

'Your Servant': The Ultimate Profile of the Psalmist According to Ps 143

Willem A.M. Beuken, SJ
Catholic University, Louvain

Recent research into the Book of Psalms has exhibited a vigorous tendency to focus on the literary and theological parameters which determined the compilation of the psalms into smaller and larger collections.¹ Within the variety of scholarly options which have emerged on the question, the following points of agreement can be discerned with respect to the so-called fifth book, Pss 107-150.²

(1) Pss 1-2 and Pss 146-150 constitute the framework of the book. The first group sets the book in the context of Torah and wisdom while the second sets it against the background of the ever increasing praise of God's dominion.

(2) The fifth book of the Psalter consists in fact of Pss 107-145. Ps 107 and Ps 145 thus constitute the framework of the collection, each sharing the intention to announce the praise of 'the love (*hesed*) of YHWH', unlimited in time (107:1) and space (145:8-10).

(3) This fifth book consists of a number of smaller compilations, among which Pss 138-145 form the last collection of 'Psalms of David'. Here too Ps 138 and Ps 145 constitute a framework, each singing praise of 'the name of YHWH' (138:2; 145:1-2, 21) with the help of semantic allusions to the revelation of YHWH on Mt. Sinai (Exod 33-34).

(4) There would appear to be a sufficient number of indications to consider Ps 139 and Ps 144 as an inner framework of the collection

1 Wilson 1993; Millard 1994; Zenger 1998.

2 The survey is borrowed from Zenger 1998: 77-102.

in question. The important key word 'to know' (*yāda'*) in 139:1-4, for example, is taken up in 144:3 ('What is mortal man that you should think of him?'). 139:19-24, likewise, appear to announce the struggle of the anointed one while 144:1-2, 9-11 proclaim victory therein.

(5) Pss 140-143 thus form a distinct group of prayers of supplication. They are mutually related by a variety of motifs such as a petition to listen (140:7; 141:1; 142:2; 143:1) and the praise of YHWH's name (140:14; 142:8; 143:11).

Against the background of such data the question arises as to whether Ps 143, with its striking inclusion 'your servant' (vv. 2, 12), plays a part in the 'concatenation', if not of the entire book then at least of the fifth collection, Pss 107-145.

1. The Servant(s) in the Book of Psalms, Particularly in Psalms 107-145

We begin this study with a survey of the use of the verb 'to serve', and more particularly of the noun 'servant' in the Psalter (root 'bd).

book	occurrence	verb	noun			
			David	other	psal- mist	'servants'
intro	2:11	x				
I (3-41)	18:1		x			
	18:44	x				
	19:12,14				xx	
	22:31	x				
	27:9				x	
	31:17				x	
	34:23					x
	35:27				x	
	36:1		x			
II						
(42-72)	69:18				x	
	69:37					x
	72:11	x				

III

(73-89)	78:70		x		
	79:2,10				xx
	86:2,4,16			xxx	
	89:4,21,40		xxx		
	89:51				x

IV

(90-106)	90:13,16				xx
	97:7				x
	100:2	x			
	102:15				x
	102:23	x			
	102:29				x
	105:6,17			xx	
	105:25				x
	105:26,42			xx	
	106:36	x			

V

(107-145)	109:28			x	
	113:1				x
	116:16			x	
	119:17,23,38, 49, 65,76,84, 122,124,125, 135, 140,176			13 times	
	119:191				x
	123:2				x
	132:10		x		
	134:1				x
	135:1,9,14				xxx
	136:22		x		
	143:2,12			xx	
	144:10		x		

finale
(146-150)

none

Total		7	8	5	26	18
-------	--	---	---	---	----	----

We can discern the following results from the above overview:

(1) The term 'servant' is found most frequently as a self-styled title on the part of the psalmist, with one exception (35:27) always in the context of direct divine address ('your servant').

(2) The aforementioned self-styled title on the part of the psalmist is absent in the fourth book where the term is applied to other individuals: Abraham (vv.6, 42), Joseph (v.17:'slave'), and Moses (v.26) in Ps 105, 'the servants of YHWH'; in Pss 90:13,16; 102:15,29; 105:25; and 'the worshipers of idols' in Ps 97:7.

(3) In the fifth book (in contrast to the fourth book) the term 'your servant' dominates, applied to the psalmist (17 times), especially in the large number of occurrences (13) in Ps 119.

