LONGING FOR A SIGN. PSALM 86:17 REVISITED

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Abstract: *This paper proposes that the communicative function of Psalm 86:17 is about making the petitioner a sign that aims at transforming his enemies, bringing them to self-knowledge, and making them acknowledge the power of God through shaming. The approach for such a reading is rhetorical criticism, a method that goes beyond stylistics to the meaning being communicated, and how persuasive the argument is. The paper argues that shame in this context is the kind of disgrace that is painful and disorienting, and paves the way for a new orientation that influences good social relationship. The psalmist was not praying to God to simply show him a visible sign but to give him a sign that can make the enemies come to self-knowledge about who God is and what God has done in the life of the psalmist. Such prayer, by analogy, calls the Christian church to pray for a portent sign that will cause the enemies of the church to be put to shame in order to influence them to come to self-knowledge of God's wondrous works.*

Key Words: Sign, Lament, Disgrace Shame, Discretion Shame, Honour, Self-Knowledge

Introduction

Psalm 86:17 is one of the Bible texts that pose problems for translators. Commentators often claim that the "sign" referred to in the text serves to confirm the faith of the psalmist: some sort of favorable demonstration of God's action for the psalmist, or a kind of evidence to build up the faith of the psalmist.[1] Marvin Tate goes further to claim that the sign plays a double function in the text. He says, "the context does not permit a precise definition of the nature of the 'sign.' Its function, however, is clear: to confirm the faith of the speaker, giving evidence of divine comfort, while serving as a token to the speaker's enemies which will

[1] C.A. Briggs and A. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), 2: 238; Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part 2 and Lamentations.* Forms of Old Testament Literature 15 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 137; Willem VanGemeren, *Psalms*, Eerdmans Bible Commentary 5, Revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 652; Allan M. Harman, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1998), 295.

leave them abashed."[2] All too often, the Hebrew text is emended and the function of the sign on the enemy seems to be overlooked.

This paper proposes another way to understand the function of the sign – a way that considers the text as a final form and allows a psychological interpretation of the motif. It uses rhetorical criticism to show how the rhetorical function of the sign in Psalm 86:17 serves as a plea for putting the enemy to shame. It suggests that the request for putting the enemy to shame aims at transforming the enemies, bringing them to self-knowledge, and making them acknowledge the power of God.

Rhetoric toward Making of a Sign

Psalm 86 is a Lament Psalm of an Individual with four stanzas (1-7; 8-10; 11-13; 14-17). Two stanzas of praise are sandwiched between petitions for help; in Psalm 86, an ABB^{1}A^1 pattern is formed. However, in the first, third, and last stanzas, there is a dynamic fusion of the elements of plea and praise making the various subthemes less distinct. For instance, in verse 4 (first stanza) there is a call to praise within the petition. In verse 11 (third stanza), there is a request within the praise, while in verse 15 (fourth stanza), there is praise within the petition. It seems the repetition of עשה ("to make, do") in verses 8, 9, 10, 17 echoes an idea of divine creation although that does not make the text a creation psalm. In fact, Rolf Jacobson says Psalm 86 testifies "to God's faithfulness not merely in the existence of creation, but in discernable ordering of creation."[3] The psalmist's understanding of creation, in many respects, is closely linked with a call to commitment.

Psalm 86:17 is a tricola that closes the lament prayer. Indeed, the mixture of petitions and praises recaptured in verse 17 help strengthen the closure of the poem. Line A is a petition while lines B and C give the reasons for the petition:

A עשה־עמי אות לטובה

B ויראו שנאי ויבשו

[2] Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51-100,* WBC 20 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 383.
[3] Rolf A. Jacobson, "'The Faithfulness of the Lord Endures Forever': The Theological Witness of the Psalter," in *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms,* ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 119.

C כי־אתה יהוה עזרתני ונחמתני

The verse seems to sum up the various themes of lament and descriptive praise narrated in verses 1-16. What is very striking in verse 17 is the echoing of several words and ideas in the whole poem. There is repetition of טוב ("good"; v. 5) and עשה ("make"; vv. 8,9,10) in verse 17. Walter Brueggemann also finds verse 17 as completing the actions in verses 11 and 13, serving as a double closure.[4] Moveover, Pierre Auffret's classic structural analysis and Kraus' metrical reading of Psalm 86 also reveal a purposeful summation of verses 14-16 in verse 17.[5] Such conclusions, in my view, make verse 17 pivotal to the understanding of the poem.

There is also a symmetrical build up of explicit petitions to affirmative statements – תענני "you will answer me" (v. 7b) // והצלת נפשי "you have delivered my soul" (v. 13b) // כי־אתה יהוה עזרתני ונחמתני "for you, O Lord, has helped me and comforted me" (v. 17c). The one at prayer freely uses יהוה (vv. 1,6,11,17), אלהים (vv. 2,8,10,12,14), and אדני (vv. 4,5,8,9,15) to address his God and uses עדת צימערי ("band of insolent people"; v. 14), זדים ("proud"; v. 14), and שנאי ("hate me"; v. 17) to address the enemies.

The first line of Psalm 86:17 is somehow difficult. Some translations render the Hebrew עשה־עמי אות לטובה as follows:

> Work in my behalf a sign for good [NJPS]
> Show me a token for good [ASV]
> Show me a sign of your favor [JPS; NRSV]
> Give me one proof of your goodness [JB]
> Give me a sign of your goodness [NIV]

It seems the differences are more theological than linguistic. The JPS,

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[4] Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Interpretation*, AOTS (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 60. 61.

