

Dirk Human (University of Pretoria)

**YAHWEH, THE ISRAELITE HIGH GOD BENDS DOWN
TO UPLIFT THE DOWNTRODDEN: PERSPECTIVES
ON THE INCOMPARABILITY OF YAHWEH IN PSALM
113¹**

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to interpret the text of Psalm 113 theologically as a portrayal of the Israelite God, Yahweh. In order to do this the composition of the text, its genre and literary context, text analysis, dating and theological relevance have been investigated.

Yahweh is depicted in Psalm 113 as an incomparable God. He is king, creator and God of justice. In this hymn there is a call on his servants to praise him. He deserves praise because he stoops down as enthroned king to uplift the destitute and downtrodden. This unexpected and unequalled deed by this exalted divine royalty of elevating the needy and the despised greatly enhances Yahweh's character. He is simultaneously transcendent and immanent of nature.

Wordplay, the presence of sun imagery and the function of the rhetorical question in the psalm that depicts Yahweh as an incomparable God, are all allusions to polemical attitudes that surfaced with respect to Yahweh and other ancient Near Eastern deities. Yahweh's kingship surpasses that of Shamash, Baal, Marduk, Re/Amun-Re or Ilu (El). For this he should be praised.

1. INTRODUCTION

A High God who bends down to reverse the fate of the lowly and downtrodden is the nucleus of this extraordinary psalm that serves as an introduction to the well-known Egyptian *Hallel* (Pss. 113-118). Yahweh, who delivers outcasts from ill-fated circumstances, provides the justification for summoning all nations and the whole of creation to praise this sublime god.

For both Jews and Christians, this hymnic group of *Hallel* psalms (113-118) is of particular significance during the *Pesach*-Passover celebrations of Jewish and Christian worship traditions (Millard 1994:30-31). The

1 I dedicate this article to Professor Siegfried Mittmann, not only because he is a good friend of South Africa, but also because his academic and scientific contributions to the study of the Old Testament and Biblical Archaeology have earned him international renown. I thank him especially for the theological insights, which I have gained from him during a short visit in 1991, when I studied in Germany under Professor Jörg Jeremias.

liturgical and cultic use of Psalm 113 during the Pilgrimage festivals, namely *Pesach*-Passover, *Sukkoth* and *Shevuôt* (Weeks) is well known. Also at the New Moon feasts and celebrations of the Dedication of the Temple (*Hanukkah*) the reciting of Psalm 113 was of paramount liturgical significance.

At Passover celebrations Psalms 113-114 were sung before the meal, while Psalms 115-118 were sung after the meal (Baethgen 1904:343; Kittel 1929:362). The reference in the Gospels to Jesus' observance of this practice at the Last Supper (Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26), links the *Hallel* also to the Christian worship tradition. Therefore the psalm is regularly part of Christians' Easter celebrations as evening song on Easter Day (Kirkpatrick 1921:677). It is thus evident that Psalm 113 has a place of honour in the *repertoire* of praise in both the Jewish and Christian cultic-liturgical traditions (Craigie 1885:70).

In the research history of the psalm several issues have been addressed. On a synchronic level the literary genre, structure and inter-textual relationships of Psalm 113 with other psalms or biblical texts have been discussed.² On a diachronic level, aspects of the psalm's development, background, date and different *Sitz(e) im Leben* (cultic and historical) have received much attention. Inner-biblical tradition-historical motives and images have been identified and analysed to provide a better understanding of the text. Quite often questions were raised as to whether Psalm 113 reflects the experience of an individual or, alternatively, whether it portrays the intrigues of the faith community of Israel as a corporate identity.

This article has the aim to interpret the text of Psalm 113 theologically as a portrayal of the Israelite God, Yahweh, who is depicted as an incomparable god, not only of his own faith community, but also of all nations and creation. Because of his nature and his deeds as incomparable deity, people are summoned to praise him.

2 In the first instance the inter-textual relationships with psalms of the Egyptian *Hallel* (Pss. 113-118) have been investigated. Textual and tradition-historical links with other psalms in the Fifth Book of the Psalter (Pss. 107-150) have also been identified. Outside these textual groups the affinity of Psalm 113 with especially 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and Deutero-Isaiah is obvious.

2. COMPOSITION OF PSALM 113

2.1 Text and translation

This well-preserved text of Psalm 113 forms an artistically composed unit, but exhibits a slight fluidity in the arrangement of its sub-sections into strophes.³ The text has been depicted as a literary masterpiece of semantic, syntactic and structural development (Zemek 1993:129). Although a few exegetes suggest certain text emendations in verses 1b,⁴ 5-6⁵ and 8,⁶ these emendations are not convincing enough to alter the existing Masoretic text. The text and possible translation therefore read as follows:

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- 3 Graber (1990:349) calls it a "highly structured hymn of praise, but its structure has a fluidity". Prinsloo (1996:473) underscores this "carefully structured unit" with a thorough syntactical and structural analysis of the psalm. Loader (1976:65) is also astounded by its "extraordinarily fine symmetrical composition".
- 4 The Septuagint, Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion and Jerome all read, according to Psalm 135:1, the vocative interpretation of "servants" (עבדים). Dahood (1970:131) though, has changed the vocalisation of the phrase, which means that the text reading "servants of" Yahweh is emended to the "works of" Yahweh. He did this because the first reading, according to him, does not lend itself to easy analysis and because ancient versions read "the servants" in the absolute, rather than in the construct form. This alteration is not convincing, because the Masoretic text is clear and has a similar parallel in Psalm 135:1.
- 5 Scholars like Kittel (1922:362), Loader (1976:64), Kraus (1978:) and Westermann (1984:144; 1989:201) have changed the text of verses 5-6 by adopting a more meaningful sequence of hemi-stichoi. They read the hemi-stichoi 5a + 6b and 5b + 6a together. But this re-arranged text reading has no support in ancient Hebrew manuscripts. It obscures the natural and functional chiasmus between verses 5 and 6 and can therefore not be accepted.
- 6 Duhm (1899:258), Anderson (1972:780) and Westermann (1984:144) emended the phrase לְהוֹשִׁיבֵי in verse 8 to לְהוֹשִׁיבוֹ ("to let him sit"), according to the suggestion of the Septuagint, the Peshitta and Jerome. Because the genitive casus ending, *hireq compaginis*, seems to be a characteristic poetic feature of the psalm, this alteration cannot be accepted.

