

An Overview of the Biblical Psalms

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Abstract

The Old Testament is the collected faith testimony of ancient Israel, regarded in Judaism and Christianity as scripture by which God's word becomes a reality and a resource to the modern synagogue and Church (Bruce Birch et al, 2005:2). It is broken into three blocks: the Law, Prophets and Writings. The Psalms, which is the object, of this work is the first book in the Writings called Ketuvim. Most of the Writings were written or collected during and after the Exile, i.e. after 550 BCE. However, there are materials especially in the Psalms and Proverbs which date from the Monarchy (1000-587 BCC). It is certain that virtually the whole collection of the Writings was already put together by 150 BCE, although evidence for the use of Esther is scanty (Willaim Sanford Lasor et al, 1982:19-21). What the books of Ketuvim have in common is they are not sacred history such as is noticeable in the Torah (the Pentateuch) and parts of the prophets (Nevi'im), nor are they accounts of divine revelation such as is found in Nevi'im. They are religious teachings, and they are intended for worship setting. This write up is focused on the Psalms, which Daniel F. Polish (2000:1) states are intended for religious teachings and also for worship. This article intends to present them as a faith testimony of ancient Israel that should be accorded the dignity of the word of God. This is in the hope that it will champion interest in the readers of this article to study them for spiritual, academic and liturgical reasons.

Key Words: Psalter, Structure, Form, Parallelism, Values.

1. Introduction

The Psalms of the Hebrew Bible have fascinated readers for centuries (Paul R. Raabe, 1990:9). Walter Brueggemnn says they "...are strange, countercultural and inherently subversive speech" (2005:2). But they are genuine literary products of ancient Israel, and they reflect in language, ideas and social concern, the age of the great prophets and kings of Israel (Martin S. Rozenberg – Bernard M Zlotowitz, 1966:xiv). They have served as the basis of Jewish and Christian

liturgies and hymns, where they have faithfully been prayed throughout the centuries (Paul R. Raabe, 1990:9). But the Psalms must not be tamed to familiarity. This happens when they are reduced to mere praise songs that smoke screen their contents, and so, it becomes difficult to identify their rich messages. This has been found done in church liturgical celebrations and even among scholars, who though assert that the Psalms are deeply disciplined in form, but have tried to interpret and understand the Psalms under the auspices and restraints of social conventions. On the contrary, the Psalms practice speech in ways that keep pushing boundaries beyond the already known to that which cannot be known until it is uttered. So the Psalms are always pushing up against being just tied down to liturgical and academic forms and restraints. That it is best to allow the Psalms to be subversive enough to continue to surprise us, in order that they may do their work amongst us (Walter Brueggeman, 2005:2), that this article was conceived of in the first place.

This article simply adds in a simplified way to the existing literatures on the Psalms. It will not study any Psalm per se. Its motivation is to empower its readers with a global picture of the book of the Psalms (Psalter). It shall start with conceptual clarifications and the rest like the origin of the Psalms, their structure, forms (literary genre), contexts and values shall up to the conclusion. of the Psalms.

2. Psalms: Definition, Style, Types and Use

The term Psalms is derived from the Greek word *psalmoi* meaning “songs of praise” accompanied with music. The designation, “the book of Psalms” is inspired by the Latin phrase *Liber Psalmorum* (James Limburg, 1992:523). In the Hebrew Bible, the Psalter is denoted as *tehillim* which means “praise”. But in the Hebrew language however, the equivalent lexeme for Psalms is *mizmor* (מִזְמוֹר) (cfr Avrohom Chaim Feuer, 1969:81) and it occurs in the titles of the 52 Psalms.

The Psalms were written in *poetic style*, characteristic of poems found in other parts of the Bible. Following Hebrew poetry style, the lines of the psalms are broken into two parts, where the second half refers in some way to the first, and this is called *parallelism*. Also a number of Psalms are constructed in *acrostic* form, which is an adherence to a particular word pattern which regulates the use of particular letters. Apart from it, *sonnet*, *hexameter* and *alliterative* poetry are other instances of word patterning. Therefore one could write an *acrostic* or, for example, a *sonnet*, about anything. But one must adhere to the pattern. However, such adherence, does not guarantee that the poem is a good one, but it does guarantee that the poem will be an *acrostic* or a *sonnet* (cfr. Psa 119). Acrostics in the Psalms are used for mnemonic purposes, that is, it functions as aid to memory (Will Soll, 1991, 5). The Psalms also use *metaphors* like “the Lord is my Shepherd” (Psa 23), “fortress” (Psa 18:2; 31:2,3; 71:3; 91:2; 114:2), “refuge”,

