



## The Psalms as Poems: A Case Study of Psalm 136

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### Abstract

The paper is an in-depth study of the one hundred and thirty-sixth Psalm of the Holy Bible from a linguistic lens view. Using a stylo-rhetorical approach to the analysis of the contents of this Psalm, the study discovers that the style and contents of the data are akin to that of many poetic works right from the time of English poetry in medieval times. Psalm 136 is essentially a ballad in terms of its tragic content. The story telling, tragic essence and lyrical content of the Psalm all combined to establish its poetic substance. The conclusion of the work is that Psalm 136, though written on and for religious worship, qualifies to be described as poetry.



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## Introduction

The book of Psalms is one of the 66 books of the Bible. The Bible is an exceptional piece of literature which can be savoured for the artistic beauty of its poetry - the main thrust of the present study. Indeed, if literature is defined in line with Egudu (1979; 1) as 'a mode or method of expression. It is not a subject that expressed something; but rather, it is the ways, manner, or method in which something is said or written. Then literature may have as its subject matter, law, geography, Religion, Science or Sports. It remains literature, irrespective of its subject matter, because it is the mode of expressing the subject matter. According to Friday-Otun (2004:38)

The Bible can be examined linguistically e.g. on the levels of phonology, morphology, semantics and syntax, while its literary and sociolinguistic value makes it a fertile ground for studies in pragmatics, stylistics and discourse.

The present study is premised on the above observations about the Bible. It is observed that apart from the Psalms, other poetic books of the Bible include: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Songs of Solomon. Meanwhile, of all the poetic books of the Bible the scope of the present study has been limited to only Psalm 136 in order to give room for an in-depth analysis of the topic under focus. What is more, Psalm 136 pictures God (the author and content of the Bible) in sublime terms - good and awesome. The chapter speaks of God's majesty, awesome power, sovereignty, and severity as well. By the historical nature of the accounts given in this particular Psalm, the activities that had taken place earlier in older books of the Bible are summarised. The account given here presents the picture of God embodied in the Bible as a whole. The language of the composition is representative of the language of the other Psalms and of the remaining poetic books of the Bible earlier mentioned. In sum, Psalm 136 is a good index of the poetic language in which some parts of the Bible had been written.

The 150 chapters of the book of the Psalms are divided into four sections: Book I (Psalms 1-41), Book II (Psalms 42-72), Book III (Psalms 73-89), Book IV (Psalms 90-106), and Book V (Psalms 107-150). The reason for this arrangement of the Book of Psalms is not that obvious except that it had to do, most likely, with the use of the Psalms in the praise of God in the temple worship. The Book of Psalms is the hymn book and the prayer book of the Bible composed by different authors with David as the leading author. These religious poems are of various kinds such as hymns of praise and worship; prayer for protection and salvation; pleas for forgiveness; songs of thanksgiving for God's blessings and petitions for the punishment of enemies. Some of the prayers contained in these Psalms are personal, portraying the most intimate feelings of one person, while others are national prayers representing the needs and feelings of all the people of Israel.

## The Poetic Nature of the Psalms

The Psalms were originally written for singing. They were worship songs in the temple of ancient Israel. The Psalms are not merely poems in that they were Holy Spirit inspired. Although, the Psalmists may not have understood what they were writing, but then, they wrote in the language of the human spirit, the utterance of the soul. Thus, the psalms contain wrenching language, dramatic exaggeration, and figurative speech- these will be the focus of this study.

Evidently, some of the Psalms began as works of private devotion, while others were meant for public worship from the onset. Ultimately, they are recorded in powerful, poetic language indicating each psalmist's response to God while undergoing particular situations. Although the 150 chapters of the Psalms, just like the other chapters of the Bible, do not aim at precision, their aim is abundantly made clear in Psalm 136 with a major truth or concern which is that God created the heavens and the earth. The basic poetic structure of the Psalms consists of a statement which the second line sharpens or heightens. Throughout the Bible, especially the Psalms and the Proverbs, we find one line of a verse followed by another that gives a variation of the same idea and sometimes this parallelism is continued over several lines. Invariably, pervading the Book of Psalms are features such as: rhythm and rhyme, repetition, unusual words, figurative expressions which all help to create and sustain a poetic atmosphere. This will unfold as the study progresses.

