


Article

“Thy Law Is within My Heart” (Ps 40:7). Sacred Tradition in the Hebrew Psalter and in African Indigenous Texts

Michael Kodzo Mensah ^{1,2} 

¹ Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon, Accra P.O. Box LG66, Ghana; mikmensah@ug.edu.gh

² Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria 0003, South Africa

Abstract: Every society possesses systems for accessing, preserving, and transmitting its traditions. These are meant to ensure that privileged knowledge entrusted to reliable custodians is passed on unchanged between generations for the preservation of society. In Africa, scholars have advocated new hermeneutical approaches to the study of the Bible, arguing that the adoption of traditional methods of exegesis served as another instrument in the colonialists’ toolkit to undermine the reception and preservation of Africa’s sacred traditions. Using African Biblical Hermeneutics, this paper studies the processes for preserving Sacred Tradition in Psalm 40. Similar processes are found in African Indigenous Sacred Texts such as the *mate masie* of the Adinkra textual system. I argue, therefore, that a complementary reading of the texts of the two traditions could serve to de-link from the monocular vision of traditional exegesis and offer a much more fruitful approach to interpreting these texts and making them relevant to the contemporary African reader.

Keywords: sacred texts; African Biblical Hermeneutics; decoloniality; Psalm 40; Adinkra



Citation: Mensah, Michael Kodzo. 2023. “Thy Law Is within My Heart” (Ps 40:7). Sacred Tradition in the Hebrew Psalter and in African Indigenous Texts. *Religions* 14: 1227. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101227>

Academic Editor: Christopher Metress

Received: 2 September 2023

Revised: 16 September 2023

Accepted: 21 September 2023

Published: 25 September 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Africans have always had their own methods for accessing, preserving, and transmitting their sacred traditions. Long before the colonial adventure, African societies drew strength and inspiration from the knowledge and wisdom of their forebears, passed on through myths, songs, legends, proverbs, and texts to subsequent generations. This, however, suffered a massive disruption with the inception of the colonial project, which deliberately sought to weaponize the Bible as a tool to denigrate and ultimately destroy African knowledge systems. The problem is that the injustice that began in the colonial era appears to have shaped biblical studies in Post-colonial Africa and continues to perpetuate its legacy. As Mbuvi argues, as a discipline, Biblical Studies “is an inheritor of a foundation built on racialized theories and presuppositions of its adherents and practitioners that refuses to self-examine critically, resulting in a perpetuation of these theories and presuppositions” (Andrew M. Mbuvi 2023, p. 13).

It is for this reason that African Biblical scholars such as Kenneth Ngwa, have called for decolonial approaches to reading the Bible in Africa, in order, while restoring the value of Africa’s sacred traditions, to re-engage the biblical text’s “unrelenting capacity to produce intellectual, cultural, religious and political resources that inform and propel movements for political liberation, legal justice and equity” (Kenneth N. Ngwa 2022, pp. 11–12). This study, by adopting a dialogical approach to African Biblical Hermeneutics, seeks to contribute to this conversation by demonstrating how the Sacred Traditions of African Indigenous societies remain a relevant interlocutor in the mutual appreciation of sacred texts both from the biblical and African Indigenous Traditions. The study will proceed in three steps: first to conduct a structural and thematic exegesis of Psalm 40 in order to identify the processes for the reception, preservation, and transmission of sacred tradition in the psalm; second, to discuss the nature of sacred tradition in Indigenous African societies,

with particular reference to the Akan people of Ghana and the Ivory Coast; third, to draw out, from the dialogue between the two textual traditions, the importance of reading these texts in parallel within the African context.

2. Methodological Considerations: African Biblical Hermeneutics

African Biblical Hermeneutics has been defined by Munde as “the interaction between the message of the biblical revelation and African issues according to the mind-set and in line with the social, religious, economic and cultural situations of life” (Albert Ngengi Munde 2012, p. 19). This means, as Amevenku and Boaheng assert, that African Biblical Hermeneutics uses “contextual principles and approaches to elucidate the meaning of scripture in a way that adequately addresses the socio-cultural issues of Africa” (Frederick Mawusi Amevenku and Boaheng 2022, p. 7). African biblical scholars have been the first to admit that this is no easy task, particularly due to the challenge of holding in tension the reception history of the biblical text with the present context of the reader. The task of African Biblical Hermeneutics, as Ngwa understands it, is not about choosing the better option, but “theorizing multiplicity as the starting point of analysis” (Ngwa 2022, p. 21). The canonical text, its historical background, the story of its reception, and the context of the contemporary reader each have legitimate roles in interpreting the Bible.

The dialogical approach to African Biblical Hermeneutics is particularly suitable for addressing the concerns of decoloniality in reading the biblical text in an African context. The colonial project was as much about denigrating African cultures as it was about creating artificial divisions between its peoples. Africa, on the other hand, has always been a religiously pluralistic space, tolerating and promoting conversations across different religious and cultural experiences. The dialogical approach, which this study adopts, addresses this concern by permitting the parallel reading of the texts of two sacred traditions, in this case, the biblical and the African Indigenous. The study will begin first with a canonical exegesis of Psalm 40 seeking to resolve questions regarding the structure of the psalm into strophic units and to isolate the main themes of the psalm (Gianni Barbiero 2008, pp. 67–91; E. Zenger 1997, pp. 181–94; Michael Kodzo Mensah 2016, pp. 3–7); next, an exegesis of the African reality will study the nature of Sacred Tradition in African Indigenous society outlining its distinguishing characteristics; finally, an engagement between the biblical and African Indigenous tradition will show the complementarity between the two traditions and how a dialogue between these traditions fosters the understanding of either tradition.

