

THE USE OF IMPRECATION BY CHURCH LEADERS IN SOME DENOMINATIONS IN NIGERIA: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Leadership position, especially in the church setting, is a difficult assignment which calls for divine wisdom for whosoever is called into such an office. This is because the environment in which church leaders operate is filled with activities of Satan and his agents as observed in the presence of all kinds of vices which include oppression, poverty and demonic oppression among others.

The thrust of this paper is an empirical study of the use of imprecation by church leaders in some denominations in Nigeria. It is discovered that several church leaders make use of imprecation in discharging their God-given assignments in their various denominations, just as the *Ifa* priests in the traditional society make use of incantation. Indeed, imprecation is a powerful weapon in the hands of church leaders as they confront various forms of evil in the lives of their members in particular and in the society in general.

Introduction

It is generally assumed that church leaders-Pastors, Evangelists, Prophets, Apostles, etc are called and commissioned by God. Each of the leaders has specific assignments to perform in his congregation. Several of the church leaders have not taken their call lightly, knowing fully well the difficult nature of the tasks before them. And of course, several men of God like Moses (Exodus 3: 1-22), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4-13), Gideon (Judges 6:11-40), etc. expressed similar reservation at the time of their call. The fundamental issue here is the fact that the setting in which the Nigerian church leaders operate looks more difficult and complex than what is obtainable in other parts of the world, especially in the western or developed countries of the world. This is because of the reality of evil which shows itself in the activities of Satan and his agents. Indeed, evil in our society is connected with wickedness, oppression, misery, distress, calamity and various forms of unpleasant situations. Incidentally, in the African society in which the Nigerian church is situated, the people visit *Ifa* priests for solution to problems confronting them. The *Ifa* priests, in turn, use incantations and recite many verses *odu* to diagnose the various problems brought before them. They give concoctions and prescribe sacrifices for their clients. Since Christians in the Nigerian church are not immuned to the activities of Satan, members of various denominations visit their Pastors, Prophets, Evangelists, Apostles, etc for solutions to their problems. These church leaders, in their attempt to seek solutions for the problems confronting their members, and in an attempt to create a conducive worship environment for their members, resort to the use of imprecation.

Goal, Method and Scope

The goal of this paper is to examine the use of imprecation by church leaders in some denominations in Nigeria. In addition, the paper aims at clarifying the use of the

word 'imprecation', especially as it is being generally misunderstood to mean the same as the words 'curse' and 'incantation'.

The empirical method is adopted, as one of the questions from the questionnaire administered during a research conducted on imprecatory Psalms was carefully analyzed. Five denominations were selected: The Anglican Communion (Ang); United Missionary Church of Africa (UMCA); Christ Apostolic Church (CAC); The Church of the Lord, Aladura (CL), and Celestial Church of Christ (CCC). The rationale for the choice of the five denominations is to have a fairly good representation of all the major denominations found in Nigeria:

Anglican Communion represents the orthodox belief. It is an example of the Protestant Church. Also, it is the earliest denomination established in Nigeria shortly after the abolition of the slave trade¹

UMCA is evangelical in its doctrine and practice. It has its origin in North America and Canada²

CAC, which is Pentecostal and charismatic in its doctrine and practice, is the most widely spread of all the indigenous churches in Nigeria³.

CL is one of the growing indigenous churches in Nigeria. The denomination is said to have four features that make it a unique denomination. It is biblical in pattern, ecumenical in outlook, evangelical in ministry, and pentecostal in power⁴.

CCC is purely an indigenous denomination with much emphasis on symbolism⁵.

A total number of 650 questionnaire sheets were widely distributed among Christians-clergymen, business men, students, civil servants, professionals, academicians, etc in such a way that significant views from each of the selected five denominations were received. At the end of the exercise, 494 questionnaires that were returned were analyzed by cross tabulation and simple percentage. The cross-sectional study is the process whereby various samples studied are compared at different times. The numbers are arranged in rows across and down the page so that they can be compared easily.⁶

Definitions of Terms

There are at least six Hebrew words and three Greek words that are closely connected with imprecation in the Old and New Testaments respectively.

i. Hebrew words:

a. כַּלַּח: This is a verb which means "to curse or ban from something".⁷ The word is used to declare a punishment (Gen. 3:14, 17; 4:11; etc). It is used to utter a threat (Jer. 11:3; 17:5; Mal. 2:2). It is also used in the context of giving certain laws, thereby serving the purpose of cautioning the covenant breakers (Deut. 27:15-26).

