

## **"From Exile to Zion" - Ethical Perspectives from the Twin Psalms 127 and 128**

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### ***ABSTRACT***

*In the past psalms were often read and interpreted as single texts. With the redactional-historical approach to psalm interpretation psalm texts are more regularly interpreted within the smaller collections where they are situated? The theological relationship between a single psalm and the larger collection becomes evident when such a text (or texts) is (are) read against the background of the collection's theological programme or intention. To illustrate this relationship the twin Psalms 127 and 128 are eclectically selected from the Sîrê Hama'alôt psalms (120-134) in Book V (107-150) of the Psalter. These wisdom-related-psalms are examined for their Torah ethical thinking as envisaged in Psalm 1. With the theological programme "From exile to Zion" of the Sîrê Hama'alôt collection (120-134) these twin psalms contribute to the ethical reflection of the Yahweh-faith in Book V.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

#### **1 Psalms: Torah and Wisdom**

The overture of the *Psalter* heralds a proclamation: Psalm 1 envisages the importance of the Torah (cf. Ps 1:2) - not only for the Israelite believer, but also for the *Psalter* as a book. Furthermore, the close connection between Torah and Wisdom motifs in this psalm emphasises how wise living is related to the Torah in the Israelite community. For the Hebrew religious mind Torah-ethics mediates the way how the righteous have access to a blessed and fruitful life in symbiosis with Yahweh. This wise lifestyle appears to be in stark contrast with the absence of Torah wisdom on the self-destructive "way of the wicked" (cf. Ps 1:6). From the outset Torah and Wisdom are inextricably interwoven in the *Psalter*.

Throughout the *Psalter* the relationship between Torah and Wisdom is evident. In different parts of the five-part *Psalter* different emphases appear from various individuals and groups. To detect some of these aspects of Torah-ethics in the Psalms, a selection of texts with a wisdom affinity could serve as stimulus for a discussion.

However, this contribution focuses on Book V (Pss 107-150) of the *Psalter*. With a few eclectic texts from the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* psalms (Pss 120-134), namely Psalms 127 and 128, one could assemble a few perspectives on how wisdom motifs in Book V comply with the vision of Psalm 1, namely to illustrate how Torah in conjunction with Wisdom ethics are phrased by the Hebrew mind, especially in the later stages of the formation of the *Psalter* as a book. Such an effort will illustrate how the theological relationship between a single psalm and the larger collection in which it appears can be described.

## 2. Psalms with a wisdom character

The characterisation of the genre "Wisdom Psalms" has become problematic, since "pure" Wisdom Psalms are difficult to define as literary form (Crenshaw 2000:15).<sup>1</sup> The distinction between "pure" Wisdom Psalms and wisdom-related psalms by Murphy (1969:569ff) outlines the problem. According to specific criteria regarding form, content and themes some psalms do indeed reflect the influence of typical wisdom literature. To identify these psalms purely as authentic wisdom psalms does not do justice to or recognise the different other form-critical elements displayed by almost all of them. Nonetheless, I agree with Whybray (1996:37) that the *literary form* of such psalms is not the most important aspect, the way in which they reflect a particular wisdom character deserves far more attention..

Various lists of so-called wisdom psalms are suggested by scholars (Crenshaw 2000:16; Kim 2008:30), and specialists do not speak in unison about such a list or its criteria. A majority of scholars agree on the influence of wisdom on Psalms 1, 19B, 32, 34, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133 (Kim 2008:30). These are not the only psalms or parts of psalms radiating Old Testament wisdom language, motifs and allusions. Psalm scholars should therefore identify these different psalms and substantiate their wisdom characteristics accordingly.

In Book V (107-150) Psalms 111, 112, 119, 127, 128, 131, 133 and 139 have been identified by some as wisdom texts. Within the frame and theological programme of Book V, I have chosen eclectically texts from the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* psalms (120-134) with a wisdom character to outline an understanding of ethical aspects of the Hebrew mind in general, and of Book V and the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* psalms in particular. In this presentation Psalms 127 and 128 serve as eclectic and selected discussion partners. Psalms 112 and 119 are major contributors to the theme, but since they are not part of the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* corpus, the insights provided by them could be added later. Hereby

<sup>1</sup> Crenshaw (2003:55) even describes the category as "vague and misleading". Kuntz (2003:150-153) contends Crenshaw's opinion. He admits the problem, but defends the category of Wisdom Psalms. Like Murphy (1990:104) Kuntz leaves it to the reader to motivate both the criteria and list of these so-called wisdom psalms.

the analysis of ethical perspectives is structured according to literary genre (sapiential texts), the order of the text in the Hebrew canon (Writings) and the chronology of Israel's history (probably the Persian-Hellenistic period).<sup>2</sup>

### 3 "Ethics" in the Old Testament

Scholarly debate on the definition, object, approaches and normative status of Old Testament ethics, Hebrew Bible ethics or biblical ethics remains complex and challenging.<sup>3</sup> Questions arise, such as: What is Old Testament ethics? What is the object of study? What are the approaches or methods to be considered? How normative are Old Testament ethics for modern contexts? These questions touch upon crucial issues in the quest for understanding ethics of the ancient Hebrew mind.

Ethics is an endeavour that deals with human behaviour, especially good human conduct. In terms of wisdom literature it can be described as a way of life – "*eine Art Lebenskunde*" (Zenger 2006:329).<sup>4</sup> The Old Testament provides a basis for ethical thinking (Davies 1995:165). Old Testament ethics can thus be defined as the quest to understand normative conduct of Israelite individual and communal deeds. Though, for this endeavour it is important to describe the motivation, possibilities and consequences of behaviour according to Old Testament written faith traditions (Otto 1991:608; 1999:1603).

Different emphases are evident from different canonical parts, compositional layers or units, literary genres, time periods and social groups. Both the transmission history and tradition historical processes of Old Testament texts and corpora make a multi-layered range of ethical thinking a reality. These processes of the creation of new texts through interpretation and reinterpretation become a hermeneutical key for multi-faceted ethical thinking (not in terms of new norms which are created, but in terms of multi application possibilities that evolve).

Various methods assist in constructing Old Testament ethics (Knight 1995:2-5), for example the so-called referential, literary, appropriative and socio-historical approaches. The *referential* construct takes the biblical text seriously, but focuses on its prehistory, literary development, authors' intentions and historical contexts in which the text(s) arose. The *literary*

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<sup>2</sup> I reckon with the collection as a redactional unit probably added to Book V during the Persian-Hellenistic period.