“stronghold” (Psa 27:1; 31:2.4; 37:39; 43:2; 53:7) and others. Then they use *similes* like “my heart is like wax” (Psa 22:14). In regards to God, they portray Him as “hiding-place,” “cover” (Psa 27:5; 31:20; 32:7; 61:4; 91:1; 119:114), “dwelling place” (Psa 90), “habitation” (Psa 91:9) and the “rock of refuge” (Psa 71:3). He is further designated as a King who reigns (Psa 47:8; 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1). Metaphors and similes are also used to address people. For instance, in talking about the “righteous” (Psa 92:12-14), “a blessed family” (Psa 128:3; 127:4-5) and also in talking about “the wicked or the enemy”, who are said to “sprout like grass” (Psa 92:7) in contrast to the righteous who are like “the palm or cedar tree” (Psa 92:12-13) (James Limburg, 1992, 530-531). Each Psalm is seemingly separate and discrete, and is therefore referred to as a chapter in the Psalter. Each of them is different in tone, style, mood and subject matter. But they do have thematic linkages among adjacent Psalms. So certain themes, images and phrases are repeated in more than one psalm. The Psalms say many things, which is what makes the Psalter so complex, as well as rewarding (Daniel F. Polish, 2000:2).

There are three types of parallelism in the Psalms: Synonymous, antithetic and synthetic. Synonymous parallelism occurs where the second half of the line repeats in different language the thought of the first (Psa 6,2), antithetic parallelism happens when the second is the opposite of the first (Psa 20;9), and synthetic parallelism is when the second part expands or supplements the first (Psa 19,9) (Robert Lowth, *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum*).

Being songs of praise accompanied with music, they have been wonderfully used down through the ages to deal with different life situations. This is simply because they mostly present the different experiences of human beings. Experiences felt in moments of pains and/or successes. The nature of presentations has led to different literary types or genres of Psalms. One could simply say, speak of any life-situation imaginable, there is a Psalm that speaks about or refers to it (cfr David Tuesday Adamo, 2000:336-349). Therefore, they are academically and pastorally relevant.

In the Psalms, mankind's history with God is described at times in a preponderance of agitations that reflect high and low moments, upward and downwards moments. Also between the high and low moments, there are always particular experiences with God. The basic two types of Psalms are complaint and praise, and they are addressed to God in language of sorrows and joy. As mankind alternatives between sorrows and joy, the Psalms can accompany it in its low moments that may go as low as to the abyss of life, and also in its high moments of joy (Claus Westermann, 1990:5). The Psalms can therefore be characterized as *little* narratives with *meta-narrative* that attest that God is the central and decisive character in the plot. Little narratives refer to a

breakdown of its presentation from for example a sheep to a man on a journey and then a community in exile and that many stars sang at creation and of a man just after adultery. These narratives are quite particular and concrete; they focus on one “critical incident” in the life of a community or a member of the community (Walter Bruggemann, 2005:11). The Psalms are of a variety of types and were intended to serve different circumstances. The vast number of them are clearly hymns of praise to God, because He is the central theme of the Psalms (Martin S. Rozenberg – Bernard M Zlotowitz, 1966: xv).

3. Origin and Date

Tradition has been attributed the Psalms to David because he was probably the “sweet singer of Israel” (2 Sam 23:1), a composer of Hymns of lament (2 Sam 1:17) and the one that established the singing guilds in the Temple (1 Chron 6,16). So, there are Psalms which bear his name at their Superscriptions, but he did not compose all the Psalms. This is because there are other Psalms which do not begin as David's Psalms, but have the titles “*Song of Ascents*”, “*Halleluyah*”, “*Asaph*”, “*Korah*” “and others”. It is held that these Psalms existed as separate collections which were then compiled into a body and in a general are attributed to David (מְזֻמָּרוֹר לְדָוִד). So David is not the actual author of the Psalms. In fact, medieval and Jewish commentators, as well as Modern scholars, have pointed out that the Hebrew לְדָוִד, (*le David*, “of David”) signifies something like “concerning David”. This has resulted some scholars understanding those Psalms with *le David* title as allusions to specific events in David's life. For instance, the Superscription of Psa 18 has “...on the day Yhwh saved him (David) from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul”. Importantly, such Superscriptions were not part of the original psalm and are not historical and, therefore not dependable in dating the Psalter (Martin S. Rozenberg – Bernard M Zlotowitz, 1966:xii-xiv).

No one can definitely tell when the Psalms were composed. Suggestions are that they were composed from the tenth to the second centuries BCE. It will be unwise not to accept that some of the Psalms go back to David in the tenth century, and that there are those composed in the time of the Kings, and before and after the 587-586 BCE exile to Babylon. Martin S. Rozenber – Bernard M Zlotowitz (*The Book of Psalms*, 199:xii-xiv) remark that there is a consensus that the final compilation of these religious poems as a Psalter occurred by 200 BCE, and may even go back a century or two earlier. Then scholars like Peter W. Flint (2014:214), Shemaryahu Talmon (1966:11-12), Moshe H. Goshen-Gottstein (1967:22-33) and Patrick W. Skehan (1973:195-205) contend that the current form of the Psalms in the Bible had already been finalized centuries before the common era and the famous Qumran finding (11QPs^a) is a liturgical collection derived from, and secondary to the Hebrew Bible.

