

READING PSALM 78 MULTIDimensionALLY: The textual dimension¹

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Abstract

This article is part of an attempt to read Psalm 78 multidimensionally. It explains the notion of a multidimensional reading. Such a reading has to deal with the dimensions of the text, the author and the reader and the interaction between these three dimensions. This paper focuses on a reading of the textual dimension of Psalm 78, looking at diachronic and synchronic aspects. The structure of the Psalm is analysed, distinguishing an introduction (verses 1-8) and two recitals (verses 9-39 and 40-72). These three sections are discussed in detail. The genre of the Psalm is also investigated. It is of a mixed type, with elements of historical and didactic poems.

1. Introduction

This article is the first in a series of articles on Psalm 78. The different articles are part of an experiment in a multidimensional reading and each of them will deal independently with an aspect of the interpretation of Psalm 78. This article will explain the notion of a multidimensional reading and then deal with the textual dimension of Psalm 78.

2. The quest for a multidimensional reading of the Psalter

Tate rightly points out the complexity arising from recent discussions of biblical interpretation, concluding that 'scholars have dislodged the text from its historical mooring and have set it adrift in a sea of relativity, where there are as many meanings of the text as there are waves of the sea (Tate, 1991:xviii).' This complexity can be regarded as the result of the use of a diversity of exegetical methods. Most scholars, however, have a certain exclusivity that manifests itself when they claim that their own specific approach and accompanying method is the only legitimate one, and the only one which can lead to valid results (cf. Barton, 1984:198). Because of this 'exclusivity within diversity', Jonker indicates the necessity of a multidimensional exegetical approach that 'evade(s) the problems posited by variety and exclusivity in exegetical praxis' (Jonker, 1993:102). It is also suggested by Barton, after surveying the methods used in the study of the Old Testament, that students of the Old Testament should begin to understand all the methods Old Testament scholarship has used and to see how they are related to each other (Barton, 1984:199).

A multidimensional approach does not mean that one 'super method' is created by amalgamating the 'strong' points of every available exegetical strategy. Such a methodological integration would be eclectic and subjective, and would deny the plurality of existing approaches. Rather a multidimensional approach attempts to understand and establish the relationship between the facets of this complexity (cf. Jonker, 1998:2).

In this respect the process of multidimensional exegesis can be compared to modern

1. This article is partly based on Y Kim's ThM-dissertation: Reading Psalm 78 multidimensionally. Cf. Kim (1999).

communication theory which deals with three basic elements, namely the sender, the medium, and the receiver. As a communication process the reading of a text also involves a sender, a message, and a receiver (cf. Deist, 1986:17). The modern exegete requires competence in taking account of this reading process in order to come to an understanding of the ancient text. In this way, different questions posed by the interpretation of a text can be answered in a more comprehensive manner.

As far as exegetical methodology is concerned, the Psalter has not escaped the recent discussions concerning the methodological problem, namely 'exclusivity within diversity.' The archaic poetic language and stylistic features of the Psalter often seem to be far removed from our modern society. It is also quite difficult to detect the historical settings of the Psalter, since their poetic language supplies almost no details linked to a particular historical context. As a result, there have been various different approaches to the exegesis of the Psalms among exegetes and commentators, as will be demonstrated in this article.

The aim of the broader experiment, a part of which is reported in this article, is to examine the exegetical value of a multidimensional reading applied to the Psalms. To achieve this aim, the different exegetical dimensions in the communication process will be investigated.

Psalm 78 was selected for this experiment, due to the interpretative complexity of the psalm, which has long been regarded as one of the puzzles of the Psalter. Reputable scholars of the last half-century differ widely among themselves on its structure, genre, date, *Sitz im Leben*, and aim. Its structure has been variously outlined, and no consensus has emerged regarding its divisions (see Clifford, 1981:126). Its literary genre is also difficult to discern since history, hymn, and wisdom can all lay a claim to it. Opinions about its date and *Sitz im Leben* range from a setting in tenth century Jerusalem to the post-exilic period (see Campbell, 1979:51- 52). This range of scholarly opinion results in part from a failure to perceive the unity of the psalm and the way in which its various parts contribute to the expression of a coherent meaning. As a result, its intention or aim has been interpreted in widely different ways (see Clifford, 1981:126).

