

## **SEMIOTIC INTERPRETATION OF SELECTED PSALMS INSCRIPTIONS (23, 35, 121) ON MOTOR VEHICLES IN NIGERIA**

David Tuesday Adamo<sup>1</sup>  
Old and New Testament  
Stellenbosch University

Old Testament  
Kogi State University' Anyigba, Nigeria

### **Abstract**

*Semiotics is defined as ‘thinking in signs’ that is, a set of theories and analytical practices concerned with the process of ‘production of meaning.’ Hence, semiotics is anything that is used to tell or communicate. Semiotic exegesis is the application of semiotic paradigms to critical biblical studies. The path of semiotic analysis as applied to the critical study of the Bible took off in the seventies and the turning points came in the eighties and continued in the nineties into the present. The inscriptions of Psalms 23, 35, and 121, represent the presence of the Almighty God who is believed to be travellers'r escort and that such signs or inscriptions on vehicles sanctify the vehicles against accidents, deaths, armed robberies and kidnappings on many of Nigeria's dangerous roads where no one is actually sure of any safe trip, because these are signs of protection, healing and success.*

**Key Words:** Semiotics; Exegesis; Inscriptions; Nigeria; Psalms; African Tradition

### **Introduction**

An inscription refers to something inscribed or engraved on a letter, stone or monuments. An inscription is a marking, such as the wording on a coin, medal, monument, or seal that is inscribed; a piece of material; such as a stone or metal tablet, that is inscribed, an enrolment or a registration of names or a short, signed message in a book or on a photograph given as a gift. It may be a short message or informal dedication in a book. It could be a message, usually brief, communicating a written or signalled message to mean more than its ordinary surface assessment or value. Inscriptions portray deeper meaning as well as communicate truths about someone or something.

Inscriptions in one form or another are written on about 70% of the commercial vehicles plying Nigerian roads. Most of these inscriptions are biblical quotations mostly from the book of Psalms, such as “The Lord is my Shepherd” (Psalm 23); “I will lift up my Eyes upon the Hills” or simply “Psalm 121;” “Oluwa O Seun” (Lord, Thank you); “In God we Trust;” “Glorify the Lord.” Some others are God-centred expressions such as “Olu Chukwu” (The work of God); “God’s Favour;” “God is good;” “God’s Case no Appeal;”

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was originally presented as a paper at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Chicago held from 17 to 20 November 2012.

“God is my Protector.” Such inscriptions are not limited to any particular area in Nigeria and are written in different Nigerian languages.

The problem is that some readers admire only the aesthetics of these inscriptions (signs) while others see them as mere identification of the vehicles. However, they are not only useful for these things. They are signs that represent the religious commitments and beliefs of the vehicle owners and drivers. In sum, they are expressions of the faith of the drivers, owners of the vehicles, passengers and readers of the inscriptions.

The purpose of this article is to examine critically – using semiotic exegetical methodology – some selected psalm inscriptions on motor vehicles in Nigeria. It examines the hidden religious meaning of the psalms that are inscribed on motor vehicles in many parts of Nigeria. Although there are many inscriptions from other various books of the Bible that are written in the three major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba), this author limits this investigation to inscriptions from three Psalms 23, 35, and 121 that are written in the English language. Although these various inscriptions on vehicles are not limited to a particular part of Nigeria, the inscriptions examined in this article are primarily from Kogi and Ondo States and Abuja, the Federal Capital of Nigeria.

## What is Semiotics and Semiotic Exegesis?

Since the article is using a semiotic approach to examine the psalms inscriptions on motor vehicles in Nigeria, it is important to discuss briefly the meaning and concept of semiotics and semiotic exegesis. The word ‘semiotic’ originated from the Greek word for *semeion* which means sign. According to Fawcett, John Locke was the first person to use the word ‘semiotic’ in modern times to suggest a third section of science (Fawcett 1984:xv). Margaret Mead describes semiotics as “patterned communication in all modalities” (Mead in Sebeok *et al* 1964:275). De Saussure’s statement which sees semiotics as “A science that studies the life of signs within a society, semiology...” is often quoted to justify the establishment of the field of Semiotic (De Saussure 1966:16). In semiotic study, the notion of sign is central (Adamo 2009:10). According to Umberto Eco, a ‘sign’ is everything that can be taken as standing for something else (Eco 1976:16). A sign is one of the six factors in communication which separately and together makes up the rich domain of semiotic research (Sebeok 1977:16). Signs, therefore, are generally perceived as functioning in a communication process as vehicles or carriers of meaning (Adamo 2009:12). Semiotics involves an analysis of signs and sign systems and their meanings especially in the area of communication (Wales 1990:416).

