

PSALMS OF TRUST: A POETIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper explores the genre of Psalms of Trust within the Hebrew Psalter, highlighting their unique characteristics and theological implications. Despite the existence of only six Psalms of Trust compared to fifty-nine Psalms of Lament, these texts, such as Ps 11, Ps 23, and Psalm 91, articulate a profound confidence in God's protective nature. Through poetic analysis, the study examines how Psalms 11 and 23 express the Psalmist's unwavering faith amidst life's adversities, emphasizing that the foundation of this trust lies not in the circumstances but in the character of God. The paper aims to draw practical lessons for contemporary believers, illustrating how the Psalms of Trust can provide comfort and guidance in navigating the complexities of faith in a challenging world.

Keywords: Genre of Psalms; Psalms of Trust; Ps 11; Ps 23; poetic analysis

1. Introduction

The Psalms of Trust, a unique genre within the Hebrew Psalter, offer profound insights into the nature of faith and reliance on God amidst life's challenges. While there are only a handful of these Psalms—six out of the total one hundred fifty—their significance is underscored by their contrasting abundance with the Psalms of Lament, which number fifty-nine. This disparity raises intriguing questions about the human experience of faith, particularly in the face of adversity. Psalms such as Pss 23 and 91 are frequently cited for their comforting assurances of divine protection and peace, yet

they also prompt reflection on the realities of life where lamentation often prevails. The exploration of these Psalms through poetic analysis reveals not only their literary beauty but also the theological implications they hold for contemporary believers navigating their own trials.

2. Genre of Psalms

The Masoretes of the Medieval age regarded Psalms, along with the books of Job and Proverbs, as *'emeth* (truth).¹ Among the Psalms that are classified under the genre of Psalms of Trust, Pss 23 and 91 are perhaps among the most quoted Psalms for consolation during challenging times. Although they offer assurance of protection from evil and promise a peaceful life, such assurances may not always hold true in real-life situations. A misunderstanding of the Psalms of Trust could misled believers to have an unrealistic expectation of protections and blessings from God. This paper attempts to provide a fresh interpretation of the Psalms of Trust using the poetic analysis methodology where the following elements are carefully studied: the basic units of the Psalms, the parallelism within the poetic lines, the structure, the keywords and figurative language found in the Psalms.² The findings are then presented with an awareness of the nature and characteristics of the genre of the Psalms of Trust to draw theological implications for believers.

Tremper Longman III defines a literary genre as “a group of texts that bear one or more traits in common. These texts may be similar in content, structure, phraseology, function, style, and mood.”³ Traditionally, Psalms

¹ C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 20.

² See Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 87–122; and C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018); *Encountering Biblical Studies*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 67–78; Ernest C. Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament: The Psalms and Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 67–78; William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 575–655.

³ Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 31. John H. Walton also defines Genre as a “classification identifying what type of literature a work is.” also John H. Walton and Andrew E. Hill, *Old Testament Today: A Journey from Ancient Context to Contemporary Relevance*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 335–39.

were categorized into wisdom, instruction, trust, praise, distress and sorrow, thanksgiving, aspiration, penitence, history, imprecation, meditation, intercession, prophecy, etc.⁴ As the criteria for classifying the genre may vary, scholars don't always agree on the same list of genres for the Psalter.⁵ Different Scholars may provide different list of the Psalms of Trust. Tremper Longman includes Pss 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 91, 121, 125, and 131,⁶ C. Hassell Bullock lists Pss 4, 16, 23, 27, 62, 73, 90, 115, 123, 124, 125, and 126,⁷ and Mark D. Futato have Pss 16, 23, 27, 62, 73, 91, 115, 121, 125, and 131.⁸

While scholars may not agree on which Psalms to be included in the genre of the Psalms of Trust, an understanding of its nature is still valuable for the interpretation and application of the Psalms. According to Mark D. Futato, the categories of the genre guide our expectations of the Psalms as a reader.⁹ The reader's awareness of the genre of the Psalm could thus "provide an additional level of context ... [which] is essential for interpretation."¹⁰ Bruce K. Waltke also emphasizes that identifying the genre of a passage or Psalm may sometimes reveal something significant about the content.¹¹ On the other hand, ignorance or unawareness of the genre could give wrong expectations, potentially resulting in a misguided interpretation of the text.

The Psalm Explorer feature in the Logos 9 Bible Software classifies the book of Psalms into seven genres, broadly following "Hermann Gunkel's form-critical analysis, with supplementation and modification from other sources, including the Anchor Yale Bible and other commentaries."¹² Among the Psalms of Trust are Pss 11, 16, 23, 62, 63, and 91.

⁴ D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 217. Bullock noted that several of the Psalms are classified as wisdom psalms (Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 21).