It is assumed that the dimension of the text is the first dimension which exegetes meet, because 'with reference to an ancient written text (and more specifically the biblical text), the context of interaction can only become known to the exegete through and by means of the text' (Jonker, 1996:404). A valid process of biblical exegesis should therefore start from the dimension of the text (Prinsloo, 1994:83). This dimension is the subject of this article, while later articles will deal with the other dimensions.

3. An introduction to the reading of the textual dimension

Each of the exegetical dimensions has its own diachronic and synchronic component. The diachronic aspect of the textual dimension in the communication process can be described in terms of the textual modification from the original stages up to the Masoretic activities. The synchronic aspect, at the same time, lies in the fact that the medium in the communication process is a written text, which can be described in terms of its structure (cf. Jonker, 1996:404).

According to Tate (1991:61) the textual dimension has two kinds of languages, that is, natural language and literary language. The natural languages of the biblical texts, namely Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, are governed by linguistic (lexical and grammatical), and structural (syntactical) codes. Likewise, literary languages also have codes. With their codes, literary languages enable a reader to move beyond what the text says in its natural language to what the text is all about (cf. Tate, 1991:61).

For Jonker the exegetical process has to take the relationship between natural languages

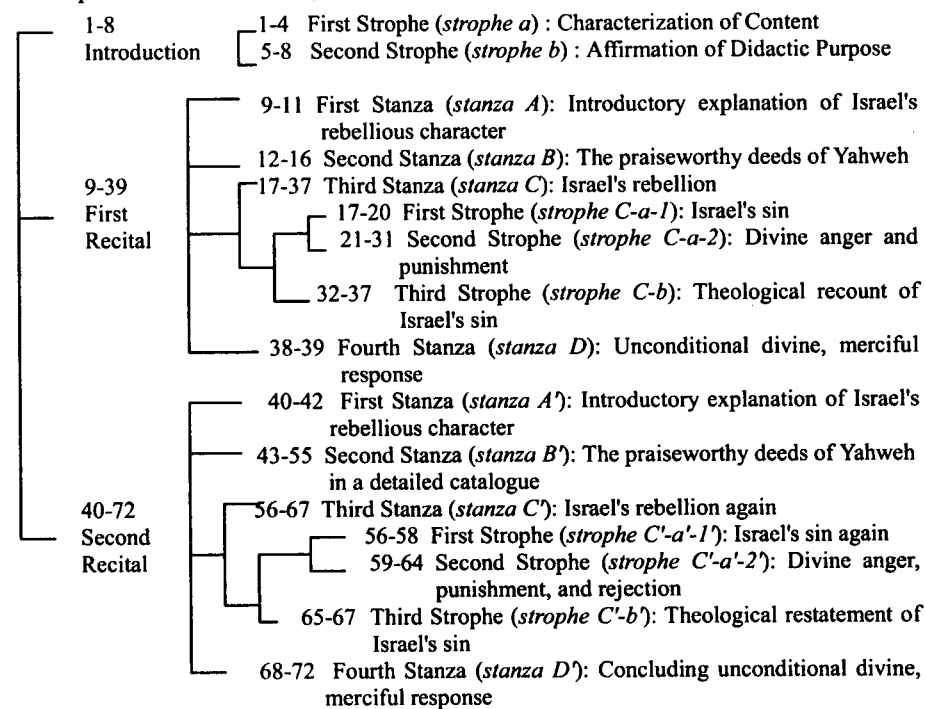
and literary languages (or, in other words, the relationship between referential quality and a mimetic quality, cf. Tate, 1991:61-62) into consideration. This involves the interaction between medium and receiver. 'On each level of reception the interaction with the text takes place in a specific context which constitutes a specific world view' (Jonker, 1996:404).