3. Preserving Sacred Tradition in Psalm 40

Psalm 40 has been described as a “complete prayer for help” (Karl N. Jacobson 2020, p. 296). This is due to the psalm’s interweaving of themes of thanksgiving for deliverance (vv. 2–5), laments and supplication (vv. 14–16), and acknowledgment of faults (v. 13) amidst expressions of confidence in God (vv. 17–18). The appearance of Psalm 40: 14–18 almost entirely in Psalm 70 has, however, led Form Critics to propose that the two parts of Psalm 40 (vv. 1–13; 14–18) have completely distinct origins and were artfully placed together to compose one psalm (Walter Brueggemann and Bellinger 2014, p. 196; H. J. Kraus 2003, p. 458; August H. Konkel 1991, p. 4). More recent scholarly efforts have sought to explain the relationship between the two psalms as a sort of sampling, as evidenced by Jacobson’s (2020) proposal of “dualing” between Psalm 40 and Psalm 70.

Textual issues have also been raised by scholars studying the Greek Septuagint version of the psalm (Ps 39). The term σῶμα (body) appears in Psalm 39:7 in some of the most important Greek Septuagint manuscripts, including the codices Vaticanus (B), Sinaiticus (S), and Alexandrinus (A). Textual critics have, however, preferred the reading ὠτίς (=οὐτίς, ears), corresponding to the Masoretic Text and attested to by minor manuscripts such as the Gallican Psalter, arguing that the reading of σῶμα might have entered the text by the hand of Christian copyists under the influence of an emendation in Hebrews 10:5.¹

Other questions raised by scholars include the theme of the Psalm. Gosse points out a series of terms that underline royal elements in the Psalm, particularly in vv. 8b–9, where a

royal meditation on a book seems apparent (Bernard Gosse 2005, p. 395; G. Barbiero 1999, p. 55). Equally worthy of note, as Zenger points out, is the interest in the Torah expressed by a certain commitment to a life according to YHWH's statutes (vv. 7–12) (Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Zenger 1993, p. 252). On the whole, it must be admitted that little consensus has been reached among scholars regarding the theme, the genre, or the integrity of Psalm 40.

3.1. Structure of Psalm 40

The structure of Psalm 40 has largely been defined by the questions regarding the unity of the Psalm, either due to concerns regarding a change in the literary genre from thanksgiving to lament, or regarding the reappearance of vv. 14–18 in Psalm 70 (Jacobson 2020, p. 296; Kraus 2003, 1:458; Lorenzin 2000, p. 179; Konkel 1991, p. 3; Beyerlin 1967, p. 219). Van der Lugt points out, however, that even among those scholars who argue in favour of a division of the psalm into two parts, there is little consensus as to where exactly that division should lie.² Other scholars have, however, proposed other divisions to the Psalm. Zenger, for example, proposes a three-strophe division (vv. 1–5; 6–11; 12–18), while VanGemenen proposes a chiasmic eight-part arrangement to the psalm.³

3.1.1. Strophe I (vv. 1–6)

There is good reason to reconsider Zenger's three-strophe division of the psalm. The scholar bases his divisions on considerations of genre—vv. 1–5: Thanksgiving for deliverance from a mortal threat; vv. 6–11: Commitment to a way of life according to YHWH's statutes; vv. 12–18: Laments and supplications. Other structural considerations, however, suggest slight alterations to the proposed three-strophe structure. The four-fold repetition of the divine name יהוה (YHWH) beginning after the superscript in v. 2 runs through v. 6, with the terms אֱלֹהִים (*elôhîm*, God) and the lexeme רב (*rb*, many). The resultant structure of the strophe may be illustrated as follows in Table 1:

Table 1. Structure of Strophe I.

Strophe	Key Terms	Verse
Str. Ia	אלהים רב	יהוה v. 2
		v. 4
		v. 4
		יהוה v. 4
Str. Ib	רב אלהים	יהוה v. 5
		v. 6
		v. 6
		יהוה v. 6

Strophe I is divided into two parts: Strophe Ia (vv. 1–4) and Strophe Ib (vv. 5–6). The arrangement of the key terms in the strophe shows a symmetrical structure. At the thematic centre of the strophe is a play on words based on the lexeme רב (many). On the one hand, the thanksgiving of the psalmist is testified to by several faithful witnesses (רַבִּים, *rabbîm*, v. 4) who can bear testimony to YHWH's goodness to the psalmist; on the other hand, the deeds which YHWH has wrought, which are the subject of the thanksgiving, are numerous (רַבּוֹת, *rabbôt*, v. 6).

3.1.2. Strophe II (vv. 7–11)

Strophe II is also divided into two parts: Strophe IIa (vv. 7–9) and Strophe IIb (10–11). Strophe IIa is structured around the repetition of the verb חפץ (*hāp̄s*, desire, vv. 7.9). In Strophe IIb, the key terms צדק (*ṣdq*, justice) and קהל רב (*qhl rb*, great assembly), repeated in

vv. 10.11, define the structure of the strophe. The term אָמַר (*ʾmr*, speak) repeated once in either part of the strophe (vv. 8.11) guarantees the integrity of the strophe. The structure of the Strophe II may be illustrated as follows in Table 2:

Table 2. Structure of Strophe II.

Strophe	Key Terms		Verse
Str. IIa	אָמַר	חַפֵּץ	v. 7
			v. 8
		חַפֵּץ	v. 9
Str. IIb	אָמַר	צֶדֶק	v. 10
		קָהָל רַב	v. 10
			v. 11
		צֶדֶק	v. 11
		קָהָל רַב	v. 11

The structure of Strophe II suggests that the thematic focus centres around the psalmist's double declaration (אָמַרְתִּי, *ʾāmārtî*) in vv. 8.11. In strophe IIa, the declaration to do YHWH's desire (חַפֵּץ), is fulfilled through the psalmist's interior disposition. His desire (חַפֵּץ) to fulfill YHWH's Torah is carried out through an interior commitment (בְּתוֹךְ מִעֵי, *bē ʾîṭōk mē ʿā*). In Strophe IIb, however, the commitment to the Torah is no longer expressed interiorly. The psalmist insists on expressing YHWH's justice, צֶדֶק (*seḏeq*, vv. 10.11), or his beneficence in the great assembly (קָהָל רַב, *qāhāl rāb*, vv. 10.11).

