

A Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Metaphors in Psalm 1 and its Ethical Implications

Abstract:

Acquiring blessing has occupied an integral position in human endeavors amidst many misconceptions about the nature and proper method. This has created destructive perspectives among many people such as armed robbery, corruption and ritual killing. The paper discussed the proper ways of acquiring blessing from the perspective of the Psalm 1, through a lexico-semantic analysis of the entire passage. It recommends that true blessing has both the divine and the human dimensions. True blessing requires righteous living, and such blessing is long-lasting and enduring.

Introduction

The Hebrew scripture is composed of certain literary patterns such as narrative, poetry, prose, poems, and stories. Each of these has its own peculiar characteristics, which necessitates a peculiar way of interpretation. One major type of biblical poetry is found in the Psalms. The psalmists are in conformity with the Hebrew poetry tradition. They exhibit the use of imagery, metaphors, similes, personifications and so on. These are used to either represent the relationship between Yahweh and His people Israel, or to picture the nature of man and their behavior. They set a pattern for knowing God and his standards, as well as revealing how humans are expected to live. Lack of proper understanding of these standards which are often couched in figurative expressions sometimes makes the reading and interpretation of Psalms difficult. This is compounded by the polysemous nature of these imageries that must be exegetically unbundled for specific nuances.

At times, the Book of Psalms is often seen as purely a book of prayer that only contains God's promises and imprecatory declarations against one's enemy. While it is true that the book has a lot of prayerful inclinations, it also contains inestimable life-changing teachings about holiness, forgiveness, friendship, wealth, love, obedience and so on, just like other books of the Bible. The quest for blessing in terms of material possession in the contemporary time is fast becoming a matter of concern. Pursuit for blessing is often reflected in the manner and content of prayer without recourse to biblical precepts. One of such can be found in Psalm 1, which serve as the introduction for the entire book. Incidentally by its position and content, it intends to intimate its readers about requirement for divine blessedness with earthly implications.

The Concept of Blessing in the Contemporary Time

One of the most sought-after contemporary phenomena in the Nigerian context is blessing. The idea of blessing has dominated both the political, social and religious domains to the extent that any gathering irrespective of organization, nation or disposition always clamors for it in its existence and operation. While the understanding of blessing may differ from one group to another, there remains a common trend that cuts across them all. Blessing implies both physical and material prosperity in form of increase in quantity and quality. Therefore, this has heightened the quest for material *cum* financial blessing in Nigeria today. The prevalence of the high quest for blessing is aided by precarious postmodern view that has now pervaded the contemporary world. This view tends to measure status and value of life by the level of material wealth that someone possesses, which is often used to determine the level of his influence.

This has eventually led to a destructive understanding about every other entity, even humans. All available materials and means now become an opportunity to acquire such blessing irrespective of the cost and implications. Such means include, armed robbery, forgery, ritual killing, suicide mission, kidnapping human trafficking, smuggling the likes. The most influenced are the youth who are desperate in their quest to make wealth quickly and at all cost. This has extended into the religious atmosphere through many preachers and religious leaders, who in the quest to keep their members say and teach pleasant things. Some of them even go as far as encouraging members to pursue wealth at all cost because poverty is a curse. They fail to teach them about the peril in excessive pursuit of wealth and balance biblical teaching about blessing and prosperity. Some even go as far as teaching the amount given to God or a particular ministry will determine the amount of blessing to be received from God. They fail to teach that God has a set of determining precepts to be followed by someone in order to be considered as a blessed person. Knowing these precepts through a thorough study of psalm 1 will go a long way to facilitate a change of opinion about blessing and enhance its pursuit.

Background to Psalm 1

Psalm 1 seems to have been placed first in the collection because from its general character and subject, it forms a suitable introduction to the rest. The psalm is a poetic statement of the Jewish conception of a good man. It

treats the blessedness of the righteous, and the misery of the wicked.¹ This is a topic that normally occurs constantly in the psalms, but psalm 1 treats them as if all experiences point only toward one direction. The moral problems, which in other psalms troubles the ancient poets of Israel is when they saw the evil prospering and the good oppressed.²

Psalm 1 is a didactic poetry which is basically influenced by conceptual element of *hokma* and *torah*, wisdom and law. The writer of this psalm could be said to belong to the circle of teachers of wisdom and Torah. The time for this psalm could be in the post-exilic times.³ This is so because of the autonomy of the individual personality that is becoming recognizable in this psalm. This means that the psalm does not address the entire congregation of Israel as a whole, rather a particular group of people the *tsadik* “the righteous,” who have been separated from the *resayim* “the wicked.”⁴ This means, among the entire ‘*edhah* “congregation” of Israel, a change and division of certain proportion has taken place.

