

Good News for the Poor: The Quest for Human Flourishing in the Psalms

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Abstract

The Hebrew Bible reflects a rich association of images and metaphors for human flourishing, not least in the book of Psalms. Beginning with some of these iconic images, the article then turns to focus on seven psalms. In each psalm there is the juxtaposition of two groups, namely the wicked or the powerful and a collection of their victims, namely the poor, widows, orphans and the afflicted. But what is most striking about these psalms is that the writer is making his appeal on behalf of the latter group rather than on behalf of himself. The Psalmist calls out to God to intervene in society and to make his presence known in the form of justice and mercy. The prayers are proleptic as the poet anticipates the actions of God in the re-ordering of our world to create a place where all the people of God can flourish. Key to this appeal, is the bestowal of honour and dignity by means of some anticipated action of God and his agents. The conclusion in this article is that it is the righteous people of God who are to be the vehicle of God’s gracious actions and of bearing the good news of an inclusive human flourishing.

1. The Good Life in the Psalms

The classic image of human flourishing or more colloquially “the good life” for the people of the Hebrew Bible is to be found in 1 Kings 4:25, which reads, “And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig-tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon” (ASV). One can imagine the scene of the farmers and their families, after a hard day’s work in the fields, resting in the dense shade of the fig tree and enjoying the fruit of the vine. Certainly, here is an idyllic pastoral scene and a model for the good life, which would continue for many centuries and other Biblical genres would contribute their own metaphorical images, specifically in the poetic writings. Brueggemann (1989) quite rightly demonstrates the unique way in which the poetry of the Bible, not least the book of Psalms, vividly conveys the mystery of God’s nature and presence.

For Psalms, metaphors for the image of the good life and of being in

the presence of God are linked. Initially, pastoral images predominate, like a tree planted near streams or canals of flowing water (Ps 1: 3), or conversely the green pastures and quiet waters of an idyllic resting place (Ps 23: 2). In later centuries, proximity to the mountain of the Lord in Zion would become the main element for visualising the good life. The Psalmist speaks of spending his whole life living in the house of the Lord (Ps 27:4) or like a bird, building his nest in the temple of God (Ps 84:2-4). The combination of proximity to God and the consequent sense of safety flow throughout the pages of the Psalter, giving birth to such unforgettable images as God our Rock and our fortress (Ps 18:2). Such poetic metaphors underline the sense of safety and security in God's presence.

The theological foundation for such images of the good life for the Psalmist is allegiance to the Mosaic covenant and to the laws found in the Torah. "His delight is in the law of the Lord" (Ps 1) and similar evocations ring through the book of Psalms. We might describe this as part of the summons to righteousness and to lives lived out in the framework of the law and covenant of God. To achieve this purpose, the Psalms sharply demarcate between the way of the wicked and the way of the righteous (*cf.* Ps 1). Ranged on the side of the righteous, is to be found a group of the vulnerable. These people are vulnerable because they have suffered adversity (widows and orphans) or been the victims of misfortune, either personal or social (the poor and afflicted). Their vulnerability marks them as people in need and so deserving of the mercy of God (*cf.* Ps 72 and 109). Indeed, they are also recipients of the good news of God's kingdom, according to Isaiah (61:1-2) and celebrated by Jesus in his Nazareth sermon (Lk 4:18-19). Not surprisingly, the plight of these people forms the basis for several prayers which will be the focus of attention in this paper.

2. Prayers on Behalf of the Poor and Oppressed

The Psalms are a rich source of information about the poor and marginalised of ancient Israel, with a wide range of Hebrew words, rendered as the poor, including *ani* (2x) *ebyon* (3x) and *dal* (2x); the oppressed found 7 times (*daka* 3x, *ashaq* 3x, and *lachats* 1x) and the afflicted found 40 times (*ani* 25x, *anav* 5x and *anah* 10x), making an impressive total of 54 mentions in the Psalms. The references are scattered across several subsections in the whole book of Psalms. This paper will examine seven psalms which are worthy of attention, and which highlight an often-forgotten element of biblical flourishing, namely a concern for the poor and marginalised.