## The Genre of Poetry

Poetry is the oldest genre of literature and it started with the works of Homer, whose *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* represent major epics of the ancient period. It is the only form of art practised in ancient times as it actually predates literacy and forms the basis for the development of another form of literature - drama. The singing or recitation of poetry started as an oral art and old poems got transcribed after the evolution of literacy. A good number of old poems are musical and are related to various religious movements. The main features of the poetic kind of writing are in its unique employment of language to create an effect in sound achievable by an arrangement pattern.

Baldick(2008:262) defines poetry as

Language sung, chanted, spoken, or written according to some pattern of recurrence that emphasizes the relationships between words on the basis of sound as well as sense: this pattern is almost always a rhythm or metre, which may be supplemented by rhyme or alliteration or both.

The major essence of poetry, from this definition is the attainment of a rhythmic end through the means of a deliberate patterning of sounds. Structure is thus an important part of poetry while the theme can also not be compromised. In essence, a good poem is seen in its combination of structure and sense to pass a message across. Poetry, as a genre of literature, employs language for aesthetic purposes in addition to the semantic implications.



A poem is a versified composition which relies heavily on imagery, stress patterns, diction, figures of speech and line measurement to achieve the intended sublimity. Abrams (2005) is more explicit in his own explanation of how sounds are arranged to arrive at a metric junction, known as verse. In his words,

In ... versification, standard rhyme consists of the repetition, in the rhyming words, of the last stressed vowel and of all the speech sounds following that vowel: late-fate; follow-hollow (282).

Apart from the rhythm arising from the sound patterning, there are other features of creativity that distinguish poetry from other forms of literary composition. This, in Baldick's words, often involves "variations in syntax, the use of special words and phrases ... a more frequent and more elaborate use of figures of speech principally metaphor and similes." Other notable features of the poetic form of writing include the tendency to decipher the mood and tone of the speaking voice in a poem, the persona.

In every good poem, certain elements are employed to achieve the desired artistic and aesthetic effects. They include prosody, stanzas, diction and meter. The correct usage or otherwise of these elements determine the success of a work of poetry. Poetry is often separated into lines on a page. These may be based on the number of metrical feet, or may emphasise a rhyming pattern at the end of the lines. Lines may serve other functions; can separate, compare or contrast thoughts expressed in different units, or can highlight a change in tone. Lines of poems are often organized into stanzas which are denominated by the number of lines included. A stanza is the Italian word for stopping place which makes almost the equivalent of the paragraph in prose writing. Thus a collection of two lines is a couplet, three lines a triplet or tercet, four lines a quatrain, five a quintain, six a sestet and eight lines an octet.

Other poems may be organized into verse paragraphs, in which regular rhymes which established rhythms are not used, but the poetic tone is instead established by a collection of rhythms, alliterations and rhymes established in paragraph form. Many medieval poems were written in verse paragraphs, even where regular rhymes and rhythms are used. African poetry is also written in verse paragraphs. Verse paragraphing seems to be a regular feature of modernist poetry in English and African poetry which are written in free verse as against the previous strict adherence to metric measurement.

## Types of poetry

The poems that have been in existence since the beginning of the practice of this genre of literature are categorized into different groups depending on the contents, length, theme and style. Some types of poetry are highly exclusive, admitting only the poems that conform strictly to laid down rules of the sub-genre. The sonnet is a ready example of this in that the fourteen-line rule must not be flouted if the poem is still to be taken as a sonnet. To this end, types of poetry exist based on the contents of the poem. These types include; elegy, dirge, ode metaphysical poetry, sonnet and the ballad. The sonnet is a fixed form because it must be written only in fourteen iambic pentameter lines and must also have a highly structured rhyme scheme. Just as the structure of the sonnet is restricted, the theme is also confined to the subject of love – secular or religious though sonneteers often raise other more serious issues while taking the part of love. Metaphysical poetry is the intelligent and argumentative kind of poetry that was written only in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century by a set of English intellectual poets while an elegy is a plaintive poem lamenting a condition or a dead person. The dirge is essentially composed in the memory of a dead person. The ballad, which is the type to which the Psalm under discussion conforms the most, will be examined in some detail at this juncture.

## Ballad

The ballad is an orally transmitted lyric poem that narrates a story. Many of the extant English ballads originated around the Middle Ages but did not get written until the eighteenth century. It is the kind of folk song that evolves from pre-literate people and, though evidently composed by a single author, the author is usually unknown. Most existing ballads were orally composed but they later got committed into writing as literacy and writing developed. Since the ballad was originally unwritten, mode of transmission is mainly oral. This leads to the existent of variant forms because each person who recites the ballad often brings in some changes into the contents depending on the situation or audience.

