


Interpreting paired phenomena in the Hebrew Psalter and in African indigenous sacred texts

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The Hebrew Psalter is a repertoire of paired phenomena. From parallelisms to twin Psalms, biblical scholars have paid attention to these structural and poetical features as keys to unlocking and interpreting the meaning and theology of these psalms. Unfortunately, the otherwise admirable results of these exegetical works remain abstract and largely removed from the interests of the African reader. An alternative way of engaging these texts is to realise that paired phenomena are not exclusive to the Hebrew Psalter. African indigenous sacred texts such as the Adinkra of the Akan people equally contain similar phenomena though relatively little attention has been paid to them. This article, using a dialogical approach of African Biblical Hermeneutics, studies the twin Psalms 111 and 112 as an example of a paired phenomenon in the Psalter. It brings this text into dialogue with the Adinkra *denkyemfunefu* to illustrate how focussing on similar structural phenomena in either text uncovers the same theme of the common good in either text and facilitates the reception of the biblical discourse in contemporary African contexts.

Contribution: It is argued that common literary features in biblical and African indigenous sacred texts could be harnessed as vehicles for facilitating the reception of biblical discourse in contemporary Africa.

Keywords: sacred texts; Psalms 111 and 112; paired phenomena; Adinkra; common good.

Introduction

Since the second half of the 20th century, African scholars have argued that the exegetical methods and approaches adopted by Western missionaries and their assigns for the reading of the biblical text have been inadequate in effectively interpreting and communicating its contents to Africans and people of African descent (Meenan 2014:268; Ukpong 2000:313–316). This has been blamed on several factors. Missionary agents either looked down with condescension on African cultures or were ill-prepared to harness them as vehicles for communicating the biblical message (Amenga-Etego 2023:100; Mbuvi 2017:158–159). The need to free biblical interpretation from the bonds of the colonial context in which the Bible was first introduced in Africa and to respond to the existential questions of its African readers is what has driven scholars to propose new pathways for biblical interpretation on the continent (Adamo 2015:36–47; Mundele 2012:16–28).

A key dimension of the new approach to biblical interpretation on the continent has been the call by African scholars for greater dialogue with elements of African culture and tradition. Whether it has to do with the use of African languages in the translation of the Bible, or with the socio-political organisation of African societies, traditional values and norms, gender issues or religious and knowledge systems, scholars have sought to approach the biblical text from a distinctly African perspective. One dimension of African culture which, to my knowledge, has not received sufficient attention has been the area of African indigenous sacred texts. Parrinder admits the existence of 'a kind of scripture, or tangible expression of African religion, which has been known for a long time but whose importance tends to be overlooked by students' (Parrinder 1968:4). These indigenous 'sacred texts' take on varied forms, whether oral, material or performative, and include myths, legends, sayings, dance, totems, and symbols, to name a few (Amenga-Etego 2023:7). It must be admitted that some studies have focussed on various dimensions of the above elements of African cultural expression. Even when this has been the case, little attention has been given to understanding these as elements of a textual tradition.¹ The Adinkra textual system of the Akan of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire provides a good example

¹The recent publication of the volume *Bible and Orality* is an important intervention of African scholars in response to this lack of attention to certain dimensions of African culture and their value for engaging the biblical text (Mundele, Wabanhu & Mkoale 2021).

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of an indigenous sacred text comparable to other textual traditions.² Using the dialogical approach to African Biblical Hermeneutics, I seek to demonstrate how common textual phenomena such as binarism or paired phenomena reveal an interesting rapport between biblical texts, like Psalms 111 and 112 on the one hand and the Adinkra on the other. This in turn demonstrates that a conscious effort at studying African indigenous sacred texts in tandem with the biblical text could become a means of rapprochement, facilitating the reception of the biblical message in contemporary African contexts.

Paired phenomena in the Psalter

The study of paired phenomena in the Psalter is hardly a novelty. Since the 18th century, when the Anglican bishop Robert Lowth argued for parallelism – synonymous, antithetic and synthetic – as the defining feature of Hebrew poetry (Lowth 1753:208–221), substantial work has been conducted by scholars on the question of parallelism in Hebrew Poetry.³ Michael O'Connor in his work on the Hebrew Verse Structure, for instance, argues for the bi-colon as the primary unit of a Hebrew Poetry (Ayars 2018:6); James Kugel, critical of Lowth, posits that parallel lines in Hebrew Poetry represent a 'seconding' or a 'sharpening' of concepts rather than a repetition (Geller 1983:626). Similarly, Adele Berlin expands on the concept of parallelism by examining the phenomenon in its morphologic, syntactic, lexical, semantic, and phonological dimensions (Berlin & Knorina 2008:xvii), while Yair Avishur rather focusses on pairs of synonymous words found in Hebrew Poetry (Avishur 1971:17–81).

