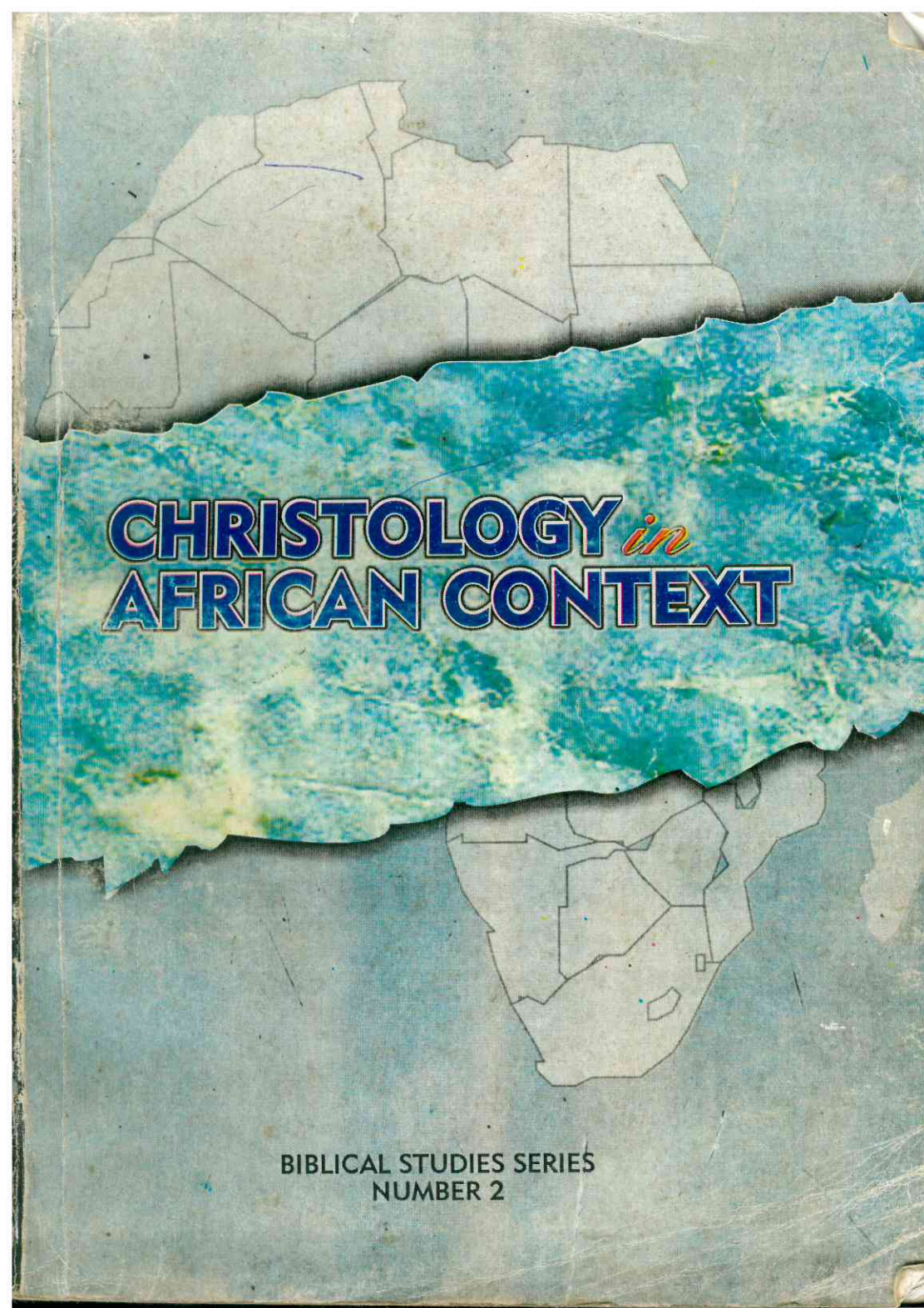




# CHRISTOLOGY *in* AFRICAN CONTEXT

BIBLICAL STUDIES SERIES  
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Rev. Dr. C.O. Ogunkunle  
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Date \_\_\_\_\_

