

# “Peace” (שָׁלוֹם)—Its Prerequisite and Promise: A Poetic Analysis and an Application of Psalm 85 to Africa

ERNST WENDLAND (UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH)

## ABSTRACT

*Psalm 85 gives utterance to a communal appeal to Yahweh for restoration and blessing (“peace/well-being”). It is a passionate prayer that is based on both the Lord’s past gracious dealings with his people and also their own present commitment to remain “faithful” to Yahweh’s covenant principles as expressed in their “righteous” behavior. Thus, the blessed promise of “peace” carries with it a divinely established prerequisite, namely, a life-style that is truly in keeping with what the Lord desires for his saints. The admirable manner in which this psalm has been composed in terms of its style and structure serves to highlight the main themes and purpose of its powerful lyric message. As we examine the text of Ps 85 more carefully in this study, it will become readily apparent that the “psalm off/for the sons of Korah” (מִזְמֹר לְבָנֵי-קָרָח – v. 1, Heb.) has much of importance to say also to the members of God’s contemporary Church, no matter where they may live in the world. However, the notion of “peace” strikes an especially resonant chord in the hearts of all those who live in the continent of Africa. The sense and significance of this psalm is such that it encourages us to seek more dynamic ways of communicating its message of peace via diverse modes and media of transmission today.*

## A THE POETIC STRUCTURE AND INSCRIBED MESSAGE OF PSALM 85

Psalm 85 manifests a highly symmetrical formal arrangement which admirably complements its powerful theological and moral message for the “saints” (v. 8b—or forgiven sinners, v. 2) of the LORD. I will first outline the psalm’s poetic structure on the following chart (minus the musical heading), which gives the Hebrew text alongside the NIV, and afterwards justify this organization in terms of the prayer’s principal stylistic features.<sup>1</sup> I have used several different

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<sup>1</sup> The main text critical issue in Ps. 85 occurs in the second line of v. 1 (Heb. 2) and whether to read the *kethiv* שְׁבִית “captivity” or the *qere* שְׁבִוָּת “turnings/fortunes.” The potential double wordplay of this verse (see below) lends support to the latter reading, which is preferred also by Marvin Tate, *Psalm 51-100* (WBC 20; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 364. I also recommend Tate’s text-conservative (non-emendative) recommendations for all of the other, lesser issues of this nature that arise in this psalm (see pp. 364-367).

typographical devices in this display (capital letters, italics, bold print, underlines, and different typefaces) in order to highlight some of the primary reiterate lexical items:

1 You showed favor to your land, O LORD;  
you **restored the fortunes** of Jacob.

רָצִית יְהוָה אֶרְצֶךָ  
שְׁבָתָ \*שְׁבּוֹת (שְׁבִית) יְעַלְבָּ:

2 You forgave the iniquity of your people  
and covered all their sins. *Selah*

נָשָׁאָת עַזְן עַמְךָ  
בְּסִיתָ בְּלִחְתְּאָתָם סָלהָ:

3 You set aside all your wrath  
and **turned** from your fierce anger.

אָסְפָת בְּלַעֲבָרָתָךָ  
הַשְׁבּוֹת מִחְרֹזָן אָפָךָ:

4 **Restore** us again, O God our *Savior*,  
and put away your displeasure toward us.

שׁוּבָנוּ אֶלְחֵי יְשַׁעָנוּ  
וְהַפְרֵב עַסְךָ עַמְנוּ:

5 Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger through all  
generations?

הַלְעוֹלָם תִּאֲנָרְבָנוּ  
תִּמְשָׁךְ אֶפְךָ לִדְרַ וְדַרָּ:

6 Will you not revive us *again*,  
that your people may rejoice in you?

וְעַמְךָ יִשְׁמַחְוּבָךָ:

7 Show us your unfailing love, O LORD,  
and grant us your *salvation*.

הַרְאָנוּ יְהוָה מִסְךָ  
וְשֻׁעָךְ תִּתְּנַלְנוּ:

8 I will listen to what God the LORD will  
say;

אֲשֶׁר מִתְּבָרֵךְ הָאֱלֹהִים יְהוָה

he promises **peace**  
to his people, his saints<sup>2</sup>

כִּי יִזְבְּרֵךְ שָׁלוֹם  
אֶל-עַמּוֹ וְאֶל-חֶסְדֵיּוֹ:

but let them not **return** to folly.

וְאֶל-יִשְׁׁוּבָו לְכִסְלָהָ:

9 Surely his *salvation* is near those who  
fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.

אֵיךְ | קָרוּב לִירְאֵי יְשַׁעָה  
לְשָׁבֵן כְּבֹזֵד בָּאָרֶצָנוּ:

10 Love and *faithfulness* meet together;  
righteousness and **peace** kiss each other.

חֶסְדֵוֹתָם נִגְשָׁו  
צְדָקָה וְשְׁלוֹם נִשְׁקוּוּ:

11 *Faithfulness* springs forth from the  
earth,  
and righteousness looks down from hea-  
ven.