b. שָׁבַע: This is a noun which means "swear, curse, or oath".⁸ The word is mainly used in a legal situation. It is used in several ways such as protecting one's property (Jud. 17:2); as a proof of guilt (Num. 5:16-28); ratifying of a treaty (Gen. 26:28-29); and as a means of judgment (Jer. 29:18; 42:18; etc).

c. קָלַל: This word means "to despise or dishonour a person or thing." (Exodus 21:17; Lev. 19:14; 1 Sam. 17:42-43; 2 Sam. 16:5-14)⁹

d. קלל ה: This word is a noun from קלל which means the absence of a blessed state (Gen. 27: 12-13)¹⁰. The word is greatly used by Jeremiah in the context of the judgment of God on the people of Judah (Jer. 24: 9; 25: 18; etc).

e. קבב: This word is used for the uttering of curse on somebody indiscriminately. It is the word that is used repeatedly in Numbers 22-24.¹¹

f. זעז is an expression of indignation in speech either by God or man (Num. 23: 7-8; Mic. 6:10; Mal. 1: 14; Psalm 7:12; etc)¹².

ii. Greek Words

a. Καταρα: This is a noun form of the verb Καταραομαι . It means "curse or imprecation" (James 3:10)¹³

b. Αναθεματιζω: This word means "to bind with an oath or to be under a curse. (Acts 23: 12, 21; Mark 14:71)¹⁴.

c. Κακολογειω means "to abuse, speak evil of somebody, revile or to insult someone" (Mat. 15:4; Mark 7: 10-12; Acts 19:9).¹⁵

In the light of the above definitions of Hebrew and Greek words connected with imprecation, it is appropriate at this time to differentiate between incantation, imprecation and curse. This is necessary as some Christians are uncomfortable with imprecation while several others spice their communion with God with curses on Satan and his agents. Incantation is the act of chanting words purporting to have magical powers with the aim of warding off the effects of witchcraft and sorcery.¹⁶ A curse is an indiscriminate invocation of evil against someone. However, imprecation, as used and understood in this paper, is an expression of displeasure against evil in the life of an individual or in a particular situation. Imprecation is an address to God, asking Him to do justice by vindicating the righteous¹⁷.

Analysis

The five tables below represent the response of the respondents to the question "How often do the following people use imprecatory Psalms in your denomination?"

i. Service Leaders

ii. Pastor

iii. Evangelists

iv. Prophets

v. Apostles

(i) SERVICE LEADERS

Denomination	Irregular	Never	Regular	Total
A. Ang	35	12	16	63
	55.6%	19.0%	25.4%	13.7%
	16.4%	13.4%	10.1%	
B. UMCA	39	23	19	81
	48.1%	28.4%	23.5%	17.6%
	18.3%	25.8%	11.9%	
C. CAC	36	10	22	68
	52.9%	14.7%	32.4%	14.8%
	16.9%	11.2%	13.8%	
D. CL	21	6	24	51
	41.2%	11.8%	47.1%	11.1%
	9.9%	6.7%	15.1%	
E. CCC	23	7	43	73
	31.5%	9.6%	58.9%	15.8%
	10.8%	7.9%	27.0%	
F. Others	59	31	35	125
	47.2%	24.8%	28.0%	27.1%
	27.7%	34.8%	22.0%	
Total	213	89	159	461
	46.2%	19.3%	34.5%	

(ii) PASTORS

Denomination	Irregular	Never	Regular	Total
A. Ang	35	18	11	64
	54.7%	28.1%	17.2%	13.9%
	15.7%	15.9%	8.7%	
B. UMCA	42	25	12	79
	53.2%	31.6%	15.2%	17.1%
	18.8%	22.1%	9.5%	
C. CAC	41	9	18	68
	60.3%	13.2%	26.5%	14.7%
	18.4%	8.0%	14.3%	
D. CL	20	16	12	48
	41.7%	33.3%	25.0%	10.4%
	9.0%	14.2%	9.5%	
E. CCC	21	11	41	73
	28.8%	15.1%	56.2%	15.8%
	9.4%	9.7%	32.5%	
F. Others	64	34	32	130
	49.2%	26.2%	24.6%	28.1%
	28.7%	30.1%	25.4%	
Total	223	113	126	462
	48.3%	24.5%	27.3%	

