

## INTERPRETING PSALM 82 IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN NIGERIA

**Bamidele Olusegun Fawenu♦**

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**Abstract:** *Social injustice, a pervasive societal affliction, knows no bounds in terms of race or geography. Its crippling ramifications within Nigeria have become glaring, manifesting in a deteriorating economy, escalating insecurity, heightened youth unrest, and a relentless cycle of poverty. The dire state of education and healthcare underscores the distressing reality. Concurrently, income disparities continue to widen, casting a shadow of doubt over the prospect of any imminent closure of these gaps. This prevailing socio-economic landscape has seemingly propelled the popularity of three successive political campaign slogans - "change agenda," "next level," and "renewed hope" - touted by the present ruling political party. Hence, this paper delves into the hermeneutical significance of the enigmatic Psalm 82 in revitalizing Nigeria's ailing social fabric. Grounded in scholarly efforts that center on unraveling the identity of the 'elohim (gods) in verses 1 and 6 of the text, a historical-grammatical exegesis of verses 2-7 is conducted, drawing connections to the deprivation of healthcare, education, and socio-economic*

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♦ Senior Lecturer, Department of Religions, History, and Heritage Studies, Kwara State University, Malete, Ilorin, Nigeria. [bamidele.fawenu@kwasu.edu.ng](mailto:bamidele.fawenu@kwasu.edu.ng)

*empowerment in Nigeria. The study employs a discussion analysis approach enriched by contextual hermeneutics to effectively contextualize the text's implications for Nigeria. The findings illuminate Psalm 82's original intent, namely, the reformation of the society for its initial audience through the conduit of leadership, leveraging the deeply ingrained religious sentiments within its socio-religious context. Furthermore, it underscores the cardinal role of social justice as a divine expectation from any human government. An appreciation of the devastating impact of social injustice on society, coupled with the prospect of divine retribution for errant leaders as delineated in Psalm 82, holds the potential to catalyze genuine change, usher in a more promising future, and materialize the long-elusive hope for improved living conditions for Nigerians.*

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**Keywords:** Social injustice, Psalm 82, you are gods, divine council, divine retribution.

## **Introduction**

The Old Testament contains profound examples of divine calls for justice, hinting at the pervasive presence of injustice as a universal social affliction. One such instance is found in Psalm 82, where *Elohim* convenes a divine council to pass judgment against injustice.

Psalm 82 not only articulates divine repugnance for the oppression of the socially vulnerable but also vividly illustrates the corrosive consequences of such

moral failings on the immediate society. A close examination of the text reveals a scenario that mirrors the Nigerian experience, marked by evident social injustice, a crumbling economy, deteriorating infrastructure, heightened insecurity, youth unrest, and rampant poverty. The culpability of the societal leadership depicted in the Psalm echoes the situation in Nigeria, where the less privileged often find themselves at the mercy of the affluent and influential.

While numerous commentators have analyzed Nigeria's social issues, the problems persist unabated. Successive administrations across all three branches of government have identified these challenges, yet effective solutions remain elusive. In fact, political parties in the country frequently leverage promises of combating social injustice and bridging the wealth gap as powerful electoral slogans. The All-Progressive Congress (APC) secured electoral victories in 2015, 2019, and 2023 by emphasizing slogans such as "change agenda," "next level," and "renewed hope." This prompts a crucial question: to what extent have these political promises translated into meaningful improvements within the nation's troubled social structure?

Hence, this paper undertakes an in-depth analysis of the contents of Psalm 82, emphasizing its central message as a potential remedy for addressing social injustice in Nigeria. This pertains specifically to the deterioration of educational and healthcare institutions, where the burden disproportionately falls on the less fortunate. This endeavor holds great significance as the text under consideration originated in a socio-religious context, and Nigeria, as a prominent African nation, is renowned for its religiosity, as famously noted by John Mbiti (1970).

The study employs analytical and exegetical methods. An examination of Nigeria's circumstances involves a comprehensive review of existing literature, including books, journals, reports, and credible online news sources, employing content analysis techniques. Concurrently, the biblical text is subjected to historical-grammatical exegesis. The theoretical framework for this study draws from Rawls' theory of justice as fairness, which underscores the equitable distribution of socio-economic resources. Rawls (11-16) asserts that all primary social goods, encompassing liberty, opportunity, income, and wealth, should be distributed equitably unless such inequality benefits

the least privileged. The core thesis of this paper posits that a well-ordered society can only be attained when leadership fulfills its obligatory role in governing the state justly, ensuring the equitable distribution of the nation's wealth.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The concept of justice has been a subject of debate among scholars, often described as vague, abstract, and even subjective (Egbewole & Etudaiye, 2015). However, there is a consensus that justice is a desirable goal, in stark contrast to its counterpart, injustice, which is widely recognized as a harmful affliction (Coninck et al., 2013). Indeed, Rawls (2005) not only identified justice as a virtue but also asserted that it stands as the foremost virtue among social institutions.

