

Social values and the interpretation of Psalm 123

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ABSTRACT

It is contended in this article that Biblical texts can no longer be interpreted without taking cognisance of the contribution that the social sciences can make to the process of interpretation. Psalm 123 is analysed stichometrically and its poetic features are described. The most important social values that are reflected in the psalm are then discussed in order to determine what contribution its cultural context can make to the process of interpretation. It is concluded that the real issue of the psalm is to have the honour of Yahweh restored and that this can only be recognised if its cultural context and its social values are understood.

A INTRODUCTION

Psalm 123 is a poem of great quality.¹ It has all the necessary poetic features such as parallelism, simile, metaphor, repetition, rhyme, and delayed identification. Its form seems to complement its contents beautifully.² But although we may be able to analyse the poem in terms of its grammar and structure, its literary strategy and its meaning will be revealed only partially unless the possible contribution that its cultural context may make to its interpretation is exploited.

The modern reader of ancient texts unconsciously supplies his or her own cultural background in interpreting such texts. Such a cultural context will be based at least partially upon a knowledge of ancient Israelite customs. But more often than not it will be biased through our own experience and culture. Modern, especially Western, culture diverges more and more from that of ancient Mediterranean societies. In this short article, I should like to suggest that it is no longer possible (or necessary) to interpret Biblical texts without taking cognisance of available reconstructions of the social values which prevailed at the time of origin of those texts.

In order to prove this surmise, I will now proceed to analyse the poetical features of Psalm 123 and afterwards attempt to show how information about the relevant social values can help us to understand and interpret the psalm more fully.

B PSALM 123 AS A POEM

		שיר המעלות	1	A Song of Ascents.
I	A	1 אליך נשאתי את-עיני הישבי בשמים:		To you I lift up my eyes, who are enthroned in the heavens.
	B	2 הנה כעיני עבדים אל-יד אדוניהם	2	Behold, as the eyes of servants to the hand of their master,
		3 כעיני שפחה אל-יד גברתה		as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
		4 כן עינינו אל-יהוה אלהינו עד שיחננו:		so our eyes (look) to the Lord, our God, till he be gracious to us.
	C	5 חננו יהוה חננו כירב שבענו בוו:	3	Be gracious to us, O Lord, be gracious to us, for we have had more than enough of contempt!
		6 רבת שבעה-לה נפשו הלעג השאננים הבוז לגאיונים:	4	Too long our soul has been satiated with the derision of the undisturbed, with the contempt of the arrogant.

According to some commentators, הלעג in verse four should be changed to לעג.³ But this is not necessary if we read (as Hengstenberg⁴ has suggested) a comma between the two words: 'with the derision, the undisturbed'. The Kethib of the last word should, however, be accepted with the majority of commentators.⁵ Except for its heading, which was added later and which should not be considered as part of the poem, there seems to be six verse lines in the poem (the numbers immediately to the left of the Hebrew text). These six lines can be grouped into three strophes, namely A, B, and C. Strophe A is demarcated from the rest through its using a first person singular form (the rest of the poem is written in the 1st person plural).⁶ But it also links up with the rest of the poem through the mentioning of 'eyes', a word which is repeated three times in strophe B. Strophe B is demarcated from strophes A and C through the reference to Yahweh in the third person masculine singular, while the other two strophes address Yahweh directly. The three verse lines of strophe B are closely interconnected: they form one linguistic sentence and are constructed around the simile of the relationship between servants and masters. By using a male and a female version of the simile, an external parallelism is formed.

The two verse lines of strophe C are linked together through parallelism and the consequent repetition of the words רב, בוז, and שבע. Strophe B is linked to strophe C through repetition of the verb 'to be gracious'. Through this connection, the idea is created that Yahweh's being gracious to the suppliants would entail deliverance from the 'contempt' and 'derision' by 'undisturbed' and 'arrogant' people.

In addition to those poetic features already mentioned, there is also an internal parallelism between the second and third stichs of verse line six. Another feature is a number of instances of rhyme (four times a hemistich ends on *-enu* and two other words have the same ending; while the last two hemistichs also rhyme).⁷ As a result of the repetition of words or stems, other instances of rhyme, assonance, and alliteration⁸ can also be pointed out although it may be difficult to define the exact effect of this in all instances. These features and the rhyme that have been mentioned may serve mainly to bind the different segments of the poem together and to emphasise its main thrust through auditive repetition. There is also the metaphor of discontent twice being portrayed as satiation.

