brand or version of Christian religion accepts that Christians are in a battle against this evil one but the strategy and way and manner of the fight are not the same for every Christian. Earlier before now docility and passivity characterized this fight among the mainline churches but the African oriented churches have advertently or inadvertently conscripted almost every Christian into the violent spiritual strategy of battle making. The MFM has gone further than the African prayer-based churches to target the evil one for annihilation. Wherever and however it manifests itself, it must die together with the person or body it is using. Since it is a spiritual battle it does not infringe the law of God and man and one wonders why some few passages in the Bible should be cited indiscriminately by non members of MFM to score this battle, the fighters and its intention low. Death resulting from this kind of battle, if it harms or does claim lives as many people testify, is not actionable. Psalm 35 as part of the canonical Christian book of the Bible has God’s inspirational authorial authority and authenticity behind it and cannot be efficacious without the originating and sustaining power of Yahweh himself.

Psalm 35 establishes the innocence of the author of this passage in verses 7 and in 11-16 and these become the reasons and principles for the workability of the psalm “for without cause they hid their net for me; without cause they dug a pit for me”. These enemies who are here targeted were ungrateful persons. They were unjust witnesses, who have accused the psalmist not only without cause but also despite his genuine charity towards them. The appeal to God’s justice is basic for understanding the efficacy of this psalm and for comprehending the point of view of the Old Testament man. The psalmist’s wishes in verses 4-6 express his desire to see God fulfil his justice. “Vindicate me, O Lord, my God, according to thy righteousness; and let them not rejoice over me!” This statement in Verse 24 implies that one who seeks justification or vindication is one who is unjustly accused. This more than anything else defines psalm 35 as an individual lament psalm. All other individual lament psalmists have unjust accusation behind their lament and it is on this basis that they seek to be vindicated and no doubt on this platform too, the request gains validity and fulfilment.

MFM uses psalm 35 as imprecation for dangerous prayer and it remains so and could work so if the contents, intentions, circumstances and the contexts of the prototype passage are similar. But it is certain that many members recite these imprecatory passage against those they have bad will towards or

those that they are not sufficiently justified to pray dangerously against. In that case the recitation of the psalm is robbed of its potency by the lack of justice on the part of the member praying. For members to be eligible for the use of this prayer dangerously and for this prayer to be efficacious, justice must be on the side of the ones praying. The whole thing bothers on the much needed but grossly lacked sincerity, honesty, social justice and good attitudinal behavior in our society.

The emphasis is on behaviour not magical punishment against the enemy resulting from praying psalm 35. If one has justice (God) on his side, he has spiritual power for protection and safety being asked for by the psalmist. God is justice and the just man is godly. If the enemy is powerless against the just man of God through prayers where lies the enmity. It is one's good behaviour, sincerity, justice and faithfulness, as possessed by the psalmist, that provide one with the opportunity of having God's listening ear for justice and vengeance in situations of injustice and marginalization.

Psalm 35 as an imprecatory prayer, together with other similar biblical passages, is currently the arsenal for spiritual warfare everywhere in the Christian society today. This is a new world view that has crept in on us. One's rejection of it collapses like a pack of badly arranged cards when life problems such as childlessness, incessant deaths in the family, series of accidents, strange sicknesses etc. are experienced. It is well believed by all to the extent that opposition to it in the family for instance makes one the visible target of the spiritual war. In practice it does not afford anyone the luxury of questioning its justifiability. The MFM is not doing anything new in concerning the use of Psalm 35 as a dangerous prayer but they are unique in the sense that they pronounce and teach it openly.

A big question to be asked here is how can this evil one that manifests itself in accident, barrenness, wizardry, etc be killed once and for all? It is agreed that there is only one Satan, the evil one that causes all problems under various guises and appearances. Daily it is being chained, cast into the abyss, fired, rendered impotent, etc; yet it lives and causes problems day after day. This is not for the MFM alone to provide answer or solution but the whole of Christendom and active prayer warriors. But on the other hand if God had intended Satan to be killed once and for all he could have done it before now. Sometimes it seems better to speak of the evil one in the plural for it beats every sane imagination to accept that it is the same one who deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden that caused the Dana air crash recently in

Nigeria (June 3rd, 2012) and to believe that it is the one that hides net and digs pit for enemies in Psalm 35 that is behind using explosives today by Boko Haram members in northern parts of Nigeria and wasting life in Syria and Palestine. Nevertheless, if Satan could cause the sin of Garden of Eden that came to assume the proportion and magnitude it has acquired over time in Judaism and Christianity and if the reaction of the psalmist in Psalm 35 against the evil ones could be the archetype for waging spiritual battle in modern day MFM, then Satan’s phenomenal transformational mutability may well be understandable.

Well it is not easy to ascertain whether there is one Satan or many since the connections of the immediate and remote causes of problems cannot be objectively known. May be in the ‘spiritual realm’ there are connections as to warrant the position of the MFM and the entire Christendom. Anyone who accepts this position, just like MFM, knows that the evil one is part of creation and that everything to an extent contains its element, hence this unending fight to keep it at bay.

Finally, it should be pointed out that at the level God and Satan operate there is no much bickering and antagonism as noticed in MFM while fighting Satan with psalm 35. What happens is that God simply gives incontestable statements that solve whatever problem (Matt 4: 4) or allows Satan to do his will with restrictions (Job 1: 12). Ultimately God is superior to Satan and Satan expressly obeys him. The smoothness that characterizes this and more other frequent interactions and communications between the duo does not reflect the stress and strenuous kind of fight known among Christians against Satan. Even though this certainly cannot be resolved at this level but what is important to notice is that God is spiritually superior and all Christians including the MFM should strive to be like him. To be like him means to be spiritually superior in interacting and communicating with the evil or enemy that pervades and permeates every aspect of our life on a daily basis. In this way only could the encounter be properly termed ‘spiritual.’

Conclusion

We must be constantly conscious of the fact that the Bible simply presents to us the records of the good and not-so-good things that holy and unholy people did, quite often leaving out the moral judgment on those actions. Thus, actions do not just become justifiable simply because holy men in the scriptures did them.

At the scene of the arrest of Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter the Bishop-elect of the Church drew a machete and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest. Thank God that the Bible in that place also recorded the explicit words of Jesus in clear condemnation of the act of that holy man of God. If that injunction had not been given, perhaps MFM and the other Christians and anointed men of God would be carrying machete today as part of their paraphernalia to wage war against enemies.

Psalms 35 is a psalm of complaint of a burdened heart yearning desperately for vindication and the imprecative outbursts in the psalm only express the natural tendencies of such a state of mind. The appeal was directed straight to the Lord of justice who does not act unjustly. Thus the modern practice of using the words of that psalm to spiritually activate verbal missiles against real and perceived enemies, so called dangerous prayer, should be justifiable.

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