Whenever discussions revolve around the equitable distribution of a society's social and economic resources for the betterment of all its members, the notion of social justice invariably comes into play. This concept hinges on the belief that every individual and group within a given society possesses the inherent right to civil liberties, equal opportunities,

fairness, and participation in the educational, economic, institutional, social, and moral freedoms and responsibilities cherished by the community (Degan & Disman, 2004). Simply put, as Wolterstorff (1983) succinctly stated, it entails the enjoyment of one's rights, the absence of which disrupts the peace (shalom) within any given society. Samuel (2016, p.1355) suggests that the fundamental idea of the concept, which implies that "people and groups should receive fair treatment and an equitable share of society's benefits," still holds, but various interpretations of this age-old concept persist.

Considering the above, societal harmony necessitates the equitable distribution or sharing of both the pains and gains of the community. Unfortunately, human societies often grapple with a situation where a select few, privileged by virtue of their power and authority, disproportionately benefit from the collective wealth at the expense of the less fortunate. This, in essence, embodies social injustice—a violation of the principle of fair treatment concerning the distribution of a society's benefits and burdens. In simpler terms, injustice prevails whenever the prosperity and privation of a society are unevenly

distributed among its members. Babalola's definition (2014, p.87) aptly encapsulates the essence of this paper, defining social injustice as "the unfair distribution of resources, opportunities, and responsibilities," which encompasses "oppression in any form and anything that obstructs individuals from exercising self-determination and realizing their full potential." In essence, within the context of this paper, social injustice is characterized by the unequal allocation or distribution of advantages and disadvantages within a society.

### **The Biblical Imperative for Justice in Human Society**

Justice is a central theological theme that permeates the Old Testament, finding its prominent place within the Psalms. It is a communicable attribute of God that accentuates His holiness (Goddard, 1960). This foundational concept underscores the unequivocal call for justice within human society, particularly as a mandate placed upon rulers who are acknowledged as divine representatives. The Prophets of the eighth century, grounded in the teachings of the Torah, consistently decried injustice to defend the vulnerable and impoverished members of society.

Consequently, their prophetic oracles were firmly rooted in the principles articulated within the Torah. The Psalms similarly echo the lamentations of the oppressed while articulating their plea for vindication and justice. This plea is frequently directed towards Yahweh, consistent with numerous references to Him as the ultimate judge (Johnston, 2005; Wenham, 2005). Moreover, the Old Testament's wisdom literature offers a wealth of counsel on fostering justice in society (Walke & Diewart, 1999). Indeed, contemporary discussions surrounding social justice have their origins in religious thought, with the term itself rooted in Christian theology, notably conceptualized by Luigi Taparelli in the early 1840s (Mollenkamp, 2022).

In the Old Testament, the term predominantly employed to describe justice is "*mishpat*," derived from the root "*shapat*," which conveys a broad spectrum of governance (Fawenu & Okunoye, 2017). It is essential to recognize that justice, within the Old Testament, extends far beyond a simple verdict of guilt or innocence; instead, it encompasses the broader pursuit of creation. This pursuit is underpinned by the ultimate goal of ensuring the harmony and peace of



humanity (Terrien, 2003, p. 591). Thus, the demand for justice embedded in the Old Testament transcends mere legalism; it encompasses a profound ethical and theological underpinning that underscores the intricate interplay of justice, divine guidance, and the welfare of society.

## **Analysis of Psalm 82**

מִזְמוֹר לְאַסָּף

אֱלֹהִים נָצַב בְּעֵדֹת־אֵל בְּקֶרֶב אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט:

עַד־מָתִי תִשְׁפֹּטוּ־עוֹל וּפָנִי רְשָׁעִים תִּשְׁאוּ־סֵלָה:

שִׁפְטוּ־דֹל וַיָּתוּם עָנִי וְרֹשׁ הַצָּדִיקוּ:

פִּלְטוּ־דֹל וְאַבְיוֹן מִיַּד רְשָׁעִים הַצִּילוּ:

לֹא יָדְעוּ וְלֹא יָבִינוּ בְּחִשְׁכָּה יִתְהַלְכוּ יְמוּטוּ כְּל־מוֹסְדֵי אָרֶץ:

אֲנִי־אֲמַרְתִּי אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם וּבְנֵי עֲלִיוֹן כְּלָכֶם:

אָכֵן כְּאָדָם תִּמּוּתוּן וּכְאָדָם הַשָּׂרִים תִּפְלוּ:

קוֹמָה אֱלֹהִים שִׁפְטָה הָאָרֶץ כִּי־אַתָּה תִּנְחַל בְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם:

The New King James Version is adopted as the translation of the Hebrew text of Psalm 82 because of the merit of its formal equivalence approach, use of

modern English and the stable nature of the translation. The translation read as follows:

1 God stands in the congregation of the mighty;

He judges among the gods.

2 How long will you judge unjustly,

And show partiality to the wicked?

Selah

3 Defend the poor and fatherless;

Do justice to the afflicted and needy.

4 Deliver the poor and needy;

Free them from the hand of the wicked.

5 They do not know, nor do they understand;

They walk about in darkness;

All the foundations of the earth are unstable.

6 I said, "You are gods,

And all of you are children of the Most High.