Peirce’s notion of semiotics involves a sign which consists of *representatum*, its *object* and its *interpretant*. This notion is important for this research. The *representatum* is the visible/present part of the sign which in this research refers to the visible inscriptions written on motor vehicles. The *object* is that to which the *representatum* refers which in this article is the owners and the drivers of the vehicles. The *interpretant* is the meaning conveyed by *representatum* which is the meaning of these signs to the drivers/owners, passengers or the writers of the *representatum* in the African context. Peirce, therefore, sees a sign as a triadic process rather than a dyadic structure and he views meaning as essentially relation rather than difference (Peirce 1986:46). A sign has meaning only in the context of a continuing process of interpretation and according to him the *interpretant* is another sign that translates and explains the first one and so on (Peirce 1986:46). It is assumed that Peirce – for this reason – calls semiotics “the doctrine of the essential and fundamental varieties of possible *semiosis*” (Peirce 1986:46-48).

Morris' sign theory is probably influenced by Peirce in the sense that the process by which something functions as a sign involves three factors called sign vehicle, the *designatum*, and the *interpretant*. According to Morris three branches of semiotics are related to three basic factors: sign, *referents* and users. In semiosis, one thing takes account of something else through mediation of a third thing. Eco defines semiotic as anything that can be used to tell (Eco 1976:16). Thus the inscriptions on motor vehicles in Nigeria are used to convey different messages and meanings and this is the concern of this article.

## Semiotic Exegesis

Semiotic exegesis is the application of semiotic paradigm to critical biblical studies. The path of semiotic analysis as applied to the critical study of the Bible took place in the 1970s and the turning points came in the 1980s (Delorme 1998:27-67). Semiotics does not replace exegesis but reminds the exegetes of the multiple tasks that they are first and foremost readers. The practice of semiotics can facilitate an apprenticeship in reading and how to read in order always to face the unknown; 'the' unexpected (Greimas 1978:227-237).

Toward the end of 1970s, decisive progress was made especially when the two levels of transformation in the narrative were distinguished (Delorme 1998:31). It is also remarkable that during this whole period the parables became the privileged places of analysis and research (Chabrol and Marin 1971:71-178).

The 1980s were characterised by dealing with "multiple figures of becoming within the texts, as well as aspectualisation of time and space to the punctual or the continuous and the accomplished or unaccomplished" (Delorme 1998:32). It was also the period of dealing with the study of "the modes of inscribing passions and emotions in the discourse, the figures of surprise and anger, of love, jealousy and hatred" (Delorme 1998:32). The stage was also set for the discussion of enunciation.

According to Olivette Genest, Greimassian semiotics has helped to address the issues left unresolved by traditional exegesis, that is, the production of meaning. Thus, it opened new hermeneutical possibilities (Genest 1998:95-114).

The pragmatic dimension of reading the Bible is an important aspect of semiotic exegesis from the 1980s to the present. This has to do with relating the Bible to personal lives with the expectation that the text will have applications to concrete lives as instruction. This is the pragmatic dimension of reading which is neither text-centred nor fusion-centred, but life-centred. These pragmatic readers allow the biblical text to 'read' their life-experiences (Patte 1998:15). From the 1990s to the present, semiotic exegesis has assumed interesting dimensions, that is, from text, discourse and meaning, from signs to signification and from signification to reading. The dimension of signification to reading entails an attitude of openness to reading without leading to a single meaning that would be complete and final.

## Semiotic Interpretation of the Various Inscriptions in an African Context

As it is difficult to deal with all the quoted inscriptions from all the books of the Bible this article will focus on a semiotic exegesis of only three examples from the psalms – Psalms 23:1, Psalms 35, Psalm 121. The reason is that inscriptions from the book of Psalms on motor vehicles outnumber quotations from any other books of the Bible. Such quotations on motor vehicles have hidden meanings beyond the literal sign seen by the public. They

are interpreted in the light of African indigenous religion and culture. One will therefore need to clarify some religious concepts in African religion and tradition.

The existence of evil people is real in African indigenous tradition. Witches, sorcerers, wizards, evil spirits and all ill-wishers are considered enemies. The consciousness of the existence of these enemies is a major source of fear and anxiety in the African indigenous society. Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, for example, there is a belief that every person has an enemy *ota* which may be known or unknown. The activities of such enemies can be deadly. Enemies as the main sources of all evil and bad occurrences are so pervasive that nothing happens naturally without a spiritual force behind it. Enemies can kill, can cause fatal accidents and inflict pain on people anywhere at any time. The African way of dealing with such enemies is for one to learn some ‘potent words’ (incantation) and/or medicine. There is a strong belief in the power of words spoken correctly, in the right place, and at the right time. Such words in Yoruba tradition are called *ogede*. The ‘potent words’ are ‘performative words’ that attain the desired effect when chanted and repeated two, three or more times without any addition. These words can also be written in parchments and worn on the specific part of the body for protection, healing and success.

Before the advent of Christianity and Western medicine, Africans had developed certain effective ways of rescuing themselves from various types of diseases which include the use of herbs, mysterious or potent words, animals parts, living and non-living things, water, fasting, praying and laying on of hands, and other rituals for restoration of harmony among the people and the wider environment.