(4) In the fifth book (once again in contrast to the fourth book) the term 'servant' is also applied to David, conspicuously enough once in the same form - 'your servant' - employed as a self-styled title by the psalmist (132:10), and once in the form 'his servant', which characterises the first and the third book (144:10; cf. 18:1; 36:1; 78:70; 89:4, 21).

(5) In the fifth book, David is called 'servant' in the context of a prayer for assistance on the part of the king (132:10: "For your servant David's sake do not turn away the face of your anointed"; 144:10: "... who gives victory to kings, who rescues David his servant").

(6) While the expression 'servants of YHWH' (or with a suffix referring to YHWH) can be found in all of the collections, its strongest representation is in books IV and V (11 times out of 16).

This inventarisation gives the impression that the fifth book achieves a sort of synthesis of the various applications of the title 'servant'. While the psalmist himself is the primary bearer thereof, he fulfils this role in imitation of David as a pioneer among those who sing the praises of YHWH. The synthesis is reinforced by the absence of the term in the finale (Pss 146-150).

With respect to the application of the term 'your servant' in the fifth book there is only one occurrence in which the reference is to a deed on the part of the servant which does not directly depend on what YHWH has done (119:23: "Even though princes sit plotting against me, your servant will meditate on your statutes"). The servant's actions are almost always in response to mostly hoped for

and sometimes already realised interventions on the part of YHWH in his regard:

109:28 Let my assailants be put to shame, may your servant be glad

116:16-17 I am your servant... You have loosed my bonds, I will offer you

119:17 Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may... observe your word

119:140 Your promise is well tried, and your servant loves it

119:176 Seek your servant. Truly, I do not forget your commandments

Thus the concept 'your servant' functions primarily in the psalmist's appeal to YHWH to act on his behalf,³ especially in Ps 119:

17 Deal bountifully

38 Confirm your promise

49 Remember your word

76 Let your love be ready to comfort

84 When will you judge those who persecute me?

122 Be surety

124 Deal according to your love

125 Give understanding

135 Make your face shine

176 Seek

This survey makes it clear that the term 'your servant' in the fifth book, prior to Ps 143, primarily embodies the psalmist's desire for YHWH's fidelity and protection. Ps 143 constitutes a sort of adjoining summary hereto. It corresponds with Ps 119, where, as with both occurrences in the present psalm, 'your servant' is an interested party in an appeal for YHWH's active intervention: 'Enter not in judgement' (v.2); 'Destroy all the adversaries' (v.12). In addition, the confession 'I am your servant' in the final verse alludes to Pss 116:16 and 119:125, all the more so since the confession in question is found nowhere else

3. On only one occasion do we find the expression 'your servant' in a retrospective reference to God's deeds: 'You have dealt well with your servant' (Ps 119:65).

in the book of Psalms (only in 2 Sam 15:34; 1 Kgs 1:26; 18:36; 2 Kgs 16:7).

Such fundamental agreements encourage us to search for further idiomatic associations. They support the impression that Ps 143 has the character of a summary, portraying the psalmist as a 'servant' of God with topics borrowed from the book of Psalms itself.

Excursus. A survey of further idiomatic associations:⁴

(1) Only in Ps 119:84; 143:2 do we find mention of a 'judgement' (*mishpat*) in which God is called to arbitrate between the psalmist, explicitly referred to as his 'servant', and his enemies (cf. Ps 35, v.23 in connection with v.27, and the use of the term 'judgement' in Ps 119:121, 132, 149).

(2) Besides Pss. 143:12; 119:76; 31:17 also mention the 'steadfast love' (*hesed*) of God for his 'servant', the psalmist.

