

RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA



Edited by
Y.A. Quadri, R.W. Omotoye and R.I. Adebayo

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Religion

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Preface

Religion is expected to be a springboard for the development of socio-ethical values, as it contains not only the spiritual backing to individual conduct but also an effective means of inculcating interpersonal relationships within the society. It is therefore a potent instrument for the realisation of the goal of national development. In the history of religion in Nigeria, religious groups and individuals have contributed immensely to issues of national and international understanding. Nobody can deny that the vehicle through which the art of reading and writing came to Nigeria is religion. Religion is playing this role up till now. In the same vein, religion has played a significant role in the health sector. This came in form of spiritual assistance rendered to individuals and communities to solve personal and communal challenges and through the establishment of health centres and hospitals. In the economic sector, religion also functions as a vehicle of economic growth by being a massive employer of labour.

However, in contemporary period, the spirit of nationalism, ethnicity and tribalism has dragged religion into mud, as it has been downplayed by those who believe that it is a potent instrument of polarisation, terrorism and insecurity. This is being amplified on the media, electronic and print. Looking at the opposite side of religion at the neglect of its positives is like being unjust to it in view of its multifarious positive contributions to the nation. It is therefore worrisome that information about religions generally on the wrong side given by those who are either not experts in the field or those who are biased of one religion and try to exonerate his own.

In view of the above, the idea to come up with this book titled *Religion in Contemporary Nigeria* is to provide a basic source material in one piece for students, lecturers, public commentators and the general readers interested in religion on

the use and abuse of religion in Nigeria. This, to us, will guide against throwing a baby with bathwater. Also, revealing the various ways through which religion is being used as an instrument of disorganisation, polarisation, disintegration and destruction will assist in determining the extent of abuse of religion in the hand of those who claim to be practising it. Since no religion teaches these obnoxious practices, we believe that this work will further assist in determining some factors working against effective use of religion in the country. In the same token, the role of religion in the provision of the moral, psychological, social and spiritual infrastructure for the development of the nation would also be examined. We therefore anticipate that this book would provide as much as what its users would need to know about religion in contemporary Nigeria as it offers variety of articles which give insights into new developments in religious studies.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

An Exegetical Study of Psalm 122 in the Nigerian Context

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Introduction

In ancient Israel, going to the place of worship was always desirable and was a thing of joy for the worshippers. Psalm 122 demonstrates the mood of the people and the joy they derived in going to the place of worship. However, the level of insecurity in contemporary Nigerian society is a serious challenge which has made many Christians to think twice when it comes to going to Church. The activities of the *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad*, an Islamic sect known as Boko Haram, especially, in the northern part of the country have led to loss of several lives and properties. The level of insecurity has degenerated to the point that many congregations have devised various ways of screening people coming for Sunday services or other services during the week.¹ These measures are taken with the aim of preventing any possible attack on the church. The pertinent questions are: for how long will the church in Nigeria experience deadly attacks on innocent worshippers and church buildings? What is the motive behind the various attacks? For how long will innocent people of Nigeria live in fear and insecurity? Therefore, this study examines the level of fear and insecurity that is

associated with religion, especially Christianity in Nigeria in comparison to what is found in Ancient Israel. It is an exegetical study of Psalm 122 in the Nigerian situation.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The importance of peace in an individual's life, community, state or nation cannot be overemphasised. The individual needs peace for physical, spiritual and emotional growth while each state or nation needs peace for sustainable development. Incidentally, scholars in the area of peace study have come up with two types of peace, namely, negative peace and positive peace. Summarising the two categories of peace, I.O. Albert and I.O. Oloyede note:

Negative peace is the absence of physical violence while positive peace is the absence of both structural and psychological violence. Negative peace is often imposed; it hardly results from an open revolution of the conflict. On the other hand, positive peace implies reconciliation and restoration through creative transformation of conflict. It is preferred to negative peace.²

The Longman Contemporary English Dictionary has a few definitions for peace: (a) a situation in which there is no war between countries or in a country; (b) an agreement that ends a war; (c) a feeling of calmness and lack of worry and problems; (d) a situation in which there is no quarrelling between people who live or work together.³ The fact that peace is not just absence of war or conflict or civil disorder has been established by Bonnie Ayodele who says:

