

God as Refuge and Stronghold in Psalm 91 in Contemporary Nigerian Situation of Insecurity

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Abstract

Life in the contemporary Nigerian society is menaced by many forces, both natural and supernatural. All these make people to live in fear, as these forces not only shorten life but render living a great burden to bear. The text of Psalm 91, like many psalms, presents God as the surest hope of strength and protection. Psalm 91 expresses great confidence in the protecting power of God in the face of any imaginable hostile force. This essay examines the argument of this psalm and brings it to bear on the many complex situations of insecurity in Nigeria. The analysis will follow a synchronic approach, taking seriously the present nature of the text of the psalm.

Keywords: Psalm 91, confidence, enemy, fear, fortress, insecurity, protection.

1. Introduction

The essay addresses the issue of God's protective guidance in the face of insecurity, as poetically articulated in Psalm 91. Human life is exposed to various tissues of violence in every age, and each age seems to experience it in many unique ways. The rate of violence in the society today makes human life appear helpless and hopeless. There is hardly any part of Nigeria that is not characterized by one form of menacing danger or another. This unfortunate reality of the contemporary Nigerian society attracted the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria (CATHAN) to devote its 35th annual Conference in 2021 to the theme of

Christian Mission and the Challenges of Insecurity in Nigeria. The concerns of Nigerian theologians are elaborately expressed in the Proceedings of the Conference, published in 2022.¹ The theme of insecurity continues to dominate discussion among Nigerians. The threat to life takes different forms every day, and many people get alarmed. The menacing forces attack from all fronts, and people interpret them as both spiritual and natural. In fact, the average Nigerian feels threatened at every moment.

This is, however, not a typically contemporary Nigerian or African problem. Insecurity has always been a recurring issue in human history and in every epoch. The biblical text projects a society that was also menaced by many forces, just like our own context today. The question often was: From where shall our salvation come? The author of Psalm 121 raises the question, “I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come?” (121:1). The answer is given immediately: “My help comes from Yahweh, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. Yahweh is your keeper; Yahweh is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. Yahweh will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life” (Ps. 121:2-7). This great confidence in the protecting power of Israel’s God is well elaborated in Psalm 91 which, like other psalms, sees God as refuge and stronghold. Many people who feel threatened by powerful enemy forces find Psalm 91 as a great source of consolation.² The psalm is well-known to many Nigerians, as they often recite it as a spiritual remedy for their problems. It is also popular among all who recite the Church’s liturgy of the hours, as it is used for Night Prayers (Compline) every Sunday and Solemnity.

¹ Luke E. Ijezie, Stephen Audu, and Agnes I. Acha, eds., *Christian Mission and the Challenges of Insecurity in Nigeria* (Port Harcourt: CATHAN Publications, 2022), i–x, 397.

² Gerrit C. Vreugdenhil, *Psalm 91 and Demonic Menace*, *Old Testament Studies* 77 (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2020), 1–508.

2. Nature of Psalm 91

Psalm 91 belongs to the fourth book of the Psalter which runs from Psalms 90 to 106. Psalm 91 is among the psalms without any specific title, but classified among the wisdom psalms because of its content that is mostly didactic in nature. The psalm is best understood when read within the context of Psalms 90 and 92. In Psalm 90, the psalmist articulates the precarious condition of humanity, rendered miserable by suffering and death. Human life has the span of only seventy years and eighty for those who are strong, and all these are passed in emptiness and pain. The psalmist likens the human condition to the grass that sprouts green in the morning but in the evening, it becomes dry and withers. For the psalmist, the only consolation is to have as many years of joy to balance the years of pain. But in the end, all return to dust. It would seem as if life were a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing, as William Shakespeare would later say. To this precarious nature of the human being, Psalm 91 offers a solution. All who live in nearness to God, who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, have nothing to fear, as God protects them from the vagaries of life. Psalm 92 responds with joyful thanksgiving for God's protective care as expressed in Psalm 91. The three psalms are interpreted by Cas J. A. Vos as forming a sequential scheme of: complaint – comfort of God – thanksgiving.³ The present essay reads most sections of Psalm 91 as general responses to the complaints made in Psalm 90.

3. Structure of Psalm 91

There are many linguistic issues in the text of Psalm 91, which make the structuring of the psalm difficult. However, the nature of the present discussion does not warrant going into all the problems. Some interpreters read Psalm 91 as a dialogue involving three persons. The first speaker is interpreted as speaking in vv 1-2 while the second speaker responds in vv. 3-4. The first speaker again speaks in vv. 5-8 and the second responds in vv. 9-13.