However, when Western missionaries arrived in West Africa, they condemned the indigenous therapeutic methods as barbaric and even abominable for converts, but they did not provide any substitute. With the total devotion of missionaries who left their countries to the so-called African jungle, and with the emphasis on the importance of the Christian book, the converts believed that there must be something equally potent that could be used for healing in the Bible which the missionaries did not want to tell them. The indigenous churches took laws into their own hands and started searching the Bible. The book of Psalms was specifically identified as the most potent part of the Bible which can be used for healing, protection and success and against these deadly enemies.

While Psalms 1, 2, 3, 20 and 40 are identified as Therapeutic Psalms, 13, 46, 91, 116, 121 and 125 as protective, Psalms 4, 8, 9, 23, 24, 20, 26, 27, 45, 46, 51, 108, 119, 133, 134 and 140 among others are classified as success Psalms (Adamo 2005:48-108). The examination of the classification of some psalms into therapeutic, protective and success psalms will be more readily understood and intelligible within the context of the discussion on the use of medicine and potent words to enhance protection, healing and success in all aspects of life in African indigenous traditions. Success in every area of life is an important aspect of African society. Lack of success is viewed with all seriousness. Medicine or potent words are employed for success in academic life (especially passing exams), business, embarking on a journey and securing love or favour from a person. Such medicine for success in academic work and business, among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, is called *isoye* and *awure* respectively. *Isoye* in Yoruba practically means “quicken the memory or intelligence” (Ademiluka 1990:88) while *Awure* means that which activates or uncovers success.

Whenever an important venture is being embarked upon among the Yoruba, a strong awareness exists that the enemies (mankind or spirits, seen and unseen) are struggling to bring bad luck to particular groups of people. This thought is indisputable in a typical

African traditional society. Hence, when an important venture is undertaken such as business, building houses, marriage, hunting for a new job, or attending an interview, a ‘medicine-man’ is often consulted to narrow down the chances of failure and increase success. Unfortunately, the missionaries did not provide a substitute for securing success when they condemned the African indigenous traditions.

The methods of indigenous belief and interpretation of healing, protection and success have been applied to the interpretation of the book of Psalms. In other words, psalms can be used for protection, healing and success. The words of the psalms are considered *performative*. The psalmists burst out with shouting, singing, screaming, crying, walking, trembling, dancing, bowing, praying and lifting of hands, and Africentric<sup>2</sup> reading of the words of the psalms in the inscriptions on motor vehicles confirms this. In line with Alter’s view, the inscriptions are “perhaps, ultimately rooted in a magical conception of language as potent performance” (Alter 1985:9). Its performative power lies not so much in the eye of the beholder but in the mouth of the readers or inscribers. Through recitation, the psalmist’s words become the reader’s or writer’s words both individually and communally. The inscribers and the readers, that is, the drivers/owners of the vehicle and the passengers are compelled to take up the position of the speaker of the specific psalms (Brown 2010:61).

## Psalm 23

“The Lord is my shepherd” is one of the animal metaphors in the Bible. Forms of animal imagery in the Old Testament have been classified as mammal and pastoral metaphors (Foreman 2011). The shepherd belongs to the category of pastoral metaphors.

Psalm 23 is one of the most familiar psalms in the Bible (Crenshaw 1993:127-135). According to McCann Jr. “Everyone knows Psalm 23” (2008:42-48). William Holladay calls Psalm 23 an American icon because of its familiarity (1993:359). Allusion to the divine shepherd is an important one as the concept symbolically represents God. There is a similarity between Psalm 23 and the African (Egyptian) poem, *Admonition of Ipuwer*, probably written during the seventeenth century BCE.

Based on Western interpretation Psalm 23 is classified as a Psalm of Confidence or Trust (Brueggemann 1984:154). Brueggemann also sees it as one of the “Psalms of New Orientation” (Brueggemann 1984:123). The psalm has a grip on deep biblical and genuine spirituality. It describes a life of trustful receptivity of God’s gifts (Brueggemann 1984:154). In this psalm the author uses pronouns and names and as in several other psalms, in Psalm 23 the presence of God transforms everything.

In the ancient Near Eastern context, a shepherd represents the authority and care exercised by a deity (e.g. Marcum) or a king who represents these gods. In the Babylonian hymn to Marduk, Marduk cares for the weak as a benevolent shepherd (Hilber 2013:26). Similarly, in a hymn to Shamash, the Mesopotamian sun god it is written, “You shepherd all living creatures together, you are their herdsman above and below” (Hilber 2013:26). An Egyptian God also praises the sun god as the “Brave Protector who tends his flocks” (Hilber 2013:26). King Hammurabi (1750 BCE) claimed that he had received his kingship from the gods and that he fulfilled his royal duty as a shepherd by providing ‘pastures’ and water to the people by settling them in a peaceful place (Hilber 2013:26). Assurbanipal

<sup>2</sup> This writer prefers “Africentric” instead of Afrocentric because one is referring to “Afri-ca” and not “Afro-ca.”

