



A PRESENTIST READING OF PSALM 23 WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF XENOPHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICA

Mogomotsi Jaba (Ph.D.)

Department of Religion Studies, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

Email: JabaM@ufs.ac.za.

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ABSTRACT: *At a summit focused on liberation movements in Kempton Park, South Africa, on 27 July 2025, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa articulated that the weaponisation of foreigners represents one of the perilous issues currently confronting society. His remark was triggered by the ongoing sentiments against foreigners that often express themselves through acts of violence in South Africa. President Ramaphosa's speech emerges amidst an expanding corpus of literature on xenophobia, urging researchers and other stakeholders in South Africa to confront the urgent issue of xenophobia. However, the existing literature primarily focuses on the causes and consequences of xenophobia. The support provided to individuals affected by xenophobia in navigating the emotional distress and consequences stemming from such discrimination is frequently neglected. In this article, I propose God's divine presence as a religious coping mechanism for victims of xenophobia, while recognising that coping mechanisms may also arise from psychological and sociological frameworks, for example. I develop this mechanism through a presentist interpretation of Psalm 23, demonstrating that the Psalmist may have faced circumstances similar to those associated with xenophobia in South Africa. I integrated the presentist hermeneutic with a thematic methodology to steer this article towards its principal aim. The conclusion reached is that God's presence functions as a coping mechanism for victims to navigate the anguish caused by xenophobia. This article engages in an interdisciplinary approach, enhancing the discourse surrounding both religious and socio-political studies related to xenophobia. It is crafted with a thoughtful regard for those affected by xenophobia.*

KEYWORDS: Bio-cultural isolation, Foreigners, Presentist reading, Psalm 23, Scapegoating, Xenophobia.



INTRODUCTION

Following the dismantling of the apartheid regime in 1994, South Africa has witnessed persistent and violent xenophobic outbreaks, notably in the years 2008, 2015, and 2017. Witwatersrand University's Xenowatch (Dratwa, 2024) reports that these attacks have culminated in 669 fatalities, 5,310 establishments looted, and 127,572 individuals displaced from 1994 to March 2024. This alarming data has prompted Landau, Ramjathan-Keogh, and Singh (2005) to contend that "South Africa is a highly xenophobic society" (p. 2), while McKaiser (in Mlambo & Mkhwanazi, 2021) has characterised "South Africa ... as a no-go area for Black Africans" (pp. 123-124). The literature distinctly demonstrates that xenophobia is intensifying into a dire situation in South Africa.

The literature, however, is presently focused on the causes of xenophobia and its consequences. Indeed, the causes reveal the character of xenophobia, whilst the consequences demonstrate its repugnance. In spite of this, the subject of how victims cope before, during, and after xenophobic outbreaks has gotten scant attention in the literature. Despite this, Tarisayi and Manik (2021) and Mutambara and Naidu (2023) are among the few scholars who highlight some of the coping mechanisms used by victims. These include some victims using fake documentation, adopting the local language, and participating in marriages of convenience. While these scholars effectively elucidate the mechanisms utilised by victims to navigate through episodes of xenophobic upheaval, they, nonetheless, do not provide mechanisms that victims could adopt. One such mechanism, as I argue in this study, is God's divine presence as a coping strategy.

This study proposes the notion of divine presence as a means of coping, examined through a religious framework. This mechanism is articulated through the lens of a presentist reading of Psalm 23. In this study, when I refer to a coping mechanism, I am essentially talking about a behaviour or a strategy that individuals use to maintain their well-being during stressful situations, including experiences of grief, pain, or xenophobia. I am mindful that a mechanism may assume various forms, including conversations with a therapist, a pastor, or a friend. Indeed, there are circumstances where certain individuals utilise meditation as a means of coping. Similarly, there are other detrimental mechanisms like substance abuse that certain individuals have resorted to in the past.

This study explores the intricate connections between Psalm 23 and the occurrence of xenophobia in South Africa, emphasising the significance of Psalm 23 as a source of divine presence that serves as a coping mechanism. I will argue in the study that in analogous distressing situations, the Psalmist depended on the presence of God as a means of coping, thereby implying a similar approach for those affected by xenophobia in South Africa. In nearly every religious tradition globally, the manifestation of divine presence is phenomenal and often perceived by those facing adversity as a source of comfort, fortitude, and reassurance. In light of this observation, an examination of the ways in which individuals may appropriate the notion of divine presence as a means of coping with the trauma of xenophobia is therefore pertinent.