אֶמְתָה מִאָרֶץ תִּצְמַח  
וְצְדָקָה מִשְׁמִים נִשְׁקָהָ:

12 The LORD will indeed give what is  
good,  
and our land will yield its harvest.

גָּמִינְיָה יִתְּנוּ הַטּוֹב  
וְאֶרְצֵנוּ תִּתְּנַזֵּן יְבוּלָהָ:

13 Righteousness goes before him  
and prepares the way for his steps.

צְדָקָה לְפָנָיו יְהָלֵךְ  
וְשִׁם לְדַרְךָ פָּעָמִים:

<sup>2</sup> The line break here is not based on syntax, but rather on phonology—sound and lexical balance.

Psalm 85 divides itself structurally into two larger “stanzas,” I = vv. 1-7 (2-8, Heb.) and II = vv. 8-13 (9-14, Heb.), each of which consists of two poetic paragraphs, or “strophes”: A = 1-3, B = 4-7, A’ = 8-9, and B’ = 10-13.<sup>3</sup> The two stanzas are correspondent in terms of their number of poetic lines (I = 14 cola, II = 14 cola) and word count, as are the constituent strophes: I = 45 words and II = 47, with A = 19, B = 26 and A’ = 22, B’ = 25 words. The obvious symmetry and balance of this liturgical poem not only attests to the skill of the biblical poet, but it also suggests the importance of the theologically-focused message being conveyed.<sup>4</sup> Each strophe embodies a distinct “speech act” that is nevertheless integrated with the others to form a coherent whole: A = *testimony* (worship leader: psalmist/priest/Levite), B = *appeal* (congregation), A’ = profession of *trust* (psalmist...), and B’ = *praise* (congregation).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, there are some clear semantic and pragmatic parallels among the four strophes: Thus, the two shorter, initial strophes both refer to Yahweh’s merciful acts, A to *past* forgiveness and A’ to *future* deliverance, while the two latter, longer strophes suggest a prayer-response sequence, with B articulating a request for restoration and B’ giving joyful expression to a beneficial outcome.

A number of topical and lexical ties recur within the text to help demarcate the psalm’s four divisions and to lend internal cohesion to each of them. First of all, a reference to “God” (הָאֵל) or the divine covenantal name “Yahweh” (יְהֹוָה) occurs in each of the four strophes, notably, in a prominent position either at or near the beginning (vv. 1, 4, 8) or ending (vv. 7, 12) of the poetic unit at hand. In the first strophe (A), the psalmist lists an impressive series of synonymous demonstrations of the LORD’s favor towards the people, in spite of their chronic sinfulness—as rendered by the NIV: “showed favor … restored fortunes … forgave iniquity … covered sins … set aside wrath … turned from anger.” The final topic of divine “anger” (v. 3) continues to be in focus in strophe B as the people communally call upon their “Savior God” (v. 4a) to “break off his displeasure”<sup>6</sup> that appeared to be currently afflicting them with some sort of a calamity, possibly a drought in view of the agricultural bounty

<sup>3</sup> Most commentators either do not break the second half of the psalm into two, for example, John Goldingay, *Psalm 42-89* (vol. 2 of *Psalm*; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 604, or they separate off v. 8 (9), e.g., Tate, *Psalm*, 370; Willem A. van Gemeren, “*Psalm*,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (vol. 5; ed. Frank E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 546-547 [3-880].

<sup>4</sup> It is not possible to record all of the intertextual links that Ps 85 has with other OT literature. I might simply note that Goldingay sees connections between vv. 1-7 and Ps 44 as well as between vv. 8-13 and certain passages in Isa 40-66 (*Psalm*, 605-616).

<sup>5</sup> It is very possible that Ps 85 served in a liturgical setting as a communal prayer in which the officiating priest or Levite chanted strophes A and A’, while the congregation responded communally with the words of strophes B and B’ (cf. Goldingay, *Psalm*, 610).

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars emend the text from “break off” (*H-PH-R*) to “turn aside” (*H-S-R*).

pictured later in strophe B’.<sup>7</sup> Two sets of rhetorical questions underscore the people’s plight in the middle of strophe B—the first rather negative in outlook (v. 5, e.g., “will you be angry with us” – אָנָּגַנְתָּנוּ-בָּנָּתָּה), the second more positive (v. 6, i.e., “will you not return to revive us” – שׁוֹב תְּחִיָּנוּ).<sup>8</sup> The first half of the psalm ends (v. 7) with an appeal which echoes a parallel that initiated the second strophe (v. 4), thus bringing to the fore the divine attributes upon which the people based their hope, namely, his (lit. ‘your’) “steadfast love” (חִסְדָּךְ) and “salvation” (שָׁמֵךְ).

