

PSALM 133 AS A RESPONSE TO XENOPHOBIC ATTITUDES IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY

SS Ndogo

Psalm 133 celebrates brotherly unity as an ideal that commands divine blessing. Similarly, the African philosophical outlook of “ubuntu” upholds that ideal. With that common ideological perspective within the biblical and African traditional culture in mind, this article seeks to redress the xenophobic attitudes prevalent in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The May 2008 xenophobic attacks in South Africa made headlines world-wide. The grim picture of Mr Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, a Mozambican national, burning alive (Sunday Times, July 28, 2008) illustrated the level of violence to which the perpetrators of these acts were willing to descend to against foreigners who were allegedly disadvantaging them. Khupiso’s article, entitled “Hunting down the Foreigners” (Sunday Times, July 28, 2008), is a reminder that whatever the issues were that gave rise to these violent attacks – which left 62 dead and 30 000 displaced - xenophobic attitudes remain, though they have

seemingly subsided from the widespread levels we formerly experienced. The article reveals that there are particular local words that foreigners supposedly neither know nor are able to pronounce (e.g. "indonwani" - elbow) which are used to authenticate one's origins; not to mention the rather derogatory label "Kwerekwere" that particularise fellow Africans.

This paper intends to take advantage of xenophobic attitudes as a matter that has currency among the people, to recall that interpersonal relationships are strongly embedded in biblical and African cultures. As such, retaining xenophobic attitudes effectively implies rejecting the anthropocentrism of "ubuntu" or "hunhu"¹ that make us who we are. At the same time, a majority of South Africans claim to be Christian – one

¹ "Ubuntu" and "hunhu" (the equivalent Shona concept) resonates from the strong subscription to communal identity and harmony which is characteristic of African society (see J. M. Kapolyo, *The Human condition: Christian Perspectives through African eyes*. (Leicester: IVP, 2005), 34-45; and M. Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona*. (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1973), 5.

would assume some Christian representation among the perpetrators of the xenophobic attacks. Perhaps, the question of identity is critical to the challenges we currently face in South Africa. It seems that the key to convivial interpersonal relationships resonates from a resolved personal identity. Unless and until we resolve (or settle) in our minds who we are, the disturbing attitudes will remain.

With this in mind we come to Psalm 133, which celebrates the beauty of brotherly unity. The title - “A song of the ascent. Of David” – indicates both the body to which this song belongs, as well as the composer. Firstly, the title “Songs of the ascents” is ascribed to Psalms 120-134. It seems that these fifteen compositions were sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem (Anderson 1992: 848; Mays 1994: 385-7; Boice 1998: 1070; Wilcock 2001: 219). Because of the topographical situation of Jerusalem on a hill, a visit there virtually from any direction was going up, hence the term “ascents”. It seems logical to associate the term *mā-ā-lā(h)* (“steps”), which may have rhythmic connotations, with the three annual pilgrim feasts (Dt 16:16) (Hughes & Laney 2001: 224).² For the purposes of this paper we need to point out that these

². For the purposes of this paper, we do not have space to dialogue with the various possibilities that have been put forward

pilgrimages functioned as natural rallying points, bringing together a number of people for a common cause. In addition to this, we are indebted to Kaminsky (2008: 123) and Ateek (2008:159) for pointing out that these pilgrims were made up of both Israelites; and the aliens who subscribed and participated in Israel's cultic life. By the time we read of the audience present on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:5-11, there were God-fearing Jews from every nation, as well as converts to Judaism – indicating that alien participation in Israelite cultic practices was a long established and acceptable practice.

Secondly, if the composer is indeed King David - as the title suggests - then he would be no stranger to conflict situations. His experiences, particularly in the area of sibling rivalry (1 Sm 17:27-31) and his flight from King Saul (1 Sm 18-31), were undoubtedly pivotal in concretising the sentiments of this song. With that in mind, we now turn our attention to the details of the song. We will approach these details under two headings; the "Goodness of Brotherly Unity" (133:1), and the "Great-

as the original function of these songs, other than to register some awareness that the precise meaning of the term "ascents" is debatable. For the purposes of this article, we have adopted what seems to be the most plausible meaning.

ness of Brotherly Unity" (133:2-3). The findings of this study will then be utilised towards their implications for possible redressing of the xenophobic attitudes that are prevalent in South Africa today.

