

**IMITATION OF GOD AS A PRINCIPLE FOR
ETHICS TODAY: A STUDY OF SELECTED
PSALMS**

by

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ABSTRACT

This study argues that imitation of God is a principle for ethical character and conduct in the world today. The contribution is to examine imitation of God in the Psalms; hence, eleven psalms, namely Psalms 8, 15, 25, 33, 72, 94, 101, 109, 111, 112 and 113 have been analysed using an integrated exegetical approach of historical-critical and literary-critical methods in combination with canonical-theological approach. The findings show, firstly, that humans are created in the image of God, and therefore they are to represent God's character and conduct in the world. Secondly, God's character and conduct are characterized by righteousness, justice and דָּסָה , which are demonstrated by God's care and concern for, and liberation of the poor, needy and oppressed. Thirdly, in addition to liberation, God's righteousness and justice include punishment for the oppressors, which is expressed in the so-called psalms of "vengeance", in which the psalmists' call for God to exercise vengeance against their oppressors is a call for justice and righteousness to prevail. Fourthly, the human ethical response is motivated by the blessings and punishment of the righteous and the wicked respectively, the fear of the Lord and by offering praise to God.

DEDICATION

In memory of Rev. Dr. Lewin Williams
who was an outstanding scholar and friend.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1	Introduction	1
1.1	Background to the Study	1
1.2	Definition of Terms	1
1.3	Overview of the field	2
1.4	The aim of the study	3
1.5	Outline of thesis	3
1.6	Bible Quotations	4
Chapter 2	Literature Review	5
2.1	Introduction	5
2.2	John Barton	5
2.3	Walter Kaiser	8
2.4	Bruce Birch	10
2.5	Eryl Davies	13
2.6	Gordon Wenham	18
2.7	Cyril Rodd	20
2.8	Christopher Wright	25
2.9	Walter Houston	30
2.10	Conclusion	35
Chapter 3	Methodological Approach	38
3.1	Introduction	38
3.2	Historical-Critical Approach	40
3.3	Literary-Critical Approach	46
3.4	Canonical-Theological Approach	49
3.5	Selected Texts – The Psalms	58
3.5.1	Why the Psalms?	58
3.5.2	The Psalms in Christianity and Judaism	61
3.5.3	Specific Psalms being studied	66
3.6	The Authority of the Old Testament for Christians	67
3.6.1	Authority of the Old Testament based on the New Testament	69
3.6.2	Other Approaches to the Authority of the Old Testament	72
Chapter 4	The Psalms in their Ancient Near Eastern Context	81
4.1	Introduction	81
4.2	Sumerian Prayers	81
4.3	Akkadian Prayers	82
4.4	Egyptian Prayers	84
4.5	Literary Style and content	85

Chapter 5	Imitatio Dei in the Psalms	87
5.1	Introduction	87
5.2	Imitatio Dei and Imago Dei	88
5.2.1	The Meaning of Imago Dei	89
5.2.2	Psalm 8 and Imago Dei	102
5.2.3	Imago Dei and Imitatio Dei	106
5.3	Imitatio Dei and the King	107
5.3.1	The King in the Ancient Near East	108
5.3.2	The King in Psalm 72	109
5.3.3	The King in Psalm 101	116
5.4	Imitatio Dei in other Psalms	122
5.4.1	Psalm 15	122
5.4.2	Psalms 111 and 112	131
5.4.3	Psalm 113	134
5.5	Imitatio Dei and the Way of the Lord in Psalm 25	141
5.6	Conclusion	148
Chapter 6	The Character of God	150
6.1	Introduction	150
6.2	God's חסד	151
6.2.1	The Meaning of the term חסד	152
6.2.2	God's חסד in the Psalms	158
6.2.2.1	חסד in Psalm 25	160
6.2.2.2	חסד in Psalm 33	166
6.3	God's Righteousness and Justice	171
6.3.1	The Meaning of God's Righteousness – צדקה/צדק	172
6.3.2	The Meaning of God's Justice – משפט	175
6.3.3	God's Righteousness and Justice in the Psalms	177
6.3.3.1	God's Righteousness and Justice in Creation	178
6.3.3.2	God's Righteousness and Justice in Deliverance	180
6.4	Conclusion	184
Chapter 7	The Vengeance of God and Imitatio Dei	186
7.1	Introduction	186
7.2	Vengeance in Psalm 94	188
7.2.1	Form, Structure and Canonical Position of Psalm 94	188
7.2.2	The Nature of God's Vengeance in Psalm 94	191
7.3	Vengeance in Psalm 109	204
7.3.1	Form and Structure of Psalm 109	204
7.3.2	The Nature of God's Vengeance in Psalm 109	208
7.4	Vengeance of God and Imitatio Dei	215
7.5	Conclusion	218
Chapter 8	Motivation for Imitatio Dei and for Being Ethical	219
8.1	Introduction	219

8.2	The Righteous and the Wicked	224
8.2.1	The Character of the Righteous and the Wicked	225
8.2.2	Motivation for the Righteous	227
8.3	The Fear of the Lord	235
8.4	Praise in the Psalms	237
8.4.1	Praise as Motivation for ethical character	239
8.5	Conclusion	243
Chapter 9	Imitatio Dei in the World Today: The Church's Response to HIV and AIDS in Belize	245
9.1	Introduction	245
9.2	HIV and AIDS in Belize	247
9.3	The Churches' Response to HIV and AIDS in Belize	250
9.4	Ethical issues involved in HIV and AIDS prevention	252
9.4.1	Forced sex	252
9.4.2	Poverty	253
9.4.3	Gender inequality	254
9.4.4	Stigma and discrimination	255
9.5	Imitating God in responding to HIV and AIDS in Belize	257
9.5.1	Dealing with issues of sex and gender	257
9.5.2	The Church as a Prophetic Voice	261
9.5.3	The Church as an open, accepting and forgiving community	264
9.6	Conclusion	266
Chapter 10	Conclusion	267
10.1	Summary of findings	267
10.2	Areas for future research	272
	Bibliography	274

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	-	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
HALOT	-	Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament
HIV	-	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
JB	-	Jerusalem Bible
JSOT	-	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
KJV	-	King James Version
LXX	-	Septuagint
MT	-	Masoretic Text
NIV	-	New International Version
NRSV	-	New Revised Standard Version
REB	-	Revised English Bible
RSV	-	Revised Standard Version
RV	-	Revised Version
UNAIDS	-	United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNGASS	-	United Nations General Assembly Special Session
UNICEF	-	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WCC	-	World Council of Churches

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the study

This study was inspired by my experience as an ordained minister. I have encountered many persons who have a negative view of the Old Testament. Some believe that the Old Testament is about obeying rules and that it portrays a harsh and judgmental God, while the New Testament presents a God of grace. In contrast to this view, I believe that the Old Testament is still relevant today and can contribute to the ethical character and conduct of Christians. Hence, the overall purpose of this study is to examine how the Old Testament can contribute to ethics today.

1.2 Definition of terms

What do we mean by ethics? C. Bullock stated: “When we speak of ethics, we are speaking of relationship – our relationship to God, to our neighbour, and to the world we live in, and the proper conduct of these relationships.”¹ The origin of the word “ethics” is the Greek word *ethos*, which has the sense of “conduct” or “practice”.² However, ethics is not only related to conduct, but it also includes character, for the way one behaves is determined by the kind of person one is. Therefore ethics is both “being” and “doing”. In other words, character addresses the question, “what kind of person should I be?” while conduct addresses the question, “what should I do?” Hence, in this study, ethics will be spoken of in terms of character and conduct.

¹ C. H. Bullock, “Ethics,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 193.

² Bullock, “Ethics,” 193.

1.3 Overview of the field

Usually when persons turn to the Bible for ethical guidance, it is common to find out what the Bible says about specific moral issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, war, to name just a few. This has resulted in emphasis being placed on portions of the Bible that explicitly address ethical concerns. With regards to the Old Testament, the sections that are often seen as addressing ethical issues are the law codes and the prophetic oracles. However, as pointed out by Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, while many materials in the Bible do not directly address specific issues, “they witness to the efforts of the biblical communities in concrete historical circumstances to discover and live according to the will of God, and this forms the linchpin for the shaping of moral identity and faithful decisions in any age”.³ Therefore, Birch and Rasmussen pointed out that ethical insight can be gained from narrative accounts, historical events, wisdom sayings and liturgical material.⁴

Since Birch and Rasmussen’s work, efforts have been made to address this, as there have been works done on the use of narratives as an ethical source. For instance, Waldemar Janzen, Mary Mills and Gordon Wenham have written on the ethical materials in the narratives. However, the section of the Old Testament that has not received extensive study of its ethical materials is the Psalms. Gordon Wenham already identified this gap and did a preliminary study on the ethics of the Psalms.⁵ Since his work was only preliminary, there is still more to be done in this field. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap and will focus on ethics in the Psalms.

³ Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life*, Rev. & exp. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 161.

⁴ See Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics*, 161.

⁵ See Gordon J. Wenham, “The Ethics of the Psalms,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and approaches*, ed. Philip S. Johnston and David G. Firth, (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2005), 175-94.

1.4 The aim of the study

Genesis 1:27 states that God created humankind in his image. This implies that humans are God's representatives on earth and therefore human character and actions should reflect God's character and actions. In the light of this, therefore, the specific aim of this study is to examine *imitatio Dei* (imitation of God) in the Psalms as a principle for ethical character and conduct in the world today. In order to achieve this aim, the following questions will be explored: Is *imitatio Dei* a theme in the psalms? What is the nature of God's character in the psalms? What is the nature of God's vengeance and how does it affect *imitatio Dei* as a principle for ethics? What is the motivation for ethical character and conduct in the psalms? How can *imitatio Dei* be practically demonstrated in the world today?

1.5 Outline of thesis

The thesis is divided into ten chapters. Chapters 1–4 are the introductory chapters, which set the study in context. After this first chapter, chapter 2 gives a review of the work of twentieth and twenty-first century scholars, who have investigated *imitatio Dei* as a basis for Old Testament ethics. Chapter 3 describes the methodology that is used in the study. The study exegetically analyses eleven psalms using an integrated path of historical-critical and literary-critical methods in combination with a canonical-theological approach. Chapter 4 then gives a brief summary of the ancient Near Eastern context of ethics in poetry.

Then follow chapters 5–7, the key chapters. Chapter 5, through the analysis of Psalms 8, 15, 25, 72, 101, 111, 112 and 113, examines *imitatio Dei* as a principle for ethical character and conduct in these psalms. If humans are to imitate God's character, then the nature of God's character needs to be known; therefore, chapter 6 examines the portrayal of God's character in

the Psalms. This chapter discusses God's righteousness, justice and $\delta\kappa\alpha$, through the analysis of Psalms 25, 33, 72, 111 and 113. There are several psalms which are classified as vengeance psalms, in which the psalmists call for God's vengeance against their enemies. This raises questions about the validity of *imitatio Dei* for human character and conduct. Therefore chapter 7, through the exegesis of two psalms of vengeance, namely Psalms 94 and 109, examines God's vengeance and its impact on the validity of *imitatio Dei* as an ethical principle.

Chapters 8 and 9 examine the practical aspects of the study. There is often a gap between knowing what should be done and actually doing it. Therefore, chapter 8 examines the motivation for ethics, as seen in the selected psalms, that is, what would make humans imitate God? Chapter 9 then discusses a practical application of imitation of God to a contemporary ethical issue, the churches response to HIV and AIDS in Belize. Finally chapter 10 concludes the study by giving a summary of the findings and areas for future study.

1.6 Bible quotations

The eleven psalms which are the main texts being studied are my own translations. All other Bible quotations are taken from the NRSV. Both the English and Hebrew versification of the psalms are given; the former is given first with the latter in brackets, as in the following example, Psalm 8:4[5].

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

As stated in the introduction, this thesis is examining *imitatio Dei* in the Psalms as a principle for ethical character and conduct in the world today. There have been various scholars, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, who have expressed various views about whether *imitatio Dei* can be a basis for Old Testament ethics. This chapter gives a broadly chronological review of the arguments of some such scholars, who have discussed the concept of imitation of God (*imitatio Dei*) as a basis for Old Testament ethics in general. It is being done chronologically, since most of the scholars interacted with those who wrote before them.

2.2 John Barton

We begin with John Barton, as many other scholars have used his views on the imitation of God as a basis for their own discussions. In 2003, he wrote *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations*, in which he brought together several of his writings in the field of Old Testament ethics, which were previously published in various journals. In this book he discussed the imitation of God as a rationale for ethics in the Old Testament in two articles. The first is in “Understanding Old Testament Ethics”, originally published in 1978, where he described good conduct for human beings as doing things which they perceive God would do if

God were human. Barton also said: “What these things are can be worked out on a sort of principle of analogy from what God is known or believed to have done.”¹

Barton referred to passages, which highlight some of these things that God has done, such as Deuteronomy 5:15; 10:17-19; 15:15 and 24:17-18, where God commanded Israel to be kind towards the strangers and the helpless just as God was kind towards them. Deuteronomy 10:17-19:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great and mighty God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Barton argued that passages like this from Deuteronomy reflect both obedience to God’s laws as a grateful response to God’s grace, and “an attempt to be like God, modelling one’s own conduct on God’s as it is seen in Israel’s history”.² This is significant because it demonstrates that Israel’s call to imitate God leads to a response not of blind obedience, but one that is motivated by Israel’s own experience of God. Chapter 8, which gives a more detailed analysis of motivational factors for imitation of God, shows further that Israel’s ethical response was motivated by their experience of God.

Barton further explored imitation of God in another article, “The Basis of Ethics in the Hebrew Bible”, originally published in 1995. He stated that imitation of God is classically visible in Leviticus 19:2, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” He further said that it is particularly visible in Deuteronomy 10:17-19 (quoted above). Barton also commented on these verses from Leviticus and Deuteronomy:

¹ John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 29.

² Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 30.

Although in one sense the desire to be ‘as God’ is reprehensible according to Genesis 3, in another the task to human beings, and especially of Israelites, is to do as God does: to take God’s character as the pattern of their character and God’s deeds as the model for theirs. This is far less generally recognized as a basis for ethics in the Hebrew Bible than the corresponding ideal of the *imitatio Christi* is in the New Testament and in Christian tradition, but it is there all the same.³

Barton argued that Yahweh is bound by at least some of the ethical constraints imposed on Israel. In referring to the passage from Deuteronomy 10:17-19, he pointed out that Yahweh does not ask human agents to do anything that is not also self-imposed, for “the God who enjoins care for the needy cares for them also”.⁴

This is further emphasised by Eckart Otto, who has produced one of the standard works on Old Testament ethics. Barton made reference to Otto’s point that imitation ethics insists that just as humans are bound by moral laws, God is also bound by moral laws, even though there are things in the Bible which show clearly that it is not a complete parallelism between God’s actions and those of humans.⁵ Barton supported this by pointing out that many texts in the Bible show that God does not act like a human agent. He used the example of 1 Samuel 26:19 when David said to Saul, “If it is the Lord who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering; but if it is mortals, may they be cursed before the Lord.” This means that “God may persecute David if God chooses, even through the agency of Saul; humans following their own volition may not.”⁶ In spite of texts which show that God’s actions are not like those of humans, Barton pointed out that there is a general “assumption that God acts according to moral

³ Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 51.

⁴ Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 51.

⁵ Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 51. See Eckart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994).

⁶ Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 51.

standards that human beings also share”.⁷ We will return to this point in chapter 5 of this thesis which will show that human beings do share ethical characteristics with God.

2.3 Walter Kaiser

Walter Kaiser, in 1983, wrote *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, and in this book he considered holiness as the central feature of Old Testament ethics. He, like Barton, referred to Leviticus 19:2 and for Kaiser, “the mainspring of Old Testament ethics is: ‘Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.’ It is an *imitatio Dei* even as the constant reminder of that oft repeated phrase captures it – ‘I am the Lord your God.’”⁸ This phrase does not only imply imitation of God, but the constant reminder of God’s identity, in the words “I am the Lord your God”, is also motivation for imitating God, as Kaiser also showed.⁹

For Kaiser, the God of holiness is the model for Old Testament men and women, and God’s character in the Old Testament sets the way that human beings ought to behave. Kaiser indicated that the ethical directions and morality of the Old Testament were directly grounded in the nature of God. He said that the goodness, righteousness, truthfulness, faithfulness and all other ethical concerns throughout the Old Testament are all traits of God’s character.

Kaiser, in addressing God’s holiness as the standard for human ethical behaviour, acknowledged that in the Bible there are aspects of God’s character and actions that seem immoral. With regards to God’s seemingly immoral character, he discussed images of God as fickle, hateful, deceptive and wrathful. Kaiser showed that these images of God are not really immoral. For example, for God as fickle, he examined passages, such as Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel

⁷ Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 52.

⁸ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Academie Books, 1983), 143.

⁹ See Kaiser Jr., *Old Testament Ethics*, 241-42 and also chapter 8.

15:11; Exodus 32:14 and Jonah 3:10, which speak of God showing repentance at a decision God had made or God changing God's mind.

He also discussed passages which seemed to give the opposite impression that God does not change, such as Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29. He pointed out that while these passages may seem contradictory, they do embrace God's essential character. For it is not God's character that changes, but, rather, it is God's actions and emotions that change. These changes result according to the response of humans to God, such as in Jonah 3:10 when the Ninevites' repentance caused God to change God's mind from destroying them.¹⁰

With regards to God's wrath, Kaiser pointed out that anger and wrath that is unchecked and uncontrolled does become evil, but "God's anger is never explosive, unreasonable, or unexplainable. It is, instead, his firm displeasure with our wickedness and sin".¹¹ God is not controlled by God's anger; rather, it is a demonstration of God's intolerance of sin and evil. God's anger does not last forever (Isa. 26:20; 54:7-8; 57:16-19) and in the midst of it, God's love still remains (Jer. 31:3; Hos. 2:19).¹²

Kaiser summed up his discussions on the seemingly immoral aspects of God, by saying:

God's character and the acts he requires are fully consistent with everything that both testaments would lead us to expect in our God. The problem usually centres in a deficiency in our view of things and our ability to properly define terms or grasp the whole of the subject.¹³

Kaiser has shown convincingly that these seemingly immoral aspects of God's character are in keeping with God's character as revealed in the Bible. However, his examples are

¹⁰ Kaiser Jr., *Old Testament Ethics*, 249-51.

¹¹ Kaiser Jr., *Old Testament Ethics*, 260.

¹² Kaiser Jr., *Old Testament Ethics*, 260. See also chapter 7

¹³ Kaiser Jr., *Old Testament Ethics*, 269. For a full discussion of Kaiser's work on the apparently immoral aspects of God's character and actions, see pages 247-269.

confined to passages from the Pentateuch, Historical books and the Prophets. He does not include passages from the Psalms which contain images that result in the perception of God as a God of vengeance. Since such passages raise questions for the imitation of God as an ethical principle, and since the Psalms are the texts being examined in this thesis, it is necessary to devote a chapter to examine some of the vengeance psalms. Therefore, we will return to this in chapter 7 which will show that when the psalmists call for God's vengeance against their enemies, it is a call for liberation against oppression, which is in keeping with God's expression of righteousness, justice and דָּסָה .

Kaiser's work described in great detail holiness in every aspect of life as, for him, holiness is the central feature of Old Testament ethics. He stated that while in the Old Testament God is celebrated for God's infinite feelings of compassion, God's graciousness, presence and acts of wisdom and power, it is God's "holiness that is most decisive for Old Testament ethics".¹⁴ This is where I find Kaiser's work as being limited because as will be shown in this thesis, there are other aspects of God's character that are ethical, such as God's righteousness, justice and דָּסָה .¹⁵

2.4 Bruce Birch

Bruce Birch, in 1991, wrote *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics and the Christian Life*. In his introduction to the book, Birch said that it is not a book about Old Testament ethics; rather, it is about the Old Testament and Christian ethics. In his discussion of

¹⁴ Kaiser Jr., *Old Testament Ethics*, 6.

¹⁵ For a full discussion of the meaning of דָּסָה , see chapter 6.

imitation of God, he cited previous scholars who discussed this, such as John Barton, Martin Buber and Harry Nasuti.

Before Birch embarked on his discussion of imitation of God in Old Testament ethics, he stated that God is the source and basis of morality in the Old Testament. He then noted that the most common way of understanding the function of the divine focus of ethics was to “stress morality as obedience to God’s explicitly revealed will”.¹⁶ Birch further stated that stressing obedience to God’s will as the central moral norm of the Old Testament focuses on God as lawgiver, while God’s character and activity in the Old Testament is much broader than simply being a lawgiver. In the light of this, he discussed scholars who have suggested imitation of God as a basis for Old Testament ethics.

Much of his discussion on the imitation of God is based on why Israel was expected to imitate God. It was not just a legalistic response of obedience to God’s commands, but a reflection of qualities which God had already acted out towards the community of Israel. It was a call for Israel to respond to having experienced the presence and activity of God. As previously noted, Barton also argued that Israel’s response was based on their experience. Their experience of God’s presence and activity was not simply the reason for them to imitate God, but it was also the motivation. As indicated above, this will be examined further in chapter 8.

Birch, like Barton, pointed to Leviticus 19:2 as suggesting imitation of God, and Birch explained the meaning and significance of the call to be holy as God is holy.

‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy,’ would seem to suggest imitation of God as a basis of moral character and conduct. Our stress on the character of God would encompass such a divine modelling of human behaviour, but it is broader. It also included morality which arises in *response* to the

¹⁶ Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and the Christian Life* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 37.

experience of the presence and activity of God. To have experienced the deliverance from bondage in Egypt may have some effects in imitating divine behaviour (e.g. in providing for the freedom of slaves), but its far greater moral impact is in engendering responses of humility and praise for the gift of God's grace and in fostering reflection on what it means to live as God's delivered people in the world.¹⁷

He referred to Harry Nasuti who pointed out that Israel, having experienced God's justice and compassion towards them when they were slaves, were to imitate God's action by acting in the same way towards others.¹⁸ Birch said, therefore, that the laws were not simply to specify actions that were appropriate to the covenant relationship, but they were for Israel to establish and preserve an identity with themselves as delivered slaves, and to imitate God in ways such as identification with the oppressed, resting on the Sabbath and embodying holiness. Birch argued that the commandment to be holy expresses God's will, but the commandment alone cannot clearly define the nature of that divine holiness. This can only be defined from the knowledge of Israel's experience of God's holiness in their various encounters with God. He concluded, therefore, that "obedience to God's revealed will and imitation of God (*imitatio Dei*) cannot be sharply separated as modes of moral authority".¹⁹

However, while Birch supported imitation of God as a basis for Old Testament ethics, he stated that there are limits to the imitation of God.²⁰ He discussed these limits in his paper "Moral Agency, Community, and the Character of God in the Hebrew Bible". In that paper he said: "we cannot duplicate God's deeds of sovereign power; we cannot perfectly embody the

¹⁷ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 39 (emphasis in original).

¹⁸ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 166.

¹⁹ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 186.

²⁰ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 192.

moral attributes toward which we strive”.²¹ This shows that imitation of God does not mean trying to be God, for, as also highlighted by Gordon Wenham, as we will see below, humans can only imitate God in *some* ways. This is important because imitation of God is sometimes opposed on the basis that there are some things about God that humans cannot imitate.

2.5 Eryl Davies

Eryl Davies, in 1999, wrote an article entitled “Walking in God’s Ways: The Concept of Imitatio Dei in the Old Testament”. In this article, Davies discussed the presence of the concept of *imitatio Dei* in the legal and prophetic material, in the Psalms and the Old Testament narratives. The scholars that have been reviewed to this point have focused mainly on *imitatio Dei* in the Pentateuch, particularly in Leviticus and Deuteronomy; however, Davies examined it in other sections of the Old Testament. Later in this chapter, we will see that Wright also discussed imitation of God as being present throughout the Old Testament. Davies also discussed the metaphor “walking in the ways of the Lord” as implying *imitatio Dei*. In his article, Davies also suggested factors that may have influenced the development of the concept of *imitatio Dei*.

Davies started, like other scholars, with Leviticus 19:2 and commented that the verse commands the Israelites “to comport themselves in a manner that reflects the very character of God himself”.²² He said that a first look at this verse may give the impression that it commands

²¹ Bruce C. Birch, “Moral Agency, Community, and the Character of God in the Hebrew Bible,” *Semeia* 66 (1994): 32.

²² Eryl W. Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways: The Concept of Imitatio Dei in the Old Testament,” in *In Search of True Wisdom: Essays in Old Testament Interpretation in Honour of Ronald E. Clements*, ed. Edward Ball, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 101.

“an abstract, utopian ideal”,²³ but Davies argued that the verses that follow demonstrate that the holiness envisaged in verse 2 is a practical one which is fulfilled in social obligations, as seen in Leviticus 19:3, 9, 10, 14, 15, 35 and 36. Davies said: “it is clear from these passages that the holiness demanded of the Israelites was not limited to cultic and ceremonial duties (such as Sabbath observance and ritual cleanness); rather, it encompassed the kind of moral behaviour expected of the people in their day-to-day activities”.²⁴ Davies, like Barton and Birch, pointed out that Israel, having experienced God’s justice and compassion, was being called to show similar concern for the weak and underprivileged among them.

Davies also discussed the exhortations in Deuteronomy 8:6; 10:12; 11:22; 26:17; 28:9, to “walk in the ways of the Lord”, and said that they imply imitating God.

Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by *walking in his ways* and by fearing him. (Deut. 8:6; my italics)

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to *walk in all his ways*, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deut. 10:12; my italics)

If you will diligently observe this entire commandment that I am commanding you, loving the Lord your God, *walking in all his ways*, and holding fast to him, (Deut. 11:22; my italics)

Today you have obtained the Lord’s agreement: to be your God; and for you to *walk in his ways*, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his ordinances, and to obey him. (Deut. 26:17; my italics)

The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and *walk in his ways*. (Deut. 28:9; my italics)

²³ Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways,” 101.

²⁴ Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways,” 102.

Davies explained this metaphor as implying that “Israel was destined to travel on a journey in which God was to lead the way as a guide and example for the people to follow”.²⁵ He pointed out that this metaphor “also suggests that the moral requirements demanded by God were those which he himself had evinced in an exemplary manner in his dealings with his people”.²⁶ I would agree with Davies on this explanation, because God does not literally have footsteps for us to follow, rather, God’s ways are seen in God’s character and actions. The use of this metaphor also occurs in some psalms, as will be noted below. Hence, it will be further explored in chapter 5 particularly in relation to Psalm 25 in which the psalmist asks to know God’s ways so that he may walk in them.

In his discussion of the prophets, Davies said that the notion of *imitatio Dei* was the underlying basis for much of the prophetic preaching. He argued that the prophets based their message on the presupposition that Israel was to mirror the way in which their God had acted towards them, in their actions in dealing with one another. Davies said that many of the prophetic indictments “were based on the fact that the people had not reflected the divine compassion in their own behaviour towards the weak and vulnerable in society”.²⁷

Of the Psalms, Davies stated that there are no clear statements of the requirement to imitate God. However, he suggested that “it is perhaps implied in the way in which God’s character and deeds are presented as the basis on which the pious should model their lives”.²⁸ In other words, *imitatio Dei* in the Psalms is not explicitly stated, but it is implied in various ways as will be shown in chapter 5, which will examine the presence of *imitatio Dei* in the psalms.

²⁵ Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways,” 103.

²⁶ Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways,” 103.

²⁷ Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways,” 105.

²⁸ Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways,” 106.

One of the examples which he used for *imitatio Dei* in the Psalms is seen in the desire of the Psalmist “to walk before God” (Pss. 56:13; 119:3; 128:1) and God’s wish for Israel to walk in God’s way (Ps. 81:13). Another example is in the twin acrostics Psalms 111 and 112, which he identified as the best illustration of human virtues as a reflection of divine virtues. The attributes of God described in Psalm 111 are regarded in Psalm 112 as being reflected in the life of the believer.²⁹ Since the topic of this thesis is imitation of God as an ethical principle in the Psalms, then an entire chapter, namely chapter 5, is dedicated to examining *imitatio Dei* in selected psalms. In that chapter, a detailed analysis of how Psalms 111 and 112 reflect *imitatio Dei* will be given. In addition, a detailed analysis of God’s character, as presented in Psalm 111, will be examined in chapter 6 showing that God’s righteousness involves deliverance from oppression. Also, both psalms will be examined in chapter 8 showing that Israel’s experience of God motivates imitation of God.

Of the narratives, Davies indicated that on first impression there appears to be little indication of *imitatio Dei*, since, the characters in these narratives are “seldom portrayed as consciously imitating God’s character”.³⁰ However, he argued that the stories of these characters were important because they established the basic character and identity of God. For as Davies explained:

The Israelites had to have an adequate knowledge and understanding of God’s attributes before they could model their lives on him, and it was through the stories relating Yahweh’s encounters with his people that his character and nature were made known.³¹

²⁹ Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways,” 107.

³⁰ Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways,” 107.

³¹ Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways,” 109.

Gordon Wenham also discussed narrative ethics, as will be seen below, and showed how God's character was revealed in these narratives.

After showing that the concept of *imitatio Dei* is present in the various sections of the Old Testament literature, Davies then suggested factors that may have contributed to the development of *imitatio Dei* in the Old Testament. He pointed out that "it is not clear how the concept of 'imitating God' originated in ancient Israel".³² He attributed it to two factors; one may have been the frequent use of human terms to depict the God of Israel, and the second may have been the doctrine that human beings were created in the image of God. As Davies suggested, the depiction of God in terms which viewed God as a person paved the way for developing the idea that God's character and actions can be mirrored by human beings. Of the second factor, Davies stated:

It is true that there is no direct evidence in the Old Testament to support the idea of a link between the concept of *imitatio Dei* and that of *imago Dei*, but it is not without significance that some of the passages which clearly presuppose the notion of imitating God (Exod. 20:8-11; 31:12-17) do so on the basis of the tradition of creation (Gen. 2:2-3).³³

It may be said, as indicated by Davies, that there is no direct evidence of the relationship between the two concepts – *imitatio Dei* and *imago Dei* – since there are no verses which explicitly state that because human beings were created in the image of God, then, they are to imitate God. However, as Davies has indicated, in the example of the verses from Exodus, the relationship between the two concepts is implied. In the example he used above, the verses from Genesis 2 speak of God having rested on the seventh day after completing God's work of creation in six days. The verses from Exodus are the section of the commandments which state

³² Davies, "Walking in God's Ways," 110.

³³ Davies, "Walking in God's Ways," 110 (emphasis in original).

that human beings must keep the Sabbath and rest on the seventh day, because God rested on the seventh day after creating the world in six days. In chapter 5 of this thesis, we will return to the relationship between *imago Dei* and *imitatio Dei*, using the example of Psalm 8 which will show that humans, created in the image of God, are crowned with attributes of “glory” and “honour” which are usually attributes of God. As will be seen below, Wenham also used creation in the image of God in the development of his argument of *imitatio Dei*.

Davies acknowledged that not all of God’s attributes can serve as a paradigm to be emulated by humans. He said:

There was obviously no problem with the concept of *imitatio Dei* while it was confined to such exemplary characteristics as God’s mercy, justice and compassion, but when God’s behaviour appeared vindictive, tyrannical and capricious the command to imitate him would inevitably be seen as morally perverse.³⁴

It was already mentioned above, by Kaiser, that there are aspects of God’s character and actions that would seem immoral. It would seem that there are contradictions in God’s character and actions, but we are seeing that the Old Testament presents a God of complex nature. As previously indicated, these seemingly immoral aspects of God’s character and actions will be discussed further in chapter 7. At this point, I would say that human beings are not divine beings, so they cannot imitate everything about God.

2.6 Gordon Wenham

Gordon Wenham, in 2000, in his book *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* focused on narrative ethics in the Old Testament, using various stories from the books of Genesis and Judges. Like Davies, Wenham pointed out that in the narratives the chief actors

³⁴ Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways,” 113.

do not always meet the ideal behaviour expected of them. However, despite their sinfulness, God does not desert them. He said:

So there is a paradox in Old Testament narrative ethics: on the one hand God is terribly demanding, he looks for nothing less than godlike perfect behaviour, yet on the other, despite human failings, he does not forget his covenant loyalty to his people, and ultimately brings them through the suffering that their sin has brought about.³⁵

He supported imitation of God as a principle for Old Testament ethics, quoting various scholars who supported this view and giving his own reasons for supporting it. Wenham's focus was that human beings are made in the image of God, and therefore can imitate God in some ways. He said:

. . . it emerges that throughout the Old Testament much more is expected of the righteous than merely keeping the letter of the law. Its writers hoped that in some way, man made in the image of God, would in some measure imitate God, his creator, in maintaining creation and in loving his fellow man. 'Be holy, for I am holy', the motto of Leviticus, sums up this aspect of Old Testament ethics.³⁶

I would say, therefore, that Wenham, like Birch, emphasised that the Old Testament requires much more than mere obedience to laws. Wenham also, like Davies and Birch, while acknowledging that imitation of God is expected in the Old Testament, realized that it is *only in some measure* that humans will be able to imitate God.

It was previously noted, that Davies suggested that the concept of the imitation of God could have originated in ancient Israel from the doctrine of creation in the image of God. Wenham discussed this by saying that the rationale for the demand to imitate God is found in Genesis 1:27 which states that human beings were created in the image of God. This means, he

³⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically*, Old Testament Studies (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 4.

³⁶ Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 4.

said, that human beings are God’s representatives on earth, and therefore human actions are to echo divine actions. Divine virtues must be exhibited in the behaviour of “kings and commoners” in pursuing justice and caring for the poor (Deut. 10:17-19; 14:28-29; Job 29:12-17; Ps. 72). Just as God has shown fidelity, love, generosity and forgiveness in God’s dealing with humankind, they must in turn treat their fellow human beings in a similar fashion.³⁷

In an essay on “The Ethics of the Psalms”,³⁸ Wenham briefly discussed *imitatio Dei* as a principle of the Psalms. Since *imitatio Dei* in the Psalms is being examined in chapter 5, I will incorporate Wenham’s brief analysis in that chapter.

2.7 Cyril Rodd

Unlike all the scholars mentioned to this point, Cyril Rodd opposed imitation of God as a principle for ethics in the Old Testament. In his 2001 book *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics*, Rodd challenged the arguments of, and disagreed with, other scholars who supported imitation of God. According to Rodd, the Old Testament writers did not have imitation of God in mind when they wrote the Scriptures; rather, scholars have read modern ideas and virtues into the texts. It is his general belief that the world of the Old Testament is “foreign” to us, and therefore not much of it can be applied to Christians in the world today.

He discussed Barton’s statement that “it could indeed be argued that the element of grateful response to God which often accompanies obedience in the Old Testament could more

³⁷ Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 105.

³⁸ Wenham, “Ethics,” 192-94.

accurately be seen as an imitation of God”.³⁹ Rodd pointed out that Barton made reference to several verses in Deuteronomy, namely 5:15, 10:17-19; 15:15; 24:17-18.

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (Deut. 5:15)

Remember that you were a slave in the land, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today. (Deut. 15:15)

You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. (Deut. 24:17-18)

Rodd said that 5:15 and 15:15 are simply motive clauses, and do not necessarily imply imitation of the divine actions they describe. The verses do contain motive clauses, but they also imply imitation. Of 24:17-18, he said that it “applies the Exodus motive clause to perverting justice and taking a widow’s garment in pledge”,⁴⁰ and can only be regarded as imitating God’s actions “by abstracting an ethical principle from the deliverance from Egypt and applying it to a different situation”,⁴¹ and this is what Barton does, said Rodd.

Rodd quoted Barton:

Thus to be kind to strangers and the helpless because Yahweh was kind to the helpless Israelites, sojourning as aliens in Egypt, is an instance both of grateful response to the divine grace, issuing in obedience to God’s laws, and also an attempt to be like God, modelling one’s own conduct on his as it is seen in Israel’s history.⁴²

³⁹ Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics*, Old Testament Studies (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 65.

⁴⁰ Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 65.

⁴¹ Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 65.

⁴² John Barton, “Understanding Old Testament Ethics,” *JSOT* 9 (1978): 61, quoted in Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 65-66.

Rodd responded to this by noting that it can be regarded as the imitation of God in a sense, but only at “some remove”. He further stated his scepticism as to whether this would not be approaching the text with “twentieth-century eyes”.⁴³ I disagree with Rodd here, because the texts are saying that just as God was kind to Israel, so they were being called to be kind to others.

He suggested that the only passage that offers support for the idea of imitation of God in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy 10:17-19. However, he said that while the commands in these verses are linked with the motive clause that the Israelites were sojourners in the land of Egypt, he found it difficult to understand what the writer “envisaged when he spoke of God as not taking bribes, giving justice to orphans and widows, and providing resident aliens with food”.⁴⁴ He referred to A. D. H. Mayes who regarded this passage as asserting the kingship of God, since the functions of being impartial, not taking bribes and helping the poor and oppressed were royal functions. Rodd, then, questioned whether this did not imply that the ethics expected of human kings were transferred to God, and then generally echoed back to human beings. He said that Barton’s arguments to establish imitation of God are suggestive but not without question.

Barton quite adequately responded to this critique that human attributes are transferred to God in his essay, “Imitation of God in the Old Testament”, published in 2007 in Robert Gordon’s *The God of Israel*. In his response, Barton acknowledged that he would not deny that in interpreting passages as *imitatio Dei* involves seeing God in a human way. However, he argued that biblical writers were convinced that there is an affinity between humans and God,

⁴³ Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 66.

⁴⁴ Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 66.

therefore, “if we want to know what it would be like for God to be good, then we look at a good human being and extrapolate that person’s moral qualities on to the divine plane”.⁴⁵ He pointed out that this is “a biblical parallel to the scholastic doctrine of analogy” which says that humans retain traces of their divine origin, and can, therefore, “offer some clues, however inadequate, to what God is like”.⁴⁶ Barton indicated that since humans were made in the image of God, then, they can suppose that, in some remote sense, God is like them. However, he highlighted that from God’s perspective, “this really means that we are like him: in the order of *knowing*, we reason from humans to God, but this is only legitimate because, in the order of *being*, we derive all our good qualities from him in the first place”.⁴⁷ In other words, humans can only know God from their human interpretation of God’s self-revelation.

Barton concluded his essay by stating that even though Rodd’s criticisms will probably result in the need for the position on *imitatio Dei* “to be stated more carefully, there is still evidence that some people in Israel saw the goal of human ethical conduct as likeness to God, and that *imitatio dei* is a usable concept in the study of Old Testament ethics”.⁴⁸

Rodd also critiqued the views of Eryl Davies. Rodd found difficulties with Davies’ view that God demands ethical behaviour for, he said, this gives the impression that *imitatio Dei* involves a commandment. Rodd expressed his doubts as to whether Leviticus 19 envisages imitating God. He said:

Imitating involves copying an action, repeating it, reproducing it. This is not what is found in the chapter. Rather what is required of Israel is to be holy (in its own way) because God is holy (in his), and although human holiness and divine

⁴⁵ John Barton, “Imitation of God in the Old Testament,” in *The God of Israel*, ed. Robert P. Gordon, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 40.

⁴⁶ Barton, “Imitation of God,” 40.

⁴⁷ Barton, “Imitation of God,” 40 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁸ Barton, “Imitation of God,” 45.

holiness as purity may be thought to coincide, the moral actions which are called out by it need not be.⁴⁹

He also disagreed with Davies' claim that exhortations to "walk in the ways of the Lord", imply imitation of God. Rodd proposed that walking in the ways of the Lord means obedience to God's commandments rather than following God's footsteps. He also disagreed with Davies' arguments that the message of the prophets was based on the presupposition that Israel was to mirror the way that God had acted towards them in the way they were to act with each other. Rodd stated that it is difficult to discover the imitation of God in the words of the prophets. He disagreed with Davies' view that the Psalms probably imply imitation of God, in the way they present God's character and deeds as the basis on which the pious should model their lives.⁵⁰ Rodd referred to this as a modern interpretation which, according to him, is almost certainly distant from the intention of the psalmists.

Rodd said: "The line between 'imitating' God and 'mirroring' his actions is very fine. Nevertheless the distinction is important. Imitating is deliberate, mirroring means no more than that the actions of the worshipper are similar to those attributed to God."⁵¹ Rodd's argument is that while there may be some evidence of a few Old Testament writers who viewed human virtues as mirroring those of Yahweh, those writers were not thinking of morality or purity as imitating God's action or character.

He said that it is natural that because Yahweh was holy and righteous that Yahweh would demand holiness and righteousness of Yahweh's people to mirror that of Yahweh.⁵² Rodd, therefore, did not see a connection between holiness, righteousness and morality. For

⁴⁹ Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 69.

⁵⁰ Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 72.

⁵¹ Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 73.

⁵² Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 75.

him, obedience to God's commands is the dominant emphasis of the Old Testament and not imitation of God. In my opinion, while obedience is an important subject of the Old Testament, the God of the Old Testament did not simply require obedience, but wanted a relationship with his people. God chose Israel as his people, and they were to respond by loving God which would lead to obedience and imitation of God. Hence the reason why the other scholars discussed spoke about Israel's *grateful* response to God. In addition, as pointed out by Birch, and as we will see also pointed out by Wright, imitation of God and obedience to God are not mutually exclusive.

Rodd concluded his argument by stating: "The idea of the imitation of God rests ultimately on the belief in a God who has been brought down to the human level and this God is never found in the Old Testament."⁵³ Contrary to Rodd, God does bring himself down. In passages such as Deuteronomy 10:17-18, and as will be seen in chapters 5 from Psalm 113, God brings himself down in order to be actively involved in liberating the oppressed from oppression.

2.8 Christopher Wright

Christopher Wright, in 2004, supported imitation of God in his book *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, which is a combination and reworking of his two earlier books, *Living as the People of God* (1983) and *Walking in the ways of the Lord* (1995). Wright, also like Birch, discussed why Israel was to imitate God in their actions. Wright referred to Israel and the Old Testament as an ethical paradigm for the world. Like Davies, Wright showed that imitation of God is reflected in the Old Testament as a whole. He showed that imitation of God

⁵³ Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 76.

is seen not only in the laws, but also in the Old Testament narratives, the Psalms, Wisdom Literature and the Prophets.

Wright's argument was developed from the point of view that ethics in the Old Testament, as in the whole Bible, is fundamentally theological. This means that ethical issues are related to God's character, will, actions and purpose.⁵⁴ Wright developed an ethical triangle for understanding Old Testament ethics. This triangle consists of a theological angle, a social angle and an economic angle. In his discussion of the theological angle, after discussing God's identity, action, words and purpose, he addressed God's way. He asked the questions: "What shape then should Israel's response take? What was to be the substance and quality of their ethical behaviour?"⁵⁵ In response to these questions, Wright said, ". . . the answer is thoroughly theological: nothing less than the reflection of the character of God himself. What God is like is seen in what he does or has done."⁵⁶

Wright then discussed the concept "knowing God" which he said is an important theme in the Old Testament. For, knowing God does not simply mean knowing what God has said and done, but knowing God in person, knowing God's values, concerns and priorities, and knowing what makes God joyful and what makes God angry. Having such knowledge should lead persons to live in the light of that knowledge.⁵⁷ Wright explained this by referring to two passages in Jeremiah. He referred to Jeremiah 9:23[24]:

but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.

⁵⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 23.

⁵⁵ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 36.

⁵⁶ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 36.

⁵⁷ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 36.

He also referred to Jeremiah 22:15-16:

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord.

From these two references, Wright pointed out that “to know God means to do righteousness and justice; but to know God also means to know that *God* delights in precisely these things. Thus this particular exercise of ethical standards is a direct reflection of the character of the LORD himself.”⁵⁸

Wright indicated that the phrase imitation of God, or *imitatio Dei*, has increasingly been used for the dimension of Old Testament ethics which refers to ethical standards as reflecting God’s character. Wright, however, cautioned that the term imitation of God has to be used with qualification. He argued that to think of imitation of God as mere “mimicry” would be misleading, as this would mean attempting to do whatever God did or does, and this is not possible as there are “areas of the activity of God that are not available or appropriate for human replication”.⁵⁹ Wright here, like Wenham, pointed out that human beings can only imitate God in some aspects. Davies, Birch and Wenham also acknowledged this.

Wright used the analogy of the imitation of Christ to help in understanding the imitation of God. He acknowledged that a simple analogy cannot be made between the two, because the incarnate Jesus lived on earth as a human being and, therefore, could be imitated more directly. However, he argued that “Christlikeness” for the Christian does not mean an obligation to imitate every detail of the earthly life Jesus lived in first-century Galilee. Wright said that it is

⁵⁸ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 37.

⁵⁹ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 37.

the stories of Jesus that are used to picture his character, attitudes, practices, values, reactions and goals.

Then we seek to be ‘Christlike’ by reflecting what we know to have been true of Jesus in the choices, actions and responses we have to make in our own lives. . . In the same way, the imitation of the LORD . . . would have meant that Israelites should work from what they knew of the character and priorities of their God to what they could assume he would want to be done in any given situation.⁶⁰

Wright noted that in order to avoid the confusion of thinking of merely copying God’s actions, it is preferable to speak of reflecting God’s character rather than the imitation of God.

Like other scholars who supported imitation of God, Wright said that this principle of imitation or reflection of God’s character is most succinctly expressed in Leviticus 19:2, which, he said, is a call to be like God in character and not so much to imitate God. He further pointed out that one may be inclined to think that holiness implies personal piety, or ritual cleanness, proper sacrifices, clean and unclean foods. However, while some of this is present in Leviticus 19, Wright pointed out, like Davies, that most of the chapter shows that it is practical holiness that reflects God’s holiness.

It includes generosity to the poor at harvest time, justice for workers, integrity in judicial processes, considerate behaviour to other people (especially the disabled), equality before the law for immigrants, honest trading and other very ‘earthy’ social matters. And all through the chapters runs the refrain ‘I am the LORD’, as if to say, ‘*Your* quality of life must reflect the very heart of *my* character. This is what I require of *you* because this is what reflects *me*. This is what I myself would do.’⁶¹

Wright, like Barton and Davies, discussed the metaphor “walking in the way of the Lord” which is commonly used in the Old Testament. Wright identified the two possible meanings of this metaphor; one is to follow the path of another person, watching that person’s

⁶⁰ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 38.

⁶¹ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 39 (emphases in original).

footsteps and following in the same way, and would thus imply the imitation of God. The other is following the instructions given by another in order to stay on the path set out by that person. He referred to Rodd's preference for the second interpretation, since, for Rodd, "walking in the way of the Lord" meant obeying God's commands and not imitating God. In response to this, Wright indicated that: "To obey God's commands is to reflect God in human life. Obedience to the law and the imitation of God are not mutually exclusive categories: the one is an expression of the other."⁶² This is similar to Birch's view where he said that one could not make a sharp separation between obedience to God's revealed will and imitation of God as modes of moral authority.

Wright also argued that reflection of God's character as a feature of Old Testament ethics is not only found in the law. "The Psalms constantly exalt the character and ways of the LORD with the clear intention of inculcating not just worship but also a quality of ethical life that reflects the God who is worshipped."⁶³ This was also expressed by Davies. Like Davies, he identified Psalms 111 and 112 as being the clearest example of reflective ethics. Wright also made reference to Psalms 15 and 24 which show that only those "who mirror the integrity, compassion and purity of God can legitimately come to worship [God]".⁶⁴ He also noted Psalm 25 in which the psalmist asks to be taught the ways and paths of God in order to walk in them. As already mentioned above, chapter 5 is dedicated to examine *imitatio Dei* in selected psalms; hence, Psalms 111 and 112, and Psalms 15 and 25 will be discussed in that chapter.

Of the Wisdom literature, he made reference to the book of Proverbs and said:

⁶² Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 40.

⁶³ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 41.

⁶⁴ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 41.

. . . so many of the little details of behaviour commanded in the book do indeed reflect the character of God himself. There is emphasis on the virtues of faithfulness, kindness, work, compassion, social justice, especially for the poor and oppressed, generosity, impartiality, truthfulness and integrity. All of these reflect the character and concerns of the Lord God.⁶⁵

While the Proverbs do not give a clear direction to be like God, as is given in the law, I agree with Wright that the virtues emphasized in Proverbs are indeed reflections of God's character. It would be worth studying further the presence of *imitatio Dei* as an ethical principle in the book of Proverbs.

Of the Old Testament narratives, Wright stated that some of the characters reflected the nature of God in their actions and attitudes because of their closeness and obedience to God. However, he also noted that there were times when these same characters, who at one point reflected God's nature, acted in compromised ways. This was also acknowledged by Davies and Wenham. In my opinion, this is to be expected because humans are not infallible, and, therefore, there are times when their actions will not be in keeping with what is a reflection of God. As noted above, by Birch, humans cannot perfectly embody the moral attributes to which they strive.

2.9 Walter Houston

Walter Houston, in the April 2007 issue of the *Journal of Theological Studies*, wrote an article entitled "The Character of YHWH and the Ethics of the Old Testament: Is *Imitatio Dei* Appropriate?" Houston described the aim of his article as: ". . . to examine the character of the God of the Old Testament, principally in the Pentateuch, to discover whether it provides an appropriate basis for the *imitatio dei* that a number of writers have argued is prominent in Old

⁶⁵ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 41.

Testament ethics”.⁶⁶ Houston examined the contribution of Old Testament writers such as Barton, whose views have already been discussed, on the importance of *imitatio Dei* as a rationale for Old Testament ethics. He also discussed Rodd’s opposition to imitation of God. In his article, Houston gave a mediating view of *imitatio Dei*. He discussed places where God is presented as a moral example for Israelites, aspects of justice attributed to God which could be held as calling for imitation and places where God’s morality is questionable. Houston’s article also points to the complex nature of the God of the Old Testament.

He cited the late Norman Whybray, one of the scholars who questioned the morality of God. Whybray wrote about the “Immorality of God”, where he reflected on passages where God was seen to act in an “immoral” way.⁶⁷ For Houston, the question was whether the YHWH or Elohim in the Old Testament inhabits the same moral universe as the people governed by this YHWH, and if this YHWH is bound by the same moral principles as the people.⁶⁸

Houston referred to the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17–26) as the most obvious passage that one would think of in considering whether God is thought of in the Old Testament as a model for human beings. Like other scholars, he referred to Leviticus 19:2. However, he felt that this verse presents a difficulty in not explaining the meaning of calling God ‘holy’. Houston argued that the admonitions which follow this verse reflect mostly social human conduct only relevant to human beings. He wondered how observance of such conduct could function as imitation of God. He mentioned Rodd who made a similar point in his critique of Eryl Davies’s

⁶⁶ Walter J. Houston, “The Character of YHWH and the Ethics of The Old Testament: Is Imitatio Dei Appropriate?” *Journal of Theological Studies* 58 (2007): 1.

⁶⁷ See R. N. Whybray, “The Immorality of God: Reflections on Some Passages in Genesis, Job, Exodus and Numbers,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 72 (1996): 89-120.

⁶⁸ Houston, “Character of YHWH,” 5-6.

use of this text. Houston noted that we have made a distinction by seeing holiness, in this sense, as ritual and not moral, but the text does not make any such distinction. He stated:

Israel is to be holy, expressing the fact that they belong to their holy God, not only by avoiding the unclean but by holding to standards of moral conduct approved by YHWH and eschewing those ‘abominations’ alleged to be characteristic of the peoples from which YHWH has separated them.⁶⁹

Houston, here, agreed with both Barton and Rodd, the later he said is right in saying that this is not imitation, and the former is equally right in saying that it is something like imitation. Houston said that YHWH’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt is the foundation of the relationship which commits them to share in YHWH’s holiness as seen in Leviticus 11:43-45. This is in keeping with what has already been mentioned above that Israel was being called to imitate God as a response to their experience of God’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

Houston mentioned passages in the Psalms and the Prophets which reflect Yahweh’s justice, and even though they do not demand imitation, they reflect the way humans should show justice and so can be seen as a model for justice. Like Davies and Wright, Houston also noted that Psalms 111 and 112 are examples of reflective ethics. The former describes God as primarily a God of justice, and the latter pronounces a blessing on the one who “fears God”, who is also just. Therefore, Houston concluded that since these two psalms are placed together, they make “it clear that the conduct of the faithful is to echo the justice and compassion of their God”.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Houston, “Character of YHWH,” 9.

⁷⁰ Houston, “Character of YHWH,” 14.

Houston also referred to retributive justice in Isaiah and many of the prophets.⁷¹ He showed that YHWH's retributive justice in the Old Testament is not "automatic rewards and punishments". Rather, he quite rightly said that they show as much about the grace and forgiveness of God as about God's wrath, and the two are brought together in Exodus 34:6-7:

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.

Houston pointed out that the context of these verses is after the Israelites' sin with the golden calf. He pointed out that Israel had pledged their covenant obedience to YHWH's commands, the first being to have no other gods, and not to make idols. After making such a solemn pledge, they blatantly broke the covenant by building the golden calf. Houston, therefore, said that YHWH was legally justified to annihilate them, as YHWH had said. He showed that Moses' plea with God for them put God in a bind. Houston stated: "It will be humiliating to destroy his people, but equally humiliating to forgive so blatant a break of covenant."⁷²

Therefore, God finally revealed to Moses on the mountain that God is indeed compassionate and it is God's glory rather than a humiliation to forgive. However, God reserves the right to punish if God chooses to do so.⁷³ Birch also discussed these verses in his article "Divine Character and the Formation of Moral Community in the Book of Exodus". In his discussion, he stated: "The recital affirms that God will not acquit guilt, and God will visit

⁷¹ For a comprehensive and thought provoking discussion of divine justice in Isaiah, see Andrew Davies, *Double Standards in Isaiah: Re-Evaluating Prophetic Ethics and Divine Justice* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000).