But one of the most striking features of the poem is its delayed identification. This is found in strophe B in an extended comparison which runs over three verse lines, constituting double enjambment and delaying the conclusion of the comparison until the end. This is probably done to emphasise the prolonged suffering of Yahweh's people and to heighten the focus on the expected intervention which is (linguistically) only reached in the last word of the strophe. This is a magnificent piece of poetry and its dramatic effect is heightened through the avoidance of any verb whatsoever until the temporal phrase with its final verb form is reached in the last hemistich. Use is made of both genders in the external parallel (servants and masters being parallel to maid and mistress), a fact which also suggests comprehensiveness. The same is also true of the parallelism in verse lines five and six, where נפש and its verb form are used as a feminine complement to the male forms in the first half of the parallelism.

This process is then reversed, since the verb to 'be gracious' is repeated two times in the very next hemistich. This transition forms the nexus of the poem, since it helps to establish a chiasmus between strophes B and C: Parallelism in verse lines two and three; use of 'be gracious' (in verse line 4); use of 'be gracious' (twice in verse line 5); parallelism in verse line six. The last parallelism has the same function and the same effect as the first, namely to emphasise the

prolonged suffering and satiation of the people with the situation (the use of both genders to this effect has already been noted).

C FIRST RÉSUMÉ ON THE MEANING OF PSALM 123

What is the meaning of this poem or prayer then, according to the poetic analysis? The truth is that we do not really know what is meant by the reference to the hand of a master and a mistress.⁹ Is it a situation in which the servant is being punished and in which the master would make a sign to put an end to the punishment? Is the servant suffering from some or other affliction so that the master needs to intervene by touching the servant? Or perhaps the master would make a sign with his hand to put an end to some or other strenuous task which is severely taxing the strength of the servant.¹⁰ All that can be deduced from the poetic composition is that Israel as a people is suffering under the arrogance and possibly the dominion of gentiles and that they are praying to God to put an end to this.¹¹ It may, however, also be Israelite leaders who are oppressing religious members of their own people.¹²

D SOCIAL VALUES RELEVANT TO PSALM 123

When we turn to an investigation of the social values reflected by the psalm, it is perhaps best to start at the end of the poem. An important observation in this regard is that the request for Yahweh to 'be gracious' is made in the context of honour and shame words. Most Old Testament scholars will know by now that honour and shame were core values in ancient Mediterranean communities, including those of the Old and the New Testaments. Honour was a commodity that could be earned by someone or conferred on someone by a superior. It was a scarce commodity and the desire for honour was increased by the fact that societies were, generally speaking, agonistic in nature. Men had to compete for honour. A claim to honour could, however, result in shame when that claim was not substantiated by society.

In religion, honour resulted when a deity substantiated the claim of his or her client about a special relationship with the deity. Well-being and prosperity would amount to substantiation of a claim of a special relationship between the worshipper and God. Bad fortune would question such a claim.

The use of words which refer to shame, such as 'contempt' and 'derision',

therefore indicate a situation in which the worshippers experienced an unwillingness on the part of Yahweh to substantiate their claim of a special relationship with him (cf Kraus 1966:845). The words 'undisturbed' and 'arrogant' indicate that the opponents of the worshippers disregarded the honour of Yahweh in their dealings with those who worship him, but also that no action is taken against them on the part of Yahweh. Arrogance is the attitude of someone who submits a false claim to honour. Such a claim should be exposed and the person who makes the claim should be publicly reprimanded and thus be shamed. When these matters are not put right, the arrogant person remains 'undisturbed'.¹³

