

Universal justice: Poetic-affective criticism of Psalm 28

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The central message of Psalm 28 has been successfully revealed by utilising poetic-affective criticism. Poetic-affective criticism is a new method in reading lament psalm by focusing on various aspects, such as lament, feeling, the concept of God and changes in textual mood. Applying poetic-affective criticism to Psalm 28 through the study of its various aspects (lament, feeling, the concept of God and changes in textual mood) enables us to find its central message. Universal justice is inherently embedded in the universe. Violation against this universal justice brings about self-destruction to those standing against it.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The conclusion reached by this article implies that there is a point of contact between Christianity and other religions. Non-Christian religions, though foggy and distorted, contain to a certain extent God's Torah which was given to preserve the unity of society harmoniously thus creating an awareness of orderliness of the universe, and an appreciation that there is God who created and sustained the universe.

Keywords: lament psalms; poetic-affective criticism; Hebrew poetry; universal justice, karma.

Introduction

Psalm 28 is heavily debated among interpreters relating all its elements. There have been much written on the interpretation of Psalm 28 but a consensus has not been reached. The disagreements include the topic of the genre, *Sitz im Leben*, the central theme and the structure of the composition.

Following Hermann Gunkel, Psalm 28 is best classified as a personal lament (Dahood 1965:172; Gerstenberger 1988:128; Limburg 2000:89; Mandolfo 2002:64; Mowinckel 1967:2; Villanueva 2008:44, 154; Westermann 1981:64, 181), not prayer (Gerstenberger 1988:128) or praise (Kraus 1993:339) or a combination of both (DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobson & Tanner 2014:273). The personal aspect can be seen through its frequent use of the first-person pronoun, though it does switch perspective to a communal one at the end. Interestingly, some interpreters do not classify Psalm 28 as a psalm of lament (Clifford 2002:150; Goldingay 2006:403). However, along with the majority of the interpreters, this article still holds that Psalm 28 is a psalm of lament because of the aspects of lament and praise contained in the Psalm (see Brueggemann 1984:54–58).

The *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 28 is also highly debated among scholars. The outcome of this debate is important as scholars believe that uncovering the *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 28 will reveal its central theme. Generally, its social context is located either inside or outside the Temple or both (Gerstenberger 1988:129). Often, interpreters view Psalm 28 as a psalm used in public worships or ceremonies in the Temple (Gerstenberger 1988:128; Mandolfo 2002:67; Weiser 1962:256), or even in cases of self-defence against the accusation of a breach of contract (Craigie 1983:237). For example, Richard Clifford (2002:150) has recently suggested that the *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 28 is directly tied to ceremonies in the Temple where the one accused of the crime has no way of proving his innocence and therefore comes to God to judge his case. Clifford points to Numbers 5:11–31 and the ceremony performed by the priests as the basis for understanding the context of Psalm 28. The husband who suspects his wife of adultery will bring her to the priests to find evidence and prove her innocence or guilt. The priest would then enact the ceremony. If the wife is found guilty, the water given by the priest would cause bitter pain. Clifford then reconstructs the *Sitz im Leben* by reading Psalm 28:1–3 in light of the ceremony in Numbers 5:11–13.

Erhard Gerstenberger is an example of reading the psalms away from its Temple contexts and the interpretations suggested by Mowinckel. Gerstenberger (1988:30–34; 2014:338–349)

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connects many of the psalms with social contexts surrounding family and the synagogue after the destruction of Jerusalem. According to Gerstenberger (1988:129–130), Psalm 28 is a psalm of prayer in a synagogue worship to help those in danger of being ostracised in society so much so that they need support to reintegrate into social groups and communities loyal to God. Gerstenberger's efforts were not entirely successful as he was ultimately forced to admit that Psalm 28 was still tied to the Temple.

Recently, however, scholars have not been satisfied with the efforts in uncovering the central theme of the psalms based on reconstructing the social contexts. There is an increasing number of scholars with the opinion that using a reconstructed social context to interpret the psalms has not given us satisfactory results (Brueggemann 1984; Westermann 1981).

Rolf Jacobson et al. suggest that a reading of the Psalm is not based on the social contexts but on its literary contexts (DeClaissé-Walford et al. 2014:18–21, 72). Jacobson's reading of Psalm 28 produces the theme of the promise of God to the psalmist. This promise is shown in verse 5 as it is sung by the worship leader in the Temple and tells us that the wicked will be defeated, and the safety of the psalmist will be guaranteed (DeClaissé-Walford et al. 2014:277, 279). This study agrees with the evaluation of Psalm 28 using literary contexts carried out by Rolf Jacobson et al. (DeClaissé-Walford et al. 2014:18–21, 72). However, these evaluations are often carried out with a partially built argument from the interpreters who based their findings on one or several verses. For example, Krause (1993:340) objects to the use of verses 8–9 being used in interpreting and establishing the social contexts of Psalm 28. According to Kraus, verses 1–7 are sufficient in reconstructing the contexts needed. While Kraus' reconstruction is broader in scope, it is not wide enough to include verses 8–9 as a cohesive part of Psalm 28. The question of whether interpretations should be based on social or literary contexts has become the latest debate. However, we may need one cohesive method of reading the psalms that encompasses the whole text as the basis of interpretation.

