

YHWH Loves Zion – Zion Loves YHWH **An Exploration of the Workings of Ancient Near Eastern Social Values in Psalm 87**

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ABSTRACT

Psalm 87 is widely regarded as being notoriously problematic, posing difficulties on all levels. Despite all of the uncertainties that exegetes have regarding this psalm, almost all agree that the psalm deals with Zion acting as mother city. This article attempts to shed new light on the problem of Psalm 87 by examining it in its immediate context as a Korahite psalm, and ultimately from an Ancient Near Eastern social values perspective. It is argued that this approach aids in determining the meaning of the psalm, as these values were an integral part of Ancient Near Eastern society. They thus not only influenced this psalm, but also reveal a lot about the thought processes behind the psalm. In light of the examination of the psalm, a new theory is proposed about Psalm 87's dealing with the exclusivity of Zion rather than its universality.

A INTRODUCTION

Psalm 87 is known for its complexity, difficulty and uncertainty in meaning.² Researchers struggle with this psalm on both the macro and the micro level. Doubt exists about its cohesiveness, structure and even the meaning of single words, not to mention the question of what the psalm is actually trying to say in its entirety.

Despite these problems, there has developed something of an agreement among some exegetes that the psalm deals with YHWH's embracing all peoples in a joint citizenry in Zion. There have, of course, been those who oppose this view, all for varying reasons and some more convincing than others.³ Yet, as far as I can find, no one has yet examined this psalm from an Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) social values perspective or has tried to determine the role of social values in it. The social values of the ANE permeated all societies of that region and guided every aspect of living, from the life of an individual, to that of the community, to that of the people as a whole.⁴ Since these values formed

¹ This paper was delivered at a seminar at the University of Pretoria as part of the requirements for the degree of MA in Ancient Languages and Cultural Studies.

² Cf. Van der Ploeg (1974:83-87) and Kraus (1989:184-189), among many others.

³ Cf., e.g., Emerton (2000:183-199).

⁴ Cf. Pilch & Malina (1993:xix-xl).

such an integral part of everything people thought and did, they must have had some effect on the writing and redaction of the Psalms.⁵ It is therefore only logical to investigate the role of these values in this psalm as well.

The psalm should also be viewed in its relation to the group to which it belongs, namely the Korahite psalms. The hypothesis is that a study of Psalm 87 in its literary context combined with a study of the workings of the social values in the psalm can ultimately prove to be a valuable key in shedding light on the understanding and interpretation of this psalm.⁶

B THE PRESENT STATE OF THEORIES REGARDING PSALM 87

The main views that exegetes have on Psalm 87 can be divided into three groups, all with the common theme of Zion as mother city. These are:

- ‘all peoples belong at the center of God’s love and that God’s love is not limited to the beloved community but extends to the entire world’;⁷
- ‘Zion is proclaimed the home for all nations’;⁸ and
- ‘Zion, the center of the community of God on earth, is the mother of all members of the people of God’.⁹

It thus is possible that the author of the psalm meant to state that Zion is the mother city of all humanity. But since there are a couple of exegetes who think that Psalm 87 does not claim this,¹⁰ I will examine the psalm afresh and add to this the knowledge of social values to see whether Psalm 87 deals with Zion as ‘the mother of messianic Israel ... and as the mother of all humanity’,¹¹ or whether it has a different message to convey.

⁵ Nel says: ‘It is impossible to interpret Biblical texts without recognition of the culturally inscribed cognition of the Biblical author as well as the culturally constituted mindsets of the reader’ (2006:172).

⁶ Since an ANE social values study forms part of the wider social-scientific criticism, a study from this angle seeks to analyse, synthesise and interpret the social, literary and ideological dimensions of Psalm 87, examining how these dimensions correlate with one another and how they were designed to be a persuasive vehicle of communication and social interaction, thus being of social and literary consequence (Elliott 1993:72).

⁷ Bos (1993:285).

