

## READING THE TEXTS OF THE BIBLE: WITH ILLUSTRATIVE REFERENCE TO PSALM 25.

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### **Abstract:**

*Various exegetical methods have been used to discover the semantic content or meaning of biblical texts. In this article a well-approved exegetical process is suggested to the Bible teacher who hardly knows anything about the biblical languages, Greek and Hebrew. This process is practically illustrated by Psalm 25. It intends to stimulate the reading of Bible texts by any Bible student.*

### **1. Introduction**

On a congress with the theme *Old and New Methods in Teaching the Bible*, it is inevitable that the text of the Bible itself should be dealt with. The discussion about methods in reading the Bible is very important and should go on, but at the end of the day it is - how difficult it may be - the background, structure and content of the Old and New Testament texts that should be clarified and interpreted. With the help of all the interpretation methods and teaching techniques, the text of the Bible is the product to be sold.

For the purpose to show how a text could be understood, I have chosen a Psalm. The actuality of the Psalms needs hardly any motivation. As a book of Prayer and Meditation the Psalmbook was simultaneously used as a Songbook, but of utmost importance - especially since the period after the second Temple - it has been used to teach the youngsters, the newcomers and established believers of the Yahweh-faith something about the relationship between God and man (Seybold, 1991:21ff; Lohfink, 1992:195ff).

### **2. Book of Psalms**

The Book of Psalms reflects a concentrator of theologies, which was the result of the faith experiences of individuals and communities of old Israel. Rooted in nearly all the facets and aspects of life, the psalms serve as inspiration for the modern believer in many respects.

People who find themselves in situations of pain and distress, could easily identify themselves with the individual or community of the so-called psalms

of lament.<sup>1</sup> Those who experience uncertainty, could find comfort in reading a psalm of confidence;<sup>2</sup> the joyous could exult their praise for God through the words of a hymn<sup>3</sup> or a psalm of thanksgiving,<sup>4</sup> while the Torah<sup>5</sup> and Wisdom<sup>6</sup> psalms set the instructions or ways of the Lord for the righteous to live up to. Like in ancient times the Psalter shows up to be an appropriate textbook for the religious teacher, to teach his pupils the different dimensions of life experienced in man's relationship with God.

Unfortunately, the so-called 'original' Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible didn't fall from heaven. The Bible was written by people for people over centuries of time. With a big gap between its origin and us today, these texts should also be interpreted by people - each one with his own historical and cultural background, each with his own confessional and denominational uniqueness, with different political and philosophical approaches combined with subjectively-coloured peculiarities and preferences. This given reality forms the unique recipe for a quite lively debate on Bible interpretation.

Years of research have shown that the Bible could be interpreted in various ways through different methods. This should not result in a crisis for the Bible teacher, but should rather inspire him and give him the freedom to formulate his own verified and scientific based viewpoint on biblical and faith issues. With the help of a well-defined exegetical process - without being a theologian - he is more than capable of reading, understanding and educating the Bible.

During the last century of research, three mainstream exegetical approaches established themselves amongst Bible interpreters. These approaches could be reduced to the different historic-critical methods, the structure-analytical methods and the reception-theoretical method (Barton, 1984:194). The historic-critical methods (Barth & Steck, 1980) take the historical context or theological ideas behind the text as starting point for the analysis, while the structure-analytical methods<sup>7</sup> make the literary features and decorative structure of the text the premise for biblical text understanding. The reader or receiver in the communication process plays a very important role in the reception-theoretical (Lategan, 1987:114) approach of exegesis.

The analysis of the Psalms has also been done from different angles. Various starting points have led to the unfolding of the multi-dimensional character

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1. For example Psalms 3, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 28, 35, 44, 60, 74, 79, 83 etc.

2. For example Psalms 11, 16, 23 etc.

3. For example Psalms 8, 19, 29, 33, 100, 103, 111, 113 etc.

4. For example Psalms 30, 32, 34, 40, 41, 66, 116, 118 etc.

5. For example Psalms 19 and 119.

6. For example Psalms 1, 37, 112, 127, 133 etc.

7. The research of W. Richter (1971) established important guidelines in this regard. Cf. his book *Exegese als Literaturwissenschaft*.

which is confined in the structure, content and implied background of each psalm.

Hermann Gunkel (1933) laid a solid foundation for the Psalm research. Apart from his contribution to connect the psalms to the lifesetting of the Israelitic cult, he distinguished between the literary types or genres of the different psalms. (For example the lament, the hymn, the psalms of thanksgiving, wisdom psalms, etc). According to a Babylonian New Year Feast, Sigmund Mowinckel (1962), introduced the understanding of the Psalms to a so-called cultic feast where the enthronement of Yahweh was celebrated. The so-called existence of such a feast stimulated the German, Arthur Weiser (1962), to understand nearly every Psalm against the background of a so-called Covenant-renewal feast. Today exegetes are quite sceptical towards both these hypotheses, for the historical existence of these feasts seems to be hypothetical and can biblically hardly be proved.