3.1.3. Strophe III (vv. 12–18)

It has already been noted how the delimitation of Strophe III has posed difficulties for scholars. The vocative expressions אֲתָהּ יְהוָה (*attāh YHWH*, v. 12a) and אֲתָהּ ֶלֹהִים (*attāh ʾēlōhîm*, v. 18b), however, form a clear *inclusio* which delimits the strophe.

The internal structure of Strophe IIIa (vv. 12–13) can be better appreciated when observed in light of the preceding Strophe IIb (vv. 10–11). The two strophes show the repetition of certain key terms which suggest a transition from the former to the latter.⁴ Thus, the lexemes לֵב (*lḇ*, heart), אֱמֶן (*ʾmn*, truth), and חֶסֶד (*ḥsd*, love) in v. 11 are repeated chiastically in vv. 12–13, as illustrated below in Table 3:

Table 3. Transition from Strophe IIb to IIIa.

Strophe	Key Terms		Verse
Str. IIb	אֱמֶן	יְהוָה אַתָּה	v. 10
		לֵב	v. 11
			v. 11
		חֶסֶד	v. 11
Str. IIIa	חֶסֶד	אַתָּה יְהוָה	v. 12
			v. 12
		אֱמֶן	v. 12
		לֵב	v. 13

The chiastic relationship between Strophes IIb and IIIa suggests a thematic continuity between the two strophes and equally underlines the psalm's integrity. In Strophe IIIa, further emphasis is laid on the public declaration of YHWH's love and faithfulness. Furthermore, in Strophe IIIa, the question of the innumerability of YHWH's deeds in Strophe

Ib (v. 6) becomes the basis for the invocation of YHWH in the face of innumerable enemies (אֵין מִסְפָּר, *’ên mispār*, v. 13).

Strophe IIIb (v. 14–18) is well delimited by the repetition of the expression עֲזָרָתִי (*’ezrātî*, my help) in vv. 14.18. Moreover, the repetition of the key lexemes בוש (*bwš*, shame, vv. 15.16), אִמַּר (*’mr*, speak, vv. 16.17), and בִּקֵּשׁ (*bqš*, seek, vv. 15.17) shows a chiastic arrangement, as illustrated below in Table 4:

Table 4. Structure of Strophe IIIb.

Strophe	Key Terms	Verse
Str. IIIb	עֲזָרָתִי בוש בִּקֵּשׁ	v. 14
		v. 15
		v. 15
	בוש אִמַּר בִּקֵּשׁ	v. 16
		v. 17
		v. 17
	אִמַּר עֲזָרָתִי	v. 18
		v. 18

The thematic focus at the end of the psalm revolves around the deliverance that YHWH, the psalmist’s helper, affords him against his adversaries. On the one hand, there are those who seek the psalmist’s life (בִּקֵּשׁ, v. 15); on the other hand, there are those who are opposed to those who seek YHWH (בִּקֵּשׁ, v. 17). Shame (בוש, vv. 15.16) is what awaits the psalmist’s adversaries. Those who deride him (אִמַּר, v. 16) will receive an appropriate response (אִמַּר, v. 17) from the upright who will joyfully declare YHWH’s salvation.

The thematic structure of the psalm may thus be summarized as follows:

Strophe I:	Thanksgiving for YHWH’s many deeds (סִפְּרָה/רַב);
Strophe IIa:	Interior commitment to YHWH’s Torah (חֲפִצָּה/אִמַּר);
Strophe IIb:	Exterior commitment to YHWH’s Torah (קִהַּל/רַב/אִמַּר);
Strophe III:	Supplication to YHWH against many adversaries (סִפְּרָה/עֲזָרָתִי).

3.2. Reception, Preservation, and Transmission of YHWH’s Torah in Psalm 40

Strophe IIa opens the debate on what YHWH truly desires of the psalmist. Scholars argue that the preference for the gift of hearing YHWH’s word to offerings and sacrifices (v. 7) is to be understood in light of similar passages in the Hebrew Bible (1 Sam 15:22; Jer 7:21–23) in which the practice of the Torah is spiritualized and comes to be received as an offering (Ps 37:31). Zenger traces these ideas back to the *Shema* (Dt 6:4–9) and its emphasis on obedience to the Law as the origin of this movement (Hossfeld and Zenger 1993, p. 256). Kraus points to the prophetic assurances of an interiorization of YHWH’s covenant in Jer 31:31 and Ezk 36:26ff, as inspiring the concept of the practice of the Torah as a spiritualized offering (Kraus 2003, 1:462).

3.2.1. Aural Reception of Torah in Psalm 40

Beyond the “Torah”–“Sacrifice” polemic, Strophe II focuses on the reception, preservation, and transmission of sacred tradition. First is the aural reception of the sacred word indicated through the mention of the ears (אָזְנַיִם, *’ōznayim*, v. 7). The term אָזֶן (*’ōzen*), is used 187 times in the Hebrew Bible with 15 appearances in the Psalter (Ernst Jenni 1997, p. 138). Jenni (1997, p. 138) notes that the term “rarely describes the human body part without reference to hearing”. Gallizia’s suggestion that the “piercing of the ears” mentioned in Ps 40:7 relates to the practice of acquiring a slave permanently (Ex 21:6) has been rejected by VanGemeren who argues that the expression is simply “a metaphor for the opening of the

ears to make them receptive to hearing”.⁵ This latter view is made more plausible by the mention of the scroll of the book (מגלת ספר, *mēgillat-seper*) in v. 8 and of YHWH’s Torah in v. 9, both of which point to the content of what is to be heard in v. 7.

