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The Praise of God's People: A Hymnological and Theological Analysis of 'Praise to the Lord the Almighty'

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14 December 2022 Congregational hymn singing in the praise of God has been a major aspect of liturgy among mission churches in Nigeria since the early nineteenth century.

Keywords: Over time there has been a consistent decline and or neglect in congregational hymn singing among Christian denominations. This paper is a hymnological as well as a theological interpretation and analysis of the hymn 'Praise to the Lord the Almighty' which aims at eliciting understanding and fostering congregational hymn singing in Faith Baptist Church Port Harcourt, Rivers State. A historical survey of the life of the author, hymn background, poetic and hymn tune analysis were carried out on the song to achieve an in-depth interpretation of the author's ideology about praise to God. Findings reveal that there were three incommunicable aspects of the nature of God, nine reasons for the praise, and a call to praise God leading to a better understanding of the hymn and a commitment by the congregation to live daily a life of praise to God.

Hymns,
Praise,
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INTRODUCTION

Music and liturgy are inseparable as there is an interplay between congregational singing and liturgical celebrations. Praise is one of the liturgical actions which can be expressed to God through singing of hymns in corporate worship experience. Historically, congregational singing of hymns in Christian worship among evangelical Christians in Nigeria has been an important tool in the teaching of doctrines about God, the church, and the proclamation of the gospel. Ojo (1987) and McClelland (1981) examined the story behind some twenty-five hymns and thirty-three hymns respectively by different authors. The hymns considered were timeless and timely as they converse and communicate themes of praise, divine guidance and protection, comfort and courage, commitment, invitation and parting. These studies imply that a hymnological of songs have been of scholarly interest. Osbeck (1982) compiled two different collections of hymns in *101 Hymn Stories* and *101 More Hymn Story* to challenge the unbeliever, edify the Christian, and bring about revival. Both collections have musical score and background stories leading to writing of individual hymn contained in each volume.

Dahunsi (1997) noted that the stories behind hymns should lead to a moment of reflection followed by prayer, a pattern he adopted in each of the fifty-four songs in his book. Zorasi (2012) in his compilations focused on good hymn singing by church choir and congregation. This he accomplished by providing appropriate and standardized tonic *soh-fah* notations to facilitate the learning and singing of selected hymns for individuals and choral groups. Osbeck (1990) and Ofoelue (2014) x-rayed the devotional import of hymns texts by not only presenting the stories behind them but by weaving the testimonies with biblical references alluded to by the author of each hymn to help enrich the devotional life of individual Christians.

The theme of praise has been expressed by many poets and hymn writers in their texts set to music for glorifying God. Some examples of hymns of praise

found in hymnody across Christian denominations include 'God, Our Father, We Adore Thee', 'Praise My Soul the King of Heaven', 'Praise to God Immortal Praise' and 'O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing My Redeemers Praise'. Individual hymn is a mosaic of theological texts in poetic forms, lined up in consecutive syllables to a melody for congregational rendering. This genre of music can be challenging to untrained individuals in a congregation and therefore calls for interpretation and analysis. The purpose of this study is to offer a textual interpretation of the hymn 'Praise to the Lord the Almighty' by examining its background story, its theological significance and by providing an analysis of the music conveying the hymn text in order to foster congregational participation in singing hymns of praise across denominations. The word praise comes from Latin *pretium* meaning 'price' or 'value' and generally defined as the attribution of worth or value. True praise is an acknowledgement of true conviction of worth as represented in the apocalypse of the true adoration of God and the Lamb inspired by a sense of their worthiness to be adored (Revelation 4:11; 5:12).

Rationale for Hymn Interpretation

In the past five decades leading into the twenty first century, the church in Nigeria has continued to experience a consistent decline in congregational singing of hymns by many denominations during corporate worship. Many mainline churches, which in the past were known for traditional hymn singing, have embraced other forms and styles of music. Montgomery (2000) attributed the shift to the negative imageries that hymn as a form brings to mind due to the use of archaic words, association with distinct type of tune from old period, and dullness of worship service. This scenario calls for interpretation of hymns, an educative venture leading to the exposition of hymn text to facilitate thorough understanding of the spiritual and aesthetic importance of church hymns. Nkem Okoh (personal communication, February 2021) noted that the dearth of trained and knowledgeable individuals in the interpretation, performance practice and appropriate use of the hymn genre in

worship has further brought about neglect or outright rejection of hymn singing among many contemporary congregations.

HYMNOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Biography of Joachim Neander: Joachim Neander was born in 1650 at Bremen a city located in North Germany known for shipping. He was the first son of his father, Johann Neander's (1614-1666) second marriage to Catharina Knipping (Teuscher, 1993). His father was a teacher at the *Paedagogicum* in Breme where he enrolled while his grandfather after whom he was named, was a Lutheran Pastor (Ofoelue, 2014). Teuscher (1993) further noted that young Joachim after completing the *Paedagogicum*, enrolled in *Gymnasium illustre* in 1666 the year his father died. According to Forbis (1992) and Ofoelue (2014) at age twenty, Joachim was a rough, stubborn, and rebellious student. One Sunday morning, 1670 in the company of his friends, he attended a service at St. Martin's Lutheran church in Bremen to mock and ridicule the word of God as well as the preacher, Pastor Theodore Under-Eyck under whose sermons and teachings he experienced salvation.

A year later Joachim Neander went to the University of Heidelberg and in 1674 was appointed assistant Pastor and Rector of the Latin school which belong to the Lutheran Reformed Church in Dusseldorf (Teuscher, 1993). During this period, he came under the influence of two notable and devout Pietists, Jakob Spener and Johann J. Schutz. In May of 1679 he took up an appointment and resumed in July as an auxiliary preacher at St. Martin's Church in his own town Bremen at age 29 under the pastoral leadership of Under-Eyck (Forbis, 1992 and Teuscher, 1993). While in Bremen, he lived a life of solitude in a cave in the mountain close to a river later named Neanderthal River by Archaeologists as tribute to Joachim Neander (Ofoelue, 2014).

Neander wrote over sixty hymns some of which he provided tunes. He was struck down ten months into his job at Bremen by tuberculosis (Forbis, 1992), an infectious disease that plagued and ravaged crowded European cities and died on Monday May 31st, 1680 at the age of thirty after writing the hymn 'Praise to the Lord the Almighty' (Teuscher, 1993; Ofoelue, 2014).

Background to the Hymn

Christians over the centuries are referred to as 'people of the Book'. The hymn 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty' is based on two passages of the bible Psalm 103:1-6 and Psalm 150. In the 16th century, according to Baily (1950), Martin Luther gave the Bible, God's Word, and the Hymnbook to the Germans in their own language so they can hear God directly speak to them in His word and that they might respond to God without any intermediary in their songs (Baily, 1950, p.313). This hymn of praise was first written in German by Joachim Neander in 1680 and later translated into English by Catherine Winkworth who included four out of the original five stanzas in her *Choral Book of England* published in 1863. The author, Joachim Neander, took *Lobe Den Herren* from Luther's translation of the Hebrew text of Psalm 103:1 to German as a basis for writing this hymn (Forbis, 1992).

Hymn text

1. Praise to the Lord, the Almighty King of Creation!

O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!

All ye who hear,

Now to His temple draw near;

Praise Him in glad adoration

2. Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,

Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth!

Hast thou not seen?

How thy desires e'er have been

Granted in what He ordaineth?

3. Praise to the Lord, who dot prosper thy work and defend thee;

Surely His goodness and mercy here daily attend thee.

Ponder anew

What the Almighty can do.

If with His love He befriend thee.

4. Praise to the Lord, O let all that is in me adore Him!

All that had life and breath, come now with praise before Him.

Let the Amen

*Sound from His people again,
Gladly for aye we adore Him!*

Poetic Features and Analysis

The text of this hymn is organized into four stanzas of five lines each. The rhyme scheme associated with the terminal sound of each poetic lines of each of the stanza follows this pattern: **a a b a**. The coupling and careful crafting of the rhyme and meter makes this hymn easily memorable. The metric pattern of the hymn is 14.14.4.7.8 denoting the number of syllables in each line of the hymn. In addition to the outward structure and form; the hymn is simply stated, clear in expression, charged with feeling and passion which characterize a good poem. The rhythmic patterns and cadence of the hymn enhance the communication of the social meaning and message that underlie the text.

Musical Patterns and Analysis

The hymn tune is *LOBE DEN HERREN* set to musical meter otherwise known as time signature in three-four, in the Key of G. This tune was first associated with a secular text in the *Ander Theil des Emeuerten Gesangbuchs* of Stralsund in 1965 (Forbis, 1992). The tune is made up of four voice parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Base). The melody is diatonic (Soprano, being the highest) ranging from D immediately above middle C to E, a 9th above. The melody moves most of the time by steps and at two different points in the music a leap of a 5th from G to D and descending a fourth from E to B with an overall low tessitura which makes comfortable for the average singer. The harmonic rhythm of *LOBE DEN HERREN* is fast and employs a large variety of chords changing every beat until the final chord at the cadence. The musical form of this tune is basically AAB; when broken further we have A A BCD.