Since most of the Psalms seem to have a liturgical setting, Sigmund Mowinckel (1962) therefore argues that they have their origin in the cult. But a vast majority of them arise from different settings, because most of them were individual prayers. This is not to negate that the Levites did sing Psalms during the Temple worship or that those individuals did not sing in the Temple (Martin S. Rozenberg – Bernard M Zlotowitz, 1966:xv). Hence, all Psalms are ultimately placed in a communal liturgical context in the canon to constitute Israel's liturgical handbook (Dave Bland and David Fleer, 2005:70).

4. The Structure of the Psalter

The Old Testament has 150 Psalms, while the Talmud has 147 because it combined some of the Psalms together, and the Septuagint (the Greek Bible) has 151 Psalms, but asserts that last one is supplementary to the 150th. These variations in the quantity of Psalms in the Old Testament's Psalter attest to the fact that the 150 Psalms had become standard and was accepted as authentic.

Although Gerald H. Wilson (1993:72) has argued that the 150 Psalms should be characterized as a book to be read and meditated upon, rather than taking them as a collection of single and individual compositions to be sung, he accepted too that they are structured into five blocks of Book I, Book II, Book III, Book IV and Book V. He further argued that the reality of this decision is confirmed in the first three Books (Psa 2-89), not only by the doxologies present at the ends of these divisions, but also by the consistent change of both author and genre designations in the psalm-headings at precisely these same points of disjuncture. To take Wilson's word into serious consideration would be to establish the literary context for studying and interpreting the Psalms.

In this 5-Book structure, Book I has 41 Psalms (1-41), Book II has 30 Psalms (42-72), Book III has 16 Psalms (73-89), Book IV has 16 Psalms also (90-106) and Book V has 43 Psalms (107-150). Hence, Books I and V have the highest number, while Books III and IV have the smallest and equal number of Psalms. This division is believed to accord with the 5-part structure of the Pentateuch into: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Number and Deuteronomy. While Psa 150 gives a concluding praise for Book V and also the Psalter, Psa 1 and 2 in Book I are associated with David in their titles. They as well serve as introduction to Book I and the Psalter. In Book II, Psa 42-49 are denoted as "sons of Korah", who were members of a musical guild (cfr 2 Chron 20:19) and Psa 84-85 and 87-88 of Book III are attributed as "Korah Psalms". After the introduction, there are a series of five lament Psalms of individuals (Psa 3-7), and this is predominant in the remainder of Book I. Book II is principally of the sound of praise with the kingship of the Lord Psalms (Psa 93; 95-99) and a series of hymns (Psa 103-106). This praise continues in Book V, from Psa 107 to 119 (109 is an exception) and then the entire Psalter concludes with five Psalms of praise, each framed with

“Praise the Lord” (“Hallelujah”). As a result, there is a broad movement from lament to praise in the Psalter.

Duplicate Psalms have been noted in these blocks. Psa 53 of Block II is almost identical with Psa 14 of Block I. The difference between the two Psalms being the different names of God used. In Psa 14:2,4,7 God is called Yahweh, while in Psa 53:2,4,6, He is called Elohim. Duplication is also noticed in Psa 40 and 70. While God is called Yahweh in Psa 40:13, He is called Elohim in Psa 70:1a.4, but Yahweh of Psa 40:13b remains as Yahweh in Psa 70:5b. There is a prevailing notion that Psa 42-83 exhibit elements of Elohim as against the other parts of the Psalter. They are therefore called “Elohistic Psalter”. But in Psa 84-150, the overriding name for God is Yahweh.

One hundred and sixteen of these 150 Psalms have Superscription which can be described as titles giving some relevant information. These Superscriptions can be a single word like *mizmor* (מִזְמוֹר) (Psa 98) to a lengthy comment (Psa 18). The 34 Psalms that do not have superscriptions are distributed as follows: Book I: Psa 1; 2; 10; 33, Book II: Psa 43; 71, Book IV: Psa 91; 93; 94; 95; 96; 97; 99; 104; 105; 106 and Book V: Psa 107; 111-119; 135-137 and 146-150. The titles in the Superscriptions are addressed as “To the choirmaster”, some are “songs” (שִׁיר; שִׁיר) which occur 30 times, at times with *mizmor* (Psa 30; 48,) or “songs of love” (sir yēdîdôt) or “song of praise” (*tehilla*). Some Superscriptions are entitled as the *miktām* of David and this occurs 6 times (Psa 16; 56-100). There are a host of other titles (James Limburg, 1992:526-528).

5. The Literary Form of the Psalms

Scholars have identified seven forms of Psalms. They are Laments - Prayers, Hymns or Songs or Praise, Songs of Thanksgiving, Royal Psalms, Songs of Zion, Liturgical Psalms and Wisdom and Torah Psalms. Due to the limitation of the scope of this work, only a few of these types will be discussed in detail and the others shall be briefly touched.