Based on this basic double exegetical character of the textual dimension, a text-critical study should be employed firstly for the investigation of a diachronic aspect of the text itself. Of course, the diachronic aspect of the text implies much more than a mere text-critical study. The diachronic aspect of the text can also be separated into two different dimensions. One is the diachronic aspect from the textual dimension and the other is the same aspect but from the dimension of the author. This latter part of diachronic aspect of the text related to the dimension of the author will form part of a second paper. A text-critical study is indeed important for the understanding of diachronic growth of the text, but has been dealt with elsewhere.²

Thus, this study will focus mainly on the synchronic aspect of the text, which will be discussed by means of a linguistic and structural investigation. Determining the genre of the text forms part of this synchronic investigation.

4. Structure and poetic features of Psalm 78

A structural analysis of Psalm 78 indicates that its basic structure consists of 3 sections. Verse 1 to 8 functions structurally as an introduction. Verse 9 to 72 demonstrates a symmetric pattern of two recitals, verse 9-39 and 40-72. The basic structure is as follows³:



2. For a detailed text-critical discussion of Psalm 78, see Kim, 1999:19-24. For reasons of space it will not be discussed in this paper.

3. For a detailed analysis, cf. Kim, 1999:36-54.

Some scholars, such as Gunkel (1926: 341), Kraus (1989:125-130), and Clifford (1981:129) regard verses 1-11 as the introduction of the poem. However, the 'line forms' (Collins, 1978:273) of the Masoretic tradition support the restriction of the introduction to verses 1-8. This is also the view of scholars such as Weiser (1962:538-542), Anderson (1972:562-576), Kidner (1975:281-285), and Campbell (1979:59-60). Verses 9-11 rather refer to a particular event as the first stanza of the first main section of the poem. This stanzaic⁴ division follows the division of the Masoretic tradition and its supporters, regarding verses 1-8 as an introduction to the whole psalm. According to the contents of the introduction, this introductory stanza is also divided into two strophes, viz. verses 1-4 (*strophe a*): 'characterization of content' and verses 5-8 (*strophe b*): 'affirmation of didactic purpose.'

The body of the poem (9-72) has a symmetric pattern of two recitals demarcated at verse 40. The first recital (verses 9-39) and the second recital (verses 40-72) each consists of 4 parallel stanzas.

The first stanza of the first recital (verses 9-11, *stanza A*) opens with the first concrete example of Israel's rebellious character like that of the fathers in the introductory stanza. Likewise, the statements in verses 7 and 8 of the introduction can be compared to the summary statements of Israel's sin at the beginning of the first and third stanzas of each recital (*stanzas A & A'* and *C & C'*). At the same time, the second and fourth stanzas of each recital (*stanzas B & B'* and *D & D'*) describe God's response to the continuous rebellion of Israel. This response is rendered by the recital of the praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh and of the unconditional divine, merciful response.

This two-dimensional parallel figure of the structure of Psalm 78 produces a cyclic pattern of ideological significance. By focussing on successive episodes, the hearers/readers are expected to distinguish a series of divine deeds of grace on the one hand and a similarly continuous series of examples of disobedience and punishment as a warning on the other (cf. Eissfeldt, 1965:16). This 'rebellion-punishment' pattern comprises 'a monotonous succession of sin, punishment, repentance, and pardon' (Anderson, 1972:569). In other words, the main flow of the two recitals consist of the sequence of the praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh (*stanzas B & B'*), and Israel's rebellion (*stanzas C & C'*) while each of the two recitals begins with an introductory explanation of Israel's rebellious character (*stanzas A & A'*) and ends with an unconditional divine, merciful response (*stanzas D & D'*).

The third stanza of each recital (*stanzas C & C'*) also produces a similar cyclic pattern in more detail, namely Israel's sin (*strophes C-a-1 & C'-a'-1*), divine anger and punishment (*strophes C-a-2 & C'-a'-2*), and a theological recount (*strophes C-b & C'-b*).