7 But you shall die like men,

And fall like one of the princes."

8 Arise, O God, judge the earth;

For You shall inherit all nations.

### **Literary Context and analysis of Psalm 82**

Psalm 82 is found within book three of the five-fold book divisions of the entire Psalms (Lasor, et. al., 1982). Book three comprises Psalms 73-89

(DeRouchie, 2017). Most of the contents of book three make up the Asaph Corpus of the book of Psalms. Specifically, Psalms 73-83 belong to Asaph corpus. It is only Psalm 50 which is equally ascribed to Asaph that is not found in book three but in book two. It is important to note that book two (Psalms 42-72) and three (Psalms 73-89) of Psalms prominently used *Elohim* for God, hence the two books are usually called *Elohistic* books (Zamani, 2002). Therefore, it should not be strange that the meaning and identity of *Elohim* is the core of the hermeneutical discourses on Psalm 82 where the term occurs three times. Also, generally, the Asaph corpus characteristically describes the sovereignty of *elohim* over all things, the irony of the prosperity of the wicked on the earth, and *Elohim's* administration of judgement.

The Psalm can be divided into five sections as follows:

1. An exordium which identifies the setting of the Psalm as the divine council/assembly (Verse 1).
2. The indictment of the gods for their negligence vis-à-vis their stewardships over the nations. (Verses 2-4).

3. The stupidity of the gods seen in their paucity of understanding and walking in darkness, failing to address the plight of the masses, hence societal unrest. (Verse 5).
4. The death verdict on the gods, showing that they are not invincible and must be at the receiving end of the injustice they has done. (Verses 6-7).
5. The epilogue where prayer that God should take over the rule of the nations for peace to reign on earth concludes the Psalm. (Verse 8).

In view of the above the chiastic format of Psalm 82 is A, B, C, B, A.

- A. God as Judge (verse1)
- B. God lays out charges (verses 2-4)
- C. God deliberates (verse 5)
- B. God Pronounces Judgement (verse 6-7)
- A. God is Judge (verse 8)

This chiastic structure emphasizes the central theme of God's role as the ultimate Judge, bookending the Psalm with this significant aspect. The central sections (B and C) delineate the charges brought against the divine beings and the consequences of their actions. This well-organized structure enhances the clarity of

the Psalm's message and reinforces the importance of divine justice.

### **Grammatical analysis of Psalm 82**

נָצַב is the *niphal* of the *qal* נָצַב which means “make to stand”, however, the *niphal* here shows that *Elohim* was not made to stand but did the standing by himself (Kahn, 2014). As used here, it conveys the idea of God asserting His authority and presence in the assembly of the mighty. Therefore, the assertion of the authority is that he gave judgement against the *elohim*. This is vivid from the synonymous parallelism used in which the second line of a couplet restates or amplifies the idea presented in the first line. The Hebrew יִשְׁפֹּט translated he judges is *qal* imperfect third person masculine singular of the verb שָׁפַט which in this verse means to pronounce a sentence against the gods. The two lines of the poetic couplet convey the same message: God presides over a divine assembly and exercises judgment. The second line restates the concept presented in the first line while adding the detail that this assembly includes other divine beings ("gods").

Verse two continues with the use of synonymous parallelism. The first line poses the question, "How long will you judge unjustly?" The word *תִּשְׁפֹּטוּ* is from the same root word used to describe the judgement of *Elohim* in verse one but here it is presented in the *qal* imperfect second person masculine plural, and it means "to govern or to rule." The word *עָוָל* which could be variously translated as iniquity, perverseness, moral evil, unrighteousness, and injustice etc., is used to show that the *elohim* (gods) were unjust in their government or rulership of the people. The second line restates and elaborates on the idea in the first line when it asks, "and show partiality to the wicked?" The word translated "show partiality" here is the Hebrew *תִּשָּׂא* which is the *Qal* imperfect second person masculine plural of *נָסָא* which means "to accept or to favour." In in this verse, it implies "to treat with honour." The receiver of that honour accentuates the debacle of such handling. The receiver of it is *רְשָׁעִים* (the wicked people), the criminals who deal with people ruthlessly (Livingston, 1980). Therefore, both lines of verse two addresses speak to the same issue: the unfair and unjust behaviour of the judges or rulers being addressed in the psalm.

In verses three and four, the use of synonymous parallelism and imperative form of four Hebrew verbs play significant roles in *Elohim's* accentuation of the failures of the rulers and in demanding them to end the injustices meted against the vulnerable members of the society. Therefore, in the first line of verse three deliver *qal* imperative masculine plural of  $\text{נָצַח}$  was used to call for a defence for the poor and the orphan. The use of the *qal* imperative suggests that the rulers were commanded to take direct and straightforward action to defend the poor and the orphan. In the second line of verse three, *hiphil* imperative masculine plural of the  $\text{קָדַח}$  which portends a command to vindicate the oppressed and the needy. Since the *hiphil* implies a causative in Hebrew (Walker-Jones, 2003), this second line is a command to the rulers to make justice happen for the vulnerable so identified and named. Furthermore, in the first line of verse four the *piel* imperative masculine plural of  $\text{פָּלַט}$  is used to command the rulers to deliver the poor and the needy from the hands of the wicked. The use of the *piel* indicates that the action must be deliberate, thorough, and intense (Kahn, 2014). Also, in the second line of the verse, the *hiphil* imperative masculine plural of  $\text{נָצַח}$

was used to command the rulers that they make the rescuing of the set of vulnerable members of the society happen unfailingly.