⁷² Houston, "Character of YHWH," 15.

⁷³ Houston, "Character of YHWH," 16.

iniquity (i.e. invoke covenant sanctions) against the community even into future generations (v. 7b). God is not lightly to be wronged. The grace offered is not cheap grace.”⁷⁴ Birch also argued that this shows a moral tension in the affirmation of God’s character, which has been considered by many as contradictory. “Those who live in relationship to this God must reckon both with God’s grace and judgment.”⁷⁵ This apparent tension in the character of God will be discussed further in chapter 7.

Houston further said about this Exodus passage that: “In its context, it is clear that this formula is not concerned with the general idea of the divine relationship to humankind, but with YHWH’s attitude to Israel”.⁷⁶ This is in contrast to Birch who noted that the verses spoke against the community and even into future generations.⁷⁷ From my own reading of the verse, it is my opinion that it does relate to humankind, because, as reflected in the call of Abram in Genesis 12:1-3, Israel was chosen so that all the nations of the world would be blessed. I would also support this by referring to Wright who said:

God’s covenant commitment to Israel was dependent on, and an expression of, God’s commitment to the rest of the nations of humanity as a whole. So therefore, what God did in, for, and through Israel was ultimately intended to be for the benefit of the nations. And furthermore, what God *ethically required* of Israel had the same universal breadth of reference.⁷⁸

Birch also, at the beginning of the article referred to above, said that the existence of the canon implies that Israel’s story “as moral community in relation to God is intended to play a crucial role in the shaping of subsequent generations of moral community in continuity with the

⁷⁴ Bruce C. Birch, “Divine Character and the Formation of Moral Community in the Book of Exodus,” in *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies, and M. Daniel Carroll, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 131.

⁷⁵ Birch, “Divine Character,” 131.

⁷⁶ Houston, “Character of YHWH,” 16.

⁷⁷ Birch, “Divine Character,” 131.

⁷⁸ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 319 (emphasis in original).

biblical communities themselves”.⁷⁹ In light of this, therefore, I believe that God still relates to Israel and Christians as a compassionate, merciful, forgiving God, who reserves the right to punish if God so chooses.

From his survey of the character of God as seen in Exodus, Houston suggested that “God (at least, the character YHWH in Exodus) may be ‘ethical’, but the ethics that apply to him, because he is God, are not the same as apply to most human beings”.⁸⁰ Houston, however, acknowledged that Yahweh’s character and actions may be imitated more than Rodd suggested. Nonetheless, he agreed with Barton that: “*imitatio dei* is not a key to unlock all doors in the ethics of the Old Testament”.⁸¹

2.10 Conclusion

This literature review has shown that among most of the scholars reviewed, it is generally agreed that *imitatio Dei* is a principle for Old Testament ethics. This means that God’s character and actions as revealed in the Old Testament can serve as a model for human character and actions. This thesis seeks to add further weight to the argument given by these scholars.

Let us therefore summarise the findings of this literature review. Firstly, all the scholars, who supported *imitatio Dei* as an ethical principle in the Old Testament, used the Pentateuch, especially the passages in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The primary bases for this theme, as discussed above, are Leviticus 11:45 and 19:2: “Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” It has also been noted that this call to holiness, as a reflection of God’s holiness, is expanded further in passages in Deuteronomy (10:17-19; 15:15; 24:17-18), in which God asked Israel to

⁷⁹ Birch, “Divine Character,” 119.

⁸⁰ Houston, “Character of YHWH,” 23.

⁸¹ Houston, “Character of YHWH,” 25.

be kind to strangers and aliens because they were once slaves in Egypt and God had delivered them out of slavery. In this, therefore, we have seen, as mentioned by Barton, Birch, Davies, Wright and Houston, that imitation of God, for Israel, was to be a *grateful* response for their experiences of God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. This raises the point that imitation of God in the Old Testament was motivated by thankfulness for what God had done in the past. As mentioned above, this will be further explored in chapter 8 which will discuss motivation for being ethical.

Secondly, Barton, Davies and Wright discussed the metaphor "walking in the ways of the Lord" as implying imitation of God. The metaphor has the sense of following the path of a person, and, since God does not literally have footsteps, the path that God sets out to be followed are revealed in God's attitudes and actions which were demonstrated in God's interaction with Israel throughout their history. It was also pointed out by Wright and Davies that this metaphor also occurs in the Psalms, for example Psalm 25, in which the psalmist asks to be taught the ways and paths of God so that the psalmist can walk in those ways. This will be discussed further in chapter 5.

Thirdly, Wenham focused on narrative ethics particularly in Genesis and Judges. He argued that since humans are created in the image of God, then, they are God's representatives on earth. This will be discussed further in chapter 5.

Fourthly, while all the scholars pointed to passages in the Pentateuch as indicating *imitatio Dei*, only Davies, Wright and Houston cited that *imitatio Dei* is present in other parts of the Old Testament outside the Pentateuch, such as the Psalms, Prophets and Wisdom literature. The psalms were noted by Davies, Wright and Houston, and, as will be noted later in chapter 5, by Wenham. It was noted that in the book of the Psalms there is no explicit call to imitate God

as in the passages of the Pentateuch, but the concept is implied in some psalms such as Psalms 15, 25, 111 and 112. The psalms were only mentioned briefly by all of these scholars, but no in-depth study of *how* they imply *imitatio Dei* has been done. As will be seen in the following chapter, the psalms were important for Jesus and the early Christians, and have remained important for Jews and Christians throughout the centuries. This is because the psalms express human responses to God and reflect every aspect of human emotions, hence people relate to them more naturally than to other parts of the Old Testament. Therefore, for texts which are so important for Christians and Jews, a study of *imitatio Dei* as an ethical principle in the Psalms will add to the work already done on *imitatio Dei* in the Old Testament. Hence the reason they were selected for study in this thesis.

Fifthly, it has been noted above that God's character in the Old Testament is complex, and this is seen in the apparent tension that exists in God's character between qualities such as God's justice, righteousness, mercy, goodness and compassion on one hand; and on the other hand, God's judgement and wrath. It has already been shown, by some of the scholars above, that these are all essential aspects of God's character. If God's character is to form the basis of human character, then, it is important to do a systematic study of the portrayal of God as an ethical being. Therefore, two chapters will examine the portrayal of God's character in the selected psalms: chapter 6 will look at the God's justice and righteousness and chapter 7 which will look at vengeance of God.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

3.1 Introduction

The complex nature of the Old Testament has led to many challenges regarding its ethical use, as adequately identified by Eryl Davies. Firstly, within the Old Testament, there is no “unified or coherent body of ethical principles; on the contrary, it contains a wide variety of moral values and norms, preserved in books which date from different periods and which have frequently been subjected to a long process of editing”.¹ Secondly, there is also the difficulty that the world and culture of the Old Testament are different from our contemporary world today, and, therefore, its ethical ideals appear to some as irrelevant and outdated.² As noted in the previous chapter, Cyril Rodd sees the Old Testament as irrelevant to the world today, on just those grounds. Thirdly, the ethical situations of today are different from those of the Old Testament; therefore, Scripture does not address “current issues such as abortion, euthanasia, global warming and genetic engineering – to name a few”.³

However, while these may be difficulties with Old Testament ethics, as Davies quite rightly noted, even though the Hebrew Bible is silent about many contemporary issues, it contains teaching on ethical matters, such as care for the poor and vulnerable in society, justice and fairness, which are still relevant today.⁴ This study seeks to add further weight to the

¹ Eryl W. Davies, “Ethics of the Hebrew Bible: The Problem of Methodology,” *Semeia* 66 (1994): 43.

² Davies, “Ethics of the Hebrew Bible,” 44.

³ Eryl W. Davies, “The Ethics of the Hebrew Bible,” *Transformation* 24 (2007): 113. See also John Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 52.

⁴ Davies, “Ethics of Hebrew Bible,” 113.

argument that the Old Testament still contains ethical teaching relevant to today, by investigating *imitatio Dei* as an ethical principle in selected Psalms.

In seeking to address this issue, the question to be addressed is what methodological approach should be used in its study? Various methodological approaches have previously been used by scholars who have explored this field. The first three sections of this chapter will discuss three of these, namely the historical-critical approach, the literary-critical approach and a canonical-theological approach, and how they have been used in studying the psalms. The review of the various approaches suggests that a combination of all three approaches will be most appropriate for this study.

Susan Gillingham, in her book *One Bible, Many Voices: Different Approaches to Biblical Studies*, has done a very good summary of the historical-critical and literary-critical approaches and their use in studying the psalms. I will draw on her work in discussing these two approaches.

The fourth section of this chapter will identify the texts that will be used and the rationale for their use. Ethical engagement with the Old Testament was previously limited to its laws. However, as was seen in the previous chapter, the ethical material of the Old Testament is not only limited to its laws, but it is also present in its narratives, in the prophets, in the psalms and the wisdom literature. The vast and complex nature of the material is one of the challenges in the study of this field. Due to the nature of a PhD, only a specific set of texts can be studied and the psalms have been chosen for reasons that will be explained below.

The final section of the chapter will discuss the authority of the Old Testament for Christians in the world today. This is important because, in dealing with Old Testament ethics, it

is necessary not only to determine whether the ethical teachings of the Old Testament are relevant today but also in what way is the Old Testament authoritative.

3.2 Historical-Critical Approach

The historical-critical approach to Old Testament ethics works on the basis of seeking to look at the “ethical beliefs and practices of the Ancient Israelites”.⁵ An example of this approach is seen in the work of Eckart Otto (1994), *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments*.⁶ This approach uses the methods that have been associated with historical-critical exegesis since the Enlightenment.⁷ These methods are interested in the author’s historical context, the date of the work, the sources used by the author, the oral and written forms chosen by the author, the traditions which influenced the author and editors of the text, and the redactors of the text. These methods therefore ask questions about the author, the processes which influenced the author and the progressive influences on the text after it passed through its earliest composition.⁸ With its main focus on the author’s world, the historical-critical approach has been described by Randolph Tate as author-centred and focusing on the world “behind the text”.⁹

We will now look at a brief description of various methods of the historical-critical approach and how they have been used in the study of the psalms. Examples of these methods

⁵ Davies, “Ethics of Hebrew Bible,” 111.

⁶ Davies, “Ethics of Hebrew Bible,” 114.

⁷ Douglas A. Knight, “Introduction: Ethics, Ancient Israel, and the Hebrew Bible,” *Semeia* 66 (1994): 2.

⁸ Susan E. Gillingham, *One Bible, Many Voices: Different Approaches to Biblical Studies* (London: SPCK, 1998), 157.

⁹ W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 3rd ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2008), 2. See also Davies, “Ethics of Hebrew Bible,” 111.

are: biblical criticism which is divided into higher and lower criticisms,¹⁰ source criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism and redaction criticism.

Higher criticism is interested in the author and date of the text. This method stresses the importance of the person who inspired the work, and so begins with the text and moves to the author. This method was that which proposed, for example, that the laws were written by Moses and the psalms by David.¹¹ Lower criticism is also called textual criticism and, according to the textual critic Paul Wegner, it seeks to find the most reliable wording of a text.¹² Wegner pointed out that textual criticism has a threefold importance:

First and foremost, it attempts to establish the most reliable reading of the text. Second, in cases where a definitive reading is impossible to determine, it can help to avoid dogmatism. Third, it can help the reader better understand the significance of marginal readings that appear in various Bible translations.¹³

Wegner also noted that because textual criticism seeks to find the most reliable wording of texts, it can result in “increased confidence in the reliability of biblical texts”.¹⁴

Source criticism asks questions about the sources that may have been used by the editor or compiler of the texts. For example, Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) applied source criticism to the Pentateuch and identified J, E, D and P as its sources.¹⁵ Form criticism is interested in the various forms used by the different writers. Its initial work in the Old Testament was done on the books of Genesis and the Psalms, with Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) being the founder of

¹⁰ See Gillingham, *One Bible*, 157-58.

¹¹ See Gillingham, *One Bible*, 157-58.

¹² See Paul D. Wegner, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible: Its History, Methods & Results* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 24.

¹³ Wegner, *Textual Criticism*, 24.

¹⁴ Wegner, *Textual Criticism*, 24.

¹⁵ Julius Wellhausen wrote about this in J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, English translation from German (London: A & C Black, 1885).

biblical form criticism.¹⁶ In contrast to the focus on the author in biblical criticism, and the focus on the editor or compiler in source criticism, the emphasis of form criticism is on the community and how it has preserved and inspired the tradition. According to Edgar Krentz,

Form criticism identifies and classifies units of (oral) material and relates them to their presumed sociological setting in the earlier life of the community. It seeks to determine how the use in this sociological setting has modified or shaped the tradition.¹⁷

Tradition criticism seeks to determine the influence of theological traditions on the minds of the writers, and the influence of these traditions on the development of the text at various points in its transmission. This method presumes that the thought-world of the day was absorbed by the writers, and, in addition to borrowing from the forms of expression of those thoughts, they also borrowed “from the key religious ideas prevalent at the time”.¹⁸ Examples of this in the Old Testament may be the creation tradition, the Exodus tradition, the tradition of King David and the Zion tradition. Like form criticism, tradition criticism also emphasises the role of the community in shaping the tradition. The difference with form criticism is that its interest is in the substance of the message of the text rather than the form of the message.¹⁹

Redaction criticism is concerned with the final stage of the text. In this sense, it can be seen as closely related with canonical criticism, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The emphasis of redaction criticism is on the theological intentions of the final editors of texts. This is where it differs from canonical criticism, which focuses on the role of the believing

¹⁶ Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms*, The two horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 12.

¹⁷ Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, Old Testament Guides (London: SPCK, 1975), 50-51.

¹⁸ Gillingham, *One Bible*, 165. See pages 164-66 for full discussion of tradition criticism.

¹⁹ See Gillingham, *One Bible*, 164-66.

community in the shaping of the text.²⁰ For example, with the book of Isaiah, redaction critics are interested in the theological intentions of the editor who joined together Isaiah 1–39, 40–55 and 56–66.

All of these historical-critical methods have been used in the study of the psalms, but form criticism has yielded the most results. Form criticism focused on “a psalm’s social context, its life setting (*Sitz im Leben*), the purpose of its writing or later adaptation, and the extent to which this purpose determined formal standardization”.²¹ It showed much interest in the occasions of public worship for which the psalms were used. However, form criticism has its limitations in that it is difficult to set every psalm into one fixed category, for example, the prophetic exhortations. In addition, it is not always possible to accurately identify the settings of the psalms.²²

As previously noted, Gunkel was the founder of form criticism. He identified five major forms of psalms, namely hymns, laments of the people, laments of the individual, songs of thanksgiving and “spiritual poems”.²³ Gunkel’s work was later developed and reworked by various scholars, such as Sigmund Mowinckel, Claus Westermann and Walter Brueggemann. Mowinckel viewed the psalms as being written for ritual use. Westermann classified the psalms into two main types, laments and praise, with the latter being of two kinds: “declarative praise”, which proclaims the acts of God and “descriptive praise”, which focuses on God’s attributes, as

²⁰ See Gillingham, *One Bible*, 166-68.

²¹ Grogan, *Psalms*, 10.

²² See Gillingham, *One Bible*, 217.

²³ Grogan, *Psalms*, 12.

revealed in God's acts. Brueggemann classified the psalms into psalms of orientation (psalms of praise), disorientation (psalms of lament) and reorientation (psalms of thanksgiving).²⁴

Redaction criticism has also played a role in psalm study. Geoffrey Grogan noted that of all the Old Testament books, outside of the Pentateuch, the hand of redactors has probably been most alleged in the Psalter. He suggested that there were probably several editors with an ultimate redactor or redactors who gave the book its final shape. There was also redaction at the level of individual psalms.²⁵

As seen above, historical-critical methods to biblical study have played a significant role in the history of biblical criticism, in seeking to identify the historical context in which texts were developed. Such knowledge of the historical background is important in understanding texts in the contemporary context today. However, in my opinion, there is need to do more. As the Christian community, we have the Old Testament texts as Scripture, and, therefore, they cannot be studied only in their historical contexts, but the significance of these texts in the context of the Christian community today is important as well, especially when asking about ethics.

After describing the methods of the historical-critical approach, let us now look at its use in Old Testament ethics. As stated by Eryl Davies, in the historical-critical approach, "the task of the biblical scholar is to describe the type of community that produced the ethical norms found in the Hebrew Bible and to illuminate the historical, political and social context in which

²⁴ See Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962); Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, trans. J. R. Porter (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989); Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984).

²⁵ Grogan, *Psalms*, 19.

those norms were originally formulated”.²⁶ It is more interested in the social reality to which the text bears witness rather than in the text itself.²⁷ One limitation of this approach is whether the biblical account “can be regarded as a simple, straightforward reflection of ancient reality, and reservations have been expressed as to whether the Hebrew Bible can be regarded as an accurate record of ‘how it really happened’”.²⁸ A second limitation is that the ethical norms and values found in the Old Testament are those of the learned and educated class in ancient Israel, and, therefore, not much can be known from it about the “moral beliefs and practices of the ‘ordinary’ Israelite”.²⁹ A third limitation, as identified by John Rogerson, is that approaching Old Testament ethics historically “involves sociological issues and raises the question whether the social reconstructions that underpin the ethical conclusions are adequate, or whether we are even in a position to know enough about ancient Israelite society to tackle the subject this way at all.”³⁰

In light of what has already been said above about the importance for the Old Testament to be examined in the Christian context today, it is necessary to use methods that focus on the text in its present form. Hence, while the historical-critical approach to the study of Old Testament ethics is important, its insufficient focus on the text in its present form makes it limiting. What is needed for the Christian church today is not only what led to the ethical norms in the Old Testament, but how these texts, which have been received as Scripture, speak to the contemporary world. This is where the literary-critical and canonical approaches may prove helpful.

²⁶ Davies, “Ethics of Hebrew Bible,” 111.

²⁷ Davies, “Ethics of Hebrew Bible,” 111.

²⁸ Davies, “Ethics of Hebrew Bible,” 111. See also Davies, “Ethics of the Hebrew Bible,” 47.

²⁹ Davies, “Ethics of Hebrew Bible,” 111.

³⁰ John W. Rogerson, “Old Testament Ethics,” in *Text in Context: Essays by members of the Society for Old Testament Study*, ed. A. D. H. Mayes, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 119.

The difficulties with the historical-critical approach led recent scholars to examine the ethics of the Old Testament from the literary-critical approach.³¹ Let us turn now to the use of this approach in Old Testament ethics.

3.3 Literary-Critical Approach

Mary Mills (2001) used a literary-critical approach in her book *Biblical Morality: Moral Perspectives in the Old Testament Narratives*.³² Gordon Wenham (2000) in his book, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically*, also used the literary-critical approach in conjunction with the historical-critical approach. Scholars who have used this approach to the ethics of the Old Testament argue “that ‘story’ rather than ‘history’ should be the main focus of scholarly attention”.³³ Whereas historical-critical methods focus mainly on the world “behind” the text, literary-critical methods focus on the text in its present form, its structure and the role of the reader in the analysis of the text.³⁴ According to Tate, text-centred methods focus on the world “within the text”, while reader-centred methods focus on the world “in front of” the text.³⁵

Within Old Testament studies, literary-critical methods work well with narrative and poetic texts. It must be noted that, just as there are various methods within the historical-critical approach, there are many literary-critical methods, such as literary criticism, narrative and poetic criticisms, rhetorical criticism and reader-response criticism.

Literary criticism deals with the language of the text. It consists of semantic readings, which analyse the meanings of words used in the texts and linguistic readings, which study the

³¹ Davies, “Ethics of Hebrew Bible,” 111.

³² Davies, “Ethics of Hebrew Bible,” 114.

³³ Davies, “Ethics of Hebrew Bible,” 111.

³⁴ Davies, “Ethics of Hebrew Bible,” 111. See also Gillingham, *One Bible*, 173.

³⁵ Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 2.

relationship between different words and how such relationships affect the understanding of the text.³⁶

Narrative and poetic criticisms emphasise the whole story or the whole poem and not the smaller parts that make up the whole. In these methods, the doublets, repetitions, contradictions and gaps, that are found in the translated texts, are considered as part of the whole text and as contributing to their understanding.³⁷

Rhetorical criticism focuses on the text as “a vehicle of persuasion”.³⁸ It questions arrangement of material in the text and the choice of discourse, and seeks to find whether an affinity exists between the reader and the text. “It looks for silences in the text” from which “it either seeks to turn the text into a vehicle of communication which supports the interests of the reader, or to upturn the text . . . so that the gaps and silences in the text are filled out with what the reader feels to be a necessary balance”.³⁹

Reader-response criticism takes into consideration the reader’s response to the text, where the reader seeks to fill the gaps in the text. This method assumes that there is no single reading of a text, but that it can be read in a variety of ways by different readers.⁴⁰ Feminist, liberation, African, Asian, Caribbean, and postcolonial readings are examples of this method.

As previously noted, the literary-critical approach is particularly suited to poetic texts; hence, it has been used in the study of the psalms. Semantic and linguistic readings have been used in the study of the psalms, for at least two centuries, through the study of parallelism and

³⁶ See Gillingham, *One Bible*, 177-79.

³⁷ Gillingham, *One Bible*, 179-80.

³⁸ Gillingham, *One Bible*, 182.

³⁹ Gillingham, *One Bible*, 182.

⁴⁰ See Gillingham, *One Bible*, 183-84.

the expression of binary ideas in the psalms.⁴¹ Poetic criticism has also been used in psalmody by looking at the performative values of the psalms within our language and culture. Robert Alter (1985) and L. Alonso Schökel (1988) are the two most influential writers with regards to poetic criticism, especially related to the psalms.⁴² Rhetorical criticism has been used in psalm study by looking at features in the psalms such as inclusio, chiasm and acrostics.⁴³ Reader-response criticism has been used by stressing the performance of the psalms and the response of the reader “in terms of prayer and acts of worship”.⁴⁴ For example, Brueggemann’s classification of psalms of orientation, disorientation and reorientation is a reader-response approach.

Having outlined the use of literary-critical methods in the study of the psalms, it must be noted, as pointed out by Gillingham, that there is still much scope for these methods in poetic texts.⁴⁵ For example, liberation theologians have not made much use of the psalms despite the fact that there are liberation themes, such as God as the protector of the poor and needy. We will return to this in chapter 6 which discusses God’s ethical character in the Psalms. With regards to the literary-critical approach to Old Testament ethics, the main focus has been on narrative texts. In this thesis, the focus will be on the psalms and while the dominant approach will be the canonical-theological approach, literary-critical methods will also be used especially literary and rhetorical criticism. Let us turn now to the canonical-theological approach.

⁴¹ Gillingham, *One Bible*, 220.

⁴² Gillingham, *One Bible*, 222. See L. Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1988).

⁴³ Inclusio means “when a psalm begins and ends with the same word, phrase, or clause, the author’s thought returning to base, its mission accomplished as in 8 and 103.” “Chiasm is a pattern of reversal, an ABBA pattern, and it normally, though not exclusively, applies in a small unit, as in 90:5-6” Acrostics is when a line or section of the psalm begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Grogan, *Psalms*, 29.

⁴⁴ Gillingham, *One Bible*, 227.

⁴⁵ Gillingham, *One Bible*, 227.

3.4 Canonical-Theological Approach

The use of this label for my approach has been inspired by the work of Hetty Lalleman. I will proceed to discuss the canonical approach as developed by Brevard Childs, and then Lalleman's "canonical-theological approach" and the rationale for using it will be discussed. In discussing this approach it is necessary to note what is meant by the term canon and the canonical process.

According to Childs, there is both a historical and theological dimension to the term canon. Its formation "involved a process of theological reflection within Israel arising from the impact which certain writings continued to exert upon the community through their religious use".⁴⁶ The growth of the canon, therefore, was influenced by the interaction "between a developing corpus of authoritative literature and the community which treasured it".⁴⁷ On the one hand, the community was given its form and content by the authoritative word as a result of being obedient to the divine imperative; on the other hand, as the hearers received the authoritative tradition, these writings took shape "through a historical and theological process of selecting, collecting, and ordering".⁴⁸

Childs argued that a series of decisions, which affected the shape of the books, were involved in the formation of the canon. He further stated that, while the canonical process consisted of different phases, there was not much qualitative difference between the earlier and later decisions; therefore, the term canonization refers to "the final fixing of the limits of scripture".⁴⁹ He also stated that the process of the formation of scripture ended, and, therefore,

⁴⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 58.

⁴⁷ Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 58.

⁴⁸ Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 58-59.

⁴⁹ Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 59.

authority was given to the fixed body of writings which were normative for the community, and not to the process. Therefore, when it became necessary for Israel to reinterpret “its scriptures to address changing needs it did so in the form of the targum, that is to say, commentary, which was set apart sharply from the received sacred text of scripture”.⁵⁰

Childs described the main function of the canonical process as that of “transmitting and ordering the authoritative tradition in a form which was compatible to function as scripture for a generation which had not participated in the original events of revelation”.⁵¹ He argued that this ordering involved a hermeneutical activity, “the effects of which are now built into the structure of the canonical text”.⁵² This means that the canonical shape is important for an adequate interpretation of the history and theology of the biblical text.

With this understanding of the canonical process, we turn now to the canonical approach to scripture. Canonical analysis focuses on the text in its final form. As identified by Childs, the canonical approach to the Old Testament shares a common interest with literary-critical methods, in that both seek to examine the integrity of the text itself. However, the “canonical approach differs from a strictly literary approach by interpreting the biblical text in relation to a community of faith and practice for which it served a particular theological role as possessing divine authority”.⁵³ He further explained that the concern of the canonical approach is “to understand the nature of the theological shape of the text rather than to recover an original literary or aesthetic unity”.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 59.

⁵¹ Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 60.

⁵² Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 60.

⁵³ Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 74.

⁵⁴ Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 74.

Childs argued that a peculiar relationship exists between the text and the people of God, hence the reason for insisting on the final form of the text. He noted that the history of the encounter between God and Israel is reflected in the shape of the biblical text. He further explained that the scripture witnesses to God's activity in history on behalf of Israel, but history is not a means of revelation that "is commensurate with a canon. It is only in the final form of the biblical text in which the normative history has reached an end that the full effect of this revelatory history can be perceived."⁵⁵

Childs argued that his canonical approach was not another method of the historical-critical approach; rather, his emphasis was to establish an approach to reading the Bible as sacred Scripture. The canonical approach resists the assumption that before interpreting any biblical text it must first be examined by historical-critical methods. Instead, the canonical approach challenges the interpreter to closely examine the text in its received form and critically discern "its function for a community of faith".⁵⁶

However, while promoting use of the final form of the text, Childs acknowledged that the biblical text cannot be isolated from its context since the Old Testament witnesses to events and reactions in Israel's life.⁵⁷ The advantage of canonical criticism is locating the received scripture within the community of faith. As James Sanders, another well known proponent of canonical criticism, said, "canonical criticism might be viewed as a confession on the part of biblical criticism that it now recognizes that the true *Sitz im Leben* today of the Bible is in the

⁵⁵ Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 76.

⁵⁶ Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 82-83. See also Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 6.

⁵⁷ Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 6.

believing communities . . .”.⁵⁸ Sanders further argued that “recanonicalizing the Bible, . . ., places it back where it belongs, in the believing communities of today. It re-presents the Bible.”⁵⁹ This for me confirms the usefulness of this method for studying Old Testament ethics. As was noted earlier, the Christian church today needs to reflect on how the Old Testament, as a collection of received texts, speaks to us in our context and not only on the history of the ethical norms of the Old Testament.

The canonical approach used by Sanders differed from that of Childs. In Sanders’ version of canonical criticism, he argued that it “is very interested in what a believing community had in mind . . . when the final form was achieved, but it does not focus so much on that form as does Childs”.⁶⁰ Sanders based this argument on the observation that even after the text was stabilized into the forms in which we have received it, the community used hermeneutical techniques to receive new meaning from it for their new circumstances. While Childs was of the view that the text is only the final form which existed at stabilization and everything after is commentary, Sanders view was that the text in the Bible includes commentary and interpretation. He argued that within the canon there is both tradition and interpretation from beginning to end. Sanders also believed that the canon is open-ended. This means that the process of interpretation which began earlier continued even after stabilization. He noted that with every new generation, after stabilization, the canonical traditions were applied to their situations and reinterpreted.⁶¹

⁵⁸ James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*, Old Testament Guides (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 19.

⁵⁹ Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 20.

⁶⁰ Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 25.

⁶¹ Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 28-32.

I agree with Sanders that the Bible, in the form in which it has been received, includes commentary and interpretation. Therefore, when I speak of the final form, I consider the form in which we have received it today, which would include interpretation.

The canonical approach was not only used in biblical theology, but it was also used in Old Testament ethics. Bruce Birch, a doctoral student of Childs, used the canonical approach to study biblical ethics. In the book *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life*, which Birch wrote jointly with Larry Rasmussen, they agreed with Childs that “the canon of the Christian church is the most appropriate context from which to do Biblical Theology”.⁶² They then said that “the wider framework of the canon is of particular importance in appropriating biblical materials for Christian ethics”.⁶³ They further noted: “One cannot with integrity enter dialog with the Scripture over ethical issues if the biblical warrants appealed to are narrow selections that have not been tested against the totality of the biblical witness.”⁶⁴ This raises another aspect of the canonical approach to exegesis. In addition to examining texts within the community of faith, it also examines a text in relation to the whole of the Bible.⁶⁵

Having discussed the canonical approach as developed by Childs and continued by others, we turn now to the use of a “canonical-theological approach” to Old Testament ethics. As previously mentioned, my use of this approach was inspired by Hetty Lalleman. She used this approach in her book, *Celebrating the Law? Rethinking Old Testament Ethics*, in which she developed a theological framework for Old Testament ethics. In her book, Lalleman argued that there are theological features in the Old Testament that can help us to understand it and to apply

⁶² Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics*, 171, quoting from Brevard Childs. *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970, 99.

⁶³ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics*, 171.

⁶⁴ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics*, 176.

⁶⁵ See Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 83.

it to our lives.⁶⁶ It was already mentioned above that the canonical approach seeks to interpret the theological role of a text; hence, the question is, why speak of a “canonical-theological approach” if the canonical approach is already theological? I am using this label because my approach to this study is specifically theological, and I want to highlight the use of the Psalms as a theological enterprise.

That Old Testament ethics should be approached theologically has also been promoted by Childs. He stated that “the Old Testament’s portrayal of ethical behaviour is inseparable from its total message respecting Israel, that is to say, from its theological content”.⁶⁷ He further argued that Old Testament ethics cannot be restricted to “ethical passages” of the Bible, but, rather, it is connected with the revelation of God’s self and God’s will to Israel, God’s chosen people. God’s expectation of Israel was for Israel to reflect God’s will “for all creation in an obedient response which conformed to the holiness of God”.⁶⁸

Christopher Wright also used a theological approach to Old Testament ethics. He said: “Theology and ethics are inseparable in the Bible.”⁶⁹ He further said that in order to “explain how and why the Israelites or Christians lived as they did”, it was necessary to “see how and why they believed what they did”.⁷⁰

Therefore, taking into consideration the works of Lalleman, Childs and Wright on the relationship between theology and ethics in the Old Testament, I decided that a “canonical-theological approach” would be the best one to use for this study, especially since the psalms reflect Israel’s response to God’s activity in light of previous events in Israel’s history. Childs

⁶⁶ Hetty Lalleman, *Celebrating the Law? Rethinking Old Testament Ethics* (London: Paternoster, 2004), 9-10.

⁶⁷ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of The Old and New Testaments: theological reflection on the Christian Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 676.

⁶⁸ Childs, *Biblical Theology of Old and New Testaments*, 676.

⁶⁹ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 17.

⁷⁰ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 17.

stated that the psalms are “perhaps the clearest witness to Israel’s response to the divine initiative”.⁷¹ In order, therefore, to interpret the psalms ethically, it is necessary to read them in the light of God’s relationship with Israel as reflected in the overall story of the Old Testament. For example, Psalm 111 speaks of God’s righteousness in light of God’s work in Israel’s history, as will be seen in chapter 6; Psalm 33 speaks of God’s righteousness and justice in the light of God’s work in creation and in the history of Israel, and God’s steadfast love (חסד) in the light of God’s work in Israel’s history. This relationship between the psalms and God’s relationship with Israel, as reflected in the overall story of the Old Testament, will be seen as specific psalms are analysed in the various chapters.

The nature of Old Testament ethics is so complex that it is often necessary to use “mixed” approaches to its study. This was noted by Birch and Rasmussen, and Wenham in their respective works. Birch and Rasmussen noted the importance of literary, historical and canonical approaches for biblical ethics.⁷² Wenham in his book, *Story as Torah*, used historical, literary and rhetorical methods.⁷³ Likewise, this study will use different approaches to complement each other; while the “canonical-theological approach” will be the main one, as previously noted, literary and historical methods will also be incorporated.

The use of these three approaches is in keeping with Tate’s argument that the best approach to biblical interpretation is an integrated one which takes into account the worlds of the author, text and reader. He argued:

Meaning results from an active conversation between the world of the text and the world of the reader, a conversation informed by the world of the author. The

⁷¹ Childs, *Biblical Theology of Old and New Testaments*, 682.

⁷² See Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics*, 166-80.

⁷³ See Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 17-43.

locus of meaning is not found exclusively in either world or in a marriage of any two worlds, but in the interplay between all three worlds.⁷⁴

The canonical approach is often seen as a historical method, for example, Tate refers to it as a method that focuses on the world “behind the text”, for he believed that it involves historical studies that were used in the historical process of canonization. However, at the same time, he noted that canonical criticism is not primarily concerned with what lies behind the text, for it is also concerned with the text itself and the situation of the reader.⁷⁵ This, in my opinion, makes the canonical approach an “integrated one”, looking at the world “behind the text”, “within the text” and “in front of the text”.

It looks at the world “behind the text” in that it examines the historical communities in which the texts were received. It looks at the text in its final form, as a means of communication and hence it involves the literary-critical approach.⁷⁶ Finally, it looks at the world of the reader because these texts are interpreted within the situations of the believing communities. For, according to Childs own insistence, the canonical approach allows for the text in its final form to be continually interpreted by the believing communities that accept these texts as authoritative.⁷⁷ Therefore, this approach allows for the readers of the believing communities today to interpret the text for their situations.

The integrated approach will be used in this study as will now be outlined. From a historical perspective, tradition criticism will be used, by examining the ancient Near Eastern traditions that contributed to the development of the theology of the psalms, for example, the

⁷⁴ Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 325. See also Gillingham, *One Bible*, 67-71. Gillingham also proposed the need for an integrated approach to biblical interpretation.

⁷⁵ See Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 82-85.

⁷⁶ See John Barton, *Reading The Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, 2nd ed. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1996), 90. See also Gillingham, *One Bible*, 168-69.

⁷⁷ See Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 15-16.

influence of the creation tradition on Psalms 8 and 33. Aspects of form criticism will also be used, such as examining the structure of a psalm of lament and a psalm of praise. Literary-critical tools of biblical poetry will also be applied, such as: 1) how the use of literary forms, such as metaphors, contributes to the meaning of the texts; 2) the expression of thought in Hebrew poetry through the use of parallelism. In addition, I will also apply linguistic study to examine, synchronically, the meaning of key words, such as צדק (righteousness), משפט (justice) and דסן. The canonical-theological approach will be applied by examining the theology within the psalms, by looking at what the psalms tell us about God's character, God's relationship with Israel and with humans in general, and how these psalms speak ethically to contemporary Christians. This approach will examine the theology in the psalms in the light of their canonical position within the Psalter and in relation to the rest of the Old Testament.

Let us also look at an example of how these methods will be combined in the use of Psalm 8:⁷⁸ from a historical perspective, it will be identified this psalm is influenced by the creation tradition of Genesis 1. A rhetorical response to Psalm 8 will highlight the stewardship of creation by emphasizing verses 6-8 in the reading process. A close reading of these verses can lead to an ecological reading (ethical reading). A canonical-theological reading of Psalm 8 will look at how the theme in the psalm, the view of humankind, is discussed in Genesis 1; hence, this psalm has to be interpreted alongside Genesis 1.⁷⁹ In addition, the theology of creation in the image of God will be examined. A detailed and full development of these various methods to the ethical role of Psalm 8 will be seen in chapter 5.

⁷⁸ See Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 3rd printing ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 151-63 for Childs application of the canonical method to Psalm 8.

⁷⁹ Barton, *Reading The Old Testament*, 83-84.

3.5 Selected Texts – The Psalms

3.5.1 Why the Psalms?

As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, scholars initially looked to the laws of the Old Testament for ethical material. However, it has now been established, by many scholars, that ethical concerns in the Old Testament are not limited to its laws, but can be found throughout the different genres of Old Testament literature.⁸⁰ As was mentioned in the previous chapter, Christopher Wright pointed out that *imitatio Dei* is a principle in the legal material, the narratives, the prophets, the psalms and wisdom literature. Eryl Davies also showed that *imitatio Dei* is a principle in the legal material, the narratives, the psalms and the prophets.

Since it has been acknowledged that ethical material can be found in all literary genres of the Old Testament, various scholars have focused on particular literary genres in their writings in Old Testament ethics. For example, Waldemar Janzen (1994), Gordon Wenham (2000) and Mary Mills (2001) have focused on the narratives; John Barton (2003), Eryl Davies (1981), Andrew Davies (2000), Carol Dempsey (2000) and Andrew Mein (2001) have focused on the prophets; Barton has also used the Pentateuch in his writings on *imitatio Dei* as a basis for Old Testament ethics.⁸¹

⁸⁰ See John Barton, "Approaches to Ethics in the Old Testament," in *Beginning Old Testament Study*, ed. John Rogerson, (London: SPCK, 1994), 128.

⁸¹ See Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994); Wenham, *Story as Torah*; Mary E. Mills, *Biblical Morality-Moral Perspectives in Old Testament Narratives, Heythrop Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, religion and Theology* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2001); Carol J. Dempsey, *Hope amid the ruins: the ethics of Israel's prophets* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000); Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*; Eryl W. Davies, *Prophecy and Ethics: Isaiah and the Ethical Traditions of Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981); Davies, *Double Standards in Isaiah*; Andrew Mein, *Ezekiel and the ethics of exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

In the recent book *Character Ethics and the Old Testament*, there are essays on passages from the Pentateuch, the Prophets and Wisdom literature, but none on the book of the Psalms.⁸² Christopher Wright, with his theological approach, has used materials from all the genres of the Old Testament, but his treatment of the psalms is still less than, for example, Deuteronomy.

While some of these scholars have acknowledged the presence of ethical concerns in the psalms, the Psalter has not received extensive study with regard to its ethical materials. As noted in the introduction to this study, the neglect of the study of the ethics of the Psalms has already been noted by Gordon Wenham, in his essay “The Ethics of the Psalms”:

Though the theology of the psalms has often been discussed, very little work is devoted to their ethics. For instance, three recent works on Old Testament ethics more or less overlook the contribution of the psalms. Eckart Otto’s *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (1994) has just thirteen references to the Psalms compared with forty to Proverbs and seventy-eight to Deuteronomy, although the book of Psalms is about three times as long as Proverbs or Deuteronomy. A similar disproportion is noticeable in Cyril S. Rodd’s *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (2001), which has double the number of references to Deuteronomy and to Proverbs as it has to the Psalms. A slight improvement is visible in Christopher Wright’s *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (2004), but still there are 50% more references to Deuteronomy than to the Psalms.⁸³

This is surprising especially since, as pointed out by Wenham, the psalm which opens the Psalter, Psalm 1, “invites the reader to meditate on the law day and night”, the law being not only “the law of Moses, but the Psalter itself”.⁸⁴ The importance of the psalms in ethics has also been identified by Childs. He said:

It is difficult to overestimate the role of the Psalter in shaping the moral life of the church. . . . The psalms provide the text by which to live, year in and year out, and their continuing impact on the heart through prayers, hymns, and confession

⁸² See M. Daniel Carroll and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: moral dimensions of Scripture* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

⁸³ Wenham, “Ethics,” 177-78.

⁸⁴ Wenham, “Ethics,” 178.

remains the best testimony to their enduring power toward shaping the Christian life.⁸⁵

The neglect of the ethics of the psalms has been similarly noted by W. Bellinger (Jr.) who demonstrated that even though “justice is a primary theme in the Psalter”,⁸⁶ most readers of the psalms concentrate so much on the prayer and worship aspects “that they miss the theme of justice which is distinctly present in the psalms”.⁸⁷

In addition to the fact that the psalms are rich in ethical material, which has not been given sufficient attention, another reason for the decision to use the psalms is because of the role that the Psalms continue to play in the lives of Jews and Christians. The psalms are widely used in worship and are also used by many Christians in their personal lives for comfort and encouragement in difficult times. A book that is so widely used by Christians, and, at the same time, has a rich ethical content can play an important role in impacting our lives in the world today. As we have seen, however, the use of the Psalms has largely been limited to the spheres of personal piety and public worship, bracketing out their important and wide-ranging ethical concerns. The present study aims to correct such selective and limited use of the Psalms, and thus hopes to make an important contribution by enriching modern (Christian and Jewish) use of the Psalter. The following section will give a synopsis of the role the psalms have played in Judaism and Christianity throughout the centuries.

⁸⁵ Childs, *Biblical Theology of Old and New Testaments*, 710.

⁸⁶ W. H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000), 142.

⁸⁷ Bellinger Jr., *Psalms*, 141.

3.5.2 The Psalms in Judaism and Christianity

As pointed out by William Holladay, the common belief among Christians and Jews has been that most of the psalms were written by King David. The belief today among scholars is that David only wrote some of the psalms. Those who have worked on the psalms over the years have demonstrated that the variations in style and emphasis in different psalms show that there were many poets and singers who produced them over many centuries.⁸⁸

The psalms were composed as songs for worship. It is believed that many of them were written to be used in the Jerusalem Temple, in the pre-exilic and post-exilic periods.⁸⁹ In the postexilic period, 150 Psalms were compiled and arranged into five books; Book I – Psalms 1–41, Book II – Psalms 42–72, Book III – Psalms 73–89, Book IV – Psalms 90–106, and Book V – Psalms 107–150. It has been shown by scholars, such as Gerald Wilson, that these psalms were not arbitrarily arranged, rather, their arrangement reflects the life and experiences of Israel. William Holladay, who drew on the work of Gerald Henry Wilson, said that the final arrangement of Books I–III, as a whole, “appears to be a presentation of devotion to God seen through the experience of David”.⁹⁰ Of Book IV he said:

This book appears to function as the editorial “center” of the Psalter, and these seventeen Psalms, interwoven in theme and structure, set forth answers to the plaintive question raised by Psalm 89, [“How long O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?” (Ps. 89:46 [47])]. The answers are, essentially: Yahweh is king; Yahweh has been our refuge in the past, long before the monarchy existed,

⁸⁸ William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 17-18.

⁸⁹ James Luther Mays, *The Lord reigns: a theological handbook of the Psalms* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 4.

⁹⁰ Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand years*, 77.

and will be our refuge now that the monarchy is gone; blessed are those who trust in Yahweh!⁹¹

Holladay further pointed out that Book V “appears to be a final answer to the plea of the exiles, and, as with Books I to III, David is seen to model the attitude of reliance and dependence on Yahweh”.⁹² Hossfeld and Zenger have also demonstrated, in their commentaries, that the psalms in the Psalter were not arbitrarily arranged, rather, they were arranged in various groups according to certain ideas.⁹³

Childs showed that in the final stage of the development of the Psalter, Psalm 1 forms an introduction to the psalms indicating that they “are to be read, studied, and meditated upon”.⁹⁴ With Psalm 1 as the introduction, these prayers which were directed by Israel to God now become God’s word to God’s people.⁹⁵ The introduction also serves to “inform the reader that the Psalter is not merely a collection of liturgical resources but is to be read and heard as a source of *torah*, ‘instruction’”.⁹⁶ With regards to the end of the Psalter, Wilson pointed out that “the final collection concludes with the exalted praise of the final *hallel* in Psalms 146–150. The

⁹¹ Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand years*, 78; See also Gerald Henry Wilson. *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter SBLDS 76*. Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985, 214-215.

⁹² Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand years*, 78.

⁹³ See Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 1-7 for a detailed discussion of the arrangement of Psalms 51-100. See also Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 101-150* (Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 17-26 for a detailed discussion of the arrangement of Psalms 101-50.

⁹⁴ Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 513.

⁹⁵ Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 513. See also J. Clinton McCann Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the book of the Psalms: Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 18; Gerald H. Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann, *JSOT Supplement Series*, vol. 159, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 74.

⁹⁶ McCann Jr., *Theological Introduction*, 18 (emphasis in original); Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 513; James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox, 1994), 15; Klaus Seybold, *Introducing the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1990), 27.

lack of any concluding doxology at the end of the fifth book suggests this group of *hllwyh* psalms provides the necessary closure of the last book and, indeed, of the whole Psalter.”⁹⁷

Throughout the centuries, the psalms have remained an important part of Judaism and Christianity, both in public and private life. William Holladay and Susan Gillingham have each written a comprehensive history of the reception of the psalms in Judaism and Christianity.⁹⁸ Gillingham has written part I and she is writing part II.

In Judaism, the psalms were used as hymns in Jewish liturgy. They were also citations from the Psalms in the Talmud and the Mishnah, and there was a Midrash on the Psalms. There were also Jewish scholars who wrote commentaries on the Psalms, such as Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, Ibn Ezra and Rabbi David ben Qimhi.⁹⁹ Within Christianity, the Psalms were used by Jesus and the early Christians in the New Testament, and have continued to be used throughout Christianity to the present, as will be seen in the summary which follows.

It has been acknowledged by many scholars that the Book of Psalms is the most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament. According to Holladay, who used D. Eberhard Nestle’s *Novum Testamentum Graece*, there are 196 citations of psalms in the New Testament.¹⁰⁰ In the book *The Psalms in the New Testament*, edited by Steve Moyise and Maarten Menken, it was stated that the psalms are used in all of the New Testament books except Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the Pastoral Epistles, Philemon, James, 2 Peter, the Johannine Epistles and Jude.¹⁰¹ As is seen in their book, some of the uses of the psalms in the

⁹⁷ Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter,” 74 (emphasis in original).

⁹⁸ See Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand years*; Susan Gillingham, *Psalms through the centuries: Volume One*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

⁹⁹ See Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand years*, 134-55.

¹⁰⁰ Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand years*, 115.

¹⁰¹ Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken, eds., *The Psalms in the New Testament* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 2.

New Testament are direct quotations, and others are allusions to the psalms. They were used for various purposes. For example, there are 47 references to the psalms within the gospels which were used for various purposes. They were used as proof texts: to prove Jesus' divinity (Pss. 8:2; 62:12),¹⁰² or to prove Jesus' arguments (Pss. 82:6; 110:1);¹⁰³ they were also used as "evidence of fulfilment" to show that God's promise to David was fulfilled through Jesus (Pss. 8, 110, 118).¹⁰⁴ Within the passion narratives, Psalms 22, 110 and 118 feature very prominently. In Romans, Paul used the psalms in expounding his message of the justice of God. He used Psalms such as Psalms 5, 14, 44, 62, 98.¹⁰⁵

After the New Testament period, the Psalms have continued to be important in Christianity. They have been used in Christian liturgy throughout the centuries, in the pre- and post-Reformation times. In the period before the Reformation, the psalms were used in the writings of the early church fathers, such as in 1 Clement, Barnabas, and the works of Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons. There were also citations from the Psalms in The Didache. Some of the church fathers also wrote commentaries on the Psalms, including Origen, Jerome and Theodore of Mopsuestia. The psalms were also memorized by Christians during this period, and they were used in the liturgy for worship, where they were sung responsively.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Dale A. Brueggemann, "The Evangelists and the Psalms," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. Philip S. Johnston and David G. Firth, (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2005), 277.

¹⁰³ Brueggemann, "Evangelists and Psalms," 266-67.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Doble, "The Psalms in Luke-Acts," in *The Psalms in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken, (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 90; Maarten J. J. Menken, "The Psalms in Matthew's Gospel," in *The Psalms in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken, (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 81. See also Gillingham, *Psalms through centuries*, 15-20 for the use of the psalms in the gospels.

¹⁰⁵ See Sylvia C. Keesmaat, "The Psalms in Romans and Galatians," in *The Psalms in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken, (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 139-61; Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand years*, 122-24. See also Gillingham, *Psalms through centuries*, 20-21 for the use of the psalms in Romans.

¹⁰⁶ See Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand years*, 161-84. See also Gillingham, *Psalms through centuries*, 24-39 for the use of the psalms by the Church Fathers.

The psalms remained important during and after the Reformation. Both Luther and Calvin wrote commentaries on the Psalms. Many eighteenth-century hymn writers, such as Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, wrote hymns based on the psalms. For example, Isaac Watts wrote “The Lord is my shepherd” based on Psalm 23 and “O God, our help in ages past” based on Psalm 90. Charles Wesley wrote “O for a heart to praise my God” based on Psalm 51:12.¹⁰⁷

From the nineteenth century to the present, the Psalms continue to be important in public worship and private devotions. The daily offices of the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches contain a psalm for each day. In the Roman Catholic Church, psalms are used for weekday Mass, Sunday Masses and Masses for special saints’ days. The Revised Common lectionary has a psalm for each Sunday which is read responsively in some churches.¹⁰⁸ In the Belize/Honduras District of Methodist churches, where I have worked for nine years, each Sunday a responsive psalm is used in worship. Contemporary song writers have also been using the psalms as inspiration for songs; hence, they continue to contribute to the music of worship. In the Caribbean, for example, Rev. Dr. George Mulrain, an influential theologian and accomplished composer, has written a paraphrase of Psalm 42 “Why are you cast down O my soul”.

In addition to their use in worship, the psalms have also been used pastorally in many situations, such as hospital visitations.¹⁰⁹ In my own ministry, in visits to church members, who are sick and unable to attend regular church services, they often like to have a reading from the Psalms. The psalms are not only used in music, but also as prayers, as there are many persons who read verses from the Psalms as prayers in both private and public worship. In summary,

¹⁰⁷ See Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand years*, 191-212.

¹⁰⁸ See Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand years*, 238-60 for use of the psalms in the nineteenth century, and 265-280 for its use today. See also Gillingham, *Psalms through centuries*, 192-234 for the use of the psalms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and 242-307 for their use in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

¹⁰⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the life of faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 6-7.

therefore, since the Psalms have such an important use in the life of contemporary Christians, a study of their ethical materials and how they motivate ethical behaviour among Jews and Christians has the potential to make a significant contribution to a fuller appreciation in Jewish and Christian faith and practice today.

3.5.3 Specific Psalms being studied

Eleven psalms have been selected for this study; they are Psalms 8; 15; 25; 33; 72; 94; 101; 109; 111; 112 and 113. These psalms were selected because they address the themes being dealt with in this study, namely *imitatio Dei* (Pss. 8; 15; 25; 72; 101; 111; 112; 113), God's ethical character (Pss. 25; 33; 72; 111; 113), motivation for being ethical (Pss. 8; 15; 25; 33; 72; 94; 111; 112) and vengeance of God (Pss. 94 and 109). Eight of these eleven psalms were selected because the overall theme of this study, *imitatio Dei*, is particularly prominent in them.

There are several other psalms that reflect some of the other themes being discussed – God's ethical character, motivation for being ethical, and vengeance of God – but they do not reflect *imitatio Dei*. Other psalms that speak of God's ethical character, namely God's righteousness, justice and *דָּסָה*, are Psalms 5; 7; 9; 11; 17; 26; 31; 51; 52; 57; 62; 67; 71; 78; 85; 86; 89; 96; 97; 98; 99; 100; 103; 106; 107; 116; 118; 119; 135; 136; 143; 145; 146; 147. Likewise, there are several psalms which speak of motivation for being ethical as they describe the rewards of the righteous, or those who “fear” God, or those who “walk in the ways of the Lord”, and the punishment of the wicked. They are Psalms 1; 2; 5; 7; 9; 11; 14; 16; 18; 19; 24; 31; 32; 34; 37; 41; 50; 53; 55; 64; 73; 84; 89; 91; 92; 97; 103; 106; 119; 125; 128; 145; 146; 147. The psalms that will be used for motivation in chapter 8 are those of the eleven that have

been chosen which also speak of motivation for being ethical. Some of the other psalms that speak of motivation such as Psalms 1 and 37 will also be mentioned in that chapter.

Psalms 94 and 109 do not have *imitatio Dei* as a theme, but these were selected as examples of the psalms of vengeance, for, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, aspects of God's character, such as vengeance, appear to be "immoral" and thus make *imitatio Dei* seem problematic. These two psalms will be examined to show that this perception is not accurate. There are many other psalms in which the psalmists call for vengeance against their enemies, namely Psalms 5; 6; 7; 9; 10; 17; 28; 31; 35; 40; 52; 54; 55; 56; 58; 59; 68; 69; 70; 71; 74; 79; 83; 104; 129; 137; 139; 140; 141; 143. In addition to these, there is also Psalm 149, the penultimate psalm in the Psalter and one of the final five psalms of praise, which, after calling for the faithful to sing for joy and praise God, ends in verses 7-9 by calling for them to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples. Psalm 94 was chosen because this is the only vengeance psalm in which God is addressed as "God of vengeance", and Psalm 109 was chosen because it is the harshest and most problematic of the vengeance psalms. As can be seen from the lists given above, a large proportion of the psalms in the Psalter contain ethical material, and thus there is scope for further study on the ethics of the psalms, even beyond this present study.