(3) 'Enemies' (*ōyebim*) of the psalmist as 'servant' of God appear in Pss 119:98; 143:3,9,12, as well as, and primarily, in psalms ascribed to David (18:1,4,18,38,41,49; 27:2,6,9; 31:9,16,17; 35:19,27; 69:5,18,19; 89:4,21,23,40,43,52; 132:10,18).⁵

(4) The fact that the psalmist endures 'trouble' (*sāra*: Ps 143:2,11,12) as 'servant' of God is a significant topic of the psalms ascribed to David (31:8,17; 86:2,4,7,16; 116:3,16).⁶

(5) It is striking that the prayer: 'Teach me to do your will' (v.10) recapitulates a characteristic prayer of Ps 119: 'Teach me your statutes' (vv. 12,26,64,66,68,108,124,135; cf. vv.71,73: 'that you may teach me'; v.171: 'that I may learn'). The prayer: 'Teach me' (*lammēd*) is only found elsewhere in the psalter in Ps 25:4-5: "Teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me". The latter's concern for the 'way of God' is also evident in the context of the prayer of Ps 143 (v.8: "Let me know the way I should go"; v.10: "Your good spirit shall lead me on level ground"). It would appear, therefore, that Ps 143 employs this theme to allude to the first and last collections within the book of Psalms.

4 A detailed survey can be found in Van der Ploeg 1974: 465-9.

5 Verses mentioned in italics contain the term 'servant', in normal the term 'enemies'.

Verses mentioned in italics contain the term 'servant', in normal the term 'trouble'.

2. The Vicissitudes of the Psalmist in Ps 143

Translation (based on the Revised Standard Version) and
Colometric Division

1. A Psalm of David.
YHWH, Hear my prayer!
Give ear to my supplications!
In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness!
2. Enter not into judgement with your servant
For no person living is righteous before your face.
3. Truly, the enemy has pursued me,
he has crushed my life to the ground.
He has made me sit in darkness
like those long dead.
4. Therefore my spirit faints within me,
my heart within me is appalled.
5. I remember the days of old,
I meditate on all that you have done,
I muse on what your hands have wrought.
6. I stretch out my hands to you,
my soul thirsts, like parched ground, for you. [Selah]
7. Make haste, answer me, YHWH!
My spirit fails!
Hide not your face from me,
lest I be like those who go down to the Pit.
8. Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love.
For in you I put my trust.
Let me know the way I should go.
For to you I lift up my soul.
9. Deliver me from my enemies, YHWH!
To you I have fled for refuge!
10. Teach me to do your will.
For you are my God!
Your good spirit shall lead me
on level ground.
11. For your name's sake, YHWH, you shall preserve my life.
In your righteousness you shall bring my soul out of trouble.

12. And in your steadfast love you shall cut off my enemies,
and destroy all the adversaries of my soul.

For I am your servant.

Next to the structural arrangement of a psalm which is based on semantic and morphological data,⁷ it also remains possible to divide a psalm according to its hierarchical concatenation of sentences. Both arrangements need not necessarily coincide.⁸ Set out according to its course of action, Ps 143 exhibits the following units:

1. Vv.1-2 contain a series of four appeals to YHWH: 'hear - give ear - answer me - enter not into judgement', which is concluded by a motivation: 'For no person living is righteous before your face'.

2. Vv. 3-4 describe what the enemy has done, by means of three verbs: 'he has pursued me - he has crushed me - he has made me sit in darkness' (v.3), followed by the consequences thereof: 'my spirit faints - my heart is appalled' (v.4). While v.4, taken on its own, introduces the activity of a new actant, the psalmist, this is presented as the consequence of the deeds of the enemy (*wayyiqtol* in v.4a, parallel with *yiqtol* in second position in v.4b; not 1st person singular, as in vv.5-6, but 'my spirit/my heart').

3. It is only in vv.5-6 that the psalmist is formally presented as acting independently, once again with four verbs: 'I remember - I meditate - I muse - I stretch out'.

These three series of verbs (mentioned under 1-3) are rounded off each with a comparison - the first implicit: 'For no person living' (v.2b), the second and the third explicit: 'like those long dead' (v.3b) and 'like parched ground' (v.6b).

4. YHWH returns as actant of the following series of appeals in vv.7-10a: 'make haste to answer - hide not your face - let me hear - let me know - deliver me - teach me'. This series exhibits two unique characteristics:

- a. It has its continuation in three verse lines (vv.10b-12), in which YHWH is indeed the person acting, not of a *qetol*, but rather of a *yiqtol*,

7 For a structural analysis, cf. Ravasi; Girard 1994; Auffret 1995. Girard's study stands out on account of its recognition of a 'double structure superposée'.