The principal turning point of Ps 85 occurs at its midpoint in v. 8 and the onset of strophe A’. This is marked by an exceptional *tetracolon*, the first line of which is extra long, that is, 5 + 3/4/3 words (the norm is 3 to 4 words per colon). The sudden shift from a plaintive plea from the worshiping congregation (v. 7) to the psalmist’s expression of patient trust (v. 8) also signals this major juncture in the psalm.<sup>9</sup> Strophe A’ then reiterates the people’s fervent desire and confident hope that their prayer (strophe A) will be positively answered by linking up the key words “peace” (שָׁלוֹם), “salvation” (שָׁמֵךְ), and the “glory” (כָּבֹוד) of the LORD. This is the prayer that the psalmist utters on behalf of “his [Yahweh’s] people, his saints” (אֱלֹהִים וְאֱלֹהִים חִסְדֵּיו), namely, “those who fear him” (לִירְאֵי), on behalf of “their (lit. ‘our’) land” (אֶרְצֵנוּ). However, the prayer’s eager expectation is tempered by juxtaposition with a warning concerning his community’s present spiritual state. This clearly stands as a precondition for divine blessing: “let them *not* ‘return’ (repeating the key word שׁוֹב to [their] folly” (לְבַסְלָה, i.e., based on the historical and prophetic record, probably a mixture of rampant idolatry, coupled with gross immorality and social oppression).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> “...God bestows the good and makes the land productive (v. 12). The optimum conditions for human life will exist (on the productive land as a feature of salvation prophecies, see Amos 9:13; Hos 2:21-23; Isa 30:23-25; Jer 21:21; Lev 26:3-6),” cf. James L. Mays, *Psalms* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 277.

<sup>8</sup> Thus, the first rhetorical question (v. 5) looks backwards to the divine “displeasure” of v. 4, while the second (v. 6) looks forward to the LORD’s “unfailing love” in v. 7. Note the covenant relational verb “turning” שׁוֹב, which occurs throughout the first two strophes, vv. 1b, 3b, 4a, 6a.

<sup>9</sup> Such a sudden and surprising shift from a negative to a positive outlook and tone at some point after the midpoint of the text has been reached is found in many psalms of the “lament” genre, whether individual (e.g., Ps 22:22, 77:10) or like this, communal in nature (e.g., Ps 79:12, 83:9).

<sup>10</sup> “The psalmist may have been thinking of the way God had forgiven them and brought them back to the land after their sin and unfaithfulness had led to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple (Isa 40:1-11; Jer 33:7-9),” cf. Cyril Okorocha, “Psalms,” in *Africa Bible Commentary* (ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo; Nairobi: Zondervan/Word Alive, 2006), 692 [605-746].

The fourth and concluding strophe B’ then lauds in vivid abstract personifications the chief ethical qualities that should characterize Yahweh’s true covenant community (v. 10): “steadfast love” (ךְַחַ – in effect, mirroring that of Yahweh himself, v. 7!), “faithfulness” (תְּמִימָּנָה), “righteousness” (קְדֻשָּׁה), and “peace” (שְׁלָמָה).<sup>11</sup> The communal (not just individual) activation of such behavior (cf. נִפְגַּשׁ “they meet together,” v. 10a) will, in turn, open the way for Yahweh to put his abundant blessings correspondingly on display in “our land” (אֶרְצָנוּ) (vv. 11-12). In v. 12, the worshipers’ confidently look into the future by paraphrasing and re-applying the psalm’s initial verse, which documents the LORD past favor upon his (lit. “your”) “land” (קֶרֶתָּה). Psalm 85 concludes with an implied reminder that the “righteousness” (קְדֻשָּׁה) of Yahweh, that is, his just dealings with his people, must also be reflected in their corresponding interpersonal behavior, even as he himself anthropomorphically “steps forth” (lit., “his footsteps” – יַמְעַטָּה) to encourage and empower them towards that same providential (“peace”-full) outcome.

To conclude this cursory text study of Ps 85, I will briefly draw attention to a number of poetic features that serve to highlight different dimensions of the LORD’s message to his saints. In the preceding structural overview, I called attention to the well-fashioned poetic organisation of this communal prayer in terms of balanced lineation as well as strophic arrangement. The following stylistic devices function both to establish the internal boundaries of the psalm as a whole and also to foreground certain key aspects of the text’s content (principal topics) and function (communicative aims):

- Strong alliteration forming a double paronomasia in the first verse underscores the psalm’s fundamental presupposition and foundation for the people’s confidence in their covenant LORD: “you favored your land – you restored [their] fortunes” (*râtsiythâ...’artsechâ – shabhtâ shibhuwth*). The reiterated second personal singular subject and possessive suffixes, namely *thâ* and *-châ* “you/your,” with reference to Yahweh is a prominent reminder of this personal thematic focus that runs throughout the first strophe (A).
- A repetition of the verbal root “turning” also helps mark the transition from affirmation to petition as strophe A moves into strophe B: “you turned” (*שָׁבַתְּנָה* – v. 3b) ... “turn us!” (*שָׁבֵבָנוּ* – v. 4a).
- A divine vocative begins and ends strophe B: “O God of our *salvation*” (*יְהֹוָה יְשֻׁעָה* – 4a) ... “O LORD” (7a), an *inclusio* that is even more noticeable due to the mention of “your *salvation*” (*קְדֻשָּׁה*) in v. 7b. The close of

<sup>11</sup> “Such keywords as ‘mercy,’ ‘truth,’ and ‘trust’ appear as mouthpieces for living realities that apply to both the character of God and the hoped-for behavior of renewed man,” cf. Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 608.

strophe B is also marked by a chiastic arrangement of the divine actions being requested by the people: “show us – your steadfast love” // “your salvation – give to us!”