1 הַלְלוּ יְהוָה

2 הַלְלוּ עַבְדֵי יְהוָה הַלְלוּ אֶת־שֵׁם יְהוָה:
יְהִי שֵׁם יְהוָה מְבֹרָךְ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם:

3 מִמְזֶרֶח־שֶׁמֶשׁ עַד־מְבֹאוֹ מִהֶלֶל שֵׁם יְהוָה:

4 כִּם עַל־כָּל־גּוֹיִם יְהוָה עַל הַשָּׁמַיִם כְּבוֹדוֹ:

5 מִי כִּיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַמְּגַבִּיהִי לְשָׁבֶת:

6 הַמְּשַׁפִּילִי לְרֵאוֹת בַּשָּׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ:

7 מְקִימֵי מַעַפָּר דָּל מֵאֲשַׁפֵּת יָרִים אֲבִיוֹן:

8 לְהוֹשִׁיבֵי עִם־נְדִיבִים עִם נְדִיבֵי עַמּוֹ:

9 מוֹשִׁיבֵי עֵקֶרֶת הַבַּיִת אִם־הַבָּנִים שְׂמֵחָה

הַלְלוּ־יְהוָה:

Translation

1 Hallelujah.

Praise, O servants of Yahweh; praise the Name of Yahweh.

2 Let the Name of Yahweh be praised, from now on and for evermore.

3 From the setting of the sun to its rising,
the Name of Yahweh is to be praised.

4 Exalted over all the nations is Yahweh, above the heavens is his glory.

5 Who is like Yahweh, our God, the One who sits enthroned on high,

6 who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?

7 He raises the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap;

8 he seats (him/them) with princes, with the princes of (his/their) people.

9 He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children.

Hallelujah.

2.2 *Literary characteristics*

A few literary and stylistic features characterise this short poem. Repetition plays a major role in the psalm. Apart from the repetition of a few *Leitwörter*,⁷ the repetition of certain prepositions deserves to be mentioned. Prepositions such as *בִּין* (2-3; 7), *עַד* (2-3), *עַל* (4) and *עִם* (8) are all utilised with either literary or theological functional effects. These are further complemented by the appearance of genitive case endings or the *hireq compaginis* in verses 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9. This archaic relic is an effective ornamental technique to enhance the poetic style of a text. Nowhere else in the Old Testament is this unparalleled heaping up of the *hireq compaginis* attested to the extent displayed in this psalm (Delitzsch 1889:184; Hurvitz 1985:117).

Another prominent feature is the appearances of the chiasmus style figure in verses 2-3, 4, 5-6 and 7. In order to stress aspects of the theological content in Psalm 113, the poet probably utilised this literary device intentionally. In each context the function of this figure can be determined more precisely. It is evident that the chiasmus not only stresses the polarity in the character of Yahweh, but also portrays the radical change brought about by him in the fate and/or social status of the deprived and needy.

Other literary style figures that enhance the aesthetic and theological beauty of the psalm include: *inclusio* (1a/9b; 1/3; 4/6), parallelism (1ab), *merismus* (2b; 3a; 6b), ellipsis (4), wordplay,⁸ antithesis or paradox (5-6), rhetorical question (5), *hendiadys* (6b), *anadiplosis* (8a; 8b), alliteration (2-3; 5-6; 7; 9a; 9b) and antiphrastic dysphemism (Marcus 1979:81).⁹

From the analyses based on syntactic, stylistic and semantic criteria, Psalm 113 can be subdivided into three strophes, namely 1-3, 4-6 and 7-9. Although the majority of exegetes¹⁰ concur with this subdivision, other

7 Despite the repetition of the divine names Yah (1, 9) and Yahweh (1-4), this includes the repetition of words and concepts like *הַלֵּל* (1-3; 9), *שֵׁם* (1-3), *שָׁמַיִם* (4, 6), *רוּם* (4, 7), *נָדִיב* (8) and *יָשָׁב* (5, 8-9).

8 See for example *שָׁמַיִם/שָׁמַיִם/שָׁמַיִם* in verses 3-4 as well as the different forms of *רוּם* (4, 7) and *יָשָׁב* (5, 8-9).

9 Freedman (1980:243-5) and Prinsloo (1996:469-474) present thorough poetic and linguistic analyses of most of these features.