As regards the question of paired phenomena in the Psalter in particular, the contribution of two authors stands out. The first, an article by the Swiss scholar, Walther Zimmerli was dedicated to the study of what he described as 'twin-psalms' in the Hebrew Psalter, namely Psalms 111–112 and 105–106 (Zimmerli 1972:105–113). Introducing the subject, Zimmerli first observes a number of paired phenomena in the Psalter. These include psalms placed adjacent to each other in the Psalter which could plausibly represent two divided halves of the same psalm such as the acrostic Psalms 9 and 10, and Psalms 42 and 43. Another paired phenomenon is that of the repeated psalms, such as Psalms 14 and 53. Other examples are those psalms which are a combination of parts of other psalms, such as Psalm 108 which draws on Psalms 57:8–12 and 60:7–14 or Psalm 70, which contains Psalm 40:14–18 (Zimmerli 1972:105).

Zimmerli points to even more subtle paired phenomena in the Psalter. Some psalms begin with almost the same words in their opening verses (cf. Ps 31 and 71) while others end with the same lines (Ps 27:14 and 31:25). The repetition of the keyword הנה (Ps 1:2; 2:1) at the beginning

2.The entire debate concerning Adinkra as a text or otherwise and the various labels assigned to it is well beyond the scope of this paper. However, literature relevant to the subject includes Arthur (2017, locs. 1120–1160); Danzy (2009:13–30).

3.For the history of research on Hebrew Poetry, cf. Ayars (2018:5–18). For parallelism cf. Scaiola (2002:219–248).

and אבנך/אבנך (Ps 1:6; 2:12) at the end of Psalms 1–2 is another example of the pairing of adjacent psalms through the use of an *inclusio*. Another example is the repetition of the closing verse of Psalm 32 in the opening verse of Psalms 33, a device used similarly in Psalms 127 and 128. More subtle examples include the employment of keywords in adjacent psalms such as in Psalms 74:4, 6; 75:3, and 77:6/78:2.

The second, an Italian scholar, Donatella Scaiola, dedicates her doctoral dissertation to the systematic study of paired phenomena in the Hebrew Psalter. Her contribution is the identification of three categories of paired psalms – similar psalms, complementary psalms, and initial and final psalms, that is, those which open and close various sections of the Psalter (Scaiola 2002:10–12). Examples of the phenomena which fall under the category named 'similar' are those named 'twin-psalms' such as Psalms 111 and 113 or 105 and 106, so designated because of the several similarities, formal and thematic as well as twin-strophes, such as Psalm 119:1–8, 9–16. Also in this category are those pairs of psalms that show partial similarity, designated 'fraternal psalms', such as Psalms 3–4; 20–2; 127–128 (Scaiola 2002:249–302).

The category of psalms designated 'complementary' refers to psalms that exhibit paired phenomena only externally, that is, similarity at the opening or closing of either psalm or the repetition of a key term in the body of the psalms. Thus, Psalms 103 and 104 both begin and end with the phrase ברכי נפשי את יהוה, while Psalms 106 and 107 both begin with the phrase יהוה ליהוה כיישוב. Similarly, the key terms ישע and עזר close the consecutive psalms 37 and 38 while the term לב at the end of Psalm 13 is repeated at the beginning of Psalms 14 (Scaiola 2002:307–309).

Finally, the category designated initial and final psalms comprises psalms such as Psalms which open the Psalter and 40–41 which close the First Book (Ps 1–41); Psalms 42–43 which open the Second Book (Ps 42–72), and Psalms 88–89 which close the Third Book (Ps 73–89). These psalms, as Scaiola notes, play an important role through their strategic collocation in the Psalter through which they influence the structure of the entire book (Scaiola 2002:352).