⁵ Sandy and Giese, *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, 35.

⁶ Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, 31.

⁷ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 168.

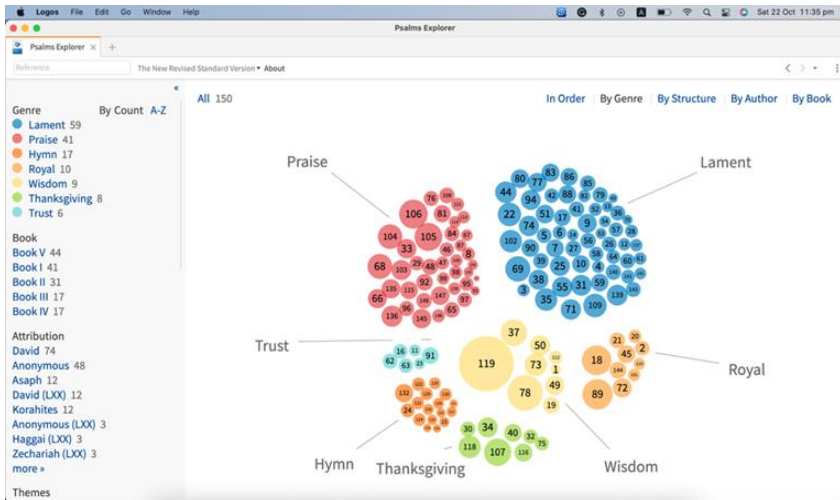
⁸ Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*, ed. David M. Howard Jr. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 161.

⁹ Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 142. See also Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, 21–23.

¹⁰ Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 144.

¹¹ Sandy and Giese, *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, 20.

¹² Faithlife (2000–2022). *Logos Bible Software* 9.17. In Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) changed the system of categorizing by "focusing on the types of psalms (Gattungen), grouped according to their function, form (or structure), and life-setting (Sitz im Leben), which refers to the situation that produced each psalm or for which each was composed" (Sandy and Giese, *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, 217–18).

Figure 1 – Overview of Psalms by Genre.¹³

3. Psalms of Trust

Psalm of Trust is also called Psalms of Confidence¹⁴ or a song of trust.¹⁵ In his explanation of the nature of the Psalms of Trust, Futato explains,

While bringing great comfort, the songs of confidence also bring a great challenge. It is one thing to sing a hymn when all is well, lament when trouble is on all sides or a song of thanksgiving when God has delivered us from distress. In each of these cases, our song and our circumstances match. To express profound confidence in God when help has not yet come is quite another matter. In this case, we experience a disconnect between our song and our situation.¹⁶

Psalms of Trust could be mistaken to be promises of God for protection

¹³ Screenshot from Logos Software, "Psalms Explorer" which is an interactive Media. Faithlife (2000–22). *Logos Bible Software 9.17*. In Witthoff, David, Kristopher A. Lyle, and Matt Nerdahl, *Psalms Form and Structure*, ed. Eli Evans (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2014).

¹⁴ Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 250. See Lucas, *Exploring the Old Testament*, 39.

¹⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 438. See also Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

¹⁶ Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 165.

in the face of challenges, but it is rather the Psalmist who verbalizes his confidence in God in a very difficult situation even when help is not immediately in sight. It is the Psalmist's "expressions of faith"¹⁷ in God's ability and willingness to intervene in his difficult moments in life.

In terms of its relationship with other genres of Psalms, Psalms of Trust can be located somewhere between Thanksgiving Psalms and Lament Psalms. According to Futato, Psalms of Trust "articulate a confidence that has moved the psalmist away from the deep anguish of the lament and toward the joy of the song of thanksgiving. While the psalmist is confident that help is on the way, that help has not yet arrived."¹⁸ In Thanksgiving Psalms, the Psalmist received salvation and sang the song of praise because of the salvation received; and in Lament Psalms, the Psalmist complains about his challenges because God has not yet delivered the Psalmist from his struggles.¹⁹ In their book, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary*, Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore point out that by faith, the Psalmist sees and enjoys the present difficult situation in light of God's promised blessed end, beyond the time when the wicked prosper, and the righteous suffer (see also 1 Sam 2:5; Pss 107:5, 9, 36; 146:7; Luke 6:25; 1 Cor 4:11; Phil 4:12).²⁰

The root of the Psalmist's confidence is not the Psalmist's favorable situation but in the character of God.²¹ Unlike praise, for God's favourable intervention in the Psalmist's dire situation, or lament, for lack of God's intervention, Psalms of Trust is an expression of hope and faith in God. As a result, the Psalmists use striking metaphors to visualize God as a protector because He is the root of the trust.²² God was addressed as "our refuge, our

¹⁷ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 168.