10 These exegetes are Hengstenberg (1851:274); Kirkpatrick (1921:677); Duhm (1922:403); Oesterley (1939:409); Kissane (1954:202); Weiser (1962:705); Lamparter (1965:237); Dahood (1970:130); Loader (1976:65); Perowne

possibilities¹¹ have also been proposed as angle of incidence for the psalm's exposition and understanding. These possibilities underscore the artistic and poetic character of the text. The combination of linguistic and semantic categories allows for an extraordinary fine symmetrical composition into three parts (Loader 1976:64). Therefore the identification of the strophes 1-3, 4-6 and 7-9 seems to be the most appropriate. Thematically, this tripartite division can thus be described as follows:

A call for all-encompassing praise of Yahweh (1-3)

Yahweh, the incomparable God of heaven and earth (4-6)

Yahweh's condescension to the poor and disgraced (7-9)

According to this division the poem displays a tendency towards a stairlike-parallelism, where the last two *stichoi* of each strophe (2-3; 5-6; 8-9) tend to reflect stronger cohesion by means of linguistic and stylistic interwovenness. Also the last two strophes (4-6; 7-9) are form-critically closer bound together, since they provide the reasons for the praise called for in verses 1b-3. This stairlike feature therefore becomes a prominent structural characteristic of the psalm to promote its aesthetic value.

The typical 'hymn' of Gunkel's (1933:33ff.) form-critical genre categories can be identified in the structural pattern of the chosen division.¹² Conspicuous elements of this *Gattung* in the psalm is the *call to praise* by means of imperative, jussive and participle verb forms (1b-3; 9c) as well as the *actual praise* of Yahweh by means of participial and infinitive descriptions (4-9). These descriptions provide the reasons why

(1976:322); Freedman (1980:243); Allen (1984:100); Craigie (1985:70-1); Mays (1994:361); Prinsloo (1996:473); Weber (2003:234-5); Prinsloo (2003:419).

11 Such possibilities include: 1) 1-3, 4-9 (Deissler 1964:449; Anderson 1972:780); 2) 1-4, 5-9 (Gunkel 1926:492; Eaton 1967:265; Van der Ploeg 1974:267; Kidner 1975:401; Kraus 1978:950); 3) 1-5, 6-9 (Terrien 2003:764); 4) 1, 2-4, 5-9 (Schmidt 1934:206); 5) 1, 2-3, 4-9b, 9c (Gerstenberger 2001:278); 6) 1, 2-3, 4-9 (Westermann 1984:146); 7) 1-4, 5-6, 7-9 (Brueggemann 1984:161-2; Burden 1991:146; Zemek 1993:135); 8) 1-3, 4, 5-9 (Graber 1990:341-5).

12 Westermann (1977:88; 1984:144) describes Psalm 113 as an example of the "beschreibende Lobpsalmen". See also Crüsemann (1969:31ff.) and Gerstenberger (1988:17) for descriptions of these elements of the hymn.

Yahweh should be hailed. All this is embedded in a hymnic framework by means of an *inclusio*.¹³

The incomparable majesty of Yahweh as an exalted God should be praised because his magnitude is bestowed on the needy and the despised through his condescension to uplift them and to reverse their fate. Therefore, Psalm 113 sketches the celebration by the subjects of their unique king because he changes their status of humiliation into one of honour and dignity (Waaijman 1986:169). Yahweh is the only one who could accomplish the humanly impossible.

3. *GENRE*

As far as the structure and form-critical elements in the text are concerned, there is general consensus among exegetes that we are dealing here with a collective hymn of praise in the Israelite cult.¹⁴ The hymnic frame (1a; 9c), liturgical summons to praise, which include eulogies (1b-3), hymnic credo (Seybold 1986:446), rhetorical question (5), joined liturgical formulas (Gerstenberger 2001:279) and hymnic participle descriptions (5-7; 9) all contribute to the genre description of Psalm 113 as a hymn.

Westermann (1977:88-9; 1984:144) is convinced that this psalm even serves as a prototype or "Grundmuster" of the Israelite descriptive praise. But Crüsemann (1969:134-5), who demonstrates that Psalm 113 exhibits a mixture of the hymnic participle and the imperatival hymn, has challenged Westermann's viewpoint. The text's "innere Vermischung beider Forme" is the result and end product of a long and complicated *formgeschichtliche* development, where the post-exilic hymnic participle merged with the pre-exilic form of the imperatival hymn. If it is true, then this form-historical argument could serve as an argument for the post-

13 The suggestion by the Septuagint to read the call for praise הַלְלֵי-יְהוָה as a heading of the following psalm cannot be accepted, because all the introductory psalms of *Hallel* collections (see Pss. 113; 135; 146) are characterised by this hymnic *inclusio*.

14 Exponents of this view include, for example, Kittel (1922:361); Gunkel (1926:49); König (1927:197); Schmidt (1934:206); Kissane (1954:202); Lamparter (1965:236); Van der Ploeg (1974:267); Kraus (1978:950); Loretz (1979:175); Allen (1983:99); Terrien (2003:764); Weber (2003:234) and Prinsloo (2003:419). Weiser (1962:705), Prinsloo (1996:467) and Gerstenberger (2001:278-80) illustrate the arguments for the psalm's cultic setting and liturgical use.

exilic dating of the text in its final form, or for its form within the Egyptian *Hallel* collection.

Willis (1973:152-4) made a suggestion that the psalm used to be a victory song. Because of the linguistic similarities between Psalm 113 with the Song of Hannah (especially 1 Sam 2:5-8) or with other songs of victory, he believes this to be quite plausible. Therefore he ascribes both Psalm 113 and the Hannah song (1 Sam 2) to traditions that were connected to the ark and to Shiloh, and in which a strong emphasis on the combat motif was implied. This led him to the conclusion that Psalm 113 may have been of a pre-exilic and Northern Israelite origin. According to Willis, the psalm was later taken over and reapplied in the Jerusalem temple worship celebrations.