(650 BCE) also declared that he had been appointed to overthrow his enemies. This image of a shepherd not only implied protection but also the authority to rule. For the psalmist, there is only one shepherd, Yahweh. For the users of these biblical texts as ‘signs’ on motor vehicles, the Christian God in whom they believe is the divine protector and guide on dangerous Nigerian roads.

In Psalms 23:5, preparing a table or setting out food as a gesture of hospitality is what Yahweh has done in the presence of enemies who had wished to overturn the motor vehicles on which the signs are written.<sup>3</sup> Yahweh is the host and the psalmist/writer/readers of the ‘signs’ are the guests. The image of protection is indisputable in these ‘signs.’ Anointing with oil in 23:5 is an important pointer to God’s hospitality, kindness and mercy. Olive oil could be used to treat dry skin or cracked skin. But it was also used in the coronation of a king. A text from an Aramaic community in Africa/Egypt dating to about 300 BCE used the word oil to speak of the ‘invigorating’ power it bestows on an old man (Hilber 2013:27). A diplomatic letter from Assurbanipal to his vassal tribes in Arabia boasted of his good treatment of them and illustrated this by his putting oil on them and turning his friendly face toward them. Thus, the psalmist, like the Africans writing the text of Psalm 23 on motor vehicles, talked about being refreshed in God’s hospitable presence without fear of enemies.

Psalm 23:6 mentions dwelling forever in the house of Yahweh. This image calls to mind what happened in Mesopotamia where true worshippers dedicated statues in the temple of their god to symbolise the individual continuous presence before their god that would guarantee divine safety, peace and goodness. This resembles the theology of inviolability of Jerusalem during the period of the Prophet Jeremiah when the temple symbolised safety. The people of Israel thought that as long as the temple stood in Jerusalem, the city would not be destroyed. Thus, every worshipper longed to be in the temple. Certainly the psalmist was aware of this symbol of protection in the house of the Lord when he says, “Surely Goodness and mercy shall follow me and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever and ever.” Perhaps the Nigerian authors or readers (in this case, drivers and passengers) of this text on motor vehicles (‘sign’) strongly believe that their safety is guaranteed in the vehicles where such signs are written and are convinced that with the guarantee of goodness and mercy, appreciation/thanksgiving should be rendered in the house of the Lord. Since according to Yoruba culture, appreciation and thanksgiving guarantee people mercy and protection so much that if one gives you a gift, and one does not say thank you on the spot, not only that day alone, but the second day or whenever they meet, the receiver of the gift will say thank you for yesterday or the other day. Thus, a proverb says, *Eniti a se l'oore fun ti ko dupe, o dabi olosa ko ni l' eru lo* (when one gives a gift and the receiver expresses no gratitude it is as if one has been robbed of one’s property).

In African semiotic interpretation, the inscription with the statement “The Lord is my Shepherd,” on Nigerian motor vehicles is a ‘sign’ that represents the entire poem of Psalm 23. It encompasses the whole chapter even though. This entire chapter can be seen through the eye of the mind of the inscriber, the drivers and some readers who are familiar with the totality of psalms. Right in this short sentence inscribed on motor vehicles, there is in it, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will hear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Psalms 23:4).

---

<sup>3</sup> According to the Yoruba tradition everyone has an enemy, known or unknown, called *ota*.

The inscription ('signs') symbolically represents symbolic *protection*. In fact, in African indigenous churches Psalm 23 is a protective Psalm that can be chanted, written on parchment and worn on the waist, arm or neck or hung on motor vehicles as a talisman. In other words, the inscription is 'worn' as symbol of protection and it represents the presence of the Almighty God. Therefore, vehicles with this 'sign' are immune to accident, death, armed robbery and hijacking on the dangerous Nigerian roads where no one is actually sure of a safe trip. Inscribing this sign or index therefore guarantees safety.

### **Psalm 35**

According to its Eurocentric classification Psalm 35 is a complaint or lament Psalm. There are more psalms of complaint or lament than any other type (Murphy and Carm 1977:16). Psalm 35 also belongs to the group called imprecatory Psalms, which express a desire for God's vengeance on their enemies (Brueggemann 1977:63). Imprecatory Psalms are also known as "cursing psalms," "psalms of vengeance," "psalms of violence" (Zenger 1996:13), and "psalms of hate." Brueggemann also calls them psalms of disorientation (Brueggemann 1977:51-122). Psalm 35 is also one of the most troublesome parts of the Bible because of its imprecatory nature. The fact that the psalmist calls for vengeance on his enemies and the enemies of God make many Christians consider them 'unchristian' psalms, to be avoided totally since the Christian teaching is to love one's enemies and bless them (Matt. 5:44; Rom. 12:14).