So, the implication of the *qal*, *Piel*, and *hiphil* imperatives in Psalm 82:3-4 is that the *Elohim* is commanding the rulers to deliberately and purposefully take immediate and thorough action to rescue and deliver the vulnerable from the oppression and harm inflicted by the wicked. It underscores the urgency and the need for a strong, determined effort to ensure the safety and well-being of the weak and needy. The straightforward nature of the command as well as the importance of taking the simple direct action, to fulfill moral and ethical imperative are adequately underscored. Equally, the helplessness of the socially weak members of the society to get justice by their own effort is strongly emphasised. Consequently, it is the responsibility of those in authority to protect and rescue the weak, needy, and marginalized while also administering fair judgment. These verses serve as a plea for righteous governance and highlight the duty of leaders to uphold justice.



In verse five, the Hebrew negation particle לֹא (not) is used to describe the rulers' deficiency in the two qualities required of a leader and a judge. Verb form of two synonymous words, יָדַע and בִּין are used in the first line of the verse. The word יָדַע means "to know" or "to distinguish" and בִּין could mean, understanding, perception, discernment, intelligence, and critical thinking for taking accurate decision. It is important to emphasize that יָדַע is presented in this verse in *qal* perfect third person masculine plural and thus suggest that and shows that their lack of knowledge is a persistent condition. Similarly, בִּין is presented in the verse as *qal* imperfect third person masculine plural, but the specific type of imperfect here is the imperfect of capability. Therefore, the rulers lack the capability to understand and take correct and moral decision. The second line of the verse expands on the thought and idea of the first line through synthetic parallelism. Therefore, the meaning and results of the rulers' deficit in knowledge and understanding were accentuated; "they walk in darkness."

The *hithpael* imperfect third person masculine plural of the verb הָלַךְ was used and it means to walk, to go, to move and is found in several instance to describe

the lifestyle of the wicked who lives in direct affront to the principles and will of God. The Hebrew noun תְּשֻׁכָּה used in the verse means darkness as a figurative term for ignorance and evil. The *hithpael* used to describe the walk (operation or lifestyle) of the rulers expresses a reflexive action (Kahn, 2014), therefore, the rulers were responsible for putting themselves in the path of ignorance to do evil. By this, all the foundations of the earth are made “to shake or fall” מוט (go out of joint). This means a chaotic situation results from their unjust rulership.

Antithetic parallelism is used between verses six and seven to pronounce divine judgement on the unjust rulers. Verse six describes their exalted position as *elohim* while verse seven states that but they will die like *adam* (mankind). *Qal* imperfect second person masculine plural of מוט (die, kill, destroy) and נָפַל (fall, perish, overwhelm) were used to describe that the Supreme God will not fail in His own responsibility to serve justice to the unjust rulers.

### **Interpretation of Psalm 82**

Almost all scholars of Psalm affirm that Psalm 82 is interspersed with elements that are difficult to

interpret because of its steepness in mythological imagery (Millar, 1986; Morgenstern, 1939). Nevertheless, its concern for justice is much obvious. In fact, Leslie (1949) underscores the Psalm as a New Year Hymn which celebrates the Lord as Judge. The decline in the spirituality of Israel inevitably led to the widespread of unrighteousness and injustice and necessitated the contents of this Psalm.

A cursory look at this Psalm shows that at least four critical questions are pre-requisite to appropriately apply the message of the Psalm. The questions are who is the speaker? What assembly does *Elohim* presides upon? Who are the gods? And what context does the address fit best in Old Testament historical narratives? The answer to the first three critical questions lends credibility to the contents of the address sandwiched between the first and the last verses of the Psalm.

**The speaker in Psalm 82:** The identity of the speaker who reported the event in the divine council is generally accepted as Asaph. This authorial assertion underscores the liturgical use of the Psalms in Temple worship (Pfeiffer, 1965). So, verse 1 (an exordium) and

verse 8 (a prayer) belong to the author while verses 2-7 were God's word delivered by Asaph as spokesperson for God. Habtu (2006, p.706) asserts that "The opening and closing verses speak about the judgement of God, while the middle section speaks about the responsibilities of human judges and the consequences of their failure to carry them out."