Verse 17 opens the first and second strophes of the third stanza (verses 17-31, *strophes C-a-1 & C-a-2*) and again refers back directly to the introductory stanza, specifically the last verse (8) of the introductory stanza. The fathers were rebellious (מרדה) in verse 8, and the subsequent generation has continued in rebellion (למרות, verse 17). Verses 32-37 (*strophe C-b*) also pick up terminology from the end of the introductory stanza and accuse Israel of continuing as their fathers did. The fathers have not been faithful (לא נאמנה, verse 8), and this generation likewise does not believe (לא דאמינו, verse 32).

The sins of the fathers, viz. unbelief and rebellion described in verses 7-8 in the

4. In this research, the stanza means a sub-unit within a poem, and a strophe means a sub-unit within a stanza (cf. Watson, 1995:160-167; Prinsloo, 1994:81-82), although these terms are ambiguous, even almost interchangeable (Watson, 1995:160). Concerning Psalm 78, the whole introduction (verses 1-8) can be regarded as a stanza and the two sub-units as strophes. Likewise, the two recitals consist of 4 stanzas each and *stanzas C & C'* consist of 3 strophes each.

introductory stanza, have been repeated over and over again. For this reason, the first stanza of the second recital (verses 40-42, *stanza A'*) opens with the exclamation, 'How often they rebelled against him!' (כמה ימרדו) using a verb from verse 8 as was done in verse 17 to open *strophes C-a-1 & C-a-2*, and in verse 32 to open *strophe C-b*. The persistent nature of the rebellion and unbelief is repeated in the initial verses of each of these stanzas and strophes. In a sense, they summarize the key theme of the psalm at important junctures (cf. Cole, 1996:228).

Verses 17 and 40, after utilizing the verb מרה, are followed respectively in verses 18 and 41 by the verb נסה. These two verbal roots appear together in verse 56 to open the penultimate stanza C' (וינסו וימררו). Again, the rebellion of the fathers in verse 8 is repeated and the testing seen in the previous stanzas is reiterated. For a fifth time, the sins of the fathers are repeated, using the same terminology that is used to describe that generation in verse 8. This cycle is concluded in *strophe D'* where the Lord intervenes to raise up a faithful leader to shepherd the wandering flock.

Therefore, the sheer length of this psalm (72 verses) contributes to the feeling of continual sin and rebellion with two dimensional parallel figures. At the same time, this psalm describes 'God's unconditional divine, merciful response' in spite of Israel's continual sin and rebellious character, using the same two-dimensional parallel figures. In this way, it is clear that with the symmetric pattern of parallel figures, Psalm 78 tries to emphasize the contrast between the repetitive and rebellious character of Israel's sin and the unconditional mercy of God in the line of redemptive history.

Having thus described the overall structure of the psalm and the interrelation of the various parts, a detailed structural discussion of each stanza and strophe is now in order.

5. Content and poetic devices of Psalm 78

5.1 Introduction to the Two Recitals (verses 1-8)

5.1.2 First Strophe (verses 1-4, strophe a): Characterization of Content

The first strophe of the introduction to Psalm 78, comprising verses 1-4, has a clearly didactic tone. Calling to attention (verse 1) to what follows is characterized as teaching. The psalmist claims it as his own teaching (תורתו), which he gives to his people (עמי) in the frame of parallelism.

The psalmist continues in the first person singular describing his teaching in the language of wisdom, as a wisdom saying (משל), and riddles (צידיה); they are things that are known since long ago, handed down from their forefathers to the present generation (verses 2-3). Verses 1-2 relates 'mysterious things' to the language of wisdom, to the teaching of the psalmist. Verse 3-4 makes it clear that these mysterious things are the praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh in the history of the people.

In these introductory verses (*strophe a*), a contrast is clearly drawn between the past and the future; something mysterious *from of old* will not be hidden to the generation to come. The insistence that this communication is not to be hidden to *the generation to come* is expressed by the use of the verb ספר (to tell), as found in verses 3, 4, (and 6). They had to tell to the generation to come about the praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh (verse 4). This communication from generation to generation, therefore, indicates 'a concern with something out of the ordinary' (Campbell, 1979:53).