Pennington (2015:np) concludes his article on biblical flourishing with an emphatic statement, “Seeking social justice, racial equality, economic flourishing, and peace ... is not an optional part of the Church’s mission nor a minor alleyway”. Instead, he argues that “These are practices that testify to the reality of God’s coming reign and are in alignment with what God himself is doing” (2015:np). In examining the book of Psalms, Pennington’s comment finds ample support in these writings, as this article will demonstrate, and poses a significant challenge to the view that biblical flourishing is sustainable without the inclusion of social justice.

Discussed here are the following: Psalms 9/10 (treated as one psalm), Psalms 34, 37, 74, 82, and 146. Among the many prayers in the book of Psalms asking for God’s intervention, these psalms stand out, because the Psalmist is not appealing for a personal response from God (as for example in Ps 26, 27, 28) but is making a request on behalf of a separate, identifiable group within the society. These psalms are chosen because they share quite specific characteristics and so, I believe, form a distinct sub-genre, which may be labelled as “Appeals on behalf of the poor and oppressed”. Collectively these people may be described as “those who share the shadow side of life” (Gerstenberger 2001:235), perhaps because they so easily slide into invisibility simply because they are not considered to be worthy of notice.

The first key feature of these specific Psalms is the juxtaposition of two categories of persons. First, there are the victims of abuse, including the vulnerable, like widows, the fatherless and the resident aliens. Added to these are the various words mentions of the poor and oppressed, (I will collectively refer to them as the protagonists) like the afflicted (‘*ânîy* or ‘*ânâv* see Gerstenberger 2001 and Wegner 1997) and the needy (‘*ebyôn* see Domeris 1997) and finally from the semantic domain of oppression those oppressed by violence (*dak*). On the opposite side there are the abusers. (I will use the word antagonists) described as the wicked (*râshâ’*), evildoers (*râ’a’*) and the enemy (‘*ôyêb*). Such terms easily allow for antagonists at either a national level (the enemies of Israel, like Assyria or Babylon) or a local situation (enemies at court, or even neighbours eager to increase their lands).

The seven Psalms discussed here reveal a familiar picture of the vulnerable who have been abused by those who wield power including those who should be protecting them (like the judges). In the process, these people

have been shamed and stripped of their dignity and honour. By citing the vulnerable as worthy of God's intervention, the psalmist recognises the needs of the vulnerable and so deems them worthy of honour in God's eyes and not least human dignity. The psalms effectively become "the universal cry of the poor" (Pleins 2001:429).

What is notable about these prayers is the assumption that because of the inherent nature of God, specifically his justice and mercy, the prayer has already been answered. In other words, they share a proleptic character. Prolepsis is a common feature of the Psalms, as Dahood (1966:54) has demonstrated by the Psalmist's use of the precative perfect, which anticipates a particular response by God. What appears to be a simple statement, becomes instead a powerful prayer for the execution of the justice of God.

Apart from the opposing parties of the antagonists (the wicked) and the protagonists (the vulnerable) and the psalmists use of proleptic appeals for God's intervention, there is a third unusual element, namely the poet's request for God's bestowal of honour (or dignity) on those who are in danger of being shamed. Such an honouring may come by means of some action of God (bestowal of land or defeat of the wicked) or the reversal of shame (so that the wicked or unjust are shamed). Values like honour or *kābad* (Collins 1997) and shame or *būsh* (Seebass 1975; Nel 1997:621-627) play a significant part in the value system of the Hebrew Bible not least in the wisdom writings, as demonstrated by DeSilva (2008). Bechtal (1991) points out the social power of shame, which can be used as an expression of social justice and unfortunately as a weapon against the weak and powerless and the vulnerable (Stiebert 2002).