### **What assembly does God preside over in 82:1?**

The use of the plural *'elohim* in verses 1 and 6 is the fulcrum upon which the debate about the constituents of the assembly revolves. In other words, the direction to which an interpreter's meaning of *'elohim* in those verses swings determines the assembly God presided over. Meanwhile, the same term appears three times in the text with the first occurrence showing that *'Elohim* stands in the congregation of *'elohim*. This appears to negate the concept of monotheism which is a fundamental theology of the Old Testament. The first singular *'elohim* (with plural of majesty) mentioned refers to the sovereign God who stands to reprimand the plural *'elohim* saddled with the responsibility of administering justice among humans but reneged. Meanwhile, should these *'elohim* be conceived as literal gods or as humans in variant role? Expectedly,

unanimity of views on this matter is still fluid in scholarly discourse. At least three views are held on this matter (VanGemerén, 1994). The first view is that the gods are human judges who were condemned by God for being unjust. In this case, they are construed as either foreign kings who oppressed the Israelites or as Judges and kings of Israel who violated the national covenant terms and treated their subjects unjustly (Briggs, 1907). The second view holds that the gods are the principalities and powers of other nations that took delight in oppressing Israel (Eichrodt, 1967). The third view advances that the gods are pagan deities who rule the darkness of the world (VanGemerén, 1994).

Largely, critical scholarship has pitched the interpretation of this Psalm in the context of ancient Near Eastern pantheon and especially, the Canaanite religion. Therefore, the assembly of the gods according to Tsevat (1970) originally referred to the political organ of a primitive democracy, a phenomenon which can be discerned in the pantheons of various non-Israelite cultures. In Israel, this image has given way to that of an absolute monarchy (Ps. 95:3), and the divine assembly is a body of counsellors and or administrators. One meets this body in I Kings 22:19-

23; Isaiah 6; Job 1:6-12, 2:1-7; and elsewhere. In this Psalm, its members are called *'elohim* (gods) It is based on this that Tsevat (1970) thinks that while YHWH, the God of Israel is supreme, the gods of other nations are equally real. He interpreted Deuteronomy 4:19 to mean that YHWHs ordained the subordination of the gods of other nations.

While relating this Psalm with heavenly court in 1 Kings 22:19-23 has some merits, it should be mentioned that, on the strength of the foregoing, Habtu (2006) asserts that it refers to the gathering of God's covenant people that had assembled to be judged (rather than to be consulted) and not of angelic or spiritual beings. He recognizes the various interpretations of gods which includes surrounding nations, angelic spirit beings, human judges and rulers, and Israel as a people. Nevertheless, he upholds that it refers to human judges on the strength that the remaining content of the Psalm addressed the issue of judgement (Habtu, 2006). The same understanding and view are held by Ross (2000). In other places in scripture, those who have been charged with the responsibility of dispensing justice among the covenant people are called 'gods' in the Hebrew text

(Exodus 21:6; 22:7-8; also, John 10:32-36). While instances of God directing judgement against the gods of the nations are found in the Bible, in this Psalm, the focus is judgement among the rulers and judges because they too were guilty of perversion of justice. This is the view Gordon (1935) considered as being deficient of validity and thus an example of theologically protecting God. Michael S. Heiser (2010) also corroborates Gordon as he argues frantically that it does not make any logical and contextual sense to think that *'elohim* in Psalm 82 refers to human beings, hence Israelites judges. According to him in all about five connotations of *'elohim* in the Old Testament, the term refers to figures that do not inhabit the human realm "... they are by nature not part of the world of humankind, a world of necessary embodiment." This kind of view could be the reason Terrien (2003) distinguished between the *'elohim* (gods) and the Judges when he said that the gods were guilty of social oppression for inspiring the human judges and other public officials to favour the wealthy to the detriment of the poor.

### **Contents and context of the addressee in verses**

**2-7:** The interrogation, "how long" (*'ad matay*) which

had proceeded from man in other places like psalm 6:3; 13:1-2; 35:17; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:36; 94:3; and 119:84 now proceeds from God in Psalm 82:2. This is an interrogation that depicts the weariness of the oppressed who feels his oppression has persisted for too long. It is the language of a person in search of prompt vengeance against the oppressive enemy. It could be described as an interrogative appeal. God must be telling the rulers that when will it be right in their judgement to end the oppression of the poor; for how long will they keep the poor in the state of oppression? Also, the statement is satirical; God appears to be telling the congregation of the unjust rulers of verse 1 that their injustice and oppression of the poor has a termination date; thereby pointing to the temporality of their person and power. This satire pre-empted verse 6 where the death of the gods was announced.

Verse 3-4 was a reminder to them that their position of responsibilities is laden with specific duties. Rather than “misrepresenting the righteous rule of God, the judges should be rescuing the weak and needy and delivering them from the hand of the wicked.” Their departure from the law of God led inevitably to



their lack of divine discretion in administering justice (vs 5) which resulted into a chaotic situation in the society. That those who God appointed to exalted offices cannot use the same for ungodly behaviour is stressed in verse 6. Divine verdict is that, though God called them gods and sons of the Most High, they will die like other mere men which they are (vs 7). Their reign, like that of every other human ruler, will come to an end and they will die. In verse 8, God is not only the God of the rulers of His people, but of the whole earth, therefore, the Psalmist made a cry to the sovereign Lord of the universe for judgement.