5.1 Lament - Prayer Psalms.

These psalms are called in Hebrew *tēphillāh* (תְּפִלָּה), because they express community or individual laments in prayers. The community laments especially in times of national crisis are expressed in Psa 12; 44; 60; 74; 79; 80; 83; 85; 90; 94 (108); 123 (129) and 137. Five of these are collocated in Book III (73-89) (James Limburg, 1995: 532). A national lament would be occasioned either by threat of war or by such natural disasters as drought, failure of crops and possibly exilism. In Psalms of national lament, the people pour out either their protest of innocence or acknowledge their former sins. In doing so, they assert at the same time that God's wrath is justified. At dire moments of this sort, the community profoundly seeks and implores God's compassion and justice. This

they do, by begging God to punish their enemy and at the same time expressing their trust that God will keep faith with those loyal to Him (Martin S. Rozenberg – Bernard M Zlotowitz, 1966, xvii). This informs why laments and prayer go together, because most laments are expressed in prayer mood and/or language. James Limburg (1992:532) characterizes the typical elements of community lament in the following structure:

- a. the *address* (simply “O God” as in Psa 44:1; 80:1-2);
- b. the *complaint* in three forms, where the subject of the verb is either “we” (Psa 44:22,25), “they” (i.e., the enemy; Psa 80:12b-13,16a) or “thou” (i.e., God; Psa 44:9-14; 80:4-6a);
- c. the *request for help* addressed to God (Psa 44:23.26; 80,1a.2b.3.7,14-15,17,19);
- d. the *affirmation of trust* in God, which may take the form of recalling the Lord's previous saving acts (Psa 44:1-7; 80:8-11);
- e. a *vow to praise* God when the crises have passed (44:8; 80:18) (Psalms, Book of, 532).

John Mark Hicks (2005:69-71) in his designation of the elements of community laments further states that before the *vow to praise* God is made,

- a. there is the appeal and motivation of the response for deliverance – or redemption. This appeal seeks to move God to act on the ground of God's mercy, faithfulness, and/or love.
- b. there is cursing – imprecation. This seeks to move God to avenge God's people on the ground of God's justice and righteousness.
- c. there is protestation of innocence. This is rarely explicit, but the laments often reflect bewilderment and perplexity over the cause of their lamentable circumstances.
- d. There is expression of confidence and hope that God will deliver and act on their behalf

These elements may not be found fully expressed in each of all the lament Psalms, but there are specific psalms which basically covers most of these elements. For instance in verses 6-12, Psa 79 develops the *request for help* at length, while Psa 74 extends the *they-complaint* in verses 4-8. The *affirmation of trust* is developed in Psa 74:12-17. This affirmation of trust in God can so dominate a psalm, that the entire psalm can be considered a Community Psalm of Trust (Psa 125 [126]). Finally, Psa 60 adds a divine prophecy to the typical elements in verses 6-8.

When the lament is by an individual, it becomes an outpouring of the Psalmist's deepest heartfelt feelings. Such Psalms are unparalleled as expressions of personal religion, where the Psalmist conveys the close bond he feels with his God. There is a mood of desperation that pervades the lament, because the author finds himself to be in mental anguish and physical suffering that brings him near the portals of death. At other times, his distress stems from the taunts of his enemies, who challenge his faith or threaten him with violence. Despite his suffering, the Psalmist feels confident that God will hear his outcry and deliver him (Martin S. Rozenberg – Bernard M Zlotowitz, 1966:xvii), and grant his prayers. This happens because the Suppliant has been assured by a priest or cult prophet that God has answered his prayers (C. Westermann, 1969:68). These moments of individual crisis are found in: Book I: in Psa 3-7; 9-10; 13; (14); 17; 22; 25; 26; 28; 31; 35; (36); 38 (39); 40:11-17; 41, Book II: in Psa 42-43; 51; (52); (53); 54-59; 61; 64; 69; 70; 71, Book III: in Psa 77; 86; 88, Book IV: in Psa 102 and Book V: in Psa 109; 120; 130; 140-43.

The typical elements of Individual Laments are as almost the same as those of community laments as follows:

- a. the *address* (Psa 13:1, "O Lord"; 22:1, "My God, my God");
- b. the *complaint* in three forms, with the subject either as "I" (Psa 13,2a; 22:2,6,14-15,17a), "thou" (Psa 13:1; 22:1), or "they" (Psa 13:2c; 22:7-8,12-13,16,17b-18);
- c. the *request for help* (Psa 13:3-4; 22:11,19-21);
- d. the *affirmation of trust* (Psa 13:5; 22:3-5,9-10);
- e. the *vow to praise God* when the crisis is past (Psa 13:6; 22:22-31).