The twin Psalms 111–112

Psalms 111 and 112 have been designated twin-psalms ever since Zimmerli applied the term *Zwillingspsalmen* to the pair to express their similarity (Zimmerli 1972:106). Both psalms are alphabetic acrostic psalms with a relatively equal length of 10 verses. In addition to these formal characteristics, both psalms bear the *Hallel* superscript, the phrase חנון ורחום in the same verse (vv. 111:4b; 112:4b) and repeat the phrase צדקתו עמדת לעד (Ps 111:3b; 112:3b, 9b) and the repetition of several lexemes (Scaiola 2002:269–270). What perhaps needs further examination is the similarity of structure which binds the pair together.

The structure of Psalm 111

There is little consensus among scholars regarding the structure of Psalm 111.⁴ While some scholars like Pardee have entirely dismissed any possibility of a structure beyond the acrostic arrangement of Psalm 111, others like Auffret have even suggested more than one structure for the psalm (Auffret 1997:196; Pardee 1992:137). There is, however, reason to argue for a four-strophe division of the psalm, vv. 1–3, 4–6, 7–9, 10, with minimal variation from those proposed by Zenger and Barbiero (Barbiero 2014:326; Zenger 2003:44).⁵

Strophe I (vv. 1–3): The Upright Praise YHWH (ישרים)

The first strophe (vv. 1–3), is structurally marked by the use of the phrase לעד עמדת in v. 3b. This same phrase, used at the end of the psalm in v. 10c, suggests a possible closure in v. 3 (Barbiero 2014:324). The two main protagonists of the psalm are introduced in this strophe. These are YHWH and a group referred to as the ‘upright’ (ישרים) in v. 1b who are invited to praise him. The character of this group as having interest in Torah is clarified when Psalm 111 is read in the light of the Psalter’s introductory psalm, Psalm 1. In both psalms, this group is characterised by its active delight (הפיץ) in YHWH’s commands (Ps 1:2; 111:2); in its emphasis on following (עשה) YHWH’s commands (Ps 1:3; 111:10), and on its belonging to an assembly (עדה, Ps 1:5; 111:1). The reason for the invitation to the ‘upright’ to praise YHWH is for his works (מעשי יהוה). The word פעל in v. 3a appears to anticipate the contents of Strophe II (vv. 4–6) namely YHWH’s work in history while the word צדקה in v. 3b anticipates the contents of Strophe 3 (vv. 7–9) namely YHWH’s commands.

Strophe II (vv. 4–6): YHWH’s graciousness to Israel (חנון)

The second strophe, set in a historical context, reveals YHWH’s saving work in history, namely the gift of manna in the desert and the gift of the land (von Rad 1966:295). The strophe is structured around the repetition of three roots זכר (4a.5b), עשה (4a.6a), and נתן (5a.6b) in the same order (abc’b’c’) (Mensah 2016:42). Of these repeated roots however, only the word נתן is repeated as a verbal form. The ideas in the strophe appear to be crystallised around this verb which refers consistently to YHWH’s action of giving in history. The structure suggests a tension between man’s limitedness in ‘remembering’ the historical events in the past (זכר, v. 4a) and YHWH’s eternal remembrance (זכר, v. 5b). The strophe creates a dialectic that requires the redefinition of the term בריה, such that it no longer points to saving events in the past

but looks forward to a new emphasis as an enduring work of YHWH. This new emphasis, בריה as the object of YHWH’s definitive commands, is what is exposed in the third strophe.

Strophe III (vv. 7–9): The stability of YHWH’s commands (סמך)

The third strophe is structurally marked by the repetition of the syndetic parataxis ומשפט אמת ונורה in v. 7a and קדוש ונורה in v. 9c.⁶ The same syntactical feature וישר אמת in v. 8c serves an inner strophic marker. Strophe III takes up the issue of YHWH’s commands and asserts that unlike the past saving events, the commands of YHWH are enduring and definitive. The strain in the rapport between humanity and YHWH’s work is re-aligned. Humanity relates to them not as some event in history but as commands to be executed (עשויים) with truth and uprightness.⁷ The object of YHWH’s command (צוה) in v. 9 is his covenant (בריה). The expression צוה בריהו is well-attested (Dt 4, 13; 28, 69; Jos 7, 11; 23, 16; Jdg 2, 20; 1 Ki 11, 11; 2 Ki 18, 12) and plausibly refers to YHWH’s Torah (Hossfeld 1993:278). In much the same way that YHWH saved his people through his interventions in Israel’s history, YHWH’s Torah is now sent (שלח) as the instrument of salvation (פדות) for God’s people (v. 9a).

