Australian Catholic University

ASSIGNMENT TITLE PAGE

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UNIT NAME:	**Biblical Poetry**
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INSTRUCTOR:	Johan Ferreira
STUDENT NUMBER:	S00036140
STUDENT NAME:	**Geoffrey Madden**
TUTORIAL GROUP:	_____
ASSIGNMENT TOPIC:	Discuss the poetic language and structure in Psalm 27.1-6
LENGTH:	1500 words
DUE DATE:	1/9/2006

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

In accordance with Regulation 4.5 I hereby declare that this submission is my own work
and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person or myself, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other unit, degree or diploma of a university or any other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgment is made in the text.

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Signature of student: _____

Date: ____/____/____

The text Psalm 27:1-6 stands as an independent unit comprising a coherent song to Yahweh that through its images and structure portrays both the lament over the weakness of the singer and the dignity found in surrender to Yahweh as the defiant way of life expressed by the poet. This interplay of metaphor and construction made the Psalm a suitable focus for individual cultic use for those feeling forsaken or in peril[1], as a text for recitation as a devotion in rabbinic times where it was recited every day in the month of Elul leading up to Yom Kippur[2] and to this day as a text during Lenten masses.

The imagery used in this Psalm to exemplify God as refuge or fortress is common to many Psalms, signifying a belief in eternal care and protection provided by God.[3] Yahweh is a rock (eg Ps 18 and 28), a shelter (eg Ps 7,11,14,16,31 and 34) and a tent (eg Ps 15 and 19). These are the repeated vehicles of the tenor of assurance in Yahweh in the Psalms yet rather than clichés they become "worn to a lovely smoothness by long usage"[4].

A rock not only signifies permanence, but also was a place of refuge from animals and enemies:[5] to "devour my flesh" equates enemies with animals. Beyond just hiding, in a premodern context, a rock allows a vantage point to see further in a prosaic as well as metaphorical sense. When "he sets me high on a rock," I can see the enemies surrounding me and, even if that sight confirms the hopelessness of my position, still trust. For a Hebrew there is the association of rock with the mountain strongholds that contrast with the perils of their nomadic past. With the

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[1] S. E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 186.
[2] Lawrence Hoffman, "Hallels, Midrash, Canon and Loss," in Harold Attridge and Margot Fassler (eds) *Psalms in Community* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 47.
[3] Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 287.
[4] Robert Alter, "Psalms" in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (eds) *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987) 252.
[5] Paul Achtemeier, *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 874.

Exodus stories they lived in the memory of God punishing enemies in the unstable sea and bringing their people to a "solid mountain sanctuary."[6]

For the Psalmist, tents are more than just shelter from the weather. The tabernacle, in which the Ark of the Covenant travelled, was the site of the presence of God and the focus of sacrificial ritual. To be "deep in his tent" is to be as close to God as is possible and a place to offer "exultant sacrifice".

The sheltering motif of the rock is shared with is shared with the "awning" that shelters "in times of trouble." An awning is a cloth shelter from the sun but has further resonances as the multiple coverings over the tabernacle (Ex 26:1-13)[7] and even as the curtain of the heavens. (Ps 104:2) The thought that God can shelter us under his awning of the cosmos broadens that concept of God's protection to our whole existence.

The initial image of Yahweh as light is another mainstay of the Hebrew imagination. God is seen elsewhere as a lamp (Ps 18:28) and a never setting sun (Isaiah 60:20). Micah 7:8-10 strikes a similar note to this Psalm of defiance in the face of enemies, and light there has the idea bringing you out into the light to reveal the "rightness of his ways."(Micah 7:9) God as light, in the sense of enlightenment, is implicit in the desire to be with Yahweh in his Temple in this Psalm.

Structurally the poem has the form of an opening declaration in a bicolon, two bicolons stating the problem, a tricolon with his solution, two bicolons with the consequences of the resolution and a jubilant monocolon to finish the unit.