⁸ Schaefer (2001:213).

⁹ Kraus (1989:188).

¹⁰ Emerton (2000:183-199), for example, proposes that Psalm 87 deals with YHWH noting the places of birth of all people, but also with the distinction that exists between being born in Zion, which was established by YHWH and is his city, and therefore being born in a foreign place.

¹¹ Lohfink & Zenger (2000:160).

C PSALM 87 AND THE KORAHITES

Psalm 87 forms part of the Korahite group of psalms (לְבָנֵי־קֹרַח [1a]), which consists of Psalms 42(-43), 44-49, 84-85 and 87-88. According to Goulder,¹² the majority of these psalms can thematically be divided as follows:

42-43	84	Psalms of longing for Yahweh's 'tabernacles';
44	85	National Laments;
46-48	87	'Songs of Zion'.

Thus, these psalms are all connected¹³ and, as the division above indicates, move from someone longing for God, to God's people praying to him for salvation, followed by YHWH's promise of blessing to his people, with them putting their trust in his covenant with them, and then moving to the Zion psalms dealing with YHWH's love for his city.¹⁴ They also have 'the thematic sequence of lament-petition (84; 85:2-8) – divine response (85:9-14; 87)'.¹⁵

Another striking feature in the Korahite psalms as a group is the prominence of nationality. Throughout, the psalms deal with YHWH and his people – always called Jacob.

If all of these features are taken into account, one cannot help but think it unlikely that praying for deliverance from enemies in the psalms preceding Psalm 87 will so abruptly change to an incorporation of those enemies into Zion here. The question that does arise is whether this psalm might not rather confirm YHWH's special love for Zion's people, perhaps acting as an answer to the prayers for deliverance.

D A NEW POSSIBILITY – A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Following the above remarks and the questions that arise from them, a layout of Psalm 87's translation and structure seems in order:

1a	לְבָנֵי־קֹרַח מְזֻמֹּר שִׁיר	By the sons of Korah, a psalm, a song -
1b	יְסוּדָתוֹ בְּהַרְרֵי־קֹדֶשׁ:	his foundation is in the Holy Mountains.
I A 2a	אֲהַב יְהוָה יְהוּדָה שְׁעָרֵי צִיּוֹן	YHWH loves the gates of Zion

¹² Cf. Goulder (1982:12).

¹³ Cf. Goulder (1982:9-12). The function of Psalm 88 in this sequence is uncertain and will not be discussed here. It is a problem too big for the scope of this study and deserves a study on its own.

¹⁴ Cf. Goulder (1982:11).

¹⁵ Hossfeld & Zenger (2000:387).

	2b	מִכֹּל מִשְׁכְּנוֹת יַעֲקֹב:	more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.	
B	3a	גִּבְרֹת מְדַבֵּר בְּךָ	Glorious things are said of you,	
	3b	עִיר הָאֱלֹהִים סֵלָה:	City of God. Selah.	
II	C	4a	אֶזְכִּיר אֶרְחֹב וּבְבֶל לְיָדַי	‘I mention Rahab and Babylon to those who know me,
	4b	הִנֵּה פְלִשְׁתִּים וְצֹר עִם-כּוּשׁ	behold Philistia and Tyre, with Cush –	
	4c	זֶה יֻלְּדָשָׁם:	this one was born there.’	
D	5a	וְלַצִּיּוֹן יֹאמֵר אִישׁ וְאִישׁ יֻלְּדָהּ	But of Zion it is said: ‘A man and a man was born in her,	
	5b	וְהוּא יְכֻנְנֶה עֲלֵיוֹן:	and he, Elyon, established her.’	
E	6a	יְהוָה יִסְפֹּר בְּכָתוּב עַמִּים	YHWH takes account when he writes down the peoples:	
	6b	זֶה יֻלְּדָשָׁם סֵלָה:	‘This one was born there.’ Selah.	
III	F	7a	וְשָׂרִים כְּחַלְלִים	‘And singers as well as dancers –
	7b	כָּל-מַעְיָנִי בְּךָ:	all my springs are in you.’	