This could have happened during the post-exilic period when religious groups and movements have emanated from the returning Jews, and they have started opposing one another.⁵ This brought about the apparent concept of dualism that is reflected in psalm I. In one instance, there was a contradiction between the righteous and the wicked. On the other hand, the judgment of YHWH for these categories will never be the same. This suffices to say that the congregation of the righteous is no longer all Israel, but a circle of those who have come out through their personal decisions and separations.⁶ As a didactic poem, the psalm extols the *tsadikim*, who is rooted in Yahweh’s torah as truly a happy person. Elmer Leslie posits that, “these were times in post exilic Judaism when for the religious man, the going was hard, when the religious living seemed futile and fruitless and the secular man is considered prosperous and secure.”⁷

As a didactic poem, it does not have cultic or social gathering, although it could have been read in worship service to give instructions. Its primary setting is literary, that is, it was placed first by the editor to make its form

¹W.L. Watkinson, “Psalm ,” *A Homiletical Commentary*. Vol. 1.12 (New York: Funk and Wagnals Company, n.d.), 4.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵W.L. Watkinson.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Elmer Leslie *The Psalms* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959), 412.

an introduction to the Psalter.⁸ Furthermore, early Jewish traditions suggest that it was joined to Psalm 2, and the two were seen as one. In Jewish tradition, Rabbi Johanna stated that “Every chapter that was particularly dear to David, he commenced with “happy” as it is written “Happy is the man,” and he terminated with “happy” as it is written “Happy are that take refuge in him.”⁹ This has been used to prove that psalms 1 and 2 are of the same literary unit. Moreover, another point deducible from Johanna’s remark refers to Davidic authorship of this psalm. However, the psalm in its structure lacks introductory statement as found in other Davidic psalms (Psa. 8:1; 19:1; etc.)¹⁰ This can make Davidic authorship of this psalm a debatable speculation.

Also, if the psalm is regarded as a post-exilic psalm as its content shows, David could not have authored it. It will be necessary to assert that while its opening statement has Davidic resemblance, some of the psalmists could have adapted David’s style and statement. In essence, psalm 1 was purposed to teach the people to be righteous by exposing what the righteous would not do and how Yahweh perceives them. The psalmist does this through the use of “*macarism*,” that is, “the use of blessedness,” which is a characteristic element in introducing wisdom teaching (1:1; 32:1; 33:12 etc).¹¹ In composition, psalm 1 can be divided into 3 sections: 1-3 deals with the righteous man, 4-5 talk about the ungodly, while 6-8 summarizes the fate of the two ways.

Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Psalm 1

This analysis is mainly concerned with the meaning of a word, as used independently within the context of the psalm in discussion. The psalm opens up with a masculine plural construct noun ‘*ashre*’ and it was interpreted as a type of interjection at a very early time.¹² ‘*ashre*’ has been taken to be a *nomina derivative of ‘ashar’* which means “he went.” Although the verb is rarely used in the *qal*, its common usage has two nuances namely, “to lead” and “to make happy” (Gen. 30:13; Mal. 3:12; Prov. 31:28). Also, the shegolate ‘*esher*’ or ‘*ashar*’, which only appears in plural construct as ‘*ashre*’ is used often as “abstract intensive exclamatory mark as “Oh the

⁸Peter C. Craige, “Psalm 1-50,” *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 19 (Waco: Word Book), 45.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Kraus, 115.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Francis Brown S.R. Oriver and C. A. Briggs, “*ashre*” in *A Hebrew-English Lexicon of Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 34.

happiness.”¹³ However, ‘*ashre* should not be interpreted as antithesis to the cry of woe, *hoy*, “Ah! Alas.”¹⁴ In the real sense of usage, the word *barakh* “blessing” is the direct opposite of *hoy*, “*woe*.” The word ‘*ashre* is really a new word to the old blessing formula *barukh*. In fact, ‘*ashre* is rarely used in Old Testament with its major concentration in the Wisdom Literature.¹⁵

Moreover, ‘*ashre* is to be regarded as “more secular” in its usage. ‘*asher* is never used in reference to God, instead *barukh* is used in ascribing blessing to God (Gen. 9:26; Neh. 9:5).¹⁶ Whenever ‘*ashre* is used, it connotes that the person or people in question must take certain steps to have that happiness.¹⁷ Furthermore, ‘*ashre* is generally taken to be a “formula of well-wishing.”¹⁸ However, it is not so much a wish or a promise directed at an individual. Rather, it is a joyous exclamation and an enthusiastic observation of a person’s happiness.¹⁹ ‘*Ashre* is seen sometimes as a product of chance while *barukh* is considered to be God-sent.²⁰ Also ‘*ashre* is said to have external connotations than *barukh*., This points to the fact that while, ‘*ashre* is temporary, *barukh* is eternal.²¹ Man can attain a state of blessedness by what he does.²²

The noun ‘*ish* can be used in three main ways; as a man in term of gender sex in contrast to “*ishshah*, “woman” (Gen. 4:1; Eccl. 6:3); as a husband (Gen. 29:32; Num. 30:7), and as a designation for the species of mankind, which includes man and woman (Judg. 9:49b; Isa. 2:9; 11:17).²³ The verb *halakh* connotes “to go along” or “to walk.” It is always followed by a preposition *be* “with,” It connotes to go with some person or thing (Exo.10:9); with *im* or *ith*, connotes “to go along,” and with *ath*, it means “to go after.”²⁴ Also, “to walk” can also mean “to live or follow a manner of life, or to imitate

¹³William Taylor, “Psalm 1-4,” *Interpreters Bible*, vol. 12, edited by Norman B. Harmon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), 19.