# CHRISTOLOGY IN AFRICAN CONTEXT

*Edited by*

S. O. ABOGUNRIN  
J. O. AKAO  
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## Editor's Preface

Christology as a subject is enormous. Until recently, studies on the theme have devoted much attention to the various titles used to express the significance of the Person of Jesus Christ and the use of those titles in the New Testament. Recent approach, however, is more concerned with how Christological concepts relate to the life of the contemporary Church and how Christology can meet the challenge of the moment.

Biblical scholars in Africa during the last two decades have shown greater interest in the subject. In spite of the fact that the Church has been in Africa, South of the Sahara, for about two hundred years, Christianity, to a large extent, has remained superficial, as it covers only the surface of the life of those who profess the faith. Yet, living Christology must have concrete effects on the people's daily life. Jesus Christ was fully involved in the life and struggles of the ordinary people. Christology in context is not just the systematic articulation of the doctrine of the Messiah, but the human response to the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, this refers to the faith once for all delivered to the Saints and on the other hand, to the faith, which employs cultural concepts in the course of interpreting and situating the content of Christology.

Christology in African context, therefore, is born out of the effort to interpret Christology in the context of Africa. It is an attempt to interpret and see Jesus with African eyes and listen with African ears, as well as employ local concepts and idioms in the course of Biblical Interpretation. It is for this reason that the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS) devoted its annual conference held at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, in July 2002 to this important theme. The articles in this volume are selected from among many papers presented during the conference. The articles are illuminating and quite revealing. The authors examine various Christological issues; relating these to the life of the Church in Africa and African societal problems. The book represents a major contribution, not only to Christological discourse, but to the Church universal.

S. O. ABOGUNRIN  
Editor - in Chief

Rev. Dr. C.O. Ogunkunle  
Sign .....  
Date .....

## Table of Content

|     |                                                                                                                                             |     |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1.  | Christology and the contemporary Church In Africa<br>- S. O. Abogunrin -                                                                    | 1   |
| 2.  | The Apocalyptic Concept of the Messiah and the Concept of<br>Vicarious Sacrifice In African Traditional Religion<br>- Ven. Dr. J. O. Akao - | 28  |
| 3.  | The Suffering of the Messiah: A Reflection On Psalm 22 in<br>the African Context - Dr. C. O. Ogunkunle -                                    | 41  |
| 4.  | Prince Of Peace (Is. 9:5 - 6): A Messianic Title For African<br>Christology - Emmanuel O. nwaoru -                                          | 54  |
| 5.  | Messianism and Zionism: Their Origin and Development<br>- Dr. S. Julius Obeta -                                                             | 77  |
| 6.  | Christ's Virgin Birth and Character: Implications for the<br>Christian Faith and Life in Africa<br>- Joseph Isah -                          | 87  |
| 7.  | An Analogous Study of the Atoning Death of Jesus Christ<br>and Deaths of Some African Heroes<br>- Dr. (Mrs.) Eunice Oluwaseun Abogunrin -   | 96  |
| 8.  | The Death of Christ in the Light of Scapegoatism in the Old<br>Testament - Rev. Stephen Oyedele Ogunbode -                                  | 108 |
| 9.  | The Daily Sanctuary Services and the Cross: Implications for<br>Christians in Contemporary Nigeria<br>- Obarido Thompson Okochi -           | 123 |
| 10. | The Incarnation and Exaltation of Jesus Christ in Philippians<br>2:5-11 - Revd. Edward A. Boje -                                            | 142 |