3.6 The Authority of the Old Testament for Christians

In studying the ethics of the Old Testament, the question of authority becomes relevant. In what way is the Old Testament authoritative for Christians? This is not a new question for the Christian church. The authority of the Old Testament has been questioned since the second century, when Marcion declared that "the Christian Gospel was wholly a Gospel of Love to the

absolute exclusion of Law”.¹¹⁰ As a result of his belief, he completely rejected the Old Testament. He declared that the Creator God of the Old Testament was not the God of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Even though Marcion’s position was rejected by the church and the Old Testament was accepted into the Christian canon, the question of its authority remained an issue, as will be seen in the survey below.

In discussing its authority, we must acknowledge that the Old Testament “was not in the first instance a document of the Christian faith at all, but of the faith of Israel”.¹¹¹ While the Old Testament was first the Scripture of the Jews, it was also the only Scripture of Christianity in its formative decades in the first century. It has already been mentioned in this chapter that the Psalms were important to the early Christians. In addition to this, most of the first Christians were Jews; hence, the Old Testament was certainly their Scripture.

John Bright pointed out that the Old Testament has been problematic because of the nature of some of its materials, such as the laws, the imperfections in the narratives, the cursing of enemies in the psalms, and the violence and bloodshed that were performed at God’s command.¹¹² Today, these questions and difficulties continue to be asked by many. The problem with the authority of the Old Testament is also its diverse and complex nature. It presents a God whose character and nature is complex, as was already indicated in the previous chapter.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1040. For a full analysis of Marcion, see A. von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (2nd ed. Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1924; Eng. Tr., Durham NC, 1990); see also B. Aland, ‘Marcion. Versuch einer neuen Interpretation,’ *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 70 (1973): 420-27; in English, see E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London: SPCK, 1948).

¹¹¹ John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 53.

¹¹² Bright, *Authority*, 53-56.

¹¹³ For a detailed discussion of the diversity of the Old Testament, see John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987).

This section will look briefly at some of the approaches to the authority of the Old Testament, by various scholars. I am dependent on John Bright who has fully discussed various approaches to Old Testament authority, in his book *The Authority of the Old Testament*. In addition, I will outline the approaches of some contemporary scholars, namely Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, Christopher Wright and Eric Seibert. Bright described the approaches of the church fathers, the reformers, the period following the reformation and liberal Protestantism. Birch and Rasmussen, Wright, and Seibert have approached the question of authority of the Old Testament as Old Testament scholars. Finally, I will outline my approach to authority of the Old Testament.

3.6.1 Authority of the Old Testament based on the New Testament

The approaches described by Bright attempted to address the problem of the authority of the Old Testament by evaluating it from the perspective of the New Testament. Bright indicated that, for a Christian, this may seem as the logical way to proceed, but to begin with the New Testament and work backward to the Old Testament may result in the conclusion that, since its religion is different from Christianity, the Old Testament is either of no concern or of subordinate concern to the Christian.¹¹⁴

The early church fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Irenaeus, Ambrose and Augustine, sought to address the problem created by Marcion's rejection of the Old Testament by resorting to allegorical readings of Scripture. They believed that Scripture had various levels of meaning. They saw three senses to Scripture, a literal or corporeal sense (the plain meaning of the words), a moral or tropological sense (edifies and guides conduct, and so figurative of the

¹¹⁴ Bright, *Authority*, 59-60.

Christian soul), and a spiritual or mystical sense. Later, a fourth sense was added called the analogical or eschatological sense. The tendency, however, was to focus on the spiritual sense and not the literal, since the text's true meaning was seen as spiritual. This approach led to Scripture, especially the Old Testament, being allegorized. It saved the Old Testament for the church, in that it had become wholly a Christian book. However, this approach was rejected by the Reformers.

Even though the Reformers rejected the allegorizing of Scripture, they still found Christian meaning in the Old Testament. It was the opinion of both Luther and Calvin that Scripture only has one sense, its plain or literal sense. The Reformers indicated that the Holy Spirit is the true author of Scripture, and, therefore, the plain sense of a text included "the sense intended by the Holy Spirit, the prophetic sense, its sense in the light of Scripture as a whole".¹¹⁵ Luther, having seen a dichotomy between law and gospel, saw the former as pedagogical and gave Christological interpretation to the Old Testament. He searched the Old Testament for whatever "urges Christ".¹¹⁶ Calvin, on the other hand, used a typological or analogical interpretation for the Old Testament. He viewed the law and gospel as complementary, and also believed that God's sovereign and gracious purposes were manifested in Israel's history and institutions which foreshadowed their fulfilment in Christ.¹¹⁷

The Christological and typological methods of approaching the Old Testament became unpopular with the rise of critical study of the Bible, during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Scholars were no longer at ease with the popular Christological or typological interpretation of the Old Testament, instead, they believed that "the plain meaning is

¹¹⁵ Bright, *Authority*, 83.

¹¹⁶ Bright, *Authority*, 83.

¹¹⁷ Bright, *Authority*, 83.

the literal, philological-historical meaning expressed in the text”.¹¹⁸ The problem with this approach then became that if the Old Testament were to be read in its literal sense, it would be seen as being strange to Christians, and this would again lead to the question of Marcion.

Wilhelm Vischer was another proponent of the Christological approach and he said that the Old Testament cannot be approached from a purely historical perspective, but it must be seen in its Christian significance.¹¹⁹ For, if it were approached from a purely historical perspective it would remain a document of ancient religion with little relevance to Christianity. However, he affirmed that grammatico-historical exegesis was important for the text to be interpreted in its plain meaning, which he suggested was to be seen “in the light of God’s intention as revealed in Jesus Christ”.¹²⁰

Bright rightly pointed out that in attempting to see the Christian significance of the Old Testament, “we must be careful to hear the Old Testament’s own word in its plain meaning”.¹²¹ The Old Testament, he rightly argued, cannot be constantly read from the perspective of the New Testament. He further argued that in order for the Old Testament to be authoritative in the church its plain message must be heard. Goldingay also argued that if the Old Testament is to be maintained as Scripture, then, it must be evaluated on the basis of its own intrinsic dynamic, rather than on a basis outside the Old Testament material.¹²²

There is also the approach of liberal Protestantism which did not reject nor spiritualize the Old Testament; rather, it made a value judgment on the Old Testament in the light of New Testament teachings. Julius Wellhausen’s work on the Old Testament, at the end of the

¹¹⁸ Bright, *Authority*, 63.

¹¹⁹ Bright, *Authority*, 88-89.

¹²⁰ Bright, *Authority*, 86.

¹²¹ Bright, *Authority*, 88-89. See also Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 6.

¹²² Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*, 130.

nineteenth century, presented the religion of Israel as having evolved from lower to higher forms and changing along the way. In the light of this understanding, theologians viewed “the Old Testament as the record of the development of the Hebrew people in the realm of religion and ethics (or, theistically stated, as the record of God’s progressive revelation of himself), which led up to and prepared the way for Christianity”.¹²³ This view led to the belief that the goal of the developmental process or progressive revelation of the Old Testament was in the New Testament, where the highest and the best of the Bible is to be found in Jesus and his teachings. Therefore, what is normative for the Christian is to be evaluated in light of the mind and teachings of Jesus. As pointed out by Bright, the problem with this approach is that many passages from the Old Testament were seen as having little relevance to Christians.¹²⁴ This approach is no more helpful than the others. For, as pointed out by Goldingay, it is not enough for us to simply feel free to choose insights from the Old Testament which we find helpful. He argued that the way in which the Old Testament tradition developed indicates that insights from earlier periods must be brought to bear on later insights.¹²⁵ He further argued that “an evaluative, critical approach to diversity in the Old Testament has to seek to do justice to the Old Testament as a whole, and not to simplify its diversity by discarding some elements of it”.¹²⁶

3.6.2 Other Approaches to the Authority of the Old Testament

Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen outlined another traditional way of looking at biblical authority. They noted that biblical authority has traditionally been associated with biblical inspiration. They pointed out that this belief goes back to the period following the Babylonian

¹²³ Bright, *Authority*, 98.

¹²⁴ Bright, *Authority*, 98-99.

¹²⁵ Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*, 84.

¹²⁶ Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*, 98.

exile. In this period, Jews saw Scripture as “the locus of divine revelation, and within that text, in all its segments and details, could be found a divine word and guidance applicable to present and future generations”.¹²⁷ Likewise, in the early church, the written documents became influential for the church, and the text was also regarded as being divinely inspired. Subsequently, the use of texts, such as 2 Timothy 3:16, “All scripture is inspired by God,” and 2 Peter 1:21, “because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God,” led to the development of the “concept of divine authorship through inspiration”.¹²⁸

Birch and Rasmussen also noted that there have been different views within the church about the meaning of inspiration and its application to the Bible.

Such typologies range from absolute inerrancy which declares the actual words of the text to be the direct product of divine communication, to limited notions of inspired infallibility in matters of faith and practice communicated through socially conditioned contexts, to inspiration located in the authors or community that gave us the biblical texts but which regards the texts themselves as human products.¹²⁹

They identified the weakness with concepts of biblical authority which are based on inspiration as investing too much in the text of the Bible itself, rather than in the God portrayed in the Bible. Such traditional views of biblical authority have been challenged by critical study of the Bible. For as previously discussed in this chapter, these critical methods of studying the Bible show that its texts resulted from particular historical and social contexts of the biblical communities. Hence, they were not divinely written. Within the Bible, therefore, we see God revealed through God’s interaction with human communities in their specific circumstances. As

¹²⁷ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics*, 144.

¹²⁸ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics*, 144.

¹²⁹ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics*, 144.

Walter Brueggemann pointed out, theology is speech about God which is given by human persons. Therefore, within the Old Testament “the God of Israel is given us *on the lips of Israel*, constituted through utterance, utterance no doubt deeply driven and informed by lived experience”.¹³⁰

Birch and Rasmussen, therefore, suggested that “questions of biblical authority properly focus not on the Bible itself (qualities inherent in the book) but on the *presence and activity of God*”.¹³¹ They supported this suggestion by referring to the authority of Jesus who “spoke with authority”. Hence, his authority was spoken “out of his being” and “evoked power out of the being of his hearers”.¹³² Therefore, Birch and Rasmussen contended “that the question of biblical authority is not properly focused in the inherent character of the Bible itself. The question is more fruitfully focused on God who is active in the world and whose will is disclosed to persons in and through that activity.”¹³³

Christopher Wright presented an alternative approach to the authority of the Old Testament. He looked at the meaning of the word authority. He argued that many persons associate authority with the issuing of commands; hence, people reject the authority of the Old Testament in the moral realm because commands and obedience to commands are seen as inadequate and infantile as a basis for ethics. “They are not going to be bossed around by the despotic god that they perceive in the Old Testament.”¹³⁴ So, in rejecting commands, people reject authority. Wright rightly argued that the authority of the biblical commands is in the one

¹³⁰ Walter Brueggemann, “The Role of Old Testament Theology in Old Testament Interpretation,” in *In Search of True Wisdom: Essays in Old Testament Interpretation in Honour of Ronald E. Clements*, ed. Edward Ball, *JSOT Supplement Series*, vol. 300, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 78 (emphasis in original).

¹³¹ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics*, 149 (emphasis in original).

¹³² Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics*, 150.

¹³³ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics*, 150.

¹³⁴ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 455.

who gave them and whose divine authority we acknowledge. He further argued that authority is not simply a matter of giving positive directives, but that it gives freedom to act within boundaries. “Authority, then, is the predicate of reality, the source and boundary of freedom.”¹³⁵ Therefore, the authority of the canon of Scripture allows us to come into contact with reality. Through reading and knowing the Scriptures, we engage with reality. This, then, authorizes us and sets boundaries, allowing us freedom to act in the world. Wright proposed that in the Old Testament we engage with the reality of God, the reality of the story, the reality of the word, and the reality of the people of Israel.¹³⁶

The first reality is the reality of God. The reality of God is revealed in the Bible through the identity and character of God, the Holy One of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ. There is authority in both God’s identity and character, which impacts on ethics. God’s identity was revealed to Israel as the only God (Deut. 4:35, 39). Therefore, God’s “unique reality as God carries its own authority and that authority calls for appropriate response”.¹³⁷ This response was to be one of worship and action. Wright pointed out that Israel’s acknowledgement of God in worship carries with it “an ethical authority, for it is impossible for YHWH to be enthroned on the praises of Israel but ignored in the practice of Israel”.¹³⁸ Psalm 15 is a good example of the importance of ethical living for worshippers. This psalm will be discussed in detail in chapter 5 where it shows that those who enter the temple are expected to reflect God’s character and conduct. God’s character is revealed in the Old Testament as one who cares for the weak, aliens and oppressed, and this calls for a response of reflection of a similar character, as already

¹³⁵ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 456.

¹³⁶ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 457.

¹³⁷ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 458.

¹³⁸ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 459.

mentioned in the last chapter, and will be developed further in this study. Therefore, Wright stated that God's "*character implies the authority for an ethic of imitation and reflection of that character in human behaviour*".¹³⁹ This highlights the need for a "rehabilitation of God's reputation" for modern readers; hence, chapter 6 on God's character and chapter 7 on the vengeance of God.

The second reality is the reality of the story. The Old Testament tells the story of God, Israel and the nations, which is taken up in the New Testament. This story had both a past and a future and both aspects contributed to shaping ethics. Israel's past experience of God contributed to the motivation for ethical behaviour, as already mentioned, and this will be further developed in chapter 8. The future of Israel's story was evident from the call of Abraham, which demonstrated that Israel existed in order to bring blessings to the nations. Therefore, the reality of this story, Wright pointed out, "*carries authority for an ethic of gratitude in view of God's actions for Israel in the past, and as ethic of missional intentionality in view of God's purposes for humanity in the future*".¹⁴⁰

The third reality is the reality of the word. Wright described God's word in the Old Testament as both revelatory and performative. It is revelatory because God spoke in the Old Testament and still speaks today, and, in this, Christians can find authority in the Old Testament. God's word was revealed through God's covenantal relationship with Israel. In this relationship, God acted on behalf of Israel, and Israel was to respond in obedience out of love, gratitude and praise for God. God's word is performative because through it things happen, as exemplified in creation and God's redeeming acts. For example, Psalm 33 shows God's performative word in

¹³⁹ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 460 (emphasis in original).

¹⁴⁰ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 463 (emphasis in original).

creation and care for God's people. This psalm describes God's character; hence, it will be discussed in detail in chapter 6. Wright therefore stated that "*the reality of this word, delivered to us in the scriptures of Israel, carries authority for an ethic of covenantal obedience for us as for Israel, for we know the One who said these things (Heb. 10:30)*".¹⁴¹ This stresses the relational nature of covenantal obedience.

The fourth reality is the reality of the people of Israel. Wright pointed out that to some degree, we can know about ancient Israel from material remains of their existence and from the literature of other contemporary nations. However, the people of Israel are rendered to us through the Old Testament, just as God, the Holy One of Israel, is rendered to us through this Scripture. Israel's existence as a people meant that there was authority in the ethical norms of the society. However, the ethical authority was not only for Israel but had wider relevance, because:

. . . the role and mission laid on Israel of being a priesthood in the midst of the nations (Exod. 19:4-6), of being a light to the nations (Isa. 42:6; 49:6 etc.), and exemplar of social righteousness to the watching nations (Deut. 4:6-8) – all of these gave the ethics of Israel a wider authoritative relevance than in their own society alone.¹⁴²

This is in keeping with Wright's argument in his book that Israel was to be a paradigm for others.¹⁴³ He defined a paradigm as "a model or pattern that enables you to explain or critique many different and varying situations by means of some single concept or set of governing principles".¹⁴⁴ A paradigm therefore functions by analogy "from a specific known

¹⁴¹ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 468 (emphasis in original).

¹⁴² Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 469.

¹⁴³ See Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 62-74.

¹⁴⁴ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 63.

reality (the paradigm) to a wider or different context”.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, the reality of the people of Israel, rendered in the Old Testament, “*generates an ethic of paradigm and analogy, in which we assume the moral consistency of God and ask, ‘If this is what God required of them, what, in our different context, does God require of us?’*”¹⁴⁶

Wright concluded his discussion on the authority of the Old Testament by highlighting that these four features of the Old Testament are focused on Jesus; hence, their ethical relevance and authority are sustained, “enhanced and transformed for those who are ‘in Christ’”.¹⁴⁷ In Jesus we encounter God; the story which began in the Old Testament climaxes in Jesus (Rev. 7:9-10); Jesus is the Word made flesh, hence, in Jesus we have heard God’s final word (Heb.10:30); and through the cross and the gospel of Jesus, we have become part of God’s people (Eph. 2:11–3:13).¹⁴⁸

Eric Seibert also addressed authority of the Bible in his book *Disturbing Divine Images: Troubling Old Testament Images of God*. He affirmed, like Birch, Rasmussen and Wright, that the authority of the Bible is in its content and not in its origins. “The Bible is authoritative because it contains various truths about God, the world, and humanity.”¹⁴⁹ He pointed out that the Old Testament teaches us about God’s continual commitment to God’s people, despite their continual rebellion; God’s passion for justice, especially for the most vulnerable; God’s good intentions in the creation of the world; the importance of community and “the right way” of relating to God and others.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 63.

¹⁴⁶ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 469 (emphasis in original).

¹⁴⁷ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 469-70.

¹⁴⁸ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 470.

¹⁴⁹ Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 276.

¹⁵⁰ Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 276.

However, Seibert claimed that there are portions of Scripture which “do not represent Christian beliefs or behaviors and should be critiqued as deficient”.¹⁵¹ He noted further that “in terms of right behavior, not everything prescribed in the Bible is equally authoritative”.¹⁵² He cited the example that while most Christians would agree with doing justice, loving their neighbours and caring for the vulnerable, as commanded in the Old Testament, “very few Christians feel any moral dilemma about eating lobster”, even though it is forbidden in the Old Testament (Lev. 11:10; 19:19, 27).¹⁵³ Therefore, he suggested that, in light of the diversity in Scripture, it is necessary for Christians to use principled judgements to determine the portions of Scripture that are normative for them. He proposed that these judgements should be made based on “the life and teachings of Jesus since Jesus is the ultimate source of authority and the one who most fully reveals the character of God”.¹⁵⁴ This is the same Christocentric approach as that of the Reformers and others discussed above, which, as already stated, is not helpful in understanding the authority of the Old Testament, as it does not allow us to hear the intrinsic message of the Old Testament in its diversity.

In conclusion, therefore, this section has shown that the church has decided that the Old Testament, including the psalms, is authoritative. However, in reality there are many persons who do not regard the Old Testament as authoritative, as was previously mentioned, they still see it as irrelevant and outdated. Therefore, I am going to provide sample explorations of the ethical value of the psalms to demonstrate their importance and suggest some practical ethical applications. My approach to authority of the Old Testament has been influenced by Birch,

¹⁵¹ Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 277.

¹⁵² Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 278.

¹⁵³ See Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 278-79.

¹⁵⁴ Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 279.

Rasmussen and Wright. The authority of the Old Testament is the authority of God whose character is revealed through God's interaction with God's people. The Old Testament remains authoritative to Christians because they have become a part of God's people through Jesus Christ; hence, the response that was required of Israel, in response to God's involvement in their history, is also expected of Christians.

CHAPTER 4

THE PSALMS IN THEIR ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

4.1 Introduction

In chapter 3, it was mentioned that the psalms were composed as songs for use in public and private worship in ancient Israel. The psalmists in Israel used genres, literary styles and thoughts that were common to the culture and religions of the ancient Near East. This chapter will briefly examine some of the prayers and hymns of the ancient Near East, in order to see whether they contain ethical materials.

4.2 Sumerian Prayers

Mesopotamian prayers were written in both Sumerian and Akkadian. There are both hymns and laments within the Sumerian language. There are three types of hymns: 1) hymns to various deities; 2) temple hymns; 3) hymns to kings. The hymns to the deities, which are the majority, offer worship to the gods. The temple hymns celebrate the god's dwelling place rather than the gods themselves. There are psalms that are similar to these temple hymns, namely the so-called Zion hymns, Psalms 46 and 48, and those that reflect the beauty of the temple, such as Psalm 84. The royal hymns were those in which either the king worshipped the gods or the king himself was praised.¹

There were also individual and corporate laments within the Sumerian language. The city laments are the most popular of the corporate Sumerian laments. These "were composed in

¹ See Tremper Longman III, "Psalms 2: Ancient Near Eastern Background," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 594-95, 99.

response to the destruction of the city of Ur at the end of the Third Dynasty of that city”.² There are also the *balags* which lament the destruction of a city, but they do not identify a specific city. These may be compared with biblical communal laments, such as Psalms 44; 74; 79; 89; 137, which also bemoan the destruction of a city.³

The Sumerian prayers also contained private laments which consisted of petitions from individuals to the gods for deliverance from trouble. The Sumerian worshippers believed that suffering resulted from the anger of their gods; hence, when there was suffering, they approached the gods in an attempt to appease them.⁴ These prayers appealed to the attributes of the gods. For example, King Sin-Iddinam wrote to Utu, the patron-deity of the dynasty, to complain about his illness and seek relief. Utu was described with ethical attributes such as justice and righteousness:

To Utu, my king, lord, senior judge of Heaven and Earth,
Protector of the nation who renders verdicts,
Righteous god who loves to preserve people alive,
 who hears prayer,
Long on mercy, who knows clemency,
Loving justice, choosing righteousness – speak!⁵

4.3 Akkadian Prayers

The Akkadian hymns offer praise to the gods. The most famous Akkadian hymn is the great hymn to Shamash, the god of the sun. In this hymn, “Shamash is praised as the one who physically illumines the world and,”⁶ as the guardian of justice.

² Longman III, “Psalms 2,” 595.

³ Longman III, “Psalms 2,” 595. Longman noted that the *balag* was an instrument which was probably used to accompany the laments.

⁴ Longman III, “Psalms 2,” 596.

⁵ William W. Hallo, “Letter-Prayer of King Sin-Iddinam to Utu,” in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 534.

Illuminator of all, the whole of heaven,
 Who makes light the d[arkness for mankind]
 above and below,
 Shamash, illuminator of all, the whole of heaven,
 Who makes light the dark[ness for mankind a]bove
 and below,
 Your radiance [spre]ads out like a net [over the world],
 You brighten the g[loo]m of the distant mountains,
 Gods and netherworld gods rejoiced when you appeared,
 All the Igigi-gods rejoice in you.

You blunt the horns of a screaming villain,
 The perpetrator of a cunning deal is undermined.
 You show the roguish judge the (inside of) a jail,
 He who takes the fee but does not carry through,
 you make him bear the punishment.
 The one who receives no fee but takes up the case of the weak,
 Is pleasing to Shamash, he will make long his life.⁷

The words of this hymn show that Shamash is concerned with justice. The quote also contains motivation for ethical conduct, for Shamash punishes the one who is dishonest and rewards the honest one. We find similar motivation in the Psalms for ethical character and conduct, as will be seen in chapter 8.

There are also Akkadian laments which are called *shuilla*. The *shuilla* is a Sumerian word which means “to lift the hand” and probably refers to a ritual gesture which accompanied the prayer. Even though it is Sumerian, there is also an Akkadian genre of the *shuilla*. However, the Akkadian is different from the Sumerian in that the latter is usually corporate lament, while the former is individual lament. These laments begin with a hymn which specifies the attributes of the god, which are relevant for the second section. The second section is a petition which may

⁶ Longman III, “Psalms 2,” 596.

⁷ Benjamin J. Foster, “The Shamash Hymn,” in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 418-19.

be about illness, the effects of witchcraft and the fear of death. The lament then ends in the final section with a renewed call to praise the god.⁸

4.4 Egyptian Prayers

Within the tomb of the courtier Ay, several short hymns and prayers were found, including “The Great Hymn to Aten”. This hymn is a “statement of the doctrine of the one god”. This god, Aten, alone “created the world and all it contains. He alone gives life to man and beast. He alone watches over his creations. He alone inhabits the sky.”⁹ This hymn contains similar passages to Psalm 104 and one similar to Psalm 8.

Splendid you rise in heaven’s lightland,
 O living Aten, creator of life!
 When you have dawned in eastern lightland,
 You fill every land with your beauty.
 When you set in western lightland,
 Earth is in darkness as if in death; (Ps. 104:20)
 One sleeps in chambers, heads covered,
 One eye does not see another.

How many are your deeds. (Ps. 104:24)
 Though hidden from sight,
 O sole God beside whom there is none!
 You made the earth as you wished, you alone,
 All peoples, herds, and flocks;
 All upon the earth that walk on legs,
 All on high that fly on wings, (Ps. 8:7-8)

You set every man in his place,
 You supply their needs;
 Everyone has food,

⁸ Longman III, “Psalms 2,” 596. See Benjamin J. Foster, “Prayer to Marduk,” in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 416-17.

⁹ Miriam Lichtheim, “The Great Hymn to Aten,” in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 45.

His lifetime is counted.¹⁰

We can see that Aten, as the creator, takes care of his creation, by providing for them.

In addition to the hymns, Egyptian prayers also consist of supplication. One example is the prayer to Re-Harakhti, which is an individual supplication, probably to be used by people in various situations. In this prayer, the worshipper does not pray for any specific thing, but he asks for his prayers to be accepted and he confesses his sins without mentioning any specific transgressions. In this prayer, the worshipper seems to be a pilgrim to the temple at Heliopolis. In this prayer, Re-Harakhti is praised for his ethical attributes as protector and deliverer:

Protector of millions,
who deliverers (*sic*) hundreds of thousands,
the helper of the one who cries to him,
the lord of Heliopolis.¹¹

There are some biblical psalms that speak from the context of “a pilgrim expressing his confidence and joy when visiting the temple, where he imagines himself dwelling always in God’s presence. Compare Ps[alms] 23:6; 26:8; 27:4; 84:3, 5, 11; 42:3; 43:3-4; 122:1. Other psalms resemble this prayer in confessing frailty and sinfulness, e.g. Ps[alms] 25:7; 51; 40:13.”¹²

4.5 Literary style and content

In addition to similarity in form, the psalms are also similar to ancient Near Eastern literature in literary style and content. The psalms share three characteristics with ancient Near Eastern poetry: 1) terseness, that is, the use of few words for the communication of the message; 2) parallelism; 3) imagery, that is, the use of figurative language. The psalms share several

¹⁰ Lichtheim, “Great Hymn to Aten,” 45-46.

¹¹ Michael V. Fox, “Prayer to Re-Harakhti,” in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 47.

¹² Fox, “Prayer to Re-Harakhti,” 47.

images with their ancient Near Eastern parallels.¹³ For example, the metaphors of judge and shepherd, which are used of Yahweh in the psalms, are also used of Shamash, the sun-god.¹⁴

In conclusion, from this brief survey of ancient Near Eastern hymns and prayers, we can see that the Israelite poets utilized the form, style and ideas from the ancient Near East in the composition of the psalms. There are also ethical similarities between the ancient Near Eastern hymns and prayers, and the psalms, especially with regards to justice. For example, in the psalms we see that justice belongs to God, and likewise, Shamash is the guarantor of justice. In light of this discovery of ethical materials in the ancient Near Eastern hymns and laments, there is need for further study in this field.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of the ancient Near Eastern background of imagery in the psalms, see Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett, Reprint ed. (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997).

¹⁴ See Alasdair Livingstone, "An Assurbanipal Hymn for Shamash," in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 474.

CHAPTER 5

IMITATIO DEI IN THE PSALMS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses *imitatio Dei* as a theme in selected psalms. As was discussed in the literature review in chapter 2, the study of *imitatio Dei*, as a principle for Old Testament ethics, began with passages from the Pentateuch. The main passages used have been Leviticus 19:2 “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy”, and passages in Deuteronomy, such as 10:17-19, which commanded the Israelites to be kind to strangers and the helpless as God was kind to them. It was also seen that Davies and Wright pointed out that *imitatio Dei* is a theme in the Psalms. However, as stated in chapter 3, the ethics of the Psalms have not been thoroughly explored, and likewise, this area of *imitatio Dei* in the Psalms.

Gordon Wenham also pointed out that *imitatio Dei* is a principle of the Psalms.¹ He noted that the psalms constantly appeal to God’s character “as the guarantor of the ethical system: he will ensure that the wicked are punished and the righteous are rewarded”.² He further noted that “God’s actions are often seen as a model for human behaviour”.³ Humans should be inspired in their attitudes to others by God’s demonstration of care for those who are downtrodden and oppressed.⁴ The psalms demonstrate that the righteous are to imitate God, who is himself righteous in many ways; and the king, who is in the best position to promote

¹ See Wenham, “Ethics,” 192-94.

² Wenham, “Ethics,” 179.

³ Wenham, “Ethics,” 179.

⁴ Wenham, “Ethics,” 179.

righteousness, is called to demonstrate “godlike qualities of justice” (Ps. 72:1-4).⁵ The king’s role in promoting God’s justice will be explored in depth later in this chapter, in the discussion of Psalms 72 and 101.

As mentioned in chapter 3, eight of the psalms that have been chosen for this study reflect *imitatio Dei* as a principle. These eight psalms will be examined in the present chapter, in order to show how they imply imitation of God. The chapter is divided into four sections: *imitatio Dei* and *imago Dei* as indicated in Psalm 8; *imitatio Dei* and the king as reflected in Psalms 72 and 101; *imitatio Dei* in psalms which describe the character and actions of the righteous in the same way as God’s character and actions are described, namely Psalms 15, 111, 112 and 113; and finally, *imitatio Dei* and the way of the Lord as seen in Psalm 25.

5.2 *Imitatio Dei* and *Imago Dei*

As was previously mentioned in chapter 2, Eryl Davies discussed, in his essay, that one of the factors which may have contributed to the development of the idea of imitating God in ancient Israel “is the doctrine that human beings were created in God’s image”.⁶ He further proposed that creation in the image of God implies that there is some similarity between humans and their creator and that the phrase probably “connotes the idea that humans were created as God’s representatives”, and, therefore, should reflect God’s character in their lives.⁷ It was also noted in chapter 2 that Wenham, in his discussion of *imitatio Dei*, similarly argued that since humans are created in the image of God, then, they are God’s representatives on earth and so their actions ought to be a reflection of divine actions. This section will develop the argument

⁵ Wenham, “Ethics,” 193.

⁶ Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways,” 110.

⁷ Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways,” 111.

put forward by Davies and Wenham, by looking at the meaning of *imago Dei* and how, as reflected in Psalm 8, it leads to *imitatio Dei*.

5.2.1 The Meaning of Imago Dei

The question of the meaning of *imago Dei* is not directly addressed in Scripture, and, therefore, there have been many debates among systematic theologians and Old Testament scholars in an effort to identify the exact meaning of the “image of God”, and to determine in what ways human beings are like God. I will be using an interdisciplinary approach drawing on the work done by these two groups of scholars.

The doctrine that human beings are created in the image of God has its basis in the creation account of Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Apart from this text, there are only two other passages in the Old Testament that refer to humans as made in the image of God. The first is Genesis 5:1-2:

When God created humankind, he made them in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them “Humankind” when they were created.

The second is Genesis 9:6-7:

Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind. And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.

After these texts, *imago Dei* does not occur in the Old Testament. Charles Sherlock highlighted that these three texts in which humans are described as being made “in the image of God” are

at three critical turning-points in the Genesis account: at the highpoint of God’s creative activity, at the beginning of the new stage of human history after the tragic events of Eden, and in the midst of God’s new beginning with the human race after the judgment of the flood.⁸

He argued that by having these texts placed at such key positions, the book which opens the Bible is emphasising that “being made in the image of God is of fundamental importance to what it means to be human”.⁹

While these three passages speak of the image of God, they do not explain the meaning of the image. However, it can be said that when humans are spoken of as being made in the “image of God”, it means, generally, that they are like God in some way.¹⁰ It also means that humans have a special relationship with God and are unique among all the created beings.¹¹ However, the exact nature of the similarity between humans and God is not clearly defined in the Scripture, and as mentioned above, this has resulted in many debates.

The history of the interpretation of the image of God has been given in detail by David Clines in his article “The Image of God in Man”, Claus Westermann in his commentary *Genesis*

⁸ Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, Contours in Christian Theology (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 31. See also Gerald Bray, “The Significance of God’s Image In Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 42.2 (1991): 201.

⁹ Sherlock, *Doctrine of Humanity*, 31.

¹⁰ D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 53.

¹¹ Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 159. See also Kathryn Tanner, “The Difference Theological Anthropology Makes,” *Theology Today* 50, no. 4 (1994): 573.

1-11 and Charles Sherlock in his book *The Doctrine of Humanity: Contours of Christian Theology*.¹² I am relying on their synopses for part of the summary of the various approaches.

One approach viewed the image of God as being spiritual. This view sees the image of God as reflected in a spiritual quality in humans. These are qualities such as self-consciousness and self-determination (F. Delitzsch), “talents and understanding of the eternal, the true, and the good” (A. Dillmann), self-consciousness, the ability to think and immortality (E. König), reason (P. Heinisch), personality (O. Procksch, E. Sellin) vitality and innate nobility (B. Jacob).¹³ The spiritual interpretation of the image is expressed in the view that since the image is primarily a similarity between human beings and God, then, it has to be identified in the spirit of humans, which is the part that they share with God.¹⁴

A second approach interpreted the image in a physical sense. This view is seen in ancient texts, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh. It was also the view of H. Gunkel, G. von Rad, P. Humbert and W. Zimmerli. This view proposes that human beings bear some physical resemblance of God,¹⁵ and it stemmed from the physical meaning of צֶלֶם, the Hebrew word used for image in Genesis 1:26. This view dominated Old Testament scholarship from 1940. Humbert did a study of the use of the words צֶלֶם and דְמוּת in the Old Testament. He concluded that the phrase כְּדְמוּתוֹ בְּצַלְמֵנוּ, “in our image according to our likeness”, in Genesis 1:26 means that humans were created “with the same physical form as the deity”, of which they are “a moulded three-

¹² See Clines, “Image of God,” 54-61; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion S. J., Continental Commentaries (London: SPCK, 1984), 148-55; Sherlock, *Doctrine of Humanity*, 74-91.

¹³ Clines, “Image of God,” 55-56.

¹⁴ Clines, “Image of God,” 56.

¹⁵ Sherlock, *Doctrine of Humanity*, 74; Clines, “Image of God,” 55-58; W. Sibley Towner, “Clones of God: Genesis 1:26-28 and the Image of God in the Hebrew Bible,” *Interpretation* 59, no. 4 (2005): 343; Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 149-50.

dimensional embodiment; delineated and exteriorised”.¹⁶ The use of צלם in other Semitic languages was examined by L. Koehler, and he similarly stated that צלם refers to an upright statue, and therefore the image of God is primarily seen in the upright nature of humankind.¹⁷ The problem with this interpretation of the image of God, as rightly pointed out by Rowley, is that nowhere in the Old Testament is God described as having a physical form.¹⁸ It may be argued that God is often referred to in the Old Testament in anthropomorphic language, which speaks of God’s arms, feet, eyes, hands, nose, fingers and loins; and actions of God, such as seeing, grieving, loving, chastising and speaking. However, these are used metaphorically in speaking of God, and do not point to a specific physical form of God.

In addition, צלם is sometimes used in a metaphorical sense when it tends to connote “likeness”, in which sense it would be similar to דמות. Even its Akkadian parallel *šalmu* is used in this sense at times.¹⁹ צלם only occurs 17 times in the Bible, hence it is not easy to identify its exact meaning. Of the 17 times, 10 times it refers to various types of physical images (e.g. Num. 33:52; 1 Sam. 6:5; Ezek. 16:17). There are two instances when it is used non-physically in a metaphorical sense (Pss. 39:6[7]; 73:20). Its occurrence with the preposition כ also helps in understanding its meaning. There have been various views about the meaning of the preposition, כ. It can be translated as what is referred to as כ – *essentiae*, which is the view of Clines, and in this sense it means “as” or “in capacity of”.²⁰ I am in agreement with the other interpretation which views the כ and כ as interchangeable, hence it means “according to” or “after”. This is

¹⁶ P. Humbert, *Etudes sur le récit du paradis et de la chute dans la Genèse*, Secrétariat de l’Université Neuchâtel (1940), 157, quoted in Clines, “Image of God,” 56.

¹⁷ Clines, “Image of God,” 56.

¹⁸ H. H Rowley, *The Unity of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1953), 75-76.

¹⁹ See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. M. E. J. Richardson, G. J. Jongeling-Vos, and L. J. DeRegt, trans. M. E. J. Richardson, G. J. Jongeling-Vos, and L. J. DeRegt, 5 vols., vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1028-29.

²⁰ Clines, “Image of God,” 75-76.

more likely since the two prepositions are governed by the same verb, and they are also used interchangeably in Genesis 5:1, 3, as pointed out by Westermann and Wenham.²¹

In both the spiritual and physical interpretations of the image, human beings are presented as divided into different components, in which the physical and spiritual realms are separate and apart. However, scholars, such as T. C. Vriezen and F. K. Schumann, have argued that the Old Testament does not make a sharp distinction between the material and spiritual realms, but stresses that humans are whole persons. Hence, the whole person has to be seen as made in the image of God.²² Therefore, this led to a third approach in which the image was interpreted as being both physical and spiritual. Von Rad wrote “one will do well to split the physical from the spiritual as little as possible: the whole man is created in God’s image”.²³ E. Jacob noted that the image implies the representative function of humankind and that humans represent God in their total being, physical and spiritual.²⁴

A fourth approach interpreted the image as being reflected in “mind and heart”. This came about due to the influence of Hellenistic thought, which was dominant in the world of the first Christians. This Hellenistic influence resulted in the church’s interaction with various strands of Greek philosophy in exploring what it means to be human. In Hellenistic thought, the intellectual dimension of being human, which is the mind, was most important. It was generally understood that the mind distinguished human beings from animals, and that it was through the mind that humans gained contact with the divine. This led to the understanding that human

²¹ Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 145; see also Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), 28-29.

²² Sherlock, *Doctrine of Humanity*, 76-77; Clines, “Image of God,” 57; Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 150; Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 30.

²³ See Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1961), 56.

²⁴ See Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958), 167-68.

beings were made in the image of God in their intellectual faculties. In this sense, intellectual properties did not mean “head knowledge”, but the “heart”.

Augustine explored this aspect of the image of God in his work, *On the Trinity*, and identified several ways in which humans are created in the image of God. He opined that humans were made in the image of God in “the way we love” or “in our knowing of outward things”.²⁵ His final conclusion was that “the image of God within us is the structure of the mind as memory, understanding, and will”.²⁶ Sherlock pointed out that Augustine himself recognized that his analysis of the “image of God within” was inadequate, since a human person is not only constituted by memory, understanding and will. For, while the intellectual faculties are an element in the image of God, they are not the whole image.²⁷

The approaches discussed so far seek to identify a quality in human beings which make them like God. However, as already stated above, the text does not identify any such quality in human beings that can be identified with the image of God. Hence, these interpretations of the image of God cannot be deduced from the text. Therefore, the approach of Karl Barth appropriately moved the discussion in a new direction.

A fifth approach interpreted the image as being relational. This view of the image of God owes its origin to the work of Karl Barth.²⁸ He drew on the work of W. Vischer and D. Bonhoeffer.²⁹ Barth’s contribution highlighted that the image is not in a human quality. In Barth’s view, the image of God is constituted in the division of humankind into male and

²⁵ Sherlock, *Doctrine of Humanity*, 79-80. See Augustine of Hippo, Saint, *On the Trinity*, trans. Arthur West Hadden (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1873).

²⁶ Sherlock, *Doctrine of Humanity*, 79-80.

²⁷ Sherlock, *Doctrine of Humanity*, 80.

²⁸ See Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation: Church Dogmatics, Volume 3.1*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. T. Torrance, trans. J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 183-200.

²⁹ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1-3.*, trans. John C. Fletcher (London: SCM Press, 1959), 33-38.

female. Barth argued that the image of God is not a “quality” of humankind; therefore, it is not necessary to identify which of the attitudes and attributes of humankind constitute the image. Human beings are the image of God by the fact that they are humans, and without the image they would not be humans. God created human beings as real partners who are capable of action and responsibility in relation to God, and are a copy and reflection of God’s divine “form of life”. Human beings are the repetition of the divine “form of life”, firstly, by being God’s counterparts; secondly, by being the counterparts of fellow humans, since the “co-existence and co-operation in God” is repeated in the relation of human to human.³⁰

Barth also pointed out that since both male and female were created in God’s image, then this is the “the definitive explanation given by the text itself of the image of God”.³¹ The relation and distinction which exists in humankind between male and female, man and wife, is like the relation and distinction of the “I” and “Thou” in God. Therefore, the image of God is not the individual person, but humankind as male and female.³²

Paul Niskanen supported Barth’s interpretation of the image of God, as consisting of the division of humankind into male and female, by applying syntactical and grammatical analysis to Genesis 1:27 and its surrounding narrative. He showed that the poetic verse 27 contains a tricolon with chiasmic and synonymous parallelism. He analysed Genesis 1:27 as follows:³³

27a (i) ויברא אלהים	(ii) האדם	(iii) בצלמו
27b (iii) בצלם אלהים	(i) ברא	(ii) אתו

³⁰ Barth, *Doctrine of Creation*, 184-85.

³¹ Barth, *Doctrine of Creation*, 195.

³² Barth, *Doctrine of Creation*, 195.

³³ Paul Niskanen, “The Poetics of Adam: The Creation of אדם in the Image of אלהים,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 (2009): 423.

27c (iii) זכר ונקבה (i) ברא (ii) אתם

From the above arrangement it can be seen that there is a chiasm between verse 27a and 27b, and 27b and 27c seem synonymous. Niskanen pointed out that the parallelism is synonymous and progressive. Hence, we can see that זכר ונקבה “male and female” is parallel to בצלמו “in his image” and בצלם אלהים “in the image of God”. Robert Alter pointed out that in most instances “in which semantic parallelism does occur in a line, the characteristic movement of meaning is one of heightening or intensification (. . .), of focusing, specification, concretization, even what could be called dramatization”.³⁴ Therefore, using Alter’s description of parallelism, “male and female” specifies “image of God”. Therefore, Niskanen concluded that “the statement ‘male and female he created them,’ far from being dissociated from the concept of the image of God, stands at the very crux of its interpretation”.³⁵

We can also see that האדם “humankind” is parallel to אתו “him” and אתם “them”. Niskanen also pointed out that both the second and third lines intensify the first line, hence the pronoun, “him”, in line two which replaces “Adam” in line one shows that God created each one. The plural, “them”, in line three indicates that humankind collectively is also related to the image of God. Hence, God created each individual and all humans in God’s image.³⁶

The relational concept of the image of God has been used and developed by other scholars. Westermann agreed that the image of God is relational, but he highlighted that the text in Genesis 1:26-28 is describing God’s action and not the nature of humans. Hence, he noted that the meaning of the image of God must come from the event of creation. “What God has

³⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985), 19.

³⁵ Niskanen, “Poetics of Adam,” 424.

³⁶ See Niskanen, “Poetics of Adam,” 427-29.

decided to create must stand in relationship to him.”³⁷ Hence, “the creation of human beings in the image of God is not saying that something has been added to the created person, but is explaining what the person is”.³⁸ He also pointed out that creation in the image of God is collective, in that it “is not concerned with an individual,” but with the human race.³⁹

Sherlock also interpreted the image of God as relational and having both a horizontal and vertical dimension.

Being male and female speaks of a ‘horizontal’ and social relationship, while dominion has a ‘vertical’ reference, in a twofold direction. ‘Upwards’, we are to acknowledge our unique relationship with God, as creatures made to hear and respond in obedience to God’s address. ‘Downwards’, we are designated as God’s ‘vice-regents’, called to manage and utilize together the created world, not as wholly independent agents, but as persons accountable to our Creator.⁴⁰

Sherlock pointed out that the texts in Genesis do not tell us “what the image of God *is*”, but they show “what being made in the image of God *involves*: living in a series of relationships”.⁴¹

Douglas Hall also developed Barth’s concept of the image of God as relational and he pointed to the image of God being the relationship between the Creator and the creature. He added: “The image of God is something that ‘happens’ as a consequence of this relationship. . . . To be *imago Dei* does not mean to have something but to be and do something: to image God.”⁴²

A sixth approach is that the image of God means that humans are God’s representatives on earth. David Clines, Jürgen Moltmann and Gordon Wenham are some of the scholars who

³⁷ Claus Westermann, *Creation*, trans. John J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1974), 56. See also Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 155-58.

³⁸ Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 157.

³⁹ Westermann, *Creation*, 56.

⁴⁰ Sherlock, *Doctrine of Humanity*, 37.

⁴¹ Sherlock, *Doctrine of Humanity*, 37 (emphasis in original).

⁴² Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion As Stewardship* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 98.

have interpreted the image of God in this way. “The meaning of the image of God in Genesis 1 cannot be understood without reference to the significance of the image in the Ancient Near East.”⁴³ Clines suggested that the words צֶלֶם “image” and דְמוּת “likeness” both point to the image as being representational.⁴⁴ This is in contrast to the earlier study by Barth which pointed to a difference in meaning between the two terms, the former he saw as meaning “representation” and the later as “imitation”.⁴⁵ Clines pointed out that within the ancient Near East, the representational image “is intended to portray the characters of the god whose image it is”.⁴⁶ Likewise in Genesis 1, humans, as the image of God, express the character of God to some extent.⁴⁷

Clines concluded that since God does not have an image of His own, then humankind was not created in the image of God, but *to be* the image of God, which means “to deputize in the created world for the transcendent God who remains outside the world order”.⁴⁸ Clines stated further that it is the whole person and all humankind that are the image of God and thus God’s representatives on earth. The image of God in humankind is expressed not so much in the nature of humankind, but in humanity’s function, which is “to represent God’s lordship to the lower orders of creation”.⁴⁹

Moltmann, like Barth, looked at the human community as being the image of God. He argued that the use of the words, “let *us* make human beings – *an* image that is like *us*” means that “the image of God (singular) is supposed to correspond to the (internal) plural of God, and

⁴³ Clines, “Image of God,” 85.

⁴⁴ Clines, “Image of God,” 92. See also Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 146-47.

⁴⁵ See Barth, *Doctrine of Creation*, 197.

⁴⁶ Clines, “Image of God,” 92.

⁴⁷ Clines, “Image of God,” 92.

⁴⁸ Clines, “Image of God,” 101.

⁴⁹ Clines, “Image of God,” 101.

yet be a *single* image”.⁵⁰ God created humans as male and female, and therefore, the human plural corresponds to the divine singular. Therefore, the one God created “a community of human beings, female and male, who unite with one another and are one”.⁵¹

Like Clines, he pointed out that human beings were created by God to be the image of God. This means that humans were created to be God’s representatives on earth. In Egyptian theology, the Pharaoh was seen as “the reigning copy of God on earth, his representative, his deputy, his reflection and his mode of appearance in the world”.⁵² Just as the Pharaoh in ancient Near Eastern thinking was represented by the statues that were set up in all the provinces of his empire, in the same way, in Old Testament thought, which is influenced by ancient Near Eastern thought, humans, individually and collectively, are emblems of God’s sovereignty on earth.⁵³ Therefore, as the image of God, human beings represent and reflect God on earth. “Likeness to God means God’s relationship to human beings first of all, and only then, and as a consequence of that, the human being’s relationship to God.”⁵⁴ Hence, it is this relationship that defines human nature and not any characteristic that distinguishes human beings from other living things.

According to Moltmann, human beings are involved in three fundamental relationships as God’s image on earth: (1) to rule over the earthly creatures in God’s name as God’s *representatives*; (2) to be God’s *counterpart* on earth to whom God speaks and from whom God expects a response; (3) to be God’s splendour and glory on earth.⁵⁵ These are not simply

⁵⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation, The Gifford Lectures 1984-1985* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 217 (emphasis in original).

⁵¹ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 217-18.

⁵² Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 219.

⁵³ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 219.

⁵⁴ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 220.

⁵⁵ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 220-21 (emphasis in original).

relationships, but they are the functions that human beings are to perform, as the image of God. The function to be God's splendour and glory on earth is stated in Psalm 8, which we will discuss in detail below.

In addressing the likeness to God as stemming from a relationship, Moltmann concluded that it is the whole existence of human beings that make them the image of God, and not simply the soul. It is also the human community, and not only the individual, that is the image of God. Since both male and female are created in the image of God, "sexual difference and community belong to the very image of God".⁵⁶ Hence, "the likeness to God cannot be lived in isolation. It can be lived only in human community".⁵⁷ Hence, for Moltmann, the image of God is both relational and representative.

Westermann objected to a representational understanding of the image of God. He noted that it is meaningful to speak of the king as the divine representative on earth, for he represents God before the people. However, he could not see how humankind, as a species, could represent God, unless they were representing God before the rest of creation. He also commented that speaking of humans as God's representatives is foreign to the theology of P (Priestly source), for in P's theology, God's holiness and revelation takes place only at a holy place.⁵⁸ Wenham responded to these objections by stating that in biblical symbolism, an individual may be represented by a class of objects, e.g. sacrificial animals represent Israel. Similarly, the high priest is the representative of God to Israel and Israel to God. Therefore, Wenham stated that the

⁵⁶ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 222.

⁵⁷ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 222.

⁵⁸ Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 153.

understanding of humans as mediators between God and the rest of creation is in keeping with biblical symbolism.⁵⁹

Another aspect of the debate on the meaning of the image of God is its association with dominion. Is the image and likeness of God shown in humanity's dominion over the other creatures, or is dominion a consequence of creation in the image of God? It has been generally agreed by most modern scholars that dominion over other creatures is a consequence of the image. This is demonstrated by the γ in Genesis 1:26 which has been described as a subordinating conjunction meaning "so that" rather than a coordinating conjunction meaning "and". Hence, Genesis 1:26 would read, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, so that they may have dominion . . .".⁶⁰ This emphasises that the image of God is seen mainly in the function that humans are to perform.

In summary, the preceding review of the history of interpretation of the meaning of the image of God reveals that the text in Genesis 1:26-28 does not give a definition of what the image of God is. The text is poetic and has been asked to do more than it indicates. As mentioned above, Westermann pointed out that the text is about God's action and not the nature of humans. More recently, Terence Fretheim also highlighted that the focus of the text is on God's creative activity; hence, the discussions over the centuries have been misplaced in focusing on the meaning of the words *image* and *likeness*.⁶¹ The emphasis of the text in Genesis 1 is more about the purpose for which God created humankind; hence, the image of God in humankind is functional. Therefore, the interpretation that I have found most convincing is that

⁵⁹ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 31.

⁶⁰ See Towner, "Clones of God," 348.

⁶¹ See Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 48-50 (emphasis in original).

human beings are to be God's representative on earth. Thus human beings are created in the image of God in order to be the image.⁶² This means that humans are to reflect the image of God as God's representatives on earth, and this is exercised in being responsible stewards of God's world. Psalm 8 can add to the discussion that the image of God is functional and is demonstrated by human beings representing God on earth. We turn now to look at this psalm.

5.2.2 Psalm 8 and Imago Dei

It was mentioned in the previous section that the concept of the "image of God" only occurs in three passages in Genesis, and then it does not appear again in the Old Testament. However, Psalm 8, while not directly saying that human beings were created in the image of God, reflects this concept. In verses 4-8 [5-9] the psalmist describes how humans were created and the role given to them by God. These verses express similar thoughts to Genesis 1:26-28.⁶³ The psalmist is dependent on the creation tradition reflected in Genesis 1.⁶⁴ Clines noted that this psalm "has been aptly termed the best commentary on Genesis 1:26".⁶⁵

Psalm 8 is a hymn of praise addressed to God. It begins and ends with an expression of praise to God in the words; "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" In addition, it is also a hymn of creation. However, the psalmist praises God specifically for the creation of human beings. Hence, after the opening verses, the bulk of the psalm speaks of the place and purpose of humankind in creation. Psalm 8:3-8[4-9]:

When I see your heavens, the works of your fingers,

⁶² See Fretheim, *God and World*, 49.

⁶³ Westermann, *Creation*, 51; William P. Brown, *Seeing the psalms: a theology of metaphor* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 157.

⁶⁴ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 152.

⁶⁵ Clines, "Image of God," 95. See also Sherlock, *Doctrine of Humanity*, 45; Adrian Curtis, *Psalms*, Epworth Commentaries (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2004), 15.

the moon and stars which you have established,
 what are humans that you remember them,
 and mortals that you take care of them?
 You made them a little lower than God,
 and crowned them with glory and honour.
 You made them rulers over the works of your hands,
 you have put everything under their feet,
 sheep and oxen, all of them,
 and also the beasts of the field,
 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
 whatever passes through the paths of the seas. (My translation)

In these verses, the psalmist expresses that in comparison to the vast nature of the created universe, human beings seem insignificant. Yet, God has given them a prominent place in the created order.⁶⁶ Verses 5-8[6-9] describe the creation of human beings and the purpose for their creation. Like Genesis 1:26-28, the focus is on God's activity and the purpose for which humans were created.