- In addition to the extra long poetic line that introduces the second half of Ps 85 and strophe A’ in v. 8a, this major aperture is distinguished by another divine vocative (יְהוָה | הָאֱלֹהִים) and שָׁלוֹם “peace”—a concept that admirably expresses the result of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and his people when things are right between them. This applies to “his saints”—perhaps better rendered “his steadfastly faithful ones” (סְדִידִים), a term that echoes the people’s emotive plea for the LORD’s “steadfast faithfulness/love” (דְּבָרָה) at the end of strophe B (v. 7).
- The close of strophe A’ features a pair of emphatic utterances that contrast with each other—first the negative warning “but *let them not return* (אַל-יָשׁוּב) to [their] folly,” which is followed by an exclamation of confident trust: “*Surely near* (קָרוֹב | אֵין) – note also the distinctive word order) to those who fear him [is] his salvation!” The latter line (9a) is a poetic parallel to v. 8b: peace – salvation; his faithful ones – those fearing him. The end of this strophe may also manifest another boundary-marking chiastic structure (as in v. 7): “near to those fearing him – his salvation” // “his glory to dwell – in our land.”
- The “faithful love” (דְּבָרָה) appealed for by the people (v. 7) is linked in turn to a series of covenantal correlates in v. 10, at the onset of the psalm’s final strophe (B’). The two poetic lines (cola) of this verse display exceptionally strict parallelism of form and meaning: “faithful-love + and-faithfulness + they-meet-[together]”<sup>12</sup> // “righteousness + and-peace + they-kiss-[each-other].” Thus the prayer of strophe B’ (vv. 4, 7) and the assured hope of strophe A’ (v. 9) have seemingly been realized within the very framework of the psalm itself!
- The exact parallelism of v. 10 continues in v. 11, thereby symbolizing in the text’s precision of form and content the continual flow of divine blessings being realized in focal fronted position in each of the poetic lines: “faithfulness + from-[the]-earth + it-springs-forth” // “and-righteousness + from-[the]-heavens + it-looks-down.”

<sup>12</sup> The two verbs of v. 10 are “perfect” forms, but they are interpreted here as exemplifying a dramatic prophetic usage, thus rhetorically describing what is hoped for as if this has already happened, or is in the process of happening, e.g., “loyal love and faithfulness have met together!” This same vivid poetic verbal style is exhibited in many African languages, e.g., Chewa of Malawi and Zambia.

- The strong expression of trust of v. 12 parallels that of the preceding strophe in v. 9 – the “glory” (כָּבָד) of the former verse being identified with and/or derived from “Yahweh” (הָיְהִי) heightened by “surely” (מֹשֶׁׁה) in the latter passage.
- The striking personifications of vv. 10 and 11 are transformed into a divine anthropomorphism in the psalm’s rather enigmatic final verse (v. 13). The question is: whose “righteousness” (כָּדָשׁ) is being referred to, God’s or man’s—that of Yahweh or that of his covenant people? Most commentators take the different attributes referred to in this strophe (B’) as characteristic of the LORD God, who is explicitly mentioned in v. 12 (cf. v. 7).<sup>13</sup> However, an intratextual case can be made for viewing here also an implicit reference to the covenant community, namely those who have repented (strophe A), begged for forgiveness (strophe B), and have explicitly identified themselves as being “his people, his faithful ones...those fearing him [Yahweh]” in vv. 8-9 (strophe A’). They are the living messengers, or heralds, figuratively depicted in v. 13, who prepare the way for their King by reflecting in their very lives his righteous behavior in relationship to one another, thus establishing “peace” (vv. 8b, 10b) and blessings throughout their land. Those who hope for “peace” from God must in turn allow that same peace to characterize their own virtuous life-style.<sup>14</sup>

## B READING AND APPLYING PSALM 85 IN AFRICA TODAY

The original setting of Ps 85 cannot be stated with certainty, and it is therefore surrounded with a considerable amount of speculation, especially on the part of form critics.<sup>15</sup> Most commentators suggest that some time in the post-exilic

<sup>13</sup> For example, “The psalm closes with a fine section of poetic depiction of the great qualities of Yahweh’s presence and power: Glory, Loyal-Love, Faithfulness, Righteousness, and Well-Being (Peace); all are ready to go forth to participate with Yahweh as he bestows his goodness on the land and its people,” cf. Tate, *Psalms*, 367.

<sup>14</sup> Some commentators and versions (e.g., NEB) propose “peace” as the implicit subject of the second colon of v. 13, thus paralleling the beginning of strophe B’ in v. 10b, cf. Van Gemeren, “*Psalms*,” 551.

<sup>15</sup> Weiser, for example, argues that the principal setting of Ps 85 is “probably that of a service of supplication of the cult community, held within the framework of the festal cult ... celebrated at the autumn feast ... when the cult community witnessed at first hand ... the *Heilsgeschichte* as the representation of the gracious hand of God’s guidance (deliverance from Egypt, bestowal of the promised land),” cf. Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (trans. Herbert Hartwell; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 571-72. This may well be another example of the form-critical fashioning of a wealth of speculative detail from a paucity of actual textual and contextual data.

period, whether earlier or later, seems to fit best.<sup>16</sup> However, there is really nothing in the text itself that would unambiguously point to that particular temporal framework. Rather, as in the case of most psalms (excepting cases like Ps 137), the wording and references are generalized to the extent that the text may be applied to the religious life of ancient Israel at just about any point in its (post-)Davidic history. Indeed, this is the special genius of the Psalter in functioning as the “prayer book of the saints,” no matter who they are (what culture, language, etc.), where they happen to live in the world, or in whichever age.