<sup>3</sup> See various contributions on these issues delivered at the SBL congress in Münster, Germany (26 July 1993) in Knight (1995:1-178); cf. also Barton (1994; 2002) and Otto (1994; 2004; 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Zenger (2006:330) explains that "Weisheitliche Lebenskunst besteht darin, die allumfassende Ordnung im Lebensvollzug zu erkennen und durch das Tun von 'Gerechtigkeit' zu festigen".

construct interests itself in the world of the text and the world of the reader with special emphasis on its artistry and play of meanings. The *appropriative* construct regards the text as an authoritative and canonical whole entity with special meaning for specific faith communities. The text is especially used for contemporary moral decision-making. Finally the *socio-historical* construct examines the socio-historical and moral worlds of the Israelite communities and their *Umwelt*.

The most appropriate way to deal with Old Testament ethics is to make it a descriptive and reflective enterprise (Otto 1999:1604). In the footsteps of Von Rad's *Nacherzählung* of traditions the various texts and corpi should in this regard "speak for itself" in its own way" (Sæbø 1998:166). The text, the socio-historical world(s) and contexts behind the text and the presuppositions and prejudices of the interpreter should all be accounted for. My own analysis below therefore intends to be descriptive and reflective.

Two basic premises underlie the normative motivation of ethics in the Old Testament in general and in wisdom literature in particular. This entails *divine legitimisation* of laws or commandments and *common, human experience*, which generates empirical and rational ways of thinking (Sæbø 1998:169). By observing regular, constant patterns in creation, similar patterns of conduct in society and human behaviour are detected in Old Testament wisdom literature (e.g. Prov 25:23-26:3). Life experience and common sense (*Vernunft*) sensitise discernment of what is wise and sensible behaviour and what is not. Through didactic paraenetic instruction wisdom literature mediates these norms for good behaviour to community and posterity. Ethics of wisdom literature are therefore grounded in a creation theology (e.g. Job 38-42; cf. Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2006:909). Its anthropology is strongly related to the creation narratives. Even the relationship between Wisdom and Torah is a *sine qua non*.

Old Testament literature, especially wisdom literature, purports ethical thinking that presupposes a view of life with a close relationship between human deeds and their consequences (*Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*), the so-called retribution principle (Otto 1991:608). Moral good deeds of justice, solidarity, mercy, and fidelity normally result positively in well-being, wealth, success, salvation, etcetera. In contrast, deeds described as wrong-doings, injustice, wickedness, transgression, unfaithfulness, sin, etcetera lead to failure, calamity, unhappiness, and a lack of life, wealth, health and fortune. Protest against this traditional wisdom thinking becomes apparent in the books of Job and *Qohelet* and some psalms (or parts thereof).

Ethics reflected in wisdom texts are certainly influenced by the active pursuit of the retribution principle or protest against it. How the twin Psalms

127 and 128 (with additional remarks from Psalms 131 and 133) contribute to this picture in Book V will be disclosed after contemplating their content.

## **B COMPOSITION AND THEOLOGY OF BOOK V**

### **1 Book V - Psalms 107-150**

Several scholars have contributed to contemplating the composition and theological perspectives of Book V of the *Psalter* (Pss 107-150).<sup>5</sup> Despite a variety of compositional possibilities a few theological characteristics prevail.

With the final doxology (Pss 146-150), the Egyptian Hallel (113-118), the hymnic twin psalms (111-112; 135-136) and numerous Hallelujah exclamations, Book V portrays a strong **hymnic character** (Koch 1998:251-258). The liturgical collections 113-118 and 120-134 bound by Psalm 119 underscore how the central part of Book V is **liturgically orientated** to the annual festivals *Pešah* (113-118), *Šabūot* (119) and *Sūkkot* (120-134). Hereby the salvation-historical stations of the Egyptian exodus, the Torah at Sinai and the arrival in Jerusalem at Zion are theologically commemorated.

With an *inclusio* Book V is framed by **hymnic praise and wisdom perspectives** (107:42-3; 145:19-21): Yahweh's universal reign and providence for all creation are hailed. A challenge follows this praise of the gracious and loving Yahweh: the wise should react with insight to Yahweh and his deeds. The final Hallel (Pss 146-150) is a crescendo that perpetuates the theme of praising Yahweh, first by the individual (146), then the community (147) and ultimately the whole creation (Pss 148, 150; cf. Kratz 1996:26). In addition to the outside frame, an inside frame puts the **emphasis on David** (Pss 108-110; 111-112 and 138-144).<sup>6</sup> This "king" David tends to be the persecuted servant<sup>7</sup> of Yahweh, the universal king. This "king" David probably belongs to a reinterpretation category that reflects on Yahweh's people as his obedient servant, namely the individual, the community and the whole creation. In a concluding wisdom perspective this people of Yahweh is blessed (Pss 144:15). Without doubt its theology is embedded in a **universal awareness**.

Books IV and V compensate for the shattered hope caused by the Babylonian exile by focusing on God's reign over all powers of destruction and on the importance of righteous conduct in the present (Gillingham 2008:210). Book V as literary unit offers a meditative pilgrimage through the Israelite

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<sup>5</sup> Significant work has been done by Westermann (1961/62:278-284); Wilson (1984:337-352; 1985; 1992:129-142; 1993:72-82); Whybray (1996); Koch (1998:243-277); Kratz (1992:1-40; 1996:13-28); Zenger (1996:97-116; 1998:1-58); Goulder (1998) and McFall (2000:223-256).

<sup>6</sup> Zenger (1996:114) depicts this part of the frame as "eskatologisch messianisch".

<sup>7</sup> The affliction and distress of this "servant David" are reflected in Psalms 140-143.

history where the afflicted servant of Yahweh travels from a position of distress in the exile through the (second) exodus, guided by careful instruction of the Sinai Torah on the way to Zion. At Zion Yahweh is actively present as universal king and waits to bless the god-fearing pilgrim who praises him in the company of the whole creation, as his wise servant.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 *Sîrê Hama'alôt* collection (Pss 120-134)

Psalms research accepts the so-called *Sîrê Hama'alôt* (120-134) collection as a "single, interrelated collection" for special use in the post-exilic Israelite community (Prinsloo 2005:457). Like the Egyptian Hallel (113-118) the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* psalms are thought to be composed as liturgy or its composition inspired by a liturgy (Millard 1994:38). The single psalms probably had their own origin and development, but they grew into a unit with its own profile mainly during the Second Temple period (Millard 1994:41).

The collection reflects an artistic literary composition, consisting of three parts with five psalms each: 120-124, 125-129, 130-134 (Auffret 1982:441-453). Each part contributes to the coherent theological concept of a *royal and Zion theology*, in which Zion is celebrated as place of blessing and salvation. Emphases on Jerusalem (122), the temple (127) and David (132) are evident. Zion draws focal attention, since the collection reflects a pilgrimage from their position in exile (120) to Zion, place of Yahweh's election, abode, presence and blessing (134).<sup>9</sup> Three theological concepts arise from the focus on Zion, namely Yahweh's blessing that goes out from Zion, Yahweh who is at work on Zion and Zion as a paradigm of trust (Körting 2006:135-145). All in all, the spatial story of the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* moves from distress and danger "below" and ascends to be close to Yahweh on Zion to experience life, wholeness, peace, protection and blessedness (Prinsloo 2005:461-2).

