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## An Exploration of Psalm 23 in the Context of the National Union of Roads Transport Workers of Nigeria (Nurtwn)

**Sangotunde Sunday O.**

Lecturer, Department of Religious Studies, Adeyemi College of Education,  
School of Arts and Social Studies, Ondo, Ondo State, Nigeria

### **Abstract:**

*This paper aims at looking at Psalm 23 in the context of the professional activities of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTWN) of Nigeria. It looks at how this Psalm specifically affects the religious thoughts and understanding of God's protective power by the stake-holders in the road transport section of Nigerian economy known by their association and trade union name indicated above. The paper not only considers the context of the text or the text itself, but goes further to examine the context of the recipients of this Psalm, which are the members of the National Union of Road Transport Workers. In particular, this paper focuses on relating this Psalm to specific issues, interests and activities in the professional practices of the National Union of Road Transport Workers in the Country.*

**Keywords:** Context, psalms, YHWH, semiotics, socio-political, prayer

### **1. Introduction**

The Book of the Psalms has a tradition of been attributed to David by people who often assume that they were composed by him or others during his time as King of Israel (Mark, 2010:1). Mark observes that the history of the Psalms however actually goes back to the Exodus times which marked a new beginning in the national historical events that led to Libration and Emancipation from slavery into a covenant relationship with YHWH (2010:1). He noted further that Exodus 13: 17ff, after the Red Sea and escaping Pharaoh's army, the great hymn of Praise, the Songs of the Sea was recited which later technically became the first Psalm we find in the scripture and perhaps Israel's first Psalm (Mark, 2010:1).

Lewis noted that the Psalms which belong to the third division of the Hebrew Bible is categorized among the Poetry books by Masorettes along side Job and Proverbs (2001:1). According to Lewis (2001:1), the Psalms are Israel's words of thanksgiving to Yahweh and a declaration of His faithfulness. The Psalms are some of the most widely read portions of the Old Testament by both Christians and Moslems in Nigeria. They however have a long history of popularity among African Christians so much that it is bound with the New Testament in pocket editions and distributed to school children by a non-governmental organization known as the Gideon International. Such popularity of the Psalm is a reflection of the sensitivity of the fact that the Psalms are about people and their struggle with their political, economic, social and religious situations and circumstances; in African context; under God. This is why Psalm 23 is one of the Psalms frequently used as inscriptions on motor vehicles in Nigeria by the members of the National Union of the Roads Transport Workers, a major stakeholders' union of road transport section of the country's economy.

### **2. A Textual Interpretation of Psalm 23 in the Context of the National Union of Roads Transport Workers of Nigeria (NURTWN)**

This Psalm which enjoys been directly quoted as inscription on vehicles by some stakeholders of roads transport in Nigeria; "Psalm 23"; is categorized by Euro-American scholars as part of the Psalms of confidence in God's care and leadership of His people (Bulter, 1991:1). Adamo, representing the popular views of African scholars, classified this Psalm among the success Psalms by asserting that the African Christians believe that this Psalm has the power to bring success if used with faith, ritualistic prayers, fasting and rehearsal of some specific symbols and a combination of other animate or inanimate materials (2007:62). As observed by Sigmund Mowinkel this Psalm is among the Psalms of confidence to express absolute trust in God's ability to protect and care for His people (1962).

In her work on Psalms and Bible verses in Hoodoo religious culture, Yronwode observed that the extensive use of the Psalms in Hoodoo practices clearly related to the book by Lewis titled the secrets of the Psalms as far back as 1930 (2010:2). She opined further that among the Hoodoo practitioners, Psalm 23 could be used to acquire blessings, protection, good luck, including luck for gambling and other beneficent work (Yronwode, 2010: 2). As reported by Catherine Psalm 23 is used among the Hoodoo people for someone

wishing to draw prosperity and money, especially when it is read seven times on a bottle of olive oil mixed with bayberry oil (2010:3). The Hoodoo practitioners also use this Psalm as divination and for knowing the meanings of dreams (Yronwode, 2010:3). Samantha Stevens categorized this Psalm among the Psalms for serenity, peace of mind and stillness of the spirit, to help access the higher self (2006).

The idea of categorizing the Psalms is not peculiar to only scholars of Euro-American origin or extraction. This is because some Christian organizations like the Holy Rosary Catholic Church, 3612 Milan Street, Houston, Texas, find it convenient to align themselves with the scholars like Gunkel and Mowinckel. For instance; Rev Fr Lan in “Categorizing the Psalms” reads in part as follows:

“Dear Parishioners, Biblical Scholars typically divide the Books of Psalms into category called hymns, laments and thanksgiving.