It (peace) means something more fundamental and all-encompassing; it is the existence of harmony either in an individual or in the society, community, and nation or between nations. It is the absence of conflicts, belligerence, instability, strife, hostilities, negative propaganda and insecurity, to mention a few.⁴

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Olarinde examines the traditional belief and practices in the sustenance of peace with emphasis on the Yoruba culture. He identifies few Yoruba words that explain the concept of peace. These are *idera* (comfort), *itunu* (peace of mind), *itelorun* (contentment), *ifokanbale* (lack of worry or rest of mind) and *alaafia* (sound health or well-being).⁵

The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom* and it means completeness, soundness, welfare, peace. Specifically, it has six different meanings:

1. Completeness in number – Jer 13:19; Amos 1:6.
2. Safety, soundness in body – Psa 38:4; Isa 38:17; Job 5:24.
3. Welfare, health, prosperity – Gen 43:27; Exod 18:7; Judges 18:15.
4. Peace, quiet, tranquillity, contentment – Isa 32:17; Psa 4:9.
5. Peace, friendship – This can be in terms of human relations (Jer20:10; 38:22; Ob 7; Psa 41:10) or peace with God, especially in terms of covenant relation with Him (Isa 54:10; Num 25:12; Ezk 34:25).
6. Peace from war – Jos 9:15; Job 25:2; Lev 26:6.⁶

From the various definitions and concepts on peace, it is clear that peace is more than just the absence of war or conflict. The starting point of a lasting peace begins with individuals whose hearts or minds are free of unnecessary anxiety. In other words, every community or state or nation is made up of individuals and if the hearts of such individuals are troubled, certainly it will have a negative effect on the whole

community. In the same vein, if the individuals in a community or nation have rest of mind, it will have a positive effect on the whole community.

It is assumed in this study that worshippers in Ancient Israel had rest of mind as reflected in the songs of ascents, that is, the songs sung on their way to the place of worship in Jerusalem. Psalm 122:6 specifically enjoined the worshippers to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Certainly, the worshippers were deeply interested in the worship of Yahweh and they were willing to pray for the peace of Jerusalem as a result of the peace which each individual experienced.

It is also assumed in this study that the kind of peaceful environment that existed in Ancient Israel and which allowed the worshippers to worship God freely and to pray for the peace of Jerusalem is a mirage in contemporary Nigerian society. The recent activities of the *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* (Boko Haram) especially, in the northern part of the country have made many worshippers to think twice before going to their places of worship.

Exegesis of Psalm 122

Psalm 122 belongs to the Pilgrim Psalms, that is, the 15 Psalms in the Psalter (Psalm 120-143) that are called the Psalms of degrees or ascents. The Hebrew word for ascent is *md'eleh* which is a masculine noun which means to go up or ascending a stairway. Ten of the Psalms of Ascents are anonymous; four of them are attributed to David (Psalms 122, 124, 131 and 133); while Psalm 127 is attributed to Solomon. James L. Crenshaw notes a kind of progression in these 15 Psalms, from a cry of distress to a complete confidence in the LORD with Jerusalem occupying a central role in each of the three fold process of spiritual maturation (120-122, 123-128,

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129-134).⁷ These Psalms are songs that worshippers sing on their way to the three annual feasts in Jerusalem namely, the Passover in spring, Pentecost in early summer, and Tabernacle in autumn. They are songs in which the worshippers expressed their joy in coming to the presence of the LORD. Each of the songs helped the people to focus their minds on what the LORD had done for their nation.⁸

Psalm 122 is rightly ascribed to David as it speaks of a united people and tribes going up to Jerusalem for annual religious festival. Warren notes that "the fact that King Jeroboam set up his own religion after the kingdom divided is evidence that the tribes must have been going to Jerusalem annually during the reigns of David and Solomon."⁹ Psalm 122 is closely related to Psalm 48 as the two Psalms describe the architectural features of Jerusalem. Anderson classifies Psalm 122 as one of the songs of Zion which was used at the Feast of Tabernacles.¹⁰