3.2.2. Written Preservation of Torah in Psalm 40

The second expression of the Psalmist’s commitment to the Torah is indicated by the mention of the scroll of the book (מגלת ספר) in v. 8. What the contents of the scroll are has been the subject of debate. Kraus and Lorenzin see in this scroll the contents of a song of thanksgiving that the Psalmist is singing to YHWH (Kraus 2003, 1:460; Lorenzin 2000, p.180). Galizia and Gosse, however, argue to the contrary, that the contents of this scroll could only correspond to the same Torah which is mentioned in v. 9. The plausibility of this latter position is underscored by the use of the same phrase (מגלת ספר) in Jer 36:2.4 and Ezk 2:9 to refer to prophetic oracles received from YHWH and written down in a book. The purpose of this, according to Hossfeld and Reuter, is to ensure the “impossibility of destroying Yahweh’s word” (Frank-Lothar Hossfeld et al. 1999, pp. 332–33). The psalmist in Ps 40:8 is referring to the same words from YHWH received aurally (v. 7), now set forth permanently in writing to which he must concern himself (קָתוּב עָלַי, *kātūb ‘ālā*). Integral to the prophetic conception of the preservation of YHWH’s word in written form is the interior assimilation of the contents of the Torah. The phrases קָתוּב עָלַי at the end of v. 8 and מְצִי מְצִי are phonetically bound. The alphabets *kaph*, *taw*, *waw*, and *beth* are the same used in the terms קָתוּב and מְצִי, with changes in the order. Moreover, the final vowels in the terms מְצִי and מְצִי create an epiphora at the end of vv. 8 and 9. Thus, the same words written in the scroll of the book are those that the psalmist must interiorize, a practice which recalls the royal injunction in Deuteronomy 17:18–19 (Cf. Gosse 2005, p. 395).

3.2.3. The Oral Transmission of Torah in Psalm 40

The transmission of the Torah is the subject of Strophe IIb (vv. 10–11). The aural reception of YHWH’s word (v. 7), set down in writing and interiorized (vv. 8–9) is now to be transmitted orally. The *Piel* verb בִּשְׂרַתִּי (*biššartî*, I announce) in v. 10 is the first indication of the intensity of the Psalmist’s proclamation. This is further emphasized by the Psalmist’s insistence that he has not kept YHWH’s word hidden, expressed through an accumulation of the negation of three synonyms, כָּלָא (*klā*, to shut up, v. 10), כָּסָה (*ksh*, to cover, v. 11), and כָּהַד (*khd*, to hide, v. 11). The contents of this proclamation are YHWH’s justice (צֶדֶק, *sedeq*), his faithfulness (אֱמֻנָה, *‘ēmūnāh*), and his salvation (יְשׁוּעָה, *šū ‘āh*), traits which are all revealed in YHWH’s Torah. The term סָפָה (*sāpāh*, lip), as Mikre-Sellassie observes, is used here in Ps 40:10 as a metonymy for speech, as occurs also in other psalms (Pss 17:1; 45:2; 140:3) (G. Ammanuel Mikre-Sellassie 1993, p. 420). This, together with the verb אֶמְרָתִי (*‘āmārtî*, I declare, v. 11), underlines the oral nature of the proclamation. Finally, the entire discourse in Strophe IIb is set in a public context. The oral proclamation must have an audience to whom the message is transmitted. The expression קָהָל רַב (*qāhāl rāb*) is used also in Ps 22:26; 35:18 in contexts that denote a liturgical assembly. The use in Ps 40:10–11 suggests the same (Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger 1993, p. 256). YHWH’s Torah is thus meant to be heard, preserved, and faithfully handed down within the community of believers.

4. Preserving Sacred Tradition in Indigenous African Contexts

There is little debate about Africa’s rich and diverse traditional heritage. Gyekye describes this heritage as “intensely religious”, such that “all actions and thoughts have a religious meaning and are inspired or influenced by a religious point of view (Kwame Gyekye 1996, p. 3). Hackman-Aidoo similarly notes that “to the African, it is difficult to separate life and religion. From birth to death religion controls every stage of life” (Alexander Hackman-Aidoo 2014, p. 135). What requires further clarity is perhaps the concept of “tradition”. For Hackman-Aidoo, African Indigenous Religion is traditional because it is “that which has been handed down from one generation to the other through oral means” (Alexander Hackman-Aidoo 2014, p. 135). Awolalu clarifies, moreover, that the idea of

African Indigenous Religion being traditional does not mean that it is fossilized (Awolalu 1976, p. 1). On the contrary, it is a religion which is still lived and practised today.⁶

4.1. *The Aural Reception of Sacred Tradition in African Indigenous Contexts*

Scholars are divided as to whether African Indigenous Religions should be classified as revealed religions. Ekeke holds African Indigenous Religion as a revealed religion because “it came into existence as a result of human experiences of the mystery of the universe” (Ekeke 2011, p. 5). Hackman-Aidoo (2014, p. 135) disagrees, arguing that the lack of a founder in African Indigenous Religions invalidates the claim to revelation. Whichever terminology one adopts, what remains clear is the fact that the practice of African Indigenous Religions involves the reception of sacred knowledge either directly or through mediation from the divine. Thus, Gyekye concedes,

The priests both men and women who serve the spiritual beings supposed to be intermediaries between God and human beings do make claims about having received message from those deities for specific individuals and groups of individuals or for an entire community; but these messages are an aspect of the ongoing practice of the religion, not its starting point (Kwame Gyekye 1996, p. 6).

A key aspect of this mediated reception of divine realities is found in the role of the ancestors in African Indigenous Religions. The ancestors, as Adamo explains, are “people who have made it to the spirit land and are venerated by their descendants. They are regarded as part of the elders of the families with enhanced powers to bless, protect or punish” (David Tuesday Adamo 2011, p. 4). Even more importantly, “ancestors act as intermediaries between God and the members of the families” (David Tuesday Adamo 2011, p. 4). For this reason, as Kamba observes, descendants would constantly consult the ancestors “as if they had been elders who were still alive” (Constant Katelu Kamba 2021, p. 230). This becomes a very important element in traditional African rituals since it provides the means of accessing the divine will. According to Mundeke and Tekwi, the elders in African society are the custodians of this “secret knowledge”, which might involve religious practices, customs, and history, on behalf of the community (Albert Ngengi Mundeke and Tekwi 2022, p. 81).