When *affirmation of trust* dominates, the Psalm may be called an Individual Psalm of Trust like in Psa 11; 16; 23; 27; 62; 63; 131 (James Limburg, 1992:532). Not all of this components are found in every individual lament, and they are not necessarily in this order. But "invocation, the lament proper, and the appeal" are the elements found in all communal and individual laments (John Mark Hicks, 2005:69-71). These lament Psalms can be the basis and foreground to the oracles of salvation, because they express double wishes or one aspect of the wish is simultaneously expressed in two directions. This type of wish expressions is normally found at the end of the Psalms of lamentation (cfr Psa 35,26; 40.15ff (14ff); 56:10 [9]; 58:7-10 [6-9]; 63:10ff [9ff]) (cfr. C. Westermann, 1969:73). These oracles of salvation (*Heilsorakel*) are promises by God to save his people in moments of difficulties. The kernel of these oracles of salvation is the assurance of God to them and encouraging them not to be afraid for He will save them against their enemies (Cfr. B. S. Childs, 2001:318).

Since most times, lament Psalms are voiced in prayer moods, especially because of the simple effort to “ask” something of God (Psa 2:8;27;7) and then either to expect an “answer” or to honour and praise God for past “answers” (Psa 34,4;118:5; 119:26; 138:3), they presuppose the knowledge of the narrative substructure to prayer found elsewhere in scripture (Psa 78:18; 99:6; 105:40; 106:15), like in the conversations between God and various persons: Adam, Eve, Abraham, Sarah, Moses and later prophets. When the human side of these conversations is detached, we will call it “prayer”. When the divine side is detached, we may call it “prophecy”, which, as a monologue, may answer questions we are too afraid, too foolish, or too ashamed to ask. Just as prophecy presumes an attentive audience, so prayer anticipates some divine response in word, deed, or presence. Of course prayer may also be the effort to answer a question God has previously asked us. In any case, both the formal style and beauty of the prayers in the Psalms confirm the need to learn to pray. This is because prayer in ancient Israel was a “duty” as well as a creative act, and that competent lamentation would inevitably include certain psycho-social and sapiential elements. (Gerald T. Sheppard, 1992:143-145).

J. Clinton McCann Jr (2005:52) observes that although often overlooked, a regular feature of the prayers in the Psalter is the presence of the Psalmists' enemies, or as they are called: the wicked, the foes, the blood thirsty, evildoers, workers of evil, pursuers, fools, hypocrites, adversaries, false witnesses, malicious witnesses, ruffians, wrongdoers, those who seek my life, the proud, the arrogant, assailants, the insolent, the ruthless and sometimes metaphorically bulls, dogs and lions. Books I and II (Psalm 1-72) is generally categorized as a prayer for help (or a Lament/Complaint – there are forty-six of them). The Psalms of these Books have references to the enemies, with the possible exceptions of Psa 4 (which does however mention people who “love vain words, and seek after lies”), Psa 51 (in which the psalmist is his or her own worst enemy, and which does mention “transgressors” and “sinners”), and Psa 62 (in which the enemies are implied by way of a description of their activities – “assail a person” and “batter your victim”). Hence, the enemies in the Psalms are pervasive, if not omnipresent; leading to why the Psalmists several times complain that even their apparent friends, companions and neighbours have become their opponents (Psa 38:11; 41:9)

5.2 Thanksgiving Psalms

Apart from Lament – Prayer Psalms, there are Psalms of Thanksgiving called in Hebrew *Tôdâh* (תודה) meaning “thanksgiving”. They are hymnic psalms which express gratitude to God. They are generally expressed by individuals in private prayers divorced from a formal worship setting (Psa 18; 30; 32; 34; 106-7, 136). The Psalmist thanks God for His compassion in not abandoning him and for the blessing bestowed on him. God's kindness justifies his faith and in

repayment, the Psalmist promises to publicize God's power and goodness to all humankind. The blessings received may include healing from illness (Psa 30; 32; 116), which may be a physical manifestation of unforgiven sin (Psa 32), or deliverance from enemies (Psa 18; 92; 118; 138) or simply rescue from trouble (Psa 66:14). A very good example of an individual's grateful response to God for a specific act of deliverance would be David's own in Psa 18. Thanksgiving Psalms are: Psa 18; 30; 32; (34); 40;1-10; 66:13-20; 92; 116; 118; and 138. While James Limburg (1992:532) argues that these Psalms assume the presence of the congregation, which is gathered either for worship (Psa 30:4-5; 34:5,8-9; 118;1-4,24,29) or for instruction (Psa 32:8-11; 34:11-14) and who hear the story of the deliverance (40:9-10; 66:16-19), Martin S. Rozenberg – Bernard M Zlotowitz (1966:xii-xiv) avow that they are generally expressed by individuals in private prayers divorced from a formal worship setting (Psa 18;30;32; 34; 106-7, 136). But it still does not remove the possibility for them to be voiced by a community at worship. However, there are indications of how these Psalms were used in worship. For instance Psa 118:19-29 assumes a procession, while Psa 66:13-15 and 116:12-19 point to a thank offering accompanying the Psalm. In Psa 138, the worshipper is in the outer court of the temple (cfr verse 2).