As noted above, the general development of the central petitionary “argument” of this communal prayer, which borders on that of a standard psalmic lament (vv. 4-8), is quite clear: The faithful community was currently facing a serious threat to their very existence—whether this danger confronted them in the form of a drought, some severe pestilence or pandemic, attack by a foreign army, political, social, and moral disintegration, or some combination of these. In the psalm’s second strophe (B), the people attribute the pressing danger to the “anger” of Yahweh in reaction to their persistent sinful behavior, as had happened on numerous occasions in the past history of their nation. They now appeal for “restoration” (v. 4) on the basis of the LORD’s manifest “loyal love/steadfast faithfulness” (v. 7), which had always been his gracious covenantal response to their corporate repentance. That historical record becomes a matter of public testimony as the psalm opens (strophe A), and as various expressions documenting Yahweh’s forgiveness emphatically follow, one immediately after the other (vv. 1-3).

Psalm 85 then pauses in the middle (v. 8a), as it were, as the psalmist (priest), speaking declaratively on behalf of the prayerful congregation announces his hope (strophe A’) for a positive divine reply to the people’s plea (strophe B). This is motivated by the promise of “peace” that Yahweh characteristically desires to bestow on his “faithful saints” (8b) by revealing his “glory” among them (in their “land”—9b).<sup>17</sup> This providential “deliverance” is thwarted, however, whenever they move away from their “fear” of him into worldly and religious “folly” (8c-9a). But all doubt is cast aside in the final strophe (B’), which lauds the LORD’s wonderful attributes (loyal love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace) as they are assumed to be reflected in the

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Johan H. Coetzee, “Psalm 85: Yearning for the Restoration of the Whole Body,” *OTE* 22/3 (2009): 554-563, who feels that “[t]he dynamic in Psalm 85 reflects a struggle towards restoration and maintenance of this three-dimensional relationship,” i.e., between “people, God, and land” (pp. 559-560).

<sup>17</sup> “The expression which encompasses all that Yahweh will do is מְלֹאת ‘Well-Being/Peace,’ used in vv 9 and 11” (Tate, *Psalms*, 372). In most OT occurrences, peace is a corporate, interpersonal, not an individual notion.

lives of his people (vv. 10-11, 13), and as he correspondingly blesses their land in response (v. 12, cf. 9b).

So what does Ps 85 say to Africa—to its diverse settings, nations, and peoples, along with their current crises, challenges, opportunities, and resources, especially as occasioned in the religious realm and spiritual sphere?<sup>18</sup> The focus of my study is “peace” (*shalom*), so what can this psalm contribute with regard to that subject in relation to African life, past and present, as well as the hopes and aspirations of many people for the future? I will not presume to try to answer in specifics, but will merely offer some rather general personal observations, first arising from the theology of Ps 85, and then with respect to several, hopefully practical life-applications.

It is quite striking to me that the promise of *peace* (85:8) comes with a prominent *prerequisite*, one that looks back into the past and extends its range into the foreseeable future. Indeed, this is a divine requirement that applied not only to ancient Israel, the initial consumers of this psalm, but it also concerns people of all nations and of every age, not just those who happen to be living in Africa today. We notice where this pledge to all faithful God-fearers occurs in the text—namely, after completing the first half of the psalm, specifically two strophes which emphasise, respectively, former “restoration” that is predicated upon a “forgiveness” and repentance (implied) (vv. 1-3), as well as a present peaceful (non-“angry”) relationship between the LORD and his covenant people (vv. 4-7). This relationship involves an implicit trust that is expressed in both word and deed on the part of those who are appealing for restoration and revival in an immanent personal God (Yahweh), whose very nature is characterized by “steadfast faithfulness” and who does, in fact, have the transcendent power to “deliver” his people in their time of need (v. 7).

In the second place, the central pronouncement and promise of peace is closely attached to an explicit warning by the psalmist with regard to the future: If people expect Yahweh to “return” to them in forgiveness and favor, then they, on the other hand, must not “return” to their former life of “foolishness” (v. 8c), which in a biblical sense refers not to some mental incapacity, but rather to a deliberate rejection of God and his ways. The LORD in his “glory”

<sup>18</sup> I present my thoughts in this section rather tentatively as a “resident outsider” (or “alien insider”)—that is, as someone who has lived, worked, taught, and learned in Africa for most of my life (since 1962). In more ways than one, my most meaningful “education” really began when I entered this cross-cultural, multilingual learning environment and encountered the many African teachers, both professional, and lay, whom I have personally benefitted from in various respects along my journey. I also realize that “Africa” covers a large expanse manifesting great differences among diverse peoples and places. Therefore, I will discuss the subject of “peace” in Africa more in general terms and from my limited perspective of the south-central region—Zambia, Malawi, and Zimbabwe.

chooses to live only among God-fearing folk (v. 9). While the divine presence may be demonstrated in agricultural bounty and general economic prosperity (v. 12), such *physical* peace is rarely found generally in any earthly society and even less so for any length of time. In the context of the Scriptures as a whole, therefore, I feel that these agrarian references are better interpreted as figurative depictions of essentially *spiritual* realities that are—or ought to be—displayed in abundance among God’s people. Thus, in v. 10 the covenantal qualities of “loyal love,” “faithfulness,” “righteousness,” and “peace” (in this context, probably peace-“makers”; Ps 34:14, 37:37, 120:7; Matt 5:9) may well refer either to Yahweh or to those who revere him (v. 9)—or, in my opinion, to both. The ambiguity of the psalm’s final strophe (B’) then is deliberate: The LORD’s righteousness becomes visible only in the lives of his people (v. 13)!