Strophe IV (v. 10): The conduct of the YHWH Fearers (יראת יהוה)

The fourth strophe shows structural elements of *inclusio* with the first strophe. The imperative call to praise (הלל) in the superscript (v. 1) is balanced substantively והללו from the same radical in v. 10 (Girard 1994:171). The use of polar expressions ראשית to open the strophe (v. 10a) and עד to close it (v. 10c) further indicates the internal unity of the strophe.⁸ The contents of the strophe also respond to the main ideas of the preceding strophes. The human subject is invited to render a holistic response to YHWH’s work. He is to implement them (עשויים), in line with the same idea in v. 8. This refers not to YHWH’s work in history but to his commands. Implementing YHWH’s commands constitutes fear of YHWH, which is the beginning of wisdom and also the culmination of his praise.

The structure of Psalm 112

Scholarly proposals on the structure of Psalm 112 present a range of possibilities. Apart from those scholars who do not see any merit to a structure apart from the mono-cola of the acrostic format (Asensio 1997:289; Thomas 1986:22), others have proposed two-strophe (Conti 1994:436; Lancelotti 1984:169; Vesco 2006:1069–1070)⁹, three-strophe (Sherwood

4. For three-strophe proposals, cf. J. Schildenberger (1960): 1ab, 2–7a, 7b–10; P. van der Lugt (1980): 1aβ-4, 5–8, 9–10; J. Schildenberger (1980): 1–2, 3–7a, 7b–10; G. Ravasi (1984): 1–3, 4–9, 10; L. C. Allen (2002): 1aβb, 2–7a, 7b–10; For four-strophe proposals, cf. K. Seybold (1996): 1aβb, 2–3, 4–6, 7–9b, 9c–10; J. P. Fokkelman (2003): 1–3, 4–6, 7–8, 9–10; E. Zenger (2003): 1–3, 4–6, 7–9, 10; For others, cf. E. J. Kissane (1954): 1ab, 2–4a, 4b–7a, 7b–9, 10; P. Auffret (1980): 1aβ-2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8, 9, 10 (ABCA’C’B’); P. Auffret (1997): 1aβ-2, 3–10: 3–4, 5–6, 7–8, 9, 10 (ABCB’C’); R. Scoralick (1997): 1–2, 3–10 (with concentric 7–8 centre); B. Weber (1997): 1ab, 2–3, 4–5, 6–7, 8–9b, 9c–10; J.-L. Vesco (2006): 1–2; 3–10 chiasm. Mid. 7–8.

5. Both scholars propose practically the same division (1–3, 4–6 + 7–9, 10) though they consider the body of the psalm (vv. 4–9) as constituting one strophe.

6. For משפט אמת ונורה as syndetic parataxis, cf. (Avishur 1971:20).

7. Contrary to the position of Van Grol who understands YHWH as the divine agent in v. 8b, the same human agents mentioned as upright in v. 1b are the same called to execute YHWH’s commands with uprightness here (Mensah 2016:46–47; Van Grol 2001:230).

8. “Expresión polar y merismo coinciden en representar una totalidad plural o articulada” (Alonso Schökel 1988:114).

9. While Vesco and Lancelotti both divide the psalm vv. 1–5,6–10; Conti divides it vv. 1–8,9–10.

1989:54; Zakovitch 2010:216; Zenger 2003:51)¹⁰, and four-strophe solutions (Prinsloo 2019:658–659)¹¹ as well as other chiasmic arrangements (VanGemeren 1991:707).

There are reasons to support a four-strophe division of the psalm. In Psalm 112:1, the use of the macarism אֲשֶׁרִי recalls the same at the beginning of Psalm 1. Significantly, the term in אֲבָד Psalm 112:10 recalls once again the use of the same term in Psalm 1:6. The use of these opposing terms at the seams of Psalm 112 underlines both the integrity of the Psalm and the thematic tension between the upright and the wicked which opens the entire Hebrew Psalter (Barré 1997:213).