³ Cas J. A. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms* (Hartfield: Protea Book House, 2005), 138.

Finally, the third speaker intervenes in vv. 14-16. But for the purposes of the present study, the text is better structured according to the themes, which are clearly evident in the body of the psalm. This means that the text can be structured along six parts.

- vv. 1-2: YHWH as refuge and stronghold for who dwells in His Shelter
- vv. 3-4: YHWH as deliverer from dangers
- vv. 5-6: Elimination of fear of destructive things and forces
- vv. 7-8: Freedom from Attack of Dangerous forces
- vv. 9-13: Acquisition of power over evil forces
- vv. 14-16: Divine Promise of good things to one who loves God

The six-part division rhymes with the division of the psalm into six stanzas with unequal lines and strophes. The stanza is a major subdivision of a poem made up of patterned lines, while the strophe is a group of two or more lines that constitute a subdivision of a stanza.⁴ The term “stanza” is an original Italian word meaning room in a house. The poetic text is like a house, and the stanzas are the rooms of the house, while the strophes are the furniture.⁵ This imagery helps one to understand that the elements of a poetic text are arranged as furniture in a house. This makes the poetic unit a sophisticated work of art. This is very much evident in the language and imagery of Psalm 91.

1 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,
 who abides in the shadow of the Almighty,
 2 will say to YHWH, ‘My refuge and my stronghold;
 my God, in whom I trust.’

3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
 and from the deadly pestilence;
 4 he will cover you with his pinions,
 and under his wings you will find refuge;
 his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
 5 You will not fear the terror of the night,

⁴ Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Technique*, JSOT.S 26 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 161–62.

⁵ Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 162.

the arrow that flies by day,
6 the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
the destruction that wastes at noonday.

7 A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
8 You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.

9 Because you have made YHWH your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,
10 no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.

11 For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
12 On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
13 You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

14 Because he loves me, I will deliver him;
I will protect him for he knows my name.
15 When he calls to me, I will answer him;
I am with him in distress,
I will rescue him and honour him.
16 With long life I will satisfy him,
and show him my salvation.

4. Analysis of the Text

vv. 1-2: YHWH as Refuge and Stronghold for the Dweller in
His Shelter

1 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,
who abides in the shadow of the Almighty,
2 will say to YHWH, 'My refuge and my stronghold;
my God, in whom I trust.'

This first stanza of the poem is made up of four lines. Each line has a different name for God, namely, the Most High (Elyon), the Almighty (Shaddai), YHWH, and God (Elohim). All these names

highlight different attributes of the same God of Israel. The point is that whoever runs to Him is comprehensively protected.

The statement in v. 1 identifies the beneficiary of all the blessings in the psalm. It is the one who dwells in God's shelter. The idea of dwelling connotes a permanent mode of settlement. The Hebrew verb used for dwelling here is *yāshab*, which means "to dwell, inhabit, live, sit, be enthroned".⁶ According to W. Richter, the Hebrew language basically employs three verbs to express different modes of dwelling in a place, and these are: *yāshab* (dwelling as a full citizen), *shākan* (dwelling as a nomad), and *gûr* (dwelling as an alien).⁷ Sometimes the verb *shākan* can connote both the nomadic form of dwelling and dwelling for a long period of time, but whenever the idea is to stress the permanent form of dwelling or citizenship, the verb *yāshab* is usually used.⁸ In the present context of Psalm 91, the dwelling is not for a brief moment but always.

But where is this dwelling place? The text identifies the place as "shelter of the Most High" (*sēter* Elyon) and "shadow of the Almighty" (*sēl* Shaddai). The Hebrew word *sēter* means hiding place. It refers to a secret place where one runs for refuge. The idea of a hiding place implies a situation of danger that demands running away. One recalls that Psalm 32:7 refers to God as hiding place: "You are a hiding place (*sēter*) for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance." A similar idea is found in Psalm 27:5: "For he will shelter (*sāphan*) me in his

⁶ Manfred Görg, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green, Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990): 428.

⁷ Wolfgang Richter, *Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Richterbuch*, BBB 18, 2nd ed, (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1966), 90. See also Görg, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 428; D. Kellermann, "rwg," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 2, (1975): 439–49; J. R. Spencer, "Sojourner," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6, (1992): 103–4; C. Van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 1–67; Rolf Rendtorff, "The ge'ør in the Priestly Laws of the Pentateuch," in Mark G. Brett, ed., *Ethnicity and the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 77–87; Peter Kidd, *Alterity and Identity in Biblical Law* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1–30.