4.2. *The Oral Transmission of Sacred Tradition in African Indigenous Contexts*

The fact that Africa possesses a vibrant oral culture is quite evident. Pobee outlines invocations, prayers, songs, proverbs, myths, and systemic recitals connected with oracle divinities as only some of the vehicles through which oral tradition is transmitted (John Pobee 1976, pp. 4–5). Ansong, Asante, and Kquofi, for instance, explain how Akan traditional names and appellations of the Supreme Being convey deep theological notions of God. Thus, the divine name *Onyankopon* explains God as the all-providing, gracious, and satisfying one, *Twereduampɔn* is the dependable One, while *Teteboakwa* refers to the one “who existed in eternity past and has no end” (Kwame D. Ansong et al. 2014, p. 129). Similarly, traditional myths are used etiologically to explain religious reality such as the non-proximity of the Supreme Being. Thus, the popular Akan myth explains how a woman pounding fufu⁷ with a pestle was ultimately responsible for the withdrawal of God into the heavens, far away from human activity (Gyekye 1996, p. 8). Proverbs equally play a part in conveying deep theological truths. Thus, *Obi nnkyere akodaa Nyame* (no one teaches a child to know God) underlines the traditional worldview of the capacity for everyone, even for a child to learn through experience, the knowledge of the divine. As regards the reliability of these traditions, Pobee (1976, p. 5) notes that the preservation of these traditions within the context of worship, rites of passage, and royal court proceedings has contributed significantly to the fixed form that they have now acquired.

4.3. *Sacred Texts and the Preservation of Tradition in Africa*

The question of the use of sacred texts as a means of the preservation of tradition in Africa requires a more detailed consideration. The issue borders on whether African soci-

eties have sacred texts at all. Ekeke, for instance, denies this outright, asserting that African Indigenous Religion “has no written scripture like other religions but is orally transmitted from one generation to another” (Ekeke 2011, p. 5). Battestini disagrees and blames the position of scholars such as Ekeke on stereotypical attitudes which are the by-product of the colonial project, in which only one perspective of writing, the logocentric approach and its “mythic perfection of the Latin alphabet” are admitted as texts (Simon P. X. Battestini 1989, pp. 20–21). Arthur further points out the tendency for non-linear and non-phonetically-based writing systems to be seen as “inferior attempts at the real thing” and are consequently marginalized (G. F. Kojo Arthur 2017, loc. 262). Indeed, recent studies are threatening the old cliché suggesting that African societies were devoid of texts and literature and preserved their traditions exclusively in an oral form (Simon P. X. Battestini 2006, pp. 9–13). These concerns warrant another look at the question of the use of Indigenous Sacred Texts in the preservation of tradition in Africa

4.4. *Adinkra as an African Indigenous Sacred Text*

The *Adinkra* of the Akan of Ghana and La Côte d’Ivoire is an example, as I have argued previously, of an African Indigenous Sacred Text (Michael Kodzo Mensah 2022, pp. 1–2). The origins of *Adinkra* are debated, though scholars trace its development either to the people of Gyaman in present-day Côte d’Ivoire (ca. 1818), to the Denkyira Kingdom (ca. 1817), or to other influences such as the influx into the Asante Kingdom of Mohammedans in the 18th and 19th Centuries.⁸ It is important to note, however, that legendary oral accounts of the origin of the *Adinkra* persist alongside the aforementioned historical explanations. Kissi, Fening, and Asante indicate that traditional sources speak of the *Adinkra* cloth having been folded on top of the Golden Stool of the Asante as it came down from the skies, suggesting the divine origins of this writing system (Samuel Baah Kissi et al. 2019, p. 31). If this is the case, then this writing system can only be understood as a sacred text.

Adinkra has variously been described as symbols (Willis 1998, pp. 1–2), as ideographs (Jasmine Danzy 2009, p. 14), or even visual metaphors. It “encodes some of the significant historical events and describes institutions and their fundamental beliefs that have been preserved in the collective memory of the people” (Arthur 2017, loc. 703). The term *Adinkra*, which itself means, “to bid another person farewell” or “to say goodbye”, refers to this textual system comprising hundreds of ancient texts which continue to evolve in the present and were traditionally printed on cloth or carved in wood. These texts which preserve multi-layered cultural and religious concepts are often accompanied by oral proverbs which explain, illustrate, and communicate the values, norms, and beliefs of the Akan and provide guidance for the right conduct in society.

4.5. *The Adinkra Texts: Examples and Meanings*

Several texts in the *Adinkra* writing system directly reflect the Akan belief in the Supreme Being. Pre-eminent among these is the *Gye Nyame* (except God), which refers to the omnipotence of the Supreme Being. Similarly, *Nyame biribi wɔ soro* (God there is something in the heavens) expresses God’s greatness and man’s reliance on Him. The text *Nyame dua* (an altar of God) represents the altar to the sky God or sacred space where rituals for the protection of humankind are performed, while *Nyame nti* (because of God), a shortened version of the proverb *Nyame nti, menwe wura* (Because God exists, I will not feed on grass), expresses trust and faith in God’s providence (Willis 1998, pp. 207–8). The omniscience of God is expressed by *Ohene aniwa* (the king’s eyes). This anthropomorphism suggests that one cannot escape God’s all-knowing gaze. Nothing is hidden from the eyes of the Supreme Being

A good number of *Adinkra* texts also focuses on good interpersonal human relations and values of community. The text *bi-nka-bi* (one should not bite the other) advocates non-violence and peaceful co-existence. This text is closely related to *se ne tekrema* (teeth and tongue), derived from the proverb *ese ne tekrema mpo ko na wɔwie a, wɔn ara asan asiesie wɔn* (Arthur 2017, loc. 2352), literally, “even the teeth and the tongue fight each other

but when they are done, they themselves resolve their differences”, which emphasizes tolerance and reconciliation (Mensah 2022, p. 22). Similarly, the text *mpatapɔ* (the knot of reconciliation) conveys the importance of forgiveness and harmony in social relations, while *Denkyemfunefu*, the mythical Siamese twin crocodiles joined at the stomach points out the need to strive to promote the common good over and above greed and avarice (Bruce W. Willis 1998, pp. 110–11).