5.1.3 Second Strophe (verses 5-8, strophe b): Affirmation of Didactic Purpose

The didactic purpose, already expressed in verses 1-4, is affirmed and further developed in verses 5-8. Here, a contrast of the two important words 'forefathers' and 'the generation

to come,' first introduced in verse 4, gradually ascends to formulate a contradiction between the character of 'the forefathers' and that of 'the generation to come.'

In this respect the second stanza of the introduction can be regarded as some overlap of the sorties, even though it is not as strictly logical as sorties (cf. Watson, 1995:215). Then, from the progressive character to a climactic conclusion of sorties, the purpose stated in the introduction of the psalm becomes clear. This psalm is a psalm with a didactic purpose for the generation to come.

In the introduction to Psalm 78 (verses 1-8), the negative particle אֵל is found five times (in verses 4, 7, and three times in verse 8). The particle is repeated throughout the psalm, with a final appearance in verse 67. According to Cole (1996:227), the final negative of the first five in verse 8 describes the unfaithfulness of Israel (אֵל plus the root אָמַם), which is repeated three times in the body of the psalm (verses 22, 32, and 37). The first specific example of unfaithfulness is presented immediately in the first recital with the sons of Ephraim. Therefore, in the introduction to Psalm 78, the psalmist earnestly admonishes the generation to come not to forget the praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh unlike their unfaithful forefathers but to keep his commandments, the Torah of Yahweh.

5.2 First recital (verses 9-39)

5.2.1 First stanza (verses 9-11, stanza A): Introductory explanation of Israel's rebellious character

Stanza A relates a simple event in historical times, in which the sons of Ephraim failed in battle, and thereby apparently betrayed their God. From this stanza onwards the introductory explanation of the first recital, Israelite's betrayal of their God, occupies a major theme in the body of the psalm. In this stanza, the concern has passed from teaching to an account of an event in the past.

5.2.2 Second stanza (verses 12-16, stanza B): The praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh

Recounting those praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh forgotten by the sons of Ephraim effects the transition to the psalm's central concern with Israel. The first part of the stanza (verse 12) 'in the sight of their fathers he did a marvel,' links up with verse 11 and points forward to the first account of the time in the wilderness. Likewise, the passage through the sea, the guidance in the desert, and the provision of water in the wilderness serve as a preface for the recital of Israel's history of rebellion.

Verses 13-16 form a diptych, or two matching pictures, united through the use of the verb בקע (to split), and the parallel of the various terms for water in both parts of the diptych (cf. Clifford, 1981:128). In the same way, in verses 15-16, especially, juxtaposition is used for depicting an abundance of wondrous water.

5.2.3 Third stanza (verses 17-37, stanza C): Israel's rebellion

The recital of the history of rebellion begins here in verse 17, and is continued in the first recital down to verse 37. It falls into two parts: it begins with a single concrete event (verses 17-31), and it concludes with an insistence in more abstract terms on the continued repetition of this rebellion (verses 32-37).

Verses 17-32 contain a chiasm that draws the verses together. The chiastic pattern in this stanza is as follows (cf. Clifford, 1981:128):

verse 17	עַד לְצַחֵא-לִי	sinned even more against him
verse 21	אֵן עָלָהּ: בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל	wrath rose against Israel
verse 25	לְטַבֵּעַ	enough to fill (or unto satiety)

verse 29	וַיִּסְבְּעוּ: מֵאֹד	they were thoroughly sated
verse 31	אֵן וְאֹלֵהֵי עָלָהּ בָּהּ	wrath of God rose against them
verse 32	צָחֵא-עַד	they still sinned

This third stanza, thus, can be seen as a well-structured unit, depicting a 'continuous rebellion-punishment' pattern.