Verse 5[6] "You made them little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour", implies that humans were created in the image of God. This verse also helps us to understand that while humans are created in the image of God, they are not equal to God, but are less than God. There have been different ways of translating אלהים in this verse. The word, which is in the plural, is often used in the Old Testament to refer to the God of Israel, but it sometimes also refers to angels (the Greek Old Testament, Syriac Old Testament, Targum and Vulgate) or "heavenly beings" (NIV translation). Symmachus, Aquila and NRSV translate it as God in this verse.⁶⁷ Either translation is possible as it does not affect the discussion that the verse implies creation in the image of God.

⁶⁶ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19 (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1983), 107; Howard Neil Wallace, *Words to God, Words from God: The Psalms in the Prayer and Preaching of the Church* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 160; Curtis, *Psalms*, 16-17.

⁶⁷ See Craigie, *Psalms*, 108.

Verse 5a[6a] establishes that God created humankind, then 5b[6b] states that God has crowned them with glory and honour, a point noted by Moltmann. The Hebrew words used here for glory and honour, כבוד and הדר, are attributes generally associated with God in the psalms (e.g. Pss. 19:1[2]; 29:1-2; 96:3, 6; 104:1; 145:5, 11, 12).⁶⁸ However, הדר is also used to describe the king. Then it is usually used with הוד (splendour), and as seen in Psalm 8:5[6], הדר and כבוד are used of humans. When these words are used of the king and humans, they are divine gifts, for it is God who bestows honour, glory and splendour on the king and humankind, as seen in Psalms 21:5[6] and 8:5[6] respectively.⁶⁹ Therefore, if God gives to humankind God's glory and honour, this implies that God did make humans like himself, God made them *imago Dei*.

The psalmist then highlights the role given by God to humankind in verses 6-8[7-9]. These verses are an echo of the "dominion" given to humankind in Genesis 1:26, 28. Glory and honour are royal attributes;⁷⁰ hence, it implies that according to this psalm, human beings have been given royal qualities.⁷¹ It also means that all human beings have a royal role.⁷² They are to reflect God's glory and honour by ruling the universe which God has created. Humans are at the centre of the created order and God has given them the responsibility to have dominion over all

⁶⁸ Wallace, *Words to God, Words from God*, 160; Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 36; M. Weinfeld, "כבוד," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 24. G. Warmuth, "הדר," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 337.

⁶⁹ See Warmuth, "הדר," 337-39; G. Warmuth, "הוד," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 355.

⁷⁰ A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms: Volume 1*, New Century Bible Commentary (London: Oliphants, 1972), 103; Edward J. Kissane, *The Book of Psalms: Translated from a Critically Revised Hebrew Text With a Commentary. Vol. 1 (Psalms 1-72)* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1953), 34-35.

⁷¹ Patrick D. Miller, *The Way of the Lord: essays in Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 232; James L. Mays, "What Is A Human Being? Reflections on Psalm 8," *Theology Today* 50 (1994): 518; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald, Continental commentaries (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 183.

⁷² John Goldingay, *Psalms. Volume 1: Psalms 1-41*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 159; Brown, *Seeing the psalms*, 157.

of God's creation. They are to be God's regents in governing God's creation.⁷³ This emphasises, therefore, that the *imago Dei* is functional.

This concept of humankind ruling over creation, having dominion and having all things under their feet has been misinterpreted as allowing humankind to do anything with creation, even exploit it. Thus, human dominion has been blamed for the present ecological crisis in the world. But this will result only if human sovereignty is not seen in the context of God's sovereignty. "When the exercise of human dominion ceases to be derivative, when it becomes unbounded, then dominion is in danger of becoming disaster."⁷⁴ When God gave dominion to human beings, it was God's intention for them to be responsible stewards in caring for God's creation in the way that God would.⁷⁵ The kingship God bestowed on humankind is to be a reflection of God's own rule,⁷⁶ and therefore it "is intended to correspond to the divine sovereignty and is to conform to God's will and way".⁷⁷

As Brueggemann pointed out, Psalm 72 can be seen in connection with Psalm 8. Psalm 72 is the mandate for a king who is to have dominion and "whose authority is for the sake of justice and righteousness" (Ps. 72:1-4, 12-14).⁷⁸ This psalm and the role of the king in the ancient world will be discussed below. However, it is to be noted at this point that human kingship in creation has to be interpreted in light of kingship over people groups in the ancient

⁷³ Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 36.

⁷⁴ McCann Jr., *Theological Introduction*, 59.

⁷⁵ Towner, "Clones of God," 348, 53.

⁷⁶ John Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New Translation* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 81. See also Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 121.

⁷⁷ James Luther Mays, "The self in the Psalms and the image of God," in *God and human dignity*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006), 33. See also Fretheim, *God and World*, 49-51. William P. Brown, "The Moral Cosmologies of Creation," in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 13.

⁷⁸ Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 37.

world. In this world, “the ideal king was one who was expected to rule for the sake of his subjects”.⁷⁹ The king was expected to use his power “to provide protection, administer justice, and plan for the prosperity of his people”.⁸⁰ In the light of this, therefore, the kingly status given to humans in Psalm 8 is not to lead to exploitation of the created order; rather, the power given to them is to reign for the sake of all the creatures over which they have been given dominion.

In addition, as observed by Wallace, “human dominion also concerns the relationships between humans if all humans are considered ‘royal’. Human dominion involves a respect for the value of all humankind within the created order.”⁸¹ Therefore, “the psalmist not only rejects the notion of human exploitation of the created order, he/she also promotes the ‘equality’ of all humans in relation to it”.⁸² Psalm 8:4[5] shows that God values humans for God cares for them, in the same way, humans, as reflections of God’s image, should care for one another. This is contrary to Westermann, who, as mentioned above, pointed out that humankind as a species can only represent God to the rest of creation. For when human beings care for one another, they are representing God in their interactions with one another.

5.2.3 Imago Dei and Imitatio Dei

Having discussed Psalm 8 and the meaning of *imago Dei*, we turn now to its relationship with *imitatio Dei*. We can deduce from the discussions above that there is a link between *imago Dei* and *imitatio Dei*. In the ancient world, only the kings were seen as made in God’s image. However, Psalm 8 indicates that every human being is made in the image of God, and that every human being is given kingly function. The psalm also shows that human kingship flows from

⁷⁹ Mays, “What is a Human Being?,” 518.

⁸⁰ Mays, “What is a Human Being?,” 518.

⁸¹ Wallace, *Words to God, Words from God*, 163.

⁸² Wallace, *Words to God, Words from God*, 163.

God's kingship.⁸³ As mentioned above, humans, as bearers of the image of God, are to be the image of God as God's representatives on earth. Therefore, in the exercise of their royal function, they are to do so in a godlike way, that is, by imitating God. "Being made in the 'image of God' elevates human responsibility for the earth and all its creatures to the highest possible level, in *imitatio Dei*."⁸⁴ Since the role of the king is to administer God's justice, and according to Psalm 8 all humans are royal beings, then all humans are responsible for ensuring that God's justice is administered. Hence, Psalm 8 points to the expectation for human ethical behaviour of the highest order. God's justice involves caring for the weak and defenceless, as we will see below, and in Psalm 8 it extends beyond the human world to include the nonhuman world. Hence, the psalm is important in identifying the role of human beings in ecological care.

5.3 Imitatio Dei and the King

As mentioned in the previous section, in the ancient world the king was seen as created in the image of the gods, and therefore, as a representative of the gods, who was to rule for the sake of the people in justice and righteousness. Kingship in Israel was influenced by the systems of kingship in the surrounding nations. This is evident in the narrative in 1 Samuel when the people of Israel asked for a king "like other nations" (1 Sam. 8:5). The greatest influence was from Egypt, Mesopotamia and Canaan.⁸⁵ This section will look briefly at how kings were perceived in these three nations. Then the function of the ideal king described in Psalm 72 and the king's pledge in Psalm 101 will be examined.

⁸³ Lalleman, *Rethinking Old Testament Ethics*, 17.

⁸⁴ Brown, "Moral Cosmologies," 23.

⁸⁵ Knut M. Heim, "Kings and Kingship," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 610.

5.3.1 The King in the Ancient Near East

Knut Heim has given a description of kingship in the Egypt, Mesopotamia and Canaan, in his article “Kings and Kingship”,⁸⁶ and I will be relying on his work to give a brief summary here. In Egypt, the king (pharaoh) was the head of state and represented the gods, “exercising the divine rule of the cosmos and upholding the cosmic order that sustained the world and Egypt”.⁸⁷ The king was also treated as a kind of deity. He was sometimes referred to as “son” of the gods and he in turn would refer to the gods as “father”. The kings were established by the creator- and sun-god Re as his representatives to maintain his justice on earth.⁸⁸

In the different cultures in Mesopotamia and during the different periods of its history, “kings ruled by divine authority and were expected to create a prosperous, well-governed land”.⁸⁹ The kings were established by the creator- and sun-god Shamash, as his representatives on earth, to maintain his justice and world order.⁹⁰ As noted in chapter 4, Shamash was known as the “guardian of justice”.

In Sumer, there were city states, each with its own patron god, who was seen as the supreme ruler of the city. This city god was represented in the temple by a statue. “The city ruler was considered as the estate manager of the various farms belonging to the gods resident in the city, but his true allegiance belonged to the city’s patron god, for whom he was expected to run the city justly and efficiently.”⁹¹ The Late Babylonian Dynasty (626-539 BCE) were dependent on the gods and also saw themselves as shepherds of the people. In Assyria, the god Ashur was

⁸⁶ See Heim, “Kings,” 610-23.

⁸⁷ Heim, “Kings,” 610.

⁸⁸ Erich Zenger, “Psalm 72,” in *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*, ed. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 211.

⁸⁹ Heim, “Kings,” 611.

⁹⁰ Zenger, “Psalm 72,” 211.

⁹¹ Heim, “Kings,” 611.

considered as the state god and not a city god. “Theologically, the Assyrian state god was a king, and the human king was his regent.”⁹² In addition, the Mesopotamian king was expected “to relieve the burden of the poor through royal edicts”. He sought to rescue the poor and weak from their strong oppressors.⁹³

With regards to Canaan, there are some texts which “show that kings were considered as gods or sons of the god El (e.g., KTU 1.16.I.10-23 and 1.16.II.36-49)”.⁹⁴ In addition, there are two epic texts from Ugarit which suggest “an idealized image of kingship that included the king’s duty to uphold the rights of the poor and vulnerable (KTU 1.16.VI.43-50 and 1.17.V.6-8)”.⁹⁵

From the preceding pieces of evidence, we can see that within the ancient Near Eastern cultures, the kings were seen as the representatives of the gods, who were expected to rule for the benefit of the people. Against this background, we now examine the image of the king presented in Psalm 72.

5.3.2 The King in Psalm 72

Psalm 72 is a royal psalm. Royal psalms are not classified according to form, but according to their theme or content. The major theme in royal psalms is the person or office of the king.⁹⁶ We will be looking at Psalm 72 in this section because it presents the king as God’s

⁹² W. Lambert, “Kingship in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Day (JSOT Sup 270; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 68, quoted in Heim, “Kings,” 612.

⁹³ Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 48.

⁹⁴ Heim, “Kings,” 612.

⁹⁵ Heim, “Kings,” 612.

⁹⁶ See Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 20 (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1990), 222. Jamie A. Grant, “The Psalms and the King,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. Philip S. Johnston and David G. Firth, (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2005), 103. See also H. Gunkel, *Introduction to the*

representative on earth, and describes his actions in ways that reflect God's own actions. We will focus on verses 1-4 and 12-14, since these verses describe the king's rule.

There have been debates about whether this psalm is pre-exilic or post-exilic. Most scholars go for a pre-exilic date during the period of the monarchy, when kings were still in power in Israel. I support the pre-exilic date, for Heim showed that, in its original setting, the psalm was an intercession for the reigning king and not a prediction of future events or expectations.⁹⁷ Those who support it as post-exilic do so on the basis that the psalm is messianic. Westermann, however, saw the royal psalms as belonging to both the pre-exilic and post-exilic periods of Israel's history. In each period they function differently. "During the period of the monarchy, they refer to the reigning king; after it, in the post-exilic period, they give expression to the expectation of a new and different king, the Messiah."⁹⁸ Westermann also pointed out that none of the royal psalms originated as a prediction of the future; rather, they originally referred to the reigning king. They were given messianic meaning after the failure of the Davidic dynasty.⁹⁹ Therefore, Psalm 72 refers to the Davidic kings.

Psalm 72 speaks of what is expected of the ideal king. There is a general consensus that it is a prayer for the king, which was probably used at his enthronement or coronation ceremony.¹⁰⁰ If this is so, then, this prayer does not refer to one particular king, but to the office of kingship, and, therefore, was probably used for the inauguration of several kings of the

Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel, trans. J. D. Nogalski (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 99.

⁹⁷ See Knut M. Heim, "The Perfect King of Psalm 72: An 'Intertextual' Inquiry," in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995), 223-48.

⁹⁸ Westermann, *Living Psalms*, 56.

⁹⁹ Westermann, *Living Psalms*, 59.

¹⁰⁰ Anderson, *Psalms, vol. 1*, 518; Grogan, *Psalms*, 131; Tate, *Psalms*, 222; John Goldingay, *Psalms. Volume 2: Psalms 42-89*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), 381-82; Eaton, *The Psalms*, 262.

Davidic dynasty.¹⁰¹ The focus of the prayer is that the king should rule with justice and righteousness, which is expressed in caring for the poor and the oppressed.

This concern begins in verse 1 by addressing God with the words:

O God, give the king your justice,
and your righteousness to the son of the king. (My translation)

This verse expresses the attributes which should characterize the king's reign, namely justice and righteousness. It also shows that these attributes come from God, for the prayer is for God to give the king God's justice and righteousness. The terms justice and righteousness are parallel and they are both objects of the verb "give". However, while parallel, the two terms are not the same. Zenger indicated that משפטִיךָ, which he translated as "your ordinances", refers to all the laws for social order in the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 21–23) and the Deuteronomic law, especially Deuteronomy 15:23-24, which "aim at the rescue of the poor, the weak, and the stranger".¹⁰² He said that צדקָ "is the ideal of a common life that affords each individual the optimum of his/her life's fulfilment, and at the same time a guiding principle that holds in view the welfare of the whole people".¹⁰³ In other words, צדקָ ensures that the laws are just and applied justly. The meanings of these two terms will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, which shows that they are key terms in describing God's character.

Verse 1, therefore, sets out right at the beginning of the prayer that the king's rule is to be characterized by justice (משפט) and righteousness (צדקה), and that these qualities come from God.¹⁰⁴ The king is given the responsibility to be God's viceroy or representative on earth.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Grogan, *Psalms*, 131; Mays, *Psalms*, 236.

¹⁰² Zenger, "Psalm 72," 213.

¹⁰³ Zenger, "Psalm 72," 213-15.

¹⁰⁴ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 119.

God is the ultimate King and Ruler of the world and God's rule is behind the reign of the earthly king, who is to embody the rule of God.¹⁰⁶ Hence, "the righteousness of the king is a function and mirror-image of the righteousness of God".¹⁰⁷

There are passages in the Pentateuch, Historical Books and the Psalms that mention God as king, such as Exodus 15:18, Numbers 23:21; Deuteronomy 33:5, 26; Judges 8:23; 1 Samuel 8:7; 10:19; 12:12; Psalms 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1.¹⁰⁸ God was seen as king over the gods, over Israel and over the nations. The understanding of human kingship in Israel was influenced by several aspects of divine kingship over the gods. It meant that the human king was assured of God's victorious support during battle against his enemies (Pss. 18; 20; 21; 144). The king's responsibility in return was to maintain God's honour (Ps. 132) "and the purity and justice of his own house and realm (Ps. 101)".¹⁰⁹ (We will return to the expectation of the king to maintain justice in his house, as seen in Psalm 101, later in this section.) There were also ethical implications of God being king over Israel. Hence, the human king, as God's representative, was assigned divine authority. This authority "was to enable the establishment and maintenance of social justice, ostensibly by enforcing Yahweh's ethical standards among the people".¹¹⁰

Having stated that the king's rule ought to be an embodiment of the justice and righteousness of God, we look now at how that was to be practically demonstrated in the king's

¹⁰⁵ Tate, *Psalms*, 223; Cyril S. Rodd, *Psalms 1-72*, Epworth Preacher's Commentaries (London: The Epworth Press, 1963), 135.

¹⁰⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's praise: doxology against idolatry and ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 68; see also John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, Studies in Biblical Theology (London: SCM Press, 1976), 135-44.

¹⁰⁷ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, trans. Herbert Hartwell (London: SCM Press, 1962), 503.

¹⁰⁸ Heim, "Kings," 615.

¹⁰⁹ Walter J. Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 138.

¹¹⁰ Heim, "Kings," 616.

reign. The practical demonstration of justice and righteousness are outlined in Psalm 72:2-4 and 12-14.

He will judge your people with righteousness
and your poor with justice.
The mountains will bear peace for the people,
and the hills in righteousness.
He will defend the cause of the poor of the people,
deliver the children of the needy,
and crush the oppressor.

For he delivers the needy who cries for help,
and the poor and the one who has no helper.
He looks compassionately on the helpless and needy,
and he saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life,
and their blood is precious in his sight. (My translation)

Verses 2-4 are translated by many commentators and modern translators, such as the NRSV and the RSV, in the jussive form, “may he”, while versions such as the LXX, the Vulgate, the KJV, the RV, the NIV and the JB translate them in the future. They could be understood either way, with both instances being dependent on the imperative in verse 1, תן למלך, “give the king”. In both translations, the prayer expresses the hopes of what is expected of the king when the prayer of verse 1 is answered, and the king receives the ability to administer justice and righteousness from God.¹¹¹ However, Heim showed that the verb forms are expressive of future events, in keeping with the fulfilment of the request in verse 1. In addition: “In the surface structure of the psalm, vv. 2-4 describe the purpose of the request in v. 1, but pragmatically they function as a motivation for God to grant the initial petition: ‘Lord, give the

¹¹¹ Goldingay, *Psalms 42-89*, 383.

king sense of justice so that [= for then] he will protect the poor!”¹¹² Hence they are better translated in the indicative.

Verse 2 highlights the point that the king is the representative of God, by referring to “your people” and “your poor”. This implies that the king will seek to administer justice and righteousness to all God’s people, but especially the poor and vulnerable.

Verse 4 highlights, even more, that the king’s role in the administration of justice and righteousness is to be exercised on behalf of the poor and vulnerable. This verse consists of a tricolon, in which a parallelism exists between each third of the line as shown in the following outline.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 4a (i) ישפט “he will defend the cause of” | (ii) עניי־עם “the poor of the people” |
| 4b (i) יושיע “he will deliver” | (ii) לבני אביון “the children of the needy” |
| 4c (i) וידכא “he will crush” | (ii) עושק “the oppressor” |

As previously mentioned, parallelism indicates a movement of heightening, specifying or intensifying. Therefore, the parallelism shows that the king will exercise justice on behalf of the poor by delivering or liberating them from their oppressive situations. The parallelism between “poor” and “needy” emphasises that these people are weak or helpless; hence, they are not able to deliver themselves. In order to deliver the poor and helpless, the king also has to “crush” the oppressor. “Crushing the oppressor” is used metaphorically to mean that the king needs to confront the oppressors and do whatever is necessary to ensure that they are unable to cause oppression again.¹¹³ We will return to the importance of “crushing the oppressor” in chapter 7, which will show that it is necessary in order to exercise justice; and in chapter 9,

¹¹² Heim, “Perfect King,” 227.

¹¹³ See Goldingay, *Psalms 42-89*, 385-86.

which will show that removing the oppressors is necessary in order to effectively address the contemporary issue of HIV and AIDS prevention.

Verses 12-14 echo similar themes as in verses 2-4, except that in this case, they are intensified. The intensification takes place in each verse. The poor, needy and destitute are helpless and they cry out to the king for help, like the psalmists cry to God for help in the psalms of lament (e.g. Pss. 69–71). As a result of the cry for help, the king is moved, by compassion, to action and he saves or delivers them. The king’s action is further intensified in verse 14a, which shows that he not only delivers, but he also restores them: “the king is to act in this way out of familial solidarity because he regards the destitute and the poor as members of his own family (לָאָה, “redeem”, is a term from family law)”.¹¹⁴ The king rescues the poor and needy because their “blood”, which is metaphorical for “their lives”, is valued by him. Houston pointed out that the language used in these verses for the king parallels what is said about God elsewhere in Scripture. For example, psalms such as Psalms 12:5[6]; 18:27[28]; 35:10; 76:9[10] refer to God’s activity in saving, and God also redeems lives, as in Psalms 69:18[19] and 103:4. These verses therefore again make it clear that “the king faithfully carries out his responsibility as God’s agent”.¹¹⁵

In addition to the content of the psalm, the position of Psalm 72 in the Psalter also contributes to the understanding of the king as God’s agent. For, Psalm 72 is commonly seen as the conclusion to the Davidic Psalter, Psalms 51–72. Zenger also identified it, more specifically, as the conclusion of a partial composition which is made up of Psalms 69–72. Psalms 69–71 are laments in which the psalmist, who is referred to as “poor”, cries out to God for rescue, as in

¹¹⁴ Zenger, “Psalm 72,” 216; see also Goldingay, *Psalms 42-89*, 390.

¹¹⁵ Houston, *Contending for Justice*, 142; see also Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald, Continental commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 79.

Psalms 70:5[6]. Hence, just as God is the rescuer of the poor in these psalms, in Psalm 72 it is the king who is the rescuer of the poor.¹¹⁶

5.3.3 The King in Psalm 101

It has been generally agreed that Psalm 101 is a royal psalm which was intended for the Davidic King.¹¹⁷ The king is not mentioned in the psalm, but as will be shown below, the contents of the psalm imply that the speaker is a king. Most commentators are of the view that it was probably a vow of loyalty to the Davidic covenant made by the king at his coronation ceremony. As pointed out by Eaton, in the main part of the psalm, verses 2c-8, the speaker “affirms his adherence to the Lord’s requirement of a ruler”.¹¹⁸ Verses 2c-8 read:

I will walk with blamelessness of my heart within my house.
 I will not set before my eyes anything worthless.
 I hate to do transgression;
 it will not cling to me.
 A perverted heart will be far from me;
 I will not know anything evil.
 The one who slanders his neighbour in the secret, him I will silence;
 whoever has eyes that are haughty and a heart that is perverted,
 him I will not endure.
 My eyes will be on the faithful of the land,
 that they may dwell with me;
 the one who walks in the blameless way will serve me.
 The one who practices deceit will not dwell within my house;
 the one who speaks lies will not be established before my eyes.
 Every morning I will silence all the wicked of the land;
 I will cut off all the evildoers from the city of the Lord. (My translation)

¹¹⁶ See Zenger, “Psalm 72,” 219; see also Goldingay, *Psalms 42-89*, 389.

¹¹⁷ Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Revised ed., Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 21 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 7. A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms: Volume 2*, New Century Bible Commentary (Edinburgh: Oliphants, 1972), 700.

¹¹⁸ Eaton, *The Psalms*, 351.

Verse 8, with its claim to judicial activity in Yahweh's city, has especially been seen as confirming that the psalm is speaking of the king.¹¹⁹ Weiser noted that the person whose words are recorded in the psalm has a large house (vv. 2, 7), many people are offered a home in his house (v. 7); to serve him is an honour (v. 6); his power is far-reaching (vv. 5, 6); "and he has judicial authority to expel the evildoers from the city of Yahweh".¹²⁰ Weiser further stated that all these facts in the psalm clearly point out "that the speaker is a prince of Judah in Jerusalem".¹²¹

In the previous section, we discussed that Psalm 72 is a prayer for God's justice and righteousness to be imparted to the king, so that he can exercise a just and righteous rule. In Psalm 101, I propose that the king is making a vow that he will indeed rule in a righteous and god-like way, and that his servants will have to meet the standards of God.¹²² I will now proceed to show how this can be deduced from the psalm.

The psalm begins in verse 1 with the king's praise of God's *חסד*, "loyalty" and *משפט*, "justice":

I will sing of loyalty and justice,
to you Lord, I will make music.

There have been different views about whose loyalty and justice is spoken of in this verse. There are those commentators like Eaton, Kissane, Broyles and Weiser who opined that

¹¹⁹ Allen, *Psalms*, 7; Anderson, *Psalms*, vol. 2, 700; John Day, *Psalms*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 95 Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 1955), 105.

¹²⁰ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 648.

¹²¹ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 648.

¹²² Wenham, "Ethics," 193.

the king was referring to his own justice and loyalty.¹²³ Eaton stated that from the sequel which follows verse 1 it can be deduced that the king is referring to his own faithfulness and not that of the Lord.¹²⁴ On the other hand, other commentators such as Allen, Anderson, Curtis, Mays and Kraus opined that the king is praising God’s justice and loyalty.¹²⁵ As pointed out by Kraus, the parallelism in verse 1 supports the view that the king is praising God’s justice and righteousness.¹²⁶ The phrase חסד־ומשפט, “loyalty and justice”, is parallel to the phrase לך יהוה, “to you Lord”, as seen in the following outline:

1a (i) חסד־ומשפט	(ii) אשירה
1b (i) לך־יהוה	(ii) אזמרה

Hence the “loyalty” and “justice” which the king is praising is that of the Lord.

“Loyalty” (חסד) is inherent to God’s character, as seen for example in Exodus 34:6-7, Psalms 5:6[7]; 13:5[6]; 103:8; 136; 145:8. God’s kingship is also exercised in “loyalty”, as for example in Psalms 18:25[26]; 50[51]; 89:1-2[2-3], 14[15], 24[25], 28[29], 33[34], 49[50]; 98:3. “Justice”, as previously mentioned, is also an attribute of God, which is fundamental to God’s rule. As already mentioned, we will discuss God’s justice and חסד in more detail in the next chapter. It was also mentioned above that God is the ultimate King and Ruler of the world, and the earthly king is God’s representative, upon whom God’s justice is bestowed, and therefore the king is responsible for preserving the justice of God in the way that he rules.¹²⁷

¹²³ See Eaton, *The Psalms*, 352; Edward J. Kissane, *The Book of Psalms: Translated from a Critically Revised Hebrew Text With a Commentary. Vol. 2 (Psalms 73-150)* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1954), 137; Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms*, New International Bible Commentary: Old Testament Series, vol. 11 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 388; Weiser, *The Psalms*, 349.

¹²⁴ Eaton, *The Psalms*, 352.

¹²⁵ See Allen, *Psalms*, 10; Anderson, *Psalms*, vol. 2, 701; Curtis, *Psalms*, 201; Mays, *Psalms*, 321; Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 278.

¹²⁶ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 278.

¹²⁷ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 280; Allen, *Psalms*, 10.

That the king is appointed as God’s representative on earth is evident in Psalm 2, the first royal psalm in the Psalter. This psalm indicates “that the king’s installation is a divine act”.¹²⁸ Jamie Grant pointed out that Psalm 2 also indicates that the king is dependent on God: “Rebellion is against Yahweh first and then his anointed (v. 2); it is Yahweh who has the power and right to mock in response (vv. 4-5); Yahweh has installed him as king, he does not rule at his own prerogative (v. 6); any power the king has is derived from Yahweh’s universal authority (vv. 8-9).”¹²⁹

In the light of Psalm 2, therefore, the king in Psalm 101 pledges that he will rule as God’s representative. After praising God’s “loyalty” and “justice”, the king is then motivated to commit himself to a life of “blamelessness”. For, as will be shown in chapter 8, praise enables one to see what God values and what is pleasing to God, and this motivates one to seek to be “like” God. Therefore, when the king praises God’s loyalty and justice, he realizes that these qualities are pleasing to God; hence, he pledges to embody God’s justice and loyalty. Hence, in the rest of the psalm, the king describes how he will embody God’s loyalty and justice.

In verse 2a, the king says: “I will pay close attention to the blameless way.” The word translated here as “blameless” is תמים which also means “integrity”, “whole”, “perfect”. It is used in many different senses, including reference to loyalty in relationship between God and the righteous (e.g. Gen. 6:9; 17:1; Deut. 18:13; Josh. 24:14); loyalty in relationship among humans (e.g. Judg. 9:16; Amos 5:10); to be pious and upright before God (e.g. Ps. 18:23[24]; 101:2);

¹²⁸ Mays, *Psalms*, 47. See also Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy’s Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms*, Academia Biblica, no. 17 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 59.

¹²⁹ Grant, *King as Exemplar*, 59.

finally, it describes the way of God as perfect (e.g. 2 Sam. 22:31= Ps. 18:30[31]; Deut. 32:4).¹³⁰ Hence, the term תמיים, “blamelessness”, like הוֹסֵד, “loyalty”, and מִשְׁפָּט, “justice”, is also rooted in God’s character. Hence, in following the “blameless way” the king is embodying God’s character.

The king then continues in verses 2c-8 to show how he will follow the “blameless” way (דָּרַךְ תְּמִיִּם). He pledges to “walk with blamelessness of heart” within his house. In this verse the hitpael form of הִלֵּךְ is used, and the literal translation is “walk about”, but it figuratively means “to live”.¹³¹ Erhard Gerstenberger stated that the hitpael form refers to an ethical sense. (See Pss. 26:3; 56:14; 116:9; 119:45; Prov. 20:7; 23:31).¹³² In other words, the king is pledging to live an ethical life that is characterized by “blamelessness”.

He will demonstrate this ethical life first by denouncing all that is evil as evident in verses 3-5. In these verses, the king lists seven things that he will avoid or abolish. Clinton McCann noted: “Seven is often symbolic of completeness, and this symbolism would be very appropriate in a psalm in which a key word is ‘integrity’ (תְּמִיִּם), the Hebrew root of which means ‘to be complete, whole’. In other words, the king completely avoids evil.”¹³³ This list of seven is similar to a list of seven evil things in Proverbs 6:16-19, which the Lord hates: “haughty eyes”, “a lying tongue”, “hands that shed innocent blood”, “a heart that devises wicked plans”, “feet that hurry to run to evil”, “a lying witness who testifies falsely” and “one who sows discord in a family”. In verses 3-5, the seven things that the king denounces are “anything

¹³⁰ J. P. J. Oliver, “תְּמִיִּם,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem Van Gemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 307.

¹³¹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Second Printing ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 236.

¹³² Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms. part 2, and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 207.

¹³³ J. Clinton McCann Jr., “The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, ed. Leander E. Keck, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1083.

worthless” “transgression” “perverted heart”, “anything evil”, “the one who slanders his neighbour”, “haughty eyes” and “arrogant heart”. Psalm 5:5[6] also speaks of the Lord hating evil. Hence the king hates evil just like the Lord hates evil.

In addition to denouncing evil, the king judges those who engage in evil. In verses 5a and 8a, the king says he will “silence” those who do evil. Also in verse 8c, he speaks of “cutting off” the evildoers. The verbs used (כרת and צמת) both mean destroy; hence, the king is speaking hyperbolically to indicate the severity of the judgment on those who do evil. “Destroying” the wicked is often God’s task, as is evident in many psalms which speak of God’s punishment for the wicked (see for example Pss. 2:11; 3:7[8]; 5:5-6[6-7]; 54:5[7]; 94:23). The king is enacting God’s rule by his judgement of those who do evil.

In verse 6, the king pledges that his eyes will be on the faithful in the land. The words “my eyes will be on” are metaphorical of caring. God is referred to in this same way in Psalm 33:18a “Behold the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him” and also in Psalm 34:15[16] “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous”. We will return to this metaphor in the next chapter, but for now we can say that like God looks after the righteous, in the same way, the king looks after the “faithful of the land”. The “faithful of the land” are also “those who walk in the blameless way” as is seen from the interlinear parallelism of the two poetic lines of verse 6:

6a (i) My eyes will be on the faithful of the land (ii) that they may dwell with me

6b (i) the one who walks in the blameless way (ii) he will serve me

The expression, “dwell with me” (ישב) is also parallel to the expression, “serve me” (שרת). Hence, the specific way in which the “faithful in the land” will dwell with the king is by “serving” in the king’s administration. The verb (שרת), also translated “minister to”, is also used

in passages which speak of serving God (see Deut. 10:8; 17:12; 21:5; Ezek. 40:46; 43:19; 44:15-19).¹³⁴ Hence they will “serve” the king like one “serves” God.

Psalm 101 is reminiscent of Psalm 15, in that Psalm 101:4-5 are similar to Psalm 15: 3 and Psalm 101:7 is similar to Psalm 15:2. According to Psalm 15:2, those who may “dwell” on God’s hill are those “who walk blamelessly”. We will discuss Psalm 15 in the next section, but based on the similar content of the two psalms, we can say that just as God “has invited all who are faithful and blameless to approach him (Ps. 15), so the king invites only people of integrity to ‘dwell’ with him and to serve in his presence as appointed courtiers”.¹³⁵

The evidence from the preceding discussion shows that the king in Psalm 101 pledges to live and rule ethically in ways that are a reflection of God’s own character and conduct. Therefore, he pledges to imitate God in his rule. Thus, this psalm supports the main thesis of this study that *imitatio Dei* is an ethical principle in the Psalms.

5.4 Imitatio Dei in other Psalms

In addition to Psalms 8, 72 and 101, some other psalms that present *imitatio Dei* as a theme are Psalms 15, 111, 112 and 113.

5.4.1 Psalm 15

Psalm 15 has generally been classified as an “entrance liturgy”. It is similar in structure to Psalm 24:3-6, which is also referred to as an “entrance liturgy”, and its structure is also found

¹³⁴ See Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 279.

¹³⁵ Willem A. VanGemenen, *Psalms*, Rev. ed., The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008), 747.

in Isaiah 33:14-16. “These entrance liturgies define the requirements for those who are to be admitted to the holy place and permitted to participate in the cult that is performed there.”¹³⁶

Inscriptions which are reminiscent of Psalms 15 and 24 have been found in archaeological discoveries. It is therefore believed that, in the ancient world, worshippers were commonly given instructions about the requirements for admission to the temple.¹³⁷ For example, inscriptions were found in the Egyptian temple of Horus at Edfu and in the temple of Hathor at Denderah, which refer to the duties of the priests:

O you prophets and priests,
 All you who enter before the gods. ...
 Do not appear with sin,
 do not enter in uncleanness,
 do not speak lies in his house!
 Do not embezzle the provisions!
 Do not collect taxes to the detriment of the poor to benefit the rich!
 Do not add to the weight and the measure, but reduce them!
 Do not do wrong in matters of sacrifices!¹³⁸

The inscription quoted above shows that there were both ethical and cultic requirements for entering the temple. However, in Egypt there is a greater emphasis on cultic requirements. The difference in Israel, as seen in the two entrance liturgies, Psalms 15 and 24, is that the emphasis is on ethical requirements.¹³⁹ There is also evidence in the Old Testament that there were lists of requirements for entering the sanctuaries (see Deut. 23:1-8; 2 Chron. 23:19).

The “entrance liturgies also seem to be reminiscent of the contents of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. “The Book of the Dead . . . was a large compilation of spells designed to bring

¹³⁶ Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of The Psalmists* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 109.

¹³⁷ J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay, *Psalms 1-50: commentary*, Cambridge Bible Commentary on the NEB (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 63; see also Anderson, *Psalms, vol. 1*, 135.

¹³⁸ Ringgren, *Faith of Psalmists*, 120.

¹³⁹ Ringgren, *Faith of Psalmists*, 120-21. See also Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 229-30.

about the resurrection of the dead person and his safety in the afterlife.”¹⁴⁰ The book contains 192 chapters, the longest being chapter 125, the Judgment of the Dead. In this chapter, “the dead delivers a long recitation of sins not committed in order to pass the judgment of the gods”.¹⁴¹ Some of the words recited in the “Hall of the Two Truths” in order that the dead may be purged from any committed sins and be able to see the face of the gods are:

I have not done crimes against people,
 I have not mistreated cattle,
 I have not sinned in the Place of Truth.
 I have not known what should not be known,
 I have not done harm.
 I did not begin a day by exacting more than my due,
 My name did not reach the bark of the mighty ruler.
 I have not blasphemed a god,
 I have not robbed the poor.¹⁴²

This citation from the Book of the Dead shows that there were ethical requirements for the judgment of the Dead.

In addition to being an “entrance liturgy”, as pointed out by Craigie, Psalm 15 also has characteristics of wisdom literature, especially since it stresses the moral requirements for entry into the temple, rather than cultic or ritual. Therefore, he said, “it is possible that Psalm 15 is a wisdom poem, based perhaps upon the form of the entrance liturgy; its didactic role would have been in the instruction of young people concerning the moral implications of participating in worship”.¹⁴³ VanGemeren opined that Psalm 15 is a wisdom poem because of its question-and-

¹⁴⁰ Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 2 (Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1976), 119.

¹⁴¹ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian*, 119.

¹⁴² Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian*, 125. See pages 124-32 for the entire recitations of chapter 25 in the Book of the Dead.

¹⁴³ Craigie, *Psalms*, 150. see also Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 219.

answer method and the concluding promise.¹⁴⁴ Les Maloney also identified the psalm as a wisdom psalm and noted that it “delineates the way of righteousness (the way of life), which stands in stark contrast to the way of wickedness (destruction)”.¹⁴⁵ Psalm 15 therefore has didactic functions like Psalm 1.

Let us now look at the content of Psalm 15. The psalm is divided into three sections: verse 1 the question of who should be allowed into the temple; verses 2-5b state the requirements of those who are to enter; and verse 5c, is a monocolon that stands on its own, which is a promise from God for those who are faithful to the righteous way of life. In this section, we will focus mainly on the question asked and the requirements for entry, since they are ethical, and the focus of this chapter is on the ethical content of the psalms and their relation to *imitatio Dei*. The promise of 5c will be dealt with in chapter 8 which deals with motivation for being ethical.

As stated above, this psalm sets out ethical requirements, rather than cultic and ritual requirements, for temple entrance. For, as Broyles pointed out, there is no mention of attendance at festivals, correct offering of sacrifices, prayer life or daily meditations. Instead, the worshippers are asked “to examine how they have lived with their neighbours since their last pilgrimage festival”.¹⁴⁶ The question is asked in verse 1:

Lord, who will sojourn in your tent?
Who will dwell on your holy mountain? (My translation)

¹⁴⁴ VanGemenen, *Psalms*, 179.

¹⁴⁵ Les Maloney, “A portrait of the righteous person,” *Restoration Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2003), www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/psalms.php; accessed November 9, 2009.

¹⁴⁶ Broyles, *Psalms*, 92.

The verb used in verse 1 for “sojourn” is גור, which literally means “to dwell as alien and dependent”.¹⁴⁷ Maloney noted that this is unusual, for in other psalms it is the term בוא that is usually used to refer to “entering or coming into the presence of Yahweh”, as for example in Psalms 5:7[8]; 42:2[3]; 96:8; 100:2, 4; 118:19-20.¹⁴⁸ The use of גור suggests that those who enter God’s “tent” are God’s guests and God offers hospitality to them.¹⁴⁹ שכן translated “dwell” means either “to settle for a longer period of time, or indefinitely, to reside”.¹⁵⁰ The אהל, “tent”, is “an archaic reference to the Temple, recalling the tabernacle in which God was believed to have dwelt in times long ago”.¹⁵¹ Within the Old Testament, the tabernacle (Temple) was a symbol of God’s presence among the people. The בהר קדש, “holy mountain”, refers to the entire hilltop on which the temple was built and not just the area surrounding the temple.¹⁵² The two questions asked therefore are both literal in terms of entering the temple, and metaphorical in asking to be in the presence of God.

In light of the intralinear parallelism in the verse, “sojourn” is parallel to “dwell”, and “your tent” is parallel to “your holy mountain”. This implies that the questions concern the requirements not only for being temporarily in God’s presence, when one is in the temple, but for living continually in the presence of God.

The response given describes the character of the righteous person.¹⁵³ There have been two views of the way the answer is given. There are those, like Rodd, Anderson, Kraus, Mays

¹⁴⁷ Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, vol. 1, 184.

¹⁴⁸ Maloney, “A portrait of the righteous person.”

¹⁴⁹ Rogerson and McKay, *Psalms 1-50*, 64.

¹⁵⁰ Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, vol. 4, 1497.

¹⁵¹ Curtis, *Psalms*, 30.

¹⁵² Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 114.

¹⁵³ Mays, *Psalms*, 84.

and Goldingay,¹⁵⁴ who refer to verse 2 as giving the general characteristics, and verses 3-5 as the expansion of the general characteristics in specific acts. Then, there is the view, put forward first by Mowinckel and more recently by Craigie and Broyles,¹⁵⁵ that there are ten conditions given which compare the psalm with the Ten Commandments. I support the former view, and will now show why this view seems more likely.

Verse 2 begins the answer to the questions in verse 1: והולך תמים ופעל צדק ודבר אמת בלבבו: , which is translated,

The one who walks blamelessly and does what is right,
and speaks truth in his heart; (My translation)

The answer continues in verses 3-5b:

who has no slander on his tongue,
who does not do evil to his friend
and does not lift up a reproach against his neighbour,
in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honours those who fear the Lord,
who makes an oath and does not change even when it hurts,
who does not lend his money with interest
and does not take a bribe against the innocent. (My translation)

In verses 3-5b, these are all practical examples of what it means to be blameless and to do what is right. The word צדק in verse 2, which we translated with “what is right” can also be translated as “righteousness”. The meaning of this word within the Old Testament is often conformity to a norm within the community. It is also relational in that it has to do with relationships between the members of God’s people.¹⁵⁶ “Righteousness” is inherent to God’s

¹⁵⁴ See Rodd, *Psalms 1-72*, 31; Anderson, *Psalms, vol. 1*, 137; Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 228; Mays, *Psalms*, 84; Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 221.

¹⁵⁵ See Mowinckel, *The Psalms*, 179; Craigie, *Psalms*, 150-51; Broyles, *Psalms*, 91.

¹⁵⁶ See Andrew Hartropp, *What is Economic Justice? Biblical and Secular Perspectives Contrasted* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007), 13-14; Mays, *The Lord reigns*, 32-33; David J. Reimer, “צדק,” in *New*

character; therefore, it will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, which discusses God's character.

The examples in verses 3-5b refer to human relationships, and they are in keeping with laws that were given by God to Israel, and, therefore, they would constitute what was considered as right within the community of Israel.¹⁵⁷ Wenham noted that verses 2-4 are in keeping with the ninth commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour" (Exod. 20:16).¹⁵⁸ In addition, verse 3bc, "who does not do evil to his friend, nor lift up a reproach against his neighbour", can be seen as a reflection of Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself." Verse 5a is reminiscent of the law about not lending money with interest to fellow Israelites: "If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not exact interest from them" (Exod. 22:25; see also Deut. 23:19). Also, verse 5b is reminiscent of the law about not taking bribes: "You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right" (Exod. 23:8; see also Deut. 16:19).¹⁵⁹

When the psalms speak of righteousness, it is not spoken of in a theoretical sense, but one is only righteous when one "does righteousness".¹⁶⁰ Hence, it can be concluded that verses 3-5b are examples of the character and conduct of the righteous person, that is, the way the righteous person "does righteousness" in everyday life; rather than being additional characteristics to those given in verse 2.

International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 750. Broyles, *Psalms*, 94.

¹⁵⁷ See Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 230.

¹⁵⁸ See Wenham, "Ethics," 186.

¹⁵⁹ See Anderson, *Psalms, vol. 1*, 139. Craigie, *Psalms*, 152.

¹⁶⁰ Broyles, *Psalms*, 94.

This psalm also presents the ethical character of the righteous as an imitation of God, or *imitatio Dei*. For, as McCann noted, the answers given in the psalm about the kind of person that is allowed into the presence of God “portray the character of persons whose lives have been shaped in conformity with God’s character”.¹⁶¹ I will use the examples given by McCann to support the hypothesis that this psalm portrays the character of the righteous as a reflection of the character of God.

Verse 2, as discussed above, gives the main answer which describes the character of the person allowed into God’s presence. In this verse, as McCann pointed out, “the words that describe the deeds and speech of those who belong to God are used elsewhere to describe God’s own character, work, or word”.¹⁶² The first word used is תמים, and this word which is also translated as “perfect”, as mentioned above, is also used to refer to God’s way, work and law. For instance, Psalm 18:30 says of God; “This God – his way is perfect;” Deuteronomy 32:4 says of God’s work; “The Rock, his work is perfect,” and Psalm 19:7 says of God’s instruction; “The law of the Lord is perfect.” This implies that “those who belong to God mirror God’s character”.¹⁶³ Psalm 15 is also reminiscent of Psalm 101 which, as previously discussed, speaks of the character of the king. The king is described in similar ways to the person in Psalm 15, as pointed out above (see discussion on Psalm 101).

The second word used in verse 2 to describe the person allowed in God’s presence is צדק, which we translated here as “what is right”. This word can also be translated as “righteousness”, and it is used to describe God. For example, Psalm 11:7, “For the Lord is righteous” (see also Pss. 5:8[9]; 7:9[10], 11[12]; 9:4[5], 8[9]). Therefore, persons who are

¹⁶¹ McCann Jr., “Book of Psalms,” 733.

¹⁶² McCann Jr., “Book of Psalms,” 733.

¹⁶³ McCann Jr., “Book of Psalms,” 733.

allowed in God's presence mirror God's character as they "do what is right". The final word used in verse 2 to describe the person who is allowed in God's presence is אמת, which in this verse we translated as "truth", but can also be translated as "faithfulness". God is also characterized by "faithfulness", as seen in Exodus 34:6, and therefore "those who speak faithfulness or truth mirror God's character and embody God's will".¹⁶⁴ (See also Jer. 9:5; Zech. 8:16; Amos 5:10.)

God's righteous character is demonstrated through concrete actions, and in the same way Psalm 15 shows that the character of the righteous is expressed in concrete ways. As mentioned above, verse 3 is in keeping with laws that were given by God and so are actions that are right in the eyes of God. Verse 4 speaks of the righteous despising the wicked and honouring the one who fears God. As mentioned above, there are other psalms which show that God despises the wicked but cares for or watches over the righteous. For example, Psalm 1:6; "for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (see also Pss. 5:4-6[5-7]; 11:6-7; 145:20). God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed, as stated in Psalms 9:18[19]; 10:17-18; 12:5[6]; 103:6; 113:7. The righteous person also protects the poor, which is demonstrated by lending money, but not at interest (v. 5a), (see Ex. 22:25).¹⁶⁵ In verse 5b, the righteous will avoid bribery just as God avoids bribery to enact justice as seen in Deuteronomy 10:17-18: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, . . ." In conclusion, therefore, the above evidence from Psalm 15 provides another example that *imitatio Dei* is a principle in the Psalms for ethical character and conduct.

¹⁶⁴ McCann Jr., "Book of Psalms," 733.

¹⁶⁵ McCann Jr., "Book of Psalms," 733.

5.4.2 Psalms 111 and 112

Psalms 111 and 112 are “twin psalms” both in structure and content. They are both acrostic psalms, in which the first letter of each colon begins with the successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. These two psalms are meant to complement each other, and so Psalm 112 must be interpreted in light of Psalm 111 and vice versa. Psalm 111 describes God’s character; hence, it will be discussed in detail in chapter 6, where it shows how God’s righteousness is demonstrated. Psalm 112 describes the character of the righteous and motivation for ethical character and conduct, and will be discussed in detail in chapter 8, which deals with motivation. In this chapter we will examine how these two psalms imply *imitatio Dei* as an ethical principle.

Psalm 111 describes the works of the Lord, as revealed in God’s saving acts to Israel in the rescue from bondage in Egypt, and God’s faithfulness, graciousness and compassion in the wilderness and in giving them the Promised Land. This psalm ends with the words in verse 10a, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”. Psalm 112 begins with the related words in verse 1b:

Blessed is the one who fears the Lord,
who exceedingly delights in his commandments.

The rest of Psalm 112 then describes the character of the righteous one, who fears the Lord. Many of the words used in Psalm 112 to describe this righteous person are also used to describe God in Psalm 111. Therefore, “the ways of God and the ways of the righteous are paired”.¹⁶⁶ The character of God, which in Psalm 111 is described as gracious, merciful and righteous, is the basis of the human righteousness described in Psalm 112.¹⁶⁷ Let us look now at

¹⁶⁶ Mays, *The Lord reigns*, 133.

¹⁶⁷ Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 46.

how God's character in Psalm 111 is seen in the righteous person in Psalm 112. The following table shows the key words and phrases that are used of both God and the righteous in Psalms 111 and 112 respectively:

Key Words	Refers to God: Psalm 111	Refers to the righteous: Psalm 112
צדקתו עמדת לעד	111:3b	112:3b, 9b
חנון ורחום	111:4b	112:4b
נתן	111:5a	112:9a
משפט	111:7a	112:5b

Psalm 111:3 says of God that “his righteousness stands forever”, and this phrase is repeated twice in Psalm 112, in verses 3 and 9, where it says of the one who fears God that “his righteousness stands forever.” Therefore, the righteousness of the one who fears God is linked to the righteousness of God. The Lord's works are described as “majestic and glorious” in verse 3a, likewise, the horn of the righteous “will be exalted in honour”. 111:4a says of God, “he has caused his wonderful works to be remembered” and 112:6b says “a righteous person will be remembered forever”. 111:4b says “the Lord is gracious and compassionate”, and 112:4 says

Light rises in the darkness for the upright;
for the gracious, compassionate and righteous.

The words חנון “gracious” and רחום “compassionate” often occur together, always referring to God. Psalm 112:4 is the only text where these words are used of humans.¹⁶⁸ This shows that the righteous is gracious and compassionate as a reflection of God, who is gracious and compassionate.

111:5a says of God, “he gives food to those who fear him”, and 112:9a says of the righteous, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor”. The common word in these two verses is נתן “to give”, hence, as the Lord gives and cares for the needs of those who fear him, so the righteous person reflects God’s generosity towards those in need. 112:5b speaks of the righteous managing his affairs with justice (במשפט). משפט is also used of God’s works in 111:7a: “the works of his hands are faithfulness and justice”. So we are seeing that both God and the righteous demonstrate justice.

The preceding discussion shows that both God and the righteous are described with the same ethical terms. These two psalms, therefore, are a clear example that human ethical character and behaviour are a reflection of the divine ethical character and behaviour. As Brueggemann noted, “Psalm 112 knows the best and most profound way in which Yahweh is characterized, and in this psalm we are dealing with a person in the image of this God, who corresponds that image in the conduct of his life”.¹⁶⁹ This correlates with what was mentioned above, that creation in the image of God results in the imitation of God.

¹⁶⁸ Lundbom Freedman, “חנון,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 25. H. Simian-Yofre, “רחום,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 448.

¹⁶⁹ Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 46.

5.4.3 Psalm 113

Psalm 113 is a hymn of praise, which has as its central theme the majesty and compassion of God. Like all hymns of praise, the psalm contains a call to praise (vv. 1-3) and reasons for praise (vv. 4-9). However, commentators have disagreed with regards to the sections into which the psalm is divided. The NIV suggests that the psalm can be divided into 3 sections: 1) verses 1-3 which is the call to praise; 2) verses 4-6 which give God's identity as the reason for praise; and 3) verses 7-9 which give God's activity as the reason for praise. On the other hand, the NRSV suggests that the psalm consists of two sections, verses 1-4 and 5-9.¹⁷⁰ This division in the NRSV is on the basis that the question in verse 5 begins a different section. According to the content of the psalm, I agree with the division into 3 sections because the content of verses 4-6 is different from the content of verses 7-9. Verses 4-6 describe God's sovereignty and incomparability, while verses 7-9 describe God's care for the needy and outcast.

The psalm begins by calling the servants of the Lord to praise the name of the Lord. Verse 1 reads:

Praise the Lord!
Praise, O servants of the Lord,
praise the name of the Lord! (My translation)

There have been discussions about whether the expression עבדי יהוה, "servants of the Lord", refers to a group of priests and Levites or to the general congregation of worshippers. However, most scholars agree that here "servants of the Lord" is referring to the entire assembly

¹⁷⁰ McCann Jr., "Book of Psalms," 1138. For division into 3 sections, see Allen, *Psalms*, 134-35; Broyles, *Psalms*, 424-25; Grogan, *Psalms*, 188; Kissane, *Psalms, volume 2*, 202; Mays, *Psalms*, 361; Wallace, *Words to God, Words from God*, 83-84; Weiser, *The Psalms*, 705. For division into 2 sections, see Anderson, *Psalms, vol. 2*, 780; Eaton, *The Psalms*, 392; Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary on Books 3--5 of the Psalms*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975/1976), 401-02; Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 367. Anderson and Eaton divide it as vv. 1-3 and 4-9.

of worshippers. I support this view, firstly, because the content of the psalm would suggest that it is all Israel and, as I will now show, the entire world being called to praise and not simply priests and Levites. For, verses 2 and 3, which speak of the extent of the praise, indicate that God's name is to be praised forever, and it is to be praised "from the rising of the sun to its setting". This phrase is usually used metaphorically to describe the whole earth (see also Ps. 50:1 and Mal. 1:11).¹⁷¹ Secondly, Psalm 135:1, 19-20 show that all Israel is referred to as "servants of the Lord".¹⁷² Psalm 135:1:

Praise the Lord!
Praise the name of the Lord;
give praise, O servants of the Lord."

Verses 19 and 20 amplify this by saying:

O house of Israel, bless the Lord!
O house of Aaron, bless the Lord!
O house of Levi, bless the Lord!
You that fear the Lord, bless the Lord!"