According to Motyer (1994), the duties described in verses 2-4 are typical responsibilities of Israel's judges and for which they owe God accountability. Therefore, the language used to convey the content of the address fits best into the monarchical context where prophetic criticism of the ruling class was vivid. In fact, Siqueira (2000) thinks the Psalm can be called a prophetic hymn because it is characterised by the features of prophetic pronouncement of the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets, especially. Afterall, the Old Testament Prophets had no message except as inspired from the divine council to which

they were given exclusive privilege to witness and derive their authority to speak (Isaiah 6:1-8; Jeremiah 23: 18, 21-22).

Furthermore, the categories of people God stood up to defend here are usually the groups that enjoyed divine protection in the legal codes and the sympathy of God in prophetic messages. They are the *dal* (weak), the *'ebyon* (socially weak), the *'ani* (afflicted), the *rash* (the poor), and the *yatom* (orphan). Those described by these appellations in the Old Testament are usually in the conditions of economic deprivation, political injustice, and legal injustice (Fawenu & Okunoye, 2017). Since this class of people does suffer neglects and oppression from the rulers and the wealthy, the Prophets served as watch dogs to protect their interest as stipulated in the torah. Bullock aptly describes such intervention as follows:

As a third party, the prophets stepped forth unbidden by anyone, except Yahweh and their own sense of justice, and interceded for those who had no intercessor. No where was the decay of the society better registered than in the

neglect of the indigent poor, and nowhere was the true nature of Israel's God more faithfully conveyed than in the words of the prophets for the disadvantaged and oppressed. The most fatal consequence of poverty was to be without defence, and where the king and officials, either because of apathy or insensibility, stepped out of their expected role, the prophets stepped in. They saw justice as the golden thread that bound Yahweh's society together in wholeness (Bullock, 1986, p.25).

Similarly, the orchestrators of the oppression against the clients of God in the Psalm also fall in the categories of people vilified in the legal code and so well scolded in the prophetic oracles. They are described as the *resai'm* (wicked) and the *'awel* (the perverted). According to Siqueira (2000) the *resai'm* in the Old Testament is constantly a threat to the lives of the people around them to the extent that they do not hesitate to kill anyone close to them, even the innocent to achieve their personal interest. In the same vein, the *'awel* implies the corrupter of any social

setting or institution through twisting of the truth and entrenching injustice to their own personal advantage (Livingston 1980). Therefore, the text most assuredly represents a scenario where God used the realm of revelation about the gathering human leaders to communicate divine message to them about their reneging on their fundamental responsibility of administering justice and ensuring that the vulnerable groups of the society are properly protected against the exploitative tendencies of the aristocrats of the society. So, it was the receiver of the revelation that communicated the concerns of God to those leaders he saw in the celestial realm. The fact that the author of the Psalm used a visionary, exhortative and imperative form of literary genre common in prophetic oracles to appeal for repentance from the addressees further buttressed this position (Siqueira, 2000).

### **Social Injustice in Nigeria**

**Healthcare:** The myriad of problems in Nigeria can largely be traced to the paucity of social justice. Overwhelming disparity exists between the living standards of the handful elite citizens and the majority poor people in Nigeria. In fact, a report shows that 63

per cent (133 million) Nigerians that reside here are multi-dimensionally poor (World Bank Poverty Report, 2023,). The poor infrastructure in terms of good road as well as life easing amenities like health care, potable water, electricity, housing, affordable and effective education etc., are the pains many suffer in Nigeria. But the few elites, particularly, those in government are exempted from the crunch because they have the means to enjoy the best amenities within and outside of the country.

The two cases sampled in this paper which are healthcare and education are based on the Chapter II of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria (as amended) where the two samples come under fundamental objectives and directive principles of state policy. Therefore, by the constitutional provision, it is the responsibility of the Government to ensure that there are adequate medical and health facilities for all persons (1999 Constitution section 17 (3)(c)) as well as equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels (1999 Constitution section 18 (1)) for Nigerians. This same constitution highlights social justice as one of the two feet upon which the country is standing (1999 constitution section 14 (1)). Also, the

constitution says, states shall “control the national economy in such manner as to secure the maximum welfare, freedom, and happiness of every citizen based on social justice and equality of status and opportunity (1999 Constitution section 16 (1)(b)).

However, the poor medical infrastructure in the country has been strongly decried by the populace but the elites in leadership seem to have turned the deaf ear. Rather, most of them have been involved in travelling overseas to access better medical services, while the less privileged people are abandoned to their awful fate. The COVID-19 pandemic deeply revealed the deficiency of Nigeria’s health care services in terms of paucity of health care infrastructure, adequacy in number of personnel and quality of remuneration for the health workers (Nwosu-Igbo, 2020). Hitherto, many elites have taken succour in the use of facilities and professionals abroad to the extent that the wife of the immediate past President, Mrs. Aisha Buhari pitied the poor who cannot afford overseas healthcare services (Ndujihe, 2022). Her husband, Muhammadu Buhari had barely begun his first tenure in office when he started patronizing medical services in the United Kingdom. Between 2015 and Friday, 18 March 2022,

he made eight visits to hospitals abroad and spent over 200 days offshore for the same purpose (Yusuf, 2022). He made at least two more medical tour (31 October to 13 November 2022 and 5-6 May 2023) before the end of his tenure in May 2023 (Quadri, 2023). The amount Nigerian elites, public and political officers spend on medical tourism yearly had been estimated in the region of 576 billion naira. Meanwhile, in 2021 less than 50% of African Union prescription of 15% of national budget for healthcare is given for it in Nigeria.