Structurally, Psalm 122 is divided into three stanzas namely verses 1-2 that speak of the joy of coming to Jerusalem; verses 3-5 that speak of the beauty of Jerusalem; and verses 6-9 that speak of prayer for the peace of Jerusalem. Clinton McCain notes the chiasmic structure of the Psalm by observing the repetition of the word 'house'. He then has the following structure:

- A vv. 1-2 the Psalmist and his companions and the house of the Lord
- B vv. 3-4 Jerusalem
- C v. 5 house of the Lord
- B¹ vv. 6-7 Jerusalem
- A¹ vv. 8-9 the Psalmist and his companions and the house of the Lord.¹¹

Psalm 122:1 is a declaration of joy of the Psalmist in going to the house of the LORD. He said: "I was glad when they said to me; let us go into the house of the LORD". The word *shamah^{ti}* which is the *gal* perfect first person singular is from the verb *shamah* and it means to rejoice or be glad. It is a spontaneous emotion or extreme happiness which is expressed in some visible or external manner. This emotion is associated with festivals such as circumcision, wedding, harvest, and triumph over one's enemies.¹² This emotion is accompanied by dancing, singing, and playing of musical instruments as in the case of David who was heralded by women of Jerusalem as he returned victoriously over the Philistines (1 Sam 18:6). Naturally, there are many other occasions that make a man cheerful in the Old Testament. These include wine (Psa 104:5; Judges 9:13; Eccl 10:19); ointment and perfume (Prov 27:9); a wise son (Prov 15:20; 10:1); and the Lord and His salvation (2 Chron 20:27).¹³

The Psalmist here was particularly glad when they said to him "Let us go into the house of the LORD". This house of the LORD was located in Jerusalem which occupied a unique position in Israel. It was the capital of Israel and afterwards, of the southern kingdom. It was the seat of central worship. It was first named as the city of the Canaanite (Joshua 1:10, 3, 5, 23). It was named in connection with David (2 Sam 5:6) and it became his royal seat (2 Sam 5:5, 13, 14; 8:7; 11:1) and it remained the capital until it was taken by Nebuchadnezzar in 588 BC (2 Kgs 25:1ff). It became the chief home of the returned exiles (Ezra 1:11; 2:11; Neh 2:11, 17). The point in this first stanza of Psalm 122 is that the Psalmist and other worshippers were glad to be in the house of God in Jerusalem.

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Psalm 122:3-5 further describes the city of Jerusalem. The city was built and compacted together which speaks of unity and security of the city. In other words, as the stages of the walls and houses were bound firmly together, so the people were bound together in their worship of the LORD.¹⁴ It is germane to note that just as Jerusalem was known as both “the city of God” and “the city of David” so also the place of worship in Jerusalem was known as “the house of the LORD” and “the house of David”.¹⁵ The twelve tribes of Israel were in Jerusalem to worship the LORD and to give thanks to Him.

Psalm 122:6-9, the third and final stanza of the Psalm is very crucial to our understanding of peace and security. It says:

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem;
May those who love you be secure
May there be peace within your walls
And security within your citadels
For the sake of my brothers and friends,
I will say, “Peace be within you.”
For the sake of the house of the LORD our God
I will seek your prosperity.

The section begins with an imperative to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. The Hebrew word used for prayer here is *sha'al* which is a verb and it means to ask or inquire.¹⁶ The verb is used about 176 times in the Old Testament, almost always in the *qal*. It signifies asking of a physical object from someone (Exod 3:22) or for information (Gen 32:17) or even demanding another person’s death (Job 31:30).¹⁷ *Sha'al* is also a kind of request that is frequently directed to God as in Psalm 122:6 which admonishes the people to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. It is of interest to note that the word *sha'al* is in the plural form. This is an indication that the call to pray was not given to an individual but to everybody in the community.