Though brief, our survey of various interpretations gives us a sufficient look of how the work of interpreters in reconstructing the social and literary context of Psalm 28 has been met with obstacles, preventing an agreement or even a consensus. This situation, among other things, has produced various interpretations of Psalm 28. This article is a humble attempt among many to enrich the scholarship surrounding the interpretation of the Psalm. This article argues that the central theme of Psalm 28 concerns the idea of universal justice. Thereafter, the concept of universal justice is contrasted with the Hindu doctrine of karma. From different directions and methods, a similar conclusion is reached by Mandolfo (2002:67). It comes to this conclusion by using the method of poetic-affective criticism (see Barus 2016) on

Psalm 28 as a whole in its final editorial form. Poetic-affective criticism is a way of reading the psalms that begins by examining the laments of the psalmist. His laments would naturally produce various feelings that we can examine further, which is the second step. The third step is to carefully assess the psalmist's understanding of God in his struggles. The fourth and final step of this method is to observe the change in textual mood contained in the lament psalm that reflects the psalmist's journey full of struggles. The aspects of parallelism and imagery, the main characteristics of psalms as a Hebrew poem, will also receive serious attention in the process of poetic-affective reading.

Structure of composition

The structure of the composition of Psalm 28 is often debated among scholars. Some would divide the psalm into two, three or even four sections as seen in Table 1.

After the superscription, Psalm 28 is arranged with elements of lament and praise as:

- Superscription (v. 1a)
- Lament (vv. 1b–5)
- Praise (vv. 6–8)
- Lament (v. 9).

Many interpreters view verse 9 as a praise instead of a lament (Davidson 1998:99). Others reject the view of verse 9 as a praise. However, verse 9 should instead be viewed as a prayer (Clifford 2002:152; DeClaissé-Walford et al. 2014:240; Gerstenberger 1988:128; Kraus 1993:339, 342). Scholars generally do not see verse 9 as a lament because the linearity of the change in textual mood only occurs from lament to praise. Why is this? Generally, scholars adhere to the theory of salvation oracles to explain the change in textual mood from lament to praise, found in lament psalms. Even so, the words 'save' and 'bless' encourage us to see verse 9 as a lament (Villanueva 2008:154).

TABLE 1: Structure of the composition of Psalm 28.

Scholar	Two divisions	Three divisions	Four divisions
Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:143)	-	-	verses 1–2; verses 3–5; verses 6–7; verses 8–9
DeClaissé-Walford et al. (2014:274) Dahood (1965:172) Weiser (1962:256)	verses 1–5; verses 6–9	-	-
Goldingay (2006:403–404)	-	-	verses 1–4; verses 5; verses 6–8; verses 9
Clifford (2002:151–152) Limburg (2000:89–90)	-	verses 1–5; verses 6–7; verses 8–9	-
Gerstenberger (1988:127–128) Kraus (1993)	-	-	verses 1–2; verses 3–5; verses 6–7; verses 8–9
Davidson (1998:99) Craigie (1983:237)	-	-	verses 1–4; verse 5; verses 6–7; verses 8–9

Note: Please see the full reference list of the article, Barus, A., 2023, 'Universal justice: Poetic-affective criticism of Psalm 28', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44(1), a2809. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2809>, for more information.

Poetic-affective criticism of Psalm 28

The lament of the psalmist

'Be not deaf to me' (v. 1)

The psalmist strongly shows his petition for God to not be silent, as seen through the negative use of an imperfect verb. He writes, 'if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit'. The imagery of 'going down to the pit' paints a picture of solitude and silence (cf. Ps 94:17) as well as helplessness (Ps 88:5). The pit in the psalm is described as the underworld, dust, desolate place, destruction and oblivion (Keel 1997:63–69).

The psalmist called the God that he knew as his rock (v. 1). Why did he have to call (אָרְבָּעָה)? Is it not enough for him to pray? The psalmist called because God had been silent. This caused him to paint an image of going down to the pit. This illustrated that the state of intense solitude and silence, as shown is not 'the state of being forsaken by God' (Kraus 1993:340). Prayer is not enough. Not only did the psalmist call out to God, but he also cried out (בָּרָךְ) and lifted up his hands. The expression 'cry out' in Piel tense conveys the gravity and intensity of the problem the psalmist is facing. The psalmist could not see any other escape apart from calling and crying to God for help. Even these were not enough. The psalmist intensified his own lament by lifting up his hands (v. 2). In the OT, to lift up your hands is occasionally an expression of worship or thanksgiving filled with joy (Ps 63:5; 134:2), but more often it denotes an attempt to reach out to God with a pressing plea for help (Lm 2:19) (Davidson 1998:99). This gesture points to a posture of prayer (Ps 141:2) as a sign of total surrender. The psalmist raised his hands towards the Temple as seen in the expression 'holy sanctuary' (אֶל-בְּיָרֵךְ) not only to plea for protection (Weiser 1962:257) but for deliverance. It is not enough for the psalmist to lift his hands to the Temple or the sanctuary. The graveness of his suffering pushed him to lift his hands towards the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies (אֶל-בְּיָרֵךְ), where the stone tablets are located (1 Ki 6:5, 19–23, 31). The psalmist conveyed his cry of lament to God, with God's presence being symbolised in the Holy of Holies (DeClaissé-Walford et al. 2014:276). What severity of sufferings could the psalmist be experiencing that he is led to these intensified cries and prayers?

Weiser (1962:257) argues that the psalmist's laments are not because of his experience of deep inner suffering and insecurity. Instead, the psalmist cries out to God to declare three important points regarding God, the wicked and the people of God. Regarding God, the psalmist shouts: do not be silent (v. 1) and hear my pleas for mercy (v. 2). Regarding the wicked, the psalmist cries out: do not drag me off (v. 3) and render them their due reward (v. 4). Regarding the people of God, the psalmist petitions: save your people (v. 9), bless your heritage (v. 9), be their shepherd (v. 9) and carry them forever (v. 9). It is a worthwhile endeavour to also observe the usage of verbs in the psalmist's lament.

TABLE 2: The usage of verbs.