Finally, several Adinkra texts exalt other personal human traits. *Duafe* (the wooden comb) appreciates feminine beauty while *Kwataye atikɔ* (the hairstyle of Kwatakye) extols the bravery of a war hero. *Nkyinkyin* (twistings) is the text which expresses human dexterity and innovation while *mate masie* (I have heard and kept it) praises the virtue of prudence. *Kuntunkantan* (inflated pride) warns against arrogance and self-conceit, while *wawa aba* (the seeds of the Wawa tree) urges perseverance as a means of attaining success. The importance of learning from one’s history and tradition is preserved in the text *Sankɔfa* (go back and take it). Meanwhile, the text *Owuo atwedee* (death’s ladder) is the perpetual reminder that all human life is finite and that no one can avoid death’s call (Arthur 2017, loc. 5383–7781).

4.6. The Adinkra Text Mate Masie

One example of the Adinkra texts is *Mate masie*, literally translated from the Akan language as “I have heard and kept it”, or “What I hear, I keep”. The same text is sometimes called *Ntesie*, the “act of hearing something and preserving it”. The term *te* in the phrase *ma-te* refers to “hearing” or “listening”, that is, the acquisition of information or knowledge through aural means. It could, however, also refer to obedience. The term *sie* means “to keep” or “to hide” or “to preserve”. Thus, *Mate masie*, shown below in Figure 1, refers to the aural acquisition of some knowledge that a person preserves or keeps.

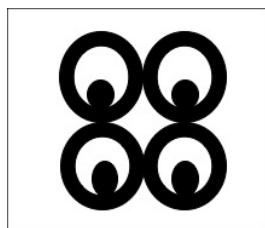


Figure 1. Mate masie (I have heard and kept it).

A further examination of oral proverbs associated with Adinkra sheds further light on *Mate masie*. Arthur observes that the name of the text, *Mate masie*, is derived from the longer aphorism, *Nyansa bunu mu na mate masie*, which literally means “Out of the abundance of wisdom, I have heard and kept it”.⁹ This implies that the source of what is heard, as referred to in the text, is from an undisclosed source of abundant wisdom. This observation is particularly interesting. In fact, Yeboah, Ofori, and Busia note that one of the Akan honorific names for the Supreme Being is *Nyansaboakwa*, that is, “the one who gives wisdom freely” (Samuel Yeboah et al. 2021, p. 1378). It could easily be inferred that the undisclosed source of abundant wisdom, in the Akan conceptual view, is ultimately from the Supreme Being.

Beyond the aural acquisition of this abundant wisdom, however, the term *sie* (preserve), implies a conservation of this sacred knowledge which is achieved in textual form. The text, *Mate masie* is an abstraction, comprising four circular figures placed together in a square shape. The text thus reminds not only the hearer, but also the reader of the importance of preserving sacred knowledge not only by memorizing tradition arising from oral sources, but also by encoding them in textual form for the benefit of future generations.

5. Sacred Texts: A Dialogue of Two Traditions

The examination of Psalm 40, as an example of the biblical text, and *Mate masie*, an Adinkra text from the African Indigenous Sacred Text tradition, permits an engagement

between the two textual traditions. The purpose of this engagement is to establish the thematic linkages or tensions that emerge from a parallel reading of both texts and to identify those insights from one text that could contribute to a better appreciation of the other. Three important points of reflection emerge from the dialogue:

1. **The Priority of Aurality:** The conversation between Psalm 40 and *Mate masie* reveals the need for much greater attention toward the question of the aural reception of Sacred Texts. In Psalm 40:7, the psalmist's encounter with the divine begins with the opening of his ears. Similarly, in Indigenous African societies, as expressed in *Mate masie*, elders are expected to listen to the counsel of the ancestors, whose wisdom derives ultimately from the Supreme Being. Both texts are unanimous about the priority of aurality in the divine–human dialogue. Béré calls attention to two processes involved in this aural engagement with the text. The first is a “reception” which he explains as an attempt to understand the message of the text. The second is an “interrogation”, in which the text confronts the life or the conduct of the hearer. This engagement results in a recontextualization, that is, a new hermeneutical context in which the Sacred Text is to be understood (Paul Béré 2006, p. 1091). This concept of aurality is, therefore, particularly important to African Biblical Hermeneutics in as much as it emphasizes the context of the African hearer of the text and permits both African Indigenous Sacred Texts and the Biblical texts to be received in the light of the current existential struggles, making them even more relevant to the African audience.
2. **Sacred Texts and the Preservation of Tradition:** Biblical exegesis today, for the most part, focuses on studying the Bible and its textual traditions. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said for African Indigenous Sacred Texts. In the study of Psalm 40 and *Mate masie*, however, strong thematic links emerge which bind the texts together. Just as in Psalm 40:8–9 where the psalmist internalizes YHWH's word, *Mate masie* also involves a certain keeping or interiorization of the sacred tradition heard from the Supreme Being. This preservation cannot be deemed to be a passive disposition, but an active one in which the individual reflects on sacred tradition and is transformed by it. The long historical tradition of preserving the biblical text has important lessons for the study and transmission of African Indigenous Sacred Text traditions, many of which face the risk of fading away into oblivion. African Biblical Hermeneutics, by engaging in a parallel reading of these texts alongside the biblical tradition, has a rare opportunity to contribute to the preservation, study, and transmission of Indigenous Sacred Texts.
3. **Oral Transmission as the Perpetuation of Sacred Tradition:** In both Psalm 40:9–10 and in African Indigenous Societies, sacred tradition is to be kept in trust for the wider community and for the generations to come. The celebration of YHWH's Torah and his justice in the liturgical assembly is both a way of transmitting sacred knowledge and of perpetuating it. The same is true of *Mate masie*, in which a sacred text is accompanied by oral proverbs, which lend themselves to be easily memorized and are thus particularly effective for the education of the young. The engagement between the biblical texts and African Indigenous Sacred Texts thus underlines the importance of bridging the gap between texts and orality. Mundele, for this reason, calls for “Biblical Oral Hermeneutics in Africa”, questioning whether it is even possible for the African to understand the Bible without its oral dimensions (Albert Ngengi Mundele 2021, p. 97). African Biblical Hermeneutics must, therefore, promote the oral performance of the text which, through its vitality, supplies those elements which are otherwise lost as a result of the conventional rules of written texts.