We recognize two smaller categories too; which are royal Psalms and wisdom Psalms. There are also some Psalms that seem to defy classification such as Psalms for protection from dangers and others such as Psalms 23, 78 and 134” (2012).

The thrust of the matter, as observed by Revd Fr. Lan is that there are other groupings other than the ones done by Gunkel, Mowinckel and other eminent Euro-American scholars.

Okorochoa and Foulkes both African scholars, observed that all over the world Psalm 23 is known and loved (1995:113). Children often learn it before they learn to read; old people die with its words on their lips among members of some indigenous churches in Nigeria. Okorochoa and Foulkes noted further that even in countries where sheep and shepherds are not known, people love this Psalm (1995:113). This Psalm, as reported by Okorochoa and Foulkes is popular because its words are beautiful, easy to remember and most importantly; it is among the Psalms that express trust in God as one who is with us in all experiences of life restoring us when we go wrong and guiding us in the dark places of life from the day that we are born till the day we die (1995:113). Adamo; another African scholar; sees this Psalm as one of the Psalms of protection which contains symbol, signs and words that are not only divine but that are potent and performative which could be used for protection against enemies when recited with faith in God (2007:65).

Hosia and Garnett observed that Psalm 23 is a great hymn of faithfulness of God to provide, protect, and to save those who call on His name (2006:181). Hosia and Garnett opined that this Psalm is not only a personal testimony of David, though he used first person pronoun in the text, but it is also a prayer of comfort to be whispered during times of great perils (2006:181). Brueggemann says that this is a Psalm of confidence because it recounts in detail, by means of rich metaphors, a life lived in trustful receptivity of God’s gift (1994:127). Brueggemann therefore, divides this Psalm into three parts and reports that each of the divisions is more immediate and more intense to the faith experience of the speaker (1994:154). Brueggemann further noted that this Psalm seems closer to the actual memories of deliverance and that the two images of “table” and “cup” seem to have some specificity as a symbol of abundance of God’ protection and safety (1994:155).

More clearly, Brueggemann observed the use of names and pronouns in this Psalm especially the name of Yahweh that is uttered only twice at the beginning and at the end (1994:154). He noticed the use of the pronoun “thou” as the only independent pronoun referring to God in this Psalm and grammatical element in the repeated and pervasive first person pronoun which abounds everywhere in the Psalm (Brueggemann 1994:155).

As observed by Thorpe in this Psalm, David is not speaking as the shepherd, although he was one, but he speaks in this Psalm as a sheep- as one of the flock (2006:166). Ken Curtis noticed that in the opening segment of this Psalm, “The Lord Is My Shepherd”, it reminds one that we are not in charge and talks about powerlessness that accompanies our nature as human beings (2009:49).

In the observation of Goulder this Psalm has national over tones in the religious history of the Israelites’ historical progression. This is because Yahweh is often spoken of as the Shepherd of Israel (Psalm 77:21, 80:2) and Israel has always been referred to as His flock (Ps. 95:7, 100:3) (2006:464). Goulder noticed that  $\text{לֹא אֶחָד מֵאֵלֶיךָ יִפְתָּח פִּי}$  which means “I shall not lack” is the same verb used of Yahweh’s provision for Israel when they were in the wilderness in Deuteronomy 2:7; “These forty years the Lord your God has been with you and have lacked nothing” (2006:464). Still considering the national undertones of this Psalm as it concerns Israel as a nation, Goulder points out that verse two of this Psalm with words such as “in green pastures  $\text{בְּעֵשְׂבָת יִשְׁבֹּעַ}$  and “by waters of rest He leads me  $\text{יְרִבְצֵנִי עַל־מַי קְדֻמוֹת יְהוָה}$ ; there is a reflection on Yahweh’s leading of His people from Egypt to the land of Canaan (2006:465). Giving the reason why Yahweh as to do that Goulder says in verse 3 of the Psalm;  $\text{לְמַעַן שְׁמִי}$  “for His name’s sake”. That is to say for Yahweh’s personal reputation was at stake if He does not do this for Israel (2006:466).

Looking at the textual fitness of this Psalm, Pyper asserts that Psalm 23 seems a prime candidate for a preliminary foray into the question of textual fitness and it is the most successful text (2001:384). According to Pyper this is because for a text to survive, especially in an ancient culture, it must have readers to recite and copy it, investing their limited time and resources in propagating this text in preference to all others they could be reading or writing (2001:385). Pyper therefore opines that the reason why this text survived, as a voice of an ancient culture when millions of others have perished by the way side, is because of the textual fitness into the day to day life of every individual and nation (2001:386). This certainly informed the reason why Nigerian Roads Transport operators use this Psalm as one of such quotations from the Old Testament as inscriptions on motor vehicles.