At the core of these Psalms are stories of the deliverance summarized briefly in "O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and thou hast heal me" (Psa 30:2; cfr Psa 18:3; 34:4,6; 40:1-2; 66:19; 92:4; 116:1-2; 118:5; 138:3). But this is often expanded in various shades and forms (Psa 18:4-19,31-45; 30:6-11; 32:3-5; 66:16-19; 92:10-11; 116:3-4,6-9,16; 118:10-18) (James Limburg, 1992:532). Little wonder, Walter Brueggemann (2005:16-17) describes them as "narrative Psalms". Because the Psalmist in prayer usually tells the tale of having moved from trouble to salvation or from plea to praise. At the outset, such a narrative account derives from a specific, individual experience of transformation. For instance, Psa 107:4-9 moves in five elements: a problematic, a cry to Yhwh, an immediate divine response of rescue, a concrete expression of thanks and generic doxology

Since, the community can also express thanksgiving in the Psalms, there exist Community Thanksgiving Psalms. In them, the community or groups within the community thank God for blessings received or for specific acts of deliverance. For instance, Psa 67 expresses thanks to God for the blessing of a good harvest (verses 6-7), Psa 75 gives thanks to Him for His "wondrous deeds" (verse 1), Psa 107 tells of stories of deliverance which are the basis for a refrain calling for thanksgiving (verses 4-9, 10-16, 17-22, 23-32), Psa 124 again tells a story of deliverance, summarized in the doubled "we have escaped" (verse 7) and Psa 136 begins with the triple imperative "O give thanks..." (verses 1-3) and continues by reciting God's mighty acts in creation (verses 4-9) and in history (verses 10-25) as a basis for the refrain of every verse, "for his steadfast love endures forever" (James Limburg, 1992, 532-533).

5.3 Praise – Royal Psalms

The other form of Psalms being presented in brief detail are called in Hebrew language *Tēhillāh* (תְּהִלָּה) meaning “praise”. These Psalms are found in congregational settings and hymns play central roles in these Psalms. They begin with *calling to praise*, summoning the community to praise God (Psa 33:1-3; 66:1-4; 100: 1-3a; 105:1-6; 111:1; 113:1-3; 117:1; 135:1-3; 136:1a; 146-50). Following the call to praise (Psa 113:1-3; 117:1) are *reasons* for the praise (Psa 113:4-6; 117:2), which may include God's might and majesty (Psa 113:4-5) as well as His mercy in caring for individuals or the community (Psa 113:6-9) (James Limburg, 1992, 532”). Erhard S. Gerstenberger (2014:34) states that by praising God, not only do the individuals or community motive Him to take action but also arrogate to Him essential power and almightiness for His activity. Just as human monarchs gain strength by the acknowledgment and veneration bestowed on him by their subjects (cfr Sing to God a new song; Psa 33:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1 or Blessed/Praised be God; Psa 28:6; 31:22; 41:14; 66:20; 68:20,36; 72:18,19; 89:53), so the praise of God is a creative act of generating beneficial forces and transferring them to God or offering them as His due tribute

God's might which is a reason for the praise is developed in those psalms which place particular emphasis on the work of God the Creator (Psa 8; 19a; 104: 148; cfr 139) or on God's acts in history (Psa 78; 105; 106). In them also, a number celebrate His work in both nature and history (Psa 33; 65; 66; 114; 135-136; 146-147). Importantly some of these Psalms are dominated by the call to praise (Psa 146-150), framed with the plural imperative: “Praise the Lord!” Those of them with hymns extolling the Kingship of God otherwise called Enthronement Psalms describe Him as King (Psa 47; 93; 95-99) and avow His reign (Psa 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1). These royal psalms connected with the life of the king are: Psa 2; 18; 20-21; 45; 72; 89; 101; 110; 132 and 144:1-11. Some of them are for royal wedding (Psa 45), coronation (Psa 2), royal thanksgiving and even for answered prayers (Psa 18; 21). There are also psalm of prayer for the King, possibly at his coronation (Psa 72). These Psalms originated during the era of the Monarch and functioned in that epoch. After the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, they took on another significance, projecting into the future a description of an ideal King to come, possibly the Lord Jesus Christ.

5.4 Zion, Liturgies, Wisdom and Torah Psalms

There are psalms which celebrate God's choice of Mt. Zion in Jerusalem as the earthly centre of His presence. They declare the Lord's presence in Zion (Psa 46:7,11) – the city of God (Psa 46:4-5; 48:8; 76:2; 87:1-3), where beautiful Mt Zion is located (48:1-3). Therefore, Psalm 122 is right to express the joy of a pilgrimage to the city and prays for the peace of Jerusalem. The songs of Zion include Psa 46, 48, 76, 84, 87 and 122 (533).

Psalms that are designed for antiphonal dialogue or which associate liturgical action with the words of the psalm are called Liturgies. They include Psa 15; 24; 50; (68); 81; (82); 95; 115; 132. For instance, Psa 15 was possibly functioned as liturgy for entrance into the temple area, with the worshipper asking the question in v. 1 “O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent” and the priest responding with the answer in verses 2-5, “He who walks blameless and does what is right...” Psa68 refers to “solemn processions” described in verses 24-27.