¹⁴J. R. P. Schlater “Psalm 1-41, *Interpreters Bible* vol. 12, 17.

¹⁵Cazelles, 466.

¹⁶Kraus, 115.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Taylor, 19.

²⁰W.E Vine, et al, *An expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 23.

²¹Taylor, 19.

²²N.D. Bratsiotis, “*ish*,” *Theological Dictionary of Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Michigan. Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 235.

²³Tregelles, 224.

²⁴*Ibid.*

life and manner of somebody” (Ps. 15:2; Deut. 19:9).²⁵ *’etsa* is a derivative of the verb *ya-ats* “he counsel” (Isa. 19:3; Hose 2 20:6) and refers to the rational faculty of forming plan (Isa. 11:2; Pro. 8:14).²⁶ The *reshaim* is from *rasha* which generally means “to make noise” (Isaiah 57:20). It also means “to be unrighteous, to have unrighteous course, to be guilty or condemned” (Eccl. 7:17; Isa. 50:9).²⁷ Ludwig Kohler asserts that *rasha* originally refers to someone who has been proved guilty in respect to an accusation in a court.²⁸ The noun *rasha* also refer to “someone that is loose and out of joint.”²⁹ “Also, *derekh* refers to “a way,” “a path,” “a venture” or “course of life.”³⁰ This points to its literal and figurative usage.

The noun *hattaim* “the sinner” is derived from the verb *hatta’t*, which connotes the idea of “a misstep or slip of foot” (Prov. 13:6).³¹ This is used 155 times in the Bible and the noun *hatta’* it used 19 times.³² Therefore, *hatta’t* means someone who misses a set standard and counted culpable for it.³³ The verb *amadh* is used 520 times in Old Testament. Its basic meaning is “to stand upright” (Gen 18:22).³⁴ This is synonymous to *natsabh*, which means “to station” or “to set up” (Gen 18:2; Exod. 33:8). *’Amadh* is also used in the cultic sense to describe approaching the altar to make sacrifice (Deut. 4:11). It can also mean to remain or changelessness of an action or habits (Jer. 32:14; I king 10:14).³⁵ Sometimes, *’amadh* can also connote “to service or to participate in an action.”³⁶ Moreover, it can also mean “to endure,” “to sustain” “to arise and passively, “to be appointed” (Psalm 102:276; Daniel 12:1; 11:31).³⁷ The verb *yasabh* “he sat” is used to refer to an act of sitting down, and has different nuances depending on the preposition that is attached to it. When used with *’im*. It connotes association with someone (Psalm 26:4-5), with desire of person or accusative of place, it connotes to

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Lugwig Kohler, *Old Testament*, vol. 1. (Philadelphia The Westminster Press, 1957), 165.

²⁸Vine, 232.

²⁹Davidg. Clines “derekh,” *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 1&2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academy Press; 1995), 465.

³⁰Tregelles, 37.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Vine, et al., 243

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 637.

³⁷Ibid.

remain or abide” (Gen 24:55; 29:19), with *beth* preposition, it connotes to dwell or to inhabit” (Gen 13:6; 7 12 and can be passively used to mean “to inhabit” (Isa 13:20).³⁸ The noun *moshebh* can both mean “a seat or a place of sitting (I Sam. 20:18), and “an assembly of person” (Psalm 107:32 and 1:1).³⁹ A *lets* “a scoffer” is generally taken to mean someone who “talks loosely.” It has its root in sense of a “babblers.”⁴⁰

The reference to the *torah* in this psalm means “law direction; instruction.” The noun occurs 220 times in the Hebrew Old Testament.⁴¹ In the wisdom literature, where the noun does not appear with definite article, it signifies primarily “direction, teaching and instruction” (Prov. 31:14; 28:7; 31:26).⁴² *Torah* is the totality of God instruction. It goes beyond legal law, rather, it includes instruction, wishes, statues and decrees of *Yahweh*. The word *torah* is from the root *yara’* in the *hiphil*, it means to teach.⁴³ Therefore, the *torah* is synonymous to the teaching, manner of principle, which men follow. The verb *shathul* is a poetic word for planting (Ps. 1:3; 92:14; Hos. 9:13).⁴⁴ In its basic usage, it means planting of a shoot or slip of a tree or vine and it is commonly used with *beth* preposition to suggest a locative sense.⁴⁵ The verb *natan*, which occur 60 times in Old Testament, is commonly used for the actual planting of seeds of trees and vines.⁴⁶ The noun *pelagh* means “a cleft” a channel or a canal.” It is always used metaphorically to mean a site of prosperity (Psa. 1:3; Isa. 32:2; Job 38:25). It can also means streams of tears (Lam. 3:48).