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Also, the word *shalom* is important in the stanza. It occurs in verses 6-9. There is a strong alliteration in Psalm 122:6-9 which is mainly to emphasise the concept of peace desired by the Psalmist and the other worshippers. In other words, the words 'Jerusalem', 'peace', 'pray' and 'security' used in the section have the same root in Hebrew.¹⁸

The Nigerian Experience

Nigeria is generally regarded as "the giant of Africa and of the black world." It has a population of over 140 million, according to the 2006 census.¹⁹ Although recently published figure by the National Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Nigeria as 163 million.²⁰ The fact that Nigerians are very religious is established in the statistical figures derived from the recently conducted research on proliferation of churches, mosques and shrines in the nation by Ade Odumuyiwa. It was discovered that within the 774 Local Governments in Nigeria, there are at least one hundred (100) locations for religious activities in each Local Government Area.²¹ He states further:

By a conservative estimate, there are 77,400 places of worship for the Christians, Muslims and Traditionalists (i.e. churches, mosques and shrines). In our estimated figures, averagely every religious location, i.e. church, mosque or shrine has at least 1,500 people as worshippers in each of the 77,400 religious locations. In an estimated population of this country of about 110 million people, our conservative estimate of religious people in our society/country is about 106.1 million people. With this estimated figure, we can claim that almost every Nigerian is somehow a religious person.²²

Again, the government of Nigeria in recent years has promoted and supported, consciously or unconsciously, religious activities in the nation.²³ The government gives

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maximum support to her Pilgrim Boards for both Muslims and Christians; this has made it possible for many people to go on pilgrimage to Mecca or Jerusalem annually. In addition, the Federal Government of Nigeria has enlarged the membership of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and its activities are being fully supported by the Government.

However, in spite of all the arrangements and opportunities to worship God in Nigeria, the level of insecurity of lives and properties in the nation is very high. The masses are exposed to all forms of dangers and challenges. The activities of the *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* (Boko Haram) group in recent time, especially as touching the place of worship tend to make many people to be afraid of going for any form of service. Etymologically, Boko Haram comes from Hausa word "Boko" which means "Western or non-Islamic education" and the Arabic word "Haram" which means "forbidden". So 'Boko Haram' means Western or non-Islamic education is forbidden. Boko Haram is a controversial Nigerian militant group that seeks the imposition of Sharia law in the northern states of the country.²⁴

The group was founded in 2002 in Maiduguri by Ustaz Muhammad Yusuf who was hostile to democracy and the secular educational system. In 2004, he moved to Kanamma, Yobe State where he set up a base called "Afghanistan". The membership of the group includes people from neighbouring Chad and they speak only Arabic. They refused to mix with the local people and they seem to have a grudge against other Muslims who do not belong to their group. By 2009, following the sectarian violence in Nigeria, the group became known internationally.²⁵

Initially, the Boko Haram group started their attack on police outposts by killing police officers. On 7th September, 2010, the group broke into a prison in Bauchi State and set free over 700 inmates. In December, 2010, members of the group were blamed for a market bombing, following which 72 of its members were arrested by the combined military and police operation. The leader of the group, Muhammad Yusuf was also arrested during the operation. He was handed over to the police where he eventually died in their custody.²⁶ In January 2011, the group struck in Borno State, killing 4 people in Dala Alemderi ward in Maiduguri metropolis. On Friday, January 28th, 2011, Engr. Modu Fannami Gubio, the then gubernatorial candidate of the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) was assassinated along with five other people.²⁷

The most disturbing part of their activities is the group's attack on worshippers and their places of worship. The worshippers that are mostly affected are the Christians and indeed the various attacks on them have brought discouragement to the people. Some of the several attacks on innocent worshippers include the blood carnage in Yola, the Adamawa State capital where about six gunmen unleashed terror on innocent worshippers at the Christ Apostolic Church in Demsawo area of Yola metropolis. Eleven people including a pastor were shot dead around 8.00pm during evening service.²⁸ Also, December 25th, 2011 was a bloody one for members of the Saint Theresa Catholic Church in Mandala, Abuja with the explosions that occurred in front of the church towards the end of the service. On that day alone, more than 25 people were killed, 13 cars burnt and 9 apartments shattered along with the church building that was badly damaged.²⁹ In another development, the Saint Finbarr Catholic Church Rayfield, Jos was attacked; the deadly bomb killed 11