So what’s the point in terms of practical application? Africa is a continent that has been longing for peace and security for a long time. The end of the colonial age (we might just begin at that point) ushered in an era of abundant optimism. But in all too many countries—east, west, north, and south—the hopes of the proverbial “common man” (*bantu balya maila* – “the millet eaters” in Tonga) were soon dashed, and they often found themselves no better off than before independence. They continued to suffer similar sorts of social and economic oppression, but now, however, this was at the hands of different masters—frequently from among their own countrymen (and the *male* gender here is significant!). The sad irony was that during these same early independence years (and thereafter) the Christian church was growing faster than ever before in virtually every quarter of the continent. New, non-European/mission-based churches (the so-called “African Independent Churches,” AIC’s) were springing up everywhere, as were splinter groups, those that had broken away from long-established and often missionary-dominated denominations. In many countries of Africa, Christianity (consisting of a multitude of different churches) soon became the dominant religion, and in some nations over 75% of the population claimed to be “Christian.” However, the “peace” and associated freedoms that the masses had so fervently hoped for—political, economic, social, and religious—never quite seemed to materialize, at least not with the same quality or intensity of vision that their leaders had originally promised. Instead, the old adage appeared to keep repeating itself: “The rich (and powerful) just keep getting richer (more powerful).” This all too often applied to the leadership of the churches as well.

Does Ps 85 offer any solutions? Two preliminary points should be noted to begin with: Corrupt and oppressive leadership is a problem not only in Africa, but it is common throughout the world—in so-called “developed” as well as in “developing” nations (though the former may be more sophisticated

in concealing their dishonesty and wrongdoing).<sup>19</sup> The second thing is that the agricultural imagery of bountiful blessing found in the final strophe (B') should not be construed in an overly literal, materialistic manner. In other words, the God-fearing, righteous nation (on the whole) will not necessarily be prosperous in every possible respect, nor will it always be able to avoid the different crises and calamities that regularly befall this earth—wars, plagues, famines, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and other environmental disasters. To adopt such a *do ut des* religious philosophy (“I give that you [God] may give [me]” – in Chewa, *kupatsa ndi kuika* “to give [to someone, including God] is to deposit [for a future repayment]”) means that one has more or less subscribed to the same sort of faulty mechanical reasoning as did Job’s false “comforters,” who thought that every worldly misfortune must be the automatic result of human sin and divine judgment—and vice-versa (e.g., Job 11:13-17). The experiences of life, including man’s relationships with God, with each other, and with nature, are much more complicated and unpredictable than that!

In contrast, the truths or teachings of Ps 85 are relatively straightforward when interpreted in a spiritual, ecclesiastical sense, which is the primary hermeneutical level, I believe, whereby the text is intended to be understood. The LORD’s offer of “peace” (v. 8b) is his default desire, not only as exhibited between him and “his people,” the God-fearers, but also as this harmonious well-being is realised among his covenant community in all of their relationships with each other as individuals and ideally also as corporate Christian religious groups.<sup>20</sup> The chief behavioral demonstrations of covenantal peace (in general, 8b) are clearly specified as involving a complex of characteristics: implicit trust (v. 9), loyal love, faithfulness, righteousness, and the activity of peace-making (specific *shalom*, v. 10). One African commentator explains it this way:<sup>21</sup>

True righteousness and real peace belong together as God’s gifts, in the lives of individuals or nations. One cannot exist without the other. The life that results is what the Igbo of Nigeria describe as *Ezi-ndu*, a life that involves total well-being as well as the fullness of justice and moral uprightness. ... It is when we order our lives along these ‘paths of righteousness’ [Ps 23:3; cf. 85:13] under the guidance of the word of God that we can enjoy ‘blessings’ or lasting success, God’s *shalom* (Josh 1:8).

<sup>19</sup> The greedy, cut-throat banking system in most Western nations is a prominent case in point. It is important, too, not to over-generalise: there are certainly exceptions in the broad area of “civic righteousness,” but such notable national states and internal governmental departments simply prove the rule.

<sup>20</sup> The quality of concordant communal vertical and horizontal “relationships” is a vital dimension of biblical *shalom*, cf. David A. Leiter, *Neglected Voices: Peace in the Old Testament* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2007), ch. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Okorocha, “Psalms,” 693; material in brackets added.