Each of the six psalms (taking Psalms 9 and 10 together) raises a different impediment to the flourishing of the poor and vulnerable on whose behalf, the poet cries out to God. These impediments range from the loss of hope (Ps 9 and Ps 10); the shaming of the poor (Ps 34); the loss of land (Ps37); the humiliation of the poor (Ps 74); the miscarriage of justice (Pd 82) and finally the struggle of the poor and oppressed to take their proper places within society (Ps 146).

3.1 Psalms 9 and 10: Human Violence and the Justice of God

Psalms 9 and 10 are two parts of a single acrostic psalm (Dahood 1966:54; Terrien 2003:138-145; Goldingay 2006:165) as recognised by the LXX

and the Vulgate (Terrien 2003:142). While Dahood emphasises its nature as a lament (1966:54), the Psalm speaks most clearly as a prayer for divine intervention against the wicked, on behalf of the afflicted (Brueggemann 1995:217-234). In terms of dating the Psalm, Goldingay (2006:169) suggests the time of Nehemiah (mid-fifth century BC). Terrien observes various parallels with the book of Jeremiah, suggesting that period as a possible date in the late 7th and early 6th century BC, for both psalms (2003:144-5). These dates offer similar context for the theme of oppression which plays out in the psalms, including both local and national oppression.

In these two psalms, there is a similar opposition of antagonists and victims. The antagonists include the wicked or *râshâ'* (Ps 9:16-17[17-18]; Ps 10:2,3,4,13,15), the nations from *gôy* (Ps 9:5[6]), the oppressors from *tôk* (Ps 10:7), the enemy or *ôyêb* (Ps 9:3[4], 6[7]), the greedy or *bâtsa'* (Ps 10:3), and evildoers or *râ'âh* (Ps 10:15). Hunting imagery is used (Ps 10:8-10), including the rare Hebrew word *châtaph* for clutch or hound (Goldingay 2016:180), to graphically describe the antagonists as they stalk and hunt down the afflicted and pursue the vulnerable (Goldingay 2006:178-181).

The victims are variously, the oppressed or *dak* (Ps 9:9 [10]; Ps 10:18), the helpless poor or *chêleka* (Ps 10:8, 14), the afflicted or *'ânîy* (Ps 9:12 [13]; Ps 10:2, 9, 12), the poor or *'ânâv* (Ps 9:18 [19]; Ps 10:17), the needy or *'ebyôn* (Ps 9: 18 [19]), the innocent or *nâqîy* (Ps 10:8), and the fatherless or *yâthôm* (Ps 10:14, 18) and the oppressed from *dak* (Ps 10:18).

In his commentary on Psalm 9, Dahood (1966:54) treats the verbs in vv5-7 as precativ perfects, namely thanksgiving in anticipation of God's actions and judgement (v4 [5], v8 [9]). The intervention itself is proleptically described as "the Lord will be a stronghold for the oppressed" (v9 [10]), "he does not forget the cry of the afflicted" (v12 [13]), and there is the assurance that "the needy will not always be forgotten, nor the hope of afflicted perish forever" (v18 [19]) (Dahood 1966:54 and cf. Goldingay 2006:177). Miller argues that "no other psalms so fully join the basic themes of the Psalter – the rule of God, the representative role of the king, the plea for help in times of trouble, the ways of the wicked and the righteous, and the justice of God on behalf of the weak and the poor" (2004:188-189).

By the simple process of raising these concerns, on behalf of the

marginalised, the psalmist honours them as people deserving of God's intervention. The process of the honouring of the marginalised found here has two dimensions. The first is in the spelling out of the plight of these people in the context of God's grace. "God as the helper of the fatherless and of the poor (v14) will execute justice on their behalf against their oppressors" (Goldingay 2006:183). In fact, in the process of honouring these people, God takes the initiative by "making decisions" on their behalf (Goldingay 2006:183). Bullock sums up the message of the psalm as "the Lord is the champion of the poor and oppressed" (2015:153). Their voices will be heard (Ps 9:13 [14]) and their hope restored (Ps 9:18 [19]).