Theological Basis for Praise

Having looked at the background and hymnological features of the composition, the paper will now focus on the theological interpretation of the hymn. Theological understanding as basis of interpreting the hymn text is important because of the background and experience of the hymn writer. Adediji (2014) noted that the practice and study of sacred music should be entrenched in thoughtful

theological viewpoint. This brings to light the mind of God in the lyrics of the hymn as it points to the act of praise in the context of congregational hymn singing in worship. The theme and object of praise resonate in the lyrics of the hymn as seen in the opening lines of the four stanzas. An interpretation of the theme and concepts of praise for better understanding will be carried out under the frames of motivation for praise; reasons for praise; and the call to praise. These three major frames will enable us unearth the ideological motivations behind the composition.

Motivation for Praise

The poet's motivation for praise is borne out of his spirituality and devotional life to the study of the Bible and prayers. This is expressed in the opening lines of Stanzas 1 and 2: 'the Almighty' and 'king of creation'. These attributes by which God is described are not shared by any other created things or deity in the universe. The Hebrew word translates Almighty as *El shaddai* as found in Exodus 6: 3 'I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord, I did not make myself known to them'. The God of Israel is the most powerful to deliver from slavery and settle those who put their trust in him in their own land (Exodus 6:6-8). The notion of conceptualizing God as Almighty is therefore the first motivation for the composition of the hymn.

The second motivation is that God is perceived as the 'King of creation'. This expression is rooted in Revelation 4:11b '... for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being'. The Almighty possesses the power to create and indeed all of creation. His creative power was demonstrated in creating the world and everything in it *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) as recorded in the book of Genesis 1:1. God is worthy to receive praise because he created all things; hence all of creation including humanity is beckoned to give praise to God in Psalm 148. God's reign over all things as the Almighty and creator is captured in the first line of Stanza 2 concludes the author's motivation for praise to the Lord. Thus, the two motivations intertextually connect with sections of the Holy Bible.

Reasons for Praise

The reasons for praise are in response to the person of God as described above. All the stanzas except stanza four have a minimum of two reasons each why worshipers should engage in the praise of God. Joachim Neander identified nine reasons why praise is necessary having been motivated by the incommunicable attributes of God as the Almighty and King of creation as follows:

Stanza 1, second line
'thy health'
'and salvation'

Stanza 2, second and fourth lines
'shelter thee'
'gently sustaineth'
'desires...granted'

Stanza 3, first and second lines
'prosper thy work'
'defend thee'
'His goodness'
'and mercy'

Joachim Neander wrote this hymn for the praise of God on his death bed due to tuberculosis infection (Forbis, 1992), which eventually claimed his life. Human praise of God therefore, elicits the favour of God to do more for His people than we can ever imagine from the list of testimonies above.

Biblical praise is motivated by the person of God and what he has done. According to Zschech (2002), praise is not the fast songs before the slow worship songs but a proclamation of faith in God, a declaration of victory over circumstances, and to stand in the place God has given you (Zschech, 2002: 52). In the same vein, Wainwright (1980) explained that full praise is more than words of adoration and includes thanksgiving for God's mighty deeds as seen in the three stanzas of Joachim Neander's poem. The full concept and meaning of praise are not limited to worship actions such as 'praise, proclamation, thanksgiving, confession, dedication and petition' (Hustard, 1989:296) but includes our total submission to God who is the Almighty, Creator and King who reigns over all things eternally.

The call to Praise

The Poet having established the motivation for praise, mentioned nine reasons why God's people should engage in praise, he then concluded with an invitation to join in the praise of God as seen in Stanza 4 of the hymn.

Praise to the Lord, O let all that is in me adore Him!

All that had life and breath, come now with praise before Him.

Let the Amen

Sound from His people again,

Gladly for aye we adore Him!

The call to praise begins with self-invitation to adore God as seen in the first line. This realization is consistent with the Psalmist, David; who himself was a great poet and musician during the Old Testament period. Psalm 103:1 says 'Let all that I am praise the LORD; with my whole heart, I will praise his name' (New Living Translation). Joachim Neander further extended the call beyond himself to include 'All that had life and breath...' to praise God in tandem with Psalm 150:6 'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord' and Psalm 148. The poem concludes with a resounding and affirmative Amen.

CONCLUSION

The praise of God's people grows as much as the people know God's worth through God's self-revelation of the Living Word as testified and written in the Bible. True praise begins with a revelation of the personality and true nature of God as Almighty, the Creator, and the one who reigns over all as King. The study 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty' highlighted the nine reasons for which praise should be offered to God. Congregational singing of hymns of praise, when offered with thanksgiving and understanding brings revelation, leads God's people into the triumph of Christ, and prepares them for miracles. Hymns texts like the Psalms are written from the experiences and real-life situations of the author which many in the congregation can relate with. Regular hymn interpretation and analysis as part of worship is recommended by participants as it will encourage

congregational hymn singing of praise and commitment to God.

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