¹⁸ Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 165.

¹⁹ Psalms of Trust "lack the anguish and the structural elements that characterize the laments. And although confident in God's power to save, the poets who wrote the songs of confidence had not yet experienced that salvation at the time of composition. While these poets seemingly have moved beyond the deep agony of the lament, they are still waiting for the day when a song of thanksgiving for salvation gained can be sung." See also Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 166.

²⁰ Waltke, Houston, & Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 438. See also Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*.

²¹ Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 164.

²² According to Futato, "The basis for this confidence is rooted in the character of God and often comes to expression through the images that are used for God in these psalms. The most frequent image is God as refuge." In some of the metaphors, "God is a shepherd (Ps 23), a mother bird who covers her children with her wings (Ps 91), and a stronghold and a light (Ps 27)" (Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old*

shepherd, our ‘mother,’ our guardian, and our surrounding mountain.”²³ See also Pss 16:1; 27:1; 62:1–2; and 91:2. So, to understand the rationale and the message of the Psalms of Trust, it is crucial to have the awareness that the Psalmist expresses hope and faith in the power and Goodness of God.

4. Contrasting Psalms of Trust and Psalms of Lament

Complaints, questions, and petitions characterize Psalms of Lament, sometimes incorporating imprecations (curses) on the enemy within this genre.²⁴ According to Sandy and Giese, “Laments include as part of their form an invocation and plea to God, a complaint, a request or petition, and a statement of confidence in God’s response. Lament refers to sorrow or grief, hence telling us something about the content of this genre. A lament psalm seeks to convey a response to a crisis.”²⁵ Psalms of Trust, on the other hand, expresses the worshipper’s complete and unwavering trust in God as a protector. Futato noted, “The distinguishing characteristic of this category is their unwavering confidence or trust in God’s ability and willingness to deliver from adverse circumstances.”²⁶

Out of the one hundred and fifty Psalms in the Psalter, there are about six Psalms of Trust according to Psalm Explorer in Logos 9, comprising of the least number of Psalms in comparison to other genres. Psalms of Lament has the most significant number, with Fifty-Nine Psalms.²⁷ The ratio between Psalm of Trust and Psalms of Lament is approximately 1:10. Considering the nature of these two genres, the difference in the number of Psalms they contain reflects the reality of the challenges believers face in their lives. Life is not always easy and pleasant even for those who put their complete trust in God.

5. Poetic Analysis of the Psalms 11 and 23

Among the Psalms included in the Psalms of Trust genre, Pss 23 and 91 are popular among believers, while Pss 11, 16, 62, and 63 are not as popular.

Testament, 250).

²³ Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 165.

²⁴ Sandy and Giese, *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, 580.

²⁵ Sandy and Giese, *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, 30.

²⁶ Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 161.

²⁷ In between these two genres, there are Psalms of Praise with forty-one Psalms, seventeen Hymns, ten Royal Psalms, nine Wisdom Psalms, and eight Thanksgiving Psalms.

This paper focuses on two Psalms from this genre: Ps 23, which is well-known, and Ps 11, which is less popular. Using poetic analysis method, the following sections will discuss Pss 11 and 23, drawing from the analysis of the basic units as Hebrew poetry, the parallelism within the poetic lines, the structure, the keywords and figurative languages. The findings are then presented with an awareness of the nature and characteristics of the genre of the Psalms of Trust to draw theological implications for believers.

5.1 Psalm 11

Psalm 11 can be broadly divided into two strophes.²⁸ Verses 1–3 consist of an embedded speech of the Psalmist, and that forms the first strophe. In this strophe, the Psalmist expresses his frustration on the counsel he received to find refuge elsewhere, away from the LORD. He was appalled at the thought of turning away from God for seeking protection because to the Psalmist, the LORD is his sole refuge. Verses 4–7 constitutes the second strophe to elaborate why the Psalmist firmly trusted the LORD for protection.

There could be more than one way of arranging the structure of Psalms 11. For example, Willem S. Prinsloo sees verses 1 and 7 which contain the utterances about the Lord as the frame of an *inclusio* that encapsulates the contrast between the action of the wicked and the Lord.²⁹ Using the *inclusio* as a structural frame, he arranged Pss 11 in a chiastic form as follows:

“A: The Lord is a refuge (v. 1)
 B: The actions of the wicked (vv. 2–3).
 B': The actions of the Lord (vv. 4–6).
 A': The Lord is righteous (v. 7).”³⁰

The arrangement of the structure into ABB'A' pattern lacks the parallel pair for line B. One may also notice that B and B' do not form true parallelism due to the unparallel nature of the subject: between a mere mortal (B) and a divine being (B'). It will be more natural to have the wicked juxtaposed to the righteous, not the LORD.