THE GOODNESS OF BROTHERLY UNITY PS. 133:1

The Psalm opens with the interjection *hin·nē(h)* “behold”, to call to attention something not to be missed. This is followed by the interrogative particle *mā(h)* “how”, used twice in this verse; not to raise a question, but as a quality marker.³ The quality issue to which our attention is drawn is the goodness and pleasantness of brotherly unity. The adjective *ṭōḇ* “good”, used twice in this song (133:2), describes something of great value which is, as such, highly desirable. The concept is immediately paralleled to the adjective *nā·im* “pleasant”, to add the aesthetic dimension of delightful or pleasurable to the eyes. Both adjectives of goodness and pleasantness here serve to modify the core issue of this song – the dwelling together of brothers in unity.

³ See J. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew*. Electronic edition. (Oak Harbour: Logos Research Systems Inc, 1997), DBLH 4537 #6.

A closer look at this core issue centres around three significant concepts. Firstly, the verb *yā·šāḇ* “inhabit” (or to dwell, live, stay, i.e. be in a place for any period of time), usually implying a longer amount of time.⁴ This conception is affirmed by Strong’s analysis, which reveals that of the 1079 occurrences the verb is consistently translated with the idea of permanence in mind.⁵ Allen (1983: 212) is correct in assuming that this phenomenon, rather than its precise location, seems to be in view here.

Secondly, the noun *‘āḥî·m* “brothers”⁶ (in the plural construct), can be

⁴J. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew*. Electronic edition. (Oak Harbour: Logos Research Systems Inc, 1997), DBLH 4537 #6.

⁵J. Strong, *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible: Showing every word of the text of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order*. Electronic edition. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996), H3427.

⁶ See appendix for the word map that shows the variety of ways that the concept is used in the OT.

used in a variety of ways which includes the following: a full male **sibling** with the same mother and father (Gn 4:2); **half-brother**, i.e. a brother with the same father but different mothers (Gn 37:4); **blood relative**, i.e. a person of the same close clan family, such as an uncle or aunt (Gn 9:25; 14:14); **relative**, i.e. a person in close clan association who is not necessarily a direct blood relation (Gn 31:32); **friend**, associate,, i.e. one in a very close association to another (Gn 29:4; 2 Sm 1:26); **countryman**, fellow-kinsman, fellow, one's own people, i.e. a member of the same race or nation (Ex 2:11; Lv 25:46).⁷ From these connotations we are able to gather that the concept "brother" is open to a variety of human relations. Since we are concerned with the plight of foreigners, we need to state that, as early as the exodus, the presence of foreigners is recognised among God's people. Instructions were specifically issued which intimate their treatment as equals. Thus, we argue the concept "brother" would have applied to them as well (Ex 12:49; 22:21; 23:9; Lv 17:8-9; Dt 1:16-17).⁸ We may surmise from these sug-

⁷J. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew*. Electronic edition. (Oak Harbour: Logos Research Systems Inc, 1997), DBLH 278, #10.

⁸ The instructions in Leviticus 19:33-34 are compelling;

gestions that similar undertones should be implied when we refer to someone with whom we have no known blood relations as “brother”.

Kaminsky (2008: 123) deduces:

The extension of such loving behaviour toward the resident alien should not be taken as a signal that [Leviticus 19:33-34] extended this command to all non-Israelites. Resident aliens are a very specific group of people who, according to Priestly tridents consists of those non-Israelites who dwelled in the land of Israel with the people of Israel.