Ballads are commonly written in quatrains – four-line stanzas with rhyme at the end of the second and fourth lines. The ballad also opens and ends abruptly. The singer gives no room for introduction but plunges straight into the story just as he gives no notice before ending the poem suddenly. The swift opening and closing of the ballad is occasioned by the quick mode of delivery of the ballad which leaves no room for details. The language of the ballad is also known for its simplicity (Owoeye, 2010). Abrams (2005: 19) identifies three set formulas of the ballad which helps the singer remember the song. They are, "(1) stock descriptive phrases, (2) a refrain in each stanza and (3) incremental repetition." The descriptive phrases in the ballad are described as 'stock' because they often involve more than one modifier, thereby revealing the aim of the poet to achieve some intensity with their usage. Finally the story that is narrated in the ballad is one that characteristically ends in tragedy. We find this in classical English ballads such as "Sir Patrick Spens" and "Lord Randall". The story narrated in ballads typically ends on a tragic note and this is a feature of almost all the English ballads being studied in contemporary times.

## Aim and Objectives

The main thrust of this study is to examine the poetic nature of the psalms using Psalm 136 as a sample. The specific objectives of the research are to:

- (i) To examine language and style of the psalms through Psalm 136





- (ii) To discover the extent to which the language and style of the psalms reflect the language of poetry.

It is our hope that the execution of these objectives will bring to the fore the stylo-rhetorical devices evident in the language of the psalms in particular and in the Bible in general.

## Research Methodology

The present data was extracted from the New King James Version of *The Holy Bible* by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Specifically, Ps.136 was extracted from the Holy Book because of its great stylistic significance. Thus, a stylo-rhetorical framework was adopted for this analysis. It is our hope that this study will enhance the frontiers of stylistic theories.

## Data Presentation

Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!

For His mercy endures forever.

Oh, give thanks to the God of gods!

For His mercy endures forever.

Oh, give thanks to the Lord of lords!

For His mercy endures forever:

To Him who alone does great wonders,

For His mercy endures forever;

To Him who by wisdom made the heavens,

For His mercy endures forever;

To Him who laid out the earth above the waters,

For His mercy endures forever;

To Him who made great lights,

For His mercy endures forever-

The sun to rule by day,

For His mercy endures forever;

The moon and stars to rule by night,

For His mercy endures forever;

To Him who struck Egypt in their firstborn,

For His mercy endures forever;

And brought out Israel from among them,

For His mercy endures forever;

With strong hand, and with outstretched arms,

For His mercy endures forever;

To Him who divided the Red Sea,

For His mercy endures forever;

And made Israelites to pass through the midst of it,

For his mercy endures forever

But overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea,

For His mercy endures forever;

To Him who led His people through the wilderness,

For His mercy endures forever;

To Him who struck down great kings,

For His mercy endures forever;



And slew famous kings,  
    For His mercy endures forever;  
Sihon king of the Amorites,  
    For His mercy endures forever;  
And Og king of Bashan,  
    For His mercy endures forever;  
And gave their land as an heritage,  
    For His mercy endures forever;  
And heritage to Israel His servant,  
    For His mercy endures forever;  
Who remembered us in our lowly state,  
    For His mercy endures forever;  
And rescues us from our enemies,  
    For His mercy endures forever;  
Who gives food to all flesh,  
    For His mercy endures forever.  
Oh, give thanks to the God of heaven,  
    For His mercy endures forever.

## Data Analysis

Psalm 136 has been described as the quintessential psalm of descriptive praise. The poem is structured in such a way that the priest would perhaps read the first part of each verse while the congregation would respond with their praise which is deliberately designed to focus on the mercy of God. In other words, Psalm 136 is a hymn of thanksgiving to God for His enduring mercy. Thus, '**For His mercy endures forever**' is repeated as the b part of every verse.

The stylistic features of the text can be accounted for as follows:

**Graphology:** As already observed, this text and all the other psalms in the Bible carry a poetic structure. The verse paragraphing with respect to the text is probably hinged on the fact that poems are ordinarily written to be sung just as the psalms had been initially written to be sung. This graphological arrangement of the text depicts the intentions of the author to create the kind of arrangement typical of poetry. After all, 'graphological patterns often play very crucial roles in conveying the message of an English poem.' (Oladeji 2008:80)

Stylistically, the poem contains 5 stanzas. Stanza 1, verses 1-3, is a call to the people to praise the Lord. Stanza 2, verses 4-9, praises God, who is the great Creator. Stanza 3, verses 10-22, centres on praise for the Lord who is the great Deliverer. Stanza 4, i.e. verses 23-25, is praise for the Lord who remembers His people forever, and stanza 5 contains verse 26 which is the concluding verse, and a concluding call to praise the Lord. Our study of graphology in this text entails the use of italics, capitalization, and punctuation marks.