Character	Imperfect	Imperative
God	Be not silent (אֶל-תִּתְקַדֵּשׁ)	Hear me (שְׁמַע)
The wicked	Do not drag me off (אֶל-תִּמְשַׁכְנִי)	Reward them (תִּן-לָהֶם)
People of God		Save them (הוֹשִׁיעָה אֶת-עַמֶּיךָ)
		Bless them (בִּרְכֵה אֶת-נַחְלֶיךָ)
		Shepherd them (רִעֵם)
		Carry them (נִשְׂאֵם)

Table 2 shows that the psalmist used imperfect and imperative verbs in his lament. However, in talking about the people of God, the psalmist exclusively used the imperative verbs and verse 9 lacked any imperfect verbs. The use of imperfect verbs points to an ongoing reality, an incomplete event that can be translated in the present or future tense (Van Der Merwe, Naudé & Kroeze 2002:70). The imperfect form used in a negated way (לֹא) expresses an absolute prohibition (Van Der Merwe et al. 2002:151). The imperative form, on the other hand, is a command or instruction when used in the second person (Van Der Merwe et al. 2002:71, 150). The use of the imperfect verb negatively illustrates the strength of the psalmist's lament over the continuing silence from God and the psalmist being dragged alongside the wicked. But why did the psalmist not use both imperfect and imperative verbs when talking about God's people? This is because God has heard his prayer. Just as God has heard the lament of the psalmist, he has also listened to the cries of his people. He is not idle. Those who are wicked are the ones who must be alert so that they are not dragged along. The vigilance of the people is expressed by the psalmist through the following comparisons of the four cola of the lament.

Save // bless // shepherd // carry

The psalmist cries out regarding the wicked with the phrase, 'do not drag me off with the wicked' (v. 3). It is important to note that the psalmist is not attacked physically or verbally. He is also not running away from his suffering (cf. Kraus 1993:341). If our observation is true, it would be wrong to declare the wicked as the enemy of the psalmist (Craigie 1983:237). Here is a comparison of the four cola in the psalmist's description of the wicked ones.

Do not drag me off with **the wicked, the workers of evil who speak peace with their neighbors while evil is in their hearts** (Ps 28:3)

Why did the psalmist ask to not be dragged off with the wicked? What did the psalmist mean? What are the transgressions of the wicked? And who are the wicked?

The psalmist realised that he does not have the means to fight and reject wickedness. His surroundings became so depraved that his laments grew in intensity. If the psalmist could resist those around him, it is only because God is his strength and shield. This is why the psalmist begged God to not drag him off with the wicked. The verb 'drag' (תִּמְשַׁכְנִי) is

also used in Psalm 10:9 to describe the lion lurking in wait for his prey, which he then drew into his net. The psalmist is not asking God to separate or disassociate (cf. Gerstenberger 1988:128) him from the wicked ones because that would mean he has to die, or the wicked ones must be erased. This is clearly not his intent. Separation from the community is not a solution to his problem. Instead, he prayed that God would strengthen him and be his rock.

The comparison of the four cola shown in verse 3 tells us the actions of the wicked: firstly, their works are evil (וְעִמּוֹתָם פְּעֻלֵי אָוֶן); secondly, they speak peace with their neighbours (בְּרִי שְׁלוֹמַם עִם רֵעֵיהֶם) and thirdly, evil is in their hearts (וְרָעָה בְּלִבָּהֶם).

Their works are evil (וְעִמּוֹתָם פְּעֻלֵי אָוֶן): The wicked ones are people who do evil things. According to Mowinckel (1967:7), the term evil (אָוֶן) refers to evil or magical powers, which means that the perpetrators of evil (פְּעֻלֵי אָוֶן) are witches with powerful incantations that cause diseases and calamities to the righteous. The existence of witches in Israel cannot be disputed. However, the word אָוֶן is used by Isaiah as a reference to idol worship (Is 41:29; 66:3) and not to witches. Repeatedly, the word 'evil' (אָוֶן) in the book of Psalms points to falsehood (Ps 7:15; 10:7; 36:4). The formulation of the word אָוֶן including the word רָעָה in Psalm 28 specifically refers to actions that do not heed the works of God.

They speak peace with their neighbours: A hypocritical friendship is another characteristic of the wicked. Their words to their neighbours are peaceful. The word 'peace' is a translation of the word שְׁלוֹמַם which is rich in meaning. The word שְׁלוֹמַם denotes 'a very positive concept related to the idea of wholeness, safety and well-being, of the world and of the people' (Stendebach 2006:19). The wicked ones speak of peace and wholeness to their neighbours despite clear destruction. They assure their neighbours that all is well, even though they themselves are plotting something evil. The wicked ones swear of peace even though there is chaos and tribulation around them.

Evil is in their hearts: The evil deeds and hypocritical friendships of the wicked come from a heart full of evil. The heart (לֵב) in the OT points to the whole being of a man (Ps 9:2; 1 Ki 8:23). The range of usage of the word 'heart' in the OT makes it difficult to formulate its meaning briefly. The heart can be grouped into two usages: literal and figurative. Literally, the heart refers to the physical organ (Ps 38:9; 1 Sm 25:37; 2 Ki 9:24). Figuratively, the heart is used to refer to emotion (Am 19:3; 23:17; Jr 4:19; 2 Sm 2:1; Gn 45:26; Neh 2:2), thought (Am 15:14; Dt 29:4; 2 Chr 7:11) and will (Ps 21:3; Ex 7:22). The most important usage of the heart is to respond to God (Ps 119:36). Therefore, the heart describes the whole human being from where come the responses to God and to fellow human beings.