As already mentioned, it is God's name that is to be praised. As is generally agreed, in the ancient world, "the name of a thing was supposed to correspond to the inner nature of the thing".¹⁷³ Hence, God's name reveals God's nature in terms of who God is and what God has done (see Exod. 3:13-15; 33:18-19; 34:5-7). Therefore, in praising God's name, God is being praised for God's character and activity, which are described as the reasons for the praise in verses 4-9, and to this we now turn.

¹⁷¹ See Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 358.

¹⁷² Allen, *Psalms*, 136.

¹⁷³ See, e.g., Ron Highfield, *Great Is the Lord: Theology for the Praise of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 158.

The reasons for praise begin first in verses 4-6 with God's sovereign character. These verses speak of God's exceptional greatness and incomparability. They read:

The Lord is high above all nations,
his glory is above the heavens.
Who is like the Lord our God,
who is seated on high,
who looks low down
on the heavens and the earth? (My translation)

According to verse 4, God is exalted above all nations and God's glory is above the heavens. This means that God reigns as king on earth, for the word "exalt" is used to proclaim God's reign, for example in Psalm 99:5, 9 and Psalm 145:1. In addition, God's "glory" (v. 4b) is "elsewhere explicitly associated with God's reign (see Pss. 29:1-3; 96:3, 7-8; 97:6)".¹⁷⁴ The rhetorical question in verse 5a, "Who is like the Lord our God?" stresses God's uniqueness and incomparability. As a rhetorical question, a direct answer is not given in the psalm; instead, the psalm proceeds to describe the character and activity of God, and based on the description of God given in these verses, we can deduce that no one in the entire created order is like God.

As the psalm develops, we can see why God is incomparable. Verses 5b-6 show that God is so exalted that God has to "look low down" on all that God has created, the heavens and the earth. There is the sense, therefore, that God is the wholly other, and that a great distance exists between God and the world.¹⁷⁵ However, God is not an observer who simply remains apart and separate from creation. Rather, God "looks down" in order to be involved with the created beings. This is highlighted by the psalmist in verses 7-9, which show God's care for God's people.

¹⁷⁴ McCann Jr., "Book of Psalms," 1139; see also Grogan, *Psalms*, 188.

¹⁷⁵ Wallace, *Words to God, Words from God*, 84.

He raises the helpless from the dust,
 he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
 to make them sit with nobles,
 with the nobles of his people.
 He lets the barren woman establish a household
 as a joyful mother of children.
 Praise the Lord! (My translation)

We can see here that this exalted and transcendent God, described in verses 4-6, is also a God who cares for God's people. It has been rightly pointed out by McCann that the verbs used in verses 5b-9 are in the hiphil, which is a causative form of the verb. So in verse 5b, לשבת, literally means "makes God's self high in order to sit"; in verse 6a, המשפילי לראות, literally means "makes God's self low in order to see"; in verse 7a, מקימי מעפר דל, literally means "causes the poor to arise"; in verse 7b, ירים אביון, literally means "makes exalted the needy"; in verse 8a, להושיבי, literally means "to cause them to sit"; and in verse 9a, מושיבי, literally means "makes to dwell". These words and phrases are used metaphorically of God to show that God is active and "God makes things happen".¹⁷⁶ In God's activity, God shows care and concern for the poor and needy, and liberates them from their situations.

Thus we see that there are two sides to God's character, where on the one hand, God is exalted and apart from creation, but on the other hand, God is intimately involved with God's people. The underlying image is that because God is "exalted", God is able to "oversee" all that is taking place in the entire world. Hence, when God sees injustice, God intervenes and brings deliverance to those who are oppressed. This image underlies Westermann's statement:

V[erse] 6a is expanded by vv. 7-9. God looks far down to help those who cry to Him from the depths. God's transcendence is from the start linked with His looking far down, the two go together. His transcendence makes it possible for

¹⁷⁶ McCann Jr., *Theological Introduction*, 80; see also McCann Jr., "Book of Psalms," 1139.

God to ‘oversee’ and so to turn towards sufferers, it enables Him to intervene as Lord of creation and Lord of history, for nothing can withstand Him.¹⁷⁷

Transcendence means that God is greater than all other beings, and God is powerful; hence, God is able to oversee everything that happens in the world. There are people in the world who are great and powerful and use such power to oppress. Hence, for some persons, such imagery of God may evoke perceptions of oppressive behaviour. However, as we see from the content of verses 7-9, God’s transcendent power is used to bring liberation.

This is confirmed further by the verbs used to describe God’s nature in verses 4-6 and God’s actions in verses 7-9. Wallace and Allen pointed out that the verb *רָם*, which is used for “raising” in verse 7, is the same verb which is used in verse 4 to describe God’s “high” or “exalted” status above the nations. In verse 8, the verb *ישב*, “to sit”, describes “the sitting of the poor and needy with princes” and in verse 5, the same verb describes “the Lord being seated on high”, and in verse 9 it describes “the establishment of the barren woman in a house”.¹⁷⁸ The uses of these verbs demonstrate polysemantic wordplays, meaning that each one expresses more than one meaning.¹⁷⁹ Their use in this way indicates that God’s actions with the poor, needy and barren are consistent with God’s own nature.¹⁸⁰

We can say, therefore, of verses 4-9 that the God described in verses 4-6 is the king who is enthroned and apart from the world, but, as verses 7-9 show, this exalted king rules by showing care and concern for those who are in need, and thus reaches out in compassion to lift

¹⁷⁷ Westermann, *Living Psalms*, 206.

¹⁷⁸ Wallace, *Words to God, Words from God*, 85; see also Allen, *Psalms*, 135; McCann Jr., “Book of Psalms,” 1139.

¹⁷⁹ See Knut M. Heim, “Wordplays,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 925-29 for discussion of wordplays.

¹⁸⁰ Wallace, *Words to God, Words from God*, 85; see also Broyles, *Psalms*, 425. Grogan, *Psalms*, 188.

them out of their situations. “The one who sits enthroned in splendour is known to be peculiarly allied with the broken-hearted, who cannot help themselves.”¹⁸¹

The question to be asked in light of the thesis of this study is: Does Psalm 113 express the concept of *imitatio Dei*? It may initially seem that Psalm 113 does not express *imitatio Dei*, for if there is no one like God, then, how can human beings imitate God? However, on closer examination, I propose that there are three ways this psalm supports the thesis that imitation of God is a principle for ethical character and conduct in the Psalms. Let us now look at those three ways.

Firstly, as mentioned above, the psalm describes God as the exalted King, whose kingship is expressed by showing care and compassion for the poor and needy, and thus liberating them from their situations. As previously mentioned, in Psalm 72 the psalmist prays for the earthly king to embody the justice and righteousness of God, which is shown by the king’s care for the poor and needy. It was also mentioned above that, according to Psalm 8, all humans are endowed with royal qualities. Hence, all humans are to be kings and queens in caring for the poor, needy and oppressed, and for God’s world in general. Psalm 113, therefore, shows the character of God which is to be embodied by humans.

Secondly, the actions of God referred to in verses 7-9 are also referred to in Psalm 112:4-5, 9, as actions of the righteous.¹⁸² Psalm 112:9a says: “They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor”; and, as McCann pointed out, אֲבִיּוֹן is used for “poor” in Psalm 112:9a and the same word is used for “needy” in Psalm 113:7b. He also pointed out that Psalm 113 is linked to Psalms 111 and 112 in that it articulates God’s sovereignty like Psalm

¹⁸¹ Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 162.

¹⁸² Grogan, *Psalms*, 188.

111 (see vv. 1-4; see also 111:2-6); and also “like Psalms 111–112, Psalm 113 asserts that God’s power is manifested in gracious, compassionate provision for the poor (see Pss. 111:4-5a; 112:9a; 113:7-9)”.¹⁸³

Frank-Lothar Hossfeld has also identified that Psalm 113 is especially connected with Psalm 112. He noted that in Psalm 112:5, 9, the rich is responsible to care for the materially poor, and Psalm 113 picks up the theme of the poor, showing that God’s behaviour is preoccupied with the poor by changing the hierarchies of the society. God makes the poor man a noble and gives the humiliated woman a position of honour in her family.¹⁸⁴

As mentioned above, Psalms 111 and 112 are twin psalms which are interpreted in light of each other. Psalm 112 shows the righteous as reflecting the actions of God outlined in Psalm 111. Psalm 111:4-5, like Psalm 113:7-9, also show God as gracious, merciful and caring for those in need. Therefore, as McCann concluded:

Especially when heard in sequence with Psalm 112, which suggests that human character and activity are to conform to God’s character and activity, Psalm 113 is an invitation to the people of God to join God at God’s work in the world on behalf of the poor and needy.¹⁸⁵

Thirdly, Psalm 113 expresses *imitatio Dei* in its call for God’s people to praise. Praise is not simply said or sung, but is also expressed as a way of life. Kevin Vanhoozer suggested that God must be praised in both singing and listening. He further stated that worship “solicits our attention and seeks to shape our character into the image of the one to whom we are attending in

¹⁸³ McCann Jr., “Book of Psalms,” 1138.

¹⁸⁴ See Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, “Psalm 113,” in *Psalmen 101-150*, ed. Frank Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, (Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 252-53.

¹⁸⁵ McCann Jr., “Book of Psalms,” 1140.

our prayers and praise: the triune benevolence”.¹⁸⁶ In other words, in praising God, God’s people are also being called to live out the praise, by living out God’s character in the world.

This can be summed up by the words of J. David Pleins:

The act of praise is an occasion to exalt God as the one who comes to the aid of the poor. Psalm 113 invokes the perspective of eternity to have us look at the world of the poor from God’s vantage point. Although enthroned on high, God’s compassion goes out to the poor and to the childless woman (Ps. 113:5-9). God does not remain detached from the poor, and neither can the worshipper who utters [the words of Ps. 113:7-8].¹⁸⁷

Therefore praising God for acts of care and compassion received from God leads to motivation for exercising the same action towards others. As mentioned above, this will be explored later in chapter 8, which deals with motivation for imitation of God.

In summary, therefore, Psalm 113, through its description of God’s character, its connections with Psalms 111 and 112, and its call to praise, supports the overall thesis that imitation of God is a principle for ethical character and conduct in the Psalms.

5.5 Imitatio Dei and the Way of the Lord in Psalm 25

Psalm 25 is an alphabetical acrostic psalm in which each verse begins with the successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, except for the sixth letter, ך, and the nineteenth letter, ך, which are missing. It has features of both an individual lament and a wisdom psalm. The wisdom elements are seen from the presence of themes which are often found in wisdom literature, such as the psalm’s concern with being instructed and guided in the ways of God, which occur in verses 4-5, 8-10, 12; and the theme of “fearing” the Lord which occurs in verses

¹⁸⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Praising in Song: Beauty and the Arts,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 117.

¹⁸⁷ J. David Pleins, *The Psalms: Songs of Tragedy, Hope and Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), 80.

12-14.¹⁸⁸ Kraus and Goldingay¹⁸⁹ opined that the psalm does not contain elements of a lament. On the contrary, I have identified elements of lament in the psalm. Lament psalms often contain some or all of the following elements: invocation to God, complaint, petition for help, a call for vengeance on evildoers, confession of sin, protestation of innocence, a vow of praise and anticipated thanksgiving, expression of confidence and trust in God.¹⁹⁰ In Psalm 25, the following elements of lament are present: invocation (v. 1); petition for help (vv. 2, 16-21); confession of sin (vv. 7, 11, 18b); expression of confidence and trust in God (vv. 3, 8-10, 12-14).

It has been the view of some scholars, such as Craigie,¹⁹¹ that Psalm 25, being an acrostic psalm, lacks a clear structure and organization; however, this assumption has been questioned by some scholars who identify a structure based on the repetition of themes. The prayer consists of requests for guidance, forgiveness and deliverance interspersed with expressions of confidence in God's character. Hence, I have identified the following structure:¹⁹²

Expression of confidence and prayer for deliverance: vv. 1-3

Prayer for guidance and forgiveness: vv. 4-7

Expression of confidence in God's character: vv. 8-10

¹⁸⁸ Broyles, *Psalms*, 133; Curtis, *Psalms*, 55; Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 368-69; Norman Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book*, JSOT Supplement Series, vol. 222 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 62.

¹⁸⁹ Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 319; Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 369.

¹⁹⁰ Ernest Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament: The Psalms and Wisdom Literature*, vol. 3 (London: SPCK, 2003), 3; Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, part 1: with an Introduction To Cultic Poetry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 12.

¹⁹¹ Craigie, *Psalms*, 218.

¹⁹² For other suggestions of structure based on recurring themes, see Jonathan Magonet, *A Rabbi Reads the Psalms* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 73-74; VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 264; Norbert Lohfink, "Covenant and Torah in the Pilgrimage of the Nations (The Book of Isaiah and Psalm 25)," in *The God of Israel and the Nations: Studies in Isaiah and the Psalms*, ed. Norbert Lohfink and Erich Zenger, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 72.

Prayer for forgiveness: v. 11

Expression of confidence in God's character: vv. 12-15

Prayer for deliverance and protection: vv. 16-22

A major theme in the psalm is instruction and guidance in God's ways. This occurs firstly in verses 4-5, in which the psalmist asks to be guided in the ways of God; secondly in verses 8-10, where the psalmist describes the nature of God's "way" as exemplified in God's character; and thirdly in verse 12, where the psalmist expresses confidence that God teaches the "way" to those who fear him. The psalmist, having sinned, prays for forgiveness, as seen in verses 7, 11 and 18, and he prays to be guided in the ways of God. As Alter pointed out, the psalm "stresses the speaker's sense of having erred (verse 7) and his desire for guidance from God about the way he should follow".¹⁹³

The theme of instruction and guidance begins in verses 4 and 5:

דרכיך יהוה הודיעני ארחותיך למדני:

הדריכני באמתך ולמדני כי־אתה אלהי ישעי אותך קויתי כל־היום:

Make known to me your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for You are the God of my salvation;
I wait for you all the day. (My translation)

In verse 4, the psalmist asks to know God's ways and to be taught God's paths (see also Pss. 86:11; 143:8, 10). The Hebrew word translated "way" is דרך, which also refers to "road", "journey", "manner", "behaviour", "mode of life".¹⁹⁴ This word occurs more than 700 times in

¹⁹³ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton & Company, 2007), 84.

¹⁹⁴ Eugene Merrill, "דרך," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. Van Gemeren, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 989.

the Old Testament, and in most instances it is used figuratively.¹⁹⁵ In this psalm, it occurs four times in the noun form, in verses 4, 8, 9 and 12, and in verses 5 and 9 it is the root of the verb translated “lead”. In verses 5 and 9, it is the *hiphil* form of the verb דרך which is translated “lead”, but could also be translated “let walk”. Therefore, verse 5a would read, “let me walk in your truth and teach me”. Hence, the psalmist does not only want to know God’s ways, but he also wants to “walk” in those ways. The word “way” in these verses is used in a metaphorical sense meaning “way of life” or “life-style”.¹⁹⁶

There is an interlinear parallelism between verse 4 and verse 5a, therefore, דרך “way” is parallel with ארה “path”, which can also refer to “way” or “mode of living” or “mode of action”,¹⁹⁷ and אמת “truth”. Since דרך connotes “way of life” or “behaviour”, then, God’s “ways” would be God’s character and actions, as demonstrated by God in God’s dealings with Israel, as previously mentioned in chapter 2.¹⁹⁸ ארה “path” is used interchangeably with דרך, and, as seen in verse 10, the paths of the Lord are described as חסד “steadfast love” and אמת “faithfulness” for those who keep his covenant. Hence, both of these terms describe God’s character and actions as demonstrated in the way God loved, rescued and cared for Israel throughout their journey from Egypt into the Promised Land.

God’s “ways” and God’s “paths”, in addition to being demonstrated by God’s own character and conduct, also refer to the conduct prescribed by God for God’s people, and these are linked closely with the law, תורה.¹⁹⁹ This is evident in passages from Deuteronomy, in which “walking in the ways of the Lord” also means to keep the commandments (Deut. 8:6; 10:12;

¹⁹⁵ Merrill, “דרך,” 989.

¹⁹⁶ See McCann Jr., “Book of Psalms,” 777.

¹⁹⁷ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *BDB*, 73.

¹⁹⁸ See chapter 2.

¹⁹⁹ Anderson, *Psalms*, vol. 1, 208. See also VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 266.

11:22; 19:9; 26:17; 28:9; 30:16; see also Pss. 119:1-3; 128:1; Isa. 42:24; Mic. 4:2). As Brown suggested, “the metaphor of the pathway, ‘maps’ both God’s *tora* and the speaker’s response to *tora*”.²⁰⁰

The verbs “make me to know”; “teach me” and “lead me” or “let me walk” are also parallel. Hence, we see a progression, in that the psalmist wants to be taught God’s ways so that he will know them and knowing them, he wants to walk in those ways. This is summed up by Goldingay who stated that each of these verbs “suggests more than teaching in the sense of causing someone to understand something conceptually; they denote a teaching that affects life”.²⁰¹ He further noted that many English versions of the Old Testament use the reference to God’s truthfulness to make the meaning of teaching as affecting life more explicit, and interpret it as the suppliant wanting “to live in ways that correspond to the truthfulness, steadfastness, and consistency of Yhwh’s ways”.²⁰² However, Goldingay disagreed with this interpretation and opined that “the parallelism with what follows suggests that the phrase more likely supports a request to Yhwh to offer guidance by appealing to Yhwh’s truthfulness, steadfastness, and consistency”.²⁰³

Goldingay is right in saying that the psalmist is appealing to God’s truthfulness, steadfastness and consistency, for this is seen in verses 6-7:

Remember your mercies, O Lord, and your steadfast love,
for they are from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth and my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love, remember me,
for the sake of your goodness, O Lord. (My translation)

²⁰⁰ Brown, *Seeing the psalms*, 33 (emphasis in original).

²⁰¹ Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 370.

²⁰² Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 370.

²⁰³ Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 370.

In verse 8, the psalmist again describes God as טוב “good” as in verse 7, and uses another word for God’s character ישר “upright”. All these attributes, חסד, רחום, טוב, and ישר, are inherent to God’s character. God’s “uprightness” means that God knows what is right, and, coupled with God’s “goodness”, it is expressed in God’s commitment to enable those who have strayed from the “way” to return to the “way”. Therefore “verse 8 also provides further reason for confidence that Yhwh will heed the appeal not to keep in mind failures and rebellion”.²⁰⁵

Verse 9 further develops the theme that God knows the right way. In this verse, “way” and “what is right” are parallel. The use of משפט does not mean judgement, but rather “what is right”. In this verse, משפט and דרכו are parallel; hence, “his way” is “what is right”. “Leads” or “let walk” – the verb used here is the same as in verse 5, the *hiphil* of דרך – is also parallel to “teaches”, meaning that God enables the humble to “walk in God’s ways” because God teaches them the way.

In verse 10, “paths” is used as in verse 4, which, as mentioned above, is interchangeable with “way”. It describes the “paths” of God with the same words used in verses 5 and 6, אמת and חסד respectively. This verse describes God’s character towards those who keep the covenant.

Since, as mentioned above, “way” refers to character, conduct or way of life, then the character of God described in verses 8-10 represents God’s ways. The psalmist, therefore, wants to be enabled by God to reflect these same attributes of God.

In conclusion, in Psalm 25 the psalmist seeks to be guided in the “ways of the Lord” and to also “walk in the ways” of the Lord, which in essence means that the desire of the psalmist is to “imitate God”. Psalm 25, therefore, adds to the number of psalms already discussed that *imitatio Dei* is a principle for ethical character and conduct in the Psalms.

²⁰⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 372.

5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, the evidence from the eight psalms examined in this chapter has shown that *imitatio Dei* is a principle for ethical character and conduct in these psalms. These eight psalms all show that human beings are expected to reflect God's character in their lives. The chapter has shown, from the evidence in Psalm 8, that human beings are created in the image of God and are given royal functions to be God's representatives on earth. Human beings are crowned with "glory" and "honour", attributes which usually describe God. As God's representatives, therefore, human beings are expected to reflect God's character and actions in their own ethical character and conduct. This is expressed more clearly in Psalms 72, 101, 15, 111, 112 and 113.

In Psalm 72, the king is endowed with God's justice and righteousness so that he will rule by caring for and liberating the poor and needy, like God cares for the poor and needy. In Psalm 101, the king pledges to rule ethically in ways that are reflective of God's character and conduct. He will walk in the blameless way, like God is blameless, he hates evil, like God hates evil, he cares for the faithful, like God cares for those who fear God and he will "destroy" the wicked, like God "destroys" the wicked. Similarly, in Psalm 15 the righteous is described by the attributes, תמים, צדק and אמת, which are attributes of God. The righteous, like God, also despises the wicked and honours those who fear God; and the righteous cares for the poor like God cares for the poor.

In Psalm 111, God is gracious, compassionate, and cares for the poor, and in Psalm 112, the righteous is gracious, compassionate and cares for the poor. Therefore, the righteous reflect the character of God in their lives. In Psalm 113, God is praised for God's majesty and care for and liberation of the poor, needy and oppressed. This psalm also describes God's sovereignty as

demonstrated in God's gracious and compassionate care for the poor and needy, as described in Psalm 111. Psalm 113 is also connected with Psalm 112 because the actions of God referred to in Psalm 113 are also referred to in Psalm 112 as the actions of the righteous. Therefore, Psalm 113 invites humans to follow God by also caring for the poor, needy and oppressed. This invitation also comes in the call to praise God; for, when God is praised for acts of care and compassion received, those uttering the praise are motivated to also demonstrate acts of care and compassion. Finally, in Psalm 25, the psalmist prays to know God's ways and to be enabled to walk in those ways. God's ways are demonstrated in God's character and actions, and when the psalmist asks to know and to be enabled to walk in those ways, the psalmist wants to demonstrate those ways in his own life, that is, the psalmist wants to imitate God.

The findings of this chapter, therefore, show that the psalms do not explicitly call on humans to imitate God, in that there are no commands to be holy as God is holy, as in Leviticus. However, *imitatio Dei* is implied in the psalms discussed above, which show that the ethical character and conduct that the righteous are to demonstrate are inherent to God's own character and conduct.

In order for humans to reflect God's character, then, the nature of the God's character must be known. We have briefly identified God's character in this chapter, but we will turn to a more detailed description of God's character in the next chapter, as portrayed in the selected psalms.

CHAPTER 6

THE CHARACTER OF GOD

6.1 Introduction

It was demonstrated in the previous chapter through the study of eight psalms that *imitatio Dei* is a principle for ethics in the Psalms. The overall argument of that chapter is that, in these psalms, the human ethical response is based on imitation of God. It was seen, as I have summarized in my conclusion to that chapter, that humans are created in the image of God and are given kingly functions to be God's representatives on earth. Therefore, as God's representatives on earth, they are to reflect God's character and actions in their ethical character and conduct. This has been shown by the evidence in these psalms that the character and actions of the righteous are described by terms which also describe God's character and actions; hence, this implies that the righteous are to imitate God's character and actions. What has been seen so far, therefore, is that the ethical qualities which the righteous are called to demonstrate are inherent to God's own character and actions.

In the light of this, therefore, this chapter will examine the nature of the character of God. How is God's character known? God's character is known from God's self-revelation in Scripture, and God is revealed through what God has done and continues to do, as was previously discussed in chapter 2. This revelation is seen in passages where God describes God's self. For example, in Jeremiah, Israel was called upon to know God, and in that call, the nature of God's character was revealed:

let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love (חסד), justice (משפט), and righteousness (צדקה) in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jer. 9:24)

Hence God's character is defined by steadfast love (חסד), righteousness (צדקה/צדק) and justice (משפט). This chapter will examine these terms by looking at the meanings that have been suggested for them throughout parts of the Old Testament, and their use in the Psalter, looking specifically at psalms that are being examined in this study, namely Psalms 25; 33; 72; 111 and 113.

6.2 God's חסד

חסד is used frequently in the Old Testament of both God and humans. It occurs 245 times in the Old Testament, 127 times in the Psalms.¹ While it is used to speak of both God and humans, it has been noted that it “more frequently (ratio 3:1) describes the disposition and beneficent actions of God towards the faithful, Israel his people, and humanity in general”.² In the book of Psalms חסד is primarily used of God, as it is only used 3 times of humans, in Psalm 109:12, 16 and Psalm 141:5.

חסד is one of the key characteristics of God in the Old Testament and is the overarching term which describes God's character. This is highlighted by Willem VanGemen: “The quality of God's love guarantees the continual operation of all his benefits (perfections) toward his people, including righteousness, uprightness, justice, forgiveness, patience, and compassion.”³ Hence, in discussing God's character, it is important to examine the meaning and use of this word in the Psalms, where it occurs with the greatest frequency. We turn now to examine the meaning of the word.

¹ Kraus, *Theology*, 43.

² D. A. Baer and R. P. Gordon, “חסד,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemen, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 211-12. See also H. J. Stoebe, “חסד,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), 461.

³ VanGemen, *Psalms*, 274. See Pss. 40:11[12]; 85:10[11]; 89:2[3]; 100:5; 117:2.

6.2.1 The Meaning of the term **חסד**

The word is used in many senses in different contexts, and it is difficult to find one English word into which it can be adequately translated. Therefore, it is often translated as “steadfast love”, “goodness”, “mercy”, “loyalty”, “kindness” and “grace”. As Birch pointed out, “this alone witnesses to the breadth of divine activity encompassed in the term”.⁴

The term came to be understood as love expressed within the covenant relationship between God and Israel, and, hence, was interpreted as “covenant love”. This understanding of **חסד** as “covenant love” began due to the work of Nelson Glueck.⁵ Glueck’s work was his PhD dissertation of 1927, which was published in German. His proposals on the meaning of **חסד** as “covenant love” were unanimously accepted by German scholars, and later influenced the English-speaking world. Glueck’s work was translated into English in 1967, and became the paradigm for the understanding of **חסד**. Glueck’s understanding of **חסד** remained unchallenged until the work of Katharine Sakenfeld, which we will review below, but first, a brief review of Glueck’s proposals for the meaning of **חסד**.

Glueck did a study of the use of **חסד** in the Bible, by looking at its secular and religious uses in reference to human conduct and its use in reference to divine conduct. From his study, beginning first with its secular usage, he suggested that **חסד** defines conduct which is exercised within mutual relationships based on rights and duties, as demonstrated in relationships between parent and child, husband and wife, ruler and people. He further stated that **חסד** demands loyalty and therefore it includes the concept of **אמת**. He also referred to it as constituting “the essence of

⁴ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 152.

⁵ Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, trans. Alfred Gottschalk (Cincinnati: The Hebrew Union College Press, 1967). This is a translation of Glueck’s PhD dissertation which was published in German in 1927 under the title *Das Wort hesed im alttestamentlichen Sprachgebrauche als menschliche und göttliche Gemeinschaftgemässe Verhaltungsweise*.

a covenant”.⁶ According to Glueck, חסד has as its component meaning: “reciprocity, mutual assistance, sincerity, friendliness, brotherliness, duty, loyalty and love”.⁷

Glueck further investigated the religious use of חסד with respect to human conduct, by looking at its use mainly in prophetic and wisdom literature. He concluded that in its religious use it is practiced as reciprocal conduct of human beings to one another and towards God, and that these two aspects of חסד are inseparable. He also referred to it as ethical and religious conduct which fulfils “the demands of loyalty, justice, righteousness, and honesty”.⁸ He noted that while it is closely related to mercy, it is not the same as mercy because unlike mercy, it is obligatory.

After examining human חסד, he then examined divine חסד. In this section of his study, he proposed that God’s חסד can only be understood as God’s covenantal relationship with God’s followers. As in the case of the religious use of חסד in human conduct, he indicated that God’s חסד contains the concepts of loyalty, justice and righteousness. God’s חסד and אמת he considered as a hendiadys, which means the use of two words to express a single idea.⁹ He also noted that, as in the religious use of חסד for human conduct, it is related to mercy, but it is not the same as mercy. He also pointed out that God’s חסד is as a result of God’s grace, but it is not the same as grace. He stated that it is as a result of grace, since the covenantal relationship in which חסד is demonstrated resulted due to God’s election of Israel, which was an act of grace.¹⁰ If חסד results from grace, then it is free and not obligatory, for God’s grace is free. Hence, it is unlike חסד within human relationships, which, according to Glueck, is obligatory.

⁶ Glueck, *Hesed*, 55.

⁷ Glueck, *Hesed*, 55.

⁸ Glueck, *Hesed*, 69.

⁹ Glueck, *Hesed*, 102.

¹⁰ Glueck, *Hesed*, 102.

Later, Katharine Sakenfeld refuted the meaning of חסד as “covenant love”. She conducted two studies of the use of חסד in the Hebrew Bible, firstly in her book, which was a revision of her PhD dissertation, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*, and later in her book *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective*.¹¹ In her first study, she examined various uses of human and divine חסד in pre-exilic and post-exilic narrative texts, prophetic literature, the Psalter and Wisdom literature. She observed that in its theological usage, the word “developed with the framework of various polarities: the individual-communal, the deserved-underserved, the surprising-promised, and the varying covenant traditions of the patriarchs, Moses, and David”.¹² She further stated that the variety of concerns expressed in the use of the word can probably be reduced to the fact that the term חסד was used as an expression of God’s free care for individual supplicants and God’s people as a whole. It was also used as an expression of “the central character of God’s action both in conditional and in unconditional types of covenant theologies”.¹³ The conditional covenant tradition focused on the Mosaic covenant, while the unconditional covenant tradition focused on the Davidic covenant. Sakenfeld pointed out that in both of these covenant traditions, the term חסד played a central role in the expression of “God’s sovereignty and power on the one hand” and God’s “enduring commitment to Israel on the other”.¹⁴

While Sakenfeld highlighted that חסד was expressed within the covenant, she differed from Glueck in not restricting it to existence only within the covenant. She expanded on this in her second work in which she used the word “loyalty” for חסד , and discussed the relationship

¹¹ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Enquiry* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

¹² Sakenfeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 147.

¹³ Sakenfeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 147.

¹⁴ Sakenfeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 148.

between loyalty and covenant. She expressed the view that, within the biblical perspective, loyalty is demonstrated within a relationship, but it does not bring a relationship into existence. Therefore, she noted that one needs to be careful in associating “the swearing of the covenant with the beginning of the relationship itself”.¹⁵ She further stated that while loyalty is shown within some sort of relationship, it cannot be restricted to any particular type of relationship such as covenant.

Bruce Birch also noted that the meaning of *חסד* should not be limited to a covenantal framework: “God’s steadfast love is always demonstrated in the context of relationship, and most often in relation to the need of the other in relationship. It is not mere allegiance to a concept – even the concept of covenant.”¹⁶

More recently, Michael Fox, in his commentary on Proverbs 1 – 9, opined that *חסד* “has no covenantal reference, nor is it essentially loyalty . . . [*חסד*] within a covenantal relationship is a benefit not mandated by the terms of the covenant.”¹⁷ He translated *חסד* in Proverbs 3:3a as “kindness”, and he stated further: “While kindness and constancy often pertain to relations between covenantal parties, these qualities are not inherently covenantal.”¹⁸ This is evident in Proverbs 3:3a, for, as he rightly pointed out, there is no allusion to covenant in that verse.

Having reviewed the studies done on the meaning of *חסד* as it is used in the Old Testament, I am of the view of Sakenfeld and others mentioned above, who proposed that *חסד* is not limited to the context of covenant. While *חסד* often exists within covenant relationships, as

¹⁵ Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action*, 41.

¹⁶ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 152.

¹⁷ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 18A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 144.

¹⁸ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 145.

pointed out by Fox, it not inherent to the covenant. This is seen in the use of the word in the psalms, where a covenant association does not exist in all psalms that speak of God's חסד .

I have identified 53 psalms which refer to God's חסד .¹⁹ Of these 53 psalms, covenant is only mentioned in 5 of them, namely Psalms 25, 44, 89, 103 and 106. In the other psalms, there is evidence of a relationship between the psalmist and God, for 27 of the psalms which speak of God's חסד are Psalms of lament, in which the psalmist appeals to God's חסד for deliverance. For example, in Psalms 17:7; 31:16[17]; 44:26[27], the psalmist appeals for deliverance from enemies or persecutors; in Psalm 6:4[5] the psalmist appeals for deliverance from illness; and in Psalms 25:6, 7 and 51:1[3] the psalmist appeals for deliverance from sin.

In other psalms, the psalmists express trust in God's חסד such as in Psalms 13:5[6]; 23:6; 52:8[10]; 62:12[13]; 63:3[4]. In the psalms of praise and thanksgiving which speak of God's חסד , the psalmists thank or praise God for חסד in deliverance from trouble, for example in Psalms 107: 1, 8, 15, 21, 31; 118:1, 29; 136; 138:2. The relational aspect of חסד in the Psalter is also seen in expressions such as "Have compassion on your servants! Satisfy us in the morning with your חסד , . . ." (Ps.90:13b, 14a); "O continue your חסד to those who know you, . . ." (Ps. 36:10a[11a]. God's חסד is also for those who love God's precepts as in Psalm 119:159. It is also "for those who express their trust, hope, reverence, servanthood by the very act of calling upon Yahweh for assistance."²⁰ for example, Psalm 31:16-17a[17-18a].

It must also be noted that God's חסד existed even before the covenantal relationship with God's people came into being. It is an essential part of God's being and character, and so it was

¹⁹ See Pss. 5; 6; 13; 17; 18; 21; 23; 25; 26; 31; 32; 33; 36; 40; 42; 44; 48; 51; 52; 57; 59; 61; 62; 63; 66; 69; 77; 85; 86; 88; 89; 90; 92; 94; 98; 100; 101; 103; 106; 107; 108; 109; 115; 117; 118; 119; 130; 136; 138; 143; 144; 145; 147.

²⁰ Sakenfeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 230.

not only in the covenant that it was expressed. Creation was an expression of God's חסד , as is seen in some psalms such as Psalm 33:5-9, which will be elaborated in the next section, and the first nine verses of Psalm 136. Psalm 136 is a psalm that speaks of God's work in creation and history, and all of its twenty-six verses end in the words "for his steadfast love (חסד) endures forever". The first nine verses read as follows:

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
 for his steadfast love endures forever.
 O give thanks to the God of gods,
 for his steadfast love endures forever.
 O give thanks to the Lord of lords,
 for his steadfast love endures forever.
 who alone does great wonders,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;
 who by understanding made the heavens,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;
 who spread out the earth on the waters,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;
 who made the great lights,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;
 the sun to rule over the day,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;
 the moon and stars to rule over the night,
 for his steadfast love endures forever;

We can see that these verses tell us that God's steadfast love (חסד) was expressed in God's creative work.²¹

Since חסד is essential to God's character and being, then what is most important in discussing חסד , in this study, is to understand the meaning of the term. For the focus of this chapter is to describe the nature of God's character. Hence, the question to be addressed is: what does God's חסד entail? In other words, how is it demonstrated in practical terms? We now turn to examine these questions.

²¹ T. B. Matson, *Biblical Ethics: A Survey* (Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing Company, 1967), 75.

As mentioned above, it is difficult to find one English word that captures the meaning of *חסד*. Hence, when it occurs in Scripture, it is often used in partnership with other qualities of God. In the book of Psalms it occurs frequently with mercy, *רחם* (Pss. 25:6; 51:1[3]; 103:4); justice, *משפט* (Pss. 33:5; 119:149); righteousness, *צדק* (Pss. 33:5; 85:10[11]); forgiveness, *סלח* (Ps. 86:5); redemption, *פדוה* (Ps. 130:7); and mostly with faithfulness, *אמונה/אמת* (Pss. 25:10; 40:10[11]; 57:3[4], 10[11]; 61:7[8]; 85:10[11]; 86:15; 89:1-2[2-3], 14[15], 24[25], 49[50]; 98:3; 115:1; 117:2; 138:2).²² These words with which it is used all contribute to the understanding of the term. Therefore, *חסד* is not simply an abstract term, for it describes both God's attitude and action, as will be seen in the next section. Kraus described God's *חסד* as God's "liberating, saving, helping, healing mercy extended to Israel and to the poor in Israel".²³ Hence, as Sakenfeld pointed out: "With its connotation of concern for the weak or needy, [*חסד*] undergirds the concepts of justice and righteousness by making it clear that they are truly for all people, and most especially for those least likely to experience them."²⁴ We turn now to examine God's demonstration of *חסד* in the selected psalms for this study.

6.2.2 God's *חסד* in the Psalms

From my survey of the psalms which refer to God's *חסד*, I have identified that in most of them, *חסד* is predominantly associated with deliverance. As mentioned in the previous section, the psalmists appeal to God's *חסד* for deliverance and/or protection from enemies. Their appeal is based on their knowledge of God's faithfulness to them. "God's faithfulness (to his people or to the individual supplicant) always is understood as the background of this deliverance, which

²² Matson, *Biblical Ethics*, 75.

²³ Kraus, *Theology*, 44.

²⁴ Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action*, 133; see also Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 63-64.

is the concrete expression of and testimony to his faithfulness.”²⁵ This is evident in that, in many of the psalms, *חסד* occurs in combination with *אמת* or *אמונה*, both of which connote “faithfulness”.

The best example of *חסד* as deliverance is seen in Psalm 107:8, 15, 21, 31, in which each section of the psalm describes a disaster from which God provided deliverance such as wandering in the desert, bondage, sickness and a storm at sea. When the psalmists appeal to God’s *חסד* for rescue, they also often ask for God to shame or destroy their enemies, as for example in Psalms 57:3[4]; 143:12. We will return to this in the next chapter which, as already mentioned in the previous chapter, will show that confronting the enemies is necessary for deliverance of the oppressed.

In addition to deliverance, there is *חסד* as protection from distress, which demonstrates God’s ongoing faithful action, which prevents distress, for example in Psalms 32:10; 36:7[8], 10[11]; 40:11[12]; 61:7[8]. Finally, there is the nuance of *חסד* in the Psalms which refers to the expression of God’s faithfulness in forgiveness as seen in Psalm 25:7, which will be examined in detail in the section below. However, as identified by Sakenfeld, there is no strict separation of the aspect of forgiveness from deliverance and the willingness to deliver, since “misfortune was often regarded as an indication of God’s displeasure and change of fortune was in turn seen as an expression or sign of forgiveness”.²⁶ This aspect of forgiveness and deliverance is seen, for example, in Psalms 85 and 90.

In this thesis, two of the psalms being studied speak of God’s *חסד*, namely Psalms 25 and 33, which we will now examine. Psalm 25 was examined in the previous chapter in relation to

²⁵ Sakenfeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 218. For a full discussion of the nuances of *חסד* in the Psalter, see pages 218-227.

²⁶ Sakenfeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 226.

imitatio Dei, now, in the present chapter, it is being examined in relation to its description of God's character. Psalm 33 was chosen for this chapter because it is a good illustration of the three attributes of God being discussed in this chapter, חסד, צדק and משפט.

6.2.2.1 חסד in Psalm 25

In Psalm 25, the word חסד, which is translated here as “steadfast love”, occurs in verses 6, 7 and 10:

Remember your mercies (רחמים) O Lord, and your steadfast love (חסד),
for they are from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth and my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love (חסד), remember me,
for the sake of your goodness, O Lord.

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love (חסד) and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies. (My translation)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Psalm 25 is a prayer for help or deliverance and guidance. In verse 6, the psalmist appeals to God's mercies (רחמים) and God's steadfast love (חסד) which the psalmist says are from of old. The use of the phrase “from of old”, which translates the word מעולם, suggests that the psalmist was aware of God's demonstration of mercy and steadfast love in the past. These could have been from Israel's past experience of God's חסד in the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants.²⁷ As mentioned above, Psalm 25 is one of the few psalms which mention the word “covenant”.

Verse 6 comes after verses 4 and 5, in which the psalmist asks to be guided in the ways and paths of the Lord. It is followed by verse 7, in which the psalmist again appeals to God's steadfast love (חסד) in asking that personal sins would not be remembered. It is possible, as

²⁷ Grogan, *Psalms*, 77.

suggested by Craigie, that the psalmist has previously walked in God's ways and wants to continue to walk in those ways, but in order to continue there is need for deliverance from a present crisis. This desire to continue to walk in God's ways reminds the psalmist of his past failure to be consistent in those ways; therefore, the psalmist progresses to the prayer for forgiveness in verses 6-7. The psalmist prays with confidence for such forgiveness because he knows that, because of God's steadfast love, God will act in mercy and forgive those sins.²⁸ Therefore, *סָדַק* in this psalm is experienced as forgiveness from sin.

The prayer for forgiveness which begins in verses 6-7 anticipates verse 10. While in verses 6-7 the psalmist was appealing to God's steadfast love and mercies, in verse 10 the psalmist makes a statement of confidence that God is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness. In this verse *סָדַק* occurs with *אֱמֶת*, which is the word that it most frequently occurs with in the psalms. The occurrence of the phrase *סָדַק וְאֱמֶת* "steadfast love and faithfulness", demonstrates God's loyalty and dedication to God's people.²⁹ God is loyal to his character and to his relationship with his people. The second part of this verse goes on to say that such steadfast love and faithfulness is shown towards "those who keep his covenant (*בְּרִית*) and his testimonies".

This part of the verse suggests the language of Exodus 34:6-7. Even though I have quoted these verses in chapter 2, because of their relevance to the discussion of this psalm, they are quoted again. These verses read:

The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, The LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

²⁸ Craigie, *Psalms*, 219.

²⁹ Kraus, *Theology*, 44.

There have been many debates about the origin of these two verses. It is the view of many commentators that these verses did not originate within the context of covenant, and they were added to this chapter of Exodus by a later redactor.

One proponent of this view is Robert Dentan. He studied the vocabulary and style of the various sections of these two verses and found that, in almost all instances, the language of Exodus 34:6-7 is associated with literature from a later period in Israel, especially from the period of Jeremiah and after. He further noted that its affinities with the age of Jeremiah may suggest connections with the Deuteronomistic school, but, after careful analysis, the vocabulary and style did not reveal a Deuteronomistic nature. He found that many of the literary affinities are with the Wisdom literature, and, therefore, he concluded that this liturgical formula of Exodus 34:6-7 was a product of the wisdom school.

He pointed out that it is not only the vocabulary and style that support its wisdom origin, but also the form and content. For, the passage can be seen to stand out from its context in being “propositional”. He further stated that the passage is concerned more with God’s character than with God’s action; there is no mention of Israel; it is universalistic in spirit and it is concerned with persons in general and not simply with the Israelite person. He further highlighted that the attributes of God in these verses are love, patience, graciousness and willingness to forgive, which are qualities that are “particularly esteemed by the Wise Men; there is nothing here of the militant, jealous and holy deity of early Hebrew religion”.³⁰ In addition to the potential anti-Jewish nature of such views, there are a number of problems with Dentan’s views as pointed out by Sakenfeld in her critique of his work.

³⁰ Robert C. Dentan, “Literary affinities of Exodus 34:6f.,” *Vetus Testamentum* 13, no. 1 (1963), <http://www.docserver.ingentaconnect.com.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/deliver/connect/brill/00424935/v13n1/s3.pdf>.

Sakenfeld critiqued Dentan's conclusions in three main ways. Firstly, she stated that the distribution of vocabulary depended on the type of materials that may have been preserved from a particular period and the circumstances that evoked them. She cited the example of mercy which was used of God mostly in the later period of Israel's history, and she pointed out that mercy would have been a concern of the nation during the exile and later. She noted that it was not an appropriate term for the theology of the pre-exilic prophecy of the Deuteronomist, but this does not mean that the word mercy did not exist or was never used of God prior to the exile.³¹ This point is persuasive, since language and its usage are fluid, and its use is influenced by various factors. Therefore, at different periods of time certain words may become more popular because they relate to situations that exist.

Secondly, Sakenfeld noted that the absence of Deuteronomic association does not necessarily support the absence of a covenant association with Exodus 34:6-7. Thirdly, she also observed that the fact that so many of the words used in these verses were concentrated in wisdom literature does not mean that they originated in wisdom literature. In fact, they should have been more present in the wisdom literature if this were the origin of the words. The words, as she rightly said, also exist in narrative, poetry, prophecy, and so would have been part of the Hebrew vocabulary and not "wisdom vocabulary". She also observed that it is equally possible "that the frequency of these words in the sayings of Proverbs came from the development of many sayings using words well known to the sages from their liturgical life".³²

In addition to the above, I would also like to point out that even if Exodus 34:6-7 were a secondary addition to the original text, it is not unlikely that it was added by J, for it fits into the

³¹ Sakenfeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 114.

³² Sakenfeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 116.

narrative in which it is placed. This view was also shared by Sakenfeld.³³ My opinion is based on my examination of the narrative surrounding these verses. As mentioned in chapter 2, these verses occur within the surrounding narrative of Exodus 32–34, which describes Israel’s rebellion against God and Moses’ intercession for their forgiveness.

In Exodus 33:12-19, Moses interceded with God asking for God’s presence to be with them, as they leave Sinai to journey to the Promised Land. In verse 17, God responded to Moses’ request by saying that his request would be granted because God knew him by name. Moses then further asked to be shown God’s glory, and God responded to this in Exodus 33:19: “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”

Following this, in chapter 34, Moses is requested by God to go up to Mount Sinai with new tablets of stone on which God was going to rewrite the commandments that were first given on Mount Sinai. Moses went up to Mount Sinai, and verse 5 says: “The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, ‘The LORD’.” As already mentioned, in chapter 33 God had promised to proclaim God’s name to Moses, and, so now on Mount Sinai, God was proclaiming that name just before rewriting the commandments that were formerly given. What follows in verses 6-7 is an elaboration of that name in the form of a description of God’s character. It was mentioned in the previous chapter that God’s name reveals God’s nature, which is reflected in God’s character. Therefore, when God revealed God’s character in these verses, it was indeed a revelation of God’s name, which God had promised would be revealed to Moses. Following this revelation, Moses, in verses 8-10, again asks God to go with

³³ Sakenfeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 116-19.

them despite the fact that the people were stiff-necked, and he also asked God to forgive them. Then follow verses 10-27, in which God renews the covenant.

It can be concluded, therefore, that this revelation of God in Exodus 34:6-7 occurred within the context of the informal renewal of the covenant, after it had been broken by Israel in their rebellion against God. After the golden calf incident, as a result of Moses' intercession, Israel experienced God's mercy, grace, patience, abounding steadfast love and faithfulness, for it was all these qualities that resulted in their experience of God's forgiveness. The latter part of verse 7 demonstrates that while God is merciful and forgiving, those who are not faithful to God in being committed to the requirements of the covenant will be punished.

This is what is reflected in Psalm 25:10, where the psalmist is noting that God demonstrates steadfast love and faithfulness to those who are faithful in keeping the obligations of the covenant. All the attributes of God revealed in Exodus 34:6-7 are present in Psalm 25: חסד "steadfast love" (vv. 6-7, 10), אמת "faithfulness" (v. 10), רחמים "mercy" (v. 6), and חנן "grace" (gracious in v. 16).³⁴ In this psalm, we see that חסד is used first in parallel with "mercies" in verse 6, it is used in parallel with "goodness" in verse 7, and it is used with "faithfulness" in verse 10.

Verses 4-11 of the psalm consist of a prayer for deliverance from sin; hence, this is an example of חסד as deliverance manifested in forgiveness of sin. As suggested by Sakenfeld, "it might be described as that great depth of faithfulness, freely extended, by which God is able to overlook the repeated human violation of their relationship".³⁵ While verse 10 may give the impression that those who fail to keep the covenant stipulations are without hope, because of

³⁴ See McCann Jr., "Book of Psalms," 778.

³⁵ Sakenfeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 227.

God's mercy and goodness, God forgives those who have strayed from the covenant stipulations. For, even though God requires commitment to the covenantal relationship, God's mercy and grace enables God to forgive in times of failure. As expressed by Goldingay, God's "character requires the expectation of commitment, but it also requires the manifestation of mercy".³⁶ From these discussions, therefore, God's דָּסָה in Psalm 25 is manifested in deliverance from sin which results because of God's faithfulness to his character and to the covenantal relationship.

6.2.2.2 דָּסָה in Psalm 33

Psalm 33 is a hymn of praise in which first the upright are called to praise God in verse 1:

Shout with joy because of the Lord, O you righteous;
praise is fitting of the upright. (My translation)

Then later in verse 8, there is a call for all the earth and all the inhabitants of the world to praise God:

Let all the earth fear the Lord;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. (My translation)

The psalm is structured as a typical hymn of praise, in which there is the call to praise followed by the reasons for praise. Following Goldingay, the psalm can be divided as follows: verses 1-3 containing call to praise, verses 4-7 containing reasons for praise, verse 8 with call to praise, followed by verses 9-19 with more reasons for praise and finally verses 20-22, which are a

³⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 373.

declaration of trust in God and a prayer.³⁷ The reasons for praise are summarized in verses 4-5³⁸ which are then elaborated in the rest of the psalm.

Verses 4-5 read:

כִּי־יֵשֶׁר דְּבַר־יְהוָה וְכָל־מַעֲשָׂהוּ בֶאֱמוּנָה:
אֵהָב צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט חֶסֶד יְהוָה מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ:

For the word of the Lord is upright;
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
He loves righteousness and justice;
the kindness (חסד) of the Lord fills the earth. (My translation)

These reasons for praise summarized in these two verses are an expression of God's character. As mentioned above, God's character is revealed in what God does, hence God's word and work in verse 4 "are manifestations of God's own self".³⁹ For God is described as יֵשֶׁר "upright" in other passages such as Psalms 25:8 and 92:15[16]; and God's אמונה "faithfulness" is mentioned in passages such as Psalms 36:5[6]; 88:11[12]; 89:1-2[2-3], 5[6], 8[9], 24[25], 33[34], 49[50]; 92:2[3]; 98:3; 100:5.

Verse 5 expands verse 4 by describing "the goal of God's speaking and acting in terms associated elsewhere with God's character and rule: 'righteousness and justice' [צדקה ומשפט] (see Pss. 97:2; 99:4), maintained in steadfast love [חסד] (Pss. 98:3; 145:8; see also Exod. 34:6-7; Pss. 5:7[8] etc.)".⁴⁰ Verses 6-19 are an expansion of verses 4 and 5. Westermann, in his analysis of this psalm, proposed that verses 5-19 are an expansion of verse 4, and further that verses 6-9 are an expansion of verse 5a and verses 10-12 and 13-19 are an expansion of verse 5b.⁴¹

³⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 464.

³⁸ Curtis, *Psalms*, 74.

³⁹ McCann Jr., "Book of Psalms," 810.

⁴⁰ McCann Jr., "Book of Psalms," 810.

⁴¹ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim & Richard N. Soulen (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 125.

Having examined the structure of the psalm, let us now discuss the meaning of *חסד* in this psalm. *חסד* occurs in three verses in this psalm, namely verses 5, 18 and 22. Since verse 5 is one of the central verses in the psalm, it is fitting to begin the discussion of *חסד* by examining its use in verse 5. According to this verse, “the kindness (*חסד*) of the Lord fills the earth.” Goldingay, in trying to explain how the earth can be full of God’s *חסד*, suggested that it may imply that God is committed to Israel wherever they are, such as, for example, whether they are in Egypt or in Babylon. Another possibility, according to him, may be that God’s commitment is experienced by the whole world along the lines suggested by the covenant with Noah.⁴² Grogan also put forward the idea that God’s *חסד* in this psalm is covenantal. Grogan, like Goldingay, suggested that it could refer to either the covenant with Noah or that creation could be viewed as covenantal. He also opined that if it is the latter, then, it would explain the psalmist’s move from the written word in verses 4-5 to the word of God in creation in verses 6-7 and then to the call of all the world to praise God.⁴³

Firstly, in response to these suggestions, there is no strong evidence in the psalm that *חסד* here has to be understood in terms of a covenant context. It is probably imposed because of Glueck’s accepted understanding of *חסד* as covenantal. Secondly, since God’s *חסד* fills the earth, we can say that it knows no bounds,⁴⁴ and, therefore, as pointed out by Curtis, it “seems to envisage something much wider than the relationship between God and Israel and to embrace the whole earth”.⁴⁵ This view is supported in the rest of the psalm, firstly in verse 8 when the

⁴² Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 466.

⁴³ Grogan, *Psalms*, 86.

⁴⁴ Westermann, *Living Psalms*, 212.

⁴⁵ Curtis, *Psalms*, 74.

whole earth is called to praise God, and secondly in verses 13-14, in which God's providential care is seen as being present over all humankind and all inhabitants of the earth.

As mentioned above, verses 6-19 are an expansion of verses 4 and 5. Verses 6, 7 and 9 describe God's work in creation, when God spoke and things came into being. Verses 10-19 describe God's work in history as demonstrated by God's involvement in human affairs (vv. 10-12) and God's protective and providential care (vv. 13-19). Therefore, God's סדק in verse 5 is demonstrated in creation and in God's acts of care. Verses 13-14 and 18-19 are reminiscent of Psalm 113: 6a, 7-9, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, describes God's character as demonstrated in compassionate care for and liberation of the poor and oppressed.