To solve the problem of the harshness and the hatred contained in the imprecatory Psalms several solutions have been suggested:

1. The most troubling sections of imprecatory psalms are quotations and not the exact words of the psalmist (Kraus 1989:338; Cherian 1982:115);
2. The psalms are personal words of the psalmists and expression of vindictiveness and hatred and a personal reaction to evil and pain and sentiments (Zenger 1996:78, Craigie 1983:41; Holladay 1995:32-38);
3. Imprecatory psalms are viewed as a prophetic prediction, that is, a divine proclamation on enemies and not an affirmation of personal sentiments (Lockyer Jr. 1993:446-447);
4. Covenant is considered to be the basis of these imprecatory psalms (Laney 1981:35-45).
5. They are prophetic judgment on the enemies (Luc. 1999:395-410).

This writer thinks that none of these theories solve the problem of relevance of these imprecatory psalms for the African Christian Community because such communities operate with a different world view where the presence of witches, wizard, evil spirits are painfully real and constitute enemies who are always ready to cause harm.

As noted above, in African indigenous heritage fighting these enemies requires one to obtain potent words (incantation) called *ogede* in Yoruba tradition, traditional medicine or a combination of potent words and charms.

This writer has previously referred to the use of charms (amulets) as a way of obtaining protection against enemies in African societies. Amulets or charms (*tira* in Yoruba) are usually obtained from medicine men who are regarded as healers and diviners. They are used for diverse purposes but mainly as protective devices to prevent enemies in the guise of witches, wizards, and evil from entering a house or from attacking a person. Charms or

amulets are also used to nullify any attempt by these enemies, who are sorcerers, to harm a person in any way. The charms and amulets are prepared with different ingredients according to the purpose for which they are meant. Some charms are wrapped with animal skin and sewn round it. Other charms are wrapped inside pieces of cloth or paper and tied with black and white threads. In order to be effective, some charms also require the recitation of potent words (Adamo 2008:575-592) and prayer (Ademiluka 1990:71-72) recited according to the instruction given by the diviner.

Thus, writing Psalm 35 on motor vehicles in Nigeria is a symbol of *protection, success and healing* and is seen mostly as a prayer to God to arise and fight for the righteous and the poor instead of leaving them to consult witch doctors, herbalists or diviner to secure potent words, medicine and power to destroy the enemies.

One notices that this inscription has just a name of a book and the chapter, “Psalm 35.” Again this is a ‘sign’ on the vehicle representing the whole chapter. In other words, the inscription, “Psalm 35” includes a vigorous person who has suffered unjustly and wants God to take vengeance on his enemies:

Plead my cause, O LORD, with them that strive with me: fight against them that fight against me. Take hold of shield and buckler, and stand up for mine help. Draw out also the spear, and stop the way against them that persecute me: say unto my soul, I am thy salvation (Ps. 35:1).

Beyond that, in African Indigenous Churches using African traditional culture the sign *representatum, sign vehicle, or index* does not only represent the content of the entire text, but also protection, vengeance and salvation.

This is *protection* from dangerous enemies who afflict others, as also protection from motor accidents, armed robbers and hooligans on dangerous Nigerian roads where there is no certainty of safety. Witches and wizards are enemies which can cause motor accidents. Other enemies can use charms or incantations to cause accidents or diseases and lack of success. The implication is that writing this reference “Psalm 35” on a motor vehicle assures the owners, drivers and those who are in the vehicle that they are protected from accident or dangerous enemies who may cause accidents, lack of success and diseases. The text could also be written on parchment and worn or hung on the part of the vehicle, doorpost of a house, or recited over and over against to ward off impending attacks of the evil ones before embarking on a journey.<sup>4</sup>

Psalm 35 is used instead of visiting the diviner to obtain incantations or medicine to destroy one’s enemies and for protection, and to ask God to fight for the Christian who is driving the vehicle. In other words, this is not a psalm of curse or vengeance by the writer. It only asks Yahweh to do justice to the enemies.

## Psalm 121

Psalm 121 is classified in traditional Western scholarship as a hymn used for worship. Of the Pilgrim collection, this psalm is admired for its eloquence and poetic beauty which is matched by few others. It focuses on the universal question of where man’s real help comes from. It comes out with the correct answer, from Yahweh in heaven (C Allen 1971:421-

<sup>4</sup> See Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and 11:13-21, which refer to the Jewish custom in which the text is written on doorframes and a small vessel called a *mezuzah* is attached to the door post with a scroll containing the biblical text and God’s name Shaddai which may also represent Yahweh’s presence and his power that ensure not only moral behaviour, but also protection, healing and the success of the household.

424). Psalm 121 functions as a psalm of trust, and in form it is a lament that ends with a promise.