Inadequate equipment and funding of healthcare in Nigeria as well as poor payment for the over-worked health workers are the reasons for exodus of Nigerian Doctors and Nurses to overseas to practice their profession. This unfair distribution of access to and use of state resources about healthcare is the reason that Nigerians have always agitated that public and political officers should not travel abroad but stay at home to use the same healthcare services available to all. The following statement poignantly describes the agitation:

If President Buhari were a private citizen, he would be entitled to seek medical care from any part of the world and retain

medical professionals of his choice. However, it is our considered view that as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, it is both unethical and embarrassing that the President would so publicly signal a vote of no confidence in the healthcare system of the country he presides over. We need no reminders that millions of Nigerians are left to the weak and inefficient healthcare system that their President so visibly disdains since they cannot have foreign medical trips paid for from the public treasury (Owoaje, 2021).

It is a share demonstration of injustice that the legislators who could not compel the executives to compulsorily patronize the health care services in the country they superintend started to contemplate the agenda of prohibiting Nigerian Medical doctors from seeking better job offers overseas in the first five years after their training (Sule, 2023).

**Education:** In the case of education, the perennial agitation that education is receiving poor attention by



the government has been brought to the fore again by the never ending ASUU (Academic Staff Union of Universities) strike actions. As in the case of medical practitioners, University lecturers have ceaselessly decried poor public education due to inadequacies in funding, professional teachers, infrastructural facilities, instructional materials, and motivations for teachers etc (Akinselure, 2022). Again, deficient budget allocation for education has been faulted as the reason the problems have persisted. Specifically, the country's annual budget allocation for education (about 7 per cent) is a far cry from the 18 per cent recommendation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Fawehinmi, 2022). The burden of the resultant poor education rests on wards and children of the majority that cannot afford to access better education abroad.

The severity of this situation as a social injustice was accentuated by the sponsorship of a bill in the National House of Representatives to regulate how wards and children of Nigerian political office holders and public officers enrol in schools outside Nigeria and spend humongous amount of public fund to the economic advantage of their host countries like Ghana,

United Kingdom, United State of America, Malaysia, Ukraine, Egypt, and South Africa, etc. (Baiyewu, 2022). Though the bill expectedly was denied accent and passage for the second attempt in four years by the law makers, it speaks volume on the inequality with regards to access and use of national resources as well as bearing the burden of dilapidated educational institutions in the country. This fact is best captured in the words of Sergius Ogun who sponsored the bill at the National house of representative as follows:

...most of those who patronize private-owned educational institutions or those who travel abroad to study are children and wards of Nigerian public officers. These are the officers who should take responsibility for the building of our public institutions...I believe that public officers should be subjected to the utility of the public institutions which they are responsible for building and maintaining (Baiyewu, 2022).

If the public educational institutions are good enough why the trend of sending their children to foreign countries to get education?

**Poverty and economic empowerment:** As of May 18, 2022, National Poverty eradication and UN sustainable development cooperative framework published that 40.1% of Nigeria's population live below poverty line. This means that the identified percentage which translates to about 87 million people lived in extreme poverty by subsisting on less than one dollar per day. This number scaled up to 133 million out of the total estimated population of 213.4 million people in 2023 (Ahonsi, 2023).

This situation shows that despite the huge mineral, material and human resources in Nigeria, the burden or challenges of socio-economic deficiencies are unevenly distributed. This disproportionate distribution of the socio-economic problem scales further down to geopolitical and gender levels. More women are found are in the category of the poorest people. A higher percentage of the poor live in Northern states of the country. Also, the majority of the poorest are disproportionately found in the rural

areas. Therefore, poverty in Nigerian is generally described as multi-dimensional in outlook and reality (Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2022).

It should be underscored that inducement of poverty in Nigeria is due to ill-use, miss-allocation, and misappropriation of resources and not absence of resources. Culture of corruption as perpetuated by political and public elite who dis-countenanced the daily struggles of average Nigerians are at the centre of the mismanagement of the commonwealth (Mayah, 2017).

It should be underscored that between 2015 and now, Nigeria government initiated and funded several programmes to empower the people economically. Such programmes are outlined below:

**N-Power:** This program aimed to reduce unemployment among Nigerian youth by providing job opportunities and skills development. It included components such as N-Power Agro, N-Power Health, N-Power Teach, and N-Power Tech.

**Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Program:** The Nigerian government launched this program to

provide financial support to vulnerable and low-income households to improve their living conditions.

**TraderMoni:** This microcredit scheme targeted small-scale traders, artisans, and market women by providing them with interest-free loans to grow their businesses.

**YouWin! Connect:** This was an entrepreneurship program that provided grants and business training to young entrepreneurs to start and expand their businesses.

**National Social Investment Program (NSIP):** NSIP encompassed various initiatives, including N-Power, CCT, School Feeding Program, and MarketMoni, with the goal of reducing poverty and enhancing social inclusion.

