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Reflections of Heuristic Learning in Psalm 73

As a concept, heuristic learning is not much used in biblical text work. Perhaps understandable since the term is quite ambivalent, associated as it is with both divine enlightenment and irrational shortcuts that result in decision biases. Nevertheless, to highlight the process of learning and experience of the "I" in Psalm 73 the term has its qualities, and in this paper I therefore have chosen the following understanding of the term: "The term "heuristic" derives from the old Greek word "heureka" which cheerfully expresses that one has found the solution to a problem. By analogy, the notion of cognitive heuristics ought to refer to those cognitive structures or processes that serve the creative function of knowledge enrichment and productive thinking".[1] When constructing an image of how education worked in ancient Israel, the thought of a silent (or missing) subject of learning has suited the idea of a school-like system in ancient Israel very well. There has been created a picture of how education took place where the teacher has absolute authority and the student is forced into silence.[2] The school debate is perhaps not as lively as it once was, but in its shadow lays a wider range of questions. One of these could be how processes of learning are reflected in the Hebrew Bible - a question I will look more into though the heuristic experiences of the "I" person in psalm 73.

Heuristic learning

In contemporary science of education there has over the last decades been a growing interest towards how education works outside of the institutions. This focus on education is, according to Frank Furedi,[3] a result of the common lack of faith in the schools systems and their ability to educate. Furedi formulates it quite clearly in his book title: *Wasted. Why Education Isn't Educating* (2009), and in his preface he states

[1] Försterling, *Heuristics…* p. 296.
[2] This position is thoroughly described by Crenshaw in his book *Education in Ancient Israel. Across the Deadening Silence* (1998), chapter six: "The Missing Voice", p. 187-203.
[3] Frank Furedi is a professor of sociology at the University of Kent at Canterbury.

that the paradox of education today is "that the more society invests in and expects of education, the less schools and universities demand of students".[4] The focus is turned from the institutions to the individual, the student. By reading Psalm 73 in search of reflections of heuristic learning one might say I try to make the same switch of focus in working with texts in the Hebrew Bible.

Detecting a problem and then to solve it is the essence of heuristic learning. But not only does one need a problem, one also needs a description of a subject of learning relating to the problem. I my view, Psalm 73 reflects both of these perspectives on learning, and in this particular psalm the self-aware student stands out in a remarkable way. The way the "I" person in Psalm 73 informs the reader of her or his experiences relevant to the problem in question, gives us reason to believe we in this particularly text will find reflections of heuristic learning.

Choosing a term like *heuristic learning* and focusing on the individual may risk undermining the importance of vital arenas for learning such as homes, local communities and schools, which all include more people than the individual. Never the less this is not done to undermine the importance of learning as collective phenomena, but rather to highlight the subject of learning in a particular text like Psalm 73. It is done to emphasize that there needs to be an individual space in order to reflect and learn to solve a problem, perhaps particularly problems concerning God.

The subject of learning in Psalm 73

The subject of learning in Psalm 73 is no doubt the "I" person. Sigmund Mowinckel identified the "I" in Psalm 73 as the author without been able to identify the historical person.[5] The key moment in Psalm 73 can for Mowinckel, and several of his predecessors, be found in verse 17 where the "I" person enters מִקְדְּשֵׁי אֵל (the sanctuary of God), by Mowinckel described as the temple.[6]

[4] Furedi, Wasted... p. ix. On *demands of the student* it might be right to add that there would be different ways of demanding a workload from a student. One could ask if the student know a certain amount of facts, like the content of the United Nations human rights or in an Old Testament context the law of Torah. Or one could demand of the student to give an ethical or religious argument were the student tries to detect the problem at hand when the making of the UN human rights or the law of Torah took place.

[5] Mowinckel, *Skriftene*... p. 156.

[6] Mowinckel, *Skriftene*... p. 156-57.

Having access to the temple and appearing in one of the Asaph-psalms, the ”I” person is often associated with a royal cultic setting.[7] Placed right after a psalm from the great royal ceremonies, Psalm 72, and a national lament over the devastation of the temple in Psalm 74, John Eaton suggests that this psalm could be read as what he calls a “drawing near to God” psalm.[8] This again builds on Eaton’s previous work with Psalm 73 where he suggests reading Psalm 73 as the testimony of a king to Yahweh’s faithfulness.[9] To this position Steven J.L. Croft states that: ”it seems better to see the piece, not as a private meditation of a wisdom poet, but, as the final verse indicates, as a piece of wisdom teaching intended to be delivered in public”.[10] In his *The Identity of the Individual in the Psalm* (1987) Croft put Psalm 73 under the headline “The Individual as a Minister of the Cult”.[11] Even if Croft focus is on the individual, the result of his work seems to have moved the discussions of Psalm 73 towards a more collective understanding of the “I” person of the Psalm. Referring to Croft, Walter Brueggemann in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (1995) reads the “I” person in Psalm 73 as the people of Israel. More precisely that is: the “trustful, waiting community” within Israel.[12]