6. Conclusions

Scholars have called for a decolonial reading of the Bible in Africa. This call is not necessarily a call for the shifting of African Biblical Interpretation to the centre (Mbuvi 2023, 13 n. 44), but the acknowledgment of this approach as one among many scientific ap-

proaches which should be employed by biblical scholars and others in reading the biblical text. Such a reading, I argue, must also take seriously a new and balanced mutuality between sacred texts, especially on the continent of Africa. This is based on the fact, as I have sought to establish, that there are real parallels that could be drawn between the sacred traditions preserved in biblical texts and those of African Indigenous societies. Psalm 40 and the Adinkra *Mate masie* are good examples of texts from either tradition which demonstrate that whether in the aural reception, the scribal preservation, or the oral transmission of Sacred Tradition, biblical texts and African Indigenous texts have long been in dialogue.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship that may have inappropriately influenced him writing this article.

Notes

- ¹ Pierre Grelot (2001, pp. 210–12); Karen H. Jobes (1991, p. 388). For a fuller discussion cf. Ronald H. Van der Bergh (2008, pp. 355–57).
- ² For example, while Konkel, Kraus and Lorenzin divide the Psalm 1–12;13–18, van der Lugt divides it 1–13; 14–18, while Beyerlin appears unsure whether to include v. 12 in the first or second stanza. Cf. (Konkel 1991, p. 3; Kraus 2003, 1:458; Lorenzin 2000, p. 179; Van der Lugt 2006, p. 399; Beyerlin 1967, p. 219).
- ³ He divides the Psalm as follows: vv. 1–3 (A); 4–5 (B); 6–8 (C); 9–10 (D); 11 (D’); 12 (C’); 13–16 (B’); 17 (A’). cf. Willem A. VanGemeren (1991, p. 317).
- ⁴ For the use of keywords as a transitional technique, cf., H. Van Dyke Parunak (1983, pp. 529–30).
- ⁵ VanGemeren’s argument is bolstered by the fact that the verb כָּרַח which is used in Ps 40:7 is different from the verb עָרַע employed in Ex 21:6. VanGemeren (1991, p. 321); Ugo Gallizia (1961, p. 146).
- ⁶ Emeka C. Ekeke (2011, p. 4). For a similar position, cf. (Gyekye 1996, p. 5).
- ⁷ A traditional delicacy made by pounding yam, plantain, cassava, or cocoyam in a mortar until it becomes a viscous paste and served with vegetable fish or meat soup.
- ⁸ For further reading on the debates of its origin, cf. Bruce W. Willis (1998, pp. 29–31); Samuel Baah Kissi et al. (2019, pp. 30–31).
- ⁹ Arthur renders translation reads “in the depth of wisdom abound knowledge and thought” (Arthur 2017, loc. 4063).

References

- Adamo, David Tuesday. 2011. Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s): The Postcolonial Round of Engagement. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32: 1–10. [CrossRef]
- Amevenku, Frederick Mawusi, and Isaac Boaheng. 2022. *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*. Series in Philosophy of Religion; Wilmington: Vernon Press.
- Ansorg, Kwame D., Eric Appau Asante, and Steve Kquofi. 2014. Eulogising God in Christian Worship through Akan Traditional Appellations: A Case of Kumasi. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 1: 126–35. [CrossRef]
- Arthur, G. F. Kojo. 2017. *Cloth as Metaphor: (Re)Reading the Adinkra Cloth Symbols of the Akan of Ghana*. Kindle. Bloomington: iUniverse.
- Awolalu, J. Omosade. 1976. What Is African Traditional Religion? *Studies in Comparative Religion* 10: 1–10.
- Barbiero, Gianni. 1999. *Das erste Psalmenbuch als Einheit. Eine synchrone Analyse von Psalm 1–41*. ÖBS 16. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin and New York: Peter Lang.
- Barbiero, Gianni. 2008. The Risks of a Fragmented Reading of the Psalms: Psalm 72 as a Case in Point. *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 120: 67–91. [CrossRef]
- Battestini, Simon P. X. 1989. The Interface between Writing and Speech in West Africa. *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 79: 20–28.
- Battestini, Simon P. X. 2006. Préface: De l’inscription de Sens et de l’écrit à l’oralité En Afrique. In *De l’écrit Africain à l’oral. Le Phénomène Graphique Africain*. Edited by Simon P. X. Battestini. Paris: L’Harmattan, pp. 9–13.
- Béré, Paul. 2006. Auditor in fabula—La Bible dans son contexte oral: Le cas du livre de Ruth. *Old Testament Essays* 19: 1089–1105.
- Beyerlin, Walter. 1967. Die tôdā der Heilsvergegenwärtigung in den Klageliedern des Einzelnen. *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 79: 208–24. [CrossRef]