The word "xenophobia" originates from two Greek terms: "xenos", which refers to a stranger or foreigner, and "phobos", which conveys a sense of fear. Various definitions have emerged from these Greek terms (Neocosmos, 2006; Chijioke et al., 2019), with the most common definition being "fear of foreigners". In this article, I use the term "foreigner" to refer to an individual who is either born in or comes from a country that is different from their own. In



scholarly discourse, however, the terms “foreigner”, “migrant”, and “immigrant” are often utilised interchangeably owing to their inherent connections (Ekanade & Molapo, 2017; Tewolde, 2020). From a semantic perspective, a migrant refers to an individual who moves in pursuit of enhanced socioeconomic opportunities, while an immigrant denotes a person who arrives in a country with the intention of securing permanent residency.

Equally, it must be stated that in its fundamental sense, xenophobia does not inherently imply an association with violence. In other words, it is possible for an individual to harbour xenophobic sentiments without resorting to violent expressions of such beliefs. Similarly, it cannot be assumed that every individual who confronts foreigners is inherently motivated by xenophobia. For example, there are cases in which individuals from abroad have faced aggression due to their unlawful intrusion into private property.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This section examines the existing literature on xenophobia to establish a foundational context for the study. The section will be established through an exploration of the fundamental causes and consequent effects of xenophobia in South Africa. This approach to examining theoretical foundations offers the benefit of accurately identifying the present condition, characteristics, and nuances of xenophobia in South Africa. In light of this, the literature presents three principal theories that elucidate the origins of xenophobia in South Africa. These are scapegoating, isolation, and bio-cultural theories. Their exploration is undertaken below.

Causes of Xenophobia in South Africa

The first theory presented is that of the scapegoating concept. This theory is extensively acknowledged within sociological and psychological research (Blessed-Sayah, Griffiths & Moll, 2022; Nnadozie & Morojele, 2024). This theory posits that during periods of national crises, certain citizens instinctively identify particular groups to blame for the prevailing situation. To put this theory into context, South Africa is currently undergoing a crisis marked by poverty, unemployment, and resource scarcity (Mvundura, 2024), with some South Africans blaming the situation on foreign nationals.

Elevating the preceding discussion is the late former Minister of Home Affairs, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who articulated in August 1994: “If we as South Africans are going to compete for scarce resources with millions of aliens who are pouring into South Africa, then we can bid goodbye to our Reconstruction and Development Programme” (Landau, Ramjathan-Keogh & Singh, 2005, p. 6). In a manner reminiscent of Buthelezi, Gayton Mackenzie, in 2024 at Orlando Stadium in Soweto, labelled illegal foreigners as devils and attributed the problem of unemployment to their presence in South Africa. Mackenzie vowed that, upon election, he would advance to Rahima Moosa Hospital to halt the oxygen supply for foreigners (Mvundura, 2024). The expressions “aliens” and “devils” employed by Buthelezi and Mackenzie, respectively, are laden with considerable xenophobic connotations and provoke intense reactions. Unfortunately, these expressions appear to endorse the theory of scapegoating foreigners.



The connection established by the scapegoating theory between xenophobia, instinct, and national crisis is evidently apparent. Furthermore, this theory enjoys considerable support within the research community (Harris, 2002). Nonetheless, the theory fails to explain why it is predominantly foreigners who are designated as scapegoats during periods of national crises. I question, for example, why in the face of a national crisis, such as resource scarcity that breeds xenophobia, it is not the avaricious politicians, rather than foreigners, who are held accountable for their complicity in exacerbating the situation through their corrupt practices. Furthermore, various elements of the socio-economic crisis can be traced back to the government's deficiencies in resource management, which, in my opinion, are unrelated to foreign influences. In this case, if the government is the cause of the crisis, should the government not be considered the scapegoat instead of foreigners? This brings us to the theory of isolation.

The isolation theory posits that the regime of apartheid fostered an environment conducive to xenophobia. This theory finds endorsement from former Minister of Education Naledi Pandor, who links xenophobic attacks to the legacy of the apartheid government, contending that the apartheid government engendered economic disparities among South Africans (Mlambo & Mkhwanazi, 2021). The theory underscores that during the apartheid era, South Africa experienced a significant isolation from the international community as a consequence of imposed sanctions. Throughout the duration of isolation, foreign nationals faced restrictions on entering South Africa, while South African citizens were similarly restricted from leaving the country.

