CONVENTION AND ORIGINALITY: IDENTIFICATION OF THE SITUATION IN THE PSALMS

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In this study I examine the possibility of distinguishing individual components within a formulaic system in the Psalms. In my opinion it is possible to discern a personal and unique situation in a psalm, even though it is identified by scholars as a cultic prayer, whose structure follows traditional conventions. I chose Ps. v as a base text, and the expression "under the shadow of thy wings" (Ps. xvii 8) as an example of an idiomatic expression which enables us to observe the process of development from individual expression to formula.

The point of Ps. v at first glance seems absolutely clear. The worshipper, who trusts in God, prays to him, asking for support against his foes. He pleads with God to condemn and punish them for their sins, to the rejoicing of all the righteous. The contrast between God's ways and the deeds of the evildoers strengthens his confidence, and forms the ground for his prayer.

On reading the psalm again, however, things become more complicated. God's positive characteristics are described by negative speech. One may presume that had it been the psalmist's intention to express only the positive, he would have avoided mentioning evil repeatedly. The positive expressions, "Thou hatest all workers of iniquity. Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing: the Lord will abhor the bloody and deceitful man" (6b-7), appear only after three negative expressions: "For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee. The foolish shall not stand in thy sight" (5-6a). Thus, one may suspect that the speaker's confidence is not so indubitable after all. The

presence of evil is perceivable to such a degree, that he has to per-
suade himself that it is not predominant, and that God has not
joined the evildoers. And indeed, in the next verses we learn that
the speaker is in need of guidance, and it seems that God’s ways
are not sufficiently clear to him:2 “‘Lead me, O Lord, in thy
righteousness because of my enemies; make thy way straight before
my face’” (9). This request for guidance certainly does not corre-
spond with the view of H. Gunkel, who says that the psalmist wants
to use his admission to the Temple to derive from it, in a superficial
and convenient manner, his own righteousness in the sight of God
and the wickedness of his adversaries.3

It may be presumed that even the opening is not simply a request
for the poet’s prayer to be accepted: the triple plea, הָצְיָנֵה, בְּנֵה, הַצְּיָבֵה, reflects an urgent need for a distinct closeness. Therefore,
it is possible that for the present the speaker feels that God is far
from him, and so his prayer reflects a sense of aberration. The
impression is that the psalm reflects a personal and perhaps unique
experience. But here we face difficulties, for it is generally agreed
that this psalm is a cultic prayer. The main controversy is whether
it is an individual4 or a communal prayer,5 to be recited in the
Temple, or at any other place.6

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2 It seems to me that “thy way” should be understood as “the ways you have
destined for me”. If so, the verse has synonymous parallelism. But if, following
Ibn Ezra and Kimchi, the other possibility is correct, then the putative meaning
will be similar to “‘show me now thy way’ (Ezek. xxxiii 13) or ‘Show me thy
ways’” (Ps. xxxv 4), although here, too, the meaning might be ambiguous.
3 Die Psalmen (Göttingen, 1926), pp. 17-20, but see the objection in A. Weiser,
Göttingen, 1955), pp. 84-5.
4 Gunkel, p. 17, classifies it as a personal prayer. For criteria of classification
see Einleitung in die Psalmen (Göttingen, 1933), pp. 172-3, 184-90, and Weiser, pp.
85-6 (E. tr., pp. 126-7).
5 C. A. Briggs, The Psalms I (Edinburgh, 1906), pp. 37-8, thinks the psalm was
composed for public morning prayer and offering.
6 M. Buttenwieser, The Psalms (Chicago, 1938), pp. 405-10, also thinks this is
a public prayer, but from vs. 7 he gleans that a distinction should be made between
prayers offered up in the Temple and prayers uttered in any other place. To him
it is clear that the writer here means to emphasize that by the grace of God he may
enter the Temple or worship God anywhere. Since in this psalm we do not find
a reflection of exilic conditions, his conclusion is that it must date from post-exilic
times. By analysing expressions like “there is no truth in their mouth” (which
includes the word נקונָה) he learns about the author’s dependence on Job. There-
fore, the time of this psalm, according to him, is later than 400 B.C.