Wisdom Psalms do not have the tone of lament or praise, they offer reflections on the possibilities and the problems of life before God and advice on how best to live in life. In doing so, they are linked with biblical Wisdom literature (Sirach, Wisdom, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, etc) (James Limburg, 1992:534). These reflections take place as exhortation that passes between a human teacher and human students, with the teacher calling upon the students to receive the wisdom spoken to them through the act of hearing (cfr Psa 34:12) (Catherine Petrany, 2014: 87). Wisdom literature are known for short sayings and longer reflective essay or drama. Both of these characteristics are found in the Psalms (James Limburg, 1992:534). No wonder Catherine Petrany, 2014:88) says;

Wisdom elements in the Psalter can come in the form of entire psalm, but they can also emerge on a smaller scale as brief, potentially didactic reflections in the midst of other, more easily established genres.

The Psalms in this category are Psa 37, 49, 73, 112, 128, 133. Psalms 127, 128 and 133 are each made up of short sayings, reflecting on such everyday issues as piety and daily work (Psa 127:1; 128:1-2), the balance between work and rest (Psa 127:2) and the blessings of life together as a family (127:3-5; 128) and as a community of believers (Psa 133). The acrostic Psa 37 are words of encouragement to a person ostensibly discouraged because of the successes of the wrong doers. This view is also shared by Psa 73.

The Torah Psalms focus on the importance of instructions (*tôrāh*; תּוֹרָה) in the life of piety. Psa 1 commends meditation on the teaching of God as the way to a blessed life, imagined by a tree that is deeply rooted and prospering. Psalm 19 talks about the desirability of the Lord's instruction depicted as “sweeter than honey”. The acrostic Psa 119 is unique in the Bible, because after the introduction in verses 1-3, it prays to God for insight into the wonders of the Lord's teaching (verse 18), and then recommends meditation and reflection on the Lord's work (verse 27), statues (v. 48), promise (verse 148) and instruction (verses 87-105). For such meditation is a joy (verses 97.103) and furnishes direction of the journey of those who believe, denoted as a sojourner on this earth (verses 1,9,35,105) or even as a sheep who has lost his way (verse 176) (James Limburgh, 1992:532-534).

6. The Contexts of the Psalms

It is difficult to arrive at an acceptable social contexts from which these Psalms originated. This is because the Psalter is the product of a long history of redaction and changed. James L Mays (1993:14) describes the difficulty in these words;

The possibility of deriving a context for interpretation from the book is not raised as a substitute for the dominant approaches in current Psalms study. In the standard commentaries and introductions, psalms are taken up individually and identified as an instance of a genre, and/or as agenda for ritual performance, or as artefacts of Israel's religious history in the context of the ancient Near East. The context for construal is an ideal genre and its proposed history, an inferred festival or ritual occasion, or the ancient Near Eastern history of religions.

He adds further that difficulties arise in giving the Psalms interpretive identity and context, because of;

the tension between the actuality of so many psalms and the ideal *Gattung* to which they are assigned, the unresolved questions of cultic history, the perplexing problem of identity of the individual, the effect on meaning of moving traditional forms and words into quite different periods of religious history and the extent of redaction in the Psalter (James L Mays, 1993,14).

So, as the career of Israel passes through dramatic changes, the givens of the settings of earlier Psalms changed. Traditional patters and vocabularies took on modified significance and roles. Old Psalms were reinterpreted to fit new conditions, and new psalms were written in continuity with classic conventions, but expressing the needs and thoughts of later times (James L Mays, 1993, 14-15).

However, if the oracles of salvation were born from Israel's worship and if C. Westermann (1969:68) opines that the lament Psalms inspires them, and from our study of the forms of the Psalms, it can be deduced that they were born from different historical experiences, some painful and sorrowful, and some joyful. This warranted the need to lament and prayer in moments of pain and sorrows and the need to praise when a good is received. The Psalms could also have context in the temple. Three factors from the presentation of the forms of the Psalms demand this. They were used for liturgical celebrations, as instructions and wisdom dissemination. Liturgical celebrations and instructions were

known to have held in the Temple and synagogues or both. Whatever, the case may, the Psalms are product of human socio-anthropological experiences, which were then poured out in the temple or places of worship in laments, prayers, thanksgiving and praise. This sets the Psalms to be of immense social and spiritual values for all times. These importance of the Psalms are what shall be undertaken next.