Verses 13-15 use the metaphor of God looking out from heaven and seeing all humankind:

From heaven the Lord looks out;
 he sees all humankind.
 From his dwelling-place he gazes
 at all the inhabitants of the earth;
 he who forms the heart of them all together,
 who pays attention to their deeds. (My translation)

The metaphor becomes more specific in verses 18-19:

Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him;
 on those who wait for his kindness (סדק),
 to deliver their soul from death,
 and to preserve them in the famine. (My translation)

In these verses, God is not only generally looking on the whole world, but specifically upon those who are faithful, those who fear God. As mentioned above, these verses are an expansion of verse 5 which means that they explain how God's סדק fills the earth. The metaphor of "looking down" may give the impression of judgment, but, in light of its expansion in verses 18

and 19, it is evidence of protective care. For, as God looks and sees everything, God is able to intervene in the world and bring deliverance and salvation in cases of oppression, as previously mentioned in the discussion of Psalm 113.

Verse 18 expands this meaning by using another metaphor of protection, “the eye of the Lord”, which – as pointed out by Curtis – is similar to the modern expression “keep an eye on”, which gives the sense of “look after” or “protect”.⁴⁶ Then, in verse 19 we see that those who fear God wait for God’s סָדַק to deliver and preserve them. Therefore, we can say that in this psalm, God’s סָדַק is demonstrated by protection, care, deliverance and preservation of God’s people.

This סָדַק is not only for Israel, the covenant people, but for all of God’s creation. Some commentators believe that verses 18-19 refer to Israel, for example Goldingay said of verses 13-19: “First they make a generalization about Yhwh’s relationship with the world (vv. 13-15; cf. v. 9). . . . Then they note the significance of this generalization to Yhwh’s own people (vv. 18-19; cf. v. 12).”⁴⁷ Kraus expressed a similar view when he stated that the meaning of סָדַק in the context of these verses “is divine goodness and covenant faithfulness that expresses itself in protection and preservation”.⁴⁸

The words of verse 12 could lead one to believe that this psalm has a covenantal background:

Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord;
the people he has chosen for his heritage. (My translation)

Since Israel was the nation that was chosen by God and they were the nation that acknowledged the Lord as their God, then it can be deduced that the psalm is speaking of Israel. However, as

⁴⁶ Curtis, *Psalms*, 75.

⁴⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 469.

⁴⁸ Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 378.

already shown above, the two verses that follow verse 12 are universal and include all humankind and all inhabitants of the earth. Even the reference to “those who fear him” in verse 18 is not restricted to Israel because, as stated above, verse 8 calls upon all the earth to fear the Lord. Hence, anyone who responds to that call and fears God will experience God’s *חסד*, and not only Israel, the covenant people.

Therefore, in contrast to my earlier discussion of Glueck’s understanding of *חסד* as “covenant love”, in Psalm 33 the psalmist includes both the covenant people and the rest of humankind as recipients of God’s *חסד*. Verse 18 emphasises the point already mentioned that *חסד* is exercised within the context of relationship, for those who fear God would be in an obedient relationship with God, and hence they will experience God’s *חסד*. The nature of relationship with God requires mutual commitment, which is similar to the contractual covenantal relationship, hence the confusion of seeing *חסד* as covenantal.

From the examination of Psalms 25 and 33, we have seen that God’s *חסד* is demonstrated in acts of care which is expressed in forgiveness from sin, protection and deliverance from distress. These acts of care are exercised towards those who are in need, for example, those who have sinned and strayed from their relationship with God experience God’s *חסד* in the forgiveness of their sins. Those who are in trouble are in need of deliverance, which they experience as a consequence of God’s *חסד*.

6.3 God’s Righteousness and Justice

The words righteousness and justice (*צדקה ומשפט*) occur frequently in the Old Testament as a hendiadys. However, even though the two words are used in a hendiadys to express a single

idea, each word has its own meaning.⁴⁹ Therefore, as mentioned in the previous chapter, righteousness and justice are not synonymous in meaning; rather, justice is an expression of righteousness. The two terms are the foundation of God's character for "righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne" (Ps. 97:2; cf. 89:14[15]). This section will examine firstly the meanings of each word and secondly how God demonstrates both virtues according to the psalms.

6.3.1 The Meaning of God's Righteousness – צדקה/צדק

The words צדק and צדקה, which are the words for righteousness, like חסד, are found more frequently in the book of Psalms than in any other Old Testament book. They appear 139 times, this being 26.6 percent of the times they occur in the entire Old Testament. As observed by David Reimer, since the hymns and prayers of the Psalms are addressed to God, the psalmists do not only reflect on their own righteousness, but, more often, they reflect on the righteousness of God and its meaning for their various situations.⁵⁰ Within the Psalms, there are instances when God's righteousness occurs in parallel with other aspects of God's work and character. With regards to God's work, God's righteousness is paralleled with God's deliverance or salvation (e.g. Pss. 40:10[11]; 51:14[16]) and with God's judgement and justice (e.g. Pss. 9:4, 8[5, 9]; 33:5). The aspects of God's character which occur in parallel with God's righteousness are: God's steadfast love/חסד (e.g. Pss. 5:7f.[8f.]; Ps. 36:5f.[6f.]); God's faithfulness/אמונה (e.g. Ps. 143:1); God's trustworthiness/אמת (Ps. 143:1), and God's goodness/טוב (Ps. 145:7).⁵¹

⁴⁹ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 255.

⁵⁰ Reimer, "צדק," 759.

⁵¹ Hartropp, *Economic Justice*, 11.

There have been attempts to distinguish the meanings of the two forms of the noun used for “righteousness” in the Old Testament, צדק, the masculine form and צדקה, the feminine form.

One such attempt at identifying a difference in meaning was proposed by Moshe Weinfeld:

In general צדק refers to the abstract principle of righteousness, while צדקה refers to the concrete act. צדק as an abstract ideal is thus personified; it is said to “look out from heaven” (Ps. 85:12; cf. Isa. 45:8); peace and צדק are said to kiss one another (Ps. 85:11); צדק ומשפט are considered the foundation of God’s throne (Ps. 89:15; 97:6); and God betrothes Israel with צדק and משפט (Hos. 2:21). By contrast, צדקה is bound up with actions (see Isa. 56:1; 58:2), and later it became the Hebrew word for giving alms to the poor.⁵²

This difference does not always exist, for צדק in Psalms 89:14[15] and 97:6 are not really personifications of righteousness, but the term expresses a quality of God. Even if there is such a difference, it does not significantly take away from the basic meaning and understanding of “righteousness”, which will now be discussed further.

“Righteousness” is a relational term which “indicates right behaviour or status in relation to some standard of behaviour accepted in the community”.⁵³ The accepted standard of the behaviour by the community would be the norm that is expected of God’s people in their relationship with one another. However, there is the question of what constitutes the content of this norm, and it has been noted that the content of the norms are case-specific, and, therefore, can vary from one case to another according to “the relational norm(s) appropriate to that context”.⁵⁴ From what has already been said, we can see that righteousness is both relational and action oriented. When God’s righteousness is spoken of therefore, it is not simply abstract, but it is demonstrated in God’s actions expressed in God’s relationships with humans. With regards to

⁵² Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 34. Weinfeld uses the versification in the Masoratic text.

⁵³ Reimer, “צדק,” 750.

⁵⁴ Hartropp, *Economic Justice*, 13-14.

the relationship between God and Israel, this was experienced within the context of the covenant, but like *חסד*, righteousness it is not limited to the covenant.

Reimer pointed out that covenant is not invoked as a basis or ground for *צדק*.⁵⁵ As stated above for *חסד*, righteousness is essentially relational but not covenantal. It is an essential aspect of God's character.

It was noted above that righteousness means conformity to a norm, and this raises the question of what does this mean in relation to the righteousness of God? God cannot be said to conform to norms, since "there are no norms external to God's own character and being and action".⁵⁶ However, God can determine to act in faithfulness to God's own character. Therefore, when one thinks of "the righteousness of God" as used in the Old Testament, as was suggested by Andrew Hartropp, the phrase emphasises, in terms of norms, that God acts in faithfulness to God's own mercy and justice, and therefore in faithfulness to God's covenant promises which display and demonstrate God's mercy and justice.⁵⁷ In other words, God's righteousness is not demonstrated in any abstract norm to which God conforms, but it is demonstrated in God's faithfulness to who God is, which is expressed in what God does.⁵⁸ With regards to Israel, this is in keeping with the promises of the covenant which God made to them. These actions which express God's righteousness involve redemption, deliverance and salvation of God's people.

God's righteousness is said not to refer much to punishment for sin, but justice, as in *משפט*, can refer to such punishment.⁵⁹ However, as noted above, justice is a part of

⁵⁵ Reimer, "צדק," 750.

⁵⁶ Hartropp, *Economic Justice*, 14.

⁵⁷ Hartropp, *Economic Justice*, 14.

⁵⁸ See Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology. Volume 1: The theology of Israel's historical traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1962), 373; William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1979), 53-54.

⁵⁹ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 155; see also Mott, *Biblical Ethics*, 63.

righteousness, and this will be explored more in the next section when the meaning of justice is discussed. Hence, I would say, as stated by Gert Kwakkel, that punishment does not figure “as the main or the only purpose of God’s intervention as a righteous judge”.⁶⁰ However, as he pointed out, in order for God’s redemption and salvation to be achieved, God needs to attend to the wicked. It is for this reason that several psalms refer to the fall of the wicked “as the indispensable corollary of God’s intervention by virtue of his righteousness (e.g. Pss. 7:11-16[12-17]; 9:3[4], 5-6[6-7], 15-17[16-18], 20[21]; 11:6). Therefore, one can claim that punishment is not the main goal of God’s righteousness but is, nevertheless, part of it.”⁶¹ Hence, within God’s righteousness there is the apparent tension between God’s mercy and God’s judgement, and this is a theme that is continuous throughout the Old Testament.

6.3.2 The Meaning of God’s Justice – משפט

The Hebrew word used for justice is משפט, which occurs 425 times in the Old Testament and has a variety of meanings.⁶² In addition to meaning justice, it can mean “judgement”, or it can indicate a law or a statute, and, usually in the plural, it means “a body of law or judgement”.⁶³ The noun משפט “is derived from the verbal root שפט, which means “to judge” or “to render judgment”.⁶⁴

Wright noted that the noun משפט can be used in a number of ways with legal connotations.

⁶⁰ Gert Kwakkel, “Righteousness,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III & Peter Enns (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 665.

⁶¹ Kwakkel, “Righteousness,” 665.

⁶² Peter Enns, “משפט,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 1142.

⁶³ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 155.

⁶⁴ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 155.

[It] can describe the whole process of litigation (a case), or its end result (the verdict and its execution). It can mean a legal ordinance, usually a case law based on past precedents. (Exodus 21–23, known as the Covenant Code or Book of the Covenant, is simply called in Hebrew the *mišpāṭîm*.) It can also be used in a more personal sense as one’s legal right, the cause or case one is bringing as a plaintiff before the elders.⁶⁵

Wright further added that the frequent expression “the *mišpāṭ* of the orphan and widow” means their rightful case against their exploiters. This last sense of “*mišpāṭ* comes to have the wider sense of ‘justice’ in the somewhat active sense, whereas *šedeq/šēdāqâ* has a more static flavour”.⁶⁶ There is an overlap in the meanings of משפט and צדקה/צדק; however, and in light of the definitions above, it can be said that משפט is the outworking of righteousness.⁶⁷ This can be summed up in the definition of justice proposed by Hartropp: “justice is that appropriate treatment, especially of human beings, and usually in a relational setting, according to the norms commanded and set by God in each particular case”.⁶⁸ This is seen in the verses of the Mosaic Law in which משפט occurs, all of which emphasise appropriate treatment of people (see for example Exod. 23:6; Lev. 19:15, 35, 37; Lev. 24:22; Deut.1:17; 4:8; 7:12; 10:18; 16:18-20; 17:9; 18:3; 21:17; 24:17; 25:1; 27:19; 32:4). Hartropp has shown further that there is a specific emphasis in many of these laws referring to treatment of the poor and needy.⁶⁹ In these laws, these were the standards that God set for human relations with one another. We will see below that the Psalms show that one of the ways that God’s own justice is demonstrated is by caring for people, especially the poor, needy and oppressed.

⁶⁵ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 257.

⁶⁶ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 257 (emphasis in original); see also Hartropp, *Economic Justice*, 16.

⁶⁷ Hartropp, *Economic Justice*, 16.

⁶⁸ Hartropp, *Economic Justice*, 27.

⁶⁹ Hartropp, *Economic Justice*, 65-66.

Like righteousness, justice is a key characteristic of the activity of God in the world, and it is fundamental to God's ethical character and actions. The justice that God exercises was also experienced by Israel within the context of their covenantal relationship with God. However, according to the Psalms, God's justice extends beyond the context of the covenant to embrace the entire world and all of humanity.

God's justice was expressed firstly in the creation of the world, as is evident in Psalms 33, 89 and 93.⁷⁰ Secondly, divine justice is also exercised in terms of defending and delivering the poor, needy and oppressed (e.g. Pss. 103:6; 113:7-8; 140:12[13]; 146:7). Thirdly, divine justice involves retribution which deals with God as judge, and, in this case, it represents God obtaining victory for the poor and oppressed, and, at the same time, defeating the wicked or the oppressors.⁷¹ In addition, there are those who fail to comply with God's righteousness and will also experience God's judgement (e.g. Pss. 1:5-6; 7:6[7]; 9:16[17]). The expression of justice as retribution will be explored in the next chapter which deals with vengeance of God, and the expression of justice in creation and deliverance of the poor and oppressed will be expanded in the next section which examines God's demonstration of justice as seen in the Psalms.

6.3.3 God's Righteousness and Justice in the Psalms

This section will examine God's display of righteousness and justice according to the Psalms, and some of the psalms being studied in this thesis will be looked at as examples of God's demonstration of justice and righteousness. Within the Psalms, God's righteousness and justice are relational but not necessarily covenantal, for as highlighted by Kwakkkel, "God's

⁷⁰ See Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 198.

⁷¹ Mott, *Biblical Ethics*, 63; see also VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 273.

righteousness is only rarely associated with his *bērît* in the psalms (the exceptions are Pss. 50:5, 16; 89:3[4], 28[29, 34[35]; 103:18; 111:5, 9; 132:12).⁷² However, as he further added, there are particular phrases in many of the psalms which proclaim God’s righteousness, that presuppose “God’s particular relationship with Israel”, such as “my God” (Pss. 7:1[2], 3[4]; 22:1[2]), “our God” (Pss. 48:1[2], 8[9]; 99:5) and “his faithfulness to the house of Israel” (Ps. 98:3).⁷³

Of the psalms being studied in this thesis, those with God’s righteousness as a central theme are Psalms 33; 72; 111 and 113. As previous discussed in chapter 3, the psalms chosen for this study are those which have *imitatio Dei* as a theme. Hence, Psalms 72, 111 and 113 were examined in chapter 5 with regards to their portrayal of *imitatio Dei*. However, they also describe God’s character, which is what is being discussed in this chapter. As already stated above, Psalm 33 was chosen for this chapter because it is a good illustration of the three attributes of God’s character being discussed in this chapter. We look now at how these psalms portray God’s demonstration of righteousness and justice.

6.3.3.1 God’s Righteousness and Justice at Creation

We will look at the revelation of God’s righteousness and justice in creation, and this is examined through Psalm 33. Psalm 33:5 states that the Lord loves righteousness and justice, and since the objects of God’s love are indications of God’s character,⁷⁴ then we can say that this verse confirms that righteousness and justice are inherent in God’s character. This righteousness and justice are revealed in God’s work in creation, in God’s history with Israel and with all of God’s people. God’s manifestation of justice and righteousness in the creation of the world is

⁷² Kwakkel, “Righteousness,” 664.

⁷³ Kwakkel, “Righteousness,” 664.

⁷⁴ Brown, *Seeing the psalms*, 183.

seen in Psalm 33, especially in verses 6, 7 and 9. As mentioned above, these verses are an expansion of verse 4, which speaks of God's word being upright, and verse 5, which speaks of the Lord's love for righteousness and justice. Hence, this justice and righteousness of the Lord was demonstrated at the creation of the world.

The description of creation in these verses is in keeping with the account of creation given in Genesis 1, in which God spoke creation into being. Psalm 33:6-7, 9:

By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made;
and by the breath of his mouth, all their host.
He gathers the waters of the sea like the dam;
he puts the deeps in storehouses.

For he spoke and it came to be;
he commanded and it stood still. (My translation)

Verse 6 makes reference to the “word of the Lord” which is the same phrase used in verse 4, where “the word of the Lord is upright”. Hence it is this upright word that was responsible for the creation of the heavens and its hosts. Then verse 9 follows verse 8 which calls on the earth and all the inhabitants of the world to fear the Lord. As already indicated, verse 8 is a second call to praise and another set of reasons for praise begin at verse 9. Verse 9, therefore, is saying that the earth and the inhabitants of the world are to fear the Lord because they came into being by the word of the Lord. So God's upright word was responsible for the creation of the heavens and the earth, as is evident in Genesis 1. As stated above, verse 5 expands verse 4; meaning that God's word is “upright” and God's work is done in “faithfulness” because of God's kindness (חסד), righteousness and justice. Hence, the creation of the world is an expression of God's uprightness (ישר), faithfulness (אמונה), kindness (חסד), justice and

righteousness (משפט וצדקה).⁷⁵ God created a world in which all was just and righteous, in which there was order and everything was “right” as God wanted it.

6.3.3.2 God’s Righteousness and Justice as Deliverance

God’s righteousness and justice are demonstrated in God’s care and deliverance of the poor, needy and oppressed. This is a major aspect of God’s demonstration of justice and righteousness, as is evident in Psalms 72, 111 and 113. Psalm 72, as previously discussed, is a psalm of prayer for the king to embody God’s justice and righteousness. However, the prayer begins by first asking God to give the king God’s justice, and to give God’s righteousness to the king’s son. Therefore, the king’s justice and righteousness is a reflection of God’s justice and righteousness. Since the king is the agent of God’s justice, then, when the prayer speaks in verses 4 and 12-14 of the king judging and delivering the poor, weak, needy and oppressed, it can be deduced that the character of God’s righteousness and justice is to care for and deliver the poor, needy and oppressed. Mays stated, based on a full discussion of these verses (2, 4, 12-14), that “the king is to be the officer of God’s merciful justice, which saves the lives of the lowly and helpless when they cry to him”.⁷⁶

Another psalm that speaks of God’s righteousness is Psalm 111 which relates to Israel’s experience of God’s righteousness. Israel experienced God’s justice and righteousness in their deliverance from oppression in Egypt. They were oppressed in Egypt and God delivered them and led them into the Promised Land, and so when the psalmists speak of God’s righteousness and justice as being that of deliverance of those who are oppressed and afflicted, it is because

⁷⁵ See Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 199.

⁷⁶ Mays, *Psalms*, 104.

they have known of God's deliverance in this way. When they cry to God for deliverance in the Lament Psalms, it is because they or their ancestors had previously experienced God's deliverance in the context of their history. Hence, they knew and could proclaim that God loves righteousness and justice.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Psalm 111 speaks of God's saving works in the history of Israel, in their deliverance from Egypt and their journey through the wilderness into the Promised Land. This psalm has a covenantal context, as there are references in the psalm to covenant. This is evident in verse 5b, which says "he remembers his covenant forever" and in verse 9b which says "he has commanded his covenant forever". Therefore, Psalm 111 describes God's character as experienced by Israel in their covenant relationship with God, as we will now see.

Psalm 111 is a hymn of praise, and after the declaration of praise in the first verse the psalmist gives the reasons for praise in verses 2-9. The overall reason for praise and the theme of the psalm is given in verse 2:

Great are the works of the Lord,
they are investigated by all who delight in them. (My translation)

Therefore the reason for praising God is because of the great works which God has done, and the nature of these great works is given in verses 3-6. As Mays indicated, verses 3-6 are a "rehearsal of Israel's foundation story from Egypt to the promised land, drawing on the story as it is told in Genesis through Joshua".⁷⁷ The content of these verses supports this view that the "great works of the Lord" referred to are God's dealings with Israel in their history.

⁷⁷ Mays, *Psalms*, 356.

Verses 2 and 3 are parallel in content;⁷⁸ therefore, the great works referred to in verse 2a are an expression of God’s majesty and honour (הוד והדר) in verse 3a:

Majesty and honour are his work,
and his righteousness stands forever. (My translation)

Majesty and honour are God’s kingly attributes, which are manifested in God’s righteousness, as can be deduced from the intralinear parallelism of verse 3, in which “righteousness” is parallel to “majesty and honour”. Therefore, God’s royal splendour is evident in God’s work of righteousness, which in this psalm is God’s deliverance of God’s people.⁷⁹

The works of the Lord referred to in verses 2 and 3 are now referred to in verse 4 as “wonderful works” which God has caused to be remembered. “Wonderful works” is also used in Exodus 3:20; “So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; . . .” It is also used in Exodus 34:10 and again in Psalms 105, 106 and 107. In these instances “wonderful works” refer to God’s dealings with Israel. The second colon of verse 4 says “the Lord is gracious and compassionate”, and so the wonderful works of the Lord are an expression of God as gracious (חנון) and compassionate (רחום).⁸⁰ These two characteristics are the attributes of God that were revealed in God’s self-revelation in the wilderness in Exodus 34:6, as was discussed above.

Verse 5a refers to God giving food to those who fear him, and since, as seen so far, the psalm is set in the context of God’s dealings with Israel in their history in the Exodus and their entrance into the Promised Land, then the food in this verse is most likely the manna that was

⁷⁸ John Goldingay, *Psalms. Volume 3: Psalms 90-150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 304.

⁷⁹ See Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 358. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 818-19.

⁸⁰ Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 304.

given to the Israelites while they were in the wilderness.⁸¹ The word “covenant” appears in verse 5b for the first time, “he remembers his covenant forever”. Covenant here is referring to the covenant in which God had promised Israel that they would enter the land of Canaan, as can be seen from Psalm 105:8-11:⁸²

He is mindful of his covenant forever,
of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,
the covenant that he made with Abraham,
his sworn promise to Isaac,
which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant,
saying, “To you I will give the land of Canaan
as your portion of an inheritance.”

Psalm 111:6 again picks up on the works of God, this time referring to the power of God’s work:

He has declared to his people the power of his works,
giving them the heritage of the nations. (My translation)

In verse 6b, the heritage of the nations given to them is the inheritance of the land of Canaan, and therefore, the power of his works mentioned in verse 6a refers to the power which God showed in enabling them to enter the land.⁸³

God’s work also reveals God’s concern for justice as stated in verse 7:

The works of his hands are faithfulness and justice;
all his precepts are reliable, (My translation)

God rules as a ‘just’ king over the earth (Ps. 99:4) who establishes ‘equity’ (Pss. 98:9; 99:4) “by upholding justice for the oppressed, feeding the hungry, freeing the imprisoned, and taking care

⁸¹ Mays, *Psalms*, 356.

⁸² Cf. Exodus 2:24 and Psalm 106:45.

⁸³ Grogan, *Psalms*, 186.

of the needs of his own (146:7-9; cf. 113:7-9).⁸⁴ The expression “precepts” (פקודים) means “orders” or “instructions”. This word is also used in Psalms 19:8[9] and 119:4. The verse contains in a chiasmic arrangement, an intralinear parallelism in which “the works of his hands” is parallel to “his precepts”. Hence God’s word and work are both reflections of God’s character. God’s “precepts” are reliable because they are for the benefit of God’s people, as stated above, the laws emphasized appropriate treatment of people.

Based on the discussion above about Psalm 111, we can conclude that this psalm shows how God’s righteousness was experienced by Israel in their deliverance from oppression in Egypt. This deliverance is summarized in verse 9:

He sent redemption to his people;
he ordered his covenant forever. (My translation)

Like Psalm 111, Psalm 113:7-9 speaks of God’s demonstration of care, concern and deliverance of the poor and needy, as was discussed in the previous chapter. In that chapter, it was seen that Psalm 113 describes the character of God as both the exalted king who is apart from the world (vv. 4-6) and the compassionate God who is actively involved with God’s people to bring deliverance and liberation for the poor and needy (vv. 7-9).⁸⁵

6.4 Conclusion

The evidence provided in this chapter has shown that God’s ethical character is grounded in God’s חסד, צדקה/צדק (righteousness) and משפט (justice). These ethical attributes of God are not abstract terms, but they are demonstrated in concrete expressions of God’s care and concern for, and deliverance of God’s people, especially the poor, needy and oppressed. God’s ethical

⁸⁴ VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 821.

⁸⁵ See chapter 5 for the full discussion of God’s character in Psalm 113.

attributes are expressed within the context of relationships, and for Israel they were experienced within the context of their covenant relationship with God. However, God's חסד, צדקה/צדק and משפט are not limited by the covenant, but extend beyond the context of the covenant to include all of humanity. This chapter supports, therefore, the thesis that the ethical attitudes and behaviour which human beings ought to demonstrate are inherent to God's own character and actions. This is the reason why we can say that *imitatio Dei* is a principle for ethical character and conduct according to the Psalms.

CHAPTER 7

THE VENGEANCE OF GOD AND IMITATIO DEI

7.1 Introduction

The overall argument of this thesis is that imitation of God is a principle for ethical character and conduct in the Psalms. The evidence provided so far shows, in chapter 5, that there are psalms in which the human ethical response is based on imitation of God, and chapter 6 has shown that inherent to God's character and actions are God's ethical attributes – righteousness, justice and דָּקָה . These attributes are demonstrated in God's care and concern for – and deliverance of – the poor, needy and oppressed. In addition, it was noted in chapter 6 that divine justice is also expressed in retribution of the oppressors.

Retribution is a principle in Israelite theology which is “the conviction that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will suffer, both in proportion to their respective righteousness and wickedness”.¹ J. Walton pointed out that this principle in Israelite theology “is integral to the belief in God's justice. Since God is just, the Israelites held that it was incumbent on him to uphold the retribution principle.”² Walton further noted that the retribution principle in Israelite theology is influenced by the belief in one God, and the absence of “belief in reward and punishment in the afterlife”.³

For some scholars, the retributive aspect of God's character and actions, which is expressed in God's “vengeance” or “wrath”, is seemingly problematic for *imitatio Dei* as a

¹ J. H. Walton, “Retribution,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 647.

² Walton, “Retribution,” 647.

³ Walton, “Retribution,” 650.

principle for ethics. This was pointed out in chapter 2 in the work of some scholars, for example Davies, who opined that *imitatio Dei* is fine when it is confined to God's exemplary characteristics such as mercy, justice and compassion, but it becomes problematic when God's behaviour appears "vindictive, tyrannical and capricious".⁴ Reference was also made to Whybray who stated that there are passages in the Old Testament in which God acts in an apparently immoral way.⁵

This issue of God's vengeance or retributive justice remains a problem for many Christians today. Whenever I have explained to persons the topic for this thesis, I have always been asked the question, "how will you explain the passages that speak of God's wrath, are we to imitate those as well?" This chapter seeks to address this question.

This chapter, therefore, will examine the portrayal and purpose of God's vengeance in the Psalms, by looking at two imprecatory or vengeance psalms, namely Psalms 94 and 109. "Imprecation pertains to cursing or uttering a curse."⁶ Therefore, imprecatory psalms are those in which the psalmists utter curses against their enemies. In these psalms, the psalmists consider that they are suffering innocently, for they are righteous, hence in accordance with the principle of retribution, God should relieve them from their suffering. In the absence of such relief, they feel abandoned by God (e.g. Pss. 13; 22:1[2]; 38:21[22]; 44:24[25]; 94:3), hence they call to God for God's presence and deliverance (e.g. Pss. 38:22[23]; 43:1; 44:26[27]; 59:2[3]; 109:21).

⁴ Davies, "Walking in God's Ways," 113.

⁵ See Whybray, "Immortality of God," 89-120. See also Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*.

⁶ B. A. Strawn, "Imprecation," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 316.

Therefore, in the imprecatory psalms, the curses are specific things, listed by the psalmists, which the wicked should experience in order for “the retribution principle to be maintained”.⁷

As stated in chapter 3, there are 32 psalms which can be classified as imprecatory in some way.⁸ As already noted in that chapter, it is beyond this PhD thesis to deal with all of these psalms, hence two are chosen as examples. Psalm 94 was chosen as it is the only psalm in which the psalmist addresses God as “God of vengeance”, and Psalm 109 was chosen because it is the harshest of the imprecatory psalms. After examining the portrayal and purpose of God’s vengeance as presented in these two psalms, the last part of the chapter will discuss God’s vengeance in relation to *imitatio Dei* as an ethical theme in the Psalms.

7.2 Vengeance in Psalm 94

7.2.1 Form, Structure and Canonical Position of Psalm 94

Psalm 94 is a psalm of lament which contains both a national and an individual lament. The national lament is found in verses 1-7 and the individual lament in verses 16-23. The middle section, verses 8-15, is of a different form, in which there is rebuke to the foolish in verses 8-11, followed by blessing for the wise in verses 12-15. This middle section contains wisdom themes.

Psalm 94 falls within the group of Psalms 93–100, which are often called “Yahweh Kingship” or “Enthronement Psalms”. However, Psalm 94 may seem out of place among these psalms, as it does not explicitly affirm Yahweh as king, and while all the others are hymns of praise, Psalm 94 is a lament. Nonetheless, several commentators have shown that the psalm is intentionally placed here, as it is closely linked especially with its immediate neighbours, Psalms

⁷ Walton, “Retribution,” 651.

⁸ See chapter 3 for the list of these psalms.

93 and 95. VanGemeren referred to it as “a fitting transition between Psalms 93 and 95”.⁹ This is further supported by Frank Hossfeld, who showed that there are many linguistic relationships between Psalm 94 and Psalms 93 and 95.

The root *דכא* is used in 93:3 as “crashing together/tossing” and in 94:5a as “striking down/suppressing”. In the former, it is used in conjunction with the waves of the sea, while in the latter it is used with reference to the people of God. There are also references to the law in terms that are different but related; 93:5 uses *עדות*, “testimonies”, and 94:12 uses *תורה*, “Torah”. There is also the same Hebrew root (*גאה*) which is used to refer to God’s exaltation in 93:1 (*גאות*), and the proud in 94:2 (*גאים*).¹⁰ Hossfeld further pointed out that:

There is an extended royal motif running from Psalm 92 through Psalm 94: YHWH the king gives stability to the earth, so that it is not moved (93:1); the petitioner is anxious about his foot slipping (94:18), and relies on YHWH’s support. The divine throne (93:2) is the opposite of the “thrones of corruption” of human judges (94:20). YHWH, enthroned on high (93:4), holds the same position as the self-exalting judges of the earth (94:2).¹¹

With regards to the relationship between Psalms 94 and 95, Hossfeld pointed out that both the conclusion of Psalm 94 and the beginning of Psalm 95 have overlaps in the expressions used, namely, “rock” as a divine title (94:22; 95:1), and the group expression “we” (94:23; 95:1). He also pointed out the presence of the following in both psalms: *עם*, “people” is used in 94:5, 8, 14 and 95:7, 10; the divine title *אל*, “El/God” in Psalms 94:1 and 95:3; *אלהים*, “Elohim/God” with a suffix occurs in 94:22-23 and 95:7 and also the proper name YHWH is

⁹ VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 710.

¹⁰ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, “Psalm 94,” in *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*, ed. Erich Zenger and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 449.

¹¹ Hossfeld, “Psalm 94,” 449-50.

used in both. There is also the indication of the “earth” or “world” in 94:2 and 95:4, as well as the creative activity of God יצר, “form/create”, which is used in 94:9 and 95:5.¹²

These linkages have also been pointed out by David Howard, who has done a detailed study of the structure of Psalms 93–100 and has shown that Psalm 94 has significant connections with the two psalms that precede it (Psalms 92 and 93) and the one following it (Psalm 95).¹³

It may be said that these linkages are incidental,¹⁴ but, even if that is so, Psalm 94 still fits into the context of being among the Yahweh kingship psalms, since it contains royal themes. Tate explained that Psalm 94 reflects God’s kingship and functions meaningfully in its context because in the opening petitions of verses 1-2 God is addressed “in language that denotes kingship”,¹⁵ which is parallel to language in Psalms 96–99. Tate also noted that it is a king or a king-like person who performs the function of נקמות (vindication or vengeance), which is what Psalm 94 calls upon God to do.¹⁶

Yahweh exercises the divine imperium of the heavenly King and Judge of the Earth (v. 2). The concepts here comport well with the judging function of Yahweh in Psalms 96–99, who will put things in right order and correct the injustice and inequity of human society.¹⁷

Tate stated further that Psalm 94:1-2 contain petitions which are in keeping with a theophany in which God is called to “shine forth”. This language also occurs in Deuteronomy 33:2, in which God comes from Mount Sinai to “shine forth” from Mount Paran and become

¹² Hossfeld, “Psalm 94,” 455-56. See also Tate, *Psalms*, 488-89, for relationship of Ps. 94 with Pss. 92 and 95; McCann Jr., “Book of Psalms,” 1057.

¹³ See David M. Howard Jr., *The Structure of Psalms 93-100*, Biblical and Judaic Studies, vol. 5 (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 105-09; 19-22.

¹⁴ See Tate, *Psalms*, 489.

¹⁵ Tate, *Psalms*, 489.

¹⁶ Tate, *Psalms*, 489. See also Howard Jr., *Structure of Psalms 93-100*, 130.

¹⁷ Tate, *Psalms*, 490.

king in Jeshuran (Deut. 33:5). The language also occurs in Psalm 80:1[2] in which the “one enthroned on the cherubim” is called to shine forth. In light of the evidence outlined, it can be said that while Psalm 94 is not directly a Yahweh-kingship psalm, it is appropriately placed among such psalms.¹⁸

7.2.2 The Nature of God’s Vengeance in Psalm 94

Psalm 94 begins in vv. 1-2 with an appeal to God:

אל־נִקְמוֹת יְהוָה אֵל נִקְמוֹת הוֹפִיעַ:

הַנִּשְׂא שֹׁפֵט הָאָרֶץ הַשֹּׁב גַּמּוּל עַל־גֹּאֲוִים:

O Lord, God of vindication,
 God of vindication, shine forth.
 Rise up, O Judge of the earth;
 give back to the proud what they deserve. (My translation)

There is an interlinear parallelism between verses 1 and 2, thus the “God of vindication”, אל־נִקְמוֹת, in verse 1 is the “Judge of the earth,” שֹׁפֵט הָאָרֶץ in verse 2. The parallelism further means that God is being called to “shine forth” in order to judge the earth. In verse 2, there is an intralinear parallelism which points out that the nature of the judgment is to “give back to the proud what they deserve”. Hence, God’s נִקְמוֹת is here interpreted as “retribution” or “punishment”, which is a part of the establishment of God’s justice. Hence, God’s נִקְמוֹת is not arbitrary or vindictive; rather, it is God’s dealings with the evildoers and oppressors of God’s people.¹⁹

¹⁸ Tate, *Psalms*, 490.

¹⁹ Hossfeld, “Psalm 94,” 453; VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 711.

The word נקמות is the feminine nominal form of the root נקם. This root occurs 79 times in the Old Testament, with God being the subject 85 percent of the times it is used.²⁰ The semantic range of נקם is “avenge”, “take vengeance”, “revenge” and “requit”.²¹ This range of meanings has negative connotations within our modern world. However, my examination of the contexts in which נקם is used in the Old Testament, which is in keeping with H. Peels, has shown that “the concept of ‘vengeance’ has a positive connotation”.²² Let us look briefly at some contexts in which divine “vengeance” occurs.

The root נקם occurs mainly in the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, it occurs only 9 times in the Psalms, namely Psalms 8:2[3]; 18:47[48]; 44:16[17]; 58:10[11]; 79:10; 94:1 (2 times); 99:8 and 149:7. As stated above, “vengeance” is most often spoken of God, for, in the Old Testament, “vengeance” belongs to God, as noted in Deuteronomy 32:35 where God says: “Vengeance is mine”. Human vengeance is prohibited in the Holiness Code in Leviticus 19:18: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.” In this case, vengeance here would be referring to revenge and it is prohibited.

Divine “vengeance” occurs in contexts of punishment, such as for disobedience to the commandments as in Leviticus 26:25 and Jeremiah 5:9, 29. God’s “vengeance” is also disciplinary in order to restore lawfulness, as, for example, in Isaiah 1:24-26 where God’s “vengeance”, which is used here with God’s “wrath”, occurs so that Judah will be disciplined and become again a “city of righteousness”. God’s “vengeance” also serves to end oppression

²⁰ H. G. L. Peels, “נקם,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 154.

²¹ Peels, “נקם,” 154.

²² Peels, “נקם,” 154.

and injustice, as in Isaiah 59:17. In this verse, נקם is parallel to צדקה, showing that divine “vengeance” is a revelation of divine “righteousness”. In the prophets, where divine “vengeance” occurs the most, it is also used against the nations for their attempts at reaching out for world power, as in Isaiah 47:3; Jeremiah 46:10; 50:15 and Ezekiel 24:8. God’s “vengeance” against the enemy occurs in order to bring deliverance to God’s people, as in Isaiah 33:8; 35:4; 59:18; 61:2; 63:4; Jeremiah 51:36 and Nahum 1:2; 1:15[2:1]. Within the Psalms, such as 58:10[11]; 79:10; 94:1, and the confessions of Jeremiah (11:20; 20:12), the psalmists and Jeremiah are facing situations of threat or oppression, and they call to God to punish their oppressors and deliver them.²³

From the above survey of the contexts in which divine נקמות/נקם occurs, we can see that it is not arbitrary vindictiveness or revenge; rather, it is an exercise of God’s justice which seeks to restore “right order” and bring deliverance. For, as indicated in Psalm 58:11[12], there is no justice without “vengeance”, as we will see in the remainder of this chapter. God’s “vengeance” is a demonstration of God’s character, for, as we see in Psalm 99:8, God is both a forgiving God and one who punishes misdeeds as part of the demonstration of God’s justice and holiness.

O Lord our God, you answered them;
 you were a forgiving God to them,
 but an avenger of their wrongdoings. (Psalm 99:8)

While for modern readers “vengeance” seems contradictory to love, with God these are not contradictions. For as previously discussed in chapters 2 and 6, God’s self-revelation in Exodus 34:6-7 shows that God is merciful, gracious and forgiving, but also punishes those who do wrong.

²³ See also Peels, “נקם,” 155 for discussion of the uses of divine “vengeance”.

The concept of divine “vengeance” goes together with the metaphor of God as King, for, as stated above, it was a king’s role to exercise “vengeance”. Therefore, as ruler and king, it is God’s “right and responsibility to restore the order of things and to vindicate his authority”.²⁴ This is part of God’s function as the world judge or judge of the nations, a concept that was part of the cultic tradition in Jerusalem,²⁵ and is reflected in other psalms, such as Psalms 7:8[9]; 9:7[8], 16[17]; 58:11[12]; 76:8-9[9-10]; 82:8; 96:10. Hence, when the psalmist in Psalm 94 appeals to the “God of נקמות”, it is an appeal for God “to vindicate his reign by intervening in the human situation”²⁶ of oppression and set things right by dealing with the oppressors (see also Pss. 50:1-4; 80:1-3[2-4]). Therefore it is a call for vindication and not vindictiveness.

The psalm continues in verses 3-7 by describing the present situation of distress that has led to the psalmist’s plea to God:

How long will the wicked, O Lord,
 how long will the wicked exult?
 They pour out, they speak arrogantly;
 all evildoers are boasting.
 They crush your people, O Lord;
 they oppress your heritage.
 They kill the widow and the stranger;
 and they murder the orphans.
 And they say, “The Lord does not see;
 and the God of Jacob does not perceive.” (My translation)

These verses speak of the “wicked,” רשעים and the “evildoers,” און פעלי און who are the same persons referred to in verse 2 as the “proud”. The verses also give the reasons for the psalmist’s plea for God’s vengeance and judgment. VanGemerem described these verses as demonstrating a

²⁴ Mays, *Psalms*, 303.

²⁵ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 240.

²⁶ Mays, *Psalms*, 303.

stairlike parallelism in which the psalmist develops the evil of the wicked.²⁷ A staircase parallelism means that there is a gradual progression of thought with each line. The wicked are exulting at their success in oppressing God's people, which they express in boasting and in the arrogance of their words. These arrogant words are described in verse 7 in which they are denying God's presence and God's activity. Their arrogant words are accompanied by their evil deeds of oppression of God's people. They behave with such arrogance either because they think that there is no God, or they think that God cannot do anything to them.

The verb used in verse 5 for "crush", the piel of כָּרַס , is used in the context of social oppression in other texts (cf. Isa. 3:15; Prov. 22:22).²⁸ Thus "crush your people" indicates that they were being socially oppressed. The use of "your people" and "your heritage" in verse 5 gives the impression that it is the entire nation of Israel (God's people) that is being oppressed. However, in the light of the interlinear parallelism between verses 5 and 6, the latter verse identifies that "your people" and "your heritage" refer to a specific type of people within Israel, "the widows, strangers/resident aliens, and the orphans". These were, socially, the most vulnerable of the people and hence God was seen as especially concerned about them (see e.g. Exod. 22:20-23; Deut. 24:17; 26:12; 27:19; Ps. 146:9; Isa. 1:17; Jer. 7:6; 22:3; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5). The words used in verse 6 to describe what was done to these three groups of people, "kill" and "murder," are a demonstration of the severity of the oppression that they were experiencing.

The question of the identity of the "evildoers" in verses 3-7 has been raised. Verse 5, which points to the oppression of God's people, leads one to believe that it was the nation of Israel that was being oppressed by a foreign nation. For example, Eaton opined that the psalmist

²⁷ VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 712.

²⁸ Hossfeld, "Psalm 94," 453.

is the king intervening on behalf of the nation.²⁹ Hossfeld opined that the identity of the oppressors is uncertain. He noted that the use of the traditional root, סדק , for “crush” and the words “wicked” and “evildoers”, which are used to describe the oppressors, seem to refer to an upper-class in Israel. However, he further noted that such identity of the oppressors is not in keeping with the concept of the people used in verse 5, which would seem to refer to all Israel. Later, in his discussion of verse 7, Hossfeld observed that “the oppression of the threefold group of the poor seems to point to a group within Israel, while in contrast the designation ‘God of Jacob’ in the quotation suggests an external perspective”.³⁰

Hossfeld is right in his observation that the language of the psalm gives the impression that the oppressors can be either internal or external to Israel. However, I support the view that the “evildoers” were from among those who were in power in Israel. The issue is about how the powerful in Israel treat the powerless.³¹ For, even though it could be addressing foreigners’ oppression of Israel, the laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy about the treatment of widows, aliens and orphans were given to the people of Israel describing how they should treat such persons who are among them. It was also the expectation that the king would care for such vulnerable groups among the people, as previously mentioned in chapter 5 in the discussion of Psalm 72 (cf., Ps. 72:4). Hence, it would seem more likely that the oppressors were the powerful and influential in Israel, who would have been in a position to care for the widows, aliens and orphans but chose to do the opposite.

²⁹ Eaton, *Kingship*, 60.

³⁰ Hossfeld, “Psalm 94,” 453-54.

³¹ Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 78; See also Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 240.

As the psalm continues, the psalmist addresses the accusation made against God in verse 7 showing that, contrary to the belief of the oppressors, God does intervene and act on behalf of God's people. In verses 8-11, the psalmist says:

Understand, you stupid among the people;
 and fools, when will you gain insight?
 He who planted the ear, will he not hear?
 he who formed the eye, will he not see?
 He who disciplines the nations, will he not reprove?
 he who teaches humankind, has he no knowledge?
 The Lord knows the thoughts of humankind;
 that they are a breath. (My translation)

We can see from verse 8 that the “stupid” and the “fools” are a group among the larger whole of the people. Hence, it is possible that the psalmist is here addressing either the “evildoers” or another group of persons within Israel who believed what the “evildoers” were saying about God in verse 7. Goldingay suggested that it was another group within Israel that was being addressed:

The brutish and stupid are addressed as “you,” suggesting they are not identified with the important people (though they were also brutish and stupid), who were spoken of as “they” and continue to be so termed throughout the psalm. Rather they are ordinary people in the community, tempted to stupid ways of thinking in light of the actions of their important people and the way they get away with things.³²

Tate also noted that there is the possibility that the “fools” and “stupid” could be members of the psalmist's “community who have failed to perceive the true nature of the evildoers' actions, perhaps because of envy of their short-term success or because of intimidation and the violent oppression of the people by the evildoers”.³³ Tate pointed out, however, that because of the strong language used to describe this group of persons, it is most

³² Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 79.

³³ Tate, *Psalms*, 492.

likely the “evildoers” who are the “fools” and “stupid”. It is possible that there may have been people in the community who may have believed that God was not seeing or paying attention to the oppression that they were experiencing, for this is often a reaction in the midst of suffering. Also, in support of the “fools” and “stupid” as a group within the community is Rolf Jacobson’s analysis of the function of quotations in the Psalms. Jacobson applied the studies of modern linguists to the use of quotations in the psalms, and identified that one of the rhetorical functions of enemy quotations against God is that they act as personal lament. For, he pointed out that, in keeping with modern linguists, “when a reporter quotes another speaker in direct discourse, she speaks from the perspective of that other speaker”.³⁴ If this is so, then the psalmist in verse 7 would not only be representing the words of the “evildoers”, but also of persons in the community who felt that same way, thus supporting that the “fools” and “stupid” were in the community.

The psalmist then develops the argument by acknowledging that God is the creator (v. 9), and, as creator, God knows the thoughts and the actions of humankind (verses 10-11). Therefore, God sees and knows everything that takes place, and intervenes and acts on behalf of the powerless. This was previously discussed in the last two chapters in relation to Psalms 33 and 113, both of which speak of God as seeing everything and intervening on behalf of the oppressed.³⁵ God intervenes by judging the nations that oppress Israel, and so the psalmist says that the God, who judges the nations, will also punish God’s own people if they are oppressing the powerless among them (verse 10). Since God’s judgment is based on God’s knowledge of the actions of the powerful, then the judgment is not revenge or vindictiveness, but rather it is

³⁴ Rolf A. Jacobson, *‘Many are Saying’: The Function of Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Psalter*, JSOT Supplement Series, vol. 397 (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 52.

³⁵ See chapters 5 and 6.

retribution.³⁶ As stated above, retribution refers to prosperity for the righteous and suffering or punishment for the wicked.

Having rebuked the “fools”, the psalmist turns in verses 12-15 to encourage those who are disciplined and instructed by the law of the Lord, using the language of wisdom. Verse 12 is a beatitude which is reminiscent of Psalm 1, giving the same understanding that the one who follows the law and instruction of God is blessed:

Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O Lord,
and whom you teach from your law,

Verse 13 shows the nature of the blessing:

to provide peace for him from days of evil,
until a pit is dug for the wicked.

This verse shows that the blessing for the one who follows divine instruction is that he will be given peace in times of trouble. It also gives hope that divine retribution will take place and the “evildoers”, who are presently oppressing God’s people, will ultimately be destroyed. Hence, as they are oppressing God’s people, they are in effect digging their own pit into which they will eventually fall, meaning that they will experience the consequences of their actions (cf. Pss. 7: 15[16]; 57:6[7]). This “act-consequence process” has been empowered by God and will be maintained by God,³⁷ and it is seen again in verse 23 to which we will return below. Ultimately, therefore, the punishment which God is asked to bring on the proud in verse 2b will take effect.

Verse 14 assures the community of God’s continual presence with them:

For the Lord will not forsake his people,
and he will not abandon his heritage.

³⁶ Grogan, *Psalms*, 163-64.

³⁷ Tate, *Psalms*, 494.

It is because of God's continual presence that those who follow God's instruction will be blessed. Verse 15 emphasises further that God's justice will be enacted. This verse has been the source of two interpretations. In the Masoretic text is written:

כי־עֲדָ צְדָקָה יָשׁוּב מִשִּׁפְטֵי וְאַחֲרָיו כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵלִים:

For justice will return to righteousness,
and after it, all the upright in heart.

However, there are two manuscripts, Symmachus and the Syriac, which use צְדִיק instead of צְדָקָה,³⁸ hence the first colon will read; "For justice will return to the righteous". This translation has been followed by the NRSV, the RSV and some commentators.³⁹ On the other hand, the NIV follows the Masoretic text and translates the verse as;

Judgment will again be founded on righteousness,
and all the upright in heart will follow it.

The two translations do not make a difference to the meaning for the purposes of this study, for in either case justice will be restored when God intervenes. In the translation following Symmachus and the Syriac, the righteous could be interpreted in a collective sense instead of as one righteous person.⁴⁰ The translation following the Masoretic text refers to the restoration of the system of justice. Since the psalm is speaking about the oppression of a group of persons, it is more likely that verse 15 is referring to a restoration of the system of justice so that all the oppressed will benefit. As discussed in the previous chapter, God's righteousness and justice brings liberation and not oppression. Hence, when God's justice is restored, God's people will no longer be oppressed.

³⁸ K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1990), 1176.

³⁹ See Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 238; Tate, *Psalms*, 482; Kissane, *Psalms, volume 2*, 117; Anderson, *Psalms, vol. 2*, 672; Weiser, *The Psalms*, 622.

⁴⁰ See Tate, *Psalms*, 484-85, notes on verse 15a.

The promises of God in these verses for blessing (v. 12), God's continual presence (v. 14), peace in times of trouble and deliverance (vv. 13, 15) give the psalmist the assurance that God will intervene and bring retribution against the oppressors. These promises are a motivational factor for God's people to strive to follow and reflect God's righteousness and justice. We will expand this point about motivation in the next chapter, which will show that the confidence of God's presence and ultimate deliverance from oppression enables the righteous to persevere in their righteousness even in the midst of hardship.

The final section of the psalm, verses 16-23, consists of an individual lament which ends in verse 23 with words of trust and confidence that God is going to act to destroy the wicked. In verses 16-21, the psalmist describes a personal experience of deliverance from distress by God:

Who will rise up for me against the wicked?
 Who will take a stand for me against evildoers?
 If the Lord had not been my help,
 my soul would have almost dwelt in silence.
 When I said, "My foot has slipped,"
 your kindness (רַחֵם), O Lord, supported me.
 When a multitude of disquieting thoughts are within me,
 your consolations delight my soul.
 Will a throne of destruction be allied with you –
 one who forms trouble by statute?
 They band together against the righteous person
 and they condemn innocent blood. (My translation)

The rhetorical questions which the psalmist asks in verse 16 suggest that, at some point in the past, the psalmist experienced personal distress. There is no description of the nature of the distress, but the psalm continues in verse 17 by stating that God was able to help and deliver. It seems that the distress was so great that the psalmist was facing death, as seen from verses 17b and 18a. The metaphor in verse 18a of a slipping foot is explored well by Goldingay who

noted that it “presupposes the picture of someone walking a narrow mountain path and being pushed off to their death with the further implication of tumbling into the grave/Sheol”.⁴¹

The psalmist’s personal distress is not simply in the past, but it is continuing presently, as seen in verses 20-21. This present distress is the communal situation of oppression and distress described in verses 5-7. It would seem, therefore, from verses 20-21, that the oppression against God’s people that the psalmist is complaining of is corruption in the courts of justice. Hossfeld suggested that “the ‘throne of corruption’ is probably, according to Psalm 122:5, a throne of judgment that makes the crucial decisions. Here they are false judgments that compel YHWH to react”.⁴² The justice system should be a reflection of God’s righteousness and justice (צדקה ומשפט), but, instead, it is so corrupt that the righteous, who are innocent, are condemned (verse 21).

The psalm ends with verses 22 and 23:

But the Lord has become to me a stronghold,
and my God, the rock of my refuge.
He will bring back their wickedness on them,
and will annihilate them through their evil;
the Lord our God will annihilate them. (My translation)

Verse 22 is an expression of the psalmist’s experience of deliverance, which has already taken place. In verse 23 we see the expression of confidence that the request for recompense in verse 2 will be fulfilled, and God will punish the “evildoers”. The verb translated here as “bring back” is the *hiphil* of שׁוּב, and the sense here is, as already mentioned above, that the wicked actions of the “evildoers” will be returned to them, and so they will be destroyed as a result of their own evil actions.

⁴¹ Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 83.

⁴² Hossfeld, “Psalm 94,” 455.

The verb שׁוּב in the Masoretic text suggests the past tense, since it is the waw consecutive imperfect or *wayyqtl*, and thus suggests that the retribution has already been completed. On the other hand there are many commentators who translate it in the future, in keeping with its rendition in the Septuagint.⁴³ Bruce Waltke and M. O'Connor showed that the *wayyqtl* form "signifies other notions than that of a preterite. In addition to occurring after the suffix conjugation, *wayyqtl* also occurs with the prefix conjugation, particles, nominal clauses, and infinitives; in all of these connections it may refer to either present or future time as well as past."⁴⁴ Since the other verb which is used twice in this verse, צָמַח, is in the prefix conjugation, and in the context of the sentence, שׁוּב can be translated in past, present or future. However, as stated above, verse 23 is the psalmist's expression of confidence, which is based on the psalmist's past experience of God's deliverance. Therefore, it is more likely that the psalmist is still waiting for God's deliverance.

Goldingay argued for a translation in the present tense by stating that the Hebrew tense is the same as in verse 22, "implying that if Yhwh's being a shelter is a present reality, Yhwh's bringing about proper moral order is also not postponed into the future. Yhwh is active in the world now."⁴⁵ While I agree with Goldingay that God is active in the world now, and not simply in the future, since the imperfect tense (prefix conjugation) can be translated as both present and future, I would say that God is active in the present and is bringing about justice for the poor and

⁴³ See BHS on Ps. 94; see also Albert Pietersma, *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title: The Psalms* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 546. See pages 547-563 for examples of the different uses of the *wayyqtl*.