Moving beyond the broad division of Pss 11 into two strophes, for a better analyses of the poetic features, it can be divided into five strophes, with

²⁸ For example, see D. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 89.

²⁹ Willem S. Prinsloo, “The Psalms,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 364–436.

³⁰ Prinsloo, “The Psalms,” 375.

a superscript preceding them. The strophes could then be arranged into a meaningful concentric structure³¹ with a pattern ABCB`A` as follows:

Superscript (v. 1a)

A Strophe 1: The LORD is a refuge (v. 1b)

B Strophe 2: The intention of the wicked to harm the righteous (vv. 1c–3)

C Strophe 3: The LORD rules and watches over humanity (v. 4)

B` Strophe 4: The intention of the LORD to punish the Wicked (vv. 5–6)

A` Strophe 5: The LORD is righteous (v. 7)³²

In a chiasmic structure, especially in concentric symmetry, Jerome T. Walsh said that “the central subunit is the most important part of the whole structure.”³³ Based on the structural arrangement and observations above, the third strophe (C) occupies the center of the concentric symmetry. The structure then suggests that v. 4 contains the foundational reason the Psalmist trusts that he can rely on the Lord for protection.

Hassel Bullock also said that the function of the chiasm is to have a more significant impact.³⁴ The concentric arrangement of Ps 11 could then portray the worldview of the Psalmist, where he sees The LORD in the centre of human existence, actively ruling over the lives of humankind. This worldview occupies the central subunit of Ps 11, which becomes the reason for his confidence in the LORD for his protection. Except for strophe 2 which questions the counsel to turn against the LORD, the rest of the strophes in Ps 11 interestingly talk about the character and nature of the LORD. The

³¹ According to Jerome T. Walsh, a reverse symmetry which have “a single-centered structure, e.g., ABCB`A`, is called “concentric”; a double-centered structure, e.g., ABCC`B`A`, is called “chiasmic.” See Jerome T. Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001), 13. See also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books) 68; Mary H. Schertz and Perry B. Yoder, *Seeing the Text: Exegesis for Students of Greek and Hebrew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 53.

³² The Psalms Explorer in Logos 9 also arranged Ps 11 into a concentric chiasmic structure, albeit with slightly different headings. See Faithlife. (2000–2022). *Logos Bible Software* 9.17. In David Witthoff, Kristopher A. Lyle, and Matt Nerdahl, *Psalms Form and Structure* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2014).

³³ Walsh, *Style and Structure*, 14.

³⁴ Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 36.

Psalmist's thought can then be seen as being directed by the worldview that God reigns over humanity.

Taking a closer look at Ps 11, it begins with a thesis-like-statement of resolute affirmation of trust in the LORD (v. 1b) in strophe 1. The Psalmist intentionally emphasizes the object of his trust by bringing the prepositional phrase, "in the LORD," at the beginning of the verse (v. 1b) immediately after the superscription. Strophe 2 presents the context of his unwavering trust in the LORD. The Psalmist then explains in strophes 3, 4, and 5 the rationale for taking refuge in the Lord despite imminent danger looming about him.

Strophe 2 (vv. 1c–3) is a quoted speech of possibly a well-meaning person trying to convince the Psalmist, who could perhaps be in a despair situation, to find refuge in the "mountains," elsewhere from the LORD. Mountains are literally an earthly geographical contour, a place to live for wild animals and birds, a possible place for the Psalmist to hide. While it may seem natural to interpret the word mountain here literally as one of the mountains in Israel, considering the use of other figurative or symbolic languages in strophe 2 and the rest, it may be regarded as a metaphoric use.³⁵

For instance, the Psalmist is likened to a feeble "bird" that should seek safety from danger in the mountain.³⁶ "Bow" and "arrow" in v. 2 are lethal weapons to hurt or kill. It is a dangerous long-range weapon that has the potential to hit the target off-guard with fatal consequences. This figure of speech could represent an ill intentional person devising a scheme to hurt the righteous, for instance the Psalmist. This is alluded to in the Psalm. The term foundation in v. 3 is used as a figurative word for established *usages*, *laws*, etc.³⁷ It could perhaps refer to a situation when faith seems unreasonable, or the word of God seems doubtful. Considering the frequent use of figurative language, the term "mountain" may be regarded as a metaphor representing worldly protection that deviates from the statutes of the

³⁵ Metaphor is a representation, an implicit comparison between two things of unlike nature that yet have something in common; a declaration that one thing is or represents another. See E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Pennsylvania: Delmarva, 1898) 735–43.

³⁶ While some English translations choose to insert a comparative word "like" before the word bird, transforming the phrase into a simile, the Hebrew text constructed it as a metaphor. When treated it as a metaphor, the Psalmist is not likening to a bird, but treated as "a bird."