The “I” person in Psalm 73 has almost become a blurred individual. When reading Psalm, 73 scholars often end up on the receiving end, together with the faith community (Brueggemann) or the people of Israel (Mowinckel, Eaton, Croft). That said; the “I” person of Psalm 73 is still the main character. This Martin Ravndal Hauge convincingly illustrated in *Between Sheol and Temple. Motif Structure and function in the I-Psalms* (1995), where he, under the subtitle “The Way to Confession”, describes how the “I” person is a character able to manoeuvre between the motives of evil and good.[13] When looking for reflection of heuristic learning in Psalm 73 the follow-up question to Hague’s observation could be: where and how did the “I” person learn to manoeuvre between motives of good and evil? At home, within the family, local community or perhaps in school, are of course generally valid answers to the question. Still, the way Psalm 73 is presented, with its problem and the

[7] “Traditions saw Asaph as one David´s chief leaders of psalmody, and these psalms will have come from his family down the generations”, Eaton, *The Psalms*… p. 265.
[8] Eaton, *The Psalms*… p. 266.
[9] Croft use Eaton’s argument as a starting point for his discussion on Psalm 73 in *The Identity*... p. 163.
[10] Croft, *The Identity*... p. 163.
[11] Croft, *The Identity*... p. 163.
[12] Brueggemann, *The Psalms*… p. 64.
[13] Hauge, *Between*... p. 267-80.

way the "I" person describes the process of solving the problem, I believe this text may help us better to understand how learning took place in ancient Israel.

Reading Psalm 73

To find reflections of heuristic learning in Psalm 73 one needs at least three findings; one is *a subject of learning* (1), the other is *a problem to solve* (2), and the third is *a description of the "I" person solving the problem at hand based on what the "I" person knows* (3). *Knowing,* aside from what the "I" person may have learned, also includes the experiences of the "I" person. Since the "I" person in this Psalm 73 appears in every respect as a subject of learning (1). The question to ask is therefore what sort of problem the subject of learning is challenged with in this text, and how the "I" person solves the problem. As a well-documented wisdom text Psalm 73 most likely has its origin in a wisdom school or learning tradition. What the "I" person then would learn is what we might call "the law of wisdom", that God is good to Israel:

Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.[14] (v. 1)

As the first psalm in the third book of psalms (73-89) the line is drawn back to the beginning of the first book of the psalms, to Psalm 1.[15] The opening phrase tells us, just as the "I" person has learned, that all goes well with those who meditate over Yahweh's Torah.[16] By establishing this wisdom doctrine in the first verse of the psalm, this "truth" is then challenged in the second verse. In the second verse the wisdom doctrine of God, "as good to those pure at heart", is put to the test by a heuristic reflection by the "I" person. In the second and third verse we then have a problem for the subject of learning to solve (2) and we also find that the "I" person in Psalm 73 uses what he or she knows when referring to experiences (3):

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked. (vv. 2-3)

[14] In this paper I have chosen to follow the NRSV of translation Psalm 73 except in v. 1 NRSV translate "to the upright" based on the prp (לישר אל). In v. 1 I follow MT and translate "to Israel" (לישראל).
[15] Eaton, *The Psalms*… p. 265 and Brueggemann, *The Psalms*… p. 206.
[16] deClaissé-Walford, *Reading*… p. 75.

The contrast between the first and second verse is overwhelming. The doctrine from the opening verse is put to the test by measuring its relevance against the life of the "I" person. The overwhelming contrast between the first and second verse almost seems like a *testing plot*. Several scholars have therefore linked this text to the book of Job, and Nancy deClaissé-Walford, in her *The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (1997), suggests the subtitle of Psalm 73 to be "Little Job of the Psalter".[17]
Indeed, an interesting link to Job is that both Psalm 73 and the book of Job comment on, or protest, that which we might assume is canonically valid.[18] When summing up more than 30 years of wisdom studies, Crenshaw argues that the student (or son) "never assumes the position of respondent" in the wisdom literature.[19] If we view the *testing plot* in Psalm 73 as a protest towards the wisdom doctrine, Crenshaw position from his *Education in Ancient Israel* (1998) may be problematic. According to Crenshaw there would be nothing like a heuristic process of learning in ancient Israel, because the students would be forced to silence out of fear.[20] To underline this point Crenshaw gives a contemporary parallel to the school-like system in ancient Israel in Singapore: "Modern educators differ with one another about corporal punishment as an incentive to learning, and at least one contemporary government, Singapore, has reinstated caning as punishment for juvenile delinquency".[21]
On the one hand a text like Psalm 73 is so well written and appears so true that one as a reader easily gets convinced that this text really is referring to a concrete episode in a person's life. On the other hand the fact that so many readers of this text rely on it may work as an argument for its universality, which in turn can easily be understood as a curriculum in a wisdom tradition, rather than authentic experiences. Either way, the reflection of a heuristic learning is there, learned or known to the "I" person of the psalm.