The hymnic twin Psalms 135-136 is a redactional addition and response to Psalm 134, which utters a call to praise Yahweh. These two psalms conclude the group 120-136 and praise Yahweh on Zion as universal king (Millard 1994:40). As a later postscript to this collection, Psalm 137 sets the context of the exile on which the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* psalms are directed. With the focus on the Israelite history the pilgrimage of Israel's second exodus starts at the Egyptian exodus (113-118), sojourns at Sinai for the Torah (119) and arrives at Zion (120-134), where Yahweh is hailed as world ruler (135-136). Yahweh's deeds and covenant promises throughout the Israelite history thus function to revive hope for the future in distressful and dangerous post-exilic contexts.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson (1985:227-228) describes Book V as an answer to the plea of the exiles to be gathered from the diaspora. The answer given is that deliverance and life thereafter are dependent on an attitude of dependence and trust in Yahweh alone.

<sup>9</sup> Explicit references to Zion in the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* psalms appear in 125:1; 126:1; 128:5; 129:5; 132:13, 15; 133:3; 134:3;

The final redactional composition of the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* psalms as unit represents a specific *Sitz in der Literatur* in the post-exilic period. The origin, development and clustering of the individual psalms in smaller groups presuppose more historical *Sitze im Leben* of these psalms. But, apart from their earlier historical settings the incorporation of this liturgical unit with the Egyptian Hallel (113-118), the Torah psalm (119), and the liturgical frame (111-112; 135-136) gives Book V a book and post-cultic character (Zenger 1996:115). In a later period when it was not possible for everyone to pay a visit to the temple, Yahweh believers undertook a "meditative pilgrimage" through their salvation history by reading the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* psalms. This meditation or reading of the songs (or Book V at large) replaced the real physical pilgrimage experience (Millard 1994:229). With the five-part division of the *Psalter* the reader reads the book of Psalms as Torah. Efforts to identify ethical perspectives or guidelines from the texts and the world(s) behind a text should reckon with these multiple historical contexts. But the challenge is set for an analysis of Psalms 127 and 128.

## C WISDOM-RELATED PSALMS 127 and 128

### 1 Psalm 127 – If Yahweh does not build the house...

#### 1.1 Introduction

Psalm 127 is an undisputed wisdom text. A majority of exegetes recognises its sapiential characteristics.<sup>10</sup> Not only is the poem dedicated to Solomon (see Ps 72) as a prominent Israelite wisdom figure, but he was the builder of the temple (1 Kgs 5-6; 8; see 1), Yahweh's "beloved" (2 Sam 12:25; see 2b) and recipient of divine wisdom in a nocturnal dream (1 Kgs 3:5,12; see 2b).

Formal stylistic features that characterise the poem's sapiential style include the proverbial tone with proverbs (1-2; 3-5),<sup>11</sup> an admonition (2), a simile (4) and *ašhrē* (beatitude-"blessing") formula (5).<sup>12</sup> Even the exclamation *hinnēh* (4) has an instructional function.<sup>13</sup> On the content level the text offers advice for everyday behaviour. Futile behaviour is discouraged (1-2) and

<sup>10</sup> Exegetes characterise the text as Weisheitsgedicht (Deissler 1964:506); wisdom psalm (Anderson 1972:866); Weisheitsdichtung (Kraus 1978:1036); wisdom poem (Allen 1983:177); community instruction (Gerstenberger 2001:345); wisdom instruction (Clifford 2003:238), and even a congratulation wish at the birth of a child (Schmid 1934:228).

<sup>11</sup> Scholars identify two (Kraus 1978:1036) or four (Allen 1983:178; Seybold 1996:488-9) proverbs in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Weber (2008:196) shows that this formula occurs in the Psalms and other biblical books in the most frequent cases in a "weisheitlich-belehrende Milieu". See also Ps 128:1-2.

<sup>13</sup> This particle appears in several psalms (Pss 7:15; 11:2; 33:18; 52:9; etc.) and especially in the collection (Pss 121:4; 123:2; 127:3; 128:4; 132:6; 134:1b).

Yahweh's beloved (or the wise 2b) is encouraged to act wisely with an attitude of dependent trust in the Lord amidst possible situations of distress such as destruction, endangerment, famine, and failure of harvest. One certainly hears the two-ways metaphor from the wisdom instruction in the text. Additionally, the psalm offers subtle critique against the retribution principle without declaring the principle void.

## 1.2 Text and translation

<sup>1</sup>שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְשֹׁלֹמֹה  
 אִם־יִהְיֶה לֹא־יִבְנֶה בַּיַּת שָׁוָא עֲמֵלוּ בּוֹנֵי בַּיַּת  
 אִם־יִהְיֶה לֹא־יִשְׁמְרֵהוּ עֵיר שָׁוָא שֹׁמְרֵי  
<sup>2</sup>שָׁוָא לָכֶם מִשְׁכִּימֵי קוֹם מֵאַחֲרֵי־שֵׁבֶת  
 אֲכָלִי לֶחֶם הָעֲצָבִים כִּן יִתֵּן לַיְדֵידוֹ שָׁוָא  
<sup>3</sup>הִנֵּה נַחֲלַת יְהוָה בָּנִים שְׂכָר פְּרֵי הַבֶּטֶן  
<sup>4</sup>כְּחֵצִים בְּיַד־גִּבּוֹר כִּן בְּנֵי הַנְּעוּרִים  
<sup>5</sup>אֲשֶׁר־יִהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר מָלֵא אֶת־אֲשָׁפְתוֹ מֵהֵם  
 לֹא־יִבְשׁוּ כִּי־יִדְבְּרוּ אֶת־אֹיְבֵיהֶם בַּשָּׁעַר

<sup>1</sup>Song of Ascents. For Solomon.

If Yahweh does not build the house, its builders build it in vain.  
 If Yahweh does not watch over the city, the watchman protects in vain.

<sup>2</sup>In vain do you wake up early and go late to rest,  
 (you) who are eating bread of toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.

<sup>3</sup>Behold, a heritage from Yahweh are sons; a reward is the fruit of the womb.

<sup>4</sup>Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are sons of the youth.

<sup>5</sup>Blessed/happy is the man whose quiver is full of them.  
 They will not be put to shame when they speak with the enemies at the gate.

## 1.3 Analysis

Didactically Psalm 127 encourages a certain view of life and attitude towards work and daily behaviour: humankind's activities are futile and in vain without

Yahweh's involvement. Humans cannot earn life's fullness and wholeness self-sufficiently without God's participation. It is Yahweh who grants life's blessing, fulfilment and successful outcome.