(iii) EVANGELISTS

Denomination	Irregular	Never	Regular	Total
A. Ang	23	16	8	57
	40.4%	28.1%	31.6%	13.0%
	13.5%	16.2%	10.7%	
B. UMCA	28	21	23	72
	38.9%	29.2%	31.9%	13.6%
	16.5%	21.2%	13.6%	
C. CAC	32	7	28	67
	47.8%	10.4%	41.8%	15.3%
	18.8%	7.1%	16.6%	
D. CL	21	17	12	50
	47.0%	34.0%	24.0%	11.4%
	12.4%	17.2%	7.1%	
E. CCC	19	8	46	73
	26.0%	11.0%	63.0%	16.7%
	11.2%	8.1%	27.2%	
F. Others	47	30	42	119
	39.5%	25.2%	35.3%	27.2%
	27.6%	30.3%	24.9%	
Total	170	99	169	438
	38.8%	22.6%	38.6%	

(iv) PROPHETS

Denomination	Irregular	Never	Regular	Total
A. Ang	14	13	14	41
	34.1%	31.7%	34.1%	10.4%
	9.9%	18.8%	7.6%	
B. UMCA	22	16	23	61
	36.1%	26.2%	37.7%	15.4%
	15.5%	23.2%	12.4%	
C. CAC	22	7	35	64
	34.4%	10.9%	54.7%	16.2%
	15.5%	10.1%	18.9%	
D. CL	17	4	27	48
	35.4%	8.3%	56.3%	12.1%
	12.0%	5.8%	14.6%	
E. CCC	24	4	45	73
	32.9%	5.5%	61.6%	18.4%
	16.9%	5.8%	24.3%	
F. Others	43	21	45	109
	39.4%	22.9%	37.6%	27.5%
	30.3%	36.2%	22.2%	
Total	142	69	185	396
	35.9%	17.4%	46.7%	

(v) APOSTLES

Denomination	Irregular	Never	Regular	Total
A. Ang	18	17	7	42
	42.9%	40.5%	16.7%	11.1%
	11.5%	17.0%	5.8%	
B. UMCA	27	21	12	60
	45.0%	35.0%	20.0%	15.9%
	17.2%	21.0%	9.9%	
C. CAC	24	10	20	54
	44.4%	18.5%	37.0%	14.3%
	15.3%	10.0%	15.5%	
D. CL	18	13	16	47
	38.3%	27.7%	34.0%	12.4%
	11.5%	13.0%	13.2%	
E. CCC	24	10	37	71
	33.8%	14.1%	52.1%	18.8%
	15.3%	10.0%	30.6%	
F. Others	46	29	29	104
	44.2%	27.9%	27.9%	27.5%
	29.3%	29.0%	24.0%	
Total	157	100	121	378
	41.5%	26.5%	30.0%	

Tables i-v above show that a high percentage of the respondents, especially in the Anglican, UMCA and CAC denominations, affirmed that their Service Leaders, Pastors, Evangelists, and Apostles use Imprecatory Psalms "irregularly" 46.2%, 48.3%, 38.8% and 41.5% respectively.

A significant percentage of 34.5%, 27.3%, 38.6% and 32% of the respondents said their service leaders, Pastors, Evangelists and Apostles use Imprecatory psalms "regularly" respectively.

A small percentage of the respondents affirmed that their service leaders, Pastors, Evangelists, and Apostles "never" use Imprecatory Psalms 19.3%, 24.5%, 22.6% and 26.5% respectively.

In addition, the table 18 (iv) shows that a high percentage of the respondents, especially in the CAC, CL and CCC denominations affirmed that their Prophets use imprecatory Psalms "regularly" 54.7%, 56.3% and 61.6% respectively. 35.9% said their prophets use imprecatory Psalms "irregularly" while only 17.4% said that their prophets "never" use Imprecatory Psalms.