[17] deClaissé-Walford, *Reading*… p. 75.
[18] Brueggemann, *The Psalms*… p. 207.
[19] Crenshaw, *Education...* p. 187.
[20] Same reference as given in note 2, p. 1.
[21] Crenshaw, *Education...* p. 203. Brueggemann presents a different way of handling the problem with protest, or challenging the doctrine, in the context of wisdom. In his; *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (1995) he presents a suggestion to the problem of protest, where he unlike Crenshaw acknowledges the protest, though he somewhat disarms the problem. In Brueggemann's view the protest is in the text, but it is not present or at work. It is an earlier protest, "however, a protest kept canonically available as one to which Israel could return again and again" (Brueggemann, *The Psalms*… p. 207).

Almost becoming the wicked to be drawn near to God?

When the "I" person of Psalm 73 observes רְשָׁעִים (the wicked) they are not "like chaff witch the wind drives away" (Ps 1, 4). On the contrary the "I" person, as we know from verse 3, seems to be drawn to the wicked due to their well-being:

For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people. Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them like a garment. Their eyes swell out with fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth. (vv. 4-9)

The problem is obvious and one of the great problems of life for anyone regarding God as rightful and good: How is it that the innocent suffer while the wicked seem to live on unharmed? In heuristic learning finding a solution to the problem as efficiently as possible is essential. The way the "I" person has learned to speak of God (v. 1) does not work in real life according to the experiences of the "I" person (vv. 2-9), and at this point in the text everything seems to be put upside down. God, who is supposed to be in favour of those of pure heart and harsh towards the wicked, lets the wicked increase their wealth whereas the pure hearted wash their hands in vain:

Such are the wicked always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued[22]*, and am punished every morning.* (vv. 12-14)

In the everyday experience of the "I" person, the wicked seem to be at ease, while the innocent "I" person feels plagued. This, the problem plot of Psalm 73, reaches its climax in verse 13 when the "I" person complains of having kept his or her heart clean all in vain. At this point in the text the heuristic conclusion is in fact that the God of the "I" person doesn't work, or as John H. Hayes pointed out in his *Understanding the Psalms* (1976), "was tempted to declare his religion irrelevant and

[22] When the "I" person in v. 14 tells that וְאֶהְיֵ֣ נָגוּעַ (have been plagued) has, beside the testing plot, also been read as a parallel to the book of Job (Kraus, H. J., *Theology of the Psalms*, p. 168.). This might be, but most likely are the plagues and punishment the "I" person experience in Psalm 73 to be read linked to קִנֵּאתִי (I was envious). It is therefore more likely to be understood as a mental struggle of jealousy rather the physical suffering know to be afflicted Job.

erroneous".[23] Even if it occasionally would be useful to have a psalm ending in despair, a reader of the Hebrew bible knows that a turn of fate is about to happen. Psalm 73 has now reach the point where the descriptions of the "I" person from earlier, when everything seemed to be upside down (vv. 2-14), now is turned back in its right place again.

I have already mentioned how Mowinckel like several of his predecessors has understood verse 17 as the key moment in this psalm.[24] There has been much speculation as to what instructions God gave the "I" person in the temple, but the text never reveals it and we are therefore left with conjecture.[25] Reading the text in search of heuristic learning uncovers a lot of information if one also includes some events prior to verse 17 (vv.15-16) and also the following verse 18. I find reading verse 17, "the sanctuary session", as the only definite turning point problematic. I therefore rather choose to read verse 17 as a part of a three, or four, step process.

If I had said, 'I will talk on in this way', I would have been untrue to the circle of your children. But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! They are like a dream when one awakes;[26] on awaking you despise their phantoms. (vv. 15-20)

The first step is where the responsibility, or perhaps even the morality, of the "I" person is tested. In verse 15 the "I" person mirrors his or her life as if she or he lived like a wicked: "If I had said, 'I will talk on in this way'" (v. 15). The "I" person is obviously tempted to let go of her or his religion and live on like a wicked (vv. 2-14), but picturing him or her self as a wicked results in a change of mind: "I would have been untrue to the circle of your children" (v. 16). It is the remembrance of בָּנֶיךָ (children), or generations of (your) children, which appears as the first argument for not becoming a wicked. Remembering the generations of children the individual