The second dimension in the honouring of the marginalised is in the shaming of their antagonists. Brueggemann writes, "The intrusion of Yahweh into social relationships decisively transforms the prospect for both the wicked and the poor" (1995: 231)". In execution of God's judgement, the wicked will be punished (Ps 9:15-20 [16-21]). Paradoxically, the wicked will be caught in the very traps they had set for the innocent (Ps 10:2; Ps 9:15-16 [16-17]). They are not invincible but will die as mere human beings [*'ênôsh*] (Ps 9:20 [21]). Terrien sums up the message of both psalms when he writes that "justice will vanquish all the oppressors ... yet it is not for the loss of them, but the salvation of the poor that fills the singer with joy" (2003:145).

3.2 Psalm 34: Their Faces Shall Never be Ashamed

Psalm 34, like Psalms 9 and 10 is an acrostic psalm (Dahood 1966:205) and typically has some irregularities (Goldingay 2006:478) and lacks progressive links between the verses (Dahood 1966: 205). In terms of genre, Goldingay notes that not one verse is addressed directly to God making this torah (teaching) rather than a thanksgiving psalm as often thought (2006:478). There are elements of wisdom writings, and the psalm may be described as a wisdom psalm (Dahood 1966:22-24) dealing with issues of social injustice.

Terrien (2003:305-306) writes, "The poet of Psalm 34 however reveals a personal involvement in the scandal of righteous suffering". He postulates (2003:305-306) a date for the psalm as towards "the end of the monarchy, when social injustice flared up at the international as well as national levels." However, the introduction to the Psalm associates it with the life of David (late 10th century). Given the very general nature of the poet's complaints, it is difficult to postulate an exact date for the Psalm based on

the contents. The early monarchy remains a reasonable hypothesis.

Verse 3[4] is an invitation (Terrien 2003:204), which Dahood (1966:205) understands as “the grateful poet inviting the afflicted to join him in his song of praise”. The pattern here of turning through God’s grace, from shame to honour is unmistakeable. Goldingay (2006:475-479) discerns three parallel imperatives in verse 5[6], addressed to the afflicted or ‘*ânāwîm* (v2[3]), to look to God, to let their faces shine and importantly not to let their faces be ashamed (*châphêr*). Terrien (2003:301) sees a similar pattern in v 6[7] where the poor man (‘*ânîy*) cried, the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles (*tsârâh*).

The Psalm is marked by the usual juxtaposition between the poet’s protagonists and his antagonists. The protagonists include the afflicted (v2[3], v6[7], v8[9], v11[12]), the poor (v8[9]), those who takes refuge (v8[9]), God’s holy ones or saints (v9[10]), those who seek the Lord (v10[11]), the broken hearted and crushed in spirit (v18[19] and the righteous (v15[16], v19[20]).

The antagonists, include the evildoers (v16[17]), the wicked (v21[22]), those who hate the righteous (v21[22]). Verse 10[11] refers to “young lions” which Walton et al (2000:523) considers a common ancient Near Eastern metaphor for enemies of the writer.

The theme of reversal is especially present in verse 18[19]. Goldingay (2006:476) renders the verse as “Yahweh is near people who are broken inside, he will deliver the crushed in spirit”. He explains that the reference is to those “who are broken inside (lit. broken of heart)”. In this verse we recognise the familiar pattern of God acting as the patron and redeemer/defender of the vulnerable. God will indeed defend the vulnerable from shame (verse 5[6]).

3.3 Psalm 37: The Inheritance of the Land

Psalm 37 is another acrostic psalm (Terrien 2003:322; Dahood 1966:227; Goldingay 2006:516 and Day 2004:244) but with sapiential themes (Dahood 1966:227; Terrien 2003:317; Day 2004:244). The inscription connects the psalm with David, while the content develops the now familiar theme of faithful protagonists against faithless antagonists (Goldingay 516), what Terrien calls “a sapiential homily” (322). Day (2004:244), based on its wisdom (Job-like) theme, and its acrostic nature

opts for a date late in the monarchy. Quite correctly Dahood (1966:228) recognises its intention as “To encourage those depressed by the success of the ungodly”.