⁸ Luke E. Ijezie, *The Interpretation of the Hebrew Word 'am (People) in Samuel-Kings*, European University Studies 830 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 117–18.

place of shelter in the day of trouble; he will hide (*str*) me in the hiding-place (*sēter*) of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.”

The other term shade or shadow (*sēl*) connotes also sense of refuge and protection from danger. The psalmist of Psalm 17:8 prays: “Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow (*sēl*) of your wings.” In the same way, the psalmist prays in Psalm 61:4 to find refuge in the “hiding-place” (*sēter*) of God’s wings. This hiding place of refuge can be understood as the sanctuary or temple. But it generally refers to God’s presence. Dwelling in the hiding place or shade of the Almighty means living in the divine presence. The psalmist of Psalm 23 says he will dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of his life. This brings out the type of permanence required. It is a lifetime commitment.

In v. 2, the psalmist expresses the confession of faith of the one who lives in the presence of God: He takes God as refuge and stronghold. The two significant nouns here are *mahseh* (refuge) and *meṣûdāh* (stronghold, fortress). The term *meṣûdāh* is used to qualify a defence that is solid and impenetrable and inaccessible. It can refer to a mountain height, a high tower or a stone wall of defence. In 2 Sam 5:7, David is said to have captured the stronghold (*meṣûdāh*) of Zion, which is the city of David in Jerusalem. In this context, *meṣûdāh* designates the mountain height. This is also the sense in 1 Sam 22:4. Defensive networks in forms of strongholds were very vital in the ancient culture as people were constantly menaced by external aggressors. In Psalm 91:4, the word is metaphorically applied to the solidity of the defence one gets from God. So God is often referred to as *meṣûdāh*. This is also the case in Psalm 31:3 where YHWH is called “my rock and my stronghold (*meṣûdāh*)”. With YHWH as *meṣûdāh*, no evil can penetrate one’s life or dwelling place.

vv. 3-4: YHWH as Deliverer from Dangers

3 For He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;

4 He will cover you with His pinions,
and under His wings you will find refuge;
His faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

Two evils are mentioned in v.3: the fowler's snare (*paḥ*) and the deadly pestilence (*deber*). The snare (*paḥ*) is what the fowler or hunter of birds uses to catch the birds. The snare can be any alluring thing or food item that attracts the bird before the hunter catches it. The psalmist describes the human person as a victim of different forms of fowler's snare, but the one who is attached to YHWH gets protected. According to Gerrit C. Vreugdenhill, the snare (*paḥ*) in this context has to do with idol worship, as the people of Israel easily fall into the nets of Pagan idols, spirits and demons.⁹ The pestilence (*deber*) is a plague or attack that brings about death and destruction. The ancient people were exposed to various plagues, in forms of deadly epidemic or even pandemic diseases that usually threatened the lives of entire populations. These plagues were often interpreted as spiritual attacks. The one who trusts in YHWH is assured deliverance from such plagues.

In v. 4, God is depicted as having wings (*kēnāphaîm*) like birds with which He protects His own. In Exod 19:4, YHWH's guidance of Israel from Egypt to the desert is described as being carried on eagle's wings (*kanphē nēshārîm*). The same imagery is seen in Deut 32:11, where YHWH, in his protection of His people, is likened to an eagle with protective wings: "As an eagle incites its nestlings forth by hovering over its brood, So He spread His wings (*kēnāphâw*) to receive them and bore them up on His pinions." The term *kēnāphaîm* is also used to denote the fold of a garment.¹⁰ Generally, the wings are used for flying and covering, and they are used metaphorically to express the divine protection. So YHWH is seen in Ps 91:4 as One who covers His faithful ones with His wings. The same wings are also represented as pinions in the text. The pinion (*'eḇrāh*) also denotes the type of wings associated with some birds. So, YHWH covers the one who trusts in Him with His pinions, and under these pinions, the person finds a protective hiding place.

The last statement in v. 4 describes the instrument of YHWH's protection as his *'emet* (truth), which can be rendered as His

⁹ Vreugdenhill, *Psalm 91 and Demonic Menace*, 402.