Two stanzas illustrate the point. Stanza 1 (1-2) underscores **Yahweh's providence** in the everyday activities of the individual and the community, while stanza 2 (3-5) concretises this principle by an illustration from the family life: **Yahweh bestows his blessing** by granting progeny, the fruit of the womb, to secure the future (3).

In the first **stanza** (1-2) humankind is anthropologically portrayed as a builder of a house (1a), keeper of the city (1b) and labourer in the field. These activities are in accordance with humankind's image in the creation narratives, namely to work and to keep (Gen 1:28; 2:15). Whether the house is a home, a family or the temple, and whether the city is in the rural area or Jerusalem itself, humans build, guard and labour in private and communal life for a home, protection and food.

Although the retribution principle requires from humans good moral deeds to be successful, the psalm cautions that neither humankind nor human deeds can secure successful outcome in building, protecting and working. "Bread of toil" (2b) is a motive reminiscent of God's pronounced judgement on Adam and Eve after their unfaithfulness to him in the garden, namely "*in pain / with sorrow* you shall bear children" (Gen 3:16) and "*in toil* you shall eat" (Gen 3:17; also 5:29). This description indicates humanity's toiling efforts from dawn to dusk in building a future to survive, to protect and to produce food and earnings.

Proverbial wisdom in Psalm 127:2b affirms that Yahweh gives his beloved "sleep". In relation to verses 1-2a humankind first has to recognise its own weakness and realise that his toiling efforts cannot secure successful outcomes. Yahweh's involvement determines the positive results. This principle of Yahweh's involvement is confirmed in wisdom literature (Prov 3:5; 10:22; 21:31; Eccl 2:22-26)<sup>14</sup> and illustrated in Deuteronomy and the Holiness Code of the Torah (Deut 8:17ff).<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, to build a house was not a guarantee of prolonged habitation. Deuteronomy 28:33 confirms this

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<sup>14</sup> Prov 3:5: Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; 10:22: The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it; 21:31: The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD.

<sup>15</sup> Deut 8:17-18 reads: You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.

conditional habitation.<sup>16</sup> Both the house and the land belong to Yahweh. Toiling in the field from morning till noon is a life necessity but could also result in failure due to pestilence (Deut 28:38), attacks (Lev 26:16), or drought (Lev 26:19-20).

Secondly, the phrase in 2b intends to imprint trust in Yahweh. "Sleep" in the ancient Near East was regarded as a gift of the gods to humankind (Zenger 1991:137). Similarly God granted Solomon wisdom and insight in a nocturnal dream (1 Kgs 3:9, 11-12). When God grants sleep, the human worker finds rest from his toil. Yahweh's unconditional gift is not dependent upon the merit of human performance. Hereby the retribution principle is turned on its head, criticised or characterised as conditional (Weber 2003:299). The psalm encourages the rhythm between work and rest and the labourer's faithful submission to God (Weiser 1962:765; Deissler 1964:506). Humankind still has to build, protect and work, but in the trustful presence and faithful submission to Yahweh, whose sovereignty he recognises.

Wisdom from stanza 1 recognises that Yahweh is the actual builder, protector and labourer and that he secures the success of daily human activities. The psalm does not advise that the human being should refrain from his work only to sleep or to do nothing. Work and rest are alternate necessities in the pattern of life (Gen 1:28; 2:3). The wise "beloved" should acknowledge that it is a misconception that a person can accomplish success by his or her own efforts. Yahweh ultimately determines fate in life. Hereby our wisdom text is an admonition against fatalism and fanaticism in mundane activities (Zenger 1991:137).

The second stanza (3-5) is a concretisation of Yahweh's provision. God **blesse**s the house (family) by **bestowing children** (3). This is divine intervention in the small family similar to Yahweh's gift of the land and offspring to Israel. The gift as "reward" (v. 3) resounds in Yahweh's promise and provision for protection and a large offspring in the history of Abraham (Gen 15:1-5). Similarly the blessing of children is confirmed in the life of humankind (Gen 1:28; 4:1) and of Jacob (Gen 30:1-2; 33:5).<sup>17</sup> The pilgrim who reads or meditates this psalm would have known this patriarchal history. Yahweh can thus be entrusted for the future.

<sup>16</sup> Deut 28:33 reads: A people that you do not know will eat what your land and labour produce, and you will have nothing but cruel oppression all your days.

<sup>17</sup> Gen 30:1-2: When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" Jacob became angry with her and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?"; 33:5: Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. "Who are these with you?" he asked. Jacob answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant."

By blessing the family with children Yahweh provides for the house, the city and the fields. In the ancient world children, especially sons, were symbols of the future. Progeny secures *inter alia* a good name, protection, caring work force and support in parents' old age, during sickness or in other endangerment. The military metaphor of a warrior with his quiver full of arrows functions therefore to express successful protection. As support at the city gate children (sons) contend with the father against the enemy. Even if the father is still young, the social function of children is invaluable. The positive role of children at the city gate not only plays a pivotal role for private and communal life, in present and future but in the principles of honour and shame.

Socio-historically the city gate was a public sphere and *chiffre* for juridical (2 Sam 15:2; Ruth 4), social (Prov 31:31), economic (Neh 13:15-22) and political (Neh 6:5-8) activities (Goulder 1998:67). The enemy, whether private or communal, signifies the danger imposed on personal and community life. They pose a threat to life in the city with regard to all these spheres.

Psalm 127 underscores the positive value of both the family for society and children for the small family. In the family lies the delight of life and source of strength for the nation. Without Yahweh's blessing of providing children, the house, city and labour in the fields are endangered, they are doomed to fail and could be cut off from a future. This wisdom text encourages and convinces the individual and community to live with and trust the presence of Yahweh and his blessing in their mundane activities.

#### 1.4 Synthetic remarks

Psalm 127 can be read on various levels from various historical *Sitze im Leben*: e.g. as part of the final redactional composition of the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* collection (Persian period), as part of a smaller collection in the early post-exilic period during the rebuilding of the temple and city (Nehemiah's time) or in its early development as an individual text somewhere in the monarchical period before the exile or thereafter. Interpretation on every level requires adjustments to the interpretation of the historical context and of certain terms (e.g. house, city).

- The psalm's rhetorical impetus strives to create hope for the future in a situation of distress or endangerment, especially the post-exilic period, for both the individual and the community. It emphasises God's sovereign abilities without excluding Yahweh-believers' participation in their endeavours to address danger and distress. This hope was raised for someone during the Persian-Hellenistic period who undertook a "meditative pilgrimage journey" when reading the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* psalms as part of Book V in a post-cultic context (Millard 1994:40). Hope was raised even if the text was read as response to the challenges

of temple building in the post-exilic period (Clifford 2003:240) or wall building (Neh 6:15-7:5) in Nehemiah's time (Goulder 1998:66-7). Similarly, hope was created when a pilgrim ascended to Jerusalem in pre-exilic monarchical (or other) periods to celebrate the *Autumn* festival (Eaton 2003:435) or *Sūkkot* while commemorating Yahweh's provision during Israel's suffering in the Egyptian exile and the desert wandering.

