

ETHICS OF THE PSALMS: PSALM 16 WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF PSALMS 15-24

A. GROENEWALD

ABSTRACT

The values and norms of the Old Testament are not in themselves the proprium of Hebrew ethics, since every one of them also features in other ancient cultures such as Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece. Rather, the centre of Hebrew ethics should be sought in the idealistic framework and structure which legitimises its values and norms. The temple theology in Jerusalem was firmly connected to the theme of ethical norms and values, which presumably originated in Yahweh as the divine king. Psalms 15 and 24 demonstrate the ethical dimension of the temple theology of Jerusalem. In Book I of the Psalter Psalm 16 belongs to the compositional unit which starts with Psalm 15 and ends with Psalm 24. Although Psalm 16 does not belong to the traditional category of the wisdom psalms, wisdom terminology permeates this psalm. This paper focuses on the ethical implications of Psalm 16, as well as the ways in which they link to other psalms on a compositional level.

INTRODUCTION

The ethics of the Hebrew Bible (HB) focuses on Israel's viewpoint of good behaviour, the possibilities it offers as well as its justification.¹ Theology and ethics are inseparable in the HB. The best way to understand and to apply the ethics of the Hebrew Scriptures is to try to put ourselves in Israel's position and understand how they perceived and experienced their relationship with Yahweh, the God of Israel; and how that experience affected their ethical ideals and practical living as a community (Wright 2004:17). In terms of its aim we can thus say that an ethics of the HB should be descriptive.

Ethical systems display both a similarity as well as variety throughout the different epochs of history and in different cultures. The values and norms of the HB are not as such the proprium of Hebrew ethics, since they also feature in

¹ Otto (1991:608) states the following: "Die Ethik des AT fragt nach dem in den alt. Überlieferungen sich je zur Sprache bringenden Verständnis Israels vom guten Handeln, seiner jeweiligen Möglichkeiten und Begründungen."

other ancient cultures, e.g., Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece. The centre of Hebrew ethics should rather be sought in the idealistic framework and structure which legitimises its values and norms. With regard to this idealistic structure of Hebrew ethics, the focus is primarily on the Pentateuch as the main source for its structure (Otto 2007:26; cf. Otto 1991:609-610; Otto 1995:162; Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2006:908). The legal collections in the Torah form one of the pillars of a study of the ethics of the HB – specifically the system of legal and ethical rules which we find in the Covenant Code (Exod 20:22-23:33), Deuteronomic Law (Deut 12-26) and the Holiness Code (Lev 17-26).

Ethics, as a theory of morals, considers the maxims of conduct from the viewpoint of normative good and seeks its philosophical foundations as well as the consequences of good action (Otto 1999:1603-1606; Otto 2004:84-97). Of course one should note that ancient Israel was a pre-philosophical society and culture (Barton 1995:12). In the HB there is no coherent reflection on ethics in the manner found in Western philosophical thought. Nevertheless, in the HB, whether at the level of individual books and sections of books, or at the redactional or canonical level, we encounter more than just a mixture of isolated concepts with no underlying rationale. The ethical systems in the HB are probably generated by fundamental structures of ethical thinking.

Ethics makes us aware of aspects that implicitly govern action to the extent that action is morally qualifiable. In the ancient world of the eastern Mediterranean, moral action was characterised by a synthetic viewpoint of life; that is, it assumed a correspondence between people's experience of life and their deeds (Otto 1999:1603; Otto 2004:84).²

This is the point where sapiential thought becomes especially relevant for the ethics of the HB, as it includes the notion of order in human life, i.e., that moral conduct in accordance with ethical rules should lead to a good life (Otto

² In this regard Levin (2006:29) states the following: "Wichtig war der Respekt vor den Ordnungen. Die Antike hatte das realistische Empfinden, daß gelingendes Leben stets gefährdet ist. Das Sein ist eine kleine Insel umgeben von Nicht-sein, dem drohenden Chaos. Ordnung ist die Macht, die das Sein gegenüber dem Chaos aufrecht halt. Wer sein Leben in Übereinstimmung mit der Ordnung des Daseins bringt, schafft die Voraussetzung für dessen Gelingen."