³⁷ F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (BDB) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 1011.

LORD. But to the Psalmist, even when faith seems unreasonable and following the ways of the Lord becomes dangerous for his own life, just the thought of fleeing from the presence of the LORD is unimaginable!

The literary construction of how the Psalmist introduces the quoted speech that tries to persuade him to abandon the ways of the LORD is significant. The Psalmist used the word *'yk* to express his disbelief that one could even think of such thoughts quoted in strophe two. The term *'yk* conveys a sense of an emphatic negative question, "how," which practically expresses the notion that such a question should not even cross one's mind! The construction of the question here can be seen as totally unexpected and even shocking to encounter such a question. The Psalmist then replies with a rhetorical question: "How could you even ask such an impossible question?"

Strophe 2 consists of two significant considerations: the evil human intent and the established principles upon which the Psalmist built his faith. The Psalmist here seems to deal with enemies who scheme and try to hunt him down with weapons that are difficult to evade. His value system, beliefs, and faith are challenged. Despite being in such a critical situation, the Psalmist expressed his unwavering faith in the established principles of God. He hopes and believes that God is able and will protect him. Therefore, he is resolute in keeping his heart upright and maintaining his righteousness for what God is.

The rationale for the Psalmist's unshakable trust in the LORD is further expounded through Strophes 3 to 5. Strophe 3 (v. 4) expresses the cause for the Psalmist's unwavering faith and dependence on God. Despite the LORD being silent when the believers face many difficult situations, such as in the conditions described in Strophe 2, the Psalmist saw the LORD as actively ruling over humankind. The particular purpose of the LORD's reign is elaborated in Strophes 4 and 5, where He is characterized as the ruler and the one who holds all the actions of the sons of Adam into account.

Looking at the pattern of the concentric structure of Ps 11, Strophe four is parallel to Strophe 2. While Strophe 2 describes *the evil intention of the wicked* towards the righteous who trust and seek refuge in the LORD, Strophe 4 describes *the intention of the LORD* towards the righteous and the wicked. The LORD has a good intention for the righteous, seeking them out (v. 5) and plans to let them behold his face (v. 7). However, the case with the wicked is the opposite, He will loathe and punish the wicked because the wicked try to harm the righteous (v. 2) and they are lovers of violence (v. 5). Since the characters of the wicked people are opposed to God's character,

His established principles, and have an intention to harm the righteous people, the LORD will destroy them. In Strophe 4, the Psalmist reveals the rationale for taking refuge in the LORD. He firmly believes that the Lord constantly examines humanity. Strophe 5 (v. 7) further characterized the LORD as having favourable inclination to the righteous people and loves righteous deeds, and as a reward, the LORD will let them behold His face.

The study shows that Pss 11 reflected well the nature of the Psalms of Trust where the Psalmist disregards his present situation as the basis of seeking refuge in the LORD. The Psalmist instead trusts and seeks refuge in the LORD for who He is: His nature towards the righteous and the wicked, and his ultimate power and purpose. It is indicative that the Psalmist sees himself among the righteous. The terms “upright” and “righteous” are synonymously used in vv. 2–3, 5, and 7. The upright established themselves upon the “foundation” (v. 3).³⁸ Since the LORD favored and loved the upright and the righteous, the Psalmist considers himself righteous and plainly expects protection from the LORD.

5.2 Psalm 11 as a Psalm of Trust

When things go wrong, and faith seems unreasonable, the Psalmist encourages us to trust in God for protection unwaveringly. The reason for holding on to such trust is based on the Psalmist’s understanding of the character and power of God. From the worldview of the Psalmist, since the Lord is righteous and hates evil, He will protect the believers who are upright at heart and live according to His will. The most dangerous thing, according to the Psalmist, is not bad people or things that could harm us but deviating from the counsel of the LORD because, as a consequence, the wrath of God will be upon such people. The Psalmist sees the world from a religious perspective where God is at the centre of human existence. Psalm 11 encourages us to align our thoughts and motives with that of God’s character in whatever situation we are. Psalm 11 ends with the declaration:

“For the LORD is righteous;
He loves righteous deeds;
the upright shall behold his face.” (v. 7)

³⁸ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *BDB*, 1011.

5.3 Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is a very well known Psalm. In the corpus of Pss 15–24, Pss 23 and 16 belong to the genre of the Psalms of trust and have a few resemblances in terms of structure (see Ps 15: “Literary Context”).³⁹ The confidence in Ps 23 is built upon trusting in the God “I AM.” While it is beautiful and comforting, a careful reading of Ps 23 poses a few challenges for believers in real life situations. For example, the Psalmist talks of lacking nothing (v. 1), of having no fear in the face of danger (v. 4), and of enjoying abundance (vv. 2, 5), but not many believing Christians will have such a similar experience. They may only be craving what the Psalmist claims to have in Ps 23 without actually finding the fulfilment in their life.