Apart from the first person singular speaker in the first verse line, the list of *dramatis personae* in Psalm 123 comprises the first person plural speakers (the 'us'), Yahweh their God, and their opponents, the 'undisturbed' and 'arrogant' people. The system of relationship which is reflected is typically that of the patronage.¹⁴ A patron, in this instance Yahweh, has clients toward whom he is expected to act in a certain way. 'The patron-client relationship is a social, institutional arrangement by means of which economic, political, or religious institutional relationships are outfitted with an overarching quality of kinship or family feeling' (Malina 1998c:151). The patron is like a father and his clients like loving and grateful children. Both parties also acted as was expected of fathers and children. Mutual satisfaction was the objective: clients had needs which had to be met; patrons received grants of honour and the accolades of affection (Malina 1998c:152). But patrons had no obligation to grant a favour. To give access to his resources was an act of grace. When the worshippers in Psalm 123 ask Yahweh to 'be gracious', the meaning is therefore that they want him to act in accordance with the patron-client relationship, to treat them with compassion like a father would treat his children who honour him (cf MI 3:17, 18). They are in fact asking Yahweh to restore this relationship, since grace points to a renouncing of one's claim to honour as precedence to gain a privileged relationship to God (Moxnes 1996:29). This would have the effect that they would receive honour when Yahweh vindicates their claim to having a special relationship to him and their claim that he is the most powerful patron of all gods. At the same time, the false claim to honour of the people who do not serve Yahweh as patron, will be exposed. They will be the objects of derision and contempt, while the worshippers of Yahweh will receive the honour and recognition due to them.

In this regard it is necessary also to refer to a very important and enlightening

article by S M Olyan (1996) on the points of contact between the sphere of covenant relations and the notions of honour and shame. According to his findings, treaty partners in Old Testament times had the obligation to honour and to love each other, while in non-covenantal social contexts it was only the persons of inferior status who consistently honoured their superiors (Olyan 1996:204). To honour a loyal treaty partner confirmed publicly the strength of existing covenant bonds; to diminish or shame someone who was a loyal covenant partner would communicate at least a loss of status (Olyan 1996:205). There was a strong competition for position in a hierarchy of vassals in their relationship to a suzerain. A suzerain had the obligation to love all his vassals (as they had the obligation to love him), but he could distinguish between them by means of honour. He could honour one vassal more than another (Olyan 1996:207). Since these rules also applied to the patron-client relationship of a god to his worshippers, it may mean that the 'undisturbed' and 'arrogant' people mentioned in Psalm 123 may also refer to Israelites. The most obvious interpretation would of course be to understand it as a reference to other nations.¹⁵ If the author of Psalm 123 had a strong notion about the universal power of Yahweh, it could well be that he had people from other nations in mind. But, as seems to have been the case in Malachi 3:17 and 18, it could also be a reference to non-believing Israelites.

Armed with this information on the meaning of grace, contempt, and arrogance in verse lines five and six, we may now turn our attention to the comparison in verse lines two to four and to the question about what kind of sign the hand of the master or the mistress would make. As a preliminary remark, we may note that the comparison of the relationship between worshipper and Yahweh with that between a servant/slave and his or her master fits squarely into the milieu of authoritarianism. Authoritarianism is a cluster of values rather than a simple value and it is rooted in the social experience of authority nearly always sanctioned by force (Malina 1998a:12). Another value in this cluster is that of domination orientation, a value that imposes sanctions of power in order to gain honour (cf Pilch 1998:48). Authoritarianism is notable in Psalm 123 in the introductory phrase 'To you I lift up my eyes, who are *enthroned in the heavens*'. The honour and authority of Yahweh are noticeable in this form of address.¹⁶ By comparing themselves with servants or slaves, the worshippers also acknowledge the power and honour of Yahweh over them. This is also emphasised by the title 'our God'

in verse line four and by the emphasis on the patience of the worshippers in the choice of the comparison. There is no hubris in the complaint of the worshippers that they are sated with the derision of arrogant people. Despite the fact that the psalm is a complaint addressed to Yahweh, it is very close in its sentiment to that of Psalm 131 ('my heart is not haughty ... I have calmed and quieted my soul'). The reason for this lies in the choice of the simile. Servants do not get fed-up with their masters, they get fed-up with the arrogance of those who do not recognise the honour of their masters and as a consequence also dishonour the servants of that master.