The expression of 'a heart full of evil' demonstrates that the total depravity of human beings happens in their source of

motivation. When a river is dirty downstream, the water upstream must be contaminated as well. Because of this, the heart needs to undergo a complete transformation and renewal that can only be done by God himself (Is 11:19; 36:26). Without the transformation of the heart, the words and deeds of human beings will be corrupted by a wicked motive.

How are the three characteristics of a wicked man related? The heart becomes the source and motivation for the wicked to commit other acts. Evil deeds and hypocritical relationships of a wicked man come from a heart full of evil (רָעָה). In that sense, it is incorrect to say that the deeds of the wicked are worse than their words (cf. DeClaissé-Walford et al. 2014:276). Their evil refers to their refusal to accept God's handiwork. The expression of God's work, as explained here, refers to the creation of man. Human beings were created by God in his image. Thus, the wicked ones act out evil as a way to reject their created purpose of being made in God's image (cf. Creach 2014:538). The wicked see fellow human beings as objects by exploiting others and oppressing the poor. What's the outcome of this? Relationships between humans are ruined. The words and deeds of the wicked corrupt and destroy human relationships.

Human beings are creatures made in the image of God. This means that humans were created with the capacity to create relationships. The creation of man as a relational creature is further supported by the creation of man and woman. Not only are we able to have a relationship with the other gender, we are also capable of having a relationship with God. The relationship between man and God is the foundation of the relationship between human beings with himself, with fellow humans, with other creations and with the universe.

The psalmist prayed that God would reward the wicked ones according to their deeds. In his lament, he used the verbs 'give' (תָּן) and 'render' (הִשָּׁב) in conjunction with the words and deeds of the wicked. Is he asking God to punish the wicked? Are these words used in a judicial sense? Some interpreters understand these words to be used in a judicial sense (Craigie 1983:239; Limburg 2000:89, 90; Mandolfo 2002:67; Mowinckel 1967:7). In other words, the psalmist wants the wicked ones to receive punishment from God. Is this true? The verb 'give' (תָּן) is used when illustrating a tree yielding its fruits (Ps 1:3). The verb 'render' (הִשָּׁב), which is synonymous with the word 'give', refers to a restoration to a previous state (Ps 6:5) or the act of returning to oneself (Ps 7:17). The verbs 'give' and 'render' are not judicial words. The use of both verbs paints a picture of rendering their wicked deeds back to themselves. The wicked will be treated the same way as they treat others around them. The psalmist is crying out to God so that the wicked ones would experience the things they did to others. Justice is rendered when they received their own wicked deeds. Justice is an inherent part of the created universe. This is the central message of Psalm 28. We can see this illustrated well in the life of Jacob (Gn 27). Jacob had deceived his father, Isaac, and his brother, Esau.

As his due reward, Jacob was deceived by others around him (Gn 29:25). An eye for an eye. If justice is the central theme of Psalm 28, why did the psalmist not use more judicial words such as *קָדַץ* or *טָשַׁעַן*? Several scholars ascribe to H. Cremer's (Eichrodt 1961:240–249; Von Rad 1962:370–376) understanding that the words used in Psalm 28 refer to the relational context of God's covenant with his people. The relationship between God and his people is expressed through obedience to the Law. Gerhard Von Rad (1962:372) even states that justice is synonymous with salvation. The link between justice (*קָדַץ* and *טָשַׁעַן*) and salvation or the law prompted the psalmist to use the words 'give' and 'render' in Psalm 28. Justice is inherently a part of the created order. All of us are bound to this justice.

The idea of cosmic justice or universal justice is also voiced, for example, in Psalm 82. The failure of God's appointed representative to uphold justice causes the very foundation of the earth to shake (Routledge 2008:237). Injustice on earth itself rocks the earth. The statement of denial in Psalm 82 gives a strong indication that justice is inherent in the earth.

What is the theological reasoning behind universal justice? The conjunction *כִּי* (v. 5) translated as 'because' gives us the theological reasoning (DeClaissé-Walford et al. 2014:277; Weiser 1962:257) or motive (Gerstenberger 1988:128) for the psalmist's lament. It is not accurate to identify verse 5 as a response from the worship leader (cultic liaison) to the psalmist's lament (cf. Craigie 1983:237, 239; Mandolfo 2002:66, 68). The actions and words of the wicked contradict the work of God (*הִקְדָּשׁוּת*) and the works of his hands (*מַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו*). This is why the wicked will get what they deserve. Justice is a universal reality and serves to reveal human wickedness.

What is meant by 'the works of the LORD?' The expression 'the works of the LORD' is synonymous with 'the works of his hands'. It refers to 'the saving acts performed by Yahweh for the sake of his people' (Weiser 1962:257) or 'a refuge and delivery for the needy who call for and trust in God's help' (DeClaissé-Walford et al. 2014:277). But this study proposes that 'the works of the LORD' and 'the works of his hands' point to the creation of man. All of the universe is created by God through his Word (Gn 1:2, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 29). But the creation of man has a different narrative. God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed the breath of life into him (Gn 2:7). The verb 'form' (*וַיִּצְרֶהוּ*) conveys an action done by hand. This word is used to describe a potter forming his pots or other objects out of clay with his own hands (Ps 2:9; Is 44:9–12; Jr 18:2). The shaping of a pot from clay is a labour-intensive work that takes a lot of time. However, it seems that such a meaning is not conveyed in the verb 'to form'. It is instead a verb that conveys an artistic and inventive activity that require skill and planning (Wenham 1987:59). The creation of man from the dust of the earth is God's handiwork and the crown of his creation. Even though man is made from dust, we are made in the image of God. What does this mean? This means that humans are relational

creatures. Humans are able to have a relationship with God and fellow human beings. This relational aspect is further strengthened by the creation of man and woman.