However, Psalm 113 reflects a total absence of the combat motif. Although the psalm was read within the context of Psalms 113-118 during festive occasions, when Yahweh's victory over all the life-endangering powers of the pharaoh and the Egyptians (or life-threatening powers in the desert or elsewhere) were celebrated,¹⁵ it is doubtful whether the psalm in its original phases of existence had reflected a combat situation. The deprivation of the poor and the childless woman (7-9) rather displays people's social needs and disgrace. Therefore, the possibility of a victory song seems to be less convincing, although it is not impossible. More convincing arguments thus prevail for classifying the psalm as a typical hymn.

4. LITERARY CONTEXT

As part of the Egyptian *Hallel*, Psalm 113 is embedded into Book V (107-150)¹⁶ of the *Psalter*. An outline of the theological programme of this book reflects a concentric pattern (Zenger 1996:114), which consists of a hymnic framework (107; 145) in which the universal kingship of Yahweh is illuminated by his provision for and deliverance of the whole creation and all his creatures. A Davidic collection (108-110 + 111-112 and 138-144) extends this framework in each instance.

Two liturgical inspired collections, namely, 113-118 (with the emphasis on the 'exodus' theme) and 120-136 (with the emphasis on the Zion theme), constitutes the core of the body part, while Psalm 119 (with

15 Texts like Ex. 15, Dt. 32; 33 and Pss. 18, 29 and 68 figure prominently in the determination of similarities by Willis (1993:153).

16 Weber (2003:236) detects the "stichwortartige Bezüge" of Psalm 113 with other psalms in this corpus.

the emphasis on the Torah) constitutes the center of this concentrically organised corpus of Psalms 107-150. Both these collections reflect universal perspectives and illustrate through whom and from where the universal kingdom of the God of Israel is established and maintained: the delivering God of the Exodus (113-118) and the blessing God at Zion (120-136). Therefore, there is a call on Israel and the nations in both collections to mutual praise of this divine rule of Yahweh.

In the above-mentioned literary context of Book V of the *Psalter*, Psalm 113 will illustrate how Yahweh, the incomparable God who is enthroned on high, bends down to uplift the downtrodden from their need and their situation of disgrace. For that he deserves praise from his servants.

5. PRAISE TO YAHWEH, THE INCOMPARABLE GOD

5.1 A framework of praise (1a; 9c)

Both the prelude (1a) and departure hall (9c) of the psalm are characterised by the liturgical call on the congregation to praise Yahweh. By means of an *inclusio* this typical cultic summons הַלְלוּ יְהוָה ("Praise the LORD") not only serves as framework for the description of Yahweh's nature and deeds in Psalm 113, but in relation with both the Egyptian *Hallel* (113-118)¹⁷ and Book V (107-150),¹⁸ it denotes what the thematic and theological basis of Israel's attitude towards Yahweh should be in both the cult and in their living world, when the Israelites celebrate his active participation in their history and ordinary lives.

5.2 A call for all-encompassing praise of Yahweh (1b-3)

Characterised by the repetition of the verb הַלֵּל 1b; 3) and the heaping up of שֵׁם יְהוָה (1-3), which effects an *inclusio* to delimit 1b-3 as a strophe, the servants of Yahweh are summoned to praise him.

These servants¹⁹ of Yahweh could have been the liturgical officials at some stage in the history of the cult, such as priests and Levites, who rehearsed the text as antiphony between two choirs (Schmidt 1934:206; Sabourin 1969:201), or between priests and the assembly (Eaton

17 See Pss. 115:18; 116:19; 117:1-2 for הַלְלוּ יְהוָה and 118:1, 29 for לְיְהוָה הוֹדוּ.

18 See Pss. 111:1; 112:1; 135:1, 3, 21; 146:1, 10; 147:1, 20; 148:1, 4, 14; 148:1, 9; 150:1, 6 for הַלְלוּ יְהוָה and Pss. 136:1, 2, 3, 26; 148:13 for הוֹדוּ and Yahweh as the object of praise.

19 See Pss. 134:1; 135:1; Is. 54:17; 2 Ki. 9:7; 10:23.

1967:265). The term could even have served as an indication of Israel as worshipping faith community or as the Israelite nation as a whole.²⁰ But, in relation to verse 4, where all the nations and the heavens are portrayed as subordinate to Yahweh, the One enthroned on high, the identification of these servants tends to reflect a universal dimension. Then the heavens and earth as total cosmos are included in the summons to praise Yahweh. The whole world becomes the cultic space.

With *merismi* that include temporal (2b – "from now on and forever more")²¹ and spacial (3a – "from the rising of the sun to its setting")²² indicators, this summons is meant to transcend all-encompassing categories of time and space in this celebration of Yahweh's praise.

The notion of Yahweh's Name as indication of both his presence in the cult and his transcendence in heaven signifies the application of the deuteronomic *Shem*-theology to the psalm (Von Rad 1973:127-8).²³ Yahweh had departed during the Babylonian exile from the Jerusalem temple to reside in heaven, where he is enthroned (1 Ki. 8:30, 39, 43) as a receptive and listening God (1 Ki. 8:32, 34, 36, 45). The Jerusalem cult became in the post-exilic period the abode where Yahweh's Name was present. With his Name "die personale, ohne Einschränkung, aber sehr aufmerksame und innige Präsenz Gottes" is described (Reiterer 1994:161-2). It becomes the representation of the image of God in the sense of the

20 Representative exponents of this possibility are Gunkel (1926:491); Deissler (1964:449); Leupold (1959:790); Perowne (1976:322); Westermann (1984:146).