Tappy (1965:256) in his consideration of the symbolism and structure of this Psalm, observed that the beauty and impact of this Psalm lies essentially in its quality as a timeless piece of work because a cursory literary analysis of the Psalm reveals the events and concepts on which its symbolism is built (1965:256). The thrust of Tappy’s observation is that unlike few other Psalms, Psalm 23 is not culturally bound as readers fix its emergence mainly from Israel’s social, civil, cultic, communal, or private spheres as this is responsible for why scholars have offered a broad range of quite specific proposal regarding the date, authorship, and historical circumstances of this Psalm (Tappy, 1965: 255). In his consideration of the structural analysis alongside the textual and literary studies of this Psalm, Tappy observed that our understanding of the artistry and sign-bolic message of the Psalm shall be enriched (1965:256).

The structural analysis that Tappy aims at here may not be seriously connected to any specific theoretical base implied in the narrower term structuralism of the works of Barthes R, Saussure F and others. But it relates to the internal organization, linguistic patterns, sequences of both smaller and larger literary units, matters of lexicography and social realities which we see giving context and function to the Psalm as a whole.

The sacred name of God; Yahweh יהוה is the proper name for the God of Israel. It is from "havah" which means "to become or to get" (Strong, 2004). Yahweh is referred to in this Psalm as the shepherd when the writer says- יהוה "The Lord is my shepherd" which means God alone possesses the ability to pasture, tend and graze. Also very important is the phrase "I shall not be in need" אֶפְסֵךְ which means "I shall not lack, I shall not be in need; I shall not be lacking or I shall not decrease" (Strong, 2004 n.p). Therefore, the whole idea here is that Yahweh, which is self-existing or eternal; Jehovah, Jewish national name of God which means also the Lord, is my shepherd who tends my life, my future and rules my affairs. For this reason, therefore, I shall lack nothing, shall not fail, shall not be abated, shall not decrease, shall not be reduced or made lower. Crenshaw observed that the metaphor of shepherd had a wide use in the ancient Near East with reference to deities and kings (2001:61).

Interpreting this semiotically in respect of its usage as inscriptions on motor vehicles in Nigeria by the members of roads transport workers, the writer and readers are familiar with the fact that feeble men may have constant and everlasting companionship with the everlasting God and he may as well cast his burden and anxiety upon Him who is more than able. David, who is believed to be the writer of this Psalm was not unacquainted with the Shepherd's office because he had his father's sheep in the mountains in Bethlehem especially in solitude situations by sympathizing in their wants, he had struggled hard, for their sake; with lions and bear to conquer. God is doing more than all of what David did for the sheep in the desert. The shepherd leads the sheep in the green pastures. This is a place where one settles down. It can stand for the dwelling of men for his safety and of comfort under God's provision and abundance. The phrase "prepareth a table for me" means a place where all things upon are in order.

This Psalm is viewed as Psalm of faith for the reason of Yahweh's ability to provide the much needed protection, care, serenity and happy confidence undisturbed by a single doubt. The underlying basis of the whole experiences mentioned above is that Yahweh had condescended to be the writer's shepherd in all his journeys as a traveller or as a transporter on Nigerian roads which of course is a "valley of death". But for the Lord being the writer's "shepherd", he is never lost in the crowd. This is absolutely unlimited; neither food, nor protection, nor loving care and safety shall be lacking. So, the writer, as well as the readers (travellers or the general public), are sure of Yahweh's restoration and guidance, also of protection and deliverance, even, in the most trying circumstance of their lives' journeys. The writer quoting this Psalm on his vehicle as an inscription and the reader at his own end, if combined with faith in Yahweh, express complete security in Yahweh's protective care. No lack or any external threat poses any danger, for the Divine Shepherd provides food and drink in the same way Yahweh was reported to have supplied manna and quail for the Israelites fleeing Egypt under the leadership of Moses.