Kaminsky’s specification of resident alien is helpful in that it correlates

"When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God". The Egyptian experience is used as a reference point for the fair treatment of foreigners.

with the xenophobic context that we have in mind. The instructions in Leviticus 19:33-34 are compelling:

When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. ³⁴ The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

Ateek's (2008: 159) commentary of this text deserves our attention at this juncture when he writes:

This commandment transcends the natural propensity of humans, and recognises the humanity of others, and reaches out in love to them. Undoubtedly, this commandment reflects a very progressive view when comprehended against its own historical and environmental context. One can only applaud its deeper and more enlightened re-

ligious insights. The understanding of neighbour has been broadened, and the circle has been enlarged to include the resident alien.

Although Ateek concedes to the limitations of the aliens' full equality; his observations here are significant in pointing out an evolving idea, which by the time of the recording of the Davidic sentiments in Psalm 133 one can assume has undergone some considerable development. Thirdly, the adverb *yā-hāḏ* "together" espouses unity. This sense of togetherness is elucidated in the comparative usages of the concept in other Old Testament references such as Job 38:7 and Ezra 4:3. The ideas of community in action, of oneness and unity, are prominent in the employment of this concept.⁹ A similar sense of community is seen as a characteristic emblem of our African culture. In his description of the interferences of Westernization to the social balance and stability of African values; Adadevoh (2006: 11) writes:

⁹F. Brown, S. R. Driver & C. A. Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Electronic edition. (Oak Harbour, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000), 403.

What concerns most keen observers of these changes is not the simple fact that changes are occurring. It is becoming increasingly obvious that changes are not for the better in all cases. For example, replacing the African sense of communalism, where everyone is his brother's keeper, with Western individualism is not necessarily a change for the better.

Adadevoh's sentiments remind us of the much cherished social equilibrium of togetherness which (perhaps) made socialism attractive to most of our political liberators. He continues to say "Western modernization brings wealth and technological advancement, but fails to adequately provide conditions that optimize the humanization of life" (Adadevoh 2006: 12). Interestingly, with particular reference to South Africa, Koopman (2007: 178) cites the anti-apartheid clergyman Archbishop Dennis Hurley as ascribing "westernization and modernization processes to the breakdown of indigenous institutions and making age-old African customs irrelevant". Globalization implies and requires that we can and should adopt values from elsewhere; however, we cannot afford to off-load our own values in the process; values that are ideologi-

cally superior, such as solidarity. At this point it is prudent to discuss the immortality of values. The articles by Murove (2008: 24-38)¹⁰ and Gathogo (2008: 39-53)¹¹ clearly argue from positions of African ethics

¹⁰ M. F. Murove, "The Convergence of Ethical Concerns between African Ethics and Process Thought with Specific Reference to Relationality and Immortality of Values." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 130 (2008), 29-38.

Murove's article argues that African ethics and process thought converge on the ethical similarities such as ethical concern for the wellbeing of the future because of the primacy that is given to relationality an immortality of value. He concludes that the idea of the immortality of values provides us with a superior foundation upon which we can build an ethic of solidarity in our existence.

¹¹ J. Gathogo, African Philosophy as Expressed in the Concepts of Hospitality and Ubuntu. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 130 (2008), 39-53. Gathogo reflects on African philosophy as expressed in the concepts of hospitality

and philosophy respectively to espouse that we still have our African values as a frame of reference in addressing the challenges that we face today.

The idea, then, of the goodness of brotherly unity as espoused in Psalm 133:1 rests on the fact that the noun “brother” is open to a wide range of relationships which encapsulate the value of communalism. The verb “inhabit”, and the adverb “together”, contribute to making a strong case for a communalism in reading this Psalm.

THE GREATNESS OF BROTHERLY UNITY PS. 133:2-3

The significance of brotherly unity is derived from similes that bring into perspective two critical images. The first image revisits the historical anointing of Aaron into priesthood (Ex 29:7; Lv 8:12). The description particularises the *šē-mēn* “oil” as *tôb* “good”, to recall the adjective used of brotherly unity in the first verse. In this case it perhaps recalls the special ingredients that were used for the anointing oil as described in Exodus

and “*ubuntu*” as relevant in the construction of post-colonial Africa.