¹⁰ A. S. van der Woude, "kānāp," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 2, (1997): 619.

reliability or faithfulness. The Hebrew word *'emet* is a feminine noun derived from the verb *'āman* meaning “to confirm, to support”.¹¹ The noun *'emet* expresses the idea of reliability, firmness, faithfulness, truthfulness. YHWH's *'emet* expresses the idea that whatever YHWH says is sure and reliable. So His *'emet* is metaphorically qualified as shield and buckler, which are weapons of protection at war. The shield (*sinnāh*) and the buckler (*sōḥērāh*) are defensive weapons used by the fighter to guard against missile attacks or projectiles from the enemy. YHWH's faithfulness to His promises is a source of defence just like shield and buckler. Thus, the one who trusts in Him is always protected against enemy attack.

vv. 5-6: Elimination of fear of Destructive Things and Forces

5 You will not fear the terror of the night,
the arrow that flies by day,
6 the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
the destruction that wastes at noonday.

The different forms of enemy attack are enumerated here in vv. 5-6 as terror, arrow, pestilence and destruction. In the ancient times, people felt menaced by many forces: terror of the night, hostile arrows thrown by day, unseen pestilence that would come under cover of darkness and other dangerous forces that often threatened in the daytime. The terror and the pestilence are in synonymous parallelism as the attacks that happen in the darkness of the night, while the arrow and the destruction are in synonymous parallelism as the dangers that come in the light of day. The one who trusts in YHWH is delivered from fear of these dangers. Fear is a terrible thing in the face of evil forces. All these will no longer evoke fear for the dweller in God's presence because YHWH's faithfulness is shield and buckler.

vv. 7-8: Freedom from Attack of Dangerous forces

7 A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,

¹¹ Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), s. v. “*'emet*”.

but it will not come near you.
8 You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.

The statement in vv. 7-8 is a consequence of the protection announced in vv. 3-4 and 5-6. Since the dweller in YHWH's presence enjoys immunity, he is freed from the attacks of the dangerous forces that wreak havoc on others. The terms "thousand" and "ten thousand" are hyperbolic expressions to express the extent of YHWH's protection. Even when formidable enemies devastate whole armies and populations, the one who lives in YHWH's presence remains unscathed. He does not even need to run away, as his eyes will be there to see the destruction of the wicked, referring to those who reject YHWH's protective presence.

vv. 9-13: Acquisition of Power over Evil Forces

9 Because you have made YHWH your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,
10 no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.

11 For He will command His angels concerning you,
to guard you in all your ways.

12 On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

13 You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

This part (vv. 9-13) of the psalm has two stanzas. The first in vv 9-10 presents the two divine names, YHWH and the Most High, which are put in parallel, and also two inimical forces, evil and scourge, also in parallel. The text repeats and reinforces the ideas in vv. 1-2 that God is the dwelling place where one goes to find refuge. The one who dwells in God's presence is shielded from the forces of evil.

In the next stanza in vv 11-13, God's angels are identified as the agents of the divine protection from evil. God's angels are ever present to protect the believer from the identified evils and guide him on the way. Because of this spiritual empowerment, he can

trample upon dangerous animals. The dangerous animals are mentioned in v. 13 as the lion (*śaḥal*), the adder (*peten*), the young lion (*kephîr*) and the serpent (*tannîn*). These animals are, no doubt, used figuratively to portray the dangerous enemies. The psalmist prays in Ps 58:6 that God should break the strong teeth of the young lions. In Isa 30:6 and Ezek 32:2, the young lion is associated with the Pharaoh of Egypt, said to be causing trouble among the nations. In the imagery in Isa 11:6, the young lion can be understood as representing the powerful enemies and trouble-makers within the society who lurk around planning evil and destruction.¹² In Ps 35:17 and Jer 2:15, the enemies are portrayed as strong lions. For the snake imageries, the adder (*peten*) and the serpent (*tannîn*), one finds different translations for them, but both represent very poisonous snakes. The species *peten* (adder, cobra, asp, poisonous serpent, etc.) occurs 6 times in the Hebrew Bible (Deut 32:33; Job 20:14,16; Ps 58:5; 91:13; Isa 11:8), and in each occurrence, emphasis is put on its venomous character.¹³ The species of serpents called *tannîn* (plural: *tannînîm*) are the sea monsters or sea dragons (Gen 1:21; Exod; Isa 27:1; Ezek 29:3; 32:2, Ps 148:7; cf. Exod 7:9-12; Deut 32:33). In the occurrence in Ezek 29:3, the Pharaoh of Egypt is qualified as “the great crouching monster (*tannîn*) amidst your Niles”. These references show that the two species of poisonous snakes in Ps 91:13 represent the powerful and dangerous evil-doers within the society. All these dangerous forces will be trampled underfoot by the one who has taken YHWH as refuge. In other words, the one who dwells with YHWH acquires power over every adverse force.