Approaching Ps 23 as a genre of the Psalms of trust could help the reader to understand that the Psalmist here expresses his faith in the LORD. Psalm 23 is not a promise that God made to Christians for a life filled with abundance and peace. As a psalm of trust, Ps 23 reveals the deeper reality of the Psalmist’s understanding of God amidst the uncertainties and challenges of life. The analysis of the poetic structure and the devices in the following discussion below will demonstrate the Psalmist’s reasoning behind his expression of trust amidst life’s difficulties.

5.4 Poetic analysis of Psalm 23

Three strophes in Ps 23 can be arranged in a chiasmic structure:

Strophe 1: The Lord Provides (vv. 1–3)

Strophe 2: The Reason for Confidence (v. 4)

Strophe 3: The Lord will Provide (vv. 5–6)

The first strophe consists of a summary statement and the positive result of the statement. The statement, “**The Lord is my shepherd**; I shall not want,” in the first verse of the Psalms, is the basis for the favorable condition that the Psalmist elaborates on in the lines that follow. As the Lord is the shepherd for the Psalmist, verses 2 and 3 elaborate on what the Shepherd did to the Psalmist, resulting in the lack-of-want life for the Psalmist. The situation of the lack-of-want was not the result of possessing material things that the Shepherd supplied to the Psalmist, but rather a consequence of the Shepherd’s leading and guiding the Psalmist to conducive places or paths of life. This scenario envisioned obedience on the part of the Psalmist.

³⁹ Waltke, Houston, and Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 435.

Verse 2 is arranged in a synonymous parallelism where the Psalmist describes the experiences of being with the Lord as his shepherd. The imagery of the Lord as the Shepherd helps the readers to infer that the Psalmist as the sheep although the Psalmist never actually stated that the Psalmist was likened to a sheep. Using the picture of a shepherd and sheep relationship, the sheep lying down in a pasture green depicts a state of comfort, abundance, and not wanting or lacking nourishment.

The Shepherd seems to tenderly lead the sheep to the water in the second line of the synonymous parallelism. He does not force the sheep to drink the water but instead brings them to a place where fresh water is accessible even if they are not thirsty. The water is said to be a still water, which is not threatening for the sheep. Given the scarcity of Water in the time of the Psalmist, this is a situation of abundance, a lack of want life. But again, this situation is reached because of who the LORD is and the Psalmist being an obedient sheep.

In v. 3, the Psalmist continues to elaborate on the situation of the Psalmist's lack-of-want life with the Lord as his shepherd. He said that the LORD restores his soul and guides him to righteousness. It is interesting to note that righteousness is not the means to access God's blessings but the result or reward of accepting the LORD as his Shepherd, his guide. The LORD did all these things "For His name's sake!" So, the Psalmist here describes the LORD as the God who transforms you and makes you righteous because that is His nature, who he is, and the very things that define Him. It is also important to note that "righteousness" is values that the Psalmist considered highly and positively in Ps 23. It is one of the aspects of the lack of want. God is portrayed as a God whose business is to care for those who depend on Him.

Up to verse 3, everything that happens in the life of the Psalmist with the Lord as his Shepherd seems blissful and he seems to be thoroughly contented. However, the analysis of Strophe 1 makes it clear that the Psalmist's version of the lack-of-want life consists of obedience on the part of the Psalmist, and righteousness is valued highly. The Psalmist does not mention the presence of evil, fear, insecurity, and enemies. The primary function of strophe 1 is to build the theological foundation of trusting the LORD by recalling a few specific positive experiences the Psalmist had in his life.

Strophe two (v. 4) introduced another element of a practical situation of the believer's life where all things are not necessarily blissful and calm. The Psalmist now talks about his dark moments in life where he faces uncertainties and dangers. The life of the lack-of-want described in Strophe one does not necessarily remove uncertainties and danger in the Psalmist's life. They

serve another purpose in the life of the Psalmist. The good experiences of the Psalmist with the Shepherd in strophe 1 become the source of comfort in the face of grievous and fearful situations. It does not envision the absence of bad things in life but describes how the presence of the LORD brings calmness to the soul of the Psalmist even in terrifying moments and situations. Note that the Psalmist does not say that the rod and staff of the LORD protected him in a desperate, terrifying situation; they instead comforted him. The Presence of the LORD with the Psalmist in all situations is the foundation of the confidence and trust in Ps 23.