During the period of isolation, the apartheid regime instituted stringent measures to regulate Black South Africans. As a result, a racial divide emerged between Whites and Blacks, fostering in the consciousness of Blacks a dichotomy of "we" versus "them" (Freeman, 2020, p. 19). A South African Marxist philosopher, Neocosmos (2006), articulates that the apartheid regime designated Black South Africans as "native foreigners" (pp. v-vi). Due to this racial divide, along with various other factors, Blacks were prohibited from entering urban areas inhabited by Whites, except in roles such as gardeners and domestic workers. In urban areas, Blacks were required to carry documentation that legitimised their presence. The isolation theory, accordingly, suggests that these and other related apartheid antagonisms established the groundwork for xenophobia (Neocosmos, 2006). This means, for example, that while isolation cultivated a dichotomy between Black and White, modern South Africa has evolved into a binary of South Africans versus foreigners. Paalo, Adu-Gyamfi and Arthur (2022) argue, moreover, that the use of violence by South Africans in xenophobic episodes stems from the legacy of the apartheid regime, which employed violence as a means to subjugate Blacks.

Undoubtedly, the similarities between the discriminatory experiences of Black South Africans during the apartheid era and the contemporary treatment of foreigners by some Black South Africans are both notable and challenging to overlook. Nevertheless, despite significant parallels, the isolation theory fails to explain why xenophobia is more acute in contemporary society as opposed to the period immediately following the end of apartheid, assuming that xenophobia is a direct outcome of that era (Solomon & Kosaka, 2013). This brings us to the last theory, bio-cultural theory.

The bio-cultural theory postulates that xenophobia emerges from the evident cultural distinctiveness of those considered foreigners. Cultural distinctions include variations in physical appearance, accent, attire, hairstyles, skin colour, and the absence of proficiency in South African indigenous languages. Regarding skin pigmentation, foreigners with darker



complexions often face xenophobia more frequently than their lighter-skinned counterparts (Adesina, 2019; Mutanda, 2017). Harris (2002) references a study conducted by the South African Human Rights Commission, which reveals that “at least ten percent of the foreign nationals who were interviewed were arrested on the basis of appearance” (p. 174).

However, it appears that the bio-cultural paradigm only explains how South Africans identify foreigners. The theory’s shortcoming lies in its assertion that colour, accent, and cultural differences are the purported origins of xenophobia; it fails to account for the absence of Europeans and Asians as targets of such bias (Harris, 2002). For example, although Chinese clothing is distinctive and identifiable, the Chinese are not subjected to xenophobic discrimination.

Wrapping up this sub-section, despite the fact that the three theories have limitations when it comes to resolving certain existential questions that I raised, they nonetheless offer vital insights into grasping the nature of xenophobia in South Africa. As a result, in order to extract the maximum value from them, I combine them in order to provide a sustained presentist interpretation of Psalm 23. To complete the aim of this section, I will now address the effects of xenophobia in the subsection that follows.

The Effects of Xenophobia

The issue of xenophobia in South Africa has manifested in extreme violence, leading Tirivangasi (2020) to classify it as a criminal act. I delineate its ramifications and effects below.

In 1998, during a training exercise, police dogs tragically killed four Mozambicans in what seemed to be an act driven by xenophobia (Kanayo & Anjofui, 2020). In 2008, during a xenophobic outbreak in the Ramaphosa informal settlement, Ernesto Alfabeto, another Mozambican, was burnt to death (Mutanda, 2017). In August 2000, residents of Zandspruit, Natal, set fire to the shacks inhabited by Zimbabweans within the settlement. In the year 2005, Somalis experienced violence in Bothaville, Free State, while Somali shop owners were forcibly expelled from a township near Knysna (Adesina, 2019). On 26 February 2013, a disturbing incident occurred in which eight police officers restrained a Mozambican individual, Mido Macia, by handcuffing him to the back of a police van and proceeding to drag him for a distance of 400 metres in the presence of witnesses. A report by Adesina (2019) indicates that Macia was subsequently beaten to death in police holding cells.