21 See Pss. 115:18; 121:8; 125:2; 131:3; Is. 9:6; 59:21; Mi. 4:7 as well as Pss. 41:14; 90:2; 103:17; 106:48; Jer. 7:7; 1 Chron. 16:36 and 29:10.

22 See Ps. 50:1; Mal. 1:11 and also Is. 59:19.

23 This theology was meant to be an answer to the crisis of the Babylonian exile (597/587 BCE) when, according to the Zion-Sebaoth theology, the presence of God in the Jerusalem temple was replaced by this "theologisches Korrektiv" (Von Rad 1973:128) in which the Name of Yahweh replaced Yahweh Sebaoth in the temple (Mettinger 1982:78). The understanding of an unbridgeable gap between God and world, as result of the theological crisis of the exile, led to the presentation that "sein Name, sein Anlitz, seine Herrlichkeit oder die Engel" represent Yahweh on earth (Kaiser 1998:129). The Name of Yahweh, therefore became an ambivalent depiction to describe him as a God who is both near and distant. As an apparent dualism (1998:183) the Name presents the radiation of Yahweh's person and the presence of him as the in-heavens-residing-God (1998:201).

"Begreifbaren, Erfahrbaren und Darstellbaren an JHWH" (Seybold 1986:445), and the manifestation of Yahweh himself (Oesterley 1939:469; Deissler 1964:449; Kraus 1978:951). To praise the Name of Yahweh thus means to bring him honour.²⁴

The wordplay between שֶׁשׁ in the expression "from the rising of the sun to its setting" and ׀שׁ as representation of Yahweh or his presence is no coincidence. שֶׁשׁ might be an allusion to the sun-god(s) Re/Shamash in Egypt and Mesopotamia or even to Shemesh in the pre-Davidic Jerusalem of Syria-Palestine.²⁵ Biblical texts indicate that sun worship was familiar to the people of Israel throughout the first millennium BC. It was well known that the sun was associated with the deity, justice, knowledge, royalty, time and life (Gericke 2003:253-4).²⁶

In relation to the rhetorical question of verse 5: Who is like Yahweh? (with the implied answer: 'no-one'), the juxtaposition of Yahweh's Name (׀שׁ) and the sun, the icon of the ancient Near Eastern god Shemesh (שֶׁשׁ) in verse 3, might allude to the presence of polemical tendencies in the psalm's discourse. This allusion functions to emphasise the all-encompassing praise of the Israelite God Yahweh, his nature and deeds, while the god Shemesh lingers elusively in the background.

5.3 *Yahweh, the incomparable God of heaven and earth (4-6)*

After the preceding summons to praise Yahweh, it becomes evident in the following two strophes why he should be praised. In the first instance (4-6) the stooping down action of the highly enthroned Yahweh illuminates

24 Compare Pss. 7:18; 69:31; 72:19; 103:1; 145:21; 148:5, 13.

25 Lipinski (1999:764-768) discusses the possibility and practices of sun worship and its relation to the Yahwistic faith, while Zenger (2003:23) describes the possible role of the sun-god Shemesh in pre-Davidic Jerusalem in the origin of biblical monotheism. Several hymns to Amun-Re and Shamash hail the sun-god as creator and judge of the universe. See 'The great Cairo hymn of praise to Amun-Re' (Ritner 1997:37-40), 'The Shamash hymn' (Gressmann 1926:242-250; Foster 1997:418-419) and 'An Assurbanipal hymn for Shamash' (Livingstone 1997:474).

26 Gericke (2003:251-254) discusses the significance and influence of ancient Near Eastern solar mythology. From the discussion it is evident that people in Israel were familiar with the beliefs of the solar mythology of the surrounding nations.

his incomparable majesty and nature, while his merciful deeds of upliftment and the elevation of the lowly illustrate his eminence (7-9). The condescension of the most high and elevation of the most humiliated characterise the downward and upward movements described in the poem.

By means of an *inclusio* this second strophe is embedded in the description שְׁמַיִם (4; 6) which, in terms of the deuteronomistic *Shem* theology, emphasises the transcendence of Yahweh (Oorschot 1999:317). Transcendence as a mode of presence assumes the position of a very high and far-off God. The statement stresses this distant presence that "Yahweh is exalted above all nations",²⁷ while "his glory is above the heavens."²⁸ In the realm of history and human activity as well as in the realm of creation (Prinsloo 1996:475), Yahweh proves himself to be supreme and sovereign. His absolute superiority in history and nature is – in the light of the rhetorical question (5) – unequaled for the Israelite congregation.

Despite his highness above the heavens, Yahweh's presence is also a reality on earth. This presence is portrayed by the concept of his glory (כְּבוֹדוֹ). His glory is visible and can be experienced both in heaven and on earth (Pss. 19:1; 29:1, 2, 9). Therefore, this ambivalent term expresses the linkage between the contrasting worlds of heaven and earth.

כְּבוֹדוֹ (4) also recalls the image of the sun.²⁹ In relation to the allusion to Shemesh, the sun-god, in verse 3, and in the context of the psalm as a whole, Yahweh seems to counter the appearance of Shemesh – like that of any other god – by the radiance of his own glory. Like the radiance of the sun, Yahweh radiates his exaltedness (רָם) above and below.