⁴⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 85.

oppressed, but God's action is not complete. "In the petitioner's experience the punishment has already begun, but has not yet resulted in complete retaliation for the actions of the wicked."⁴⁶

In summary, from the arguments put forward above, when the psalmist petitions for God's *בְּקִמּוֹת*, it is not a request for revenge or vindictiveness, but for vindication. It is a call for God's judgement of the "wicked" and "evildoers" for their deeds of evil against God's people, especially the most vulnerable. God's judgment is an expression of God's righteousness and justice, in which God sees to it that the actions of the wicked result in the appropriate consequences. Therefore, the wicked who oppress and cause God's people to suffer will themselves suffer. God allows the effects of their own evil to be diverted back to them "as it rebounds on them".⁴⁷ In God's system of justice, the vindication of the oppressed also requires that the oppressors be condemned (cf. Ps. 72:4). In order to take the plight of the oppressed and defenceless seriously, the oppressors' sin must also be taken seriously. This is important for the healthy functioning of societies. For, when the oppressors are left unpunished, the oppressed may take matters into their own hands and retaliate in revenge. In addition, if the oppressed are liberated, but the oppressors are not held accountable, then oppression can continue. One group of persons may be liberated from oppression, but the oppressors may oppress another group.

7.3 Vengeance in Psalm 109

7.3.1 Form and Structure of Psalm 109

Psalm 109 is considered "the fiercest of the imprecatory psalms".⁴⁸ It is an individual lament which is divided into four main sections: verses 1-5 consisting of an appeal to God for

⁴⁶ Hossfeld, "Psalm 94," 455.

⁴⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 85.

⁴⁸ Grogan, *Psalms*, 182.

deliverance from false accusation and a lamentation; verses 6-20, which contain an extensive imprecation; verses 21-29, which return to the petition for God's deliverance and complaint as in the first section, and verses 30-31, which conclude the psalm with a vow to praise God.⁴⁹

There have been two views among commentators about the voices present in this psalm. On the one hand, the majority view interprets the entire psalm as being a prayer from the psalmist to God. On the other hand, there are those who are of the opinion that the curses in verses 6-19 are not from the psalmist, but are a quotation of the words of the accusers against the psalmist. The arguments put forward for the former view are: 1) there is nothing to suggest that verse 6 begins a quotation.⁵⁰ The NRSV inserts "They say" at the beginning of verse 6, but those words are absent from the Masoretic text; 2) there is a similarity between verses 16 and 22,⁵¹ in that both speak about the poor and needy (עני ואביון). In verse 16, the accuser did not show kindness to the "poor and needy" and in verse 22, the psalmist is referred to as "poor and needy"; 3) in verse 20, the psalmist asks for the curses to be the reward from the Lord to his enemies.

The arguments put forward for the view that the curses were the words of the enemies are: 1) in verses 2-5 and 20-29, the enemies are spoken of in the plural, while in verses 6-19, the person being cursed is in the singular.⁵² 2) The presence of ואתה at the beginning of verse 21 indicates that a change is about to take place, which Kraus explained as the psalmist now turning to God after revealing the curses of his enemies.⁵³ 3) Verse 28 refers to the cursing of the enemies, יקללו־המה, and God is asked to counteract the enemies' cursing with blessing. 4) In

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Psalms*, vol. 2, 758. See also Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 339-41.

⁵⁰ David G. Firth, *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms: Responses to Violence in the Individual Complaints* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005), 38.

⁵¹ Anderson, *Psalms*, vol. 2, 758; Grogan, *Psalms*, 183.

⁵² Broyles, *Psalms*, 412; Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 60. See also Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 338.

⁵³ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 338; Broyles, *Psalms*, 413. See also Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 60.

verse 29, the petitioner definitely expressed an imprecation against the enemies, praying that those who were responsible for cursing him be put to shame. The imprecations in verses 28-29 are milder in comparison to the imprecations in verses 6-19.⁵⁴ 5) The enemies put an “accuser” next to the one who is being persecuted (v. 6) in order to declare him guilty and judge him (vv. 7, 31), while on the other hand, the psalmist closes with the opposite, being completely assured that God stands at the right hand of the poor (verse 31a).⁵⁵ 6) Another argument put forward by Goldingay in support of the curses being a quotation of the enemies’ words is that God is addressed in verses 1-5 and 21-29, but, in verses 6-19 there is no mention of God except in verses 14-15, where it is used conventionally. He further added that there is a different orientation in verses 6-19 over against verses 1-5 and 20-31.

Both focus on real life, but vv. 1-5 and 20-31 bring God steadfastly into relationship to that life, whereas vv. 6-19 do so more nominally. The many references to the accusers’ words in vv. 2-5 make it feasible enough to infer that it is these words that now follow; there are other psalms where someone’s words are quoted without a formula to make that explicit (e.g., 2:3; 22:8[9]; 50:7).⁵⁶

The identification of quotations in the psalms has been studied extensively by Jacobson who has shown that direct discourse in the psalms is not always marked. He identified the following examples of direct discourse: Psalms 2:3; 10:4; 46:10[11]; 50:7-15; 59:7[8]; 77:7[8]; 87:7; 89:3-4[4-5]; 91:14; 105:15 and 132:14-18.⁵⁷ Jacobson does not support Psalm 109:6-19 as an unmarked quotation because of his view that quotations in the psalms are usually short, hence it would be unprecedented to have a quotation as long as Psalm 109:6-19.⁵⁸ However, some of the indicators of unmarked quotations that have been identified by Jacobson are present in

⁵⁴ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 338; Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 59-60. See also Broyles, *Psalms*, 412.

⁵⁵ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 338;.

⁵⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 279. See also Broyles, *Psalms*, 412.

⁵⁷ Jacobson, ‘*Many are Saying*’, 21.

⁵⁸ Jacobson, ‘*Many are Saying*’, 27, n. 2, see also 24 for discussion on length of quotations.

Psalm 109. He pointed out that unmarked quotations in the psalms are identified by internal indicators, which are of two types: “deictic indicators and syntactic indicators. Deixis refers to the change in personal, temporal, spatial, or hierarchical perspective that is reflected when a different speaker is speaking.”⁵⁹ Jacobson noted further that personal pronouns are the primary deictic indicators of direct discourse. In Psalm 109, there is a shift of personal pronoun from “they” in verses 2-5 to “he/his” in verses 6-19.

In addition to the deictic indicators, there are the syntactic indicators which “consist of a change in the syntax of a psalm that necessitates that direct discourse be understood. These syntactic changes include a verbal shift to the jussive (for example, Ps. 2:3) or to the imperative (Ps. 105:15).”⁶⁰ This is present in Psalm 109, for while in verses 2-5 the verbs are either in the perfect or imperfect tense, verse 6 shifts to the jussive which continues to verse 19. These observations of the deictic and syntactic indicators add to the arguments given above in favour of the quotation hypothesis for Psalm 109:6-19. It is not sufficient to rule out these verses as a quotation simply because the quotation would be too long. There are always exceptions to every rule.

On my first reading of this psalm, I interpreted the verses 6-19 as the psalmist curse against his enemies. However, on reading Jacobson’s work I was more convinced that the verses were the quotation of the enemies’ curse. Therefore, in light of all the evidences given, I am interpreting verses 6-19 as the psalmist’s quotation of the enemies’ curse. We turn now to look at the ethical implications of this psalm.

⁵⁹ Jacobson, *Many are Saying*, 21.

⁶⁰ Jacobson, *Many are Saying*, 21-22.

7.3.2 The Nature of Vengeance in Psalm 109

The psalm begins in verse 1 with a plea to God for intervention, followed by a lament by the psalmist in verses 2-5 highlighting that his enemies are attacking him without cause:

To the director. A psalm of David.
 Do not be silent, O God of my praise,
 for the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful
 have opened against me;
 they have spoken against me with a tongue of deception.
 They have surrounded me with words of hatred;
 and they fight me without cause.
 In return for my love they accuse me,
 but I am a man of prayer.
 They repay me with evil for good,
 and hatred for my love. (My translation)

From the language used in verses 2-3, we can see that the psalmist is suffering because of false accusation, though the nature of the accusation is not specified. Verses 4 and 5 expand further that the psalmist had extended kindness and friendship towards his accusers, in the past, and instead of them being kind towards him, they have hated and verbally attacked him.

The psalmist then continues by quoting the curses which the enemies have made against him:

Appoint an evil man against him,
 and let an accuser stand at his right hand.
 When he is tried, let him come out guilty,
 and let his prayer be counted as sin.
 May his days be few;
 may another take his stored goods.
 May his children be fatherless
 and his wife a widow.
 May his children wander about and beg,
 and may they be driven from their ruined homes.
 May a creditor seize all that belongs to him,
 and may strangers plunder the produce of his labour.
 May no one extend kindness (רַחֵם) to him
 or be gracious to his fatherless children.

May his descendants be cut off;
 may their name be wiped out in the next generation.
 May the sin of his fathers be remembered before the Lord,
 and may the sin of his mother not be wiped out.
 May they be continually before the Lord,
 and may he cut off their remembrance from the earth.
 Because he did not remember to show kindness (חסד),
 but pursued the poor and needy and broken hearted to death.
 He loved to curse, so may it come to him;
 and he did not take pleasure in blessing, so may it be far from him.
 He put on a curse as his garment;
 and may it enter into his body like water
 and into his bones like oil.
 May it be for him like a garment with which he wraps himself,
 and like a girdle with which he continually girds himself. (My translation)

The curses in verses 6-15 and 19 are the words spoken by the “mouth of the wicked” and the “words of hatred” spoken of in verses 2-3.⁶¹ Verses 6-7 show that the enemies want the accused to be tried and to be found guilty of the false accusations. The enemies then wish a number of curses against the psalmist and his family in verses 8-11. In verse 8, the enemies wish that the psalmist would die and his פקדו, which has the connotation of “appointment”, “office”, “what has been stored up”, would be taken away. In this case it most likely connotes “stored goods”. The psalmist’s death will then result in his wife being a widow and his children being fatherless.

Widows and orphans usually did not have any position in society and also they lacked economic security.⁶² Therefore, if the psalmist dies, his wife and children will become vulnerable. Verse 10 emphasises the children’s vulnerability, for this verse speaks of the psalmist’s children begging, having been driven from their home, which has been destroyed.⁶³

⁶¹ See Broyles, *Psalms*, 413.

⁶² See David L. Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands? Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 189-95 for discussion on widows and orphans.

⁶³ See Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 281.

Verse 11 expands on verse 8, in that the accusers want the psalmist to lose all that belongs to him.

Verses 12-13 continue the enemies' curses against the psalmist and his family, in which they want the psalmist's family to be totally destroyed. In verses 14-15 the curse asks that sins of the psalmist's ancestors never be forgiven. Verses 16-19 give the alleged reasons why the enemies are pronouncing these curses on the psalmist. These verses (vv. 16-19) highlight the false accusations that they have expressed against the psalmist, "the tongue of deception".⁶⁴ In these verses, the enemies are wishing that the psalmist will suffer the effects of his own alleged habits and deeds.

In verse 16, they accuse the psalmist of failing to show *חסד* and instead pursuing to death the "poor and needy". Hence, in verse 12 they wished that no one should extend *חסד* to the psalmist. In verses 17-19, they accuse the psalmist of having a habit of cursing and hence they want the psalmist to suffer the effects of his habit of cursing.⁶⁵

We can see that the enemies have made severe accusations and attacks against the psalmist. After recalling these severe accusations and attacks before God, the psalmist speaks the words of verse 20:

May this be the reward of my adversaries from the Lord,
and those who speak evil against my life.

This verse begins with the demonstrative adjective *זאת*, which in this case refers to what precedes.⁶⁶ Hence, *זאת* refers to the preceding quotation in verses 6-19. Therefore, when the psalmist says "may this be the reward of my adversaries from the Lord", he is wishing for God

⁶⁴ See Broyles, *Psalms*, 413.

⁶⁵ See Allen, *Psalms*, 77.

⁶⁶ See Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 309, 311 for uses of the demonstratives.

to repay his enemies, so that they will experience the same curses that they have wished on him. Therefore, the psalmist is now turning the enemies' wishes into his own.⁶⁷

To modern minds, this may appear to be vindictive and vengeful. However, when the psalmist asks for the enemies to experience what they have wished for him, it is be in keeping with the *lex talionis*.⁶⁸ The *lex talionis* is the law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, which is stated in the Torah in Exodus 21:22-25; Leviticus 24:17-22 and Deuteronomy 19:16-21. The purpose of the *lex talionis* was to ensure that the punishment fits the crime. Hence, David Baker, in his detailed study of the Old Testament laws, pointed out that the *lex talionis* is a guarantee of justice.⁶⁹ Therefore, the psalmist is not seeking revenge, but is calling upon God to exercise justice and punish the enemies for their accusations and attacks against him.

Even though the psalmist wants his enemies to be punished, he does not dwell on the wish for their punishment; rather, the psalmist changes his mood and appeals to God for deliverance. As noted by Zenger, he “appeals to the God of mercy and blessing to save – to save the one against whom these enemies are fighting without cause, and who has practiced the love demanded by Leviticus 19 (cf. the echoes of Lev. 19:17-18 in v. 5)”.⁷⁰ The psalmist's plea for deliverance appears in verses 21-29:

But you, O Lord my Lord,
 act on my behalf for your name's sake;
 because your kindness (רַחֲמֶיךָ) is good, deliver me.
 For I am poor and needy,
 and my heart is pierced within me.
 I am gone like a shadow when it stretches out;
 I am shaken off like the locust.

⁶⁷ See Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 285; McCann Jr., “Book of Psalms,” 1125.

⁶⁸ See John N. Day, *Crying for Justice: what the psalms teach us about mercy and vengeance in an age of terrorism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 2005), 78; McCann Jr., *Theological Introduction*, 113; McCann Jr., “Book of Psalms,” 1126; Brueggemann, *The Psalms*, 276.

⁶⁹ See Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands?*, 207; Day, *Crying for Justice*, 67-68.

⁷⁰ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 60-61.

My knees totter from fasting;
 and my flesh has become lean from lack of fat.
 I have become an object of scorn to them;
 when they see me, they shake their heads.
 Help me, O Lord my God;
 save me according to your kindness (רַחֵם).
 Let them know that this is your hand,
 that you, O Lord, have done it.
 They may curse, but you will bless;
 let them rise up and be ashamed, but your servant will rejoice.
 May my adversaries be clothed with disgrace,
 and be wrapped in their shame as a robe. (My translation)

Verse 21 begins with וְאַתָּה, “But you”, thus signalling a change of mood in the psalm. As was mentioned above, this change of mood in verse 21 supports the hypothesis that verses 6-19 are the enemies’ curses. This emphatic “But you” is an indication that the psalmist is calling upon God to intervene against the deadly curses to bring deliverance. The emphatic “you” signals that God’s character is in contrast with that of the accusers and of the curses in verses 6-19.⁷¹

The appeal for God’s intervention is made by appealing to God’s רַחֵם, God’s kindness, in verses 21 and 26; to the maintenance of God’s reputation, “for your name’s sake (v. 21); and also the psalmist appeals for God’s intervention because of his state of distress which he describes in verses 22-25.⁷² Mays observed that this psalm is based on the theology of God as someone who shows רַחֵם to God’s servant (v. 26) in times of need (v. 31).⁷³ Brueggemann argued that רַחֵם is the crucial factor in this psalm. He highlighted the fact that this word is used four times in the psalm (vv. 12, 16, 21, 26) and “that the main flow of the argument of the poem

⁷¹ See McCann Jr., “Book of Psalms,” 1126.

⁷² Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 82.

⁷³ Mays, *Psalms*, 349.

can be traced through the uses of this word”.⁷⁴ Brueggemann, interpreting verses 6-19 as the psalmist’s curses against the enemies, argued that the key indictment of the psalm is that someone who had the capacity to show חסד did not do it; hence, in verse 12 the sentence wished for is that such a person should also live without חסד . Having spoken of the lack of חסד on the human side, the psalmist moves to appealing for God (vv. 21, 26) to intervene and “make available the *hesed* that has not been found in the economic realities of the day, where one might best expect them”.⁷⁵

Brueggemann’s argument is still applicable to the psalm even with the interpretation of the curses in verses 6-19 being that of the enemies. The enemies are failing to demonstrate חסד towards the psalmist, for in their accusations and attacks they are exhibiting cruelty and hatred against the psalmist, which is what the psalmist says in verses 4 and 5. Therefore, the psalmist who is poor and needy (v. 22), instead of being cared for, is being attacked. This thought is summarized by Goldingay: “Ironically, they accuse him of doing what they themselves are doing in pursuing to death one who is weak, needy, and therefore crushed in spirit, who feels a heavy burden pressing down on his inner being and weighing him down.”⁷⁶

That it is God who will act to deliver the oppressed is made clear in verse 27 with the emphatic “you” as in verse 21. The emphasis of this verse is also that God will act in deliverance by reversing the crimes of the oppressors, for God’s power to bless will make the curses of the oppressors ineffective (v. 28).⁷⁷ God’s deliverance of the psalmist will result in the enemies being ashamed (cf. Ps. 35:26).

⁷⁴ Brueggemann, *The Psalms*, 275.

⁷⁵ Brueggemann, *The Psalms*, 277.

⁷⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 283.

⁷⁷ See Allen, *Psalms*, 77.

The psalm concludes with verses 30-31:

I will greatly confess the Lord with my mouth;
and in the midst of many I will praise him.
For he stands at the right hand of the needy,
to save his life from those who condemn him. (My translation)

Verse 30 is a vow to praise God, which the psalmist makes in confidence that God will act in his favour and deliver him. The psalmist is confident because of the assurance expressed in verse 31 that God is always on the side of the needy. It is such confidence that leads the psalmist to cry out to God for deliverance from oppression.

In summary, Psalm 109 is a psalm of a severely oppressed person submitting his anger and anguish to God, crying out for God's justice, righteousness and דָּסָה to be demonstrated so that the oppressed can be delivered and God's judgment can be brought against the oppressors. For, as mentioned above in the discussion of Psalm 94, as part of God's care for the oppressed, the oppressors need to be condemned. However, this psalm shows that even though retribution is an important principle in the Old Testament, it is less central to God's character than God's דָּסָה . For it is only in verses 20, 28 and 29 that the psalmist asks for the oppressors to be punished, while in the remaining verses the psalmist asks for God's דָּסָה , which is first and foremost love, care and deliverance.

In both Psalms 94 and 109, we see that the psalmists do not really want revenge on their enemies; rather, they want deliverance from oppression and injustice. As argued above, in God's system of justice, liberation of the oppressed also requires that the oppressors be confronted and condemned. Therefore, the psalmists call for God's vengeance against their enemies. As mentioned above, the principle of God's retribution appears to be problematic for *imitatio Dei* as an ethical principle. We turn now examine whether this is so.

7.4 Vengeance of God and Imitatio Dei

As seen in Deuteronomy 32:35, the psalmists appeal to God for vengeance because of their faith in God's affirmation that vengeance belongs to God. It has not been easy for Christians to accept this concept of God's vengeance. Texts such as the two psalms discussed above and other psalms and Old Testament texts, which speak of God's vengeance, violence or wrath, have led many to regard the Old Testament as contradictory to the Christian message of love and forgiveness. As previously mentioned in chapter 3, this was Marcion's belief, which led to his rejection of the Old Testament. There are many contemporary Christians who still see the Old Testament in this light.

However, as Zenger pointed out, and as we have seen in the two psalms used as examples of vengeance psalms, when the psalmists appeal to God for vengeance, their appeal is "to a God who, as the God of justice, considers, decides, and punishes, this last not out of a pleasure in punishment, but in order to restore and defend the damaged order of law".⁷⁸ McCann explained these pleas for vengeance by stating the following:

. . . the psalmists' pleas need not be heard as requests for personal revenge, but rather as prayers for justice and righteousness in the fullest sense of these terms – the creation of or restoration of conditions that make life possible for all, including, and indeed especially, the poor, weak, needy, and oppressed.⁷⁹

Hence, we can see that God's "vengeance", in this interpretation, is an essential aspect of God's character; it is the other side of God's compassion, which deals with the redress of

⁷⁸ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 71.

⁷⁹ J. Clinton McCann Jr., "Toward a Nonretaliatory Lifestyle: The Psalms, the Cross, and the Gospel," in *Character Ethics and the New Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley, (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 163.

wrong.⁸⁰ Brueggemann pointed out that in the Old Testament “there is no neat development from a vengeful to a loving God. Rather, there are various sketches and disclosures in different circumstances”.⁸¹ God is both “God of vengeance” and also the God who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love [חסד]” (see e.g. Exod. 34:6; Ps. 103:8; Ps. 145:8-9). Hence, God both saves and liberates those who keep God’s will, and judges those who violate God’s purposes (see e.g. Exod. 34:6-7; Pss. 58:10[11]; 149:7). The violation of God’s purposes do not relate simply to personal sin but to structural injustices. Therefore, when God’s people are oppressed, the oppressors will be judged.

Since God’s vengeance is an expression of God’s love and the other side of God’s compassion, it means that for God, vengeance is usually not the last word; there is always the possibility that vengeance will not be enacted. God can abandon the deserved punishment even after it is announced. God’s vengeance can be reversed as a result of repentance, as in the book of Jonah (cf., Joel 2:13), or intercession, as in Exodus 32:9-14, or by God’s own decision as in Exodus 4:14 and Hosea 11:8-9.⁸² We can see in the psalms that even though the psalmists prayed for God’s vengeance and the destruction of their enemies or oppressors, they are not really destroyed. There is no evidence of God acting suddenly to wipe out all the enemies and oppressors, for if this were the case then the large number of imprecatory psalms would not be present.⁸³ This is because, with God, love outweighs vengeance and wrath, hence God does not take “pleasure in judgment (Lam. 3:33) or in the death of anyone, even the wicked (Ezek. 18:23,

⁸⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, Oreg.: Cascade Books, 2007), 70; Day, *Crying for Justice*, 12.

⁸¹ Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 69.

⁸² Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 72; Terence E. Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God in the Old Testament,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24, no. 2 (2002): 13.

⁸³ McCann Jr., “Nonretaliatory Lifestyle,” 163.

32)”.⁸⁴ Instead, God’s judgment is to enable the wicked to repent and experience the life that God offers (Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11). Hence, when oppressors are punished it is so that they will repent and cease to oppress.

In light of the theme of imitation of God as a basis for ethics, the question now is whether humans should imitate vengeance? It has already been established that the psalmists did not themselves exercise vengeance against their enemies and oppressors, but rather entrusted the vengeance to God, for vengeance only belongs to God. In their prayers “vengeance is transferred from the heart of the speaker to the heart of God”.⁸⁵

However, we have noted that the vengeance is not revenge; it is an expression of God’s justice, in order to liberate the poor, needy and oppressed, and restore the social order. Therefore, if humans are to enact God’s justice, then, these psalms of vengeance do imply that they should be like God in being angry at injustice.⁸⁶ Such anger at injustice should lead humans to act in liberation of those who are oppressed. We have seen that liberation of the oppressed also calls for the sin of the oppressors to be punished, so that they will cease to oppress. Therefore, while humans are not to act in revenge against oppressors, they are to be like God in being on the side of the poor, needy and oppressed, and work to demonstrate God’s justice and righteousness in seeking to liberate the poor, needy and oppressed. In order to effectively bring liberation to the poor and oppressed, the oppressors must also be confronted. We will return to this in chapter 9, which will show the necessity of confronting the oppressors in order to adequately address the situation with HIV and AIDS.

⁸⁴ Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on Wrath of God,” 26. See also Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 288-89.

⁸⁵ Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 67. See also Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 71.

⁸⁶ Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on Wrath of God,” 6-7.

7.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, the psalms of vengeance are not simply songs of hate, or cries for retaliation and revenge. Rather, they are cries against the injustices and oppression which God's people experienced at the hands of their oppressors. In crying out against these injustices, the psalmists' call for God to exercise vengeance against their oppressors is a call for God's expression of righteousness, justice and דָּם . These attributes of God are demonstrated not only as deliverance of the oppressed but also as condemnation of the oppressors. For in taking the plight of the oppressed seriously, it is also important to take the sin of the oppressors seriously. In addition, these psalmists pray to God in this way, because of their confidence that God "stands at the right hand of the needy", and therefore God will deliver them from their enemies. They pray for God's vengeance also because they know that vengeance belongs to God. If humans are to embody God's justice, then they should be like God, in being angry at oppression and systemic injustice, which will lead to both liberation of the oppressed and condemnation of the oppressors.

CHAPTER 8

MOTIVATION FOR IMITATIO DEI AND FOR BEING ETHICAL

8.1 Introduction

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, ethics is about “being” and “doing”; therefore, ethical living is practical. However, knowledge of what is expected does not necessarily mean that persons live according to that knowledge. Hence, in discussing ethics, it is important to address the question: why should I live ethically? In other words, what motivates ethical living?

Therefore, having established that ethics in some psalms is based on imitation of God, we will now examine the motivation for ethics in the Psalms. Within the field of Old Testament ethics, motivation for ethical character and behaviour has not been extensively written about; however, as mentioned in chapter 2, some scholars have identified that the ethical response of the Old Testament was expected to be a motivated response. We will look briefly at work that has been previously done on motivation for ethical character and behaviour. John Barton pointed out that:

. . . Old Testament writers argue or reason with their readers . . . by adding what are technically called ‘motive clauses’ to their appeals for people to act more morally. Morality is not only grounded – in the will of God or in natural law – but also *motivated*.¹

Barton pointed out that motivation for ethical conduct is “seen as early as what is universally recognized as the oldest Israelite law code, the so-called ‘Book of the Covenant’ in Ex[odus] 21–24”,² which contains the detailed commandments given to Moses, for Israel, immediately after the Ten Commandments. Barton outlined that the motivations in these laws

¹ John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press 1998), 77 (emphasis in original).

² Barton, *Ethics*, 77-78.

were of various kinds, for example, the law against doing wrong to aliens appealed to Israel's knowledge of what it means to be aliens in Egypt. For example, Exodus 22:21: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." (See also Exod. 23:9.) There was also the motivation through God's threat of punishment, as in the law for widows and orphans in Exodus 22:22-24:

You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

Barton described the motivation for ethical conduct in the Old Testament as being of three types: future, past and present motivations. Future motivations appeal to the fear of punishment for disobedience to the law (e.g. Exod. 20:5) and the promise of blessing for righteousness (e.g. Exod. 20:12). Future motivations are also present in the prophets (e.g. Isa. 1:19-20) and in the wisdom tradition (e.g. Prov. 3:1-8).

Past motivations appeal to Israel's past experience as aliens in Egypt, and to moral conduct as a response of gratitude to God for what God has done (Deut. 10:12-22). Israel had experienced God's goodness in the past, in their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and throughout their journey in the wilderness and into the Promised Land. Barton pointed out that gratitude as a motivation for moral conduct is also present in the prophets, where Israel is continually punished for ingratitude as is present for example in Micah 6:3-4.

Present motivations appeal to the inherent beauty and perfection of the law:

The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;

the commandment of the Lord is clear,
 enlightening the eyes;
 the fear of the Lord is pure,
 enduring forever;
 the ordinances of the Lord are true
 and righteous altogether.
 More to be desired are they than gold,
 even much fine gold;
 sweeter also than honey,
 and drippings of the honeycomb. (Ps. 19:7-10)

How sweet are your words to my taste,
 sweeter than honey to my mouth! (Ps. 119:103)

Your decrees are wonderful;
 therefore my soul keeps them. (Ps. 119:129)

In these verses, the psalmists refer to the law as beautiful and perfect. Since the law is beautiful and perfect, then, those who keep the law will be happy; therefore, it should be a delight in itself for one to keep the law. The happiness which those who abide by the law receive is in itself the reward for well-doing even if there were no external benefits (e.g. Deut. 4:5-8).³

See, just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? (Deut. 4:5-8)

Walter Kaiser also identified motivation for Old Testament ethics as being present in the motive clauses of the law. Kaiser followed Rifat Sonsino,⁴ who identified four areas to which motive clauses appeal. The first area is motive clauses which express the authority of God,

³ See Barton, *Ethics*, 82-96 for Barton's full discussion of future, past and present motivations.

⁴ See Rifat Sonsino, *Motive Clauses in Hebrew Law: Biblical Forms and Near Eastern Parallels* (Chico, Calif.: Scholar's Press, 1980), 109-113.

which is seen in the Holiness Code when the appeal is “(for) I am the Lord your God” or “I am the Lord”. The second area is the appeal to the historical experiences of the people in which the motivations will be gratitude and faithfulness. The third area is the appeal to fear of punishment. The fourth area is the promise of well-being.⁵ Kaiser pointed out that such clauses are not only found in the law, but also in Proverbs. He further noted that the motive clauses all seek to respond to the question: “Why should I heed the instruction or command given here?” The clauses “wish to set forth the reasonableness of this admonition, the consequences that will follow if it is not followed, and the emotions from or signals to the will that will aid the listener in responding to this commandment, precept, or proverb”.⁶

Another contribution to motivation for ethical behaviour was made by Dennis Winter, who wrote “Motivation in Christian Behaviour”.⁷ He noted that motivation in the Bible is based on rewards and punishments, and pleasing and displeasing God. Winter pointed out: “Rewards and punishments in some form or another are essential to any practical system of morality.”⁸ With regards to pleasing God, he noted that whatever God commands is equal to the “will of God”, and, therefore, it is “what is pleasing to God”. Therefore, those who love God desire to please God, and, therefore, they are motivated to obey the commands. He further stated that because God is consistent, what pleases God is what God would do in the same circumstance. Hence, as discussed in chapter 5, since humans are created in the image of God, then, they are called to imitate God, in acting in the way that God would act in that circumstance.⁹

⁵ Kaiser Jr., *Old Testament Ethics*, 241-42.

⁶ Kaiser Jr., *Old Testament Ethics*, 242.

⁷ See Dennis Winter, “Motivation in Christian behaviour,” in *Law, Morality and the Bible*, ed. Bruce Kaye and Gordon Wenham, (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 193-215.

⁸ Winter, “Motivation,” 203.

⁹ See Winter, “Motivation,” 208-09.

Christopher Wright pointed out that Israel's personal experience of God's goodness and blessing was a major motivation for their ethical living. "Personal experience of God's goodness is turned into motivation for ethical behaviour that responds out of gratitude and love."¹⁰ He also noted that the laws contain motivational clauses which give specific reasons why they should be obeyed. He also noted that the reasons may refer to God's character and actions, the future well-being of the people, security in the land, deterrence of potential wrong-doers, or that the other nations were watching. Wright further maintained that Israel's constant forgetting of God's great acts showed forcefully the importance of personal gratitude to God. For, in a personal relationship, to forget is a sign of "offensive or tactless ingratitude".¹¹

In speaking of ecological ethics, Wright identified that motivation lies also in eschatology. He cited Isaiah 65–66 as being the climax of the eschatological vision of the Old Testament regarding creation. Eschatology affects ethical living in that what humans hope for from God affects how they live in the world now.¹² In addition, Wright pointed out that while in the Torah and the prophets, ethical motivation is grounded in the "historical-redemptive tradition", in Wisdom it is grounded in creation. He identified that "for Proverbs, the poor should be treated with the dignity that reflects the fact that they too were created by the same God".¹³ Hence, whatever is done to or for the poor is done to or for God (Prov. 14:31; cf. also 17:5; 19:17; 22:2, 22-23; 29:13).

In summary, therefore, the brief literature review above shows that scholars have identified that ethical character and conduct in the Old Testament are motivated by: 1) God's

¹⁰ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 42.

¹¹ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 43.

¹² Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 141.

¹³ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 178.

authority seen in the repetition of the phrase “I am the Lord your God”; 2) gratitude for personal experience of God’s goodness; 3) rewards and punishments for obedience and disobedience to the law respectively; 4) seeking to please God, which comes from a loving relationship with God; and 5) creation in the image of God.

In addition, from the literature review, we have seen that scholars have looked at motivation in the laws, the prophets and wisdom; however, there is hardly any mention of the psalms. As previously mentioned in this thesis, little study has been devoted to the ethics of the Psalms, and consequently, there is also not much on ethical motivation in the Psalms. As already mentioned in chapter 3, Gordon Wenham has begun to address this lack of attention to the ethics of the Psalms, and he noted that the chief approach to ethics in the Psalter “is through the description of the righteous and the wicked”.¹⁴ Prior to Wenham, T. B. Matson also stated that the psalmists appealed to the blessings of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked.¹⁵

The remainder of this chapter will look at the motivation for ethical character and conduct in the Psalms. The most obvious ethical motivation in the Psalms is by appealing to the rewards of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked. Two other motivational factors are the fear of the Lord and offering praise to God. We will now look at these three motivations for ethics in the Psalms in detail.

8.2 The Righteous and the Wicked

As mentioned above, the most explicit ethical motivation in the Psalms is through appeal to the rewards for the righteous and punishments for the wicked. This is evident as there are 41

¹⁴ Wenham, “Ethics,” 187.

¹⁵ Matson, *Biblical Ethics*, 79-80.

psalms which contain descriptions of the fate of the righteous and/or the wicked.¹⁶ As already mentioned, it is beyond this thesis to look at all these psalms in detail; therefore, since 6 of the psalms being studied in this thesis contain motivation by appealing to the righteous and the wicked, we will look at those 6, namely Psalms 15; 25; 33; 94; 111 and 112. Before proceeding further, let us look at the identity of the righteous and the wicked as they are described in the psalms, especially those being studied in this thesis.

8.2.1 The Character of the Righteous and the Wicked

The characteristics of the righteous, צדיקים, and the “way” that such persons follow are expanded in Psalm 112. Psalm 112 was previously discussed together with Psalm 111 in chapter 5, in which it was shown that the two psalms complement each other and are interpreted together. The evidence discussed in that chapter showed that Psalm 111 describes God’s character, and Psalm 112 describes the character of the righteous in the same words that are used to describe God.¹⁷ In chapter 6, we saw that the characteristics of God described in Psalm 111 are ethical characteristics, as this psalm describes God’s righteousness as experienced in the history of Israel.¹⁸ From what has already been discussed about these two psalms, we have already seen that the צדיקים imitate God’s righteousness. We will now examine Psalm 112 in more detail in order to see the characteristics of the righteous.

Psalm 112 begins:

¹⁶ See Psalms 1; 2; 5; 7; 9; 11; 14; 15; 16; 18; 19; 24; 25; 31; 32; 33; 34; 36; 37; 41; 50; 53; 55; 64; 73; 84; 89; 91; 92; 94; 97; 103; 106; 111; 112; 119; 125; 128; 145; 146; 147.

¹⁷ See chapter 5.

¹⁸ See chapter 6.

Blessed is the one who fears the Lord,
 who exceedingly delights in his commandments.

This verse shows that the one who fears the Lord (יִרָא אֶת־יְהוָה) and delights exceedingly in the commandments of the Lord is “blessed” (on this, see more shortly). Due to the intralinear parallelism, the one who “fears the Lord” is the one who “exceedingly delights in his commandments”. This is reminiscent of Psalm 1 which speaks of the two different ways of life, “the way of the righteous” and “the way of the wicked”. According to Psalm 1:2, the righteous delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night. Therefore, we can conclude that the one who “fears the Lord” is the צַדִּיק. In addition, the one who is referred to as fearing the Lord in verse 1 is referred to as the צַדִּיק in verse 4. Hence, one of the characteristics of the צַדִּיקִים is that they fear the Lord, and to “fear the Lord” means that they live according to the “way” of the Lord and are obedient to the commandments of the Lord. We will return to the concept of “fear of the Lord” below, where is discussed as a motivation for imitating God.

The righteous who fear God, imitate God’s character in their relationship with others, as outlined in Psalm 112. As mentioned in chapter 5, the righteous are gracious (חַנּוּן) and compassionate (רַחוּם) (v. 4); they give generously, lend to those who are in need, exercise justice in all their affairs (v. 5); and they give freely to the poor (v. 9). These characteristics of generosity and care for those in need are demonstrations of “righteousness and justice” as mentioned in chapter 6. Verse 9 says that their “righteousness endures forever”. This means that the righteousness demonstrated by the righteous is not a one-off act of kindness, but it is a continual lifestyle. The character of the righteous is shaped in righteousness. As shown in chapter 5, these virtues of the צַדִּיקִים also describe God’s character in Psalm 111; hence, their righteousness is grounded in the righteousness of God and this enables them to imitate God. The

character of the righteous is also described in Psalm 15 which has also been discussed in chapter 5.¹⁹ In Psalm 15, the righteous is described as one who imitates God by walking in the blameless way, doing what is right, speaking the truth, despising the wicked, honouring those who fear God and caring for the poor.

Unlike the righteous who imitate God in their character, the wicked, רשעים, are the opposite of the righteous in their character. In the previous chapter, examples of the character and conduct of the רשעים were seen in Psalms 94 and 109. They oppress God's people, the widows, strangers and orphans (Ps. 94:5-7), and they also oppress the poor (Ps. 10:2). They falsely accuse the צדיקים, they are evil towards them and they express hatred towards them (Ps. 109:2-5); they also want to condemn them to death even though they are innocent (Ps. 94:21). The wicked are, therefore, the enemies of the righteous and God (Ps. 2:2). They have no fear of God (Ps. 36:1[2]) and they do not obey the commandments of God (e.g. Pss. 5:9[10]; 10:2-11; 11:2-3; 31:18[19]; 36:1-4[2-5]; 37:12, 14, 21, 32, 35; 73:4-12).

Having described the character and conduct of the צדיקים and the רשעים, we now turn to look at what motivates the צדיקים to follow the way of God and thus imitate God.

8.2.2 Motivation for the righteous

As stated above in the introduction to this chapter, one of the motivational factors for ethical character and conduct in the psalms is the rewards of the צדיקים and the punishment of the רשעים. The rewards of the צדיקים are presented as “blessings” in Psalm 112. As mentioned above, Psalm 112:1 states that the one who “fears the Lord and exceedingly delights in his commandments”, is blessed or happy. Verse 2b says “the generation of the upright will be

¹⁹ See chapter 5. See also Ps. 37: 21, 26, 30 and 31 for a description of the righteous.

blessed”. The word translated in verse 1 as “blessed” is אַשְׂרֵי, which also means “happy” or “fortunate”. This word is found mostly in the Psalms and a few times in Proverbs (see Pss. 1:1; 2:11[12]; 32:1-2; 33:12; 34:8[9]; 40:4[5]; 41:1[2]; 65:4[5]; 84:5-6, 13; 89:15[16]; 94:12-15; 106:3; 112:1-3; 119:1-3; 127:5; 128:1-4; 144:15; 146:5; Prov. 3:13; 8:32, 34; 20:7; 28:14). Fox noted that the אַשְׂרֵי formula extols “a certain virtue or experience by exclaiming the good fortune of its possessor”.²⁰

Hence, in Psalm 112, the verses that follow verse 1, in addition to describing the character of the צַדִּיקִים, also outline the good fortune of such persons. As seen from verse 2, the blessings are not only for the צַדִּיקִים, but also for their descendants. In addition to Psalm 112, other psalms that are being studied in this thesis also describe the blessings for being righteous, namely Psalms 15, 25, 33, and 111. We will now look at these blessings. Based on the psalms being studied in this thesis, I have divided the blessings that the righteous receive from God for their ethical conduct into two categories: firstly, they experience prosperity; secondly, they experience God’s friendship and providential care.

Psalm 112:3a says of the צַדִּיקִים that wealth and riches are in their house, thus giving an indication that they experience material prosperity. Wealth and riches as a sign of divine blessing are present in other places in the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Kgs. 3:13; Job 1; Prov. 3:10, 16; 13:18; 22:4).²¹ The notion of prosperity for the righteous is also seen in Psalm 25:13:

²⁰ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 161.

²¹ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 364.

His life will remain in prosperity,
and his offspring will possess the land.

This verse contains an intralinear parallelism in which the second colon clarifies the first colon.²² In the first colon, the word that is translated here as “remain” is לִיָּן, which often means “staying the night” and may suggest that the “prosperity” of the righteous is temporary. However, the second colon says “his offspring will possess the land”. This colon clarifies that the “prosperity”, which the first colon is referring to, is that of staying in possession of the land, which God had promised to Israel (Deut. 4:1). The use of יָרַשׁ “take possession” clarifies that it is not temporarily dwelling in the land, but staying in possession of the land (cf. Ps. 37:11).²³ Psalm 25:13 also shows that the blessing is not only for the righteous individual but also for the family of the righteous, and this provides additional motivation.

The second type of blessing is that the צַדִּיקִים experience God’s friendship and providential care, which is evident in Psalms 25, 33, 94 and 111. As already mentioned, Psalm 25 is a prayer for guidance in the “way of the Lord”. Verses 12 and 14 read:

Who is the one that fears the Lord?
He will teach him in the way he should choose.

The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him,
and he makes his covenant known to them.

From these two verses, we can say that God pays attention to those who fear him. For, God teaches them the “way” that he wants them to follow, they receive God’s סֹד, and he reveals his covenant to them. I will show that the word סֹד connotes the idea of friendship.

²² Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 374.

²³ Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 374.

The use of סוד in the Old Testament has three semantic possibilities. These three possibilities have been identified by H. Fabry.²⁴ He identified one connotation of סוד as referring to the secular assembly in which the oldest occurrence is probably in Genesis 49:6, where it refers to the assembly of the tribes of Simeon and Levi. He noted that this collective understanding of סוד is limited to smaller groups, such as the “circle of youth” (Jer. 6:11) or “of merry-makers” (Jer. 15:17), during the pre-exilic period, and to the “circle of friends” (Job 19:19) or “circle of the faithful” (Ps. 111:1) during the post-exilic period. A second connotation of סוד is “Yahweh’s council”. When used in this way, סוד refers to “the smaller circle of Yahweh’s heavenly entourage”, for example Psalm 89:7[8]. In addition, prophets were seen as belonging to the סוד יהוה, that is, the “council of the Lord” (see, e.g. Jer. 23:18, 22; Job 15:8; Amos 3:7). Amos 3:7 says that “God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets”. Fabry noted that in the post-exilic Psalm 25:14, “Yahweh’s throne council is democratized to the point that every person ‘who fears Yahweh’ is able to participate in his *sôd*”.²⁵ Hence, according to Psalm 25:14, it is no longer only the prophets who belong to God council, but everyone who “fears the Lord”. The third connotation of סוד identified by Fabry is that it refers to the religious-cultic community. He noted that this shift in meaning occurred during the post-exilic period. This sense of סוד is portrayed in Psalms 25:14 and 111:1, in which the “throne council” is the cultic community of those who are upright and fear the Lord.²⁶

From the brief survey above, we can see that those who are a part of God’s סוד are so close to God that God’s secret is revealed to them. Therefore, such persons, who are a part of

²⁴ See H.-J. Fabry, “סוד,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 171-78.

²⁵ Fabry, “סוד,” 174.

²⁶ Fabry, “סוד,” 175.

God's council, have a relationship of intimacy and friendship with God.²⁷ A relationship of friendship is based on love and loyalty; hence, the experience of God's friendship motivates the righteous to imitate God out of love and loyalty. Also, in a love relationship, the parties involved seek to please rather than hurt the other. Therefore, as a result of this intimate relationship with God, the righteous are motivated to imitate God because they desire to please their God.

In addition, those who fear God also experience God's providential and protective care as seen in Psalms 33, 94 and 111 (cf. Ps. 1:6a). As was discussed in chapter 6, Psalm 33:18, which says that "the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him", means that those who fear God experience God's protective care. This is also seen in Psalm 111:5a which says, "He provides food to those who fear him". The provision of food is a sign of God's providential care, in that God seeks to attend to the needs of those who fear him, who are also the righteous. When the righteous experience material prosperity and God's care they are motivated to imitate God out of gratitude for his goodness to them, as in the law and the prophets.

We have seen that the blessings of the righteous include material prosperity, God's friendship and care. However, it must be noted that, contrary to some unrealistic expectations current in our contemporary society, blessings in the psalms do not mean that life will be free from adversity. This is attested by the high number of lament psalms within the Psalter. In such psalms, the צדיקים cry out to God for deliverance from various forms of distress, such as persecution, illness and oppression. So, while Psalm 112 speaks about prosperity as a blessing for the righteous, this psalm also acknowledges that even though the righteous may normally experience material prosperity it does not mean that there will be no adversity. Hence, Psalm

²⁷ See Deryck Sheriffs, *The Friendship of the Lord* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1996), 16.

112 shows that the blessings of the צדיקים include their ability to remain steady and constant in all circumstances.²⁸

Most of the psalm highlights this aspect of the blessings, that is, constancy in the midst of adversity. As noted above, verse 3 speaks of the blessing of prosperity, in that the צדיקים will receive wealth and riches. Then verse 4a follows immediately with the words: “Light rises in the darkness for the upright”. The metaphor of “darkness” is symbolic of the suffering which the צדיקים may experience, and the “light” metaphor is symbolic of relief in the midst of suffering. Kraus pointed out that אור “in a general and comprehensive way” is “a symbol of the fortunate life”.²⁹ God is referred to as light in passages such as Isaiah 9:2[1]; Micah 7:8; Psalms 27:1; 36:9[10] and Job 29:3. Therefore, the righteous are confident that in the midst of adversity, they will receive God’s deliverance.³⁰

Verses 6-8 expand further such blessing in the midst of adversity:

For he will never be shaken;
 a righteous person will be remembered forever.
 He will not be afraid of evil report;
 his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord.
 His heart is unshakeable, he will not be afraid;
 until he looks down on his oppressors.

These four verses show that the צדיקים will persevere in the midst of suffering and hardship. They persevere in living a life of “righteousness and justice” for, as noted in verses 3b and 9b, their “righteousness endures forever”. Verse 8b indicates that the צדיקים may experience

²⁸ Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 45-46.

²⁹ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 364.

³⁰ See Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 364.

oppression, but in the end they will persevere over their oppressors, hence the reason why they are not afraid.³¹

Psalm 15:5c also says that the righteous “will never be shaken”. As discussed previously, this psalm describes the characteristics of the צדיקים, which is necessary for them to enter the presence of the Lord. After describing the characteristics in verses 2-5b, verse 5c says: “The one who does these things will never be shaken”. The verb used in this verse and in Psalms 112:6a is the root מוט. A. Baumann noted that this root is usually used in “reference to something firm, such as the human body or bodily parts, or the earth or its foundations”.³² He highlighted that the phrase “he will not totter” occurs frequently in the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Chr. 16:30; Job 41:15; Pss. 10:6; 15:5; 16:8; 21:7[8]; 30:6[7]; 46:5[6]; 62:2, 6[3, 7]; 93:1; 96:10; 104:5; 112:6; 125:1; Prov. 10:30; 12:3; Isa. 40:20; 41:7). He also noted that it often occurs with statements of “eternal permanence”, such as לדר ודר (Ps. 10:6), לעולם (Pss. 15:5; 112:6; 125:1; Prov. 10:30), or עולם ועד (Ps. 104:5). In light of these occurrences, Baumann suggested that it was probably a fixed formula which was “apparently part of the framework of worship (perhaps entry or dismissal ceremonies) functioning as the expression directly pledging the stability and imperturbability mediated by trust in Yahweh”.³³ Hence, the metaphor of “not being shaken” connotes the idea of stability and constancy. Therefore, when the psalmist says that the righteous will “never be shaken”, the psalmist means that, even in the midst of hardship, the righteous will remain stable and will persevere in all circumstances. This stability is based on their trust in God’s care and concern for them.

³¹ See Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 365.

³² A. Baumann, “מוט,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 152-53.

³³ Baumann, “מוט,” 157-58.

The righteous persevere in the midst of hardship because of their knowledge of God's character and actions. They know that God loves righteousness and justice (Ps. 33:5), God is gracious and compassionate (Ps. 111:4) and full of חסד (Pss. 103:8; 145:8). As was discussed in the previous chapter, because of God's righteousness, justice and חסד , God delivers the oppressed and punishes the oppressors. Hence, when the righteous are being oppressed, they are confident that God will ultimately deliver them from the wicked (Ps. 94:13b). For God is faithful in all that God does (Ps. 111:7); hence, since God has delivered his people in the past (Ps. 111:9), the righteous can say with confidence, "the Lord will not forsake his people, and will not abandon his heritage" (Ps. 94:14). Hence, since the righteous are confident that God will ultimately deliver them, then in the midst of hardship, they continue to hope for God's deliverance and are thus motivated to persevere in living according to the ways of God.

Hope motivates ethical living because, as pointed out above by Wright, what humans hope for from God affects how they live in the world now. Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope proposes that Christian hope is rooted in God's activity in history and in God's promises. Past experiences of the fulfilment of God's promises leads to hope in the present circumstances that the promises will be fulfilled again.³⁴ Hence, this hope motivates the righteous to persevere in righteousness even in the midst of suffering.

While the צדיקים are blessed, the רשעים are said to perish (Pss. 1:6; 3:7[8]; 9:5[6], 16[17], 17[18]; 34:21[22]; 68:2[3]; 101:8; 146:9; 147:6). In Psalm 112:10 the wicked are angry when they see the prosperity of the צדיקים and their victory over the evil which is done to them by the

³⁴ For a discussion of Moltmann's theology of hope, see Timothy Harvie, *Jürgen Moltmann's Ethics of Hope: Eschatological Possibilities for Moral Action*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 13-37. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of hope: on the ground and the implications of a Christian eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 1967).

רשעים. Even though the overall picture is that the צדיקים will be blessed and the רשעים will “perish”, life is not that simple; hence, some psalms, for example, Psalms 34; 37; 49 and 73, question this because, in their experience, the צדיקים were suffering while the רשעים seemed to be triumphing. In Psalm 73:3, the psalmist says: “For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” Therefore, in the midst of such apparent failure of the prosperity of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked, what motivates the righteous? In addition to hope of deliverance in the midst of suffering and belief in ultimate justice, the righteous are also motivated by the fear of the Lord, to which we now turn.

8.3 The Fear of the Lord

It was mentioned above that the righteous fear the Lord. The “fear of the Lord” is a theme in several psalms and in wisdom literature, especially Proverbs. The root word for fear is ירא. Van Pelt and Kaiser indicated that this root has a range of meanings which includes terror, respect and worship.³⁵ They have shown examples of the passages in the Old Testament in which ירא has these different meanings. They noted that when ירא is associated with terror, it often refers to circumstances in everyday life,³⁶ or it is also “used to describe a human response to the presence of the numinous”, for example “Adam and Eve feared the approach of God after they had sinned” (Gen. 3:10).³⁷

³⁵ M. V. Van Pelt and W. C. Kaiser, “ירא,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 528.

³⁶ See e.g. Gen. 19:30; 26:7; 31:31; 32:7, 11; Exod. 2:14; 14:10; Deut. 2:4; 7:19; Josh. 9:24; Judg. 6:27; Job 32:6; Eccl. 9:2; 1 Sam. 7:7; 14:26; 18:12, 21; 21:12; 2 Sam. 3:11; 1 Kgs. 1:50; Neh. 6:9, 13, 19; Dan. 1:10.

³⁷ Van Pelt and Kaiser, “ירא,” 528. See e.g. Gen. 3:10; Exod. 3:6; 34:30; Deut. 5:5; 2 Sam. 6:9.

They pointed out that fear associated with respect is only used on a few occasions and usually refers to respect for an authority figure.³⁸ Finally, Van Pelt and Kaiser stated: “The fear of Yahweh associated with worship is characterized by obedience to his decrees and commandments (Ps. 119:63).”³⁹ This verse reads:

I am a companion of all who fear you,
of those who keep your precepts.

They further stated that appropriate moral conduct is also involved when “fear of Yahweh” is associated with worship (e.g. Gen. 42:18; Exod. 1:17, 21).⁴⁰ In other words, one who fears the Lord will be obedient to the commandments of the Lord and will demonstrate good moral conduct. This was supported by Longman, who pointed out that in the Old Testament, in most instances “fear of God” is a virtue that “leads to right behaviour and good results”.⁴¹ Longman pointed out that, in the Book of Psalms and in Proverbs, those who “fear the Lord” live in a relationship of submission to God and in turn they receive blessings from God, as we have seen above.⁴²

In addition to describing the way of life of those who fear the Lord, and the outcome of their fear of the Lord, Psalm 111:10 says “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”, which also occurs in Proverbs 1:7; 9:10 and 15:33. Fox pointed out that the “fear of God” is valued because “it motivates right behaviour even when socially enforced sanctions do not exist or cannot be effective”⁴³ (e.g. Gen. 20:11; Exod. 1:17; Neh. 5:15). Exodus 1:17 reads: “But the

³⁸ See e.g. Lev. 19:3, 30; Josh. 4:14; 1 Kgs. 3:28.

³⁹ Van Pelt and Kaiser, “יָרָא,” 530.

⁴⁰ Van Pelt and Kaiser, “יָרָא,” 530.

⁴¹ Tremper Longman III, “The Fear of the Lord,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 201.

⁴² Longman III, “Fear,” 204-05.

⁴³ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 70. See also Van Pelt and Kaiser, “יָרָא,” 533.

midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.” Another example of fear of God motivating right behaviour is in the Holiness Code, which “invokes the fear of God as a motive for kind and respectful actions”.⁴⁴ Some of these actions are honouring the aged (Lev. 19:32), not overworking a slave (Lev. 25:43) and not mistreating the handicapped (Lev. 19:14).