1995:167).³ The ethical rules of wisdom literature are however very distinct from those of the law codes. Its literary history was fundamentally connected to the theological discourse about the legitimization of these rules and the consequences of ethical conduct (Otto 1995:166). It was only in the post-exilic period that wisdom in Israel, in contrast with for example Egypt and Mesopotamia, went through a significant process of theologization (Lange 2005:1367).⁴

Wisdom thought, especially the pre-exilic proverbs in the book of Proverbs 10-31, derives its ethical rules and regulations from the observation of structures of reason and consequence in nature and society.⁵ If a specific action leads, again and again, either to a positive or to a negative outcome, the existence of some kind of a structure could be postulated. Sapiential ethics endeavours to recognise these structures, to adjust human actions accordingly, and subsequently lay the basis for a positive and successful life. The structures ordering nature and society have their ontological basis in the creation of the world.⁶ The wise person thus knows that only God has full knowledge of

³ Cf. Zenger (2006:329): “Ausgangspunkt aller weisheitlichen Theologie, von der einfachen Verhaltensregel bis zur reflektierten ethischen Maxime, ist die aus Erfahrung gewonnene Überzeugung vom Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang, den jeder in seinem Alltag als Grundorientierung menschlichen Handelns kennt, nämlich: dass Gutes Tun gut tut (der Gemeinschaft, in der man lebt, und zutiefst dem Guttuenden selbst) und dass Böses Tun Schaden anrichten (für die Gemeinschaft und zutiefst für den Bösen selbst).”

⁴ In this regard Lange (2005:1368) states the following: “Daß die Theologisierung der Weisheit sich erst in nachexil. Texten dokumentiert, deutet auf eine Nachwirkung, wenn nicht Verarbeitung der Exilerfahrung hin: Das Zusammenbrechen der vorexil. Geltenden Ordnungen hinterfragte das tradierte Erfahrungswissen.”

⁵ In this regard Langer (2005:1366-1367) states the following: “Das Erkenntnisstreben dient dem Erfassen einer Seinsordnung mit ethischer Relevanz. Erkenntnis ermöglicht ein dieser Ordnung angemessenes Handeln, was wiederum in einem positiven Ergehen des Handelnden resultiert (Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang). Gott kan dabei als Garant der ethischen Seinsordnung verstanden werden. Weisheit wendet damit aus vorgängiger Erfahrung gewonnene Erkenntnis auf neue Erfahrung an, um diese zu deuten und zu strukturieren.”

⁶ Cf. Schwienhorst-Schönberger (2006:909) who states the following: “Die weisheitl. Ethik ist schöpfungstheologisch geprägt: In der Schöpfungsordnung wird ein sittl. Anspruch vernehmbar, der durch Erfahrung und Vernunft einsehbar und durch Lehre zu vermitteln ist. Die Grundstruktur weisheitl. Denkens ist geprägt von der

creation. He furthermore realises the limited character of his wisdom, and that the fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom. Sapiential ethics strives to reach the balance between the natural order and moral conduct, as it was obvious to the wise that there was no other possibility in order to obtain a good life (Otto 1995:167).

This article intends to demonstrate that the Psalms are no less important with regard to the ethics of the HB. The temple theology in Jerusalem was firmly connected to the theme of ethical norms and values, and had its origin in Yahweh as the divine king. Psalms 15 and 24 demonstrate the ethical dimension of the temple theology of Jerusalem. In Book I of the Psalter, Psalm 16 belongs to the compositional unit which starts with Psalm 15 and ends with Psalm 24. Although Psalm 16 does not belong to the traditional category of the wisdom psalms, wisdom terminology permeates this text. The text of Psalm 16 demonstrates those particular ethical norms that were connected to the metaphor of the “temple theology of life”. This article focuses on the ethical “way” of Psalm 16, as well as its links to the surrounding psalms on a compositional level.