The verb *nathan* has an idea of “to give” when followed by an accusative of the object thing and *lamedh* of persons (Gen. 25:6; Isa. 8:18). Also, it can mean “to deliver” when follow with *beth* preposition or “to keep in custody” (Gen. 39:20). It can also mean “to produce” or “give forth” (Job 1:22).⁴⁷ The verb *tsalah* means “he advanced” or “he prospered.”⁴⁸ It was a basic understanding to making someone prosperous by *Yahweh* (Gen. 24:21). It also connotes experience of prosperity by a man as it relates with the course

³⁸Ibid, 371.

³⁹Clines.

⁴⁰Mitchell Dahood, “Psalm 1-50,” *Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday Inc. 1960), 39.

⁴¹Tregelles, 860.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Tregelles,, 853.

⁴⁴Brown et als, 1060.

⁴⁵Vine, et als, 178.

⁴⁶Brown et al, 852.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

of life.⁴⁹ In the *hiphil*, it connotes “to finish well” (2 Ch. 7:11; Dan. 8:25).⁵⁰ In verse 4, *kamots* is derived from *mots* “chaff.” *mots* is commonly used with *kaph* preposition to present a simile of the wicked and hostile nations (Job 21:18; Psa. 35:5).⁵¹ The verb *na’ahaph* means “to dispel” or “to drive away” (Psa. 1:4; 68:3). It is also used as a simile for conquering enemies (Job 32:13). The verb *kum* in verb 5 generally mean “to arise” (Gen 19:1; 23:3; Lev. 19:32). When followed with *al* it connotes rising against” (Psa. 3:2); with *beth* preposition, it means “rise as a witness” (Ps. 27:12). *Kum* can also mean “to go forth,” “to grow up,” or “to flourish” (Ex 1:8; Ps. 78:6). It is used synonymously with *amadh* “he stood” but always with *liphenev* “before” to mean “to stand fast” or “to remain” (Amos 7:2; I Sam. 24:21). In the *piel* it can also mean “to live,” to make valid,” to fulfil,” “to rise up” (Isa. 44:26; 58:12; Ex. 26:30). *Kum* also has the idea of maintaining himself in a position (Jos. 7:12, 13).

Ethical Implications of Psalm 1

From the study above, certain deducible facts can be identified. First, it must be noted that true blessing had both human and divine dimensions. On the human part, it is expected that certain expectations be met to qualify for blessing. Within the context of Psalm 1 as indicated by the use of *hatta'im* “sinners” *resha'im* “wicked” and *letsim* ‘scoffers.’ Anyone who engages himself in any of these groups cannot share in the God-given blessing. He employs tree verbs to depict absolute disassociation from these condemnable attributes. These terms are *halakh ubha'atshath reshayim* “walking in the way of the wicked,” *ubhmoshabh lets'im* sitting on among scoffers” and *ubhedhenach hatta'im* “standing on the pathway of the sinners.” All of these are qualified with negative particle *lo'* “not.” This implies that true blessing comes from keeping oneself from any contaminating tent of this world. Anyone who does this in the Psalmist perspective is said to be *tsadhiq* “righteous” and such shall be called blessed.

On the divine dimension, the Psalmist emphasizes tghat true blessing only come from God after someone might have exhibited acceptable righteous living and total loyalty to his commandment. According to Psalm 1, someone to be considered blessed shall *b'ethorath 'adonay hephtso* “be delighted in the

⁴⁹Tregelles, 709

⁵⁰Francis et al, 558.

⁵¹Tregelles, 535.

law of God". In other words, *torah* "will be the guiding principle of such a person as against the material driven mentality in the pursuit of blessing. God shall make such a person a permanent blessing as depicted in '*ets palge mayim* "a tree planted by the channel of water" which shall perpetually be yielding fruits. However, this shall be a product of strict obedience to God's law and righteous living. This is the source of lasting and enduring blessings.

Conclusion

While blessing remains a paramount element in the pursuit of human beings, many people are still groping in the dark concerning the true nature and sources. This has led to the use of diverse devilish and diabolical means of achieving their aims. At the end of the day, such blessings have often become transient, destructive and regrettable. As shown in the paper, true blessing has a lot to do with individual life and activities, faith and actions. It has both the divine and human dimensions.

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