There is the regular opposition of antagonists and protagonists in the psalm. The antagonists include the evildoers (v1[2]; v9[10]), the wrong doers (v1[2]), the one who prospers and those who carries out wicked schemes(v7[8]), and the wicked (v10[11]; v12[13] v14[15], v16[17], v17[18], v20[21], v21[22], v32[33], v34[35]), v35[36], v38[39], v40[41]). In addition, there are the enemies of Yahweh (v20[21]), those cursed by Yahweh (v22[23]), descendants of the wicked (v28[29]), and the transgressors (v38[39]).

The protagonists are conversely those who wait for the Lord (v9[10]), the righteous, (v17[18], v18[19]), (v16[17]v21[22], v25[26], v28[29], 29[30], v39[40]), the blameless (v18[19]), those blessed by God [v22[23)]; and the man of peace (v37[38]). Importantly for this article there is also the poor *’ânîy*, the needy *’ebyôn* (v14b [15]) and the afflicted (v11 [12] or *’ânāwîm*. In reference to the *’ânāwîm*, Gerstenberger (2001:234) writes: “The words associated with the root [Heb *’ana II*] belong to a negatively charged domain of knowledge and experience” and adds “The nouns and adjectives refer to situations inimical to human life. The basic experience appears to be ‘affliction’ in its various forms”.

The opening verse of Psalm 37 encourages the audience “Do not become upset [or angry] about the wicked, or envious of those who work unrighteousness” (Ps 37:1 [2]). Lohfink suggests, “It is possible that the psalm refers specifically to the peasantry, who faced increasing class differences and were in danger of losing their land to great landowners” (1990:394). The climatic verse is verse eleven or verse twelve in the Hebrew. The MT should be rendered as “But the afflicted will possess the land and delight themselves in abundant prosperity” [v12]. Up to this point, in the Psalm, the recipients of God’s good pleasure have been the usual category of the faithful and just, but verse 11[12] and again verse 14[15] draws the circle wider to include the afflicted, the poor and the needy which reinforces the notion that this and the other psalms considered speaks to the issue of God’s honouring of the marginalised.

Lohfink draws out the element of paradox when he concludes that “yet in this Psalm, it is the poor and the righteous who dispossess others and

occupy their land” (1990:371-2). Here is the element of reversal writ large. Goldingay (2006:522) develops this theme: “The idea then is that whereas at the moment the wicked are doing so well that they might be in a position to take over the land of the others, that situation is due to be reversed”. Brueggemann (1995:249-253) reminds us that this psalm carries implications for unjust governments and “colonising powers that appropriate the land of other peoples”.

3.4 Psalm 74: Let not the Oppressed Return Dishonoured.

The tone of the psalm with its references to the burned sanctuary (v7[8]), and to the meeting place (v4[5 and v8[9]) suggests that it follows the destruction of the temple (*cf.* v3-8[4-9]) leading Dahood (1968:199), term the psalm a “national lament” and like Estes (2017:33) and Goldingay (2007:436) connects the psalm to the fall of Jerusalem and the oppression which followed the exile.

The psalm ends with an appeal to God on behalf of the oppressed and afflicted (v18-23[19-24]). Of specific interest for this paper is verse 21 which reads, “Let not the oppressed return dishonoured (*kālam*); let the afflicted and needy praise your name”. This appeal captures the essence of the reversal psalms. God is asked to reverse their present state of dishonour (v21[22], see Estes 2017:33). Once again, there is no merit attached to the victims, meaning that this is an act of grace from God.