11. The Adequacy of Christ in The African Context an Illustration  
from the Parable of the Marriage Banquet (Matt. 22:1-14)  
- Dr. (Mrs.) Hope Amolo - 163
12. Proclaiming The Lordship of Jesus in A Religious Pluralistic  
Africa - Oyeronke Olajubu - 177
13. Johannine Christology - D.C.A. Oguike - 192
14. The Death of Christ in the Light of Scapegoatism in the Old  
Testament - M. O. Iyede - 206
15. Johannine Christology: A Critical Analysis  
- Rev. Canon (Dr.) N. S. Nwigwe - 216
16. The Message of Christ and the Issue of Inculturation in Africa:  
A Critical Appraisal - Rev. J. Anda - 226
17. Reconstruction Christology for Africa of the 21st Century: A  
Re- Reaching of Mark 11:15-19 and Parallels Matt. 21:12-17;  
Lk. 19:45-48; John 2:13-22  
- Prof. Chris Ukachawu Manus - 238
18. Christology From Below: A Reflection on Christological  
Elements in Selected Yoruba Gospel Songs  
- Dada Adekunle Oyinloye - 259
19. Christian Theological Literature on Ancestor Veneration in  
Africa: An over view - Pius Oyeniran Abioye - 227
20. Christ as our Ancestor  
- Dr. Wellington O. Wotogbe Weneka - 289
21. Functional Christology in The Fourth Gospel: Implications for  
African Christianity - Dr. G. O. Folarin - 299

22. Christology and the contemporary Women in Africa  
- Akintunde Dorcas Olubanke - 317
23. Jesus Christ as a Revolutionary in an African Perspective: An  
Exegesis ff John 2:12-17  
- Rev. Godwin N. Toryough - 337
24. Christological Bases for Social Praxis  
- Rev. O. A. Adewale - 353
25. Christ as a Revolutionist in the African Context  
- Rev. J. O. Kolawole - 367
26. Christ as a Social Liberator: A Challenge for African Christianity  
- Adamolekun Taiye - 389
27. The Concept of the Ideal Leadership in Matthew 20:20-28: A  
Re-Reading of the Text and Parallel for contemporary Nigeria  
- Samson M. Nwaomah - 400

# THE SUFFERING OF THE MESSIAH: A REFLECTION ON PSALM 22 IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

By

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## **A. Introduction**

Jesus Christ is the central figure in the whole Bible. He Himself claimed to have been the subject of the Old Testament scriptures as reflected in His statements to two of His disciples on the way to Emmaus in Luke 24:25-27. Therefore, there is no doubt that Christology is a crucial topic in Christian theology<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, it has been noted that Christology or the doctrine of the Messiah is the most significant way in which the Old and New Testaments are related to each other.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the fact that Christology in the New Testament is deeply rooted in the Old Testament has been noted by W. Bousset who affirms that:

Many of the concepts in the New Testament have been taken over from the Old Testament, and it is necessary when we are examining any passage in the New Testament to look for passages in the Old Testament which may have influenced the writer to think and write in the way he did.<sup>3</sup>

The Christological theme is found throughout the Old Testament especially, in Deutero-Isaiah.<sup>4</sup> The Christological concept is particularly pronounced in the Psalms. In other words the Psalms have had a significant influence in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ as He quoted from them extensively.<sup>5</sup> Right from His childhood, Jesus quoted from

Psalms 26:8 and 27:4 while talking to his earthly parents who were looking for him in Jerusalem after the feast of the Passover (Luke 2:49). In the Sermon on the Mount, he quoted from Psalm 6:8 and 4:2 in his teaching (Matthew 5:35 and 7:23). Jesus referred to Psalm 78:2 while teaching multitudes (Matthew 13:35). In the process of cleansing the Temple (Matthew 21:42), he cited Psalm 118:22-23. While he was weeping over Jerusalem (Matthew 23:27), Jesus quoted from Psalm 91:4. In answering the Jews (John 10:34), he cited Psalm 82:6. At the last supper (Matthew 26:30) Jesus sang from Psalm 136. He quoted from the Psalms twice while on the cross. His words recorded in Matthew 27:46 were quoted from Psalm 22:1 and his words recorded in Luke 24:46 were quoted from Psalm 31:5. After the resurrection, Jesus referred to the Psalms while talking to his disturbed disciples:

These are my words, which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and Psalms must be fulfilled (Luke 24:44).