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people and 22 members were injured.³⁰ Unfortunately, the attack was taken to the university community at Bayero University, Kano, where Christians were attacked by gunmen at the places of worship and several people lost their lives including two professors.³¹

Another church service was brutally terminated in Yola, Adamawa State after suspected Boko Haram members marched into Christ Apostolic Church, Jimeta, spraying worshippers with bullets killing at least 16 worshippers. This came just 24 hours after members of the sect killed 8 and injured 19 in a similar fashion at the Deeper Life Bible Church, Gombe.³² In addition, the fuel subsidy strike embarked upon by the Nigeria Labour Congress all over the nation in January 2012 turned out to have side effects on the Christians in Zamfara State. The youths between the ages of seven and seventeen stormed the gate of the Government House and attempted to gain entrance. They were protesting against their Governor's support of the removal of fuel subsidy. The protest was hijacked by hoodlums when they attacked and vandalised six churches in the state capital.³³

James Bwala cites security threat as the reasons Christians are fleeing Damaturu and Potiskum. He quoted a resident of the community, Marcus Duniya who said that "many churches have closed as both indigenes and non-indigenes have fled to Nasarawa, Taraba, Jos and surrounding villages because they believed that they were no longer secured in Damaturu."³⁴ He says further:

Look at the street, everywhere is empty. I know that over 200 people have fled Damaturu. In my church, the pastor left without even informing us, we learnt that he fled to Jos and he confirmed it. We are still communicating with him, and from what he is saying it is likely that he may not be coming back to the state.³⁵

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Speaking on insecurity and Boko Haram, President Jonathan in a church service was reported to have admitted that Boko Haram was everywhere including the three arms of government. He stated further:

Some are also in the armed forces, the police and other security agencies. Some continue to dip their hands and eat with you and you won't even know who will point a gun at you or plant a bomb behind your house.³⁶

Indeed, the current insecurity challenge in the nation is a serious concern to all well-meaning Nigerians. The poor masses are suffering. Unlike the nation of Israel in general and the city of Jerusalem in particular that experienced peace and conducive atmosphere for worship, the nation of Nigeria is currently going through a difficult time to which there must be an urgent solution. There is the need for the political leaders to look inward and do a thorough self-examination. The issue at hand is not how much money we budget or spent on security but how willing the leaders are to identify the issues and trash them out.

Solution/Way Forward

Several individuals have made various proposals as to how to deal with the Boko Haram group, so as to have lasting peace in the nation. Some people are of the opinion that military action is the way out. To a certain extent, the government has taken the option and this has led to the declaration of state of emergency on some local governments in some northern states where the Joint Military Force is in charge. Some other people are of the view that dialogue with the Boko Haram group is the best option.³⁷ Still, a large number of people believe that the best option and way out of our current

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predicament is prayer.³⁸ This is the option to which this writer subscribes. The challenge that is confronting the nation at this moment is complicated as it is both political and religious. Hence, it is on this note that this study recommends prayer among others, as the main weapon to fight the battle. This position is corroborated by the view of Apostle Paul who recognised the spiritual dimension of the battle confronting Christians (2 Cor 10:4-6; Eph 6:10-20). Also, the former Nigerian Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon was reported to have admitted that Nigeria was going through a difficult period. He believes that the effective weapon to stop Boko Haram sect's insurgence against Nigeria is prayer.³⁹

The Psalmist says: "For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your prosperity" (Psa 122:9). As Jerusalem, the house of the LORD needed peace because of its unique location, so also does Nigeria need peace as it is regarded as the giant of Africa. Therefore, it is imperative for all to pray for Nigeria and seek her prosperity and her good. This is because any major crisis in the nation will not only have negative effect on the nation but it will have a negative effect on the whole of the continent of Africa.