The antagonists are the enemies (v3[4], v18[19]) and adversaries (v4[5], v23[24]). As with the Psalm 34, animal imagery is used in verse 4[5] of the adversaries who roar (like lions). The enemy is belittled as the foolish people (v19[20], v22[23]) and their land as habitations of violence. By contrast the victims or protagonists are described as your turtle dove (v19[20]), the afflicted (v19[20], v21[22] *‘ânîy*), the oppressed (*dak* v21[22]) and the needy (*‘ebyôn* v21[22]). Terms which properly belong to the domain of the poor and oppressed are here used of the exiles. This might be explained as a spiritualisation of these terms, but equally of the actual plight of the exiles as they face oppression and poverty in exile (Is 58 and Neh 4). The proleptic tone is evident when the poet gives reason for his prayer as so that the people might praise God (v21). Once again, there is no attempt to justify God’s gracious acts. The assumption is not the merit of those people, but the constant faithfulness of God.

3.5 Psalm 82: Unjust Judgement

The setting of this Psalm is widely recognised (Estes 2017:80; Terrien 2003:588-589; Dahood 1968:268) as the divine council (v1 'ēdāh). of God. Yahweh occupied the seat of honour and was attended by the other members of the council who are described as 'ēlôhîym (Ps 82:1[2] and see Job 1:6:). Scholars are divided between the opinion that these beings were pagan gods (Dahood 1968:270; Terrien (2003:589) or angels (Estes 2017:79).

The keyword of the psalm is *shâphat* (v1,2,3,8 [2,3,4,9]) as the poet calls on Yahweh to counter the injustice of the wicked with his justice including the redemption of the poor. Commenting on the psalm, Mays (1994:271-2) notes “It becomes an axiom of the Old Testament theology that the worship of this Lord must and shall bring justice to the weak”.

A forensic form frames the psalm (Terrien 2003:588-590) beginning with the exordium, followed by the indictment, list of offences and concludes with the verdict. The psalm is addressed to the judges who are in fact on trial for their failure to preserve justice and righteousness (Estes 2017:79). Instead of defending the vulnerable including the poor *dal* (2x), the fatherless *yâthôm*, the destitute *rûsh*, the afflicted 'ânîy and the needy 'ebyôn (v3-4), the judges have sided with their oppressors (v2,[3] v4[5]). For Estes (2017:79) consequently “that is to hold the just and gracious God in contempt”. In fact, Dahood concludes (1968:270) these judges are “quite incapable of defending the poor and rescuing the downtrodden” leading to God’s implicit intervention.

Verses 6 [7] and 7[8] reflect the psalmists hope for an honour and shame reversal and Dahood (1968:270), notes the sense of contrast in the verbs used in verses 6[7] and 7[8], with verse 6[7] reflecting an a priori assumption on the part of the writer “I said you are gods, and all of you are the sons of the Most High” and verse 7[8], the verdict, “You will die as [mere] men, and fall like one of the princes (Heb. *Śar*)”. Dahood (1968:268) calls this the “restoration of universal justice under sole rule of Yahweh as God takes up the cause of those who have been unjustly judged (see also Terrien 2003:589; Estes 2017:79),

Terrien (2003:589) draws attention to the “unusual number of synonyms to describe economic destitution”. The psalmist calls for these victims to be vindicated *shâphat* (v3a[4a]), to have justice *tsâdaq* done for

them (v3b[4b]), to be rescued *pâlat* (v4a[5a]) and to be delivered *nâtsal* (v4b[5b]). These verbs especially the first (vindicate) clearly signals the pattern of reversal implicit in this psalm found especially in God's defence of the vulnerable. Terrien (2003:591) concludes, "The oneness of God, incomparable, calls for equality among all humans".