Strophe I (vv. 1–3): The blessedness of the Upright (יִשְׁרִים)

Strophe I (vv. 1–3) is marked at its closure by the phrase לַעֲדָתָהּ עֲמִדָּה. This same phrase which, as noted earlier, closes Psalm 111 and marks the first strophe in Psalm 111:3, appears to play the same function in Psalm 112:3. The thematic thrust of this first strophe revolves around the man who fears (יִרָא) YHWH (v. 1b) also described in v. 2 as upright (יִשָּׁר). The precise meaning of ‘fear of YHWH’ is specified in v. 1c as one who delights in YHWH’s commands. The consequences of such comportment which is blessedness, expressed with the macarism אֲשֶׁרִי, and the verb בָּרַךְ, are consistent with the theology of Psalm 1, in which those who delight in the Torah are blessed.

Strophe II (vv. 4–6): The graciousness of the Upright (חֲנוּן)

Strophe II (vv. 4–6) is structured around the alternate arrangement of two terms חֲנוּן (vv. 4b.5a) and צַדִּיק (vv. 4b.6b). The term עוֹלָם is also repeated in vv. 6a.b. None of these repeated terms occurs outside this strophe in Psalm 112. A clear thematic continuity can be observed by reference to the upright (יִשְׁרִים) in v. 4a, recalling the use of the same term in Strophe I (v. 2b). The emphasis in this strophe is however the conduct of the upright which is defined in terms of his relations of his neighbour. He is gracious (חֲנוּן) and just (צַדִּיק) and considerate of the poor. This provides the reason for his blessedness as indicated in Strophe I.

Strophe III (vv. 7–9b): The stability of the upright (סִמָּךְ)

The delimitation of Strophe III is less clear. While scholars like Zenger and Zakovitch argue for the strophe to close in v. 9c, I argue for a closure in v. 9b (Zakovitch 2010:216; Zenger 2003:51). The phrase לַעֲדָתָהּ עֲמִדָּה לַעֲדָתָהּ in v. 9b is the same which signalled the closure of Strophe I (v. 3b). Moreover, considering v. 9c as part of Strophe IV is more logical as it provides the immediate context for the frustration of the

10. Both Zenger and Zakovitch propose a division, vv. 1–3, 4–9, 10, with vv. 4–9 subdivided into vv. 4–6, 7–9. Sherwood however divides the Psalm, vv. 1–6a, 6b–9, 10.

11. Prinsloo divides the Psalm, vv. 1–3, 4–6, 7–9, 10.

wicked in v. 10a. The wicked sees the rising horn of the upright (v. 9a) and that is the reason for his irritation.

The internal structure of Strophe III revolves around the chiasmic arrangement (*abb'a'*) of the repeated terms יִרָא and לֵב. Building on the theme of the upright in the preceding, Strophe III explains the outcome of the generous conduct of the upright. The kindness of the upright results in his personal security such that he is unshaken (סִמָּךְ). This is despite the reality of evil (רָעָה) around him. The use of the term יִרָא in vv. 7a.8a is in sharp contrast with the use of the same term in v. 1b. Whereas in v. 1b, the blessed fears YHWH, he does not fear evil. The distinction is thus made between that fear of YHWH which refers to a deep reverence (v. 1), and that of terror as in vv. 7.8.

Strophe IV (vv. 9c–10): The conduct of the wicked (רָשָׁע)

In Strophe IV, the repetition of the radical רָשָׁע (vv. 10a.c) finally indicates the thematic shift to consider the wicked. In line with the vision of Psalm 1, the wicked is destined for destruction. The contrast is however not limited to his person. Essentially, it is the desires of the wicked (תַּאוּת) in v. 10 which are opposed to the delights of the upright (חֶפְצִי). What the wicked opposes is not just the just but fundamentally YHWH’s commands, which are the object of the delight of the just. The wicked sets himself up fundamentally as opposing YHWH, which is what seals his doom.