Strophe two (v. 4) is structurally and strategically located at the centre of Ps 23. The lines of v. 4 are arranged in a concentric structure, where the phrase “for you are with me” (*kî-’atta’immaḏi*) sits at the center of the chiasmic. There are 24 words before the clause “for you are with me” (*kî-’atta’immaḏi*), and followed by 24 words, situating the phrase structurally and theologically at the heart of the Psalm. The number of words before and after the clause “for you are with me” seems intentional because *maqṣef* is used purposefully to join words or particles that could have otherwise stood separately.⁴⁰ In addition, it is nested at the center of a chiastic structure in v. 4. Structurally, the concept of the presence of God with the Psalmist is foundational in Ps 23.

In Strophe three, the Psalmist envisioned life in the presence of evil and enemies (v. 5). Building on his conducive experiences with the Lord as his Shepherd in Strophes one and two, the Psalmist continues to express his unwavering trust that he will do well even under a very challenging situation. However, unlike in the first Strophe, the Psalmist here moves further to express his hope and belief in the future, not his past experienced.

Considering the cultural context of Ps 23, the Shepherd spreading a table for the Psalmist and the overflowing cup is an imagery of the abundance and divine favour. Similar to how v. 2 demonstrates the lack of wanting life (v. 1b) for the sheep, v. 5 demonstrates a lack of wanting life for a person. Øystein S. LaBianca noted, “Food served in Bible times, as today, as a powerful instrument for communicating social meaning—for expressing hospitality (Abraham and his angelic visitors); commemorating evidences of Divine intervention in human affairs (the annual festivals), and sealing compacts between peoples and individuals.”⁴¹ Anointing of oil on the head echoes divine favour.

⁴⁰ Jacob Bazak, “Numerical Devices in Biblical Poetry,” *VT* 38 (1988): 333–37.

⁴¹ Øystein S. LaBianca, “Food,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 466–67.

Verse 6 expresses the ultimate reward the Psalmist hopes to attain with the LORD as his shepherd. The use of the particle *'ak* (surely) to begin v. 6 demonstrates the assertiveness of the Psalmist in his belief that all will end well with the LORD as his shepherd. According to BDB, the particle emphasizes the “assertive, often introducing with emphasis the expression of a truth (or supposed truth) newly perceived.”⁴² This particle is sometimes used to emphasize affirmation in combination with an infinitive absolute. In his elaboration of the use of the infinitive absolute, Waltke and O'Connor state, “*Affirmation* is the most straightforward role for an infinitive absolute (## 1–5); sometimes the particle אִם is added for emphasis (# 6).”⁴³ The hope that the Psalmist describes is based on his knowledge of the nature and ability of the Shepherd.

5.5 Psalm 23 as a Psalms of Trust

There is a clear progression of thought through the different Strophes in Pss 23. Building upon his positive experience of enjoying being in the presence of God in Strophe One, the Psalmist emphatically expresses his trust in the ability of God to protect and provide all his needs even in difficult situation as seen in Strophes two and three. The Psalmist focuses solely on what God can do, regarding his current situation, but drawing his confidence from the previous experiences. Pss 23 presents a perspective of God and his power from a believer's point of view.

6. Summary of the Study

Psalms of Trust are the Psalmist's expression of faith and trust in God. It expresses the Psalmist's confidence and trust that God is able and willing to protect him even in an immensely challenging situation. The Psalmist is confident that help from God is always available, even in a difficult situation where such help may not necessarily be in sight. The root of the confidence is not in the promising situation of the Psalmist but in the character of God.

In the Psalms of Trust, God is often portrayed with different protective figures. Psalms of Trust are not promises of God for protection of the believers, but it is rather the Psalmist's poetic utterance of his understanding of God's nature and character. The Psalmist has a profound trust in God's

⁴² Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *BDB*, s.v. “ אִם .”

⁴³ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 585.

ability and willingness to protect those who are righteous. The presence of God is then considered as an assurance of protection.

Based on the analysis of the Psalms of Trust, God's protection is accessible only by the righteous person. While the Psalms of Trust did not intentionally define the characters of the "righteous," it assumes a life inclined to obeying the commandments of God and keeping the laws of God. The Psalmist based his hope on the final blessing from God though the righteous may not enjoy complete tranquillity and prosperity here on this earth immediately. The Psalmist firmly placed his trust in the will of God.

7. Theological Implications

A few observations from the analysis may be worth considering as one reads the Psalms of Trust. This section will include intertextual study in the discussion.

7.1 Focus on Righteousness

Psalm 11 focuses on "righteousness" as a character of God and in his dealing with man. The Psalmist sees himself among the righteous and trusts that no man with evil intention will be able to harm the upright and the righteous. Since God hates evil and punishes the wicked, He will favor the upright and righteous man.