3.6 Psalm 113: God Lifts the Needy from the Ash Heap.

The psalm is a hymn of praise to Yahweh and forms the first of the Hallel psalms namely Psalms 113-118. (Craigie 146-147; Estes 2017:250). Both the first and last verse contain the instruction "Praise the Lord". The psalm begins with an invitation to the servants of the Lord to join in the praise (Terrien 2003:763). Several scholars (Estes 2017:250; Terrien 2003:763) connect the psalm with the song of Hannah (1 Sm 2:1-10) in its celebration of Yahweh's victory and triumph over adversity.

Verse five poses the question, "Who is like the Lord our God?" and then brings in the defence of the evidence to support the uniqueness and greatness of Yahweh (vv5-9). Yahweh is praised for his ongoing activities on behalf of the vulnerable including the poor *dal* and needy '*ebyôn* (v7) and adds the barren woman or '*âqâr* (v9). As with the other psalms under consideration there is a proleptic dimension as the psalmist looks forward to the future gracious actions of Yahweh among his people. A remarkable juxtaposition is found between verses 5 and 6 in which Yahweh who is great among the exalted powers of heaven, deservedly so, choses to humble himself to be present with the poor in the dust and the needy in the ash-heap (Goldingay 316-317), The NASV offers an alternative text for verse 6 as "Looks far below in the heavens and on earth". Goldingay simply has "Gets down to have a look" (2008:317).

In all the psalms, Psalm 113 contains the clearest statement of the shame to honour reversal: "He raises the poor from the dust ('*âphâr*) and lifts the needy from the ash heap ('*ashpôth*) (v7-8). Goldingay (2008:315) makes clear that the verb should be rendered as "to set them" and not to set me, since "the ending is a connective". Poignantly the final verse includes the barren woman, like Hannah, who becomes "the joyful mother of children" (v9). For the psalmist, such an honouring of the vulnerable and the shamed is worthy of praise, not just for the honouring but for the fact that the almighty Yahweh humbles himself to lift up even those who live on the rubbish dumps. The deeper texture of the verse is an instant reminder of those scenes commonly found today in the cities of the Two-

Thirds world, where ragged children and hungry adults sift through the rubbish in the hope of a dried crust of bread (See Estes 2017:251).

The twin verbs “raises up” (*qûm*) and “lifts up” (*rûm*) creates a poetic resonance but make clear how the honouring is manifested in vivid form in a world bound by a fear of shame and a desperate longing for honour. The poet now takes the honouring to an entirely unexpected level in verse 8 as he explains that Yahweh will “make them sit with nobles, with the nobles of his people”. Indeed, these people who were shamed are destined to share honour with nobles or princes (*nâdîyb*), with the very people who are born to a high status of honour. They are being restored to their “proper place in the community” (Goldingay 2008:318), just as the barren woman becomes the honourable mother finding her rightful place in the home.

3.7 Psalm 146: God Executes Justice for the Oppressed

The final psalm for consideration occurs in the last section of the psalms indicating that the theme of reversal is not limited to any part of the corpus. The psalm is a hymn of praise for God’s gracious acts. In the third strophe (vv 8-9) there is a litany on the name Yahweh (Terrien 2003:910). The psalm is the first of five Hallelujah psalms and following Dahood (1970:130) belongs to the third set of Hallel psalms (Ps 146-150). Verses 3 and 5 suggest to Estes (2017:425) “an audience of worshippers”.

The psalm warns against putting faith in human agents, like nobles (*nâdîyb*) and ordinary people (lit. son of man; v3) and reminds the reader of the blessing and hope which comes to those who put their trust in God (v5). The antagonists are once again the wicked (v9) and presumably the unreliable nobles and others in authority (v3). Yahweh will act to reverse the present situation by dishonouring the way of the wicked and raising up the oppressed (v9). There is probably a sense of irony in the use of the verb ‘*âvath* which carries the sense of be bent or crooked (Brown, Driver, Briggs, 1977:736) and is used here (v9) for disrupting the way of the wicked.