vv. 14-16: Divine Promise of good things to one who loves God
 14 Because he loves me, I will deliver him;
 I will protect him for he knows my name.
 15 When he calls to me, I will answer him;

¹² Luke E. Ijezie, “Peace as Fruit of Justice and Righteousness: The Perspective of Isa 11:1-9 and Implications for Peace in Africa,” in *Conflicts and Reconciliation in the Bible: Proceedings of the Fourteenth Congress of the Pan-African Association of Catholic Exegetes, 2009*, eds. Paul Beré, M. S. Nwachukwu, and A. I. Umoren (Abidjan: Editions CERAP, 2015), 188–89.

¹³ Ijezie, “Peace as Fruit of Justice and Righteousness,” 188–89.

I am with him in distress,
 I will rescue him and honour him.
 16 With long life I will satisfy him,
 and show him my salvation.

This last part and stanza of the psalm sums the whole attachment of the believer to God as *hāshaq*, which can be translated as “to cling” or “to love” in the sense of desiring. God promises to protect all who trust in him with length of days (*’ōreḵ yāmîm*). The phrase *’ōreḵ yāmîm* does not necessarily mean eternal life or everlasting life but an unspecified length of days. The same terminology is used in Ps 23:6 with the same meaning. The idea is that of a number of days or years that continues for a long time in the future. One recalls the shortness of life complained about in Psalm 90:3-12. Now, God promises to change the story by offering a length of days for the one who loves Him.

5. Implications for Contemporary Situations of Insecurity

Psalm 91 gives us reason to trust and never lose hope in the face of calamities and security challenges. In our Nigerian context, fear of diverse evil forces conditions the lives of many people. Fear is usually linked to the perception of something as threatening.¹⁴ These threatening things determine the nature of the fear. Thus, in our society, we have such fears as: fear of unknown forces, fear of misfortune, fear of sickness, fear of enemies, fear of thieves, fear of criminals, fear of bad neighbours, fear of terrorist groups, fear of unknown gunmen, fear of bandits, fear of kidnappers, fear of scammers, fear of remaining childless, fear of death, fear of God and supernatural forces. The remedy to all these fears is to live daily in the presence of God. The realisation of being in the presence of a superior power gives courage and confidence.

But here the problem arises. Our daily experiences show that these evil forces do not discriminate in their attacks of both the

¹⁴ Bruna Costacurta, *La vita minacciata: Il tema della paura nella Bibbia Ebraica*, in *AnBib* 119 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988), 15-28.

good people and the bad people. How then does God save all who trust in Him when, in fact, many good and pious people are victims of terror attacks? The reality of evil and its menace of good people is a great challenge to the reading of hope-giving psalms as Psalm 91. One is, therefore, constrained to find a deeper explanation of what divine protection or deliverance actually means and entails. One of the aims of reading the biblical text is to help us understand the patterns of God's relationship with human beings in the past so that we can effectively enter into a relationship of faith and trust with Him. In this relationship, what matters is not the immediate solutions but the confidence that sustains the relationship, knowing that for God a thousand years is like a single day. So, it does not matter the length of time the promise of deliverance gets to be fulfilled, the important thing is that it will surely be fulfilled. Without this disposition of patient resignation to God's will, one can hardly understand the type of faith and trust that sustain the Psalmists.

6. Conclusion

The essay has highlighted the immense treasures of Psalm 91 which is one of the most favourite prayers of those who feel menaced in a dangerous world. It is a psalm that fits our contemporary society where different forms of terror come under the cover of darkness and innumerable hostile arrows are thrown by daytime. The psalmist of Psalm 91 acknowledges that human life is truly menaced but promises divine protection for all the terrors of the night and the dangers that come in the light of day. But the provision is that one should take cover under the shadow of the Almighty, meaning that one should cling to God and abide in His presence with faith, hope and love.

These virtues of faith, hope and love are not determined by what the human eyes presently see. In fact, the experiences of many today pose serious challenges to the belief in the divine promises. But our hope is not based just on human experience but on the solidity and reliability of the divine word of promise. This faithfulness of God to His promise sustains our hope and gives us strength in every moment of trial. So, we can say with confidence, "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (Ps 46:11).