- Brueggemann, Walter, and William H. Bellinger Jr. 2014. *Psalms*. New Cambridge Bible Commentary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available online: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAn3854111&site=ehost-live&custid=ns083164> (accessed on 30 August 2023).
- Danzy, Jasmine. 2009. *Adinkra Symbols: An Ideographic Writing System*. Master's thesis, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY, USA.
- Ekeke, Emeka C. 2011. African Traditional Religion: A Conceptual and Philosophical Analysis. *Lumina* 22: 1–18.
- Gallizia, Ugo, ed. 1961. *Salmi*. La Sacra Bibbia. L'Antico Testamento 2. Giorgio Castellino, trans. Torino: Marietti.
- Gosse, Bernard. 2005. Le Psaume 40 et Le Livre de Jérémie. *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117: 395–404. [CrossRef]
- Grelot, Pierre. 2001. Le Texte Du Psaume 39,7 Dans La Septante. *Revue Biblique* 108: 210–13.
- Gyekye, Kwame. 1996. *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Accra: Sankofa.
- Hackman-Aidoo, Alexander. 2014. A Review of the Concept of Origin and Founder of the Indigenous African Religion. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 4: 134–37.
- Hossfeld, Frank-Lothar, and Erich Zenger. 1993. *Die Psalmen I. Psalm 1–50*. NEB.AT 29. Würzburg: Echter.
- Hossfeld, Frank-Lothar, Eleonore Reuter, and Christoph Dohmen. 1999. “סֵפֶר, sēper”. In *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. X. Edited by Johannes G. Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fabry. Translated by Douglas W. Scott. Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, pp. 326–41.
- Jacobson, Karl N. 2020. Dualing (Read: Dueling) Psalmos. *Word & World* 40: 290–99.
- Jenni, Ernst. 1997. “אָזן ōzen, ear”. In *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Edited by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. Peabody: Hendrikson, vol. 1, pp. 137–40.
- Jobes, Karen H. 1991. Rhetorical Achievement in the Hebrews 10 “misquote” of Psalm 40. *Biblica* 72: 387–96.
- Kamba, Constant Katelu. 2021. “And Your Ears Open to Hear” (Neh 1:6a) and Prayers in African Traditional Religions. In *Bible and Orality in Africa: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Verbum Ad Terram 1. Edited by Albert Ngengi Mundeke, Emmanuel Wabanhu and Jean-Claude Loba Mkole OP. Nairobi: BICAM-CEBAM, pp. 213–42.
- Kissi, Samuel Baah, Peggy Ama Fening, and Eric Appau Asante. 2019. The Philosophy of Adinkra Symbols in Asante Textiles, Jewellery and Other Art Forms. *Journal of Asian Scientific Research* 9: 29–39. [CrossRef]
- Konkel, August H. 1991. The Sacrifice of Obedience. *Didaskalia* 2: 2–11.
- Kraus, Hans-Joachim. 2003. *Psalmen*. 1–59, 7th ed. Vol. 1. BK 15/1. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.
- Lorenzin, Tiziano. 2000. *I Salmi*. I Libri Biblici. Primo Testamento 14. Milano: Paoline.
- Mbuvu, Andrew M. 2023. *African Biblical Studies. Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies*. London and New York: T&T Clark.
- Mensah, Michael Kodzo. 2016. *I Turned Back My Feet to Your Decrees (Psalm 119:59): Torah in the Fifth Book of the Psalter*. Österreichische Biblische Studien 45. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Mensah, Michael Kodzo. 2022. “I Am Peace...They Are for War” (Ps 120:7): The Language of Peace in Sacred Texts and in Contemporary African Contexts. *Kanien* 10: 5–31.
- Mikre-Sellassie, G. Ammanuel. 1993. Metonymy in the Book of Psalms. *The Bible Translator (Ap, O Practical Papers)* 44: 418–25. [CrossRef]
- Mundeke, Albert Ngengi, and Benoît Pae Tekwi. 2022. *Leadership in the Bible and African Society*. Nairobi: BICAM-CEBAM.
- Mundeke, Albert Ngengi. 2012. *A Handbook on African Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*. Limuru: Kolbe Press.
- Mundeke, Albert Ngengi. 2021. Retrieving Orality from Biblical Texts: A Process of Multiple Interpretations. In *Bible and Orality in Africa: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Verbum Ad Terram 1. Edited by Albert Ngengi Mundeke, Emmanuel Wabanhu and Jean-Claude Loba Mkole OP. Nairobi: BICAM-CEBAM, pp. 89–102.
- Ngwa, Kenneth N. 2022. *Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus*. Louiseville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Pobee, John. 1976. Aspects of African Traditional Religion. *Sociological Analysis* 37: 1–18. [CrossRef]
- Van der Bergh, Ronald H. 2008. A Textual Comparison of Hebrews 10:5b-7 and LXX Psalm 39:7–9. *Neotestamentica* 42: 353–82.
- Van Dyke Parunak, H. 1983. Transitional Techniques in the Bible. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102: 525–48.
- Van der Lugt, Pieter. 2006. *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*. Vol. I. OTS 53. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- VanGemeren, Willem A. 1991. *Psalms*. EBC 5. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Willis, Bruce W. 1998. *The Adinkra Dictionary: A Visual Primer on the Language of Adinkra*. Washington, DC: The Pyramid Complex.
- Yeboah, Samuel, Emmanuel Amo Ofori, and Kofi Busia Abrefa. 2021. A Morphological Analysis of Akan Honorific and Title Names for God. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 11: 1371–83. [CrossRef]
- Zenger, Erich. 1997. Die Provokation des 149. Psalms: Von der Unverzichtbarkeit der kanonischen Psalmenauslegung. In *Ihr Völker alle, klatscht in die Hände! FS Erhard. S. Gerstenberger*. ExZ 3. Edited by Rainer Kessler, Kerstin Ulrich, Milton Schwantes and Gary Stansell. Münster: LIT, pp. 181–94.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.