Fox also noted that the sages of Proverbs insist on punishment which is either enforced by God or ensues naturally. However, there is often a delayed connection between act and consequence; therefore, it is necessary to have a motivation that is “prior to and deeper than the promised retribution, and this is the fear of God”.⁴⁵ This also applies in the Psalms, for as mentioned above, there are psalms which address the apparent prosperity of the wicked, while the righteous were suffering. Hence, in addition to being motivated by confidence and hope in God for deliverance in the midst of suffering, the righteous are also motivated by their “fear of God”. This is expressed in their reverence and love for God.

8.4 Praise in the Psalms

Praise is an important theme within the Psalter. Westermann⁴⁶ made the case that there are two main types of address to God in the Psalms: praise and lament. He further pointed out that within the Psalter there is a movement between praise and lament. This is seen in many of the laments which also contain praise either as an expression that their petition has already been answered, or in anticipation that it will be answered. This praise is either expressed as a vow to praise (Pss. 5:11[12]; 12[13]; 7:17[18]; 13:5-6[6-7]; 22:22-25[23-26]; 26:12; 31:7[8]) or a

⁴⁴ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 71.

⁴⁵ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 71.

⁴⁶ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*.

declaration of praise (Pss. 28:6; 31:21[22]; 35:9-10; 36:5-9[6-10]). Also in many of the psalms of praise, there is an element of lament as the psalmists recall the distress from which they were delivered (Pss. 8:2[3]; 18:4-19[5-20]; 34:4-6[5-7]; 40:1-2[2-3]; 65:2-3[3-4], 5[6]; 66:13-14; 106:44; 107:6; 124:1-5; 136:23-24).⁴⁷ Miller commented on this by saying:

In thinking about praise of God as one of the primary biblical modes of faith in God and speech to God, one must recognize that the continuum of prayer between supplication and praise is not just a kind of pendulum swing that means the praying Israelite always moved back and forth between petition and praise or that these were in a sense simply the two components of prayer. Rather one always was moving *toward praise*. . . . Praise and thanks are in a sense the *final* word, the direction one is headed, in the relationship with God.⁴⁸

He further pointed out that this movement towards praise is not only found in individual psalms, but in the overall shape of the Psalter, which contains predominantly lament psalms in the first half and then increasingly moves towards hymns of praise.

It must also be noted that the movement is not a simple one, since the first part of the Psalter also contains hymns (e.g. Pss. 8 and 33) and the latter part also contains laments (e.g. Pss. 140–143).⁴⁹ We can therefore say that praise is a central theme within the Psalter. In praise, the psalmists respond to God's character and works, by declaring their praises to God and/or calling the congregation and/or all the earth to praise God. They praise God because of God's attributes and for God's deeds in creation, in history and in specific acts of deliverance. The following table shows the psalms in which the psalmists make their own response of praise, those in which they invite others to praise God and those in which there are both personal

⁴⁷ Patrick D. Miller Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 65. See Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 52-90.

⁴⁸ Miller Jr., *Interpreting*, 66 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁹ Miller Jr., *Interpreting*, 67.

response and invitation to others. The psalms in this table are those which I have identified, from my reading of the Psalter, which are predominantly psalms of praise.

Psalmists Praise	The psalmists call others to praise	The psalmists praise and call others to praise
Psalms 8; 18; 48; 75; 92; 93; 104; 108; 111; 116; 138; 145; 146	Psalms 32; 33; 47; 66; 67; 68; 95; 96; 97; 98; 99; 100; 105; 106; 107; 113; 117; 134; 135; 136; 147; 148; 149; 150	Psalms 30; 34; 103; 118

From the table, we can see that most of the psalms of praise contain an invitation in which others are invited to praise God. The aim of the next section is to show how, in the psalms, the response of praise to God motivates a response to be like God.

8.4.1 Praise as Motivation for ethical character

As already mentioned in the previous chapters in which psalms of praise were discussed, they often contain a call to praise (e.g. Pss. 33:1-3, 8; 113:1-3) or a declaration of praise (Pss. 8:1[2], 9[10]; 111:1), which is then followed by the reasons for praise (e.g. Pss. 33:4-7; 9-19; 111:2-9; 113:4-9). Patrick Miller explained what praise is:

The *act* of praise . . . means to acknowledge and confess who God is and in so doing render honour and glory to the one who is the object of praise. It is at the same time gratitude and thanksgiving because God has shown forth as the God who has demonstrated divine care and providence, a beneficent activity in behalf of individuals and community.⁵⁰

As mentioned above, praise is a response to God's person and actions and hence it comes out of human experience of God. This was seen in previous chapters, in which psalms of praise were discussed. In Psalm 8, God is praised for God's majesty and God's creation of the

⁵⁰ Miller Jr., *Interpreting*, 70 (emphasis in original).

world, especially humankind. In Psalm 33, God is praised for God's acts in creation and in deliverance and protective care. In Psalm 111, God is praised for God's work in deliverance and provision. In Psalm 113, God is praised for God's majesty and for his care of those in need.

Pleins stated that the Hymns of Praise enable us to see that in worship we encounter God's glory and majesty. He further proposed:

In worship we are to revel in the compassion and love of God for us. This does not mean that in worship we seek to escape from earth to hide with God in eternity. On the contrary, worship is a very human act whereby we bring heaven and earth closer to each other, allowing us to glimpse the creative spirit that shapes our planet. This meeting with God calls us to care for our world and stand by the side of the poor.⁵¹

In other words, in praise, God is exalted as the God of justice, righteousness and *חסד*, which is revealed in God's care and compassion for the poor, needy and oppressed. In the reasons for praise, the psalmists recount the goodness of God, which is demonstrated in God's providential care for the poor, needy and oppressed. For example, Psalm 113:7 speaks of God raising the helpless from the dust and lifting up the needy; Psalms 33:19; 111:5; 145:15; 146:7; 147: 9, 14 speak of God giving food to those in need; and Psalms 8:2[3]; 104:35 and 145:20 speak of God as one who delivers those who are oppressed by defeating their enemies. Therefore, in recounting what one has experienced from God, it motivates one to do to others as they would like done for themselves. In other words, they are motivated to imitate God in caring for and liberating God's people, especially the poor, needy and oppressed. Psalm 101 is not a psalm of praise, but in this psalm, as already discussed in chapter 5, the psalmist praises God and then is motivated to imitate God. For, after praising God's *חסד* and *משפט* in Psalm 101:1, the psalmist proceeds to commit himself to rule in a way that is reflective of God's character.

⁵¹ Pleins, *Songs of Tragedy, Hope and Justice*, 76.

The reasons for praise also remember and highlight God's care for the world as expressed in creation; for as previously mentioned, Psalm 33 speaks of the revelation of God's justice, righteousness and דסן at the creation of the world. When humans encounter this God of love, care and compassion they are motivated to look at the needs of the world, and to respond by bringing the same love, care and compassion that God gives. Hence, Pleins pointed out that the Hymns of Praise enable us to see "that our theology of God and creation must also be a justice theology".⁵² This means that praise does not only cultivate in us "a sense of mystery and wonder toward God but also fosters a desire to extend the love and compassion of God to all who are in need".⁵³

Brueggemann also argued that praise involves both speech to God and the action of humankind on earth. He described praise as both duty and delight, and the ultimate vocation of humankind and all creation. Brueggemann also added that praise is addressed to heaven but it is also "spoken by human voices on earth".⁵⁴ Therefore, since praise is spoken on earth it does not impinge only on heaven, but it also impinges on earth. This means that, "praise is not only a religious vocation, but it is also a social gesture that effects the shape and character of human life and human community. Inevitably praise does its work among human persons as much as it does in the courts of heaven."⁵⁵

In light of this understanding of praise, Brueggemann proposed that the practice of worship and ethical responsibility should be related to each other intentionally. Hence, he suggested that worship is both "responsive" and "constitutive". This means that praise "not only

⁵² Pleins, *Songs of Tragedy, Hope and Justice*, 81.

⁵³ Pleins, *Songs of Tragedy, Hope and Justice*, 89.

⁵⁴ Brueggemann, *Israel's praise*, 3.

⁵⁵ Brueggemann, *Israel's praise*, 3.

addresses the God who is there before us but also is an act of constructing the theological world in which we shall interact with God”.⁵⁶ In other words, praise motivates an ethical response.

The relationship between worship and ethics is discussed in detail in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells.⁵⁷ Hauerwas and Wells noted that during worship “God trains his people to imitate him in habit, instinct, and reflex”.⁵⁸ Therefore, in the context of the psalms, when persons pray the words, for example, of 113:7-9, as mentioned above, they are motivated to also liberate the oppressed like God does.

This has also been highlighted by Joel LeMon, who in an essay on the Psalms as a source of ethics, discussed Psalm 146:5-9, a psalm of praise in which, as in Psalm 113, God is praised for God’s involvement with the oppressed, the powerless and those in need. He pointed out that such a psalm contains beliefs about God’s character and actions which can shape the character and activities of the faithful. For, as the community continually prays that God delivers the poor, needy and oppressed, then they are more likely to act in the same way as God.⁵⁹

Praise motivates the righteous to act like God, thus imitating God, because when humans praise God, as they recount God’s goodness, they are motivated as a result of gratitude, as mentioned above. Also when God is praised for God’s character and actions, those uttering the praise verbalize what God values and what pleases God, and they align themselves with God. As was mentioned above, God acts in the way that pleases God. Therefore, the righteous who offer

⁵⁶ Brueggemann, *Israel’s praise*, 4.

⁵⁷ See Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, Blackwell companions to religion (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

⁵⁸ Hauerwas and Wells, eds., *Blackwell Companion*, 25.

⁵⁹ Joel M. LeMon, “Saying Amen to Violent Psalms: Patterns of Prayer, Belief, and Action in the Psalter,” in *Soundings in the Theology of Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf Jacobson, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming). I am grateful to Dr. LeMon for allowing me access to his essay before its publication.

praises to God in realizing what is pleasing to God and what God's values are, they are motivated to act like God in demonstrating the same character and actions of care and liberation for the poor, needy and oppressed.

Therefore, when the righteous pray the words of Psalm 8 and praise God for creating them a little lower than God and giving them glory and honour to care for the world, they are motivated to exercise care for the world. When they pray the words of Psalm 33:5, the Lord "loves righteousness and justice", they are motivated to demonstrate God's righteousness and justice in the world. When they pray the words of Psalm 33:18-19 about God's protective care, they are motivated to participate in liberation of the oppressed. When they pray the words of Psalm 111:5, that God gives food to those who fear him, they are motivated to provide for the needy. When they pray the words of Psalm 111:9a, which says that God sent redemption to his people, they are motivated to liberate the oppressed. When they pray the words of Psalm 113:7-9 they are motivated the care for and liberate the poor, needy and oppressed.

8.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, imitation of God in the Psalms is motivated by appealing to the blessings of the righteous and punishment of the wicked, the fear of the Lord, and offering praise to God. The righteous are blessed with material prosperity, the friendship of the Lord, God's providential care and protection, and perseverance in the midst of adversity. The experience of material prosperity, God's provision and care motivate the righteous to imitate God's character and conduct out of their gratitude for God's goodness. Their experience of God's friendship results in their love and loyalty for God, which motivates them to respond by imitating God's character and actions in their dealings with others. In the midst of adversity, they persevere

because of their confidence that since God is a God of righteousness, justice and דָּקָה , God will deliver them from their troubles. Hence, the hope of God's deliverance motivates them to persevere in living out God's righteousness and justice, even when they are suffering. In addition to the blessings which the righteous receive, they are also motivated by their fear of the Lord. Finally, within the psalms, the psalmists respond to God's character and actions by offering praise and/or inviting others to praise God for God's character and actions. In the offering of praise, God's goodness is recounted and out of gratitude for God's goodness, the righteous are motivated to imitate God's character and actions. Praise also enables one to realize God's values and what is pleasing to God, which also motivates the imitation of God.

CHAPTER 9

IMITATIO DEI IN THE WORLD TODAY: THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO HIV AND AIDS IN BELIZE

9.1 Introduction

This thesis has developed the argument that a significant number of psalms present *imitatio Dei* as an ethical response for believers in God in the Old Testament. It was shown in chapter 5, through the exegetical study of Psalms 8, 15, 25, 72, 101, 111, 112 and 113, that *imitatio Dei* as an ethical response is a key ethical concept in the Psalms. Following the discussion of *imitatio Dei*, chapter 6 examined how Psalms 25, 33, 72, 111 and 113 portray God's character as implying ethical behaviour. As already noted in that chapter, God's character is described in terms of God's righteousness, justice and דָּוָן . Chapter 6 also showed that all of these characteristics are demonstrated in God's care and concern for, and liberation of the poor, needy and oppressed. This means that if the human ethical response is to be based on *imitatio Dei*, then it should also be expressed in caring for and liberation of the poor, needy and oppressed.

As we shall see, Christians in the world today are also expected to be representatives of God on earth, as was expected of Israel as the people of God in the Old Testament, for *imitatio Dei* continued into the ethical teaching of Jesus, Paul and also the Pastoral Epistles. The focus of this thesis is not the ethical teaching of Jesus; hence, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to do a detailed discussion of Jesus' ethical teaching. However, if Jesus included *imitatio Dei* in his ethical teaching, then it would confirm that it continues to be expected of Christians today as followers of Christ. Therefore, I will mention briefly Jesus' use of this Old Testament theme.

Jesus in his address to his followers, in the Sermon on the Mount, concluded a significant section with the phrase in Matthew 5:48: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The Sermon on the Mount constitutes a key part of Jesus’ ethical teaching, and verse 48 sums up a section of the teaching contained in verses 21-47. These verses are referred to as the six antitheses, as each of them begins with the words “you have heard that it was said . . .”, which contrasts the law with Jesus’ demands introduced by the words, “but I say to you . . .”.¹ The words in Matthew 5:48 are similar to the words of Leviticus 19:2 “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy”; hence, Jesus summed up this part of his teaching in verses 21-47 with the words of the command in the Torah to be holy as God is holy. Richard Hays, a prominent scholar in New Testament Ethics, pointed out that the admonition in Matthew 5:48 sums up the entire unit by blending echoes from both Leviticus 19:2 and Deuteronomy 18:13. The latter says in the LXX, “You shall be perfect before the Lord your God.” He further stated:

The concluding exhortation of Matthew 5 catches up these two ideas together: the community of Jesus’ disciples is to reflect the holiness of God as disclosed through the teaching of Jesus . . . The point is that the community of Jesus’ disciples is summoned to the task of showing forth the character of God in the world.²

In addition to Jesus’ teaching, *imitatio Dei* is also present in the ethical teaching of Paul. In Ephesians 4:25-32, Paul described what is expected of those who are living the new life in Christ, after which he said in Ephesians 5:1 “Therefore be imitators of God . . .”. Thus Paul was saying to his followers that their lives were to be a reflection of God’s character. The theme of

¹ See Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 207, 16.

² Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 329. See also Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 75, 77, 216- 17.

imitation of God also continues in the Pastoral Epistle of 1 Peter, in which the writer calls his readers to holy living. In this call to holy living, Peter quotes from Leviticus 19:2. 1 Peter 1:14-16: “Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’.”

Having briefly outlined *imitatio Dei* as a theme in the New Testament, we will now discuss an example of how *imitatio Dei* can be applied as an ethical response in the world today, by looking at the church’s response to HIV and AIDS in Belize. I have chosen to deal with an issue in Belize because I have worked there as a Methodist Deacon for 9 years. The situation of HIV and AIDS has been chosen as the topic for discussion for two reasons: 1) it is a major social issue that affects the country; 2) I was a member of the “Committee for a Faith Based Response to HIV and AIDS” (COMFORTH), which is an ecumenical initiative in Belize, funded by UNICEF. Through my involvement with this committee, I became aware of the severe consequences which the high incidence of this disease has on the country.

The aim of this chapter is to link the new insights we have gained from the psalms studied in this thesis, with an important ethical concern, to show how the churches’ response can be informed and enhanced by *imitatio Dei* as exemplified in the psalms. However, to put things in context, we will first look at some facts about the HIV and AIDS situation in Belize.

9.2 HIV and AIDS in Belize

Belize is located in Central America, with Mexico and Guatemala as its immediate neighbours. Its population consists of 314, 300 people, and at the end of 2007 there was an estimated HIV rate of infection of 2.1%, which ranked it as the highest rate of infection per

capita in Central America and fourth in the Caribbean.³ The first case of HIV was reported in the country in 1986, and since then there has been an increase in reported cases. For example, the Ministry of Health reported that from 1986 up to the end of 2006 there was a total of 3, 805 reported HIV infections, and from 1986 to the end of October 2007 there were 4, 131 reported infections.⁴

The main mode of transmission of HIV in Belize is through heterosexual activity, as shown from available information between 1986 and 1994, in which 71% of the reported AIDS cases during that period were attributed to heterosexual intercourse.⁵ I was not able to find more recent statistics for the period after 1994 to the present, with regards to mode of transmission. However, sexual transmission still remains the main mode of infection. For, other modes of transmission of the virus are usually through blood transfusion with infected blood and mother to child transmission either during pregnancy, birth or breast feeding. Transmission through blood transfusion has been eliminated because 100% of blood donated to the blood bank is tested prior to transfusion. Mother-to-child transmission has decreased since a high percentage of infected pregnant women receive anti-retrovirals, which are the medications used to treat HIV, to reduce the risk of mother to child transmission. For example in 2006, 88.5% of infected pregnant women were treated and in 2007, 83.3% received treatment.⁶

The high rate of HIV infection in Belize poses a great threat to the nation as a small developing country, for HIV and AIDS impact negatively on the development of a country, in a number of ways. One of the effects of the epidemic is a reduction in the working population,

³ National AIDS Commission, "UNGASS Country Progress Report: Belize,"(2008), <http://data.unaids.org/pub/Reoprt/2008/belize-2008-country-progress-report-en.pdf>.; accessed 31 December 2009.

⁴ Commission, "UNGASS Country Progress Report: Belize."

⁵ "National AIDS Commission: Responding to HIV/AIDS in Belize," www.ncabelize.org.; accessed 4 January 2010.

⁶ Commission, "UNGASS Country Progress Report: Belize."; accessed 31 December 2009.

since the highest percentage of infected persons in the country is in the age group 15-49. For example, in 2006 there were 443 reported new infections, 17 of which were under 15 years, while 426 were 15 years and over, with 372 (84%) being 15-49 years.⁷ It also results in an increase in the number of orphans as a result of children having lost their parents to HIV and AIDS.

HIV and AIDS also have a great socio-economic impact on countries. Poverty contributes to the spread of HIV, and it also leads to an increased impact of HIV on individuals, communities and societies. We will return to this later to look at how poverty exacerbates the spread of HIV, but at this point we will discuss the effect of HIV and AIDS on the socio-economic situation. As poverty exacerbates the spread, the HIV and AIDS epidemic leads to people who are already poor becoming more impoverished because of the death of wage-earners, consumption of savings and increasing expenses for medical treatment and funerals. Hence, as highlighted by Sonja Weinreich and Christoph Benn, there is a vicious circle between poverty and the spread of HIV. “A vicious circle develops: the poor have less access to treatment and care in the event of chronic sickness; they lose their already low incomes and thus have even less access to resources. This increases their risk of HIV infection.”⁸ This negative impact on individuals and their families extends to affect the entire economy of a country. For, as companies have an increase in employees being absent from work because of illness or because of caring for family members with HIV and AIDS, there will be an overall reduction in the work force and thus reduction in production. These effects will hamper the development of

⁷ Commission, “UNGASS Country Progress Report: Belize.”

⁸ Sonja Weinreich and Christoph Benn, *AIDS - Meeting the Challenge: Data, Facts, Background* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), 40.

an already struggling nation. Hence the reason why the increasing spread of HIV in Belize is cause for great concern.

It is this grave concern which has led to the need for a response from different groups within the country, including faith-based communities. We now turn to look at the response of the churches in Belize.

9.3 The Churches' Response to HIV and AIDS in Belize

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I was involved in an ecumenical project to help persons infected and affected by HIV and AIDS in Belize. This project was funded by UNICEF and was a joint effort of the Belize Council of Churches and the Evangelical Association of Belize. The first phase of the project was to raise awareness of the situation with HIV and AIDS in Belize. Therefore, representatives from these groups of churches attended a consultation hosted by UNICEF, which focused on making them aware of the HIV and AIDS situation in the country. At this consultation it was agreed that it was necessary for the churches to get involved in the fight against HIV and AIDS.

This decision was motivated by three main factors. Firstly, Belize is predominantly a Christian country in which the education system is based on a church-state partnership. Thus, most of the schools in the nation are managed by the Christian denominations. This means that the churches have contact with a large percentage of the population through the schools. Hence, the representatives from the various denominations, who were present at the consultation, agreed that the churches were in a position to make an impact in the nation with regards to HIV and AIDS education. Secondly, it was noted that the churches could offer pastoral care to those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS and thus enhance the work that was being done by the

secular organizations. The infected are those who have been infected with the virus, HIV and the affected are the family members of the infected. Thirdly, since Jesus showed care and compassion towards the sick and the outcast, then the representatives of the churches noted that, as Christ's representatives in the world, they should also respond with compassion to persons with HIV and AIDS.

Therefore, following the consultation, a Committee for a Faith-Based Response to HIV and AIDS (COMFORTH) was formed to spearhead this response. The response had three aims: 1) to provide care for the infected and affected, 2) to create programmes which will result in the prevention of the spread of HIV and 3) to fight against stigma and discrimination towards the infected and affected. Of the three aims that were identified, more work has been done in providing care for the infected and affected, since this was seen as the area in which the contribution of the churches was most needed. Thus, COMFORTH produced a "Manual for a Faith-Based Response to HIV and AIDS", which has been used to train persons to provide pastoral counselling and care for those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS.

The Christian community needs to be involved in the response to the HIV and AIDS situation, because, as stated above, they are God's representatives within the world, and, as God's representatives, they are called to reflect God's ethical character in caring for and liberating the poor, needy and oppressed as stated in Psalm 72:12-14. Persons infected with HIV are most frequently the poor, needy and oppressed; therefore, the Christian community has a responsibility to care for them and also to liberate them from factors and conditions that make them vulnerable to the disease.

As stated above, care has already been taking place from the churches' perspective. The area in which more work needs to be done is liberation of the population from the factors that

make them vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. This response of liberation will cover largely the area of prevention, for while at present there are medications to prolong life and enable the infected to enjoy a normal life, there is no cure for the disease. Hence, from the beginning of the epidemic, there has been an emphasis on prevention. Since the main mode of transmission is through sexual intercourse, prevention initiatives have focused on preventing sexual transmission of the virus. The virus (HIV) is usually transmitted as a result of unprotected sex and, in particular, as a consequence of sex with multiple partners. Therefore, prevention initiatives promote abstinence before marriage, sexual fidelity between uninfected partners and the use of condoms during sexual activity. COMFORTH decided not to place a main emphasis on the use of condoms, but rather to focus on changing sexual behaviour. However, the prevention of HIV and AIDS is a complex issue, for sexual behaviour is determined by factors such as cultural practices, socio-economic status and gender issues. Hence, in order to deal effectively with the issue of prevention, it is necessary to first identify the ethical issues involved.

9.4 Ethical issues involved in HIV and AIDS prevention

Some of the ethical issues that are involved in HIV and AIDS prevention are forced sex, poverty, gender inequality and stigma and discrimination.

9.4.1 Forced sex

As noted above, sexual behaviour is often influenced by cultural and social factors. In some instances persons are infected not because of a sexual choice but because of being forced into sexual intercourse, like in cases of rape and incest. In cases of sexual intercourse as a

consequence of violence, the risk of HIV transmission for women is higher, because the trauma leads to bleeding and hence a higher risk of HIV infection.⁹ In Belize, there are young girls who are victims of incest and thus are exposed to HIV infection not because of their own choices but because they are forced into sexual intercourse. There is also the myth among men that if they are HIV positive, sex with a virgin will cause them to be cured.¹⁰ Hence, there are HIV positive men who go after young girls to have sex with them, since it is more likely that they will be virgins. In this case we can see that young girls, who are subjected to this, will be at a high risk of becoming HIV infected.

9.4.2 Poverty

Poverty contributes to exposure to HIV infection because of the choices that some women make as a result of poverty.¹¹ There are young girls who are placed at risk of HIV infection because they are sexually involved with older men in exchange for money. There are many single parent families in Belize for whom the mother is the sole provider. In some of these cases, the mother has many children and she does not earn enough money to provide for them. In some cases, she may be unemployed, and in this case, money will not be available. These women allow their daughters to be sexually involved with older men for money, which enables them to take care of their other children.

Commercial sex workers are also placed at high risk of infection because of poverty. They are considered as being among the groups that are most vulnerable to HIV infection. Commercial sex workers are women who earn their income through having sex with several

⁹ Weinreich and Benn, *AIDS - Meeting the Challenge*, 29.

¹⁰ See Robert J. Vitillo, "The Human and Pastoral Challenges of HIV and AIDS," in *Reflecting Theologically on AIDS: A Global Challenge*, ed. Robin Gill, (London: SCM Press, 2007), 35.

¹¹ See Vitillo, "Humans and Pastoral Challenges," 34.

different men for money. Women who engage in sex work are often poor women who are unable to find other jobs and see no other way to earn a living.

Poverty also contributes to vulnerability because poor people will often be affected more from the effects of HIV infections than people who are wealthy. The poor are more likely to develop AIDS and die quickly. When persons are infected with the HIV, the virus attacks the immune system by destroying specific cells in the blood which are responsible for fighting infection. The body attempts to produce more cells, but, over a period of time, the number of cells decline and the immune system eventually stops working. When the immune system stops working, then the infected persons are at high risk of developing severe infections and disease, such as cancer. It is at this stage that the infected persons have developed AIDS.¹² Since the immune system is no longer working at this stage, then the body cannot fight these severe infections and the infected person eventually dies.

People who are infected with HIV can often live normal lives for many years before developing AIDS, if they are treated and if they take care of themselves through good nutrition. Those who are infected with HIV and live in poverty are often not able to afford medication and good nutrition; hence, their immune system will stop working quicker, thus leading to the development of AIDS and death.

9.4.3 Gender inequality

Weinreich and Benn defined gender as “the expectations and norms within a society with regard to appropriate male and female behaviour and roles, which attribute to women and men

¹² “HIV and AIDS,” www.nhs.uk/Conditions/HIV/Pages/Introduction.aspx; accessed 30 April 2010.

different access to status and power, including resources and decision-making power”.¹³ Gender inequalities have been known to contribute to the spread of HIV and AIDS.¹⁴ This is because if women and men are not equal in society, then this inequality is manifested in all relationships between women and men, including their sexual relationships. Inequalities in sexual relationships result in behaviours that place women at greater risk of HIV infection. For example, as pointed out by Weinreich and Benn, in many societies women generally do not have as much possibilities as men “to determine whether and under what conditions sexual intercourse will occur, [such as] whether condoms will be used”.¹⁵

Another example is the belief among men that to be “macho” means that a man should be sexually involved with many women. Hence, this leads to men having multiple sexual partners, and even after they are married, some have extra-marital affairs. While a man who has many women is seen as “macho”, a woman who does the same is seen, by society, as promiscuous or “loose”. This means that, generally, women tend to be faithful to one partner. However, if the husband is unfaithful, then he is at high risk of infection, which then means that his wife will also be at increased risk.

9.4.4 Stigma and discrimination

Stigma and discrimination often exists towards persons infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. Stigma is defined in the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* as “a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person”.¹⁶ In the case of HIV and AIDS,

¹³ Weinreich and Benn, *AIDS - Meeting the Challenge*, 26.

¹⁴ See Vitillo, “Humans and Pastoral Challenges,” 34. See also Weinreich and Benn, *AIDS - Meeting the Challenge*, 26-27.

¹⁵ Weinreich and Benn, *AIDS - Meeting the Challenge*, 26.

¹⁶ Judy Pearsall, ed. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1826.

stigma results because HIV infection is seen as being caused by sexual promiscuity, sex outside of marriage or prostitution.¹⁷ The stigma then results in discrimination which is defined as “the unjust or prejudiced treatment of different categories of people or things, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex”.¹⁸ In this case, the unjust treatment is because of HIV infection. It is often manifested in the rejection of persons who are HIV positive, by their families and the wider community. In cases where the families accept and care for their loved ones who are infected, then the family experiences the rejection by the community.

The lifestyle of the infected contributes to the level of stigma and discrimination that they experience. Often those who are infected are classified as either “innocent victims” or those who are responsible for their own infection. “Innocent victims” are frequently seen as the “faithful wife” who is innocently infected by her unfaithful husband. This may be problematic because unless both husband and wife were tested prior to the marriage and revealed their status to each other, then there can be no certainty about who is the “innocent victim”. There is a tendency to be more compassionate towards the so-called “innocent victim” than towards those who are viewed as responsible for their own infection. It is for this reason that when COMFORTH was formed in Belize, it was decided that the method of infection should not determine the response to the infected and affected.

It is important to eliminate stigma and discrimination in order for prevention efforts to be successful. Stigma and discrimination present “a fundamental obstacle in the fight against HIV/AIDS, since they make open discussion more difficult”.¹⁹ In the presence of stigma and discrimination, people will most likely not want to discuss the disease freely, nor will they get

¹⁷ Weinreich and Benn, *AIDS - Meeting the Challenge*, 46.

¹⁸ Pearsall, ed. *Oxford Dictionary*, 528.

¹⁹ Weinreich and Benn, *AIDS - Meeting the Challenge*, 46.

tested, the latter being because of fear of discrimination when their HIV status is known. In the case of those who know that they are HIV positive, they will often not engage in any discussion to get help or to even change their behaviour.²⁰ For to engage in discussion would mean that they have to reveal that they are HIV positive, and there is the possibility that they may experience discrimination.

9.5 Imitating God in responding to HIV and AIDS in Belize

I have mentioned above that this chapter is looking specifically at a response of liberation from the factors that contribute to the HIV and AIDS epidemic, and thus the focus here is largely on prevention, as this is where a lot more work needs to be done. Having discussed some of the ethical issues involved in prevention, I will look at the prevention initiatives under three headings: 1) dealing with issues of sex and gender; 2) being a prophetic voice in challenging structures that promote poverty; 3) providing an open and accepting environment for discussion of issues that contribute to prevention.

9.5.1 Dealing with issues of sex and gender

In light of the fact that the main method of transmission of HIV and AIDS is through sexual intercourse, the main thrust of prevention efforts have been to change sexual behaviours. From the churches' perspective, as mentioned above, this has been done by promoting abstinence before marriage and faithfulness in marriage between two uninfected partners. If sexual behaviours are transformed along these lines, it will result in the reduction of new infections. However, as we have already mentioned, there are many factors that lead to negative

²⁰ Weinreich and Benn, *AIDS - Meeting the Challenge*, 47.

sexual behaviour; hence, it is necessary to address those issues in order to transform sexual behaviour.

It begins with the churches' teaching on sexuality. The churches' teaching on sexuality needs to acknowledge that God created humans as sexual beings; hence, sexuality is a gift from God, which is to be celebrated and used responsibly.²¹ The teaching on sexuality also needs to promote the equality of men and women.

The creation account in Genesis 1:26-28 states that God created humankind, אדם, which includes both male and female, in God's image. Genesis 1:27 specifies even further that God created male and female. God blessed them both and gave them responsibility for God's creation. There is no sign in these verses that men and women are unequal in the sight of God, on the contrary, they are equal.

As was discussed in chapter 5, the theme of Genesis 1 is repeated in Psalm 8. In Psalm 8:4-6[5-7], as was previously discussed, God created humankind a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honour, which are royal attributes. In Psalm 8:4[5], the Hebrew word used here (אנוש) could mean either man or all human beings.²² In Psalm 8, אנוש occurs in parallelism with בן-אדם, which literally would be translated "son of man". However, בן does not only mean son, as in a male child, for it can also refer to a single individual in a group or a human being, for example, in Ezekiel 2:1.²³ בן-אדם is also used in some passages to refer to an individual human being (see Isa. 51:12; 56:2; Jer. 49:18-33; 50:40; 51:43; Psalm 80:17[18];

²¹ See Robin Gill, ed. *Reflecting Theologically on AIDS: A Global Challenge* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 20-21.

²² See Fritz Maass, "אנוש," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974), 346-47. See also HALOT, vol. 1, 70.

²³ See HALOT, vol. 1, 137-38.

146:3).²⁴ Therefore, in Psalm 8:4[5], with אנוש and בן־אדם being synonymous does not mean that the verse is only referring to a male. For, as previously noted, a synonymous parallelism does not mean saying the same thing, but adding some specification or intensification in the second colon. Therefore, in Psalm 8:4[5] the parallelism moves from the general to the specific, that is, God created human beings and the individual human being. So again in Psalm 8 we see that God has created both male and female as royal beings, giving both the responsibility of dominion. Since God has created all humans as royal beings, then God greatly values humankind and this is reflected in verse 4[5], which speaks of God’s care for humankind. Hence humans as God’s representatives must also value one another as God values them.²⁵

If emphasis is placed on the equality between male and female and the value and dignity which they must have for one another, this can help to reduce some of the negative attitudes towards women and promote more responsible and caring relationships between men and women.

In addition to the teaching on sexuality, the church’s response must also include the issue of forced sex which can be either rape or incest. I am using the specific example of incest, but the principles used can be applied to other forms of forced sex. The response needs to involve both liberation of those who are sexually abused and also dealing with their abusers. As was discussed in chapter 7, God’s justice requires both liberation of the oppressed and condemnation of the oppressors as stated in Psalm 72:4.²⁶ In this verse, the psalmist speaks of defending the cause of the poor, delivering the needy and crushing the oppressor. As mentioned in chapters 5, “crush” is used as a metaphor and gives the sense of ensuring that the oppressor

²⁴ See HALOT, vol. 1.

²⁵ See chapter 5 for discussion of Ps. 8.

²⁶ See chapter 7.

does not continue to oppress, and so liberation is not complete unless the oppressors are also confronted. Hence, as Christians embodying God's justice it is necessary to confront oppressors.

With regards to the issue of incest, therefore, it is not only that the children need to be removed from their abusers, but the abusers need to be dealt with. Usually if persons are caught in sexual abuse of children, they are convicted and dealt with by the law. However, this does not necessarily mean that the problem is solved, for some of them repeat the same crimes when they are released from prison. This means that unless sex offenders are transformed, they will continue to be abusers even if they have been convicted. In addition, there are some sex offenders who never get reported, hence they are not caught, and there are others who are tried in court but get off. Therefore, a comprehensive approach to the issue of incest must take all of this into consideration.

This means that removal or elimination of the oppressor needs to go deeper than the legal conviction. I would like to suggest that elimination of the oppressor cannot only be through physical punishment such as imprisonment, but it also needs to include an elimination of the desire of the oppressors to oppress. In this case, it would mean that abusers need to be rehabilitated and this is an area in which the churches can contribute, by assisting with programmes and creating support groups to assist such persons in their rehabilitation.

Generally, society does not give second chances and encourage people to change; hence, usually when a person has been convicted of a crime, on release from prison, they are forever seen in light of the original offence. The churches need to be different and create communities that will be forgiving and merciful and thus support rehabilitation of persons such as sex offenders. For if sex offenders continue to be rejected by the society it is likely that they will

continue to abuse children. The issue of creating forgiving and welcoming communities is developed further below.

Psalm 25:8, which was discussed in chapter 5, speaks of God as instructing sinners in the way; hence, in this psalm, the psalmist asks God not to remember his former sins. The psalmist asks for God's forgiveness because of his knowledge that God is merciful and good (Psalm 25:6-8). It was discussed in chapter 7 that God is both a God of vengeance and a God of compassion and mercy as stated in psalms such as 103:8 and 145:8-9:

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,
The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

It was also mentioned in chapter 7 that vengeance is not usually the last word with God. Even when God has acted in judgment there is usually room for forgiveness.²⁷ Hence, if the ethical response in dealing with issues of incest and other forms of sexual violence is based on *imitatio Dei*, then being like God means being willing to forgive and help the offenders to be rehabilitated. Such a community would not be neglecting the punishment aspect of justice, for the offenders would serve their time after being convicted by the law, but it should not end there.

9.5.2 The Church as a Prophetic Voice

It has been mentioned above that persons living in poverty are more vulnerable to HIV infection. Some of the reasons why poverty increases vulnerability to HIV infection have

²⁷ See chapter 7 for a detailed discussion of this.

already been mentioned. We have seen that the poor are often forced to risky sexual behaviour, such as prostitution, in order to gain money. God's justice involves care for and liberation of the oppressed, as already mentioned, hence, as imitators of God's justice, an appropriate response from the churches needs to address these underlying factors, such as poverty, that contribute to the sexual choices which increase exposure to HIV infection. In such cases, a response of justice involves both liberation of the oppressed persons and condemnation of the oppressors as already mentioned above. The oppressors in this case are the political leaders who are responsible for the structural injustices that promote poverty within the country.

Hence, in the churches' response to HIV and AIDS, it is necessary to fight to remove the structural injustices in the society that result in the high incidence of poverty in the country. Belize has an unemployment rate of 8.1% and 33.5% of the population is living below the poverty line.²⁸ The poverty line refers to the level "below which households will not have the wherewithal to maintain a healthy existence".²⁹ The churches need to advocate that the government work towards the elimination of factors that contribute to such a high rate of poverty.

Churches also need to take the lead in encouraging people within the country to vote for leaders who have the interest of the people at heart and not those who are interested in making themselves rich at the expense of the people. Belize has a history of political corruption, in which, for example, leaders have used funds which should have been used for development for

²⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Central America and Caribbean: Belize," <http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bh.html>; accessed 9 January 2010.

²⁹ Kari Consultants Ltd. and The National Assessment Team of Belize, "Poverty Assessment Report - Belize," <http://www.belize1.com/BzLibrary/trust466.html>; accessed 15 January 2010.

other purposes. Such corruption has contributed to increasing international debt in the country and thus worsening of the situation of poverty.³⁰

The churches need to educate the members of the government that their role as leaders is to be God's representatives and thus care for the people and not promote oppression, as we have seen from the psalms that have been studied in this thesis. Many of the members of the government consider themselves to be Christians; hence, they need to exercise their leadership roles in the way that God requires them to do so. As we saw in chapter 5, Psalm 72:2-4 and 12-14 speak of the king as God's representatives who defends the cause of the poor, delivers the needy and liberates them from oppression. The king in the Israelite society was the leader of the people, hence within the Belizean society the equivalent of the king would be the political leaders. As we also saw in chapter 5, Psalm 8, as mentioned above, shows that all humans have been given royal functions as God's representatives. More specifically, Christians are God's representatives on earth, as mentioned above; therefore, it is the responsibility of the churches to ensure that those who are put in leadership are faithful to the task of taking care of the people rather than oppressing them.

Just as the psalmists lament against injustice and corruption in Psalms 94 and 109, in the same way, the churches should lament, both in the public sphere and within worship, against the injustices within the society that promote poverty and ultimately lead to risky sexual behaviour and vulnerability to HIV infection.³¹

³⁰ For a detailed discussion on corruption and what churches can do to end it, see Daryl Balia, *Make Corruption History* (London: SPCK, 2009).

³¹ See Denise M. Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry: Rereading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/AIDS Pandemic," in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 206-07. Gill, ed. *Reflecting Theologically on AIDS*, 25-26.

9.5.3 The Church as an open, accepting and forgiving community

As noted above, one of the methods of prevention of HIV and AIDS is through education about sexuality. The churches need to create an environment of openness to facilitate teaching and discussions on issues related to sexuality. As previously mentioned, one of the methods of prevention is faithfulness between two uninfected partners. Within the Belizean context, there are many persons who do not know their HIV status; hence, when couples get married, they usually do not know the HIV status of their partner. In order to know one's HIV status, a person must be tested, for one cannot tell by a person's appearance whether or not they are infected with the virus. For, most infected persons remain healthy and look quite normal for a number of years, especially when receiving treatment, and will not demonstrate any signs or symptoms of illness. An HIV positive person only becomes ill when the immune system is no longer able to resist the virus, at which time they develop AIDS, as mentioned above.

Therefore, to promote prevention, people need to be encouraged to get tested, and to be willing to discuss their results with those nearest to them, especially if they are preparing for marriage. Many times however, persons do not want to be tested, and are not willing to discuss their status because of the fear that they will experience discrimination if they are positive. The churches can help in this area by creating an environment which is open, accepting and forgiving rather than being condemnatory and judgmental. As was discussed in chapter 6, one of God's ethical qualities is *חסד*, hence for an ethical response based on *imitatio Dei* the churches need to embody God's *חסד*. In our previous discussion of the meaning of *חסד* we noted that there is no one English word that completely defines it, but it is used in many nuances in the psalms, including mercy, forgiveness, faithfulness, kindness and deliverance. We also noted that *חסד* is

demonstrated within the context of a relationship.³² Therefore if churches embody God's דָּוָה , they will create communities that exhibit kindness, mercy, forgiveness and care. The presence of such qualities will enable open acceptance, which will consequently result in the willingness to engage in open discussion on issues related to HIV and AIDS, and it will also contribute to the elimination of stigma and discrimination.

Such open discussions about sexuality need to be held in the different age and gender groups in the churches. Generally, in addition to worship services, churches have specific group meetings for children, youth, young adults, men and women. Therefore, it is necessary to hold open and honest discussions on sexuality in these specific groups. Honesty is very important in such discussions. It is necessary to be honest in giving accurate information about sexuality and HIV and AIDS, and it is important for people to be honest in sharing their stories. Psalm 15:4 states that speaking the truth is necessary for one to dwell in God's presence, as was previously discussed in chapter 5.³³

Open and honest discussions also need to be encouraged in intimate relationships, hence it needs to be included in pre-marital counselling and encouraged in marriage. In pre-marital counselling, the two persons preparing for marriage should be encouraged to engage in open and honest discussions about their sexuality and other issues of their lives in general. Churches should implement policies for pre-marital counselling to include mandatory HIV testing before marriage, and mandatory disclosure of the HIV status of the two persons to each other. If there is a community of openness and acceptance, then it is more likely that people will be willing to engage in such discussions and to share information about their HIV status.

³² See chapter 6 for detailed discussion of דָּוָה .

³³ See chapter 5.

Once the testing is done, the clergy needs to be prepared for cases where one of those tested is positive. In this case, the couple can choose either to proceed in getting married, or the HIV negative partner may decide not to proceed with the marriage. The choice of whether the marriage proceeds should be left to the couple involved and churches must not refuse to perform weddings of HIV positive persons, but should rather be supportive of the couple and their families. To refuse to conduct such a marriage would be discriminatory.

9.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has shown how *imitatio Dei*, in the psalms, can be applied in a contemporary ethical situation. Previous chapters have demonstrated that *imitatio Dei* is a central aspect of Old Testament ethics. This chapter has shown that *imitatio Dei* was not only central to the Old Testament, but that Jesus also called on his followers to demonstrate God's character in the world, as evidenced in Matthew 5:48. With regards to the specific issue of the churches' response to HIV and AIDS in Belize, the chapter has shown how a comprehensive approach of *imitatio Dei* addresses the issues involved in the HIV and AIDS epidemic in a holistic way. There are many factors that contribute to the high incidence of HIV and AIDS in Belize. Hence, prevention of HIV and AIDS cannot be achieved by simply promoting the need for change in sexual behaviour without addressing the underlying factors that influence sexual behaviour, an approach inspired by *imitatio Dei*.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

This study has examined *imitatio Dei* in the Psalms as a principle for ethical character and conduct in the world today. In seeking to achieve this aim, the following questions were explored: Is *imitatio Dei* a theme in the Psalms? What is the nature of God's character in the Psalms? Does God's vengeance affect *imitatio Dei* as a principle for ethics? What is the motivation for ethical character and conduct in the psalms? How can *imitatio Dei* be practically demonstrated in the world today?

This concluding chapter will summarize the findings, draw conclusions, give implications of the findings and suggest avenues for future research in the field of the ethics of the Psalms.

10.1 Summary of findings

The first four chapters were the preliminary chapters, with chapter 1 giving the introduction to the thesis, chapter 2 giving a literature review of previous work done on *imitatio Dei* as a basis for Old Testament ethics, chapter 3 identifying the methodological approach and chapter 4 giving a brief summary of the ancient Near Eastern context of ethics in the Psalms. Following these preliminary chapters, the five questions listed above were examined in chapters 5–9, the findings of which will now be summarized.

Chapter 5 examined the question: Is *imitatio Dei* a theme in the Psalms? In seeking to address this question, eight psalms were examined in this chapter, namely Psalms 8, 15, 25, 72, 101, 111, 112 and 113. The evidence has shown that *imitatio Dei* is a principle for ethical

character and conduct in these psalms, thus we can say that *imitatio Dei* is a key principle for ethical character and conduct in the Psalms. This implies that God's character and conduct are exemplary of the ethical character and conduct that humans ought to demonstrate. The eight psalms show that the righteous are expected to reflect God's character in their lives. From Psalm 8, we see that humans are created in the image of God and are given royal functions to be God's representatives on earth. Humans are crowned with "glory" and "honour", attributes which usually describe God. As God's representatives, therefore, humans are expected to reflect God's character and actions in their own ethical character and conduct.

Psalms 72 and 101 speak of the king as the imitator of God. In Psalm 72, the psalmist prays for the king to be endowed with God's justice and righteousness, so that he will rule by caring for and liberating the poor and needy, as God cares for the poor and needy. In Psalm 101, the king pledges to rule ethically in ways that are reflective of God's character and conduct. He will walk in the blameless way as God is blameless, he hates evil as God hates evil, he cares for the faithful as God cares for those who fear God, and he will "destroy" the wicked as God "destroys" the wicked. In Psalm 15, the righteous is described by the attributes of צדק, תמים and אמת, which are attributes of God. The righteous, like God, also despises the wicked and honours those who fear God and the righteous cares for the poor as God cares for the poor.

Psalms 111 and 112 are twin acrostic psalms which are similar in content and structure; hence, they are interpreted in light of each other. Psalm 111 portrays God as gracious, compassionate, and caring for the poor; Psalm 112 describes the righteous as gracious, compassionate and caring for the poor. Psalm 113 calls on humans to praise God for his majesty, care for and liberation of the poor, needy and oppressed. In other words, this psalm calls on humans to praise God for his character and conduct. It connects with Psalm 111, in its

description of God's character and with Psalm 112, in its description of the righteous. Therefore, Psalm 113 invites humans to respond by also caring for the poor, needy and oppressed, as God cares for them. Finally, in Psalm 25 the psalmist prays to know God's ways and to be enabled to walk in those ways. "Way" is used metaphorically to mean "way of life" or "life-style"; hence, God's ways are demonstrated in God's character and actions towards God's people. "Walk" is also used metaphorically to refer to how one conducts oneself. Hence, when the psalmist wants to walk in God's ways, the psalmist wants to conduct himself according to God's own conduct.

If humans are to imitate God, then the nature of God's character must be known. Therefore, chapters 6 examined the question: What is the nature of God's character in the Psalms? This chapter examined the portrayal of God's character in Psalms 25, 33, 72, 111 and 113. The findings have shown that God's character is grounded in God's צדק/צקדה, חסד (righteousness) and משפט (justice). Psalms 25 and 33 show that God's חסד is demonstrated in God's faithful care for his people, which is manifested in forgiveness from sin, protection and deliverance from distress. Psalms 33, 72, 111 and 113 show that God's righteousness and justice are demonstrated in liberation of the poor, needy and oppressed. The findings of this chapter, therefore, conclude that the ethical attitudes and behaviour which human beings are expected to demonstrate are inherent to God's own character and actions. Therefore, God demonstrates the actions that God requires of humans.

Chapter 7 examined the question: What is the nature of God's vengeance and how does it affect *imitatio Dei* as a principle for ethics? This question is important because divine justice is not only expressed as care and liberation of the poor, needy and oppressed, but it is also expressed as condemnation of the oppressors. This aspect of divine justice is expressed in the psalms of vengeance, in which the psalmists pray curses against their oppressors. Such prayers

for vengeance have been and continue to be problematic for Christians, for they are viewed as being immoral and contradictory to the Christian message of love and forgiveness. Therefore, the question is asked whether humans ought to imitate such vengeance.

In seeking to address the question, two vengeance psalms were examined in this chapter, Psalms 94 and 109. The evidence has shown that the psalms of vengeance are not simply songs of hate or cries for retaliation and revenge. Rather, they are cries against the injustices and oppression which God's people experienced at the hands of their oppressors. In crying out against these injustices, the psalmists' call for God to exercise vengeance against their oppressors is a call for God's expression of righteousness, justice and דָּם . For, the oppressed can only be truly liberated if the oppressors are prevented from causing oppression in the future. In addition, the psalmists pray for God's vengeance against their enemies because of their confidence that God "stands at the right hand of the needy", and therefore God will deliver them from their enemies. These psalms of vengeance, therefore, do not call for human beings to act in revenge, but to imitate God in being angry at oppression and injustice and to be like God and "stand at the right hand of the needy". This means that in enacting God's justice, righteousness and דָּם , human beings need to seek to speak out against structural injustices in the society and confront the oppressors.

Chapter 8 examined the question: What is the motivation for ethical character and conduct in the psalms? This chapter is important because there is often a gap between knowing what one ought to do and actually doing it. Therefore, it is necessary to determine what would make humans imitate God's character and conduct. From the evidence of this chapter, we have seen that, in the Psalms, imitation of God is motivated by appealing to the blessings and punishment of the righteous and the wicked respectively, the fear of the Lord and offering praise

to God. The righteous are blessed with material prosperity, the friendship of the Lord, God's providential care and protection and perseverance in the midst of adversity. The experience of material prosperity and God's provision and care motivate the righteous to imitate God's character and conduct out of their gratitude for God's goodness. Their experience of God's friendship results in their love and loyalty for God, which motivates them to respond by imitating God's character and actions in their dealings with others. As a result of their love for God, they are also motivated by their desire to please God. In the midst of adversity, they persevere because of their confidence that since God is a God of righteousness, justice and דִּינָה , he will deliver them from their troubles. Hence, the hope of God's deliverance motivates them to persevere in living out God's righteousness and justice even in the midst of suffering.

In addition to the blessings which the righteous receive, they are also motivated by their fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord means reverence and love for God. Even though the psalms speak of the blessings of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked, there are many psalms in which the righteous were suffering and the wicked seemed to be prospering. This indicates that the scheme of rewards and punishment is not always enacted as expected. Hence, in the absence of these external benefits of ethical living, the righteous are motivated by their fear of God.

Finally, within the psalms, the psalmists respond to God's character and actions by offering praise and/or inviting others to praise God for God's character and actions. In the offering of praise, God's goodness is recounted and out of gratitude for God's goodness, the righteous are motivated to imitate God's character and actions. Praise also enables one to realize God's values and what is pleasing to God, which also motivate the imitation of God. The

findings of this chapter imply that humans respond to God's demand for imitation because of their relationship of love and affection for God.

Chapter 9 examined the final question: How can *imitatio Dei* be practically demonstrated in the world today? This chapter applied the principle of *imitatio Dei* to the HIV and AIDS situation in Belize. The chapter has shown that *imitatio Dei* was not only central to the Old Testament, but that Jesus also called on his followers to demonstrate God's character in the world, as evidenced in Matthew 5:48. With regards to the specific issue of the churches' response to HIV and AIDS in Belize, the chapter has shown that a comprehensive approach of *imitatio Dei* can address the issues facing the HIV and AIDS epidemic in a holistic way. This is one example of an application of *imitatio Dei* to a contemporary situation, which demonstrates how it can be applied to other contexts.

In conclusion, the findings of this study show that the Psalms can contribute to ethics today through the principle of imitation of God. Therefore, the Psalms are important to Christians today, not simply as a resource for prayer and worship, but also as one which can play a major role in the inculcation of virtues and thus shaping moral character and conduct in humans today.

10.2 Areas for future research

In the course of this study, the following were identified as areas for further study in the ethics of the psalms:

Firstly, throughout the study, ethics has been referred to in terms of character and conduct. The field of character formation in biblical ethics has become an important one, as seen in the two recent publications of *Character Ethics and the Old Testament* and *Character Ethics*

and the New Testament. Apart from an essay by Clinton McCann in *Character Ethics and the New Testament*: “Towards a nonretaliatory lifestyle: The Psalms, the Cross, and the Gospel”, as mentioned in chapter 3, there are no essays on the Psalms in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament*. This study has not been able to examine character formation in the Psalms. It would be worth doing further studies to examine how the psalms contribute to character formation.

Secondly, it was noted in the thesis that in order to imitate God then the nature of God’s character has to be known. This examination of the nature of God’s character began in this thesis in chapters 6 and 7. These two chapters have not exhausted the description of God’s character in the Psalms. For example, the holiness of God is an aspect of God’s character in the Psalms that was not examined. Hence, there is need to do further studies in this area.

Thirdly, it was seen that in prayers for vengeance the psalmists leave vengeance to God. There is need to do further studies to examine how the use of psalms of vengeance can help communities to cope with situations of violence and oppression.

Fourthly, it was indicated in chapter 3 that there are many more psalms that contain ethical material than the eleven that were examined in this thesis. Therefore, there is scope for more studies on the ethics of the psalms in order to identify other ways, other than *imitatio Dei*, that the Psalms address ethics.

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