[23] Hayes, *Understanding*... p. 94.
[24] Page 2 in this paper.
[25] Hayes, *Understanding*... p. 94-95.
[26] When first choosing to read Psalm 73 for reflections of heuristic learning and due to my argument that the "I" person *almost* becomes the wicked, NRSV's choose of translation v. 20a, "They are like a dream when one awakes", is not helping me much. In future work with this psalm a new translation in needed, and to keep closer to MT (כַּחֲלוֹם מֵהָקִיץ אֲדֹנָי בָּעִיר) in v. 20a most likely to be better chose.

understands that leaving God is not only a personal matter, it implies generations of children.[27] The moral of the "I" person is put to the test by seeing the implications of leaving her or his religion.

The second step contributing to the change of view of the "I" person is the time of reflection in verse 16: וָאֲחַשְּׁבָה לָדַעַת (I thought how to understand this). Based on what the "I" person had learned of God (v. 1) and what the "I" person knew from her or his experiences in life, trying to understand this and holding it together is described as "a wearisome task" (v. 16). A task not solved until the "I" person enters מִקְדְּשֵׁי אֵל (the sanctuary of God) in verse 17. The event that takes place in verse 17, where the "I" person enters the sanctuary of God, makes the third step in this turning process. I would like to separate verse 17 into two events, the entering episode and the foreseeing episode: "then I perceived their end" (v. 17).

The third step is when the "I" person enters the sanctuary of God. A common way of understanding this passage is presented by Hans-Joachim Kraus in his *Theologie der Psalmen* (1979): "The psalmist had entered the temple precincts in order to seek a solution to the problems that were oppressing him".[28] Including the two previous steps, this passage in verse 17 seems more likely to be understood as an end of a process rather than the beginning of one. The "I" person enters the sanctuary to give praise to the God that made her or him understand. The "I" person in Psalm 73 uses the sanctuary to mark an ending of a process which led the "I" person to understand how it goes with the wicked (v. 17-20), or rather how it would go with him or her if the "I" person became one of the wicked.

How to understand the wicked is a potential fourth step in this heuristic process of learning in Psalm 73. I say potential because a comprehensive discussion of the רְשָׁעִים (the wicked) in Psalm 73 is indeed an overwhelming task. Nevertheless I will give a brief description of how the wicked may be understood as evidence of a heuristic learning. Even if the wicked are to be read as "wealthy and happy lords" (vv. 3-9) within Israel or not,[29] the way the "I" person identifies with the wicked throughout the psalm makes it possible to understand the wicked as something other than an outsider.

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[27] This observation I find very well describes by Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, in her *Reading from the Beginning. The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (1997), where she states: "The psalmist's remembrance of belonging, of being part of an ongoing community, provides the assurance required to maintain identity and direction" (deClaissé-Walford, *Reading*… p. 76).

[28] This quotation is taken from the English translation of *Theologie der Psalmen*: *Theology of the Psalms,* published in 1986.

[29] Referring to Crofts discussion with Birkeland in *The Identity*... p. 16-23.

When we in the beginning of verse 18 read "Truly you set them in slippery places" we hear the echo from the opening of the psalm "but as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped" (v. 2). The same motive as in verse 2 appears again here (v. 18), even though the fate of the "I" person differs from the fate of the wicked. Where the wicked "slip" the "I" person *almost* "slips" The way it goes with the wicked is also a description of the way it *almost* went with the "I" person in the past - had it not been for:[30] 1) the moral obligation to the generations of children; 2) the process of reflection; 3) marking the end of a painful process by entering the sanctuary and 4) seeing oneself in another by identifying with the wicked.
The reflections of a heuristic learning are not telling us that the wicked will have their final punishment. But it shows us how the "I" person ceases to be jealous of the wicked (v. 3-9) when he or she understands that the wicked have problems of their own. The "I" person doesn't become the wicked, but by almost becoming the wicked and that way identifying with the wicked, the "I" renews her or his insight of God. A God the "I" person first has learned of (v. 1), for then to experience in his or her life. Therefore the "I" person concludes:

But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell of all your works. (v. 28)

Having reached the conclusion of this psalm we have our happy ending and perhaps also an essential key to understanding this psalm. In the first verse we find the *learned* attitude towards God and in the last verse we find a renewed insight, based on a self-experienced relationship with God. These two ways of describing God indeed seem at odds and indicate that something quite important took place between the first and the last verse. When searching for reflections of a heuristic learning one could say the sum of what the "I" person experienced in Psalm 73 changes the way she or he describes God. These two verses (v. 1 and v. 28) are not only separated by the text they share, but also by concrete experiences in the "I" person's life.

[30] Hauge, *Between*... p. 277.

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