Interpreters have also debated on whether the voice in Psalm 28 is a singular one or a communal one. The question we have to ask is, who is the voice in Psalm 28, especially in verse 5? There are a variety of answers from numerous scholars. There are three strong interpretations of the voice of Psalm 28:

- Sigmund Mowinckel (1967:74) understands the expression 'his anointed' (v. 8) as referring to a king. Several scholars agree with his interpretation (Dahood 1965:172; Hossfeld & Zenger 1993:176; Kidner 1973:123). The king had suffered a serious illness but recovered. However, the connection between Psalm 28 and a king's illness is inaccurate (Craigie 1983:237, 240).
- Robert Davidson (1998:99) has used Psalm 28 to reconstruct a supposed dialogue between the psalmist and the priest. The psalmist delivers his lament in verses 1–4. The priest then responds in verse 5 by declaring God's punishment against the wicked. The psalmist then lifts up praises (vv. 6–7) when he hears of the verdict of the wicked. The priest closes with a blessing towards the people of God as the one the psalmist had received (vv. 8–9) (Craigie 1983:237; DeClaissé-Walford et al. 2014:277, 278).
- Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:144) argue that the phrase 'his anointed' refers to God's chosen people rather than to kings or priests, based on the parallel between 'his people' and 'his anointed ones' (v. 8). Moreover, blessings and salvation are given by God to the whole community, not just individuals.

We cannot ascertain with confidence the voice of Psalm 28, whether it is the king, or priest, or the people of God, or the psalmist. If Psalm 28 is accepted as a personal lament psalm, it follows that the voice of Psalm 28 should be an individual. Erhard Gerstenberger (1988:33) suggests that personal laments during the era of monarchy (Goldingay 2006:404; Kraus 1993:340) are conveyed in the context of family, with the psalmist's hands raised towards the Holy of Holies. Though the specific location of the psalmist remains elusive, we can say with certainty that the psalmist is not at the Temple, because of him having to raise his hands towards Jerusalem. Most likely the psalmist is among his family, dispersed throughout Palestine. After realising that God had heard his cries of lament, the psalmist then spread his newfound spiritual experience, namely, God is his strength and shield to the wider community who adopts his view without hesitation.

Save your people (v. 9)

The textual mood of the psalm change from praise to lament in verse 9. The second lament section only uses imperative verbs, as seen in Table 2, without any use of the imperfect verbs compared to the first lament section. The lament of the second section is written in parallel with each other as shown (save us//bless us//shepherd us//carry us).

The psalmist is asking God to save his people from the coming wickedness. Without the saving work of God, the psalmist and his people are prone to be swept away by the wickedness. God's blessing is shown through his presence and involvement among his people.

The phrases 'shepherd us' and 'carry us' point to the functions of a shepherd. The psalmist is once again asking God to act as their shepherd (Ps 80:2; Is 40:11; Jr 34:15–16). God as a shepherd is a common imagery in the psalms. As a shepherd, God leads his people (Ps 77:21; 78:52; 80:2). Psalm 23 especially portrays God as our shepherd. The shepherd provides rest for the sheep, leads the sheep to fields of grass and still waters, and protects the sheep from predators. The people of God in the psalms are portrayed as the flock of sheep (Ps 79:13; 95:7; 100:3). A flock of sheep depends on the shepherd for their lives. They do not have the ability to run like a deer for safety or the self-defence tools such as claws and horns to fight against wild predators. When facing lions, a sheep can only depend on the protection of its shepherd, with his rod and staff (Ps 23:4). A sheep is also prone to being lost (Is 53:6), and the shepherd would have to find the lost sheep and carry it back to safety among their flock. Lastly, a flock of sheep must rely on their shepherd to find fields of grass and still water for sustenance.

When the people of God experience his deeds (saving, blessing, shepherding and carrying) in their lives, they will learn that God is their strength and fortress. The psalmist's spiritual experience is repeated in the struggles of the people.

The psalmist's struggles and complaints, which he uttered in the form of a lament, immediately brought up feelings in him akin to the death of a loved one, feelings of sorrow. The psalmist's feelings will be discussed in the section 'The psalmist's emotions and feelings'.

The psalmist's emotions and feelings

'My heart exults' (v. 7)

The psalmist is experiencing two different grievances. One, God is silent. Two, the wicked surround him. In spite of these present problems, the psalmist cries out, 'my heart exults' (v. 7). What does he mean when he says, 'וַיִּשְׂמְחֵנִי לִבִּי' which is translated 'my heart exults' (ESV), 'and my heart is full of joy' (NET)? Why is he exulting? Why is he joyful? Is he praising the damnation of the wicked? Is he rejoicing because God has answered all of his cries? Is it because God is his strength and shield? Why is the psalmist exulting in his heart?

The verb *וַיִּשְׂמְחֵנִי* in the perfect Niphal tense with the passive content 'to allow something to be done to someone' (O'Connor & Waltke 2004:379) is better translated as 'I have been helped'. Who helped the psalmist? God is the one. In verse 3, the psalmist earnestly begged the LORD so that he may not be dragged off alongside the wicked who prosper all around him, as a lion is lurking for his prey. The psalmist alone had no power to resist the wicked. But God heard his

prayer and redeemed him from the wicked, causing him to cry out with joy. Why? He is not praising God because he has been delivered. His heart is exulting because God is his rock for now and forever, and his deliverance further taught him that God is his strength and shield. He has grown nearer to God and learned more about him by living through his struggles of life.