30:22-29 that made it sacred.¹² However, that verse also emphatically specifies the descent of the oil (*yā·rāḏ*, “running down”)¹³ from the head

¹² In view of the sacredness of the anointing oil, Exodus 30:31-33 issues the following instructions to the Israelites: “Say to the Israelites, 'This is to be my sacred anointing oil for the generations to come. Do not pour it on men's bodies and do not make any oil with the same formula. It is sacred, and you are to consider it sacred. Whoever makes perfume like it and whoever puts it on anyone other than a priest must be cut off from his people'”.

¹³ *yā·rāḏ* is used twice in this verse, and “down” occurs once, to actualise the threefold repetitive pattern “running down ... running down ... down” which we will see in verse 3. We disagree with J. M. Boice, *Psalms Volume 3: Psalms 107-150*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 1159, sentiments that this pattern emphasises that the blessing of Aaron’s anointing was from above himself; that is from

down to Aaron's beard and the collar of his robes. Wilcock (2001: 244) regards this repetitive pattern as descriptive of a natural process that, once ignited, is unstoppable. That is the phenomenology of brotherly unity that the Psalmist seems to dwell on as he compares it to possibly one of the most significant spiritual events in Israel's economy – the anointing of Aaron as the High Priest. The anointing of Aaron is described by Allen (1983: 215) as follows:

The sacramental anointing was a divine commissioning (cf. 1 Sm 9:1) of this majestic prototype, so that he might be Yahweh's mediator at the sanctuary. The family of God were gathered at the cultic place where fragrant grace flowed down.

Thus, apart from Aaronic anointing, it was humanly impossible for the Israelites to have dealings with God.

The second image, which occurs in verse three, also plays upon phenomena of great significance to the Israelites. It describes the *ṭāl* "dew" from Mount Hermon. As in verse two, the verb *yā-rād* "coming down" is used of the dew as it descends to Mount Zion. Boice (1998: 1159)

God.

reminds us that “Hermon was the highest mountain in Israel, located several hundred miles north of Jerusalem. It was proverbial for the dew that fell on its lofty reaches. Here that dew is also said to fall on Zion, which is not very high”. The significance of the “dew”, which corresponds to that of the “oil” in the way this song is constructed, is perhaps better represented in the following explanation:

The blessing of God’s people living in unity is like the oil of blessing being poured not only over the high priest Aaron but also over the entire city of Jerusalem. Moist, Mediterranean air blown inland to the foothills of Mount Hermon (9,200 feet high) results in a very heavy dew fall in the area mentioned (133:3). This represented the abundant blessing of unity that God would bring to Jerusalem.

Hughes & Laney 2001: 225

It seems then from the above, that the amount of “dew” that was experienced in this part of the world was perhaps of greater significance than what we may be used to (see Is 18:4; Dn 4:15,33; Hs 14:5 Mi 5:7; Zch 8:12). In fact a number of Old Testament passages cite the with-

drawal of dew as a part of divine judgment (2 Sm 1:21; 1 Ki 17:1; Hg 1:10). If our reading is reasonable then, just like the anointing oil was a necessity for priestly commissioning and the ensuring of spiritual life, dew was equally imperative for crop life and the sustaining of the greater populace of the described world (see Van Gemeren 1991: 817).

From these images the goodness of brotherly unity is given much greater significance. Beginning with what is purely a human experience, from there moving to a religiously significant event, as well as a physically imperative natural phenomena; we can now see why the song ends as it does, “For there Yahweh ordained his blessing, even life forever”. Grammatically the adverb *šām* “here” seems to refer back to the subject of this song - the blessedness of brotherly unity. At this juncture the closing statement celebrates unity as a divinely sanctified reality that commands his blessing. The nature of the blessing is described as “life” itself, which McCann Jr. (1996: 1214) describes as the fullness of enjoying life in the presence of God as his gift. In so doing, McCann Jr. (1996: 1215) concludes that when God’s people gather together in an expression of brotherly unity, they are in touch with the true source of their life. We say that the greatest of human good, brotherly unity, begets dignity.