Neocosmos (2008) articulates apprehension regarding the conditions at Lindela, a detention facility for foreign nationals pending deportation, where individuals endure treatment that exceeds the severity typically encountered in prison settings. For example, numerous foreigners experience coercive demands from authorities in order to facilitate visits from their family members. Similarly, Landau, Ramjathan-Keogh and Singh (2005) report cases in which police officials took and destroyed foreigners’ permit documentation to justify their detention.

Furthermore, considerable obstacles are faced by foreigners in their pursuit of fundamental services, such as healthcare, housing, and access to financial institutions. Landau, Ramjathan-Keogh, and Singh (2005) detail a poignant incident concerning a pregnant Somali woman who, after being refused assistance due to her inability to pay a foreigner fee, gave birth on the pavement of the hospital. Unfortunately, the infant succumbed shortly thereafter. These exemplify only a fraction of the extensive array of recorded repercussions stemming from



xenophobic violence in South Africa. The results have prompted many foreign nationals to experience significant apprehension, contending with anxiety about their prospects for survival, while others face deep episodes of depression.

This section culminates in the observation that, although the literature comprehensively addresses the causes and effects of xenophobia, there is a notable lack of focus on how victims navigate the complexities of their distressful experiences. It is a reality that numerous victims endure profound fear for their lives, alongside anxieties, depression, and various related challenges, thereby necessitating the development of effective coping mechanisms. At times, certain foreigners have resorted to unlawful methods, such as employing counterfeit documentation, in an attempt to circumvent xenophobia. Some individuals have, in fact, endeavoured to acquire proficiency in local languages as a means of ensuring their survival. In this regard, I contend that alternative mechanisms, which may encompass economic, psychological, sociological, and political dimensions, could be formulated. In consideration, therefore, I put forth a religious coping mechanism that centres on God's presence in the following sections to address this gap. Given that a significant number of xenophobic attacks target Africans, and considering the inherently religious disposition of many Africans, it is my hope that a coping mechanism rooted in spirituality may assist them in traversing the challenges posed by xenophobia.

METHODOLOGY

I used two methods to direct this article. The first is a presentist hermeneutic, which I utilised to interpret Psalm 23 in light of xenophobic situations in South Africa. This method was popular among Qumran scribes, who used it to interpret biblical texts in light of their current circumstances (De Troyer & Lange, 2005; Hunter, 2004). I recognise, though, that some presentist interpreters of biblical texts occasionally misinterpret texts due to an overreliance on modern settings. I have tried to avoid this mistake by basing my interpretation of Psalm 23 on its tentative historical background, language, structure, and content. As will be demonstrated later in the article, this led to a dynamic interplay between xenophobic situations and Psalm 23.

Secondly, to clarify the phenomenon of xenophobia in South Africa, I utilised a thematic approach, drawing on relevant concepts from political science, migration studies, and sociology (Harris, 2002; Tarisayi & Manik, 2020). Insights for both methods were obtained from a variety of sources, including books, journal publications, Google Scholar, ResearchGate.net, Academia.edu, and online news articles. The literature was meticulously integrated, analysed, synthesised, and interpreted to substantiate the primary argument of this study.

Accordingly, the article advances through eight distinct stages to achieve its aim. The first stage involves the introduction, which delineates the research issue at hand. The second stage focuses on the theoretical foundations, wherein the literature concerning xenophobia in South Africa is examined to offer context and identify gaps in the existing research corpus. The third stage elucidates the research methodologies, while the fourth stage explores the findings related to the language, content, and structure of Psalm 23. The fifth stage, central to this study, examines the findings through a presentist interpretation of Psalm 23. The sixth stage explores the implications of the study for victims of xenophobia and the broader research context, while the



seventh stage provides concluding remarks on the findings of the study. Finally, a recommendation for further research is presented in the eighth stage.

FINDINGS

This section provides a clear and reasoned account of my findings from the analysis of Psalm 23. These findings served as the catalyst for examining a contemporary interpretation of Psalm 23 in relation to those affected by xenophobia. The section serves as a foundational element for the ensuing discussion, wherein the meaning and significance of Psalm 23 are examined as a potential coping mechanism for individuals affected by xenophobia in South Africa.