**Italics:** These are printed letters that lead to the right. The word *endures* is written in italics through the text and it occurs 26 times. Italics like gothic printed letters are usually used to foreground and compel attention to any printed expression to which it is applied. It has been applied here to show emphasis. It is to kindle the interest of readers and even alert their consciousness to the fact that something important lies at the heart of the text to which it is applied.

**Capitalization:** Capitalization is used here to create a poetic structure for the text since every line of the text begins with a capital letter. Capitalization like gothic writing or italics is also used in writing to make important parts of a text stand out clearly so as to capture the attention of the reader. Thus, LORD in line 1 of the text is capitalized. Again, the G of the God of the Bible and the L of Lord with the pronouns referring to this Almighty God. His/Him were all capitalized in the text. Indeed, capital H of His occurred 28 times in the text. H of Him occurred 8 times while the H of He occurred just once in line 1. Other uses of capitalization here include R of Red, S of Sea, P of Pharaoh, S of Sihon, A of Amorites, O of Og and B of Bashan, which are geographical feature and proper names. Invariably, these other uses have simply conformed to the norm and convention of the written language.

**Punctuation marks:** The text is very rich in punctuation marks with six marks of punctuation: the comma, exclamation mark, full stop, colon semi-colon and the dash. Virtually all the punctuation marks are used conventionally. For instance, the dash when used singly as used here usually indicates that what follows is a summary or conclusion of what has gone before. Punctuation marks when applied appropriately aid our understanding of a printed text as it creates



both linguistic and textual harmony in a text. Proper punctuation use also aids the reader to follow the thought flow of the writer.

By the use of the above stylistic features in Psalm 136, the identification of the psalms in general with poetry was ensured. What is more, the language in these verses of psalm 136 is poetry. Moreover the choice of words and sounds here is poetic and highly exalting. Indeed, there is something therein that adds solemnity to them and these will be revealed shortly as we examine the rhetorical devices evident in the text.

### Rhetorical devices:

Psalm 136 takes the form and appearance of poetic compositions in the way it is written in short lines and this is the first identification sign of any creative work that clearly reveals that it is not a prose work. Its division into lines and stanzas therefore confirms our proposition that psalm 136 is a piece of poetry. The stanzas of the poem address a point which it describes as clearly as possible within the short space available. The first stanza of this psalm establishes the almightiness of God while the second describes the expression of his mighty power in the creation of the world. From the third stanza, we read of his battle prowess in the manner of wrenching the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. In subsequent stanzas, we read of the rest of the war-like acts that conclude the deliverance of the Israelites and the last stanza brings his acts of mercy to the present times, being the only means that the children of Israel and all living souls generally, are sustained.

The most prominent figure of speech used in the poem is irony, seen in the way the author mixes God's goodness to His own people with his severity on other gentile nations that his people might pass on to total safety. As the Psalmist describes the Lord's anger on the gentile nations, he keeps up the refrain 'For His mercy endures forever' and this leads to a great contradiction between what is said in succeeding lines. For instance,

To Him who struck down great kings,

For His mercy endures forever;

And slew famous kings,

For His mercy endures forever;

Sihon king of the Amorites,

For His mercy endures forever;

And Og king of Bashan,

For His mercy endures forever;

And gave their land as an heritage,

For His mercy endures forever;

And heritage to Israel His servant,

For His mercy endures forever;

Because of His mercy on Israel His servant, many nations had to go down. Therefore, the mercy is not directed at the other nations but at Israel only. Hence 'He slew famous kings/ for His mercy endures forever'. Literally, the second line is not consequent upon the first hence the ironical presentation. The reason for this seemingly unequal treatment of the nations is not within our reach here though some Bible scholars aver that those nations have offended God at one time or the other and as such are simply serving deserved punishment. The Psalmist might have been aware of this hence his insistence that even while punishing other nations for His own people to pass safely, God's mercy endures forever.

Other figures of speech include the use of personification as seen in the second stanza where we see 'the sun to rule by day... the moon and stars to rule by night'. Ordinarily the sun and moon shine by the nature of their creation and function. It is humans that rule as kings and presidents hence this ascription of a human attribute to the sun is what accounts for the presence of personification in the poem. The use of the word 'flesh' to represent all living beings both man and animal is synecdochic since living beings like man is not made of only flesh but flesh and soul. Hence 'who gives food to all flesh' in the last stanza is using the part to represent the whole and this is synecdoche.