■ First strophe (verses 17-20, strophe C-a-1): Israel's sin

Here the first recital of the history of rebellion against Yahweh begins with a concrete example. First the abstract statement (verse 17) is presented, then the concrete content in verse 18. Three further lines extend to give detail to the demand with the rhetorical questions in verses 19-20. Here, the rhetorical questions precede the miraculous outpouring of water in verses 15-16. Therefore, while the wonder of abundant water is acknowledged in verses 15-16 through juxtaposition, Israel's forefathers are characterized in this strophe not by gratitude but by greed, not by thanks but by testing. Five lines on the graceful wonder in the previous stanza are balanced by five lines on ungrateful sin (cf. Campbell, 1979:55).

■ Second strophe (verses 21-31, strophe C-a-2): Divine anger and punishment

The fact of God's wrath is stated here, along with the reason for it (verses 21-22). The lack of faith first appeared at the time of the provision of manna and quails. In this sense, the phrase וַיִּמְחַר עֲלֵיהֶם (and he rained upon them) in verses 24 and 27 seems to be a poetic device to bring together the two traditions of manna and quails (cf. Clifford, 1981:128). Here, a simile is used to illustrate the impression of the abundance of God's love:

קַעֲפָר: שְׂאֵר	meat // like dust;
וַיִּכְצֹל יָמֵי עֵץ כֶּן	flying birds // like the sand of the seas;

The divine wrath is expressed in verses 21, and the lack of faith proves to be without ground in verses 22-29. This is then followed by the report of the execution of God's wrath (verses 30-31). Within this strophe, therefore, a paradigm of faithless murmuring is recounted, and its punishment by death reported. Two lines report on the wrath of God in verses 21-22 with a tricolon⁵ and a bicolon, and two lines on its execution in verses 30-31 with a bicolon and a tricolon (cf. Campbell, 1979:55).

■ Third strophe (verses 32-37, strophe C-b): Theological recount of Israel's sin

The third strophe approaches the problem of Israel's continued sin quite differently from the first and second strophes. The concrete event is replaced by theological concepts in more abstract terms. The basic concepts are summarised in two lines: in spite of the demonstration of all the wondrous works and punishment, they still sin, and so they are punished (verses 32-33). In verse 33, especially, God's eternal might and people's mortal weakness are well contrasted by the effect of paronomasia:

וַיִּקַּל-בְּהַבֵּל יָמֵהּ	And so he ended their days in a breath [לְבַבָּהּ];
וַיִּשְׁחַת בְּבִהוּלָהּ	and their years in sudden terror [הִלְחַבְּבָהּ].

The attitude of the rebellious generation under punishment is then described in the sequence: repentance (verse 34), remembrance (verse 35), deceit (verse 36), and infidelity (verse 37).

5. In this article, colon designates the verse. For example, bi-colon (plural: bi-cola) is a verse with two parallel lines.

5.2.4 Fourth stanza (verses 38-39, *stanza D*): Unconditional divine, merciful response
 In spite of all these, the redemptive history is then taken up in the compassion of Yahweh in spite of Israel's sin. The attitude of Yahweh is depicted: mercy and restraint of anger, remembrance of human fragility. It shows the character of God's redemptive history in that the punishment in the wilderness is not the end, but God's unconditional mercy makes a new beginning possible. People's redemption does not depend on their attitude to God, but on God's merciful attitude to them. With this couplet on the compassion of Yahweh, the first recital is concluded.

5.3 Second recital (verses 40-72)

5.3.1 First stanza (verses 40-42, *stanza A'*): Introductory explanation of Israel's rebellious character again

The history of rebellion and infidelity is resumed in the second recital. The introductory explanation of Israel's rebellious character in the second recital reaches back to and repeats the theme of the first recital, viz. that they forget what God has done (verse 11), that they do not remember his hand (verse 42). Both introductions explain the cause of Israel's sin, that is, they do not remember the praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh in the wilderness, they forget what God has done in their redemptive history.

5.3.2 Second stanza (verses 43-55, *stanza B'*): The praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh in a more detailed catalogue

The second stanza in the second recital opens with a reminder of God's graceful deeds, which reaches back to, and repeats the parallel stanza in the first recital (verse 12 & verse 43). From the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan, God performed his signs and his wonders. These praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh are described in the form of a catalogue in this stanza. It is a summary, a list of the plagues in Egypt (verses 44-51). Two bicola refer to the passage of the wilderness and the sea, concluding with a bicolon and a tricolon devoted to the conquest (verses 52-55).