At first glance, Psalm 23 appears to consist of two stanzas that centre around two primary images of God. Scholars, nonetheless, hold differing views regarding the exact number of governing images in the Psalm. Tappy (1995), for example, presents three distinct images: God as shepherd, wanderer, and host. Terrien (2003), on the other hand, identifies four images: God as shepherd (vv. 1b-3a), guide (vv. 3b-4), healer (v. 5), and host (v. 6). For Merrill (1965), Psalm 23 ought to be considered a cohesive work in which God consistently represents the shepherd, a perspective that is corroborated by Morgenstern (1946). My aim is not to explore the concept of “imagery”; it is enough to assert that, regardless of the number of images within the text, Psalm 23 consistently conveys the notion of God’s presence in the Psalmist’s life during periods of distress. The diverse imagery may indicate that God assumes different roles throughout the various stages of the Psalmist’s life.

The opening lines of Psalm 23 explore two fundamental themes: divine guidance and sustenance. In 3a, God revitalises the Psalmist’s soul (*yā·šō·w·bēh nāp·šī*). The phrase “*nāp·šī*” may be understood as “vitality” or “life”, suggesting that God sustains the Psalmist. According to the text, God performs this for the sake of His name (*šā·mōw lā·ma·‘an*). “Name’s sake” pertains to God’s reputation in caregiving. This is emphasised in verse 6, when God’s nature is defined by “goodness” and “mercy”. Vos (2020) asserts that goodness and mercy “refer to the concrete goodness and love of Yahweh” (p. 640), emphasising the enduring protective nature of God.

The designation “Yahweh” appears on two occasions within the Psalm, notably at both its commencement and conclusion. Verses 1 and 6, consequently, outline the boundaries of the Psalm (Botha, 2015), suggesting that all occurrences in Psalm 23 unfold within the realm of God’s presence (Brueggemann, 1984). The parallels between the expressions *lō ‘eh·sār* (v. 1b) and *lō ‘î·rā ra‘* (v. 4b) highlight the unwavering trustworthiness of God and the Psalmist’s persistent faith in the face of challenges. The presence of God is additionally substantiated by the recurrent employment of first-person pronouns. Tappy (1995) observes that verses 1, 4, and 6 commence with third-person singular subjects and conclude with the first-person singular subject. This strategy emphasises God’s presence as a cohesive element within the Psalm.

The notable similarities between the phrases in the two stanzas of Psalm 23 merit attention. The expression “green pastures” in the first stanza (v. 2a) is comparable to the term “a table” in the subsequent verse (v. 5a). The term “waters” (v. 2b) is comparable to the term “cup” (v. 5c). The act of “laying down to rest” (v. 2a) is synonymous with “returning to the house” (6b). The expression “not lack anything” (v. 1b) is equivalent to abundance (v. 5). The presence of



“evil” (v. 4b) corresponds with the presence of foes (v. 5a). The phrases “rod” and “staff” (4d) are linked to the notions of “righteousness” and “mercy” (6a). The first stanza (vv. 1-4) depicts God as a shepherd, whereas the second stanza (vv. 5-6) portrays God as a host. These commonalities strengthen the core premise that God is the origin of existence and acts as a guardian for His people.

Considering the aforementioned findings, I suggest the following structural divisions for Psalm 23: verse 1 serves as the introduction, verse 4 represents the core subject, and verse 6 concludes the passage. The theological importance of Psalm 23 is rooted in these divisions, each emphasising a distinct idea. The integration of verses 1, 4, and 6 culminates in a complete Psalm of trust.

DISCUSSION

This section aims to elucidate the significance of the preceding findings by providing a presentist interpretation of Psalm 23, particularly in relation to the experiences of victims of xenophobia in South Africa. The section represents the pivotal element of this study, addressing enquiries regarding the potential of Psalm 23 to be utilised as a means of coping. To enhance understanding, I have structured this section around the theological motifs that arise from the text of Psalm 23.

Motif of Distress

I commence by highlighting the relationship between God and victims of xenophobia within the framework of distress in Psalm 23. This framework is based on the evident presence of adversaries in the text (vv. 4-5), as noted by Hunter (2008) and Vos (2020). Ahroni (1982) concurs with this, asserting that the term “in the presence of my enemies” (v. 5) pertains to actual adversaries who pursue the Psalmist. Johnston (2005) aligns with the presentist interpretation, postulating that “the struggle to maintain faith in trying circumstances today is given powerful expression by the similar struggles of psalmists many centuries ago” (p. 64). The claims advanced by these scholars highlight Psalm 23’s capacity to express a sense of divine presence, which, through a presentist lens, may function as a means of coping for individuals impacted by xenophobia.