- Confident trust in Yahweh and recognition of his providence and blessing serve as motivation principle for the ethics of the mundane activities of the Israelites. This faithful trust simultaneously discloses self-insight of the individual and community that building, keeping, working, and procreating are meaningless without the participation or involvement of Yahweh. In their day-to-day behaviour humans should always remember their own weakness, fragility and dependence upon God for success and a happy life.
- Yahweh's role in the psalm can be defined as provider of human needs. As actual builder, keeper and sustainer he cares for and stands behind the everyday human activities. He provides unconditionally and conditionally, whereby his sovereign character is outlined.
- With protest against the misconception of human abilities the retribution principle is declared futile by the psalm. Divine sovereignty prevails, since God grants unconditionally ("sleep" v. 2) and conditionally ("land", "children" v. 3). Even good deeds of toil might not be rewarded accordingly, because without Yahweh's participation and involvement human activities are valued "in vain". The voices of Job and *Qohelet* are evident from both motifs of the protest against the retribution principle and the enjoyment of God's gifts. With this emphasis the text persuades pilgrims didactically to maintain a lifestyle in dependence upon and recognition of Yahweh.
- Reservation against the retribution principle does not mean an abolishment of humankind's building, keeping, working and procreating deeds, as is known from the creation narratives. This wisdom text offers no encouragement for the pilgrim or reader to stop building, keeping, working, etcetera. It rather addresses misconceptions about human abilities and how God deals with them.
- Appreciation and positive assessment of the family's role in society and children's value within the small family and larger society are portrayed. Family solidarity includes participation of children and exhibits values of mutual protection against danger, care, support against injustice and maintaining family honour or a good name. The family as basic social group of the community is highly valued. Activities in the family are

connected to the communal interest of the city and reflect interconnectedness between the individual, the small family and the community.

- Openness exists about the detail of the religious ethical norm, namely the appearance of the exact execution of human activities when they are faithfully directed towards Yahweh. The text opts for a "situational" approach rather than a strict prescribed "moral" one. Therefore Psalm 127 sets an appeal to the executor to make his/her own wise decision in different life situations, always in relation to the norm of trust in Yahweh and his provision. The journey from exile to Zion goes through Sinai: the reading and meditating of the Torah.

## 2 Psalm 128 - Happy is everyone who fears Yahweh...

### 2.1 Introduction

Psalm 128 similarly resembles characteristics of wisdom literature.<sup>18</sup> The psalm is often described as companion or twin of Psalm 127 (Gerstenberger 2001:351; Clifford 2003:241; Prinsloo 2003:427).<sup>19</sup>

Formal sapiential characteristics include the *ašhrē* (beatitude) - "blessing" formula (127:5), the "way" metaphor (1b), and the use of similes (3) and the particle *hinnēh*, with its instructional function. Thematic wisdom elements include the presence of the retribution principle where everyone who fears Yahweh can expect blessing and prosperity from him. Furthermore, the psalm functions didactically as instruction for everyday behaviour with special focus on hard toil, family activities and community engagement.

As a literary genre the beatitude functioned in various non-Yahwistic societies for didactical and ethical purposes. It served to standardise behaviour or to bestow positive powers on those who complied with accepted norms (Gerstenberger 2001:349). In the same way the beatitude is applied to the Yahweh faith.

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<sup>18</sup> The text is categorised as "Weisheitslied" (Van der Ploeg 1974:375), "wisdom psalm" (Anderson 1972:869; Kraus 1978:1041; Allen 1983:183; Goulder 1998:72; Prinsloo 2003:427), "Grussgedicht" (Schmidt 1934:229), "Segengruss" (Seybold 1996:491) or a song with sapiential or wisdom character (Clifford 2003:242; Weber 2003:303). See further Kim (2008:30) for a list of scholars who depict Psalm 128 as a Wisdom Psalm.

<sup>19</sup> Formally both texts reflect common terms like the *ašhrē* (beatitude) - "blessing" formula (127:5; 128:1), the terms *hinnēh* (127:3; 128:4) and *נָהַג* (127:4-5; 128:4), the use of similes (127:4; 128:3) and the presence of the retribution principle (127:1-2; 128:1). According to content, common themes like hard-won harvest (labour), family, fertility and role of the city / Jerusalem are shared.

Psalm 128 instructs a god-fearing life. In Israelite wisdom literature the “fear of Yahweh” is the beginning of wisdom; it is the foundational principle of Israelite wisdom.<sup>20</sup> A life in “fear of Yahweh” has consequences for humankind’s labour, for a happy life with the wife of “your house”, for family life, and for abundant offspring. Behaviour, which is orientated to the religious norm of fearing Yahweh, results in blessing and prosperity for the individual and impacts on community life.

## 2.2 Text and translation

<sup>1</sup>שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת

אֲשֶׁרִי כָל־יִרְאָה יְהוָה תְּהַלֵּךְ בְּדַרְכָּיו

<sup>2</sup>וְיִנְעַ כַּפְיֶךָ כִּי תֹאכַל אֲשֶׁרִיךָ וְטוֹב לְךָ

<sup>3</sup>אֲשֶׁתְּךָ כְּגִפֵּן פְּרִיָּה בְּיִרְכָתִי בֵּיתְךָ

בְּנֵיךָ כְּשֹׁחֲלֵי זֵיתִים סָבִיב לְשִׁלְחָנְךָ

<sup>4</sup>הִנֵּה כִּי־כֵן יִבְרַךְ גֹּבֵר יִרְאָה יְהוָה

<sup>5</sup>יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה מִצִּיּוֹן

וּרְאֵה בְטוֹב יְרוּשָׁלַם כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ

<sup>6</sup>וּרְאֵה־בָּנִים לְבְנֵיךָ שְׁלוֹם עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל

Song of Ascents.

<sup>1</sup>Happy is everyone who fears Yahweh, he who walks in his ways.

<sup>2</sup>You will eat the fruit of your hands; blessings and prosperity will be yours.

<sup>3</sup>Your wife will be like a fruitful vine in the innermost part of your house;

your sons will be like olive shoots around your table.

<sup>4</sup>Behold, for thus blessed is the man who fears Yahweh.

<sup>5</sup>May Yahweh bless you from Zion,

and may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life,

<sup>6</sup>and may you see your children's children.

<sup>20</sup> See Prov 1:7; 9:10; 15:32; Job 28:28 etc.

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Peace be upon Israel.

### 2.3 Analysis

The proprium of Psalm 128 evinces from its theology, namely that Yahweh is the only source of blessing and prosperity for the individual and the Israelite community. Happiness and blessing are granted by Him and is reserved for the righteous "god-fearing".