IMPLICATIONS

To come back to the issue of xenophobia that forms the main concern of this paper, we would like to draw towards a close with the following implications.

Firstly, brotherly unity is a compelling value for the ongoing transformation of our nation. In her book, *Laying Ghosts to Rest: Dilemmas of the Transformation in South Africa*, Mamphela Ramphele (2008: 13) explains her conception of transformation as follows:

The term "transformation" is used here to denote fundamental changes in the structures, institutional arrangements, policies, modes of operation and relationships within society. In this all-embracing description, we particularise the aspect of "relationships within society", which is critical to our discussion, as demanding a radicalisation of current attitudes and actualisation of the value of *ubuntu* embedded in our African cultures.

Ramphele (2008: 13) continues to say that “a successfully transformed South Africa would be characterised by the antithesis of all that was bad about the apartheid system: non-racialism, non-sexism, and social relationships consistent with the observance of human rights and greater equity”. In making this statement, we cannot overlook the zeroing in on the critical nature of human relationships in advancing and realising the ideals of democracy. The adversative notion to Psalm 133 suggests that bad interpersonal relationships have wide ranging counterproductive implications.

Secondly, brotherly unity is embedded in our African cultural values. In order to not miss out on the opportunity to expand on the concept “*ubuntu*” cited above, Kapolyo (2005: 34) rightly calls it “a Bantu ontological noun describing what it means to be a member of humankind”. He explains further that “*ubuntu* indicates the presence in one’s life of such human characteristics as kindness, charity, and love of one’s neighbour” (Kapolyo 2005: 35). We cannot ignore the relational overtones that the concept projects. In his attempt to capture the essence of this concept, Schwarz (2005: 30) surmises the following:

When looking for a common denominator
that characterises the [Southern hemi-
sphere] as a whole, the Xhosa word *ubuntu*,

which Archbishop Desmond Tutu has placed at the centre of his theology, seems to fit best. The concept *ubuntu*, which is to a certain degree related to the Tanzanian *ujamaa* or the Kenyan *harambee*, is difficult to translate into a Western language. The closest equivalent that I have been able to come up with is the English term *solidarity*.

Schwarz's postulation of solidarity as the essence of *ubuntu* is perhaps validated through the Zulu proverb "*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (A person is a person because of people).

Another place where solidarity is expressed is through the greetings as O' Donovan (2000:8) explains:

The high value placed on human relationships in Africa is the reason why extensive greeting, even between close relatives, is so important. There is often quite a ritual of greetings between people upon their meet-

ing of the day. This time of greeting is an enjoyable time of sharing, but it also serves to continue and extend an existing relationship. It is felt that a person cannot presume upon the relationship of yesterday or last month to care for the relationship needs of today.

More significantly, Schwarz (2005: 31) deduces that “the *koinonia* concept of the New Testament and the whole thought structure of the Old Testament, has a close affinity to *ubuntu*”.

Thirdly, as already spelt out above, brotherly unity is an ideal celebrated in both the Old and New Testament accounts of the Bible. It is our opinion that we do not need to look further than which we already have, our African cultural values and biblical injunctions, to address xenophobic attitudes today.

CONCLUSION

Towards redressing xenophobic attitudes in South Africa today; firstly, we have argued on the basis of the validity of “*ubuntu*” as a commonly subscribed to African philosophy on life. In appealing to that subscrip-

tion, we are saying that we do not need to go out of our way in refuting xenophobic attitude, as it is the true foreigner to our culture.

Secondly, we have presented the affirmation of Psalm 133 through the core issue of "Brotherly Unity" which reveals that we have a mutual philosophical position between the African culture and biblical injunctions. On the basis that cultural and biblical viewpoints are not in contradiction with one another, it stands to reason that xenophobic attitudes are untenable.

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Sampson S Ndogo

BTC Southern Africa

PO Box 50710 Randburg, 2125

sam@btc.co.za