With these allusions to ancient Near Eastern sun imagery this transcendent God also conveys hereby his immanent character. In view of the priestly *kabôd*-theology where Yahweh's glory is present among his

27 See Pss. 46:11; 99:2; 138:6; Is. 6:1; 57:15.

28 See Pss. 8:2; 57:6, 12; 108:5-6; 148:13; 1 Ki. 8:27.

29 In biblical times the sun was a vivid symbol to portray God's glory (*kabôd*), see Lipiński (1999:766). His appearance is described as the rising of the sun (Dt. 33:2; Hab. 3:3-4); his glory comes from the east (Is. 59:19; Ezek. 43:2; 44:2); and his glory will replace the sunlight (Is. 60:19). The concrete meaning of Yahweh's *kabôd* is contained in the image of a fire-like phenomenon, from where rays and splendour radiate (see Weinfeld 1982:32-4. Compare e.g. Ex. 16:10; 40:34ff.; Num. 17:7; Ezek. 1:4; 10:4). An abstract meaning of the concept can be translated as "Ehre, Würde und Majestät" (Weinfeld 1982:38).

own people (Von Rad 1973:129; Kaiser 1998:191), and the notion in Psalm 113 that his majesty is above heaven, verse 4 states both the transcendent and immanent character of Yahweh. The polarity in this nature is poetically enhanced by the chiasmic pattern in the verse, the contrast between the realm of heaven and the realm of history (nations), as well as its relation to the *merismus* in verse 6 ("in heaven and on earth").

With a rhetorical question ("Who is like, Yahweh, our God?")³⁰ the incomparability of Yahweh³¹ in the total cosmos is declared. The question not only sets a challenge to any other god or power, but it provokes a negative answer in order to sketch Yahweh as supreme God. The question is polemically inclined towards any other deity or utterance describing the incomparability of other gods.³²

30 As a device of the hymnic style the rhetorical question is employed in a few psalm-like texts to portray the incomparability of Yahweh, see Pss. 35:10; 71:19; 77:14; 89:9; 113:5; Ex. 15:11; Mi. 7:18. Compare also Dt. 3:24; 4:7; Job 36:22 (Labuschagne 1966:22).

31 See Ex. 15:11; Dt. 3:24; 33:26; 1 Sam. 2:2; 2 Sam. 7:22; 22:32; 1 Ki. 8: 23; Is. 40:18, 25; 44:7; Mi. 7:18; Pss. 18:32; 35:10; 71:19; 77:14; 86:8; 89:7-9, on the incomparability of Yahweh.

32 Egyptian, Ugaritic and Mesopotamian texts exhibit similar exclamations on and claims for the incomparability of favorite gods:

In Egypt the sun-god Amun-Re is hailed in the 'Great Cairo Hymn of praise to Amun-Re' (Ritner 1997:37-40) in column I as "Unique one, like whom, among the gods?", "Chief of all the gods", "who made what is below and what is above", "Whose plans are more exalted than any other god", "Who suspended heaven, who laid down the ground"; in column II as "Lord of gods"; in column III as "You are the sole one, who made (all) that exists, One alone, who made that which is", "Hail to you who did this entirely", "Chief of the gods", "Who suspended heaven, who laid down the ground", "Father of the father of all the gods", "Single unique one, without his second"; in column IV as "Unique king, like whom among the gods", "Power of the gods", "Creator and maker of all that exists".

In Mesopotamia (Babylonia) the sun-god Shamash is praised in the 'Shamash Hymn' (Foster 1997:418) in lines 1-2 as "Illuminator of all, the whole of heaven, who makes the light in the d(arkness) above and below" (2x); in line 100, "The careful judge who gives just verdicts"; in line 165 "They revere you, they extol your name. They (?) praise your greatness(?) forever".

With the description of Yahweh as the "One who is enthroned on high, but stoops down to look³³ far below" a royal image of Yahweh is conveyed. He is portrayed as a king.³⁴ This kingship is applied to him as "our God", a term that strengthens the strong covenantal relationship between him and Israel (e.g. Jer. 24:7; 30:22; 31:1).

In relation to the rhetorical question (5) and the broader context of the Egyptian *Hallel* in which Psalm 113 appears, a polemical atmosphere can be sensed with regard to other gods. The kingship of Yahweh appears to be in tension with the kingship of Baal, Marduk and the Egyptian pharaoh or gods, who are also declared as kings (Human 2001:431-2).³⁵ According to the motif of the sitting god in verse 5, even an allusion to the Ugaritic god Ilu (El), chief of the Ugaritic pantheon, might be considered. However, Yahweh's incomparability surpasses the kingship of all these other deities.

Worshippers who celebrated the kingship of Yahweh, because of his deliverance of the Israelite people from Egyptian bondage, would have acknowledged his supremacy above the deities Baal, Marduk, Shamash, Re/Amun-Re or the god, related to the Egyptian pharaoh. The *chiasmus*

In Mesopotamia (Assyria) the sun-god Shamash is praised in 'An Assurbanipal hymn for Shamash' (Livingstone 1997:474) in line 2 as "Lofty judge, shepherd of the celestial and earthly regions"; in line 6 "You alone are supremely brilliant, no one among the gods can rival with you! "; in line 10 "All the gods pay attention at your bright appearance". On the reverse side in line 8 "Whoever learns this text by heart and honours the judge of the gods, Shamash"; ... Shamash, the light of the great gods".

- 33 The verb רָאָה that normally means "to see" also implies that Yahweh cares for his creation, see Gen. 22:8, 14; 29:32; 1 Sam. 1:11; 2 Sam. 16:12; Ps. 106:44 (Zemek 1993:143). The tradition-historical motif of a god, who cares (looks) from above is well-known from Pss. 14:2; 33:13; 138:6; Is. 40:22; 57:15. In extra-biblical literature the motif appears in a hymn to the sun-god, Shamash: "Du siehst ständig einher über den Himmel, über die weite Erde wandelst Du täglich" (Gressmann 1926:245).
- 34 The verb יָשַׁב denotes the reigning action of a king in biblical (Pss. 29:10; 103:19) and extra-biblical literature. In Ugarit literature it alludes to the sitting God, Ilu, chief of the Ugaritic pantheon (see CTA 2 iii, 18; CTA 4, i, 20-44; 4, vi, 22-29; vi, 30-; see Pardee 1997:241-274).
- 35 It was well known among the peoples of the ancient Near East that all these deities, namely, Shamash, Baal Shamaim, Marduk and Re/Amon-Re, were solar deities (Gericke 2003:251-3).