With various influences and paradigm shifts in Bible interpretation, Meir Weiss (1972) represents a turning point in reading the Psalms. His literary approach brought new stimulus and appreciation for the analysis of each psalm as a literary work of art. His influence opened new horizons for psalm interpretation. The function of the literary structure, stylistic features and poetic devices can today hardly be ignored when the meaning or semantic content of a psalm is to be determined.

Another dimension that should be mentioned in this regard is the canonical approach of the American scholar Brevard Childs (1985). He emphasises the fact that every biblical text, also the texts of the psalms, should be understood and explained within the context of the Biblical canon. Greater emphasis was placed on the literary units or collections in which a psalm occurs. The tendency to view the psalms collectively rather than individually, becomes thus more part of scholarly approach.

Without intending to step into the trap of methodism or getting rigoristic about method, I want to recall a broad outline for an exegetical process that can help any Bible reader or Bible teacher, who knows very little or nothing about Hebrew or Greek, to read and understand a biblical text responsibly.<sup>8</sup> With the help of this process, together with the implementation of all the techniques and didactic guidelines which the educational experts teach us, any Bible teacher should be able to teach the Bible with greater confidence to either adults, students, teenagers or little children.

### 3. This process consists of the following elements:

- ▣ Read the chosen text preliminary to explore the content carefully;

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8. This exegetical process or method has been used at the University of Pretoria for the past couple of years to help students of Biblical Studies to read the texts of the Bible responsibly without having knowledge of Hebrew and Greek.

- Demarcate the text to work with the smallest possible text unit or pericope. This will make Bible reading exciting and easier. To do this, different criteria can be applied. Be on the lookout for introductory and ending formulas as well as for the sudden change of time, place, characters and happenings, because all these criteria will introduce the reader to a new text unit.
- Compare different translations by reading two or more Bible translations. Discover by this means some of the problems which the Hebrew or Greek texts pose to interpreters. Make a motivated choice for a translation.
- Try to determine the macro-context or structure of which your text unit or pericope forms part of. A chapter or psalm always forms part of a cluster or collection of chapters/psalms.
- Analyse the micro-structure of your text by dividing it into smaller parts or units. This will lead to a better understanding for the composition of the text.
- Determine the literary type or genre of the text. Ask yourself: Do I deal with a poem, with prophetic literature, with a historical description, a letter, a parable, etc. Remember that each literary type or genre sets his own rules for interpretation.
- Look at the life-setting of the text. Ask whether the historical or cultic background can be determined and try to determine how this will help to clarify uncertainties in the text.
- Perceive how interpreted Old Testament traditions (stories about the creation, the patriarchs, the exodus, the Sinai-happenings, the wandering through the desert, the settlement in Canaan, stories about Sion and David etc), motives and images function in the pericope.
- With a detail analysis all the remaining uncertainties and prominent literary features of the text must be addressed and identified.
- Two last questions still have to be dealt with. With all the above results now available, the following questions must be answered: What did this text mean to its first audience - to the people in Old Testament times; In the last resort clarity should also be gained on the question: What is the meaning of this Bible text for me/us today?

These elements in the proposed interpretation process could be helpful to formulate a message from the Bible to be conveyed by the Bible teacher. It must be stressed that not all these elements have to be applied during the close reading of every Bible text.

A lack of space prevents an illustration of all the elements in the above mentioned process. Here follows only a few illuminating and illustrative remarks with Psalm 25 as an example of how a Bible text can be read.

**4. Psalm 25 (of David)**

1. To you O Lord, I lift up my soul;
2. in you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.
3. No-one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame, but they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse.
4. Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths;
5. guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.
6. Remember, O Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.
7. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O Lord.
8. Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.
9. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.
10. All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant.
11. For the sake of your name, O Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.
12. Who then, is the man that fears the Lord? He will instruct him in the way, chosen for him.
13. He will spend his days in prosperity, and his descendants will inherit the land.
14. The Lord confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.
15. My eyes are ever on the Lord, for only he will release my feet from the snare.
16. Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.
17. The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish.
18. Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins.
19. See how my enemies have increased and how fiercely they hate me!
20. Guard my life and rescue me; let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.
21. May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope is in you.

22. Redeem Israel, O God, from all their troubles.

Like nearly all the psalms, Psalm 25 could be regarded and read as a demarcated pericope or text unit. Both the heading, the content and literary genre distinguish it from the previous and following psalms.