The peculiarity of the dangers and perils on Nigerian roads make case for this Psalm as a Psalm of personal trust in God. It is the pure utterance of personal trust in Jehovah. The imagery of the Psalm suggests to the scholar a passing lesson that a certain man paints religious truth in the colours furnished by his own character and personal life's experiences and sometimes by the mode of his occupation. David talking of Yahweh as his shepherd bears credence to this fact. This is because David here adopts objects (rod and staff) and relations (shepherd and sheep) that are familiar to him to furnish his understanding of Yahweh; the God of Israel; with a vocabulary which clearly explains God's nature. So, the great outstanding thought of this Psalm is God. David saw his daily employment as the shepherd of the sheep either of his in-law; as Moses did for Jethro or of his father; Jesse, as a symbolic representative of God over Israel as a nation. He uses this symbolic analysis to describe God's relation to him. This means, with this symbolic description done by David, God is presented as closed with individual's life and experiences. Therefore, it means all wants are met in God, all energy and joy are supplied in God, all needed guidance and protection are given, all blessed companionship in the journey of life are enhanced, all serenity and security on our rugged and dangerous Nigerian roads are guaranteed and all comfort from hardship of life are realized.

Naturally, as observed by Samantha Psalm 23 is used to acquire blessings, protection, good luck and other beneficent works (2006:1). It is one of the magic Psalms of prosperity (2006:1). Samantha noted that this Psalm is used for acquiring a successful business venture or to procure the goodwill in ones business transactions (2006:20). This Psalm is recommended to be recited like African incantation, the Yoruba *Ogede* or potent words for seven times daily for three days after sun set, using the Holy name of *Rechmial*, which signifies strong and merciful God of love, grace and kindness (Samantha, 2006:1). This Psalm is recommended to be said as a prayer over a small quantity of olive oil with this simple prayer, "May it please thee, *Oh, Rechmial Eel*, to grant that I may obtain love, grace, and favour in the eyes of men according to thy holy will. Amen! *Selah*" (Samantha, 2006: 1). Samantha asserts further that this Psalm and those in its category of prosperity or success Psalms are meant to disarm gossips, and those who are targeting ones reputation for destruction (2006: 18). It means to conquer fear of poverty, to ask for a special financial favour, to request mercy from creditors, to remove all barriers on ones way of progress, to bring customers to ones business, to enlarge ones confidence and business stamina, to acquire mercy, tenderness and compassion and to receive daily uncommon blessings, for spiritual liberation that will invite prosperity in ones endeavours. Samantha also observed that the Psalm is also used for protection of the home, deliverance from enemies and for a favourable court verdict (2006:2). While Lewis opines that the Psalm could be used for the interpretation of dreams (2001:10).

The Nigerian vehicle owners and their drivers who wrote and believe in the importance of this Psalm are undoubtedly aware of its uses and spiritual relevance to transport business. This has explained why this Psalm is seen as a vital text chosen as an inscription written on some vehicles in Nigeria. They use this Psalm so that while driving, all disturbed thoughts of the gossips and anxiety of the

activities of some obnoxious elements in the family or in the work place, are automatically calmed down when one remembers that “The Lord is My Shepherd”. This Psalm gives an inspiration to attain a much higher self than what a shot of *opa ehin* (alcoholic drink that intoxicates) could give. It affords financial serenity, peace of the mind and stillness for the attainment of financial break-through in transport business.

The word “Shepherd”  $\text{רֹעֶה}$  explains the ability of Yahweh to provide for His loved ones especially in reference to the members of the Roads Transport Workers in Nigeria. He will confidently satisfy all their needs and that they will lack nothing. This is because He authored all the good things of the world and chooses to distribute them as He likes. So, He is more than able to do it as He did it in the life of the Israelites in the Wilderness.

It is therefore obvious that this Psalm is used by the members of the National Union of Roads Transport Workers of Nigeria for invocation of the divine guidance, safety, protection and prosperity in their daily professional endeavours. The members who write *The Lord Is My Shepherd* from Psalm 23 as an inscription on their vehicles confidently exercise their faith in God’s ability to show mercy and shower them with Protection, prosperity and financial buoyancy. This is what they project for their homes and businesses as the reason for quoting this Psalm.

### 3. Conclusion

This textual study has been able to examine and establish how the word of God, especially Psalm 23, has become more and more the major spiritual and physical nourishment, comfort, sources of protection, succour, deliverance, safety, source of emotional healing, expressions of Yahweh’s goodness and invocation of successes to the Nigerian transport operators, drivers and the travellers.

It also clearly reveals the level of religiosity of Nigerian drivers and people generally which really confirm that Africans and indeed Nigerians are irrevocably religious and very conscious of the supremacy of God in all their human endeavours. It affirms that the textual interpretation of this Psalm enable the study to do a comparative analysis of the context and the text with the local situation among the transportation stakeholders in Nigeria in the light of biblical witness, and the historical critical method used as a tool in analyzing the Psalm.

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