The focus of this essay is the examination of the suffering of the Messiah (Jesus Christ) with a reflection on Psalm 22.<sup>6</sup> It is assumed in this paper that Jesus Christ had a good understanding of Psalm 22 and he identified himself with it. Jesus Christ was fully aware of his suffering as he taught it to his disciples on several occasions (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; Luke 9:44; 22:1-2; John 12:32-33 and 15:20). Also, the Greek verb which means 'to suffer', occurs about 42 times in the New Testament and it is mostly used in the context of the suffering of Christ and those of his disciples.<sup>7</sup> Incidentally, Jesus suffered greatly in the hands of Scribes, Pharisees and Roman authorities. Therefore, an attempt will be made in this paper to understand the Messianic Psalms in general and Psalm 22 in particular. This will give us a solid background for our understanding of the suffering of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.<sup>8</sup>

This research is carried out through a multiple approach. The historical method is used whereby various scholarly literature on Messianic Psalms in the Psalter is examined. Also, a comparative

method is used whereby the suffering of the Messiah in Psalm 22 is compared with the suffering of African Christians. The terms 'suffering Messiah' and 'Jesus Christ' are used interchangeably in this essay.

## **B. Messianic Psalm in the Book of Psalms**

The book of Psalms comprises of 150 Psalms which are divided into five books namely Book 1 (Psalms 90 - 106); and Book V (Psalms 107 - different experiences of man such as joy, sorrow, etc. One of the predominant themes in the Psalm is that of the Messiah of which about 10 percent of the 150 Psalms are classified as Messianic.<sup>9</sup> The Messianic Psalms include 2, 8, 16, 22, 23, 24, 40, 41, 45, 68, 69, 72, 89, 102, 110 and 118.

Biblical scholars are divided on the issue of the interpretation of the Messianic Psalms. On the one hand, some scholars, even though believe that the Messianic Psalms are historically grounded in the person of David yet they are prophetic in context and are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. One of such scholars is Derek Kidner who states that Messianic Psalms are predictions or foreshadowing of the Christ"<sup>10</sup> Supporting the argument, E. Calvin Beisner is of the opinion that:

The title of Psalm 22 ascribes authorship to David and that surely is true. But the suffering described is beyond anything David ever endured, and the descriptions are so clearly tied to crucifixion that Christian scholarship through the ages has overwhelmingly understood the Psalm as prophetic of Christ's passion and resurrection.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, some scholars even though recognise that few Psalms such as 2, 16, 22, 69 and 110 are applicable to the coming Messiah yet, argue that the Psalms are not prophetic in the narrow sense.<sup>12</sup> J. Clinton McCann while making a strong case for the connection between Psalm 22 and the Gospel accounts states that:

There is a relationship between Psalm 22 and the Gospel accounts. It should not be understood in terms

of prediction and fulfillment. Rather, either Jesus internationally embodied the experience of the faithful sufferer in Psalm 22 or the Gospel writers articulated their understanding of Jesus in the light of their knowledge of Psalm 22, or both.<sup>13</sup>

Some other scholars are in between the two extreme interpretations of the Messianic Psalms. A. F. Kirkpatrick presents four proposals: that some of the Messianic Psalms point to the Messiah as the Son of God, king and priest, that some of the Psalms prepare the way for the suffering Redeemer; that some Psalms find their full meaning in the perfect son of man; and finally, that others foretell the advent of Jehovah Himself to judge and redeem.<sup>14</sup> C. Hassell Bullock divides the Messianic Psalms into two groups namely, those that refer to the king and his rule (Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 61, 72, 89, 110, 132, 144) and those that treat man and his life generally (Psalms 8, 16, 22, 35, 40, 41, 55, 69, 102, 109).<sup>15</sup> Speaking of the Psalms in the second group he says;