Examining Ps 87 closely, and keeping the fact that it is part of the Korahite psalms in mind, one can see a different possibility as to the meaning of this psalm, summarised and set out as follows:

Verse	Text	Explanation
2	יְהוָה שָׂעֲרֵי צִיּוֹן מִכֹּל מִשְׁכְּנוֹת יַעֲקֹב: אֶרְחֹב	YHWH loves Zion more than the other places of Jacob. Zion thus has an elevated status.
3	גִּבְרֹת מְדַבֵּר בְּךָ עִיר הָאֱלֹהִים	People say great things about this city that God loves so much.
4	אֶזְכִּיר אֶרְחֹב ... זֶה יֻלְּדָשָׁם:	YHWH states that he knows the citizenry of those that are not from Zion.
5	וְלַצִּיּוֹן יֹאמֵר ... עֲלֵיוֹן:	But people know that those who are from Zion have special status because Elyon established their city.

6	יְהוָה יִסְפֹּר בְּכִתּוּב עַמִּים זֶה יֵלֶד-שָׁם	YHWH knows the citizenry of all peoples. Thus also those who are not from Zion and those who are.
7	וְשָׂרִים כְּהַלְלִים כָּל-מַעְיְנֵי בְּךָ:	YHWH states his special love for Zion's people (those who sing and dance) by confirming that his sources of life are there. ¹⁶

Thus, the possibility exists that Psalm 87 does not deal with YHWH embracing all peoples in Zion, but rather that YHWH has a special love for Zion and its inhabitants. Furthermore, this view would corroborate the meaning of the Korahite psalms as a whole¹⁷ and their nationalistic views.

The question now arises as to whether this hypothesis is feasible, and it is here that social values come into play. By approaching the psalm from this angle, I will try to determine whether such a study and its findings support the theory put on the table.

E YHWH – THE GOD OF JACOB

The Old Testament consistently speaks of YHWH's special relationship with Israel.¹⁸ Israel understood itself as the people of YHWH, the people whom he had chosen to be his own¹⁹ and singled out from the other nations.²⁰ Since people and the world were seen as subject to the will of the gods,²¹ this relationship that Israel had with YHWH afforded them not only a sense of exclusivity in their religion as the people of YHWH,²² but also his protection and care,²³ and the honour that comes from being counted as one of his people.²⁴

This view becomes even more evident when one takes the ANE social values of patronage and dyadism into account, views that can be classified as a

¹⁶ According to the ancient understanding of the universe, rivers/springs symbolise the sources of life flowing from the Holy Mountain. I thus propose that 'all my springs are in you' (v.7b) imply that YHWH's sources of life are in Zion and its inhabitants.

¹⁷ Cf. section C, Psalm 87 and the Korahites.

¹⁸ Cf. Barton & Bowden (2004:54).

¹⁹ Cf. Helberg (1990:13).

²⁰ Cf. Barton & Bowden (2004:54).

²¹ Cf. Helberg (1990:12) and Block (2000:19).

²² E.g. Exod. 19:5-6, Deut. 7:6-7 & 14:2, Ps. 50:7, Ps. 122:3-4 and Jer. 2:3-4.

²³ Cf. Block (2000:61).

²⁴ Cf. Barton & Bowden (2004:57).

type of feudal relationship²⁵ wherein the gods were seen as divine overlords, while the people that served them were considered their vassals and/or servants.²⁶ This view can be extended even further to the actual land that was the people's country, since it was seen as owned by the god,²⁷ creating a 'deity-nation-land triad corresponding to the lord-vassal-estate complex in feudal societies'.²⁸

1 YHWH the patron – Jacob the client

According to Malina, the patronage value is 'a social, institutional arrangement by means of which economic, political, or religious institutional relationships are outfitted'.²⁹ The patron and the client both had special concern for one another's welfare, despite the fact that there were differences in status and power.³⁰ This meant loyalty, justice and assurance of aid from the patron,³¹ and honour, praise and force for status from the client.³²