The opening bicolon exhibits synonymous parallelism with the parallelism of the "whom should I fear" motif, and giving the expectation of the parallelism of

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[6] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 124.
[7] M.G. Easton, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* np 1897
http://biblestudy.churches.net/CCEL/E/Easton/EBD/EBD/T0000900.htm accessed 13.8.2006

light with fortress. This combines the two images of the psalm, setting the stage for the change in voice in the tricolon.

Before this occurs, however, a pair of bicolons clearly enunciates the desperation felt by the poet. The first is an antithetical parallel where the evil men who advance to devour him are to come to grief and the second a synonymous parallel where those waging war against him will not cause him to lose faith in God. Grammatically the repetition of "evil men", "my opponents" "my enemies" and "army…against us," is used to emphasise the bleakness of the circumstance. The description of the failing opponents is the prayer of the supplicant, not the reality, because the shelter of Yahweh is unnecessary if the enemies were already defeated, and of course the history of the Hebrew people was not one of conquest and victory. At a personal level the threat imagery works as hyperbole for any feeling of defeat and isolation in the singer of the song.

The central tricolon signals a change. The first line has an internal grammatical parallel with the repetition of "one thing" that suggests the link of "Yahweh" with "seek" so as to return the concept of light and enlightenment to the thought. The two remaining lines of the tricolon exhibit a chiastic structure with syntagmatic development of both aspects of the parallel. It is more than living in Yahweh's house, but real communication; more than spending all my days, it is enjoying the sweetness of this relationship.

The last two bicolons develop the two that preceded the tricolon by applying the lesson of the tricolon. These two synthetic bicolons work together, piling up the images of refuge in Yahweh. The four lines have significant repetitions: "head… held high" and "sets me high" go back both to the rock image and to the light/seeing metaphor and the repetition of tent allows "hiding" to develop into

"exultant sacrifice", to emphasise the closeness to God as a refuge beyond mere physical protection.

The joy of the concluding monocolon is final and certainly suggests a separate song as a source of verses 1-6 compared to the tone of the rest of the chapter. While not a repetition of the introductory bicolon, the common declaratory nature of both the introductory and closing statements forms a loose inclusio and defines the sense unit.

The poem therefore works to combine two seemingly opposite ideas, the openness and exposure of light with the safety and refuge of hiding. The structural engine of this paradox is the central tricolon of communion with Yahweh in his Temple.

In purely rational terms the answer to "Whom should I fear?" is those who would, even for all the hyperbole, "devour my flesh". At the level of community, the Hebrews' story of slavery and exile tells them that it is only in their God that they can succeed because they are fated to be relatively powerless and surrounded by mighty empires. At an individual level, too, hopelessness at feeling exposed to the cosmos is a universal temptation in the face of life's troubles and it is this risk that the poet both eschews and resolves here.

In the commitment to Yahweh's steadfastness the poet wrenches himself away from the perils of his life to ask "one thing" of Yahweh. This unit makes perfect sense on its own but when shoehorned in between the two bicolons of threat preceding and shelter following makes the argument for living in the shelter of Yahweh as the way to face perils with a head held high. The idea of the powerless living in the will of God is a Hebrew commonplace; often it must be said as the only alternative to despair. This Anawin tradition flows down through

Jewish thought through to the Lukan Canticles[8], which share the imagery of this Psalmist, with the Benedictus proclaiming deliverance from "the hands of our enemies" (1:74) and the Nunc Dimittis proclaiming enlightenment for all nations. (2:31-2)

For Yahweh to be my light and my fortress is to live a life with God under his awning, the sky, while feeling as safe as if hiding in Yahweh as a rock. This paradox is beyond rational analysis but can live in poetry as artful as this Psalm. As an expression of the response to powerlessness, fear turns to a life of sweetness even though the singer remains surrounded by enemies. Nothing has changed except the attitude of the poet who finds shelter and light, both antidotes to fear, in the house of Yahweh. The structure of the poem melds the paradoxical into the liveable, beatitude no less: happy are those who are sheltered by Yahweh, for their enemies shall see their heads held high.

[8] Geoffrey Madden, "The Lukan Canticles: Luke's Support for the Jews," *Australian E- Journal of Theology* 5(1995), np http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_5/Madden.htm accessed 14.8.2006

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