The Value of Imprecation

There is no doubt that our contemporary society is much more complicated than what was obtained at the time of the Psalmist in the Old Testament. James E. Adams notes that "the whole world has announced its rebellion against God. Even the latest 'Scientific' technology is being used to mold and promote a godless society."¹⁸ He notes further that:

Christians today undergo not only physical persecution but daily attempts of the enemy to destroy the church of Jesus Christ within: temptation to sin, discouragement, and jealousy. We are bombarded on every front.¹⁹

Therefore, in the light of the numerous problems confronting the church, it is appropriate for church leaders to use imprecation which is an address to God and an expression of displeasure against Satan and his agents. In other words, imprecation is a prayer for the overthrow of Satan's kingdom. By implication, it is a prayer for the extension of the kingdom of God and the destruction of all other kingdoms. Imprecation is intended for men to seek the name of the Lord cf. Psalm 83:1-6.

However, church leaders should not abuse imprecation by using it selfishly, carnally or indiscriminately.²⁰ This means that they should prayerfully use imprecation in times of trouble, persecution, affliction, etc. Church leaders should note that each servant of God that used imprecation in the Bible was led by the Spirit of God. None of them used imprecation arbitrarily and indiscriminately. Even David who used imprecation mostly did so in the light of the word of God. In fact, with all his imprecations, his love for his enemies, his forgiving spirit and his Psalms of praise and thanksgiving, stand out clearly in all the scriptures.²¹ James E. Adams recommends that:

To pray the imprecations of the Psalms is to surrender all rights for vengeance to God. It means being prepared to suffer and to endure without personal revenge or hatred as Christ did. It involves being gentle and loving even when I am reviled and persecuted. It encompasses acknowledging in all my ways that God's cause is more important than I am.²²

Conclusion

It is established in this empirical paper that imprecation is a weapon in the hands of church leaders which they use against Satan and his agents. On the one hand, the leadership in the orthodox and evangelical denominations use imprecation against Satan, who makes people stubborn and unrepentant to the Gospel and thereby hinders the work of evangelism. In other words, they are interested in the spiritual well-being of their members. On the other hand the leadership in the indigenous denominations is deeply interested in the physical aspect of her members. Therefore, the leadership directs her imprecation against Satan and his agents who are responsible for the physical problems, such as hunger, oppression, poverty etc, in the lives of their members.

End Notes

¹ Peter Falk, *the Growth of the Church in Africa* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), pp. 102-141; and S. A. Adewale "The Role of Ifa in the Work of the 19th century Missionary." *Orita* 12/1 (June 1978); 23-32.

² Clare Fuller, *Banfield, Nupe and the UMCA* (Ilorin: Indemac Publishers; 2001), pp. 12-35.

³ See C.O. Oshun, "The Pentecostal Perspective of Christ Apostolic Church" *Orita* 15/2 (1983); 105-14; and Adewara Alokun, *the Christ Apostolic Church: 1928-1988* (Akure: Ibukunola Printers, 1991).

⁴ These sayings are part of the inscription written in the logo of the church. See: *The Revised Constitution of the Church of the Lord* (Aladura) approved on Saturday 24th October, 1992.

³ M.A. Adekunle, *The Challenge of Christianity and Celestial Church of Christ* (Lagos: Watershed Publishers 1998), pp. 17-42.

⁴ See Frank Bechhofer and Lindsay Paterson, *Principles of Research Design in Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 116-7, A. N. Oppenheim, *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measuring* New Edition (London: Printer publishers, 1997), pp. 24-5; and Harry Frank & Steven C. Althoen, *Statistics: Concepts and Applications* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), pp. 4-12.

⁵ Victor P. Hamilton "אֵרֶר" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* Volume 1. Edited by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980): 1: 75-6.

⁶ Francis Brown; S.R. Driver; Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon with An Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), p. 46.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 886.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 887.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 866.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

¹¹ William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1979), p. 417.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

¹⁴ J. Omosade Awolalu & P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonaje Press, 1979), pp. 251-2.

¹⁵ C.O. Ogunkunle, "Imprecatory Psalms: Their Forms and Uses in Ancient Israel and Some Selected Churches in Nigeria," A thesis in the Department of Religious Studies submitted to the Faculty of Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria (November 2000), pp. 298-9.

¹⁶ James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and reformed Publishing Company, 1991), p. 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ The indiscriminate use of imprecation was observed in the empirical research carried out recently on the use of imprecatory Psalms. See Ogunkunle, "Imprecatory Psalms: Their Forms and uses in Ancient Israel and Some Selected Churches in Nigeria" p. 292.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 292.

²⁰ Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms*, p. 56.