In Israel's case, YHWH was the central and focal symbol of their religion, worshipped in Jerusalem's temple.³³ He was considered their patron, understood as having chosen them for his direct care.³⁴

In Ps 87 this patronage view clearly comes to the fore. The psalm starts with a heading claiming that YHWH's foundation is the 'Holy Mountains' (his foundation is in the form of the Holy Mountains – בְּהַרְרֵי־קֹדֶשׁ [v.1b]). This provides a possible claim and implied view of YHWH as patron of the people of Jacob, since the Holy Mountains mentioned here are thus identified as YHWH's land.

This patronage view of the land is then expanded upon and made even clearer by stating YHWH's love and establishment of Zion in verses 2 and 5 (YHWH loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob – אֲהַבְּ יְהוָה שַׁעַר צִיּוֹן מִכָּל מוֹשְׁבֹת יַעֲקֹב [v.2]; But of Zion it is said: 'A man and a man was born in her, and he, Elyon, established her':

²⁵ This relationship points to the definition of feudalism as 'the technical arrangements by which vassals became dependents of lords, and landed property ... became organized as dependent tenures or fiefs' (Strayer 1956:15).

²⁶ Cf. Block (2000:61).

²⁷ Cf. Block (2000:75).

²⁸ Block (2000:75). Cf. Helberg (1990:18) as well, who considers this relationship as constitutive for Israel's existence.

²⁹ Malina (1993:151).

³⁰ Cf. Malina (1993:152-153).

³¹ Cf. Barton & Bowden (2004:57).

³² Cf. Malina (1993:153).

³³ Cf. Malina (1993:151).

³⁴ Cf. Block (2000:32).

– וְלִצִּיּוֹן יֹאמַר אִישׁ אִישׁ יִלְד־בָּתָּהּ וְהוּא יִכּוֹנְנָה עָלָיוֹן [v.5].

These verses are followed by the consequences of having YHWH as a patron, namely the glory given to Zion (glorious things are said of you, City of God – וְגִבּוֹרֹת מִדְּבַר בָּךְ עִיר הָאֱלֹהִים [v.3]) and possessing YHWH's source of life ('and singers as well as dancers – all my springs are in you':

וְשָׂרִים כְּחִלְלִים כָּל-מַעְיְנֵי בָךְ [v.7]).

Looking at these verses from this perspective thus makes it clear that YHWH established, and consequently chose, Zion and its inhabitants to be his own. Hence, he is their patron and they are his clients.

2 Identity through association

Closely linked to the social value of patronage is dyadism. According to this ANE social value, people, whether individuals, groups or nations, were thought of in terms of their relationship/s to others, for example where people lived or came from, and to what nation they belonged were believed to say a lot, almost everything, about them.³⁵ People were thus inclined to think in terms of stereotypes,³⁶ viewing preconceived ideas about specific people as truth.

On the other hand, people also felt the need to legitimise their lives and themselves through others,³⁷ applying this stereotypical way of thinking to themselves as well. This legitimisation was mostly found in the form of their relationship/s to their superiors, be that a governor or a god for example. This consequently led to them to seek patrons who could provide protection, authorization and favour.³⁸

Following this view, Israel's very basis of identity was rooted in their relationship with YHWH³⁹ – he was their god, their patron and their source of knowing who they were as a people. In addition, it also provided them with a very specific status and honour – by means of their having this relationship with YHWH, they had the status and could claim the title of being his chosen people.

In Psalm 87 the view of others and of the selves is depicted. As mentioned already,⁴⁰ special emphasis is laid on YHWH's love for 'the gates of Zion' (v.2) and the glory that comes with it (vv.3 & 5). In addition to than, YHWH himself is the one who says that his sources of life are found in Zion's

³⁵ Cf. Neyrey (1993:53).