Generally the terms of these Psalms are viewed as perfectly fulfilled in Christ. The human aspirations and frustrations have their ultimate extensions and resolutions in Him. David's cry of abandonment in Psalm 22:1 was used in its Aramaic form by our Lord on the cross (Matt. 27:46) and the author of Hebrews applied 22:22 to Christ (Heb. 2:12).<sup>16</sup>

In the light of various interpretations given to the Messianic Psalms, we would like to submit that Psalm 22 is indeed a Messianic Psalm which has its historical connection with David. It is obvious that Jesus Christ, the suffering Messiah was conscious of Davidic lineage hence, he identified himself with the nasty experiences of David as recorded in the Psalm. In other words, Psalm 22 contains prophetic statements from David and these prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This explains why several statements or phrases in Psalm 22

are repeated by Jesus Christ. Some of them include:

- i) "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Psalm 22:1 - Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.
- ii) "He committed his cause to the LORD, let him deliver him" Psalm 22:8 - Matthew 27:43; Mark 15:29; Luke 23:35.
- iii) "They have pierced my hands" Psalm 22:16 - John 19:37.
- iv) "They divide my garments" Psalm 22:18 - Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:27.
- v) "I will tell of thy name to my brethren" Psalm 22:22 - Hebrew 2:12.<sup>17</sup> The Messiah is called by various names and titles in the Psalms.

These include: the Anointed one (Psalm 2:2; 45:7), the King (Psalm 2:6); the Son of God (Psalm 2:7); the Shepherd (Psalm 23:1); the King of Glory (Psalm 24:7-10); the Lord strong and mighty (Psalms 24:8); Mighty One (Psalm 45:3); the Shepherd of Israel (Psalm 80:1); the Firstborn (Psalm 89:27) etc.

### C. Psalm 22 and the Suffering Messiah

Psalm 22 is the clearest of all the so-called Messianic Psalms. Leupold calls it "a prophecy concerning the Messiah's suffering and victory". Craigie titles it a liturgy for one threatened with death".<sup>19</sup> Structurally, Psalm 22 has, three kinds of materials namely 'lament' (verses 1 - 22), 'prayer', (verses 12, 20-22), and 'praise' and 'thanksgiving' (verses 23 - 32).<sup>20</sup> It has been noted that "the dark description of Christ's seemingly hopeless suffering, (verses 1 - 21) gives way suddenly to a triumphant description of their results (verses 22 - 31)".<sup>21</sup> Thus, the sharp distinction between the two main sections of the Psalm has led some scholars to suggest that originally there were separate Psalms which were fused into one.<sup>22</sup> This view may sound good but it does not help us to appreciate the liturgical import of the Psalm of which Craigie says:

The mixture of forms and types of language suggests strongly that the text of Psalm 22 is the basis of a liturgy,

in which the worshipper moves from lament to prayer, and finally to praise and thanksgiving.<sup>23</sup>

The fundamental issue in Psalm 22 is the identification of the sufferer vis-a-vis, the Messiah. Albert Barnes in his study of the Psalm makes three suggestions.<sup>24</sup> One, that the sufferer could be David who described his condition and feelings as he was forsaken by God and man. This view is with the background that David went through nasty experience in the hand of Saul as well as the experience of his rebellious son - Absalom.<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, that the sufferer could be Jeremiah as described in his prison experience in Jeremiah 37:11-21, when he was seized, beaten, and imprisoned for many days, without a cause. People with this opinion argue that even though Psalm 22 is ascribed to David yet the suffering described in it is far beyond any thing that David endured. They believed that there are some expressions in the Psalm, which do not apply to David. For instance, David's hand was never pierced (v.16) nor his garment taken (v. 18).<sup>26</sup>