On the other hand, the *failure* to achieve this godly concord and orderliness within the community is dealt with in the first half of the psalm. Quite simply, all expressions of conflict and hostility are the inevitable result of human iniquity and sinfulness (v. 2)—chronic sins that are left unrepented and unforgiven, hence also punishable by the LORD (v. 3). Such communal discord and wickedness within the fellowship of God’s people may be coupled with widespread evil in the nation as a whole and thus provoke his wrath in the form of adverse political, social, economic, and physical consequences for them all. How can there be any peace if there is no righteousness in the land?<sup>22</sup> And how can there be righteousness in society if there is no real repentance? Finally, how can there be genuine repentance if people habitually return to their former folly—their diverse forms of ungodly behavior (v. 8c)? Any hope of restoration and revival is quickly extinguished in a prevailing climate of sin and injustice, whether on the national or local level, or indeed, within the church itself. In such a corrupt environment, only the wrath of God may be expected (v. 5).

But as in the case of Ps 85 itself, it is good to end on a positive note. No matter what happens in contemporary society and the nation at large, when the “saints” actively fellowship with their LORD of “loyal love” (vv. 7-8), they are united by a bond that can never be broken. Then they will experience the matchless “peace that surpasses all understanding” (Phil 4:7, 9)—a pervasive sense of spiritual well-being, which begins in this life but comes to full fruition only in the next, when God’s peace and “glory” will be manifested among his people forever (v. 9; cf. Ezek 36:26-28, 43:4-7). And how can a person become more firmly convinced of this encouraging message, such that s/he applies it more fully to all aspects of life? The psalmist himself gives us the key in the middle of his prayer: “*I will listen* (הִשְׁמַע) to what God the LORD will say” (v. 8a). We do that by immersing ourselves in his Word and by correspondingly putting it into daily practice. As another psalm-writer poetically puts it: “Great [better: ‘abundant’] peace (בְּרִית לְוָדֵשׁ) have they who love your Law...I obey your statutes for I love them greatly” (Ps 119:165a, 167, NIV).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> And it starts from the top: “Zambia’s new President [as of 20/09/2011] Michael Sata, the first elected Catholic head of state and a devout believer, said on Sunday his government would follow the tenets of the 10 Biblical Commandments.” Cf. News24, “10 Commandments for Zambia,” n.p. [cited September 25, 2011]. Online: (<http://www.news24.com/Africa/News/10-Commandments-for-Zambia-20110925>).

<sup>23</sup> “Immersion” in the Word means just that—a rigorous daily study of Scripture at the comparative world-view level, individually and in community, followed by a corresponding thorough application in one’s everyday life. As one African apologist-theologian has recently noted: “Simply stated, the version of Christianity that was planted in Africa was largely divorced from the intellectual legacy of Christendom that had produced first-rate Christian scientists, moral philosophers, political thinkers, artists, business entrepreneurs, etc. It was instead the product of a pietistic strain of evangelicalism which was already in intellectual retreat in the West by the time it was

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## C TOWARDS AN ORATORICAL EQUIVALENT OF PSALM 85

The importance of studying the Scriptures for spiritual growth and development leads to our final topic for consideration, namely, how we might better *communicate* God’s message concerning the “peace” that we have in Christ, as prefigured in Ps 85, to a contemporary audience. The term “audience” is used deliberately, for research has shown that most people today, especially in Africa, actually *hear* the Word rather than reading it silently in print for themselves. This raises the question of media compatibility: How accommodating are the published Bible translations that we are most familiar with to transmitting the text via oral-aural means? In other words, are our local Bibles generally easy to read (are they clear and legible) as well as being easy to listen to (idiomatic and natural sounding)? In my experience, this is normally *not* the case—for various reasons, for example, the primary vernacular Bible is an old, rather literal version, a translation that was dominated by non-mother-tongue speakers, a version containing errors, a poorly formatted text, one that uses the wrong dialect of a language, and so forth.

In contrast, the Scriptures are, by and large, comprised of excellent “literature,” that is, texts that have been composed in an artful manner in terms of structure and style to complement the crucial theological messages being conveyed. I cannot argue the case for this conclusion here,<sup>24</sup> but our brief survey of the superb, literary-fashioned discourse of Ps 85 is just another supporting example. The various biblical books, the Psalter in particular, were both created orally and ideally also intended for aural reception. But that is not how many of the current translations into African languages read or sound. On the contrary, due to a sight-focused, print-based translation technique, these versions often seem to reflect a language style that is as far-away and foreign as the divine concepts being conveyed. This state of affairs is of special concern in Africa whose societies are still characterised by the dynamics of orality and also reflect a wonderfully rich oral artistic tradition that is still very much alive and well in many respects.

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coming to maturity in Africa. In short, since the advent of the missionary movement in the latter eighteenth century, the Judeo-Christian tradition has never been rooted in Africa as it had once been in the West. The West may presently be busy hacking away at the root of its moral foundations, but Africa in one sense has yet even to break ground in order to lay down a strong biblical foundation within its many cultures.” Cf. John M. Njoroge, *Apologetics: Why Your Church Needs it* (Norcross, Ga.: RZIM Publishing, 2009), 12. It is not incidental, I believe, that the “peace” (εἰρήνη) that Christ promises his disciples is intimately associated with the “teachings” (διδάσκω) of Jesus, as imparted by his Spirit through the Word (John 14:26-27; cf. Matt 11:28-29, where “learning” [μανθάνω] from/about Jesus is linked with “rest” [ἀνάπαυσις], which is the equivalent of peace).