³⁶ Cf. Malina (1993:18).

³⁷ Cf. Neyrey (1993:55).

³⁸ Cf. Neyrey (1993:55).

³⁹ Cf. Barton & Bowden (2004:59).

⁴⁰ Cf. section E.1, YHWH the patron – Jacob the client.

people (v.7). Thus are the inhabitants of Zion associated with YHWH. Their truth, honour and status reside in the fact that they are his people, whose city he loves more than any other (v.2).

In stark contrast to this love for Zion is YHWH's mere acknowledgement of the other peoples named in the psalm. YHWH only mentions them, and that only to those who know him ('I mention Rahab and Babylon to those who know me, behold Philistia and Tyre, with Cush –

אֶזְכִּירָה רָהַב וּבָבֶל לְיָדַעַי הִנֵּה פְלִשְׁתִּים וְצֹר עַם־כּוּשׁ [v.4a & b]).

Though he does in fact take note of them (YHWH takes account when he writes down the peoples: 'This one was born there' –

יְהוָה יִסְפֹּר בְּכֹתֹב עַמִּים זֶה יֵלֶד־שָׁם [v.6]),

he does nothing else when it comes to them. Zion's people thus have the special attention of YHWH, while the other peoples most certainly do not.

The concept of dyadism can be applied to these mentioned peoples and their lack of any real role in the psalm in another way. These were peoples who not only surrounded Israel geographically,⁴¹ but who were also Israel's enemies, constantly threatening her and her people.⁴² This, then, would be the pre-conceived view held as truth by those who heard and/or read Psalm 87. By merely being mentioned, these peoples are immediately identified and then associated with a very specific reality as experienced by Israel's people. But again these peoples are only mentioned, both in the psalm and by YHWH. Thus their status and threat are diminished in the light of the honour and status that Zion and its inhabitants are assured of from their greatly emphasised relationship with YHWH.

In this way the peoples that are merely mentioned play a very important role in Psalm 87. Through their lack of true importance in the psalm, their importance is in fact highlighted. By only being mentioned, they are sharply contrasted with the elaborate claim of honour and title that Zion has, therefore serving to even further emphasise Zion and its inhabitants' status as the city and people of YHWH.

⁴¹ Rahab was Egypt to the south, Babylon lay to the east, Philistia was situated to the southwest and Tyre to the northwest of Israel.

⁴² Cf. Kidner (1975:315).

3 YHWH – Jacob – Zion

The patron-client relationship was that between the landowner and his tenants.⁴³ As already mentioned, this can be compared to the feudal lord and vassal system, which included the lord's land inhabited by the vassals.⁴⁴

The lord's land belonged to him and served as the place of his residency,⁴⁵ but it also was the place where the vassals lived and worked, very much in the service of the landlord.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the land not only delivered sustenance to its inhabitants, but also provided them with a home – a place where they could feel they belong and found protection from enemies.⁴⁷

The Israelites viewed themselves as living in the land especially reserved for them by YHWH, that is, Canaan/Israel.⁴⁸ This land was also seen as YHWH's territory, though, the place where his residence was to be found.⁴⁹ YHWH thus had divine ownership of the land of Canaan/Israel, and the Israelites lived there as his dependent tenants.⁵⁰ Seeking YHWH's attention and care, they were pledged to him and thus believed that he would be loyal to them and grant them what they needed.⁵⁰

This train of thought and understanding is evident in the whole of Psalm 87. YHWH is claimed to love the gates of Zion (v.2) and to be the one who had established it (v.5b). YHWH's land is thus identified as Zion – he is its landlord and it is the place where his tenants receive his sources of life (v.7b).

Concerning the other peoples mentioned in Psalm 87 and their relationship to their territories and YHWH, the psalm claims that YHWH knows of each people's region (v.4c & v.6b) and that he takes account of where they are (v.6a), but that is all. As with the dyadic social value,⁵¹ this diminishes their status and importance – they do not live on YHWH's land and therefore cannot claim from him what Zion's people, who do live on his land, rightfully can.