Paired structures in Psalms 111 and 112

Since Zimmerli referred to Psalms 111 and 112 as ‘twin psalms’, several studies have sought to highlight various dimensions of similarity between these two psalms. The points of convergence for many of these scholars are the common superscript, the colon-alphabetic acrostic format, and the relatively equal length of the two psalms (Schildenberger 1980:203; Prinsloo 2019:659; Weber 2003:67). Prinsloo and Scaiola also underline 17 words repeated in either Psalm (Prinsloo 2019:661; Scaiola 2002:269). Differences, however, emerge on how to understand the thematic relationship between the psalms. Zenger, for instance, argues that Psalm 111 presents a theology of YHWH’s works while Psalm 112 offers an anthropology of human works that correspond to that of God (Zenger 2007:83). Prinsloo suggests that Psalm 112 encapsulates everything that is said about Psalm 111 and is thus a midrash on Psalm 111 (Prinsloo 2019:662). Divergences also emerge as regards the structure of either psalm. While Alden reads both psalms together in a chiasmic format (Alden 1978:204), Auffret disagrees with this structure, proposing a rather complex structure in which Psalms 111:1 and 112:10 form the concentric centre of the psalm (Auffret 1980:277). These attempts at fusing both psalms, however, compromise the integrity of the individual psalms and risk creating an entirely new composition out of the canonical text.

Another look at the structure of the two psalms, 111 and 112, as argued in this study shows a similar four-strophe division of either psalm. Both psalms open with the superscript יה הללו (Ps 111:1; 112:1) and are marked with the phrase לעד וצדקתו עמדת to close the first strophe (Ps 111:3; 112:3). The theme of the first strophe in either psalm revolves around the upright (ישירים). While in Psalm 111:2, these upright ones are identified as taking delight (הפיץ) in YHWH's works, in Psalm 112:2 the upright are the object of praise for their delight (הפיץ) in YHWH's commands.

The opening of the second strophe in either psalm (Ps 111:4; 112:4) is marked by the repetition of the phrase הנון ורחום. This phrase underlines the theme of graciousness (הנון) in either psalm. In the case of Psalms 111, YHWH shows his graciousness through the gifts of food, probably a reference to manna, and the gift of the land to his people. In Psalm 112, the upright replicates this divine action by lending to the poor and needy. The third strophe (Ps 111:7-9; 112:7-9b) in either psalm revolves around the question of stability (סמך). In Psalms 111:8, the commands of YHWH are described as stable and firm. Indeed, they are liberating and enduring (לעד). In Psalms 112:8-9, the same expressions are used to describe the upright. He is firm (סמך) and enduring (לעד) despite the reality of evil.

Finally, the fourth strophes of either psalm (Ps 111:10; 112:9c-10) present a complementary view of human conduct in relation to YHWH's commands. While in Psalms 111:10 the fear of YHWH (יראת יהוה) is considered good, the conduct of the wicked in Psalm 112:10 is condemned as wicked (רשע) and leading to destruction. This opposition between the desires of the wicked and the deeds of the upright creates further tension between the human agents which is only resolved through YHWH's justice (Ps 111:7). The thematic structure of the psalm may thus be summarised as per Table 1

The Adinkra as an African indigenous sacred text

The existence of a wide repertoire of texts on the African continent and among peoples of African origin have been noted by scholars (Turner 1961:1100). Barber testifies, especially with regard to sub-Saharan Africa, the ingenuity of African cultures in producing a variety of what she describes as 'text-objects' such as the *lukasa* board of the Luba, Zulu bead messages, message-staffs among the people of Dahomey

and the *Adinkra* of the Asante (Barber 2003:327). These text-objects are often accompanied by laconic formulations such as proverbs that serve as an exegetical tool to interpret and expand the meaning of the text which might otherwise remain opaque or obscure (Barber 2003:328).

The Adinkra, an indigenous text of the Akan people of Ghana and La Côte d'Ivoire, is one of the writing systems which has attracted scholarship. Scholarly positions surrounding the origin of the Adinkra vary between those who trace it to the Gyaman kingdom in modern day Côte d'Ivoire (Marfo, Opoku-Agyeman & Nsiah 2011:64), those who consider it to have been an invention of the people of Denkyira in Ghana (Adom 2016:1154), and those who trace its provenance to the encounter of the Asante with Islamic traditions (Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah & Nartey 2016:25). These texts are used among the Akan to memorialise historical events, represent cultural values, communicate elements of traditional wisdom, or simply for aesthetic purposes (Owusu 2019:49). Very importantly this textual system is a 'window to the religious life' of the Akans demonstrating belief in the Supreme Being, in the ability to communicate with the ancestral world and constitutes a means of seeking favour and blessing from the Divine (Adom, Asante & Kquofi 2016:45).