8 On the basis of semantic repetitions, for example, one can view vv. 1-7 as a unity surrounded chiasmically by the imperative 'answer me' (vv. 1, 7) and the term 'your face' (vv. 2, 7; Auffret 1995: 250-4). According to the course of action, however, v.7 begins a new segment.

which, moreover, is not in the first position. The aspect of the action thus shifts from appeal to expectation for the future and from YHWH himself to his attributes: 'your good spirit - your name - your steadfast love'. For this reason we do not translate vv.10a-12a with imperatives, as the RSV does, but rather with future tenses (cf. LXX, Vulgate, Jerome *Iuxta Hebraeos*).⁹ These three verse lines are comparable with v.4 which presents the consequences of the enemy's deeds. Furthermore, the first clauses of these two segments form a contrast around the word 'spirit': 'My spirit faints within me' (v.4) and 'Let your good spirit lead me' (v.10b).

b. In the second series of appeals to YHWH, each appeal contains a motivation in the second colon which has to do with the psalmist himself: 'my spirit fails - lest I be like those who go down to the Pit - in you I put my trust - to you I lift up my soul - to you I have fled - you are my God' (vv.7-10a). The first and second motivations concern the psalmist's physical powerlessness and ultimate collapse, the three following his relationship with YHWH, and the last YHWH's relationship with the psalmist. This series of motivations further explains those of v.1 ('faithfulness/righteousness'), which similarly assumes a relationship between YHWH and the psalmist without explicitly mentioning the latter.

A survey of the three clusters of action reveals that the third would appear to be a continuation of the first. This is hardly surprising, given that YHWH is the acting person in each case:

1-2	7-10a
hear	
give ear	
answer me	make haste, answer me
enter not into judgement	hide not your face
for no one is righteous before your face	lest I be like those who go to the Pit
	let me hear
	let me know
	deliver me
	teach me

⁹ Girard (1994: 476) recognises the future tenses, Auffret (1995:255: 'deux demandes') does not.

The third 'act' constitutes a climax with respect to the first (v.7: 'Make haste'). At the same time, there is an evident reversal since 'your face' is no longer associated with 'judgement' (v.2), but rather with deliverance from 'the Pit'. It should be noted that the threat of enemy hostility in this 'act' plays a subordinate role. Although it is clearly mentioned (v.9; plural), direct address to YHWH would appear to have forced the adversaries into the background (note the word order: 'away from my enemies - YHWH - to you'). This prayer for deliverance, moreover, is surrounded by prayers for knowledge concerning 'the way I should go' (v.8b) and 'to do your will' (v.10a). In principle, the psalmist has placed the enemy's hostility behind him and is now looking to the future, a future in which his relationship with YHWH is all that still counts.

Using compound nominal clauses, the appendix to the third 'act', vv.10b-12, portrays the situation hoped for by the psalmist after YHWH's intervention. The 'act' itself is meaningfully concluded with a confession: 'For you are my God! (v.10a). The caesura which follows expresses the unspoken expectation that YHWH will answer the psalmist's prayer. The appendix portrays a new phase in the life of the psalmist, one which is characterised by the protection of the three attributes of YHWH: 'your good spirit - your name - your steadfast love' (each in a syntactic position at the beginning of the verse line). The concepts 'name' and 'steadfast love' echo the psalms ascribed to David as well as the psalms of praise in general (18:50-51; 31:4, 8, 17; 48: 10-11; 103:1, 4, 8, 11, 17; 106:1, 7, 8, 45, 47), and even on one occasion in combination with 'spirit' of YHWH (33:5, 6, 18, 21, 22). The specific concept 'the good spirit of YHWH' is only found in one other place in the Scriptures: "you gave your good spirit to instruct them" (Neh 9:20). As such, therefore, Ps 143, the last 'Psalm of David', offers a perspective on an existence under the protection of YHWH's 'spirit', 'name' and 'steadfast love', in which David's personal expectations and those of his people whom he leads in prayer coincide.

As we noted above, vv.10b-12 are comparable with v.4 from the syntactical perspective. V.4 reveals how the psalmist reacts to the way the enemy treats him (*wayyiqtol*), while vv.10b-12 illustrate the expected outcome of the intervention which YHWH has been called upon to perform. One difference is evident, however, namely that the psalmist himself reacts to the hostile deed of the enemy while the expected consequences of YHWH's intervention restores the damage done by the enemy. The latter has brought an almost fatal end to the

mobility of the psalmist: 'He has crushed my life to the ground, he has made me sit in darkness like those long dead' (v.3). The psalmist himself is unable to move of his own accord: 'My spirit faints within me' (v.4). By contrast, YHWH's hoped for intervention will restore the psalmist's freedom of movement, albeit along a track determined by YHWH alone: 'Let me know the way I should go' (v.8); 'Your good spirit shall lead me on level ground' (v.10); 'You shall bring my soul out of trouble' (v.11). At the same time, the transformation from enforced immobility to restored mobility does not take place without the psalmist but rather via his trust in God: 'To you I lift up my soul' (v.8); 'To you I have fled for refuge' (v.9).