THE ETHICS AND COMPOSITION OF PSALMS 15-24

According to Psalm 16 the source of joy is God’s presence in the life of human beings. This joy is in contrast to death, because in the realm of death one is separated from God. With respect to the initial meaning of the text, it should not be interpreted either messianically or in terms of individual eschatology (Craigie 1983:158). The psalmist was faced with imminent death, he rose in confidence above that danger to know the fullness of life in God’s presence. The psalmist wrote from a particular experience, and yet his words touch upon the experience of all mortal beings, namely the fear of death. It is a fear which

Lehre von Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang, der zufolge es einem Menschen so ergeht, wie er sich verhält: Wer gutes tut, dem ergeht es gut; wer Schlechtes tut, dem ergeht es schlecht”.

must be controlled confidently if life is to be lived fully (Groenewald 2008:106).

Psalm 16 touches upon important matters regarding the anthropological viewpoint of the people of Judah. According to them, they received life as a benevolent gift from Yahweh. Human beings have the choice, opportunity and task to fill and fulfil their lives. Yahweh guides them and gives them strength to live accordingly. A fulfilling life thus implies to live according to Yahweh's laws. Such a life furthermore implies the fulfilment of hope. It provides every human being with trust in God and courage which is necessary in order to face the challenges of life (e.g. death threats). This triad of "life as a divine gift", "life according to the law", and "life as hope" is based on the fundamental chord of the introductory statement (vv. 1-2) and the final statement (v. 11abc): Yahweh is the source of happiness and is the "path of life" (Groenewald 2008:96-106).

The subsequent analysis will focus on the quest for the canonical Psalm analysis, namely on the position of Psalm 16 within the smaller collection of Psalms 15-24. This analysis will be highlighted from the perspective of ethics, the ethical implications of Psalm 16 as an individual text, as well as the ethical implications of the whole collection as read in interaction with Psalm 16. The focus upon Yahweh's Torah and obedience to his divine instruction is the hallmark of this collection (Miller 1994:127). Delight in the Torah and obedience to it, stand both at the beginning and end of this collection in both Psalms 15 and 24 – whether we interpret them as entrance liturgies or not. The inclusio structure of these two psalms is a major reason to regard these ten psalms as a collection.⁷ It begins and ends with the identification of those who have access to Yahweh in the sanctuary as those who are obedient to the Torah.⁸ This collection is shaped, at least in part, by a ring or concentric structure in such a way that ends are in beginnings, beginnings in endings, and the centre looks both ways (Miller 1994:133).

⁷ Liess (2004:408) outlines the thematic links existing between these two texts. Cf. Barbiero (1999:311-313).

⁸ Cf. Zenger (2002:197 n. 49): "Sowohl in Ps 15,2-4 als auch in Ps 24,3-5 liegt eine auf Recht und Gerechtigkeit im sozialen Alltag ausgerichtete Ethik vor."

Psalm 19, which stands at the centre of this collection, can be depicted as a Torah and creation psalm. It places the joy of the Torah in the centre of this collection (Miller 1994:127). This psalm tells us quite clearly what the meditation of the heart is: it is study, reflection and keeping of Torah. There is also another central focus in this collection, namely the king. At the centre of this collection we find the royal psalms 18, 20 and 21, which form a frame around the central text of Psalm 19 (Barbiero 1999:240ff). These royal psalms are framed by the two laments, namely Psalms 17 and 22.

In terms of content and the theological profile of this collection the theme of “righteousness/justice” comes to the fore and specifically in two ways: on the one hand the supplicant is portrayed as “righteous”, and on the other hand the “saving righteousness” of Yahweh is depicted (Liess 2004:409; cf. Janowski 2000:55f.). Both aspects are inextricably linked to one another: this collection of psalms sketches the ideal picture of the “righteous/just” and abides by the fact that he receives help and salvation from Yahweh (Hossfeld & Zenger 1993a:13). The twin Psalms 16 and 23 portray the faithful protection of God. Whereas Psalms 15 and 24 give guidelines for the ethical behaviour of the righteous/just, Psalms 16 and 23 form the inner-frame of this collection and confidently sketch God’s lifelong protection.