5.3.3 Third stanza (verses 56-67, *stanza C'*): Israel's rebellion again

The catalogue of Yahweh's praiseworthy deeds from Egypt to the conquest in the second stanza (verses 43-55) is introduced by the assertion of repeated rebellion in the wilderness (verses 40-43), and concludes with the statement of Israel's rebellion even after they have settled in the land (verses 56-58).

▪ *First strophe (verses 56-58, strophe C'-a'-1')*: Israel's sin again

Israel's response to the praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh in this strophe concludes with the statement that they have tested God and rebelled against him. This repeats verses 40-41; however, there is some progress. Verse 40 explicitly locates the rebellion in the wilderness, while in verses 56-58 Israel has already been settled in the Promised Land. Verse 56 is especially remarkable, by using hendiadys to describe the repetitive and stubborn character of Israel's sin against God, the Most High:

וַיִּסּוּ וַיִּבְדּוּ
 they tested and rebelled

At the same time, verse 57 seems to be an echo of verse 9.

▪ *Second strophe (verses 59-64, strophe C'-a'-2')*: Divine anger, punishment, and rejection

Here a sharp and sudden reversal is found. The statement of divine rejection is made

simply and with radical brevity (verse 59). In this respect verse 59 is well-balanced bicolon within which the word מָאֵד is parallel to וְאֵלֶיךָ (cf. Freedman, 1973:268):

שָׁמַע וְאֵלֶיךָ וַיִּחַעֲבֹר
 וַיִּמְאָס מֵאֵד מֵאֵלֶיךָ
 When God heard, he was furious,
 and he utterly rejected Israel.

The statement can fall into two categories: the departure of God from among his people (verses 60-61), and the venting of his wrath upon his people (verses 62-64). It is swiftly and tautly told in six balanced bicola: one for the theological statement of rebellion; five for the events generating that statement. Two of these concern the departure of God from his people: he has forsaken Shiloh, he has handed over his splendour to the foe. These concern the visiting of his anger on his people: firstly as a general statement, and then with a picture of individual desolation, young men and young women, priests and widows (cf. Campbell, 1979:57-58).

▪ *Third strophe (verses 65-67, strophe C'-b')*: Theological restatement of Israel's sin

This strophe can be regarded as a theological restatement, not the mere report of a historical event. As a result of Israel's rebellious nature, Yahweh 'gave his people over to the sword' (verse 62). In other words he wasn't present among them; he was absent from them. Verse 65, however, describes how God dwelt among Israel again. The awakening of Yahweh, especially, is depicted with daring imagery in a simile:

וַיִּקָּרַח כִּישָׁם אֲדֹנָי
 כַּגִּבּוֹר מִחַרְיָם מַיִם
 And then the Lord arose as from sleep;
 like a strong man sobering up from wine.

As can be seen, it was as if God had been sleeping and now awoke to help his people. Such images speak directly not only to minds but to hearts and wills as well. With the awakening of Yahweh, the everlasting shame of his enemies is also depicted (verse 66). The insistence on the rebellion of the older order (Joseph/ Ephraim, verse 67) prepares the statement of the election of Judah and Zion (verse 68).

5.3.4 Fourth stanza (verses 68-72, *stanza D'*): Concluding unconditional divine, merciful response

The all-important verb, וַיִּבְחַר (and he chose) occurs twice in this stanza: once for the tribe of Judah and the mountain of Zion (verse 68), once for David, his servant (verse 70). The choice of Judah and Zion has as its consequence the building of the sanctuary expressed in a single bicolon (verse 69). The choice of David stands out, isolated in a single colon (verse 70a). It is then developed in three bicola, moving from his origin as a shepherd (verses 70b, 71a) to his rule over, his tending of Jacob, and culminating in the perfection and understanding of his rule (cf. Campbell, 1979:58).