(5-6) poetically visualises the reversal of their fate. In comparison with Yahweh their kingship is nullified. Therefore, he deserves to be praised.

5.4 *Yahweh's condescension to the poor and disgraced (7-9b)*

This final strophe certainly builds to a climax. Characteristically, the tradition-historical connection with 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and the repetition of certain keywords from the previous strophe (רִים in 4 and 7; יֵשֵׁב in 5; 8 and 9) are special features in this unit. As practical expression of Yahweh's mercy and compassion for the poor and the disgraced, this strophe elaborates on the condescension of Yahweh in order to give reasons why he should be praised.

A chiasmic pattern in verse 7 illustrates stylistically Yahweh's transformative and delivering intervention (Brueggemann 1984:162), when he elevates the poor from the dust and exalts the needy from the ash heaps.³⁶ Yahweh, the king, as the Most High, cares for the most humiliated, the social outcasts. The One exalted above nations and above the heavens (7) condescends to exalt the lowly (7-8). When he seats them with the princes of his/their people, they are extolled to the highest rank of nobles,³⁷ with honour and dignity. It means that Yahweh's mercy is superior to the law, because he grants deprived and powerless people of low standing a new social status. He proves himself to be a God of justice.

In a second example of Yahweh's redemptive change of people's fate he intervenes in a smaller unit of the social community, namely the family. He reverses the status of a barren woman into one of honour, protection and happiness,³⁸ when he gives her sons to fill a happy home. The One who sits on a throne on high (5), gives her a seat (9) in a happy

36 The terms עֶפֶר and אֶשְׁפָּת recall the world of the garbage dump or rubbish heap outside a town or village, where the rejected, powerless and helpless, who were either expelled from a community or who were searching and begging for food and shelter, were found. Even those with certain diseases were sometimes there. Ash is a metaphor of degradation and misery, but also of poverty and defeat (1 Ki. 16:2; Job 2:8; Lam. 4:5; Is. 47:1).

37 See for example Num. 21:18; Pss. 47:10; 83:12; 118:9.

38 In the context of the ancient Near East in biblical times barrenness was often regarded as a disgrace and a curse from God (see Gen. 16:4; 20:18; 1 Sam. 1:5; Lk. 1:25). This recalls the histories of Sarah (Gen. 11:30), Rebekkah (Gen. 25:21), Rachel (Gen. 29:31), Hannah (1 Sam. 1-2), and Samson's mother (Jdg. 13:2-3).

household. By making the humanly impossible possible through the birth of children, Yahweh has proven himself to be powerful creator.

Both examples illustrate a paradox in the divine character and deeds of Yahweh. Through his condescension and reversal of fixed extremes in human society and order this exalted king associates himself with the humiliated, after which the humiliated are exalted to the highest position of social equality, honour, dignity and happiness.

If it is true or intended by the poet that these examples of Yahweh's mercy should depict the ill-fated life situations of a man and a woman as representatives before Yahweh (Breukelman 1982:16), then they also serve as an expression for the completeness of God's salvific and transformative work with regard to humans in general and not only to Israel in particular.

In relation to texts like Isaiah 54:1-5, 61:3 and 66:8, verse 9 could also be interpreted as a reflection of the exilic/post exilic Israelite history, where the barren woman represents Zion-Judah who was restored by Yahweh through the return of the Israelites from Babylon. Their humiliation and barrenness were left behind because of the judging and creating powers of Yahweh. If Psalm 113 opens up the possibility of a collective Israelite interpretation within the context of their Egyptian bondage and deliverance by Yahweh (113-118), then this interpretation is also valid for the contexts of Israel's return from the Babylonian exile and the restoration of Zion-Judah. Then Yahweh's transformative and redemptive intervention is certainly a reality on various levels and stages of the lives of the individual and the nation.

In the literary context of Book V (107-150) and the Egyptian *Hallel* (113-118) this psalm confirms the kingship of Yahweh through similar salvific experiences as the exodus. In Psalm 113 he bends down as king to uplift the downtrodden – the needy and the despised. Yahweh proves himself to be a God of justice and powerful creator. If one takes the allusions to mythological powers or gods of the ancient Near East in the psalm into consideration, then it is clear that Yahweh as the incomparable God brought the divine positions of the gods Baal, Shamash, Ilu (El) and Re/Amun-Re into jeopardy.

6. *DATE OR HISTORICAL SETTING*

To determine a historical *Sitz im Leben* of the psalm is indeed a difficult and speculative undertaking (Anderson 1972:781; Kraus 1978:950; Allen 1983:100). However, it is not impossible to suggest a relative dating for the final form of the text. If one assumes the textual development,

transmission and different redactional processes of the psalm, then more than one historical *Sitz im Leben* could be proposed.

For a variety of reasons the majority of scholars have argued for an exilic or post-exilic³⁹ dating of the psalm. This date has also been described as a "comparatively late period" (Oesterley 1939:468). The reasons for this late date include the universal expressions about Yahweh (verse 4) in the exilic/post-exilic period as well as expressions of his incomparability (verse 5), which belong to the same period as the monotheistic utterances of Deutero-Isaiah (Kittel 1922:362; Buttenwieser 1938:348; Weber 2003:236). Even the piety of the poor (verse 7) is indicative of the post-exilic era (Sellin-Fohrer 1965:291).