Paired phenomena in the Adinkra textual system

The phenomenon of pairing has been observed in what Turner describes symbols in the African ritual. As an example, Turner (1973) notes that there are in the African textual systems, many types of binary opposition, such that:

[M]embers of pairs of symbols may be asymmetrical ... they may be antithetical; one may be thought of as the product or offspring of the other; one may be active, the other passive; and so on. (p. 1102)

This is not surprising at all even to the casual observer of the Adinkra textual system. Adinkra texts exhibit a wide variety of paired phenomena, only a few of which may be considered in this study.

Examples of the above-mentioned pairing in the Adinkra system include the text *dwennimmen*, which shows a pair of ram's horns turned on each other. The text that symbolises strength, humility, wisdom, and learning advocates the cultivation of these values in traditional society. The *akofena* (sword of war) composed of a pair of crossed ceremonial swords, is a symbol of state authority, legality, and of gallantry. The symbol is used as a sign of legitimate authority and of the right of a ruler to exercise government, which underscores the society's appreciation of the role of political authority. *Bi nka bi* (one should not bite another) is an abstraction of a pair of fish used to express peace, harmony, and the avoidance of conflict, values necessary for the cohesion of society. Similarly, *nkansankansan* (chain), shows a pair of locks of a chain which expresses unity and community and underscores the traditional concept of placing community ahead of individual interests. The pair of crossed

TABLE 1: The thematic structure of the psalm.

Psalm 111	Keywords	Psalm 112	
Str. I (vv. 1-3)	The Upright Praise YHWH	ישירים	The Blessedness of the Upright Str. I (vv. 1-3)
Str. II (vv. 4-6)	YHWH's Graciousness to Israel	הנון	The Graciousness of the Upright Str. II (vv. 4-6)
Str. III: (vv. 7-9)	The Stability of YHWH's Commands	סמך	The Stability of the Upright Str. III: (vv. 7-9b)
Str. IV: (v. 10)	The Conduct of the YHWH fearers	יראת יהוה / רשע	The Conduct of the Wicked Str. IV: (vv. 9c-10)

staves (*Nyame nwu na mawu*, God won't die for me to die) expresses life after death and the immortality of the human soul and sheds light on Akan anthropology and eschatology (Figure 1).

The Adinkra Text *denkyemfunefu* can be seen in Figure 2.¹²

One of the paired texts of the Adinkra system is the text *denkyemfunefu* or *ɔdenkyem mmemu* depicting the Akan concept of the mythical Siamese twin crocodiles (Arthur 2017:209). The text which is composed of a cross pair of crocodiles sharing a common stomach is often accompanied by the Akan proverb *Funtumfracu denkyemfracu, wɔwɔ yafunu korɔ nanso wonya biribi a wɔfom efiri se aduane no de no yete no wɔ mene twitwie mu*,¹³ meaning, the twin crocodiles share a common stomach and yet when they find food they struggle over it because the tastiness of the food is felt as it passes through the throat (Appiah, Appiah & Agyeman-Duah 2007:114). The proverb explains the text of the paired crocodiles as a warning against greed and selfishness while exalting the values of sharing, generosity, and the common good. It emphasises the fact that although members of a group may have different goals, cooperation, rather than competitiveness, is important in the creation of the collective (Willis 1998:110).

The concept of the common advocated by the text *denkyemfunefu* belongs to the wider ethical framework of the Akan which has been underlined by scholars. These otherwise ferocious animals are creatures of the Supreme Being and have no reason to compete against one another because essentially, they are created equal. Furthermore, the creator is able to provide enough to meet the needs of both. The text is thus a metaphor for the equality of all humanity before the creator who provides for all but who also requires the sharing of resources. As Appiah-Sekyere argues, communalism among the Akan is the view that emphasises that the welfare of the larger society does not militate against the success of the individual. Egoism on the other hand is to be avoided. Thus, the proverb *Onipa baako didi mee a ekuro mu nnyede*, literally, if one person eats alone, there is no joy in the village, is another way of emphasising the importance of the common good in traditional Akan societies.