The literary type or genre of Psalm 25 can be described as the lament of an unknown individual (Ridderbos, 1955:217; Deissler, 1964:104; Gunkel, 1968:106; Anderson, 1972:206; Van der Ploeg, 1973:170; Kraus, 1978:209). This supplicant bewails his situation of affliction and misery before God. The structure of the lament in the Old Testament contains a few elements (Gunkel, 1933:240; Westermann, 1954:48; Wevers, 1956:80)<sup>9</sup>. Most of them are seen in this psalm. In verses 2, 7 and 16-19 he complains about his distress. This distress includes his anguish, his sin and enemies who torture him. By means of a prayer he communicates and conveys his pain to God. This doesn't end here. His complaints and prayer also reflect expressions of trust and confidence in the Lord (2-3,5,8,20-21) while verse 11, which can be described as the numeric and structural centre of this poem, clearly has the character of a hopeful confession. Hymnic tones which reflect the goodness and uprightness of the Lord also emerge from verses 8-10.

All the abovementioned elements contribute to the description of a faith experience between an afflicted individual and God - which can be typified as a lament. The 22 verse structure which appears in Psalm 25 is also typical of the Old Testament lament.

By just reading this psalm, the content becomes clear. A pious and godfearing man is depressed and discouraged by the malicious joy, the violent hatred and oppression of his enemy. Also the struggle with his sin, his loneliness and the sorrows of his heart force him to complain before God in a well-structured manner. With a metaphor borrowed from the life of a hunter this man felt himself trapped in a snare (15). Full of hope and trust in the Lord he prays for instruction, for guidance, for forgiveness and protection.

The real historical situation behind this psalm cannot be determined or connected to specific persons. Descriptions are therefore too vague. This general formulated experience in the psalm makes it possible that anyone in a similar situation could identify with the problem and (implied) solution described in the text.

Psalm 25 is a literary work of art par excellence. The figures of speech and poetic devices identified in its structure contribute to the understanding of the psalm as a whole. The most characteristic feature of the psalm is its acrostic structure (Watson, 1984:199). Although this feature cannot be seen in any translation, it means that the first letter of each line follows a certain sequence. This sequence is alphabetic so that each line begins with a

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9. The content of the lament in the Old Testament normally reflects the most of the following elements: An invocation, call for help, complaint(s), prayer, reasons for supplication, expressions of trust and assurance, praise and a vow.

successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In this pattern, deviations sometimes occur to draw the attention of the reader to important issues in the text.

The second feature is the repetition of certain keywords.<sup>10</sup> With this stylistic measure the poet wants to emphasise the key issues in his presentation. The repetition of God's Name and the expression of hope at the beginning and end of the psalm (2-3; 21-22) is no coincidence. As a poetic device it is known as an inclusion or an embracement. Structurally it has a definite function. For the message of the psalm it assures that the experience of distress and affliction by a godfearing believer takes place within the embracement of God's auspices. The hope and trust in Him alone surrounds the pain and serves therefore as an assurance that God will answer the complaint of a pious believer.

With an overall mirror structure which reflects a definite *abcb\*a\** pattern, Psalm 25 can thus be divided in three stanzas and an epilogue.

- *Stanza A* (1-7) is an opening prayer and reflects the hope and willingness of the supplicant to be taught in God's ways. He wants God not to remember his sins, but to reflect his mercy and love as was shown at Mount Sinai.

- *Stanza B* (8-14) can be divided into three sections. Verses 8-10 describe the attributes of Yahweh hymnic in terms of his guidance to the sinners and the humble. Verse 11 is a prayer for forgiveness while verses 12-14 focus on the blessed consequence of a godfearing life.

- *Stanza C* (15-21) expresses again the dependence and hope of the complainer on God alone through a final prayer.

- *The Epilogue* (22) is probably a later addition to the psalm and applies the preceding experience of an individual collectively to God's people, Israel.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. A last word on the centre of the poem, verse 11.

Several similarities in the psalm with the text of Exodus 32-34 recalls the history of the so-called Covenant-reinstitution and God's forgiveness, after Israel worshipped the golden calf at Sinai. With this in mind and knowing that God related his faithfulness to his Name when He revealed himself to Moses (Exodus 3:14-16), the Psalmist pleads for forgiveness. This verse is therefore not only a confession of sin, but an assurance that God will hear the voice of those who fear him.

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10. The most obvious words and phrases which are repeated can be reduced to: hope (3, 21), put to shame (2, 3), teach me (4, 5), remember (6, 7), way(s) (8, 9, 12), covenant (10, 14), God (2, 22) and Lord (1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15,).

11. See also Psalms 130 and 131.

## **6. Conclusion**

To conclude this brief discussion: For the Bible teacher reading of the Bible text is of the utmost importance. A discussion on didactic guidelines and methodological issues would be in vain if Bible texts were not carefully read and responsibly analysed. To sell the text of the Bible responsibly, it thus means that the Bible teacher has to do three things: to read, to read and to read the texts of the Old and New Testaments with great care and enthusiasm



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