Psalm 23 also values righteousness (v. 3). The Psalmist believes that the LORD is a sovereign God while he considers himself upright and the righteous by way of always inclining in the ways of God.

7.2 The Psalmist Sees Himself as a Righteous Person

Psalm 11:2 mentions that the upright in heart are vulnerable, and the voice suggests they should hide. Verse 3 asked, "what can the righteous do?" to protect themselves. In this psalm, the Psalmist sees himself as "upright in heart" and as "the righteous." In Ps 23, the Psalmist said that the LORD leads him to the path of righteousness due to his obedience to the Shepherd (v. 3). So, in the Psalms of trust, the Psalmist often sees himself as righteous. However, righteousness is not used synonymously with perfection or sinlessness but rather the result of the work of the LORD. On the part of the Psalmist, obedience is all that matters.

In many other psalms, the Psalmist claims to be righteous and blameless. Since they live according to the instructions of the Lord, they feel they are

in the right relationship with the Lord. Therefore, they are worthy of making their request to God. For example, Ps 26 reads:

¹ Vindicate me, LORD,
for I have led a blameless life;
I have trusted in the LORD
and have not faltered.

² Test me, LORD, and try me,
examine my heart and my mind;

³ for I have always been mindful of your unfailing love
and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness (NIV).

This is one aspect of the Psalms of trust that is often overlooked.

7.3 Finding Peace amidst Uncertainties and Challenges of Life

In the Psalms of Trust, the Psalmist focuses solely on the mighty power of the LORD to protect and provide the Psalmist who is upright at heart. The Psalms of Trust does not envision a life where evil and challenges do not exist but instead finding peace amid those challenges in life and full belief from some of the past experiences that God will protect and care for him. Pss 11 is situated in the setting of evil people whose purpose is to hurt the upright. Even in those situations, God can be trusted. The use of synecdoches such as soul and heart to refer to the whole being of man emphasized the significance our one's inclination and attitude towards God.

7.4 God's Presence as the Basis for Comfort

The Psalms of Trust focus solely on the mighty power of the LORD to protect and provide the Psalmist who are upright at heart. Psalms of Trust may not be read in the same way as Deut 28, where God pronounces the covenant blessings and the covenant curses, or when he gave the Ten Commandments in Exod 20. Psalms of Trust are the Psalmist's expression of his dependence and trust on the mighty power of God in his present difficult situation or for his difficult future situations, perhaps based on the national history or his personal experiences.

7.5 Understanding of Psalms of Trust

My study of the Psalms of Trust in the poetic literature parallels the narrative of Dan 3:16–18.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image you have set up.

The narrative of the three friends of Daniel in the fiery furnace always fascinates me. At times I find it hard to understand their positive understanding of God. While they never seem to doubt God’s power and ability to rescue them from their intense situation, they also consider the possibility of God not acting in their favor, but without any complaints whatsoever! They placed their Trust in God no matter the outcome.

Approaching the Psalms of Trust from the above cognitive framework, it can be assumed that the Psalmist here contemplates solely on the power and the mighty hands of God that the Israelites experienced in history. They fully trust that God can protect and provide their needs, but they have no full knowledge of whether God will do that! And if he does not, their perception of God is not affected. The ultimate goal of their relationship with God is to behold his face and to be with him.

8. Conclusions of the Study

In examining the characteristics of the Psalms of Trust, it becomes evident that they serve as expressions of unwavering confidence in God’s ability to deliver and protect. Psalms of Trust provide a unique perspective on finding peace amid life’s uncertainties and challenges. The Psalmist does not envision a life devoid of difficulties but centers the trust in God’s power to protect and provide, even in the midst of adversity. It underscores the belief that God’s protection is rooted in the character of God.

It also emphasizes the understanding that God’s protection is accessible to the righteous, those who obediently follow His commandments and laws. The use of synecdoches, such as soul and heart, emphasizes the significance of one’s inclination and attitude toward God. It is important to note that the Psalmist identifies with the righteous and views God’s character as just, favoring those who walk in righteousness.

The study also sheds light on the Psalms of Trust as expressions of dependence and trust in God's mighty power, which is distinct from covenant pronouncements or commandments. This confidence is not merely a promise of safety but rather a declaration of faith rooted in the understanding of God's righteous nature. In essence, the Psalms of Trust serve as poetic expressions of faith, emphasizing the Psalmist's unwavering trust in God's character, the importance of righteousness, and the ability to find peace amidst life's challenges. The study invites readers to contemplate a relationship with God that transcends circumstances, echoing the sentiment of the Psalmist in seeking God's presence and trusting in His unfailing power.