The Composition of Psalm 27

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1) Few methodological remarks

In recent years the so called canonical approach to scripture has been quite popular. It emphasizes the significance of the fact that the historical writings have been gathered together into a canon of sacred literature. As a result, the focus has been on the final canonical form and context of the Old Testament or the Bible as a whole. However, this has also led to an understanding of the Old and New Testament that lacks acknowledgment of the diversity of the biblical texts. Most of the Biblical writings are composite works, either because various sayings or writings of a single author have been collected and edited into a single work or because the works of several authors or editors have been edited together into a single work. That would be the case of the Hebrew Psalter. The Psalter is a collection of at least 150 psalms that have been gathered together in a long period of time. Each of those texts has an individual character that can and should be studied with the research tools accessible to scholars in that field.

In the present study of an individual Hebrew/Masoretic text I use linguistic categories that have been defined primarily on the basis of syntagmatic and paradigmatic distributions of their members. I have tried to account for the morphological and syntactic values contained by each graphical unit distinguishing four levels of description: word, word group, clause and clause combinations. I follow the methods of literary criticism, structural analysis and semantics. In addition I use the speech act theory (J.L. Austin et.al.) that gives us the tools to analyze special sentence types, clauses and text sections, from the perspective of their function.

2) Psalm 27: The text and its analysis

The majority of commentators agree that Psalm 27 is marked by a clear break between verses 6 and 7. Many interesting ideas have been put forward to explain the combination of the two main parts of the Psalm. The main problem is whether this Psalm consists of two originally independent poems or whether it forms a literary unity.
There are indeed some significant reasons for separating the two parts of the text. With A.A. Anderson (1989) the main arguments can be summarized as follows:

a) There are differences in tone between the two sections; one voices confidence and trust, while the other is full of lamentation and petitions.

b) Both parts seem to be reasonably self-contained, and they belong to different psalm-types. The first part is a Psalm of Confidence, and Yahweh is spoken of on the third person, whereas the second part is a Lamentation or a prayer of an unjustly accused person, and Yahweh is addressed in the second person in most verses.
c) The sequence of the two sections is rather unusual, in that the cry for help follows expression of confidence and certainty; there is no real parallel to this in other Psalm.

I will be discussing the main arguments for looking at Psalm 27 as a literary unity, especially the interpretation of H. Birkeland (1933) and A.H. van Zyl (1971). I will also be introducing the results of my own analysis based on the above-mentioned methodological program: Psalm 27 consists of two originally separate sections (Psalm 27A: v. 1-6 and 27B: 7-13) that have been edited into a single work (v. 14 functions primarily as an indication of the composite work). A pragmatic-functional analysis of the text shows the possible interpretations of the text, both of the two separate parts and of the text as a whole.

3) Selected Bibliography (without Commentaries)

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