Thirdly, that the sufferer could be Jesus Christ the Messiah as referred to by the Apostles. This is the position we have adopted in this paper and our argument is rested on the fact that several portions of the Psalm applied expressly to the Messiah in the New Testament. In other words, the internal character of the Psalm shows that it refers to the Messiah. In fact, Barnes is of the opinion that "the sufferer in Psalm 22 refers to the Messiah just as the sufferer in Isaiah 53 refers to the Messiah".<sup>27</sup>

It is appropriate at this point to examine the nature of the suffering, which the Messiah went through. In the first place, which the Messiah was left alone. The Psalmist says "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me, why art thou so far from helping me from the words of my groaning?" (Psalm 22:1). The Hebrew verb means "to leave, forsake, loose, or abandon".<sup>28</sup> In this context the word is used of God abandoning his son (cf Deut. 31:17; Isa. 42:16; 49:14; 54:7; Chron. 12:5; Ezra 9:9; Psalm 9:11).<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it was a period of agony

for Jesus Christ. But then in the midst of this despair, the Messiah affirmed his faith in God that he would trust him.

Secondly, the Messiah was mocked. Psalm 22:7-8 says:

All who see me mock at me, they make mouths at me,  
they wag their heads; He committed his cause to the  
LORD, let him deliver him, let him rescue him for he  
delights in him

The Messiah did not only suffer physical agony and the awful separation from the father; he also suffered verbal abuse from the antagonists crowd, the chief priests, the scribes and the elders around the cross (cf. Matthew 27:43).<sup>30</sup>

Thirdly, the Messiah was thirsty and dried up physically. Psalm 22:14-15 says:

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of  
joint, my heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast;  
my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue  
cleaves to my jaws, thou dost lay me in the dust of death.

The fact that the strength of the Psalmist was dried up as he was thirsty connotes the experience of Jesus when he was thirsty as recorded in John 15:28. The idea of thirst is one of the several expressions used by the Psalmist to portray the immense suffering of Jesus Christ.

Generally, the suffering of the Messiah in Psalm 22 did not come as a result of sin hence there is no iota of confession of sin in the Psalm. Writing on Psalm 22, Allen O. Ross says:

The interesting feature of this Psalm, is that it does not include one word of confession of sin, and no imprecation against enemies. It is primarily the account of a righteous man who was being put to death by the wicked men.<sup>31</sup>

#### **D. Psalm 22 in Relation to the Suffering of African Christians**

Having examined the suffering of the Messiah in Psalm 22, it is appropriate at this time to consider the suffering of African Christians. Suffering is real in Africa even though it is not an experience that any man desires. It is an unpleasant experience whereby an individual is not in his normal state in terms of health, wealth, position, etc. Indeed, the African Christians can identify themselves with the suffering of the Messiah in Psalm 22. The situation is even more pronounced in the last two decades in Nigeria. It has been reported that:

Between 1991 and 2000, religious persecution led to Muslims killing thousands of Christians in Kaduna, Gombe, Sokoto, Kano, Bauchi, and other northern States... The violence included the murder of Pastors and destruction of hundreds of churches.<sup>32</sup>

February, 20, 2000 is the day that will be remembered for long in Nigeria especially, by Christians in Kaduna. It was the day that thousands of Christians died in the city as a result of the attack by the Muslim militants who were protesting the implementation of Islamic (Shariah) law in the state.<sup>33</sup> Many Christians in their attempt to propagate the Gospel have landed in serious trouble. Many of them been molested, mocked, beaten, tortured and humiliated because of their religion. A good example is the case of one Monday Yakunat, a Kafanchan based itinerant preacher who was kidnapped on Friday 6th September 1996 by the fundamentalist Islamic shites because he preached the Gospel at the motor park that morning.<sup>34</sup> He was beaten while preaching by the Shites and thereafter was bundled to their enclave at the house 68, Borno Street Kafanchan. The goal of the Shites leaders was to try Monday Yakunat according to Shariah law as they claimed that he blasphemed Prophet Mohammed. If found guilty, he was to be executed.<sup>35</sup> In spite of the life threatening situation which Monday Yakunat found himself, he held on to his faith in God. While his hands and legs were tied and a knife was placed on his neck and he was told that he would be killed, he simply requested that he should