7. The Contemporary Value of the Psalms

We earlier highlighted that God is the central concerns of the Psalms, because the Psalms are generally addressed to Him. What do they say therefore about God? James Limburg (1992:534-535) outlines them as: *His teachings delight, He is our rock, Lord and redeemer, there is none greater than Him and human beings are like the beasts that perish before Him*. In nutshell, these titles about God demonstrates His relationship with people and the universe. But they invariably invite people to meditate: on the instruction of God (Psa 1-2), His work of creation (Psa 19), to theological reflection of God in modern times (Psal 77), to take refuge in Him (Psa 2,2) and to reflect on life's mysteries (Psa 37). Therefore, the first remarkable value of the Psalms is they attract their readers and those who use them for prayers to centralize God in their daily living, in order that He will be the guide and protector of their lives. It is like saying God should come first in life and living. When this happens, then people can easily run to God in whatever circumstances of life like the Psalmists: sorrows and pain, praise and joy, exhortation and glorification. These circumstances of life reflect socio-anthropological conditions, be them good or bad. This therefore informs why the Psalms are replete with real human emotions and vibrancy. Their real and vibrant human emotions enable a living and vivid presence of God as the Psalmists relate with Him in their words. The Psalms are about people reaching out to God and/or aspiring to. This is what the Psalms should inspire, because they are models of what human relationship with God should be. A careful meditation and/or prayer and even academic work on the Psalms reveals a close intimacy that can be developed with God, because in them one learns that God is close at hand (Psa 34:19), guards man's going out and coming in (Psa 121:8), listens (Psa 116:1; 145:18), and is *chasid* – steadfast and reliable, and cares for His people (Psa 111:9), by championing the needy and downtrodden and raising them from the dust (Psa 113:7) (Daniel F. Polish, 2000, 14).

Since the Psalms do not speak of a single voice or of a single subject matter, they serve as hymns, giving poetic expression to religious commitments – as has been seen above in the presentation of the form of the Psalms – praise, petition, and supplication on behalf of a nation or of the individual. They can be used for issues of sin, atonement and forgiveness. Some of them give voice to concerns of a particular moment – the present – in the life of a nation or individual. Psalms teach ideals and values and also denounce evil behaviour and oppression like

the prophets did. This gives them power, because they speak directly and personally to human condition. One of the Church Fathers, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria (cir 293-373 BCE) states;

The Psalms embrace the entire human life, express every emotion of the soul, every impulse of the ear - [Psalms speak for you] when the soul yearns for penance and confession, when the spirit is depressed or joyous...when the soul is yearning to express its thanks to God, or its pains... (Daniel F. Polish, 2000, 6-9.13).

These make them fitting for dealing with all manners of life. They can be used for instructions, exhortations, and prayers, and can become the lyrics of hymns and songs of human empower. This is because as was said earlier, there is no situation and experiences of man and his community, that there is no psalm that reasonably deals with the matter and/or explicates it. So, just as they have been useful to yester generations, so they can be in the contemporary. This means they have values of socio-anthropological proportion, perspective and extent. Hence, they deal and relate situations that affect our everyday lives. They Psalter has a psalm that speaks and addresses immediate and enduring problem. Praying them with passion and with attention to the content of each of them would appeal greatly to people's social and even communal life. The Catholic Church has traditionally prayed it in the Breviary. But in most cases, it is the clergy, religious and those in Houses of Formation who pray it most. There have been efforts by parish priests to introduce their parishioners to the praying of the Psalms before Mass. This should not be limited to a few a parishes, but should become a common practice. They psalms have a way of speaking to the hearts of those praying them in order to give them comfort, consolation and healing of their situation. If not for anything, it will enable them realize that humanity has dealt with the same problems down the through the ages, because the Psalms talk about all of them. Since, they are addressed to God, it brings to the minds of the faithful, the awareness that the God who listened and cared for those of yesterday generations, will care for those praying the Psalms in our time. Like David Tuesday Adamo observed the Psalms when classified according to the Nigeria cultural hermeneutic categories, such as: protective, curative or therapeutic and crave for a better life, can make a difference in the lives of the averagen Nigerian. He further argued that Nigerians have constantly faced the question of how to use their Christian faith and the Bible as a concrete and effective substitute for the traditional means denied them by the missionaries, and in the process found solutions in their reading of the Psalms for protection against enemies and evil spirits, for healing and sicknesses and bringing successes in work, school and business. This type of Afric0-cultural hermeneutic, which make African socio-cultural contexts the subject of interpretation is good. For indeed, a average Nigerian is

faced with the fact of evils ones and enemies. Indeed, witches, sorcerers, wizards, evils spirits and any ill-wishers therefore form part of the major sources of fear and anxiety among them (2000:336-337). But greater care should be taken to prevent reducing the Psalms to objects of magic, rather than the promotion, growth and maturation of faith.

Conclusion

There are also other poems in the Old Testament that are psalmic (Lamentations 1; 2; 3; 4; Proverbs 31:10-31), Nahum 1:2-8, Sirach 51:13-30 (Will Soll, 1991, 11-12), Isa 38:10-22, Wisdom 9 and Tobit 13:2-10a. These were not studied in this article. The concentration thus far was on the Psalter. This article has not aimed at resolving problems about the psalms, it simply has given a global picture of the Psalter and its psalms with the purpose to educate people on the biblical psalter and introduce them to it. However, on-going exegetical work should be engaged on studying the Psalms, but like Alexander Ryrie (2004:17) states "...there is no one correct method of interpreting the Psalms, and no one correct strand of meaning to be drawn from them". Therefore, different useful methods can be employed. After all, the field of Linguistics has so much in abundance for that endeavour.

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