Conclusion

The research has demonstrated the difference between the worshippers in Ancient Israel and Christians in the contemporary Nigerian society. In Ancient Israel, as demonstrated in Psalm 122, people were glad to be in the house of the LORD; there was peace and security in the land; and generally, the atmosphere was conducive for worship. In contemporary Nigerian society, however, in spite of the so many places of worship, the various religious activities taking

place, and the so much support that the government is giving to various religious groups, worshippers' morale has been dampened as a result of insecurity. The threat to lives and properties in the nation especially, the places of worship in the northern part of the country, has robbed many innocent worshippers of the joy of going to the house of the Lord. Therefore, the study submits that all political leaders must come together to iron out issues so as to give peace a chance in the nation. Also, everyone, both the leadership and followership must look inward and take time to pray for the peace of the nation. Prayer is the main weapon to fight every spiritual battle.

Notes and References

1. Recently, the administration of the University of Ilorin made an arrangement for the anti-bomb squad to be available during Church and Mosque services on Sunday and Friday respectively. Since then cars have not been allowed around the building during services and members are screened as they go in for worship.
2. I.O. Albert and I.O. Oloyede, (eds.) "Beyond Adversarial Conflict Management" in *Dynamics of Peace Process*, (Ilorin: Centre for Peace and Strategic Studies, 2010), 2.
3. "Peace" in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, (Essex, England: Pearson Educational Limited, 2003), 1041.
4. Bonnie Ayodele, "Curriculumising Peace Education as a strategy for Conflict Management in Africa" in I.O. Albert and I.O. Oloyede (eds.) *Dynamics of Peace Process*, 79.

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13. Bruce K. Waltke, "Shamah" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament Two Volumes*. R. Laird Harris; Gleason L. Archer; and Bruce K. Waltke (eds.), (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:879.
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18. Ordinarily, one wonders why the word *sha'al* is used in this Psalm for prayer instead of *phalal* which is the common verb in Hebrew for prayer. It means to pray, meditate or intervene. Obviously, the uncommon word is used so as to give weight to the use of alliteration in the Psalm.
19. For detailed information on land and resources, people, arts, economy, government, and history of Nigeria, see Microsoft Encarta Premium (2006) and S.S. Lawal, *The Unmerited Favour* (Abuja: Midianett Ltd. 2011), 97.
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22. E. Ade Odumuyiwa, "A Religious but Criminal Society—Any Remedy?", 8.
23. Perhaps the reason for this may be connected with Karl Marx's theory of religion who sees religion as the opium of the masses. In other words, the political class is probably promoting religious activities so as to take advantage of the poor masses. See, C.O. Ogunkunle, "Humankind's Wickedness and God's Goodness: A Theological Study of the Oppressed in the Psalter in the Nigerian Context." A paper presented at the
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 28. Wale Akintunde, "Again Gunmen kill 11 in Adamawa" *Sunday Tribune* (8th January 2012), 4.
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 31. See: "Terrorists attack Bayero University: Two Professors, 13 others shot dead" *The Punch* (30th April 2012), 1 & 8.
 32. Yusuf Alli, "Boko Haram kills 16 in Yola" *The Nation* (8th January 2012), 1ff.
 33. Muhammad Sabiu, "Other sides of Zamfara strike action" *Sunday Tribune* (15th January 2012), 48-9.

34. James Bwala, "Boko Haram: Why Christians are fleeing Damaturu, Potiskum" *Sunday Tribune* (29th January 2012), 32.
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36. Olawale Rasheed, "Boko Haram: Enemies within and without" *Sunday Tribune* (22nd January 2012), 15.
37. One Apostle of Peace who believes in dialogue is Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama. See, Ignatius Ayau Kaigama, *Peace, not war. A Decade of Intervention in the Plateau State Crises (2001-2011)* (Jos: Hamtul Press, 2012), 1-244.
38. Ignatius Ayau Kaigama, *Peace, not war*, 190-194. The President, CAN declared Thursday 14/06/2012 as a national day of prayer by all Christians against Boko Haram activities in the nation.
39. Idowu Adelusi, "Only prayer can stop Boko Haram threat- Gowon" *Sunday Tribune* (6th May, 2012), 6.

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