be allowed to pray. His request was granted and it is obvious that his prayer was answered as he was released after 10 hours of torture.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, the suffering of African Christians as being experienced in Nigeria is uncalled for. According to the 1999 Consitution of Nigeria, Sections 33 to 42, every Nigerian is entitled to the right to life, right to dignity of human person, right to personal liberty, right to fair hearing, right to freedom to thought, conscience, religion, etc. This means that no Nigerian Christian should be harassed, molested or tortured because of his religion. However, while all the right are recorded in the Nigeria's Consitution, there is ample evidence that Christians, especially in the northen part of Nigeria have experienced blatant violations of their rights, often with little or no redress.<sup>37</sup> Summarizing the nature of the suffering of Nigerian Christians, Samuel P. Ango states that:

Christians have been killed for being Christians in many incidents of religious bigotry. They have been harassed and molested and their peaceful processions violently disrupted. Their properties, businesses, churches and private homes have been destroyed without compensation. They have been refused religious education for their children, while they have discovered that getting land to build places of worship in the north is a nightmare.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, there are times when the Government is directly involved in the persecution and suffering of Christians. There are cases of discrimination against Christians through numerous anti-Christian policies that have been promulgated by the Government of some states in Nigeria. One of such cases was reported recently in Christianity Today that:

State officials in Borno State demolished churches in the capital city of Maiduguri... They plan to demolish more, claiming the building infringes on city development ordinances. Christian leaders say officials

want to prevent churches from acquiring land and erecting buildings.<sup>37</sup>

### **E. Conclusion**

Our study has demonstrated that suffering is real as experienced by the Messiah and the African Christians. Incidentally, the Messiah had his total trust in God in the face of suffering as noted in Psalm 22. Also, most of the African Christians have their total trust in God in times of suffering. Conclusively, the suffering of the Messiah is a source of encouragement to African Christians. The Messiah chose to go through suffering without sin so that others might be saved. He was honoured eventually by the father because none of his bones was broken (Psalms 22:16; 34:20; John 19:36; 20:20, 25). The fact that Psalm 22 was concluded with loveliest expressions of praise is an indication that African Christians who are suffering currently will one day sing songs of praise to the Almighty God!

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6. Even though Isaiah 52:13-53:12 has a good description of the suffering Messiah yet our focus in this essay is Psalm 22.

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8. The Book of Psalm has various prophecies concerning Jesus Christ. For example, there is the Prophecy concerning the death of Christ in Psalm 41:9 which was fulfilled in John 13:18 and Acts 1:16. Also, the prophecy concerning resurrection in Psalm 16:8-11 was fulfilled in Acts 2:25-28.
9. Some other types of Psalms include: Hymns (Psalm 8, 19, 29, 33 etc), Penitential Psalm (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143), Wisdom Psalms (37, 49, 73), Imprecatory Psalms (7, 35, 48, 69, 109 etc) etc.
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32. See *Christianity Today* (February 2003), p. 82.
33. Glenn M. Penner, "The Cost of Discipleship in Nigera" *The Voice of the Martyr* (May 2002), pp. 2 - 3. Also, Islamic extremists in Plateau State attacked several villages in June 2002, leaving 1,000 Christians homeless and razing all churches in the village of Wase of Wase F. *Christianity Today* (February 2003), p. 82.
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38. Ibid., p.4. Cf. The New (6 March, 2000) pp. 12 -18 and Emma Usman Shehu, "Sharia and the Fate of Northern Christians" *The Warrior Magazine* (Vol. 2 No. 1), pp. 10 -13.
39. See *Christianity Today* (January 2003), p. 27 A similar thing happened in April 2002 in Kano State when Local authorities destroyed at least seven churches on the pretence that they violated building codes. See *Christianity Today* (January 2003), p.28.