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'Many Are Saying': The Function of Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Psalter

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J. Dwayne Howell
Campbellsville University
Campbellsville, KY 42718

'Many are Saying': The Function of Direct Speech in the Hebrew Psalter by Rolf A. Jacobson is part of the Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series. It is based on Jacobson's dissertation, which he wrote at Princeton Theological Seminary. The purpose of the study is to investigate the use of direct discourse in the Psalms. His basic assumption is that the use of direct discourse, through the quoting of self or others, provides a greater literary force than texts that do not use such a rhetorical device. The study is based on the use of both formal historical-critical interpretation and rhetorical interpretation.

Chapter 1 discusses the rhetorical use of the quotation. One of the first obstacles to overcome in providing a rhetorical analysis of the text is the defining of terms. The confusion of terms in biblical studies and linguistic analysis is based on two factors. First, linguists use similar terms to describe different phenomena. Second, biblical scholars invent their own terms. Jacobson, while not providing new terms himself, does provide a set of standard terms that he uses throughout the study. He also notes that he maintains gender-specific language in his translation of the various texts because, as he shows, the use inclusive language often turns direct discourse into indirect discourse. However, he does incorporate inclusive language in his own research.

Jacobson next discusses several quotation theories. This section provides a good primer for those who are unfamiliar with this aspect of rhetorical theories. Five primary theories are discussed: the theatrical dimension of quotation, quotations as demonstration, the Proteus principle, speech-act theory, and quotation as a means of characterization.

The author concludes chapter 1 with methods of distinguishing direct discourse in the Psalms. He notes that quotations in biblical Hebrew are indicated by both internal markers, often shown by the use specific vocabulary, and external markers, change in syntax or person. He also establishes four aspects of quotations: (1) content of the inset as it is set in its frame (context); (2) verbs of speaking in a given frame; (3) identity of the speaker; and (4) modifying words or phrases in a given frame.

Chapter 2 studies the use of the enemy quotations in the Psalms, the most common type of the direct discourse found in the Psalms. These psalms are divided into two groups: the enemy attacking God and the enemy attacking the psalmist. The attack on God by the enemy is used to declare the powerlessness of God. This claim to God's powerlessness may also include the questioning of God's faithfulness to the people or asserting God's defeat by the god(s) of the enemy. Jacobson includes an excursus on the "Where is your/their God?" taunt that commonly occurs in the enemy speeches.

Jacobson next discusses the enemy speeches against the psalmist. Showing that these are not as numerous as the enemy-God speeches, he still sees a rhetorical function for them. First, they provide the speaker a method of crediting statements about God to the enemy that would be unacceptable coming from the speaker or a member of the community of faith. These speeches also can serve as a challenge to God to come to the aid the people. Finally, they give an opportunity for instruction by encouraging the people not to be or believe like other nations.

In chapter 3 Jacobson studies the use of self-quotations by the psalmist. These self-quotations are cast as either discussions with God or as attacks on one's enemies. Jacobson discusses each self-quotation in the time frame in which it is used. Past quotations are used to narrate past events in order to sustain the psalmist's present argument or to encourage the aid of God based on past events. These quotes center on both thanksgiving and prayers for help. Self-quotations set in the present also emerge out of thanks or need. They share the inward thoughts of the psalmists without denying an outward faithful attitude. Quotations framed in the future center on promises to fulfill vows given for healing or deliverance. Close to the self-quotations in future time are hypothetical words that deal with the possibility of events yet to come. The self-quotation in the psalms provides the psalmist with the opportunity to speak for himself or herself and not to recast the words of another. Thus, they provide the opportunity for self-characterization where the psalmist can address the needs of the community.

Chapter 4 deals with quotations credited to God. The primary setting for the psalms that use God speech is liturgical, including coronations and festivals. Often the quotations are delivered by an intermediary such as a priest or a prophet. Jacobson present a lengthy

discussion on the research done on the occurrence of God speech in the Psalms. He notes a consistency in the research labeling the God quotations as “oracles” and takes issue with the use of “oracle” to describe this type of speech and believes that it should only be applied with “great care.” While there are parallels of god speech in ancient Near Eastern literature, one must consider both the similarities and the dissimilarities in applying it to biblical studies, according to Jacobson. The consensus he develops from the research on God speech in the Psalms is that the context plays an important role in the interpretation of each quotation, noting that these quotations are more concerned with the current circumstance of the individual psalms than with the original context of the quotes. The quotes are given to provide authority for the current argument. Jacobson also sees other rhetorical uses of the God quotations in the Psalms. First, they are used to construct society by offering a point of solidarity. Second, they are used to challenge God to act according to past promises or actions. Finally, the God quotations offer a characterization of God and God’s relationship with the people.

Chapter 5 identifies the quotations credited to the community and their functions. These are divided into two groups. The first group is the community quotations set in a liturgical refrain. These seek to affirm beliefs that the Psalmist wants the community to affirm. The second group is based on what the psalmist desires the community to say. According to Jacobson, these quotations provide the opportunity for a sociological alignment between the psalmist and the community. The psalmist can also produce words for the community based on future events, that is, words not yet spoken. Jacobson also notes that the community quotations provide opportunity for the modern reader to participate in the psalms and to relate to the events dictated within them.

Jacobson ends with a conclusion that simply reiterates the material covered in the five previous chapters. The final chapter is lacking in that it does not discuss the implications of the findings of his work for current research in the Psalms. Outside of the brief conclusion, Jacobson provides a good analysis of direct discourse in the Psalms. He has shown that this is an area of research that has been lacking in the past and provides a framework that both identifies and researches direct discourse in four specific areas: the enemies, self-quotation, God speech, and quotations of the community. The first chapter provides valuable information concerning the study of quotations in rhetorical analysis. This information is important not only for the study of the Psalms but also for any biblical research that includes direct discourse. While the cost of the book (\$120) may be prohibitive for use in a personal library, it would serve well to be a part of any school’s library.