This psalm has been interpreted in various ways. Even though the text does not specify the nature nor the destination of the journey, this psalm has been regarded as a father's blessing upon his son who was preparing to go to Jerusalem (Volz quoted by V Allen 1983:152). Another interpretation is that the psalm is a collection of cultic dialogue between a priest and a pilgrim on his way to Jerusalem. It is also read as a priestly farewell liturgy with blessing of an oracle of salvation, or an entrance liturgy (C Allen 1971:152). It shows that it is a blessing to the representative of the people of Israel before God (C Allen 1983:153). Additionally, it is seen as a priestly encouragement to a convert to Yahwism, to continue steadfastly in his new faith (V Allen 1983:153). Psalm 121 is also a song of Ascents which contains some parallelism and belongs to Psalms 120-134 which are unified as a sub-collection of the Psalter with the common title "A song of ascents" (DeClaisse-Walford 2004:120). The word, 'ascents' in the superscription has many interpretations and in Hebrew it is related to the verb *alah* which means going on a pilgrimage. Going up to Jerusalem is regarded as going on a pilgrimage because the city is situated on the hills. Ezra uses the same term to describe his journey from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem, so this term may recall Ezra's journey from Babylon. What appears to be the most common view is that pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for the annual feasts sang this song which reminded them of the festivities (Ex. 23:14-17; 34:18-24; Lev. 23:4-44; Deut 16:1-17) (Hilber 2013:110). The word accents can also mean steps, imaging, the term used by Ezekiel to refer to the staircase of the temple. It appears that the first meaning in which the pilgrims looked up to the temple in Jerusalem for help and protection is more appropriate in the light of the African situation.

The reference to the sun and moon reflects the scorching heat of the sun as a common human experience (Isa. 49:10; Jonah 4:8). The sun and the moon could cause some sickness for those who travelled bare-footed to Jerusalem in the same way some Africans trekked to the farms and nearby villages and eventually contracted certain diseases such as skin cancer. In Africa, the only help is to look for divine healing from God since many in Africa still do not have access to standard healthcare.

The references to the hills appear to invoke images of dangers, difficulties and trouble in a rugged terrain of the hill country when approaching Jerusalem. Like some parts of Nigeria, armed robbers seemed to have inhabited these hills. In that case, any pilgrim going to Jerusalem had no choice but to look to Yahweh who could send help. The hills could also be a figure of speech for the location of Jerusalem on the hilltop where Yahweh dwelt in his temple. Looking up to the hills נָרְאָה then means searching for divine help as is in the case when ancient Israelites who travel to Jerusalem for pilgrimage looked up to the abode of Yahweh for protection and safety.

Again, this inscription consists of only a biblical reference without a single word from the text but this reference is a sign representing the entire content of the text. Even though not a single word of the text is written on the motor vehicle, the sign/reference written on the motor vehicle also symbolises protection, deliverance and coverage during dangerous journeys on the Nigerian roads. The inscription is a sign for *safety* for the owner of the vehicle, the driver and the passengers.

The biblical reference is chosen on occasion as the name of the transport company to ensure safety. The first two verses of this psalm is the voice of an individual believer speaking out of the devotion of his heart when his faith has been well-established and

quickened by the participation in the celebration of the festival of the temple worship. He has experienced the helplessness of being alone on the journey of life and affirms the need for divine help to overcome the difficulty of everyday life to which he/she will shortly return, having discovered this holy mountain where Yahweh dwells in his temple – the creator of heaven and earth. After the writer has rediscovered that the whole world lies in Yahweh's hands, he responds with a renewed faith in Yahweh's claim that he never sleeps nor slumbers. In verses 3-8, the confirmation message resembles the priestly blessing bestowed at the end of the worship in the Jerusalem temple (Num. 6:24-26). At the end of the worship service he or she has been given a confirmation of his faith to take home. In all the dangers of life's journey, he is given the assurance of "the ever-vigilant protection of God," of his "constant presence, ever living, never sleeping," and as he wards off the threats which beset his daily life, that would stop life fulfilling its positive potential such as the "sun and the moon, the armed robbers, and other threats" (Allen 1983:154). Day and night, there is assurance that Yahweh stands and guards the psalmist (vss. 3 and 6). Yahweh is a match for all of life's dangers. He is able to keep his own safe in his loving care. Just as the pilgrim leaves Jerusalem festival with the message of the potent promise, Yahweh's words, "I will be with you," are not only for the heroes of faith like Moses, Joshua and Abraham, but for everyone who trusts in him and holds that promise. The Lord is their escort. It is not unusual in situations of danger to see passengers recite the passage each in his/her own language.

Thus, the drivers and the passengers in the vehicle on which Psalm 121 is inscribed believe that Yahweh will guard them, will be their escort and be with them. The traditional Africans who wear this inscription, Psalm 121, whether on a parchment or on the body, believe in the power of this psalm to protect them.