The reception of Psalms 111 and 112 in contemporary African contexts

The question of the common good constitutes a real dilemma in contemporary Africa. In Ghana, a report of the Ghana Integrity Initiative for the year 2021 indicates that the country scored 43 out of a possible score of 100, placing Ghana 73rd out of 180 countries which shows that the country made no progress in the year under review in the fight against corruption (Ghana Integrity Initiative 2022:5). Scholars have

12. Sometimes also referred to as *funtumireku denkyemireku* (Willis 1998:207).

13. Another rendition of the proverb reads *funtumireku denkyemireku, wɔn afuru bom, nso wodidi a na w'reko*, literally, the paired crocodile struggles for food that goes into the same stomach (Willis 1998:238). For other variations cf. (Appiah, Appiah & Agyeman-Duah 2007:113–115).

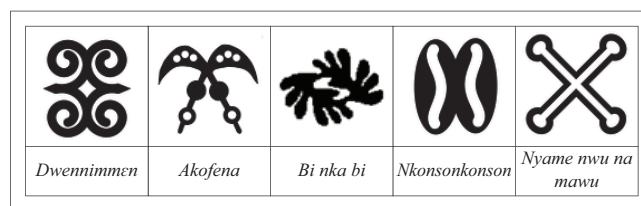


FIGURE 1: Paired phenomena in some Adinkra Texts.

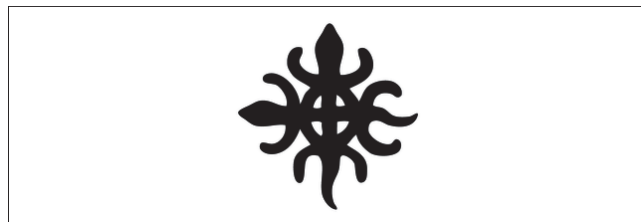


FIGURE 2: The Adinkra Text *denkyemfunefu*.

further drawn attention to the fact that this situation seems to be worsening despite the apparent growth of Christianity in Africa (Wijaya 2014:230). Questions thus need to be asked regarding how effectively the biblical message of solidarity, generosity, kindness, and the common good are being transmitted within the contemporary Ghanaian context. I propose that using African indigenous sacred texts such as *denkyemfunefu* as vehicles for engaging and communicating biblical texts like Psalms 111 and 112 might facilitate the reception of the biblical message in contemporary Ghanaian contexts.

Engaging Psalms 111 and 112 through the Adinkra *denkyemfunefu*

The biblical texts Psalms 111 and 112 and the Adinkra *denkyemfunefu* present a natural opportunity for mutual engagement based on the formal element of binarism which they share. While Psalms 111 and 112 are twin psalm, the adinkra text also exhibits the mythical Siamese twin crocodiles. In both texts, a deeper meaning underlies the formal elements. In Psalms 111 and 112, the main binding element has to do with the question of graciousness (חסד). God's graciousness is expressed in his giving of food and the land to his people. This same graciousness becomes the trait of the upright in Psalm 112, who shares his wealth with the poor. Moreover, the consideration of the poor in Psalm 112 does not impinge on the welfare of the blessed. It rather ensures his security. This emphasises the idea that the common good and the welfare of the individual are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the wicked person who opposes the right conduct of the upright is the one whose desire leads to perdition.

The idea of the *denkyemfunefu* could be seen as complementing the same concept in the biblical text. The mythical twin crocodiles represent the same values of sharing and the common good. The twin creatures on the one hand point to the reality of the Creator who provides for each of his creatures, while on the other hand requiring a sharing of resources. Commonality does not preclude individuality but only

enhances it. Like the biblical text, the Adinkra cautions against egoism, a trait that could threaten the survival of the common. These concepts cannot be more emphasised in contemporary Ghanaian society as a means of combating the rising levels of greed, selfishness and extreme individualism.

Conclusion

The task of African biblical scholarship is both one of interpreting the biblical text in the African context and of facilitating the reception of the biblical message by the African reader. The use of various elements of the African culture as vehicles to achieve this task has always been advocated by African scholars. One of the least studied aspects of this culture, the sacred text traditions of African societies, holds great promise for a dialogue between the Bible and the contemporary African reader. The Adinkra *denkyemfunefu* illustrates this well, as it replicates the binary phenomenon of pairing found in several biblical texts, particularly in Psalms 111 and 112. The commonalities in these texts from varied textual traditions go beyond the formal. Even at the thematic level, both texts reinforce in each other the values of the common good, of generosity, and of concern for neighbour. These become reasons for advocating further scholarly engagement between African indigenous sacred texts and the biblical tradition as a means of facilitating the reception of the biblical message in contemporary African society.

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