The psalm has a remarkable spread of words to describe the vulnerable. In verse 7, there are the oppressed (‘*âshaq* see Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1977:799), the hungry (*râ’êb*), and the prisoners (‘*âsar*). Goldingay points out that the prisoners in the ancient world. were those incarcerated for political stances rather than civil crimes (2008:710). In verse 8, there are

those who are bowed down (*kâphaph*) with the sense of oppressed, the blind (*‘ivvêr*), and the righteous (*tsaddîyq*). Finally in verse 9, there are strangers (*gêr* - resident aliens who did not enjoy citizen rights so Dahood 1970:340), fatherless (*yâthôm*), and the widow (*‘almânâh*) (v9).

A range of verbs are used to describe Yahweh's interventions. In verse 7, Yahweh executes justice (*mishpât*), gives food (*lechem*), and sets free (*nâthar*). In verse 8, he opens [the eyes] (*pâqach*), raises up (*zâqaph*) and loves (*‘âhab*). In verse 9, he safeguards (*shâmar*), and he preserves (*‘ûd*). Terrien (2003:911) observes the “affinity between justice and love” in this list of verbs. Out of Yahweh's love comes his justice on behalf of all those who are wronged, but this justice requires the cooperation of humankind (Estes 2017:426), and out of his actions of setting things right, a deep sense of the honouring of the marginalised.

4. The Role of the Righteous in God's Grace

The study found here shows a distinctive pattern present across the book of Psalms in which those who least deserve honour in the eyes of the world, are giving special attention in the eyes of the psalmist, leading to a proleptic cry for God's intervention and restoration – what this article describes as a reversal process. Each Psalm raised a particular obstacle to the full and free inclusion of the poor and marginalised within the experience of God's intended flourishing among his people ranging from the loss of hope, the shaming of the poor, the lack of land, the humiliation of the poor, the miscarriage of justice and finally the struggle to take their proper places within society. Each Psalm emphasises the different ways in which God will intervene on behalf of these people to create a full and inclusive sharing of Christian wellbeing and so the experience of the good news promised by Jesus.

The recognition that such people rightly deserve honour and to be delivered from shame, grounds the Psalmist's belief in the justice and grace of Yahweh. The underlying assumption in this article, is that poverty itself does not grant special status to any individual although it does recognise the person's need of a redeemer-God (Pleins 2001:422-424).

From time to time, the term “righteous” is used as a synonym for those who have been marginalised. This might lead to the assumption that terms like poor and oppressed are simply synonyms for the righteous ones. While this may in some measure explain the juxtaposition of the

righteous and the wicked (as in Ps 1), it fails to explain the sheer diversity of the marginalised, and the clear appeal to injustice and abuse of the poor and needy found in the psalms considered here. Instead, the evidence of these psalms reflects a reality in which poor and vulnerable people like the widows and orphans suffer at the hands of the rich and powerful, and those simply called the wicked.

Pleins writes (2001:429). “If only in a slightly rhetorical sense, the Psalms preserve for us the universal cry of the poor. In this sense, then, they continue to hold out poverty and justice as key issues for their community and any group that seeks to take up the Psalter to frame its liturgical life.” In the light of the theme of human flourishing these are also key issues for that quest, especially among evangelicals.

5. Conclusion

Clearly, the psalmist believed that not only would God take heed of his cry on behalf of the poor and marginalised, but that those who have means and opportunity, and who seek for righteousness should respond to the needs of those in their own communities (Estes 2017:426; Powell 1996). As evangelicals seek out God’s gift of human flourishing, this article suggests that all those who desire the way of God’s righteousness, who are chosen to be the vehicle of God’s gracious actions are therefore those who are called to be good news to the poor. Since there is no suggestion that the poor and needy merit the favour of God, this in turn implies that the righteous are called to be the bearers of the generous mercy and gracious honouring of God. Only when that impulse is present and active does human flourishing become more than a selfish desire for a comfortable life.

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Author’s Declaration

The author declares that there is no financial gain or personal relationship(s) that inappropriately influenced him in the writing of this article.

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SECTION C