Both Psalms 15 and 24 are illustrations of the ethical dimension of the Jerusalemite temple theology, which was inextricably linked to the theme of ethical norms and values (Otto 2007:31; Zenger 2002:195-199).⁹ These ethical norms were connected to the creation theology linked to the temple in Jerusalem. According to the temple theology, human beings did not have the ability to practice justice/righteousness (צדקה) on their own – in the sense of loyalty to the community (Otto 2004:89). Alternatively, a sense of loyalty to the community, as well as the ability to act in the favour of the community, was

⁹ Cf. in this regard Otto (1986:164): “Die Psalmen 15 und 24 gehören in den Kontext Jerusalemer Tempeltheologie: Der Gott JHWH dieser Theologie ist der Schöpfer- und Königsgott (Ps 24,2.8.10), der Herr der Gesamtheit von Wirklichkeit, so daß Kultgeschehen über den Kultraum hinaus Bedeutsamkeit für alle Lebensbezüge Israels hat. Die Teilnahme am Festgeschehen wird also nicht kultische Reinheit, sondern an qualifizierte Verhaltensweisen im Alltag gebunden”.

received (Ps 4:5 [MT 4:6] and Deut 33:19) through Yahweh's blessing (Pss 24:5; 89:15-17; 99:4; Isa 1:21-27; 33:5). Psalm 15:5 formulates the promise that the experience of chaos would never overwhelm the individual. Similarly to the divine king Yahweh, who transcended chaotic powers during the establishment of the world, the individual would transcend the experience of chaos in his/her life. Psalm 24:4-5 states that the fortune of the individual is based on his/her loyalty towards the community. In Psalm 24:6 the individually-stated definition of Torah-obedience is given an explicit corporate identity. An important concept of the ethics of the Psalms is the biblical idea that human beings receive from God the ability to deal righteously in a communal sense, as this ability is received through God's blessing only.

In its immediate context Psalm 16 is framed by Psalms 15 and 17; the first (Ps 15) is a temple entrance liturgy and the second (Ps 17) is a lament in terms of *Gattung* designation. Despite the fact that Psalms 15 and 16 seem to have little in common, given the different *Gattungen* they belong to, both of them share a temple theology which was profoundly shaped by the wisdom tradition. These texts thus reflect temple theology (Ps 15:1; Ps 16:1, 11bc) and wisdom tradition (Ps 15:2ff; Ps 16:7, 11a); both can be linked to an ethical understanding of these texts.

The introductory question in Psalm 15:1 "Who may dwell on your holy mountain?" is once again taken up in Psalm 16:9 by means of the keyword שָׁכַן ("to live/dwell"). On a contextual level the expression of trust (confidence) "my body also rests/dwells secure" can be interpreted as an answer to the question posed in Psalm 15:1. The supplicant of Psalm 16 can be regarded as one of those who "dwell" on God's holy mountain (Liess 2004:413). The expression יִשְׁכֵּן לְבִטָּח ("to live/dwell secure") should thus be read in connection with the topos "to dwell in the house of YHWH": the temple theological language in Psalm 16:1, 11bc also invokes this understanding.

Psalm 16:3-4 thematically link to the conditions of admission as outlined in Psalm 15. The supplicant's confession that he belongs to the "community of the faithful" is a fulfilment of Psalm 15:4 (Liess 2004:413). The request to honour those who fear Yahweh (15:4) corresponds to Psalm 16:3 in which the

supplicant states that he delights in those who are faithful, and who do not partake in syncretistic worship (16:4). This also corresponds to the supplicant's self-designation as one of Yahweh's חֲסִיד ("faithful") in 16:10. If the texts are thus read synchronically he adheres, at least in this regard, to the example of a just supplicant as set forth by Psalm 15 in view of the compositional unit Psalms 15-24 (Hossfeld & Zenger 1993a:105).