The phrase 'my heart exults' paints a picture of joy shown through a song of thanksgiving. As shown the imperfect verb 'exults' (*וַיִּשְׂמְחֵנִי*) points to an incomplete event. The psalmist continually rejoices through a seemingly difficult time when God seems to be silent and the wicked surround him. Even though he returned to lamenting in verse 9, his exulting heart never stops. This continues even through the second lament in verse 9. This is why the psalmist did not use a combination of imperfect and imperative verbs as he did in the first lament (v. 1b–5).

The psalmist expressed his joyful heart by singing a song of praise to God. The message of the song is mentioned explicitly: The LORD is my strength and shield. 'The LORD is my strength' is how Israel praised God after they had seen a demonstration of God's power (Ex 15). The experience of seeing God's work caused his people to praise him with many instruments and dances. This is how the psalmist would have most likely praised God after his prayers were heard. He would have also given an offering with his prayer. How do we know this? Let's look at the first instance of the OT expressions 'God is my shield'. When Abraham won a battle, God showed himself to Abraham and said, 'I am your shield' (Gn 15:1). Abraham responded to this self-declaration by giving an offering. We can see that the psalmist also gave an offering as an expression of gratitude when he was in the Temple. He responded to the revelation that God is his strength and shield by singing praises and offering sacrifices of thanksgiving.

In his deep struggles, the psalmist rejoices not because the wicked are ruined, but because his LORD has heard his cries.

God

'My rock' (v. 1)

In the first part of his lament, the psalmist calls God his rock. What does he mean by this? Interpreters are divided on whether this expression should be taken literally or figuratively. Some follow the arguments by D. Eichhorn who points to the Temple as the literal rock in Psalm 28 as it is built on holy ground where God revealed himself as the protector of his people (Craigie 1983:238; Kraus 1993:341). Kraus (1992:31) explains that the rock refers to Jerusalem's role as a place where God functions as a just judge so that those who are accused or persecuted flee to God for protection and plead for his judgement. God as the rock is an expression of a place of justice for those who are wronged and seek divine justice.

Other scholars understand the expression as a figurative one (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:143; DeClaissé-Walford et al. 2014:276; Limburg 2000:90). 'Rock' refers to the stable foundation, a strong and secure place of refuge. This figurative use of 'rock' is common in the Psalms (Ps 18:3, 47; 19:15; 62:3, 7; 92:16; 144:1). The psalmist delivers his lament while resting on the sure confidence that God is his rock. In the midst of growing wickedness, he realised that his only place of refuge is his God. He is in need of a strong and stable place to rest, as he has become shaky and almost been carried away.

'He will tear them down' (v. 5)

The wicked will receive their due reward. Why? Because they did not heed the works of God's hands. What is their reward? God will tear them down (יִהָרֵס) and build them up no more (לֹא יִבְנֶה) as written in verse 5. The verbs 'tear down' and 'not build up' are both in imperfect tenses and paint a picture of ongoing action. The verb הָרַס is used to describe Pharaoh's army being overthrown (Ex 15:7), and the possibility of destruction of God's people if they pass the boundaries around Mount Sinai (Ex 19:21, 24). The wicked who refuse to treat other humans as God's creation undermines human sanctity. The act of wickedness itself is nothing but an act of self-destruction. If the wicked destroy themselves, who will build them up? No one. The psalmist had witnessed the self-inflicted destruction of the wicked and realised that God has heard his prayers.

'For he has heard' (v. 6)

The psalmist had lamented on God's silence and retribution against the wicked, and God heard his prayers. The verb 'heard' (שָׁמַע) is in the perfect form. This usage points to an act that was completed in the past. The verbs in verse 7 are also written in the perfect form: 'trusts' (בָּטַח) and 'helped' (יָצַד). The choice of the perfect form is evidence that God was never silent. Furthermore, the clause קוֹל תְּהַנְּנִי (v. 1) repeated in verbatim in verse 6 (קוֹל תְּהַנְּנִי) proves that God heard the cries of the psalmist. If we are to interpret this correctly, it would be inaccurate to say that verse 5 is a promise that will be fulfilled in the future (cf. DeClaissé-Walford et al. 2014:278; Goldingay 2006:408).

How did God hear the psalmist's cry? How did the psalmist know that God had answered his prayers? This is an important question that needs an answer. The psalmist had seen how the wicked lived around him. However, he eventually realised that God is never silent. He only may appear to be silent from a human perspective. The wicked had earned their own destruction because they did not treat other human beings as God's creation. They had reaped what they had sown. Thus, the psalmist saw the destruction of the wicked from a divine perspective. They were destroyed and were not built back up. Not only that, but the psalmist also saw his own protection from ruin and God's work in sustaining him. This is when the psalmist realised that God had heard his prayer. In short, the collapse of the wicked and

the protection of the psalmist from ruin opened the avenue for him to know God in a new way.

How did the psalmist respond with this newfound knowledge? He praised God and exclaimed, 'Blessed be the LORD' (בָּרַךְ יְהוָה). The verb בָּרַךְ means to acknowledge someone in a position of power and proclaim his greatness (Kraus 1992:341). The psalmist expressed this verb with songs of offerings and praise of thanksgiving, as explained.

'God is my strength and shield' (v. 7)

The psalmist first recognised God as his rock. After his lament was heard, he further exclaimed that God is his strength and shield. Why the change? There are two things that happened that caused the new knowledge of God. Firstly, the wicked had reaped what they had sown. Secondly, the psalmist did not receive the same kind of punishment. If he was not brought down and was instead being built up, then it is because God is his strength and shield.