Two stanzas outline this proprium. A beatitude introduces the song and serves as wisdom instruction: **everyone who fears Yahweh will be happy** and will **receive his blessing** and prosperity. The first stanza (1-4) is further framed by an *ašhrē* ("blessing") formula. By means of agricultural and familial images Yahweh's blessings are portrayed as "the fruit of your labour" (2), "the wife...in your house" (3a) and "the sons around your table" (3b). In the language of either a profane<sup>21</sup> or priestly<sup>22</sup> benediction, the second stanza (5-6) functions as supplication (Prinsloo 2003:427), wish or promise of blessing (Duhm 1922:440) in benefit of the "god-fearing" "you". The stanza portrays **Yahweh as only source of blessing in Zion**. The interrelatedness and interdependence between the welfare and prosperity of the individual and the well-being of the Jerusalem / Israelite communities are finally emphasised.

The retribution principle in **stanza 1** (1-4) has a bearing upon on the proposed ethos and ethical behaviour of the Israelite / Yehudite society. The "fear of Yahweh" or "walking in his ways" sets the condition or religious norm for a successful or blessed lifestyle of both the individual and larger community. Verses 1 and 4 outline the religious principle whereafter the blessed consequences for faithful and "god-fearing" behaviour are portrayed (2-3).

Blessings and prosperity as result of a god-fearing life are bestowed by Yahweh as the "fruit of your hands" (2), "the wife...in your house (3a), and numerous progeny (3b). These are conditional gifts of Yahweh according to Torah descriptions. The Covenant Code (Exod 23:25-26)<sup>23</sup>, Deuteronomy

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<sup>21</sup> The blessing was not the duty of priests alone. A host at the door of a house could have executed this function (Allen 1983:183). Schmidt (1934:229) thinks of a farmer who visits a friend at his house or in the field. Kraus (1978:1041) also reckons with a non-priestly speaker in the post-exilic period, while Seybold (1996:490) proposes a matrimonial blessing or felicitation at a wedding ceremony.

<sup>22</sup> This possibility includes the priest's role at the Autumn Festival (*Šukkot*) when the priest blessed the pilgrims / travellers at their arrival, departure or sometime during the course of the festival (Kraus 1978:1041; Goulder 1998:72). Even a Korahite Levite (133:3) seems to be a possible person to bestow the blessing.

<sup>23</sup> Exod 23:25-26: Worship the LORD your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you, and none will miscarry or be barren in your land. I will give you a full life span.

28:38-41<sup>24</sup> and the Holiness Code (Lev 26:14-16)<sup>25</sup> encourage the individual and community to be faithful to Yahweh's commands in order not to miss out on these life assets. Especially the blessing and curse sections of the Sinai covenant (e.g. Deut 28:1-14) describe the criteria for success and failure in view of the catastrophe of the exile. This exilic crisis made the people aware of their disabilities to comply with Yahweh's will and to secure success with their own human abilities (Otto 1999:1604).

The blessings of the prosperous "god-fearing" are reported in images such as the "eating" of the hard-won harvest (2), the wife as "*fruitful vine*" (3) and the children (sons) an "*olive shoots*" around a table. These images and metaphors create a picture of joy, happiness, beauty and vigour.<sup>26</sup> The expression "innermost parts" (alcove) of your house (3) alludes to sexuality or sexual love (Terrien 2003:833; Weber 2003:303), which is also meant to be enjoyed. All these pictures describe a meaningful and joyful life amidst threatening afflictions.

According to form and content Psalm 128 resembles both Psalms 1 and 119, two strategically positioned Torah psalms. All three psalms commence with the *ašhrē* ("blessing") formula and employ the "way"-metaphor whereby the relation between Torah and Wisdom is chained (1:1, 6; 119:3; 128:1).<sup>27</sup> The importance of Torah for wisdom is thus underlined.

The "fear of Yahweh" is a typical motif from the sphere of Israelite wisdom literature (e.g. Prov 1:7).<sup>28</sup> To walk "in his ways" is indicative of wise living and depicts an obedient lifestyle of complying with the laws, instructions and commandments of Yahweh's Torah (119:1-3). For an everyday lifestyle in home and in town, during a journey on pilgrimage or even by contemplating

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<sup>24</sup> Deut 28:38-41: You will sow much seed in the field but you will harvest little, because locusts will devour it. You will plant vineyards and cultivate them but you will not drink the wine or gather the grapes, because worms will eat them. You will have olive trees throughout your country but you will not use the oil, because the olives will drop off. You will have sons and daughters but you will not keep them, because they will go into captivity.

<sup>25</sup> Lev 26:14-16: But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life. You will plant seed in vain, because your enemies will eat it.

<sup>26</sup> The vine is also a metaphor for Israel (Ps 80:8; Isa 5:1-7; Hos 10:1), while wine rejoices the heart of man (Ps 104:15). Olive trees are often a symbol of beauty and vigour (Jer 11:16).

<sup>27</sup> Other psalms that contain this blessing formula are 32:2; 34:8; 40:4; 112:1; 146:5.

<sup>28</sup> See Job 28:28; Pss 19:10; 34:12; 111:10; Prov 1:7; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 10:22; 14:27; 15:33; 19:23; 22:4; 31:30.

the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* collection or Book V as a whole, the Torah remains the basic ethical orientation and *axis*.

In Book V Psalm 112 is also introduced by the beatitude "blessing"-formula *נָרָא אֶת־יְהוָה אֱשֶׁר־יִירָא אֱלֹהִים* ("Happy is the man who fears Yahweh"). Apart from Psalm 119 only Psalm 112 outside the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* collection offers a detailed description of Torah orientated ethical behaviour which describes the ethos of the righteous who adheres to Yahweh. Psalm 112 is a twin psalm of Psalm 111. Both psalms are a response to the oracle of Psalm 110 and form an introduction to the Egyptian Hallel (113-118). While 111 hails Yahweh for the merciful deliverance of his people and encourages a wise lifestyle in "fear of Yahweh", namely in obedience to his commands (111:10), Psalm 112 portrays the righteous as mirror image of Yahweh. The "god-fearing" will be happy, powerful and respected; he and his house will be blessed by wealth, riches, prosperity and honour. His deeds are characterised as merciful, compassionate and just (4), he is generous with his loans (5a), conducts his affairs with justice (5b), gives generous to the needy (9), and is righteous (9). These detailed characteristics of Yahwistic ethical behaviour lack in Psalm 128, which only proposes the general ethical orientation, namely to comply to the "fear of Yahweh" (128:1, 4) or "walking in his ways".