6. Genre of Psalm 78

6.1 Views about the genre of Psalm 78

- Psalm 78, according to Campbell (1979:42), 'has long been one of the puzzles of the Psalter,' as its literary genre is quite difficult to discern. Kraus also expresses the same degree of difficulty: 'the category of this extensive song is already very hard to determine' (Kraus, 1989:122). In this respect, a comparison of different opinions about the genre of Psalm 78 held by reputable scholars seems to be valuable.
- Gunkel sees the genre of Psalm 78 as a combination of different genres, such as legends, hymns, prophetic warnings, and wisdom poems (Gunkel, 1926:342).
- To Von Rad (1965:11-12), Psalm 78 is 'an excessively long-winded account of the

thought' (Nasuti, 1988:157). In this respect, the so-called prophetic psalms may also be seen as having some relevance to this communal aspect.

Therefore it is quite impossible to classify Psalm 78 into a specific genre. This is, however, not unusual since 'a great many of the psalms in the Old Testament can no longer be assigned to a single literary type on the basis of formal characteristics' (Stolz, 1975:68). In this respect, Psalm 78 seems to be a kind of 'mixed genre' in which elements derived from different types are included, resulting in an original composition. When the word of God came to the psalmist, he began to handle the most varied elements of form and concept with individual freedom, in order to create his own unique poetry. In poetry of this kind, which handles elements from different genres, extreme freedom, new and unconventional ideas should appear. In the case of Psalm 78, the psalm is composed by the creative psalmist for the people of Israel to fit a particular didactic purpose, namely to remember the redemptive history of Yahweh, and as a prophetic warning to keep the covenantal Torah.

In addition, in Psalm 78 a 'communicative understanding of genre' can also be found from which the function or purpose of the genre unit is determined. According to Psalm 78:2, the allegory, which is characteristic of a wise saying (parable) and riddle, is integral to the instruction of the succeeding generation since, as a speech form in wisdom literature, allegory primarily has a didactic function (Hill, 1995:260). Here the wisdom forms are connected to the explication of Israel's history from the past for the purpose of engendering covenant faith and obedience of Yahweh's Torah in the generation of the psalmist. In a sense the mysterious actually provides clues for solving a mystery (in the case of Psalm 78, the relationship of the past to the present) by means of a simple comparison of past and present (cf. Kidner, 1975:281). From this communicative character of genre, allegory is able to underscore a given truth, or heighten the impact of divine revelation.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear from structural study that this psalm has the so-called litany-style in which each line of invocation possesses its own strength and message (cf. Stuhlmueller, 1983:25). Returning to the structure of Psalm 78 as a whole, the people addressed in verse 1 (עמִי), appear throughout the psalm and then finally in the penultimate verse 71 (עמִי). This creates an inclusion within which the whole lengthy psalm should be read from the beginning to the end (Cole, 1996: 226).

The first recital deals only with the miracles immediately preceding the gift of water. It shifts its concern to rebellion and sin. The second recital, on the other hand, affirms rebellion and sin, but it recalls in far more detail the praiseworthy deeds of Yahweh, from Egypt to the Promised Land, which the sinful generation failed to remember. In this respect, the whole structure of the two recitals finally results in a chiasmic distribution of 'redemption - rebellion (sin) / rebellion (sin) - redemption'.

As to a conclusion on the investigation of genre, the genre of Psalm 78 seems to be a kind of 'mixed genre' in which elements derived from different types, viz. the wisdomlike didactic type, the historical type, and the prophetic type, are mixed, becoming an original composition. Then, this 'mixed genre' itself becomes a psalm of unique poetry that creates new and unconventional ideas. In this respect, the psalm seems to be composed by a creative psalmist to fit a particular didactic purpose, namely to remember the redemptive history of Yahweh, and to warn the people prophetically to keep the covenantal Torah.⁶

6. Additional articles in this series will discuss other dimensions in the reading of Psalm 78, such as the dimension of the author and the reader/exegete.

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