The psalmist's experience in fighting against the temptation of the wicked opened his eyes to the reality of God working in his life. He was able to fight against wickedness because he was empowered by God's strength. Knowing this, he is now witnessing to the fact that only God's power can help his people fight against wickedness. Without any doubt, the psalmist cries out,

'The LORD is the strength of his people' (v. 8)

The confession that God is the strength (יָצַד) of his people shows the helplessness of the psalmist. He lacks the ability to fight against evil. If the psalmist was still standing, then it was because God had empowered him to do so. We can see a display of God's power in the exodus event, as he destroyed the forces of Egypt in the Dead Sea, kept his people alive in the wilderness for 40 years and conquered the people of Canaan (Ex 15:13). This confession points to God's victory in all that he does and his protection of his people. Not only did the psalmist resist the wicked, but he was also being continually kept from becoming wicked.

The LORD is my shield. This is the confession of the psalmist. A shield functions as armour against the attacks coming from an enemy, especially against arrows flying through the air. Ancient soldiers are usually equipped with two main tools of war: tool of protection (shield) and tool of aggression (sword or spear). It was not uncommon for officers in the army to be equipped with additional larger shields carried by other soldiers. The reliability of shields as a means of protection can also be seen in the gods of ancient societies. We can see the portrayal of gods as shields in Ancient Near Eastern texts. For example, Esarhaddon, the king of Assyria, received an oracle of protection from the goddess Ishtar, 'I am your good shield' (ed. Pritchard 1969:605).

Throughout the book of Psalms, the expression of God as the shield is used to describe protection for his people against

their enemies (Ps 3:4; 5:13; 7:11; 18:3, 31; 33:20; 59:12; 115:9–11; 119:114; 144:2). Not only is God their shield, but God also carries their shield with him (Ps 35:2). These two images emphasise the fact that the psalmist receives protection against attacks from all directions. God is his shield and is a total and perfect protection.

It's important to note the use of 'my' in all of these expressions (my rock, my strength, my shield). These usages point to a personal relationship between God and the psalmist. He knows God on a personal level, and this personal relationship is then brought to a communal level. Knowledge of God is never exclusively individual but always expands to the community.

'God is the saving refuge' (v. 8)

If a shield is a tool of protection that is light and mobile, a place of refuge is the ultimate place of protection for a community, similar to a fortress. Enemies will not be able to reach and attack God's people when they are in their place of refuge, their fortress. The existence of the fortress itself will discourage their enemies from attacking, further protecting God's people from harm.

Changes in textual mood

The changes of mood in Psalm 28 are different from the conventional psalms of lament. It is common for lament psalms to move from lament to praise. There are also psalms that move from praise to lament (Ps 9/10, 27, 40). However, the changes of mood in Psalm 28 reject this mould and moves from lament to praise and end with another lament. Psalm 28 contains two changes in mood instead of one: firstly, from lament to praise; secondly, from praise back to lament.

Lament to praise

The first change of mood happens in verse 6 when lament turns to praise. How can we explain the change? Following J. Begrich, many scholars explain the 'oracle of salvation' in verse 5 as the reason for the change (Brueggemann & Bellinger 2014:143, 144; Gerstenberger 1988:129; Kraus 1993:339, 341; Mowinckel 1967:219; Villanueva 2008:158). God has heard the lament of the psalmist in a theophany (Weiser 1962:258) or oracle. The postulate of the assurance of being heard (Gewissheit der Erhörung) becomes the opinion of many scholars.

This article suggests that the change in textual mood is caused by the psalmist's newfound knowledge of God. Borrowing the expression from Brueggemann, the psalmist is experiencing a new orientation after a time of disorientation. His struggles in life brought him to a new level of knowing his God. The strong expression of his lament opened his eyes to a fresh reality. He had come closer to God. If the psalmist had known God as his rock before, his experience of suffering brought him to a new understanding, that God is his strength and shield.

However, not only did the psalmist direct his life upward to God, but he had also taken a look around him. Now with new eyes, the psalmist saw the people around his life. This new outlook on his life causes him to change from praise to lament.

Praise to lament

Figure 1 shows the movement of textual mood from praise to lament. Why did the psalmist change his mood in the midst of singing praises to God? The answer to this question has not been discussed among scholars. This is because most scholars cannot notice the change in mood after the psalmist had received the oracle of salvation in verse 5.

Federico Villanueva (2008:159), following John Goldingay, argues that the change of mood from praise to lament is because the answer to the psalmist's lament raised other questions. Villanueva sees the change of mood in psalms of lament as a cycle of questions → answers → new questions. This cycle will only conclude when an eschatological understanding of the text is reached. What this understanding is or the objective of this new understanding is unclear.

Psalm 28 contains a change of mood from praise to lament. This change happens in verse 9. Why did the mood of the text change? It is because the psalmist's problem had not been resolved. God had heard his lament, and the psalmist knew it. He even proclaimed that God is his strength and shield. There seems to be no reason for him to raise another lament after he had learned of God's constant protection. However, his experience of God's goodness flamed a desire in his heart to tell his people of what God has done. He saw that the wicked still lived around him and his people, and their presence was threatening the life of his people. They were people prone to wickedness, so what can the psalmist do? He can only cry out to God. In the midst of his lament, the psalmist told his people that God is their strength and their place of refuge. This is what the psalmist had learned, and he wants his people to experience the same thing. God is the fortress of salvation for his chosen people.

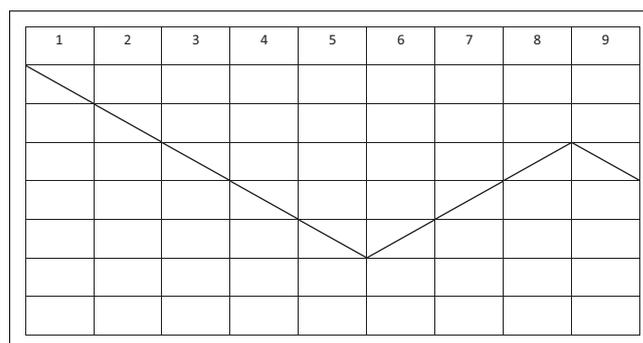


FIGURE 1: The movement of textual mood.