The wisdom motif of the "path/way" also links these two psalms together: "those who walk blamelessly" (Ps 15:2) corresponds to "path of life" (16:11 – אֲרֵץ חַיִּים). Both these expressions have profound ethical implications. Akin to the wisdom experience is the "way" which wisdom urges the Israelites to walk in, as it leads to, or secures, life in the full sense, prosperity and a relationship with God (Murphy 1992:925). The way itself is the conduct which incarnates the teachings of the sage(s). In the context of Psalms 15 and 16 this would imply the following: honesty, justice, a sense of responsibility, to refrain from syncretism and to adhere to Yahweh. Moral action here is thus determined by what is good for both the individual person as well as for the community he belongs to.

The promise in Psalm 15:5 ("will never be moved") and the expression of confidence in 16:8 ("I shall not be moved") also link these two texts together. In Psalm 15:5 this expression is explicitly linked to the deed-consequence-nexus. The protasis, "he who does these things" (15:5), is a summary of the preceding requirements of verses 2-5a and links the promise to specific behaviour as outlined in these verses. Psalm 16, however, differs in this regard from Psalm 15: the promise "not to be moved" is in the first instance a result of the divine's presence in the supplicant's life (Liess 2004:415).

If Psalm 17 is read in connection with Psalm 16, it becomes a concretization of the statements of confidence we encounter in the latter. The general petition in 16:1 has its counterpart in the more specific petition of 17:8, which is seen at the backdrop of the danger caused by the supplicant's enemies (17:9-12). This text reflects upon the life of the pious (Ps 16:10; Ps 17:7) who is in community with God. He will not be given up to Sheol (16:10), which in Psalm 17 is exemplified as the enemies. He takes refuge at God's right hand (16:1; 17:7);

God is his portion (16:5) in contrast to those people who find their portion in this world (17:14). It sketches this relationship as an enduring relationship – even in the face of death. The salvation, to which Psalm 17 witnesses, attains a lasting perspective (Liess 2004:420; cf. also Hossfeld & Zenger 1993b:178). The concluding statements of confidence in 16:11 and 17:15 are both embedded in temple theological concepts; e.g., the motif of the divine face. Psalm 17, however, deepens and intensifies the metaphor of life which was tradition-historically influenced by temple theology. It thus seems that Psalms 15-17 are the product of a carefully designed redactional-compositional process – *iuxtapositio* (Liess 2004:421).

This process also includes Psalm 18: (1) the metaphor of the “way” influenced by wisdom in Psalm 18:22, 31 [Eng 18:21, 30] (cf. Pss 15:2; 16:11; 17:5); (2) the perspective on the temple in Psalm 18:7 [Eng 18:6] (cf. Pss 15:1; 16:1, 11; 17:8, 15); (3) the motif of protection and the seeking of refuge in Psalm 18:3, 31 [Eng 18:2, 30] (cf. Pss 16:1; 17:7); (4) the motif of strength/steadiness: “and my feet did not slip” in Psalm 18:37 links to “will not be moved” (Pss 15:5; 16:8; 17:5); (5) the motif of the “right hand” of God in Psalm 18:36 [Eng 18:35] (Pss 16:11; 17:7; cf. 20:7; 21:9).

It has already been mentioned that Psalm 19, at the centre of this collection, is framed by the royal Psalms 18, 20 and 21). This collection is characterised by a ring structure. Whereas Psalm 16 is followed by the lament Psalm 17, the lament Psalm 22 is followed by Psalm 23, a psalm of confidence. In Psalm 16 the supplicant declares, “Yahweh is my chosen portion and my cup”, a way of speaking about his trust in Yahweh (Miller 1994:135). The only other place the expression “my cup” appears in the HB at all is in Psalm 23:5, as this collection moves to its close: “you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows”. In the first song of confidence used in this collection (Ps 16)¹⁰ and in the song of confidence that matches it near the end (Ps 23), the same motif is used to speak of God’s benevolence.