## Conclusion

This article has defined semiotics as a science that studies the nature of signs in a society. Semiotics therefore, is the analysis of sign systems and their meanings for the purpose of communication whereas semiotic exegesis is the application of semiotic paradigm to critical biblical studies. From the 1990s to the present semiotic exegesis took a new dimension as it focused on parables and the pragmatic dimension of biblical interpretation. While this pragmatic dimension has been criticised as not objective and dismissed by some exegetical scholars, semiotic exegesis sees it as useful and appropriate because it emphasises how the text itself (sign) and its subject-matter (object) affect the readers in their life contexts. Semiotic biblical studies require that any critical scholar should know that critical biblical studies are "a didactic discourse and the interpreters have an ethical responsibility for the effect that the chosen interpretation has upon people." In sum, "a critical biblical study is a didactic discourse which brings to critical understanding faith interpretations of biblical texts and not a production of new interpretations as most usually believe" (Patte 1998:19).

There is a temptation for scholars, especially Western scholars, to dismiss this type of interpretation as fetish and unscholarly, but a closer examination of semiotic exegesis in the African context shows that care must be taken before criticising the approach. This writer believes that there is the likelihood that ancient Israel actually interpreted and used the words of psalms in their worship for healing, protection and success. A very important piece of evidence supporting the use of the words of psalms this way is the existence of a handful of Phoenician and Punic amulets from the first millennium with the same verbs

‘guard,’ (*smr*) and ‘protect’ (*nsr*) inscribed on their surfaces (Schmitz 2002:818-822; 2010:421-432; Smoak 2011:75-92). The presence of these two verbs in both West Semitic inscriptions and the book of Psalms shows some common cultural and religious practices and common purpose for invoking the deity’s protection or help (Smoak 2011:75-92). Inscribing words on metal and apotropaic magic in ancient Israel was not uncommon, as uncovered by archaeologists (Smoak 2011:72-92). Several 7<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century Punic gold bands which were discovered in the excavations at Carthage are also inscribed with the same two verbs as part of the protective formula as those in these psalms (Smoak 2011:72-92; Barnett & Mendelsson 1987; Krahmalkov 2000:471-472).

The understanding of the culture of the ancient Near East makes one believe that the words of the Psalter were memorised and recited not for fun, aesthetic or scholarly purposes, but there was a faith behind the recitation or singing of the psalms with the expectation that they would achieve a desired effect. In ancient Israel, those words of the Psalms were *potent* and *performative* and invoked particular results. Like the ancient Israelites who were the original authors of the Psalter, many biblical scholars – including the author of this article and members of African Indigenous Churches – see the Psalter as divine, potent and performative. They can be used to protect, heal diseases and bring about success in the same way as words (*ogede*) are used in Africa. A few eminent biblical scholars (E Jacob, W Eichrodt, O Prokesh, G von Rad, GAF Knight and R Bultmann) would agree with African biblical scholars that the spoken word in ancient Israel was “never an empty sound but an operative reality whose action cannot be hindered once it has been pronounced” (Jacob 1958:127; Eichrodt 1967:69; Von Rad 1969:85; Knight 1953:14-16).

As magical as it may sound, it is very likely that such was the belief of the ancient Israelites and the people of the ancient Near East generally.

Semiotic biblical interpretation emphasises the necessity for scholars or all biblical interpreters to assume responsibility for their interpretations. It calls for an ethic of biblical interpretation, emphasises communication with others, and contributes to the recognition of the mysterious otherness of others. It also calls for ethical responsibility in biblical interpretation in every pragmatic and political way. The approach also stresses that biblical interpretation matters affect people deeply (Schüssler 1988:3-17; Patte 1995). Critical biblical scholars cannot afford to ignore the character of interpretation, that is, the pragmatic effects of this interpretation and their theological dimension. Any biblical interpretation which overlooks faith-interpretation would lead to excesses and could promote parochialism, anti-Semitism, oppression, injustice, colonialism and sexism, among others (Patte 1986:22). The attitude of rejecting other interpretations as “somehow legitimate and plausible” is unjustifiable. The ultimate goal of critical biblical studies is to teach interpreters of the Bible to assume responsibility for their interpretations and not condemn other interpretations (Patte 1986:23).