Universal justice and karma

Applying poetic-affective criticism to Psalm 28 reveals that the central theme of the psalm is universal justice. Justice means that the wicked will experience themselves what they unjustly did to others. This justice is universal as we can see evidence of it all throughout our universe. In short, justice is retribution against the wicked.

Is this theme of universal justice identical with the theory of karma? What are the similarities and differences between them? Before we answer this question, we must first examine the theory of karma and then compare the two (Table 3).

Karma is an important concept in the Vedic philosophy or Hindu philosophy, especially of India. It is not only important but also complex (see ed. O'Flaherty 1980). The word 'karma' comes from Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language, and it means action. The theory of moral retribution (karma), which is inherently causal, is formulated as follows:

There is a direct causal link between the moral quality of one's present actions and one's future contentment or frustration in this birth or another (a commentator points out that by 'actions' here what is meant is righteous and unrighteous conduct, since it is such conduct that is the cause of birth and rebirth). (Ganeri 2003:419–420)

Karma tells us that human actions have an inherent consequential dimension towards the perpetrator. The accumulation of this karma affects the migration of body (*âtman*) to their new bodies during reincarnation. The *âtman*, seen as a spark of Brahman (supreme being), cannot be destroyed or disappear but simply reincarnates into a different physical body in the next life. This migration of body (*âtman*) is explained in *Bṛhadâraṇyaka Upaniṣhad*, 1.4.4:

She then thought to herself: 'After begetting me from his own body (*âtman*), how could he copulate with me? I know – I'll hide myself'. So she became a cow. But he became a bull and again copulated with her. From their union cattle were born. Then she became a mare, and he a stallion; she became a female donkey, and he, a male donkey. And again he copulated with her, and from their union one-hoofed animals were born. Then she became a female goat, and he, a male goat; she became a ewe, and he, a ram. And again he copulated with her, and from their union goats and sheep were born. In this way he created every male and female pair that exists, down to the very ants. (Olivelle 1998:47)

If humans commit a wicked act against another human or creature, then their body (*âtman*) will migrate to a body with lower status than its previous one. Harmful words will cause

TABLE 3: Comparison between karma and universal justice.

Constituent	Moral retribution theory (karma)	Universal justice
Essence	Causality	Causality
Action	Good and evil	Evil
Retribution	Received when the body (<i>âtman</i>) comes to a new body	Received in their lives on earth (self-destruction)
Foundational belief	Release from <i>samsâra</i>	Man is created in the image of God

the body (*âtman*) to reincarnate as a bird or as a wild beast (Rocher 1980:63). Just as evil acts will have an impact on reincarnation, good actions will also affect the next life positively. This cycle of death and rebirth is known as *samsâra*. Karma and reincarnation are two central doctrines in Hinduism. Humans' ultimate goal then are to set themselves free from this cycle (Olivelle 2003:274). Becoming free from *samsâra* is known as *moksha* or *nirvana*. Karma is inextricably linked with the rebirth of the soul into a new body. The outcome of this migration depends entirely on the accumulation of moral acts in the previous life, whether good or bad. A positive karma will help the body (*âtman*) reach a body of higher status than its previous one.

The theory of moral retribution, as explained reveals a foundational understanding of human life. We are not 'beings' but instead 'becoming', as we are never finished with our lives. However, the theory of karma does give an explanation on why some humans are born rich, some poor, some happy, some suffering and the differences in human castes.

There is one last question that we must answer: why do we have to accept universal justice? What is the fundamental reason for upholding universal justice in our lives? Do we really have to treat others the same way we want to be treated? We will often say that those who commit evil acts against others will receive their own action as retribution. What is the reason for this? It is because all human beings are creatures created in the image of God, regardless of gender, social status and ethnicity. This is the universal reason for human ethics.

Jesus reformulated the principle of universal justice by saying, 'So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them' (Mt 7:12). This statement, which seems to be the climax of Jesus' sermon on the mount, is taught as the essence of the Law and the Prophets, and is known as the golden rule. Our lack of space prohibits us from writing more on this issue, but it must be said that this golden rule must be the ultimate desire of the disciples of Jesus. Regardless of their race, gender and social status, they have to take the initiative to do to others what they wish others would do to them.

Before we reach our conclusion, we should note that our research findings of Psalm 28 have implications for imprecatory psalms such as Psalms 12, 58, 69, 83, 94, 109, 129, and 137. Why are these psalms categorised as imprecatory psalms? They are called such because they contain prayers to God to act against their enemies (For discussion, see DeClaissé-Walford 2011:77–92; Sadler 2014:447–458). Is it appropriate, however, for us to use the term 'imprecatory psalm?' for Psalm 28? No. It is said that even though Psalm 28 is not considered an imprecatory psalm, it contains prayers against the enemies of the psalmist. Is this an accurate conclusion? The words 'give' and 'render' are not judicial terms. Therefore, verse 4 cannot be said to contain imprecatory words. Instead, verse 4 points to the reality that the wicked acts themselves will ruin the perpetrators (*self-destruction*).

Conclusion

Using poetic-affective criticism on Psalm 28, we find that the central theme of the psalm is universal justice that is inherently tied with the created universe. Human beings will act in wicked ways when they reject their created purpose as images of God and will receive just retribution for their actions, inciting destruction for themselves.

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