⁴³ Cf. Malina (1993:153).

⁴⁴ Cf. section E Yhwh – The God of Jacob.

⁴⁵ Cf. Block (2000:78).

⁴⁶ Cf. Block (2000:110).

⁴⁷ Cf. Strayer & Coulborn (1956:6-7).

⁴⁸ 'The inheritance of Israel is a sacred space and the divine owner maintains his legal right over the land to secure sustenance of his people as a whole and to avoid the violation of this right by members of Israel who have become proprietors of the land' (Nel 2006:176).

⁴⁹ Cf. Gutmann (1982:63-64) and Block (2000:78).

⁵⁰ Cf. Wright (1983:58).

⁵¹ Cf. section E.2 Identity through association.

F A CALL TO HONOUR...

Throughout this study, terms such as ‘status’ and ‘glory’ have frequently occurred. These are terms that are related to yet another ANE social value, namely that of the core value of honour and its inverse, shame. According to the understanding of this social value, honour was the claim to worth that was publicly recognised by people.⁵² It primarily was a group value, which had to be maintained and defended before peers.⁵³ As such, Israel’s most important claim to honour was their special relationship with YHWH and their reliance on him.⁵⁴

The value of dyadism is also related to the honour/shame social value, in that association with a certain group or person (dyadism) could serve as a means of checking, affirming or even challenging someone’s honour or shame.⁵⁵ Since honour was a public claim and acknowledgement to worth, other people’s opinions were a way of learning about and pursuing one’s honour.⁵⁶

Being the lord of a person or group was also a means of gaining honour,⁵⁷ for the relationship between them involved patronage. In such relationships, the patron in a sense sustained the client’s life, an action for which the client owed the patron especially honour.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the patron-client relationship as between a landlord and his tenants resulted in the landlord receiving deference and loyalty, and the tenants receiving his favour.⁵⁹

If all of these features that are so prominent in Psalm 87 are taken into account in conjunction with the psalm’s relation to the other Korahite psalms,⁶⁰ and since the psalm is permeated with the idea of the status and glory that Zion has as the special loved one of YHWH, especially when compared to the lack of status allocated to the other named peoples,⁶¹ Psalm 87 can be seen to be a claim to Zion’s honour – YHWH has given Zion and its inhabitants a much higher status than other peoples can claim to have because he established Zion, it is his city and the place where his sources of life are found.

⁵² Cf. Plevnik (1993:106).

⁵³ Cf. Plevnik (1993:107).

⁵⁴ Cf. Plevnik (1993:108).

⁵⁵ Cf. Neyrey (1993:54).

⁵⁶ Cf. Neyrey (1993:55).

⁵⁷ Cf. Pilch (1993:49).

⁵⁸ Cf. Malina (1993:93).

⁵⁹ Cf. Malina (1993:153).

⁶⁰ Cf. section C Psalm 87 and the Korahites.

⁶¹ Cf. sections E.2 Identity through association and E.3 YHWH – Jacob – Zion.

G CONCLUSION

By examining Psalm 87 from a social-scientific perspective, focusing on the ANE social values, an interesting possibility of the psalm's meaning is revealed. Through the social values of patronage and dyadism it seems that this psalm deals with the special relationship that YHWH has with Zion. The theme of honour that is also present throughout the psalm further serves to emphasise this unique relationship between YHWH and Zion. Furthermore, the other peoples named are not included in this relationship of YHWH with Zion. They remain separate from God's city, rather serving to emphasise Zion's elevated status.

The ANE social values thus prove to be a great aid in the analysis and determining of Psalm 87's meaning. These social values help to clarify an otherwise complicated and difficult psalm by exposing the factors that are interwoven in its composition, just as they were in every aspect of the lives and thoughts of those who wrote, heard and read the psalm.

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