<sup>24</sup> See Ernst R. Wendland, *Translating the Literature of Scripture* (Dallas: SIL International, 2004).

How, then, can the vibrant orality of African languages be revealed more fully in Bible translations—that is, in “oratorical” renditions that idiomatically capture the essence of the original message of Scripture in a functionally equivalent manner, which is faithful to its semantic content and pragmatic intent as well as its primary medium of transmission? In short, how can we *pray for peace more poetically and potently* in the vernacular? I will conclude with a short example that will hopefully illustrate some of the important issues involved here and also encourage such community-based experimentation in other African language-cultures. The following is the dramatic central portion of Ps 85 (vv. 4-9), rendered in a way that reflects a traditional *ndakatulo* genre of Chewa poetry, which is well-suited for “re-oralising” the text for a contemporary listening audience. This version has been formatted for easier oral articulation and is accompanied by a relatively literal English back-translation:

Inu Mulungu, ndinu Mpulumutsi wathu.	4. O God, you are our Deliverer.
Mutibwezerenso ife anthuanu mwakale;	Restore us, your very people, as in the past;
mutichotsere mkwiyo wanu, inu Ambuye!	remove from us your wrath, O LORD!
Kodi mudzakhalabe wakupya-mtima	5. Will you remain being hot in the heart as long as forever?
mpaka muyaya?	Will you continue to be angry with us through all generations?
Mudzapitiriza kutikalipira kwa mibadwo	6. Well, will you not give us again real life,
yonse?	so that we might rejoice in you, we your people?
Nanga simudzatipatsanso ife moyotu,	7. Reveal to us [your] love that never-ever changes,
kuti tikondwere mwa Inu ife anthuanu?	Oh LORD, please deliver us!
Tiwonetseni chikondi chosasinthikadi,	8. Ha! Just let me hear what the LORD will say,
Inu Chauta, choonde mutipulumutse ife!	since he promises peace to his people,
Hah! Koma ndimve zimene Chauta	yes indeed, we are the clean-hearted, faithful people.
adzanene,	But surely, let us not revert to that foolishness of ours!
popeza amalonjeza mtendere kwa anthu ake,	9. Truly, God is prepared at all times
indedi, ndife anthu oyera-mtima	those people who always fear him to deliver,
okhulupirika.	
Koma zedi, ife tisabwererenso kuzopusa zathuzo!	
Zoona, Mulungu ali wokonzekera nthawi zonse,	
kti anthu amene amamuwopa awapulumutsewo,	

so that his Glory in our land might ever remain.

I cannot detail all of the various stylistic features that distinguish this poetic, oral-oriented Chewa translation. I will simply point out a few of its principal characteristics in summary fashion:

- The text has been composed with prominent rhythmic lineation, including typical lyric alliteration, assonance, rhyme, and euphony in general.
- An additional vocative is inserted (4c) along with vocative pronouns on every occurrence, as would be natural in direct discourse (e.g., *inu Ambuye*).
- The extra-long lines of v. 5 constitute an isomorphic image of the content, which refers to an extreme length of time—forever in fact!
- A number of emotive emphasisers have been incorporated into the text, also as a way of “naturalising” it for orality, for example *Hah!* and *indedi* in v. 8a, c.
- A shift has been made from the third to second person plural in v. 8c-d so that the text sounds more personal and immediate, more typical of vernacular prayer.
- Several word order changes were effected for rhythmic purposes and also to reflect the apparent focus of the original, for example 9b-c, where the verbs appear in colon-final position.
- Expressive, idiomatic figures involving the “heart” (*mtima*) were added in vv. 5a and 8c.

The artistic and rhetorical devices just listed exemplify the way in which a printed text may be fashioned in order to render it more amenable to oral articulation, as in the case of a congregational gathering for worship or a group Bible study. Such an *oratorical* translation would also be suitable for a dramatic, enacted performance of the biblical text, or for use as the basis for a *musical* sung composition. Presentations of this nature, if done well, would be especially effective in societies where an active tradition of dynamic oral art forms is still in force. Even in cases where this performance convention has diminished in the face of the present decade's electronic media revolution, enough people would no doubt be familiar with such ancient artistry to be able to appreciate alternative versions of their vernacular Scriptures communicated to them in this audible way.

An innovative orality-based strategy would be beneficial not only to offer more variety in terms of Bible products, or to provide the basis for novel comparative studies of the text, but it would also give people the opportunity to sense the beauty and power of God’s Word in a manner that offers them a new perspective on—indeed, *hearing of*—familiar Bible texts. Surely the poetic message of Ps 85 concerning the “peace of God” (v. 8) is one that has ongoing relevance and unremitting urgency in today’s world—not only for Africa. This expressive prayer-poem should therefore be transmitted verbally via those communication media that have been carefully selected as being most suitable for specific segments within the society at large. But above all, it must also be *lived ethically in community* as the text further implies, that is, with conjoined loyal love, faithfulness, righteousness, and personal efforts continuously and vigorously directed towards the promotion of interpersonal and inter-ethnic *peace* (v. 10).

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Dr. Ernst Wendland, Lutheran Seminary, P. O. Box 310091, Lusaka 15301, Zambia. *Email*: [erwendland@yahoo.com](mailto:erwendland@yahoo.com).