There are a few more motifs linking these two texts together (Liess 2004:426ff). First of all, the motif of the divine instructed “way”: “you show me

¹⁰ Cf. Groenewald (2008:91-93) for a discussion of the *Gattung* of Psalm 16.

the path of life”; “he leads me in paths of righteousness” (Pss 16:11; 23:3). Secondly, the notion of the presence of God (16:8; 23:4). This divine presence assures the supplicant that he will not be delivered into Sheol. In Psalm 23 this presence also assures the supplicant of the confidence that he will not experience the darkest valley. Thirdly, these two texts share a common temple theological motif occurring at the end of both texts. The cup also belongs to the temple motif. Fourthly, in both psalms the contrast between the sphere of death and the sanctuary as a guarantor of life is emphasized (Pss 16:10-11; 23:4, 6). This fullness of life is attained in the nearness of God, and will be valid “all the days of my life”.

Psalm 23 can be regarded as the theological pendant to Psalm 16, considering the theme of death on the one hand and the temple theology with the sanctuary as the place of life on the other hand (Hossfeld & Zenger 1993a:109). Psalm 23 intensifies the statements of confidence we encounter in Psalm 16 (especially v. 10): it witnesses to the divine presence even in view of the sphere of death. It further illuminates the temple references of Psalm 16 – similarly to Psalms 15 and 17. Within this compositional unit, we thus move from confidence (Ps 16), through the experience of distress and salvation (Pss 17; 18; 22), to confidence again (Ps 23).

We thus arrive at the end of this collection of psalms, returning once again to questions about what true obedience and true piety are. Or, how does one seek Yahweh? Psalm 24 echoes Psalm 15. The direction indicated by the beginning and the centre of this collection, becomes the goal at the end. The climax is this direction, which however is found in the declaration of Yahweh’s kingship (Miller 1994:139). The king of glory is Yahweh, the Lord.

CONCLUSION

The ethics of the HB is thus based on insight into the character of God. Yahweh, the God who behaves ethically, also requires ethical behaviour from his followers. Obedience to the declared will of God is a strong justification for ethical obligation in the books of the Hebrew Scriptures. The justification for

ethical deeds is furthermore based in the festive cultic community. The scribes writing the biblical books regarded “the good” as that “way of life” (Ps 16:11) which God instructed and demanded of human beings. Ethical behaviour becomes visible when it is accomplished through experience and reason, and is mediated through teaching.

In this article these statements were paradigmatically illustrated by means of Psalm 16, as well as its relationship with the surrounding texts within the small corpus of Psalms 15-24, which is profoundly rooted in the Jerusalemite temple theology. Psalm 15:1 puts this collection firmly within the view of the temple as the place of divine protection, refuge and blessed life, thus highlighting its ethical dimension.

In this article I have attempted to demonstrate that the Psalms are no less important with regard to the ethics of the HB. The temple theology in Jerusalem was firmly connected to the theme of ethical norms and values. The wisdom tradition is also linked to ethical behaviour. Although Psalm 16 does not belong to the traditional category of the wisdom psalms, wisdom terminology permeates this psalm. The text of Psalm 16 demonstrates the ethical norms that were connected to the metaphor of the “temple theology of life”. The supplicant of Psalm 16 not only adheres to Yahweh as his refuge, but also proclaims the fact that Yahweh shows him the path of life (16:11). This path of life not only indicates fullness of life flowing forth from an ethical lifestyle, but also indicates the blessing of Yahweh bestowed upon the supplicant, giving him the ability to act in favour of the community. The supplicant’s confidence of protection from Sheol is a result of his ethical actions linked to the character of Yahweh. The ethical “way” portrayed to us by Psalm 16 thus links this text to the surrounding psalms on a compositional level.

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A. Groenewald
Faculty of Theology
Department of Old Testament Studies
University of Pretoria
Pretoria 0002
South Africa
Email: alphonso.groenewald@up.ac.za