**Anchor Borrowers' Program:** This agricultural intervention program aimed to provide financial support and technical assistance to smallholder farmers to boost food production and reduce importation.

**Presidential Enabling Business Environment Council (PEBEC):** PEBEC worked on improving the

ease of doing business in Nigeria by implementing reforms and reducing bureaucratic bottlenecks.

**Industrial Training Fund (ITF) Programs:** The ITF ran various skill acquisition and vocational training programs to enhance the employability of Nigerian youths.

**Agric Small and Medium Enterprises Investment Scheme (AGSMEIS):** Launched by the Central Bank of Nigeria, this scheme provided loans and funding support to agricultural and small business enterprises.

As laudable as the list above looks, the question to ask is, why has the current steepness in the poverty index of the country betrayed the array and corresponding huge money put into the programmes? The unpleasant trend in Nigeria is that when Government rolls out programmes for socio-economic empowerment of the people, they have yielded no significant success. In fact, as of Monday 9 of October 2023, the federal government has suspended the N-Power programme, to allow for audit due to suspected indication of corruption in the scheme (Agbana, 2023). This corroborates the assertion made by Mayah (2023,

p.6) that “The overlap between political and economic power bends the allocation of opportunities, income and wealth to vested interests, and biases policymaking in favour of the rich”.

### **Application of Psalm 82 in the Context of Social Injustice in Nigeria**

**Call for Justice:** Psalm 82 begins with the statement, "God stands in the divine assembly; among the divine beings, God pronounces judgment." This can be seen as a call for those in positions of authority and power, including government officials and leaders in Nigeria, to uphold justice and ensure that the rights of all citizens are protected.

**Defending the Weak and Fatherless:** The psalm goes on to say, "Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed." This verse emphasizes the importance of protecting the vulnerable and marginalized members of society, which is particularly relevant in a country like Nigeria where social inequality and poverty are significant issues.

**Deliverance from Injustice:** *Elohim* asks rulers to "rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the

hand of the wicked." This can be seen as an expression of divine expectation from the leaders of the country, which grandstands as very religious and God-fearing one. Intervention in cases of injustice and oppression, which resonates with the desire for justice and accountability in Nigeria, especially in the current menace of corruption and human rights abuses.

**Accountability of Leaders:** Psalm 82 highlights the accountability of those in positions of power, stating, "I said, 'You are gods; you are all sons of the Most High.'" This suggests that leaders should act with a sense of responsibility and fairness, which can be applied to the expectations of leaders in addressing social injustice in Nigeria. However, leaders should realize that divine retribution is inescapable if they fail to heed the divine command and treat the oppressed with fairness. The exalted position is subjected to the supremacy of God who would not hesitate to treat them like every other human like their subjects.

Therefore, Psalm 82 emphasizes the importance of justice, the protection of the vulnerable, and the accountability of leaders. Its relevance to social injustice in Nigeria lies in its message that calls for the



fair treatment of all individuals and the need to address issues of oppression, poverty, and inequality. It can serve as a moral and ethical guide for those seeking to promote social justice and equality in the country.

## **Conclusion**

The words "You are gods" in Psalm 82 should be comprehended within the context of the authority held by the addressees, an authority for which they remain accountable to both the people they govern and, above all, to their Creator and Benefactor. This perspective aligns with the broader biblical theme of recognizing human authorities as representatives of God in human societies. Through intertextual reflection, we find that Psalm 82:6 finds resonance with other biblical verses such as John 10:34-35 and Romans 13:1, further supporting the interpretation that "gods" in Psalm 82:1 and 6 refer to human leaders as divine representatives among humankind.

The notion of the death of these "gods" in the latter part of the Psalm underscores the biblical understanding of the mortality of human beings. It emphasizes that even leaders, while entrusted with

authority, remain subject to the same human condition and moral accountability.

The fundamental message of justice within the Psalm aligns harmoniously with the recurring themes in the Prophetic oracles, highlighting the paramount importance of fighting for the cause of the poor and marginalized. This responsibility is a divine charge bestowed upon leaders and judges to act on behalf of God. The grave consequences of social injustice on society are made evident, emphasizing that human judges do not serve as the ultimate arbiters of justice; they are under the sovereignty of God, who is the ultimate judge. Consequently, human judges and rulers must acknowledge that they too will face divine judgment, either in this world or in the hereafter.

In light of the enduring message of Psalm 82, the political class in Nigeria, and by extension in all societies, is strongly urged to take inspiration from its teachings. The call to governance is a call to righteousness and justice. An agenda for change must transcend mere political rhetoric and empty promises; it must genuinely uplift the people towards a better standard of living and secure a brighter future. This

transformation should extend beyond the pursuit of electoral victories for personal gain. It must reflect a profound commitment to defending the rights of the weak and the poor within society. The pursuit of justice is not merely a civic duty but a moral obligation, resonating with the divine mandate. By adhering to the principles embodied in Psalm 82, political leaders can contribute to the well-being and prosperity of their nations, fostering a society where justice prevails and the weak are protected.

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