It is reasonable, based on the above paragraph, to assert that the theme of distress in Psalm 23 may have elicited experiences of anxiety, fear, and depression in the Psalmist. These occurrences bear a striking resemblance to those experienced by individuals subjected to xenophobia. As shall be made clear, the central thesis presented in this section posits that, just as the Psalmist discovered solace in the presence of God, individuals who have experienced xenophobia may similarly derive comfort from such a divine presence.

Inside-Outside Motif

Brueggemann (1984; cf. Johnston, 2005) elucidates the motif of distress present in Psalm 23. According to him, the cause of distress in Psalm 23, though not explicitly defined, is ascribed to enemies, whom I perceive as xenophobes through my presentist lens. The adversaries afflict the Psalmist in both public arenas (vv. 1-4) and in the private domain of the home (vv. 5-6), highlighting a significant inside-outside motif within the text. The outside-inside motif



interfaces significantly with the prevailing xenophobic climate in South Africa, where xenophobia manifests both publicly and in enclosed environments like schools and universities. For instance, Emmanuel Sithole, a Mozambican, was murdered by knife-wielding attackers in the public streets of Alexandra township (Mutanda, 2017), while several foreigners have been pursued and assaulted within their residences (Tarisayi & Manik, 2021).

I extract the outside-inside motif as a rhetorical strategy in the construction of a coping mechanism. The motif emphasises that God is present to xenophobic victims in both public and private spaces. In the public sphere, God takes on the role of a shepherd, guiding, safeguarding, and supplying for the victims. He engages in the same activities, even while serving as a host within the household (v. 5). Thus, the relationship between verses 2 and 5 effectively reinforces the notion of divine presence in the face of adversity caused by xenophobes.

Exodus Motif

Botha (2015) posits that the shepherd metaphor in Psalm 23 is derived from the Exodus motif, wherein God guides the Israelites through the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land. Botha's perspective appears to be corroborated by the assertion "I lack nothing" (v. 1), which resonates with Exodus 16:18, where manna is bestowed as nourishment to fulfil the hunger of the Israelites. Furthermore, the pastures referenced in verse 2 conjure images of abundant resources present in the Promised Land, as corroborated by Jeremiah 23:3, 31:23, and Ezekiel 34:14-15. The reference to waters in this verse brings to mind the water supply detailed in Exodus 15:22-27 and 17:1-7. I perceive South Africa, akin to the Promised Land, as a place of socioeconomic richness, or, to employ the terminology of the Exodus setting, as manna. In fact, these riches are the main draw for most foreign visitors to South Africa (Tesfaye, 2020). The persistent downturn of South Africa's economy following the global economic crisis of 2008 has, regrettably, resulted in the vilification of foreigners as the culprits behind the depletion of resources.

In alignment with Jeremiah 2:6 and echoed in Psalm 23:4, the Israelites encountered daunting shadows of death throughout the Exodus. This experience, when viewed through a presentist lens of Psalm 23, resonates with the current realities faced by foreigners in South Africa. For example, the shadows of death indicate dangers to foreigners' lives, such as burning their shelters and throwing them off moving trains in xenophobic attacks (Adesina, 2019). The Exodus setting, on the other hand, shows that God's presence is always with victims, giving them the strength to withstand adversity even in the face of hardship. Indeed, Mutambara and Naidu (2023) cite numerous foreigners who assert that their faith in God "served a multifaceted purpose in enhancing their agency and resilience in an unfamiliar environment" (p. 67). This suggests that there are foreign nationals who already view God's presence as a coping mechanism.

Exilic Motif

Regarding Psalm 23:4, Brueggemann (1984) sees the exilic motif at play. According to him, the term "comfort" refers to God comforting the Israelites while they were in captivity in Babylon. Mtshiselwa (2015), who also sees the exilic motif in Psalm 23, avers that the "returning" in verse 6 may be referring to a returning of the Israelites captives from exile to



their homeland. The *Targum* seems to endorse the exilic view as well, interpreting “death” in verse 4 as a symbolic representation of a gloomy period of exile (Gillingham, 2018).