The **second stanza** (5-6) depicts Yahweh as only source of blessing in Zion. The blessing motif (4-5) and the address "you" in the second person, a typical reference to the individual and Israelite people of the brotherly (*Geschwister*) community in Deuteronomy (Eaton 2003:437), bind the life / lifestyle of the individual and family (1-4) to the fate of the larger communities in Jerusalem and Israel (5-6). The fortunes of the individual are therefore bound with the prosperity of the whole community. On the contrary, the happiness, welfare and good behaviour of the individual and the family build the well being of the community. The future of one lies in the future of all (Anderson 1972:871) or the wellbeing of the one guarantees the well-being of the other (Van der Ploeg 1974:377). A long life, numerous progeny and peace are the ingredients of this prosperity and blessing. In relation to the Torah later Israelite generations could have visualised the wisdom figure Joseph, as example or recipient of these blessings (Gen 50:22; cf. Lange 2005:1369).

Zion as earthly abode of Yahweh and mythological centre of the world in Israelite world view receives focal attention in Ps 128 (5). This city symbolises Yahweh's blessing and presence.<sup>29</sup> Zion not only functions as a binding bridge between the individual and the community, but also between the present and the future. The prayer- or wish-character of the benediction in

<sup>29</sup> The motif of God's abode on Zion appears regularly in the book of Isaiah (Gerstenberger 2001:350), while his blessing from Zion is characteristic of the Psalms of Ascents, e.g. Pss 132:15 and 134:3 (Körting 2006:135-142).

verses 5-6 emphasises the fact that Yahweh's blessing is a gift. He bestows it in sovereign manner on whom he wants.

#### 2.4 Synthetic remarks

Psalms 128 functions didactically as wisdom instruction to convince Israelites, pilgrims or meditative readers of a life of fearing and obedience to Yahweh, especially with regard to everyday activities. A life of "walking in the ways" of Yahweh is meant to describe an ethos and ethical lifestyle orientated to Yahweh and the Torah.

- Psalm 128 encourages a happy and meaningful life, especially with regard to labour, family, and community affairs. All three aspects touch on the survival and future prospects of the individual and community. Blessings and prosperity for the "you" (2-3) presuppose, in relation to Torah descriptions, possible *Sitze im Leben* which include drought, pestilence, hostile attacks, a lack of joy and barrenness among Israelites who had to deal with everyday afflictions. A single historical *Sitz im Leben* and identification of specific participants can hardly be construed, but the socio-historical contexts of "einfachen Menschen" like farmers, hand workers and family heads are likely possibilities (Seybold 1978:42; Körting 2006:134). Their need for Yahweh's blessing and prosperity alludes to situations where people required food, a house, a wife, children, a long life and hope for the future. Polarization of the individual and community threatened the existence of the Israelite / Yehudite identity in the post-exilic period (Gerstenberger 2001:349). Another context where the psalm suffices as a welcoming song to people from rural areas who left their homes to populate and reside in Jerusalem for a better future in the time-period of Nehemiah (Neh 11:2) seems to be a possibility (Goulder 1998:73), but is unconvincing in terms of the time when Book V was finally composed / edited and incorporated into the *Psalter*.
- A Torah-orientated lifestyle created a religious ethos in the Israelite society and built social and religious identity amongst the post-exilic Jerusalem / Israelite communities. Such an ethos revived hope for the future amidst desolated and distressful life settings.
- The role of Yahweh is reserved as object for reverence. He is depicted as one who bestows blessings and prosperity on the everyday activities of those who venerate him. These blessings include "the fruit of your labour" (2), "a fertile woman in your house" (3a), "children (sons) around your table" (3b), a long life and peace (6).
- The retribution principle is evident in the psalm: "godfearing" behaviour, a life "walking in the ways" of Yahweh (1, 4), is expected to

be blessed with prosperity. This principle does not expose the same tension as in Psalm 127. The portrayal of Yahweh as donor of blessings and prosperity expects something more from the afflicted believer than just pure good deeds. "Fear of Yahweh" requires an ethos of the heart. In reminiscence of the daily distress experienced by the afflicted, Yahweh as giver of blessings, and the enjoyment of the food, the wife in your home and children around the table the theology of Psalm 128 reminds strongly of the theology of Qohelet (2:24-25; 9:7-10). The sum of these motifs confirms a late Persian-early Hellenistic time for the context of both the text and final setting of Book V.

- The value and importance of the individual and family for Israelite society are also highlighted in Psalm 128. These two social institutions are inextricably interwoven and interdependent, especially in view of future existence. The ethos and lifestyle of individual and family have direct implications on the wellbeing of the community, in this context Jerusalem and Israel. Vice versa, the fortune and welfare of the community implicate on the life of the individual and family. The emphasis on this interrelatedness is a necessary reaction against the polarisation of individual and community in post-exilic times.
- Psalm 128 visualises a Torah-orientated ethos and lifestyle for the Yahweh believer. A lack of detailed prescriptive laws, instructions and commandments, especially with regard to labour, family life and other community activities seems obvious. A characterisation of ethical behaviour, like the description of the righteous as mirror image of Yahweh, as described in Psalm 112, is absent from the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* collection. The psalm leaves detail decision-making for the wise discern of the Yahweh believer.

## D CONCLUSION

The individual *Sîrê Hama'alôt* psalms have most probably developed from various historical and cultic *Sitze im Leben* into a post-cultic collection for meditation. Through processes of reinterpretation these texts were utilised in- and outside the cult in monarchical, and early and late post-exilic times. The theological programme of the final collection exhibits a reading direction (*Leserichtung*) with a movement from (Egyptian and Babylonian) exodus through Sinai (Torah) to Zion as symbol of Yahweh's presence, blessing and peace.

In an overview of the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* psalms several indications allude to the danger, distress, or affliction which the individual or community had

encountered.<sup>30</sup> Allusions from the wisdom poems Psalms 127 and 128 (with 131 and 133) similarly confirm these life settings of need, distress and affliction. In Psalm 127 the misconceived idea that humankind can provide success, life and blessing for its mundane activities such as building, keeping, working and providing life and children pose a threat to the existence of the individual and the community. Without Yahweh's involvement these activities are in vain, when they are built on human toil alone. Distress and needs like the lack of a home (127:1), attacks by enemies (127:1, 5), drought, pestilence and ruined harvests (127:2) or barrenness (127:3) were all afflictions that posed threats on Israel's present and future existence. Psalm 128 continues in similar vein. Everyday needs like the labour (fruit) of one's hands (128:2), a fertile wife (128:3a) and children as offspring (128:3b) are blessings and prosperity granted by Yahweh, for which he should be recognised. Without the provision of God the existence of the individual and the community is endangered.