This article has made a substantial attempt to apply semiotic exegesis to the inscription of Psalms on motor vehicles in Nigeria in a way that has not been done before. It contributes to the production of meaning of the Psalms and the use of African culture to interpret the Bible.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adamo, David T 1990. "African Cultural Hermeneutics," in *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, (ed.) RS Sugirtharajah Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 5-11.
- Adamo, David T 2005. *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament*. Benin: Justice Jeco Press and Publishers Ltd.
- Adamo, David T 2008. Reading Psalm 109 in African Christianity. *Old Testament Essays*, New Series, 21 no. 3.
- Adamo, Grace Ebunlola 2009. "An Analysis of Student Slang in Delta State University: A Semiotic Approach." PhD Thesis, University of Benin.
- Ademiluka, Sola 1990. "The Use of Psalms." MA dissertation, University of Ilorin, Nigeria.
- Alter, Robert 1985. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York: Basic Books.
- Allen, Clifton (general editor) 1971. *The Broadman Bible Commentary, Esther-Psalms*, Vol. 4 Nashville: Broadman Press.
- Allen, Volz 1983 (quoted by Leslie V). "Psalms 101-150." *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 2 . Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher.
- Barnett, RD, Mendelsohn, C 1987. *Tharros: A Catalogue of Material in the British Museum from Phoenician and other Tombs at Tharros, Sardinia*. London: British Museum Publications.
- Brueggemann, Walter 1977. "The Formfulness of Grief." *Interpretation* 31:265-275.  
Reprinted in the *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick Miller, 1995:84-97.  
Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing.
- Brueggemann, Walter 1984. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing.
- Brown, William 2010. *Psalms*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Cherian, CM 1982. "Attitude to Enemies in the Psalms." *Bible Bhashyam*. 8 1982.
- Chabrol, C, Marin L 1971. "Semiotique narrative: recits biblique." *Languages* 6/22;
- Craigie, PC 1983. *Psalms 1-50: Word Biblical Commentary*. Waco: Word Publisher.
- Crenshaw, James L 2001. *The Psalms: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans.
- deClaisse-Walford, Nancy L 2004. *Introduction to the Psalms*. St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press.
- Delorme, Jean 1998. "Orientations of a Literary Semiotics Question by the Bible." *Semeia*, Daniel Patte (ed.) Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 27-81.
- De Saussure, F 1977. *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Eco, Umberto 1976. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Eichrodt, W 1967. *Theology of the Old Testament*, II. London: SCM Press, 69, in G Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, IV. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Fawcett, Robin, Lamb, SM, Sydney, M and Makkai, Adams 1984. *The Semiotics of Culture and Language*. London: Frances Publishers Ltd.
- Foreman, Benjamin A 2011. *Animal Metaphors and the People of Israel in the Book of Jeremiah*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- Genest, Olivette 1998. "From Historical-critical Exegesis to Greimassian Semiotics: A Christological Issue, The Meaning of Jesus' Death." *Semeia* 81:95-114.

- Greimas, AJ 1978. "Postface." *Signes et Paraboles. Semiotique et Texte Evangelique.* Groupe d'Entrevernes. Paris Seuil, translated G Phillips, *Signs and Parables*. Pittsburg: Pickwick, 227-237.
- Hilber, John 2013. *Psalms*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Holladay, WL 1995. *Long Ago God Spoke: How Christian may hear the Old Testament Today*. Minneapolis: Augsburg.
- Holladay, WL 1993. *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayer Book of a Cloud of Witnesses*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Jacob, E 1958. *Theology of the Old Testament*. Translated Arthur W Heathcote and Philip J Allcock. New York: Harper & Row, 127.
- Knight, GAF 1953. *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Krahmalkov, CR 2000. *Phoenician-Punic Dictionary*. Leuven: Peeters, 471-472.
- Kraus, HJ 1989. *Psalms 60-150*. Translated HC Oswald. Minneapolis: Augsburg.
- Laney, CJ 1981. "A Fresh Look at Imprecatory Psalms." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 138:35-45.
- Lockyer Jr. H 1993. *Psalms: A Devotional Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Kregel.
- Luc, A 1999. "Interpreting the Curses in the Psalms." *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society*, 43/3:395-410.
- McCann, Clinton Jr. 2008. "Preaching the Psalms: Psalm 23." *Journal for Preachers*, 42-48.
- Morris, Charles 1938. *Foundation of the Theory of Signs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Murphy, Roland E, Carm O 1977. *Proclamation Commentaries*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Patte, Daniel 1998. "Critical Biblical Studies from a Semiotic Perspective." *Semeia*, D Patte (ed.). Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 3-26.
- Patte, Daniel 1995. *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Re-evaluation*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox.
- Peirce, CS 1986. "Logic as Semiotic: A Theory of Signs." In *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*, RE Innes (ed.), 4-27. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sebeok, TA 1977. *A Perfusion of Signs*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sebeok, TA, Osgood Ch. (eds.) 1964. *Approaches to Semiotics*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Schmitz, Philip C 2002. "Reconsidering a Phoenician Inscribed Amulet from the Vicinity of Tyre." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. 122:817-22.
- Schussler, Fiorenza Elizabeth 1988. "The Ethics of Interpretation: De-Centering Biblical Scholarship." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 107:3-17.
- Smoak, Jeremy D 2010. "Amuletic Inscriptions and the Background of YHWH as Guardian and Protector in Psalm 12." *Vetus Testamentum* 60:421-432.
- Smoak, Jeremy D 2011. "Prayers of Petition in the Psalms and West Semitic Inscribed Amulets: Efficacious Words in Metal and Prayers for Protection in Biblical Literature." *Journal for the Study of Old Testament* 36.1:75-92.
- Von Rad, Gerhard 1965. *Old Testament Theology*, II. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Wales, Katie 1990. *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. New York: Longman.
- Zenger, Erick 1996. *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*. Translated Linda M Maloney. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.