If the exilic setting is anything to go by, then the Israelites were foreigners in Babylon, although as prisoners rather than migrants. On the other hand, most foreigners are in South Africa for economic reasons. However, there are certain similarities between the two environments. Mtshiselwa (2015) observes, for example, that the Israelites were exploited as a source of cheap labour in Babylon. This exploitation is evident in South Africa, where some firms and organisations exploit foreign workers for low wages. Tarisayi and Manik (2021) identify examples in Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal where Zimbabwean teachers are paid less than their South African counterparts. While on this point, it is worth noting that there have been numerous occasions where hiring foreigners for a low salary has resulted in xenophobic violence, with locals claiming that foreigners are stealing their jobs.

In spite of the above circumstances, the message of Psalm 23 is that God’s presence keeps the victims alive even in precarious exploitative situations. The parallel between the Hebrew words *rā*’ (v. 4), which means evil, and *rō’î* (v. 1), which means shepherd, recognises the fact that xenophobia is as real as the existence of God. But the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* offers a forceful assertion of God’s existence, suggesting that God’s presence outweighs xenophobia. The line *’āt-tāh ’im-mā-dî* (you are with me, v. 4) was repeated as a promise of God’s presence to the exiled Israelites, according to McCann (1993).

Justice Motif

As noted by Mtshiselwa (2015), the paths referenced in verse 3 may represent “ethical ways”, indicating that “the addressees of Ps 23 also experienced corruption which caused the composer of the psalm to state that YHWH led him or her in the ‘paths/ethical ways’ of justice” (pp. 711-712). Mtshiselwa’s interpretation of justice finds support in Ahroni (1982), who describes the “rod” and “staff” in verse 4 as emblematic representations of justice.

According to my presentist interpretation of Psalm 23, Mtshiselwa’s assertions are an exhortation to foreigners to behave morally uprightly when acclimating to South Africa. This is an important observation, especially considering that some foreigners engage in immoral activities, such as using fake documents to obtain resources (Mlambo & Mkhwanazi, 2021). Indeed, certain foreigners have been linked to drug distribution and even human trafficking (Mvundura, 2024). Thus, the message of Psalm 23 indicates that while the divine presence serves as a source of solace, it also encourages victims to adhere to ethical principles, including the avoidance of unlawful conduct.



IMPLICATION TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

This section succinctly delineates the implication of this study for individuals affected by xenophobia.

Xenophobia is a tangible issue in South Africa, and its consequences frequently result in victims enduring various afflictions, including anxiety and depression. In light of this, it may be advisable for victims to consider exploring a religious coping mechanism. Africans are often characterised as a deeply spiritual populace, indicating that this type of mechanism is likely to find a receptive audience among them. Psalm 23, in this regard, serves as a profound source of solace amidst the turmoil of xenophobic attacks. Verses 5-6 emphasise the reconfiguration of the power structure for the victims. The key point, illuminated by the image of God preparing a table for the Psalmist, is that those who express xenophobic sentiments do not possess genuine power. The essence of true power is embodied in the God who takes on the role of a king, arranging the table and ensuring safety for those most in need (cf. Ps 72:12-14).

In my view, it is plausible that South Africa may continue to witness the resurgence of xenophobia; however, the assurance of divine presence for the victims remains steadfast. Considering the motifs of the Exodus and the experiences of exile, for instance, it is evident that the Israelites ultimately return to their homeland, where they attain a state of rest. Through the presentist interpretation of Psalm 23, I aspire for South Africa to attain a state of rest, free from intra-community animosities and the scourge of xenophobic violence and fatalities.

CONCLUSION

This study conducted a presentist interpretation of Psalm 23, suggesting that the presence of God functions as a coping mechanism for victims of xenophobia in South Africa. This interpretation explored the structure, language, and content of Psalm 23, alongside the motifs that may have influenced its composition. The study concludes that during the Psalmist's harrowing experiences, along with xenophobic occurrences in South Africa, God's presence consistently remains there for the victims of these events. Considering that South Africa is largely a religious culture, I hope this article inspires a collective spirit, urging us to denounce xenophobia and the accompanying violence.

RECOMMENDATION

This study exclusively examined Psalm 23 as a potential coping strategy applicable in moments of xenophobic distress. In acknowledging this limitation, I recommend that future studies take into account other similar Psalms. This encompasses Psalms, including 6, 22, 42, 77, 102, and 130. These texts have the potential to enhance the conversation regarding xenophobic trauma and resilience, introducing more intricate layers to the topic at hand.



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