Psalm 133 elicits the danger of disharmony and unbrotherly behaviour among individuals and social groups by means of a positive appraisal of brothers who dwell together in unity (133:1). Strife, conflict, tension and schism jeopardise peace and life of both individual and community, as post-exilic Israel had experienced. The condemnation of arrogance and hubris against fellow humans and self-exultation before God in Psalm 131 is a rejection of an attitude of heart to look down upon fellow humans and to behave "like God" with deeds that Yahweh alone can perform.<sup>31</sup> Although the psalm is generally characterised as a Psalm of Trust,<sup>32</sup> verse 1 reflects a wisdom character (Deissler 1964:514; Gerstenberger 2001:360; W. S. Prinsloo 2003:428). By means of a loyalty declaration an admonishment against haughtiness is declared. The psalmist denies the behaviour of self-exulted

<sup>30</sup> This picture includes *inter alia* the righteous believer who lived among liars and deceivers (120:2) or with people who hate peace (120:6). There were different dangers (121:7) which posed a threat to the travelling pilgrim from the mountainside (121:1), and from the sun and the moon (121:6). Sometimes the righteous was mocked by the rich or scorned by proud oppressors (123:4), even attacked by angry enemies (124:2-3) and ruled by the wicked (125:3). The dry and arid land was threatened by drought and no harvest, and caused much sorrow to the farmers. They wept (126:4-5). Furthermore, Israel was persecuted and injured by cruel enemies and slavery (129:2-4). They also fell into despair caused by their sin (130:1-3). Both the hardships that David suffered (132:1) and Yahweh's rejection of the earthly king (132:10) were threats experienced in Israelite history.

<sup>31</sup> These are deeds similarly to what Eve did in the Garden narrative, namely to be like God (Gen 3:4). The great things (Pss 9:1; 78:11) and the marvellous things (Pss 18:28; 101; Prov 6:17) (גִּדְלוֹת וְנִפְלְאוֹת) that the psalmist refuses to do, are references to the salvation historical deeds of Yahweh with his people during the Israelite history. See Isa 2:12-18; Ezek 17; 27; 31.

<sup>32</sup> See Weiser (1962:776); Deissler (1964:514); Anderson (1972:878); Kraus (1978:1052) and Allen (1983:198).

arrogance by conducting divine deeds and opts for a life of intimacy, warmth, and humble trust in Yahweh for help and protection, like a weaned child with its mother (131:2). Human beings are unable to act in a divine manner; therefore hubris and self-exultation pose a threat to peace with God and with the self. For the individual and community in post-exilic Israel these situations of distress, danger and affliction were orientated towards their experience of the exile.

The ethical inclination of the Wisdom-characterised Psalms in the *Sîrē Hama'alôt* collection reveals a religious ethos which addresses and transcends the burden of distress, danger and challenges of everyday life. From these psalms emanate **general criteria or norms** as ethical guidelines for a lifestyle that results in a happy and meaningful life in the Israelite context. The texts differ from the hymn in Psalm 112 (outside the *Sîrē Hama'alôt* collection) which sketches the character and ethical deeds of the righteous as mirror image of Yahweh in detail. Nevertheless, the following broad guidelines are wisdom criteria that seemed to determine ethical behaviour.

- Firstly, for adherents of the Israelite faith it is important to behave and live everyday life in recognition of and trust in Yahweh as sovereign provider for necessities and needs; and to refrain from the misconception that humans can build, keep and work hard to determine success and provisions (Ps 127; 131). An awareness of human disability and failure accompanies the ethos of trust in Yahweh; hard work and the enjoyment of the fruit of one's hands and the wife in one's house are not nullified by the protest against the retribution principle (127:1-3).
- Secondly, for Yahweh-believers it is imperative to conduct a "god-fearing" life by walking "in the ways" of Yahweh, whereby the Torah outlines and directs this Yahweh-orientated life (Ps 128);
- Thirdly, these believers pursue (or idealise) a lifestyle of fraternal solidarity that ascertains peace and life in a society where the Yahweh-believer, the poor, the enemy and the foreigner are all inspired by the same religious ethos (Ps 133);
- Fourthly, for the Yahweh-believer it is necessary to foster and be guided by an internal ethos of the heart: firstly, to be humble and not arrogant or to look down on fellow humans; secondly, to refrain from any form of hubris or self-exultation against God (131:1).

With the **hymnic character** and **universal awareness** of the theology of Book V these ethical norms are understood to be conducted in praise of Yahweh, the provider of life, blessing and prosperity. This is done as part of all creation's celebration of Yahweh's reign as king over this brotherly community, where

the Israelite, the poor, the enemy and foreigner are all directed by Torah ethics with disregard of person, sex or social status.

According to the content of the above wisdom related psalms the **Torah occupies a central role** in the theology and ethical mind of Book V. As *axis* of orientation the Torah, probably as a whole, served to determine the ethos and ethical behaviour of Israelites in the late-Persian early-Hellenistic period. Obedience to the Torah is therefore depicted as wisdom and good ethical conduct which results in a happy and meaningful life, simultaneously creating hope for Israel in various distressful and afflicted *Sitze im Leben*.

A **portrayal of Yahweh's role** in all three wisdom texts draws attention. Yahweh is the provider, but also bestower of the blessing of life. Meaningful ethical deeds can therefore not prevail without the blessing of divine intervention. According to Psalm 127 he gives sleep to his "beloved" (127:2b), a heritage to his people (127:3), and children (sons) to a family (127:3). Psalm 128 underscores how he provides blessing and prosperity, namely the fruit of one's labour (128:2), fertility of the womb (128:3), fruit of the vine (128:3), children (sons) in the house (128:3b), and a long life (128:6). Finally Psalm 133 describes how a life of fraternal solidarity, as blessing of Yahweh, assures the future and existence of the community in Zion. Therefore, he is worthy of being trusted (Pss 127; 131) and feared (Ps 128:1,4).

For contemplating Old Testament ethics from selected *Sîrê Hama'alôt* psalms two final perspectives are noteworthy. Firstly, the family and family solidarity system are important vehicles to preserve or direct ethos and ethical behaviour. Behaviour of the individual or family members had a direct impact on community life (127:5) or the future of the community (133:1-3). Vice versa, the wellbeing of the community similarly influenced the life of the individual (128:5-6). A reciprocal relationship and influence between individual and community are thus evident in this regard.

Secondly, a triangular relationship exists between Yahweh, the righteous and the land. Yahweh is not only donor of the land (127:3), but provides fertility, growth and crops as blessing for obedient behaviour (127:2; 128:1-4). The righteous is therefore encouraged to live an obedient life to Yahweh and the Torah in order to benefit from all these blessings (Deut 28:1-14). Humankind has therefore a responsibility to cultivate and work to care for the land as God's gift.

By moving from the overture (Ps 1-2) to the *grand finale* of the *Psalter* (Pss 146-150) the reader encounters the marvel of the life giving God, Yahweh, who safeguarded his people Israel from birth to death and from exile to Zion. When tuning in on the refined sounds of the *Sîrê Hama'alôt* collection one is struck by the awe in this voice. Especially wisdom motifs in Book V contribute to inspire, create hope and encourage an ethos of praise, dedication and sincere

trust in Yahweh, the universal divine king. In this ethos the Torah assumes a central role.

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