The identification of the servants⁴⁰ in verse 1b with the Israel of post-exilic times and the psalm's apparent dependence on 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and Isaiah 54:1ff. serve as further motivation for assigning it to a post-exilic epoch (Prinsloo 1996:479). Israel-Zion's transformation or restoration from captivity, according to Isaiah 52:2 and 49:21-22, as a barren, childless woman who went on to bear numerous children (verse 9) might have been the same epochal event described by Psalm 113 and Deutero-Isaiah (Buttenwieser 1938:348).

Linguistic arguments that also support a date after the exile include the relationship of verse 2 ("from now on and for ever more") with Psalms 115:18; 121:8; 125:2 and 131:3, that must probably be late psalms. Also the appearance of the nota-accusativi (verse 1) and the enjambment that characterizes the language of the hymn in verses 2-6 confirm a post-exilic date (Loretz 1979:178).

If Crüsemann (1969:134-5) is correct in stating that the merging of the imperatival hymn and the hymnic participle verb forms have developed into a "untrennbare Einheit" in Psalm 113 as the end product of a long and complex form-historical process during post-exilic times, this is a convincing argument to date the psalm accordingly. Add to this argument the application of the exilic/post-exilic deuteronomistic *Shem*-theology (verses 1-4) and the priestly *kabôd*-theology (verse 4), which has escaped

39 For example, Beathgen (1904:343); Kirkpatrick (1921:677); Gunkel (1926:492); Kissane (1953:202); Deissler (1964:449); Anderson (1972:781); Van der Ploeg (1974:268); Kraus (1978:950).

40 Terrien (2003:764) also identifies the similarity between the formula "servants of Yahweh" with Deuteronomic literature (Dt. 32:36, 43).

the eyes of exegetes⁴¹ thus far, then there is a strong case to be made that Psalm 113 in its final form reflects a post-exilic date. It will strengthen the fact, argued by exegetes,⁴² that the psalm was rather dependent on the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10), and not vice versa.

Nevertheless, the post-exilic period as historical *Sitz* for the psalm has not been accepted uncritically or unilaterally. Both Willis (1973:154) and Terrien (2003:765) have challenged the majority of researchers to provide for a pre-exilic origin of the psalm. In a comparison of the psalm with the Song of Hannah (113:7-9 and 1 Sam 2:5, 8) Willis allows for a Northern Israelite, pre-exilic origin, while Terrien mentions the possibility "close to the dawn of the monarchy", although he is still open to a dating of Psalm 113 as a pilgrim song before or after the exile.

Not even the archaic form of the *hireq compaginis* (verses 5-9) can be used with certainty as an argument for an early dating of the text. Hurvitz (1985:121) has reviewed the early dating of Psalm 113 as an archaic composition because of this feature, with the result that the antiquity of these archaic verb forms is highly questionable. This archaic feature is instead part of a late linguistic phase in the historical development of biblical Hebrew and is therefore applied intentionally as a poetic characteristic (Weber 2003:235).

In view of the abovementioned discussion, a calculated choice for a probable post-exilic dating of the final text of Psalm 113 seems to be the most appropriate.

7. SYNTHESIS - THEOLOGICAL RELEVANCE

Yahweh is portrayed in Psalm 113 as an incomparable God. He is king, creator and God of justice. In this hymn there is a call on his servants to praise him. He deserves praise because he stoops down as enthroned king to uplift the downtrodden. This unexpected and unequalled deed by this exalted divine royalty of elevating the needy and the despised greatly enhances Yahweh's character. His nature is simultaneously transcendent and immanent.

Wordplay, the presence of sun imagery and the function of the rhetorical question in the psalm (5), that depicts Yahweh as an

41 Only Gerstenberger (2001:278) has noted the appearance of the D theology of the Name of Yahweh with regard to this psalm, but he has not mentioned it as an argument for dating the psalm.

42 See for example Buitenwieser (1938:349); Cohen (1945:379); Kidner (1975:402); White (1984:171); Terrien (2003:764) and others.

incomparable God, point all to allusions to polemical attitudes about Yahweh and other ancient Near Eastern deities. Yahweh's kingship surpasses that of Shamash, Baal, Marduk, Re/Amun-Re or Ilu (El). Nothing can be compared to him. He is not only the supreme power, but also creator and God of justice, because he has reversed the social status of the deprived and provided children for the despised and the childless. For this providential intervention he deserves praise.

The psalm does not only promote the celebration of the highly exalted Israelite God, Yahweh, but it poses a challenge to the worshipping community to address circumstances of poverty, need, contempt and unhappiness. Human dignity should be given back to the socially deprived (Quesson 1991:197). The power to uplift the downcast and to extol the humble is certainly situated in the active praise of the worshipping community. This praise does not only include liturgical singing or participation in hymnic cultic activities, but it involves an active endeavour outside the cult to combat inhuman conditions like poor wages, joblessness, malnutrition, illnesses like HIV Aids and tuberculosis, homelessness, lack of water and electricity, bad education, instable political societies and various forms of violence. Through social activities and community involvement the praise of God can also be actualised and celebrated.

In South Africa the Church should therefore sharpen her social conscience and involvement by developing a more strongly critical attitude towards established social and political structures. She should get politically involved without being manipulated or contaminated by political parties or influential social figures. Through this action the praise of God will fill the *Welt-Raum*.

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