The psalmist's progress does not simply run from misfortune to deliverance. He undergoes this process as 'servant of YHWH' (vv.2, 12). His appeal to YHWH is rooted in a relationship between the two, a relationship based on God's former deeds. This stands in sharp contrast to the enemy with whom the psalmist has no relationship and whose actions lack any foundation (v.3). To the God whose 'hands' have toiled on his behalf (v.5), the psalmist now stretches out his own 'hands' (v.6). Trampled to the ground by the enemy (v.3), he now turns 'like parched ground' to the one who is responsive even to the needs of the earth (v.6). A concealed creation motif is at work here. YHWH is a God who makes things happen and brings things into existence (v.5: 'what you have done/what your hands have wrought'). It is appropriate, therefore, that in light of his history with God the psalmist does not simply go his own way after being delivered, he cooperates rather with YHWH's 'good spirit' and 'name' (vv.10b-11).

Conclusion

The vicissitudes of the psalmist as 'servant of YHWH' in Ps 143 are expressed theologically in such a way that he appears as Israel's paradigmatic supplicant. At the same time, they call to mind the image of David as it is portrayed in part in the relevant narratives of 1-2 Samuel and in part in the book of Psalms, especially those attributed to his name. The very first sentence employed by the psalmist to describe his situation of need: 'the enemy has pursued me' (v.3: *rādaf*), calls to mind the situation of pursuit endured by David at the hands of Saul (1 Sam 23:25, 28; 24:15; 26:18, 20; by Achitophel in 2 Sam 17:1; by enemies in general: 2 Sam 24:13). At the same time, however, it reminds us of the psalmist who speaks in the psalms attributed to David (7:2, 6; 31:16; 35:3; 142:7; further 71:11; 119:84, 86, 157, 161).

While both figures are alternately called to mind in the psalm's semantic material, the psalmist's own developmental progress brings them together in the image of 'the servant of YHWH'. It is this latter figure who first gives thanks to God for deliverance (Pss 144-145) and then leads all creation in the praise of YHWH (Pss 146-150).

This study is an expression of my esteem for Jesu Raja S.J., skilful scholar and charming colleague. His life of dedication to the Sacred Scriptures has fostered the universal praise of YHWH, once inaugurated by David.

Selected Bibliography

Commentaries

- L.C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (WBC, 21), Waco TX, 1983.
 F. Delitzsch, *Die Psalmen* (5.Aufl), (BKAT, IV/1), Leipzig 1894.
 M. Girard, *Les psaumes redécouverts: de la structure au sens. III. Ps. 101-150* (Recherches, NS), Montreal 1994.
 H.J.Kraus, *Psalmen 2* (BK-AT, XV.2), Neukirchen 1978.
 J.P.M. Van der Ploeg, *Psalmen II* (BOT), Roermond 1974.
 G. Ravasi, *Il libro dei Salmi III*, Bologna 1984.

Monographs and Articles

- P. Auffret, *Merveilles à nos yeux. Étude structurelle de vingt psaumes dont celui de 1 Ch 16, 8-36* (BZAW, 235), Berlin - New York 1995 (Chapitre XVI. Étude structurelle de Psaume 143, 249-261).
 J.C. McCann Jr (ed), *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (KSOT.S, 159), Sheffield 1993.
 M. Millard, *Die Komposition des Psalters: Ein formgeschichtlicher Ansatz* (FAT, 9), Tuebingen 1994.
 G.H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBL.DS, 76), Chico CA 1985.
 E.Zenger, "Der Psalter als Buch. Beobachtungen zu seiner Entstehung, Komposition und Funktion"; in E. Zenger (ed), *Der Psalter in Judentum und Christentum*, Freiburg 1998, 1-57.

Translated from the Dutch by Brian Doyle (Leuven).