Apart from general poetic qualities such as the ones identified above, the Psalm is closer to the ballad poetic form than all others. Although this is a poem of thanksgiving and praise to God, it nonetheless tells a story. The author goes from his stylish representation of the story of creation to the story of the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt and the arduous journey to the Promised Land. The content is similar to that of the English ballad in the sense of the tragic destruction of some of the royal personages involved in the story. Although the end of the poem is not tragic for the Israelites, the sense of tragedy in the story of the Israeli departure from Egypt as given in this poem is evident in the destruction of the kings of the Amorites and the king of Bashan. The tragedy in Psalm 136 is collective just as in the case of "Sir Patrick Spence". In actual fact the subtle manner of presentation in the two poems are almost exact. In "Sir Patrick Spence", we have;

Half o'er, half o'er to Aberdour

It's fifty fathoms deep,



And there lies guid Sir Patrick Spens  
Wi' the Scots lords at his feet.  
This is paralleled by such accounts in the Psalm as;  
But overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea,

...

To Him who struck down great kings,

...

And slew famous kings,

...

Sihon king of the Amorites,

...

And Og king of Bashan,

It is an interesting coincidence too, that, just as Sir Patrick Spence and the Scottish lords jointly perish in the Sea, Pharaoh and his armies are also destroyed together in the sea.

Psalm 136 is obviously a song and this is one of the attributes of the ballad easily noticeable in this Psalm. The psalms are meant to be sung. A ballad is a song that tells a story. In the same way, the King David is singing this Psalm and he is telling a story in the process.

The repetition of the phrase "For His mercy endures forever" throughout the poem forms a refrain and reminds one of English ballads like "Lord Randall" which are known for the use of refrain characterized by the repetition of certain phrases in the poem. The repetition that occurs in lines 1, 3 and 5 of the poem is also akin to the type referred to as incremental repetition in English ballads. It starts with "Oh, give thanks to the LORD" in the first line and continues with "Oh, give thanks to the God of gods!" in the third line and ends with "Oh, give thanks to the Lord of lords!" in the fifth line. In "Lord Randall", the phrase "...my son! And where ha'e ye been, my handsome young man" is repeated with an addition that advances the story" (Abrams, 2005: 19) The advancement brought to "Lord" by Lord of lords" is in proclaiming that the lordship of the divine character under discussion has surpassing power when compared to other lords around.

Although the version of the Psalms available to us from the New King James Version of the Bible is a translation from the original Greek text, some sort of rhyme is still noticeable at the end of some of the lines. For instance in the first part of the poem below;

Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!

For His mercy endures forever.

Oh, give thanks to the God of gods!

For His mercy endures forever.

Oh, give thanks to the Lord of lords!

For His mercy endures forever:

The last sounds of the second and fourth lines rhyme naturally because they are made up of the same words. This alternate rhyme runs through the whole poem in what we have earlier identified as a refrain. In other instances like in this first stanza here, there is the rhyming of 'gods' in the third line with 'lords' in the fifth line. We must note however, that the 'good' ending the first line does not rhyme with any of the words ending the other lines.

The Psalm under discussion qualifies to be described as a folk ballad because it is an orally composed poem that tells a story. No doubt, they got committed into writing after it has become popular as a song of praise to God. It also starts and ends abruptly without any introduction or conclusion. The Psalmist plunges straight into the story as soon as he begins singing and stops in an equally sudden manner. This, indubitably, is an attribute of a ballad.

## Conclusion

Psalm 136, a chapter out of the 1189 chapters of the Bible was analysed here to confirm the poetic language with which some parts of the Bible has been written. Indeed, most of these chapters of the Bible especially, the Old Testament chapters spoke first to a people on the move, at the dawn of Hebrew history. Over the ages, they have spoken to ancient and medieval people. And today, these chapters speak to people from all background. Although, the modern man sometimes wonders why the language is not more precise, yet the beauty of the Bible language gets renewed from age to age. What is more, in spite of the translation of the Bible from the original Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic languages, the poetic nature of the Psalms remains in the English versions of the Bible, particularly in the New King James Version. The analysis also reveals that the content of the Psalm also conforms with the ballad poetic form in more ways than one even





though King David was not a conscious balladeer. In conclusion, the story telling, tragic essence and lyrical content of the Psalm all combine to establish the poetic essence of the Psalm.

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