And now, finally, what is it that the servant or slave would be looking for at the hand of his master? It is important to remember that hands and feet in the Bible are correlative terms that refer to the human capabilities of doing, making, building, having a physical effect on others and on one's environment (Malina 1998b:98). It refers to an area of human capability that can be defined as 'purposeful activity', the purpose being to acquire or preserve honour (cf Malina 1998b:98). Although it is possible that the psalmist had a specific action of a master in mind, such as the laying on of a hand to signify empowerment or the granting of a favour, the most probable explanation for the reference to the hand is that the servant is waiting for some action (any action) on the part of the master. In the situation in which the worshippers were, patiently waiting for the intervention of Yahweh in their unjust suffering from the contempt and derision of others, any sign of activity from Yahweh would be a good sign.¹⁷ Slaves could wait for hours on end for a sign from their owner: a beckoning of the slave with the hand, an attempt to gather clothes or belongings together in order to rise and go into action. Any movement of the hand of Yahweh would suffice, for it would suggest that the time has come for action. That action would entail intervention on behalf of his worshippers to grant them the honour they deserve and to shame their enemies.

E CONCLUSION

It seems that a more detailed knowledge of the social values of Ancient Israel has indeed a contribution to make to the understanding of this psalm. We feel much more certain in our description of what is at stake in this psalm. It has become clear through the investigation that the relationship between the worshippers who are mentioned in the psalm and Yahweh is strained as a result of what they see as

the inactivity of their God. They experience a situation which is not congruent to their belief that their God is the pre-eminent power in the universe. And yet they still honour him. The imagery of Psalm 123 suggests simultaneously the greatest degree of discontent with the situation and the greatest degree of deference towards God and of humility before him.¹⁸ There is anger, but the anger is not directed to God. It is directed to the usurpers of the honour of Yahweh. It is directed to the worshippers of other gods, to people who do not recognise the honour of him who is enthroned in the heavens. And therefore they wait patiently for their God to put things right. They wait, their eyes watching his hand. For his hand is the symbol of action. They wait for him to act, to show mercy to them. And mercy is tantamount to restoring his own honour, and the honour of those who worship him. This psalm really is a prayer for the restoration of the honour of Yahweh.

NOTES

- 1 Leupold (1977:878) calls it a 'litle, attractive psalm'. Kittel (1922:393) has described it as '(eine) schöne Liedchen', comparable to Psalm 126; De Liagre Böhl & Gemser (1968:177) as a small, pure psalm ('kleine, zuivere psalm').
- 2 According to Weiser (1955:518) it is a short, unpretentious prayer arranged around a single image of moving tenderness ('von rührender Zartheit'). This description, however, does not seem to take account of all its other poetic features.
- 3 Cf Valeton (1913:291).
- 4 Hengstenberg (1847:37). Dahood (1970:210) has also noted several instances of a double use of the definite article in construct phrases in North-Western Semitic languages. Cf also Viviers (1990:56).
- 5 Cf Viviers (1990:56).
- 6 According to Kraus (1966:843), the psalm is a mixture of motifs from the lament of an individual and a community lament. He understands the psalm as the prayer of an individual on behalf of the community, his people (1966:843, 845). The transition, however, comes between v 1 and v 2, not between v 2 and v 3 as Kraus (1966:843) states.
- 7 Delitzsch (1871:302) also notes the remarkable number of instances of rhyme.
- 8 E.g., the alliteration of *h* and *h* in v 1 as noted by Seybold (1996:481).
- 9 Leupold (1977:879) notes that 'some confusion of understanding (about the hand) has resulted'. According to him, many activities of the hand of God could be thought of, so that the image should be understood to mean that, whatever the need of God's people is, the hand of the Lord will be adequate for the occasion. Valeton (1913:293) considers it to be a reference to the complete dependence of a slave on his or her master or mistress. Seybold (1996:481) thinks of the servants as waiting for a sign of compassion ('ein zeichen der Zuwendung').
- 10 Kittel (1922:393) speaks of the 'schuldbewußten Knechte' who look 'flehend solang auf den zum Schlage ausholenden Herrn'. Hengstenberg (1847:36) is of the same opinion.

According to Kraus (1966:844), the image describes the longing and expectant attitude of a servant who looks upon his master for nourishment and the dispensing of whatever he needs: 'Die Knechte schauen in der Hausgemeinschaft erwartungsvoll auf die spendende Hand ihres Herrn.' He makes a comparison with Ps 104:27 in this regard. Gunkel (1968:544) and Allen (1983:160) are of the same opinion, as is Viviers (1990:62). Van der Ploeg (1974:360) mentions the two possibilities of punishment and nourishment and chooses the latter. Weiser (1955:519) suggests that, since the image is couched in general terms, we should not look for one variable situation such as punishment or nourishment, but see in it a symbol of reverence, awe, submission, and humility because of the awareness of being utterly dependent on the will and power of God; but also devoted love and trustful hope in the fatherly care of God. This in turn seems to be too general.

- 11 The circumstances of the exilic or post-exilic time seem to be the context of this psalm (Kraus 1966:843). 'Das Gottesvolk lebt in der Zerstreung und wird verhöhnt, weil sein Gott es an sichtbaren Erweisen seiner Huld und Macht im geschichtlichen Leben fehlen läßt.' (Kraus 1966:844). The tradition of the most high God, reflected in v 1, seems to corroborate this surmise (Kraus 1966:844). Hengstenberg (1847:35) refers to the parallel description in Neh 2:4 and 19 and considers the psalm to be from the same period.
- 12 So also Weiser (1955:518), Böhl-Gemser (1968:178), and Seybold (1996:482).
- 13 Valeton (1913:292) has drawn our attention to the parallel use of the word 'undisturbed' in Am 6:1 where it refers to the arrogant people of Judah against whom Yahweh will take action.
- 14 The social system of patronage is well-known and documented in Roman culture. But it is fairly obvious that it existed widespread in the ancient world, for instance between kings and their vassals. Malina (1980) has pointed out how in the early and later church the presumed relationship of devotees to God (and later, also to the saints) replicates on a symbolic level of religious belief the social relationship of client and patron. Cf Elliott (1996:151).
- 15 Cf the use of 'our God' in verse line 4. This reference to Yahweh indicates that the opponents of the people do not recognise him as their god.
- 16 According to Weiser (1955:518) it is simultaneously an expression of humble submission and firm trust.
- 17 Seybold (1996:482) comes close to this interpretation with his remark that 'Man wartet auf ein gnädiges Handeln JHWH's'.
- 18 Leupold (1977:879) gives the heading 'an expression of complete submission to God till He be pleased to help' to the first two verses.

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Just you, and I, waiting – The poetry of Psalm 25¹

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ABSTRACT

The present article endeavours to determine some of the structuring and non-structuring poetic features of Psalm 25. At the same time, an effort is made to establish priority among the psalm's poetic features, particularly between the acrostic and the concentric aspects thereof. The article concludes that the history of exegesis of this psalm has been distracted by its acrostic form and has thus tended to ignore its concentric structure. The latter serves as the psalm's primary meaning bearing feature, focusing the reader's attention on the central verse 11 in which the psalmist pleads for forgiveness in the context of an intimate direct address to YHWH.

A INTRODUCTION

As can be gleaned from the literature, Psalm 25 exemplifies the skilled use of a wide range of poetical devices, some of which, the more or less perfect acrostic² for example, are more apparent than others. The purpose of the present paper will be to examine the poetic features of Psalm 25 as the key to its structure, and its structure as the (hermeneutical) key to its meaning, in attempting to understand the psalmist's purpose in using the techniques he/she used. As a means to this end we shall endeavour to establish degrees of priority or hierarchy in the various poetic devices and speech acts employed by the author. Which of the poetic devices employed by the author predominates? Which if any can we designate the primary meaning carrier of the psalm? While the acrostic would appear to be the most evident poetical device in Psalm 25, we accept the cautionary warning offered by Ridderbos: 'the difficulty which many authors envision in the use of the poetic device (acrostic) is largely overstated. The harness in which the poet subjects himself is less a hindrance than is generally presumed' (Ridderbos 1963:61). Is the acrostic form less of an apparent hindrance to semantic cohesion than some might suggest? If this is the case then it might be that the author invested more significance in some other poetical device running together with the acrostic. What