[5] Pierre Auffret, "Essai Sur La Structure Litteraire Du Psaume Lxxxvi", *Vetus Testamentum* 29, no. 4 (1979):400. 401, observes that verse 17a completes the metrical stich in v. 16, while the plea in v. 14 and the praise in v. 15 are emphasized in v. 17 to form a chiastic pattern. On the other hand, Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 180, suggests a translation where verse 16c is transposed to v. 17a to satisfy the metrical reading.

NRSV, JB and NIV translations suggest an anticipation of some practical act as an assurance of God's care. What is expected from God is the nature of the sign. These translations emphasize on the עשה as a *leitwort* in the imperative mood and not the whole clause עשה־עמי. The NJPS stands out from the translations above with its emphasis on the sign working on behalf of the psalmist, rendering the clause עשה־עמי "work in me" instead of work with me".

In my view, עמי "with me" (preposition עם plus first person singular pronoun) plays a key role in the clause. The preposition here can be taken as a עם *of coordination,* connoting a necessary part of the action or an additive in the action. The particle עמי occurs about 38 times in the Hebrew Bible, and in all these occurrences the speaker was an active part of the action.[6] In a similar vein, עמי can mean "work with me", implying using the one at prayer "as good as," or "same as" a sign. Suggestively, the psalmist in Psalm 86 was asking God to use him as the primary tool in the making of the sign. One may expect עמי which points to a spatial relationship between God, the sign, and the psalmist to constitute a veritable plot of the clause, hence the idea "make with me as good as a sign" or better still, "Make with me a sign to a good effect."

In three of the four uses of עשה in Psalm 86, the petitioner notes that God is the one who does (עשה) wondrous things (v. 10a), and has made (עשה) all the nations (v. 9), and no works (עשה) on earth parallel what God does (v. 8b). Such a conviction is purposed to attest to the creative power and wonders of God in the life of the psalmist. Much as the psalmist may want God to show him His loving kindness that has been so abundant once more, the knowledge that God can use him as a tool to "make/do/create" something is not farfetched. Rather than being a proof to the psalmist, it is the one who hates the psalmist who must see the value of the sign. If the psalmist becomes a tool in making the sign, then the translation "show me" or "give me" in such a context would

[6] See Gen 31:31; 39:7,12,14; Ex. 33:12; Lev. 26:21,23,27,40; Num. 22:19; Josh. 14:8; Judg. 4:18 (2x); 1 Sam. 15:25,30; 2 Sam. 13:11,16; 19:26; 1 Kgs. 11:22; Pss. 42:9; 86:17; Job 10:17; Ruth 1;11; Esth. 7:8; Dan. 10:7,11,15,19,21; Ezra 7:28; 8:1; Neh. 2:9,12 (2x); 12:40; 1 Chr. 4:10; 2 Chr. 2:6; 35:21.

be a shift from what the poet is building and would swing the basis of the request.

A similar reference can be seen in the 1 QHodayot[a] xv:12-15 which reads:

> [For according to the mysteries] of thy [wisdom],
> thou hast ordained them for great chastisements
> before the eyes of all Thy creatures
> that [for all] eternity
> they may serve as a sign [and a wonder],
> and that [all men] may know Thy glory
> and Thy tremendous power.

In this reading, the sign is seen as an object portending a divine display of glory and power for the people to see the glory and power of God. In relation to Psalm 86:17, the psalmist wishes that God would strike the enemies with shame, a sign to prove that God has listened to the prayers of the psalmist. How it turns to emphasize the building of the psalmist's personal faith as some scholars suggest remains unclear.

Similarly, D. Luke looks at the striking similarities between El Armana Texts 100:31-38 and Psalm 86:17.[7] The El Armana Text reads:

> Let the king, my lord, listen to the words of his faithful servant
> And give a present to his servant
> While our enemies see and eat dust
> Let the breath of the king not depart from us

Luke, however, points out that, the verb *ia-di-na* (root: *nadānu*) as used in the second line is equivalent to the Hebrew root נתן ("to give") and not עשה "to make".[8] In this respect, the sign serves not only as a pointer to the enemies but also as a means to an end.

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[7] D. Luke, "Canaanite Psalms," *India Journal of Theology* 26, no. 1 (1977): 50. 51. Temper Longmann III, however, attest that sometimes the uniqueness of Israelite prayers and psalms from that of the ancient Near East is basically about the deity being addressed and not the form. See "Ancient Near East Prayer Genre," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnson (Downers Grove: InterVasity, 2005), 59.
[8] Luke, "Canaanite Psalms," 51.

Rhetoric Function of the Sign

The Hebrew אות occurs 83 times in the Old Testament and 7 times in the book of Psalms, specifically Psalms 65:9[8]; 74:4,9; 78:43; 86:17; 105:27; 135:9. Of these references, Psalms 78:43, 105:27 and 135:9 talk about the wonders God made through Moses in Egypt. In such usage, signs were meant to influence belief. One may be right in stating that the value of the signs in Egypt was the effect of the divine manifestations for the witnesses. Both the people of Israel and the Egyptians were to come to some realization after God's interventions.

The signs in Egypt were to make the people encounter the faithfulness of God on one hand and the judgment of God on the other hand. Helfmeyer emphasizes that the effect of the plagues on Egypt before the exodus "appear as signs by which Israel, in her weakness before the mighty of this world, can 'know' the power and help of her God."[9] For him, the plagues were signs for Israel to gain some knowledge about the power of God (Ex. 7:3). The story of the exodus began with YHWH giving Moses certain signs – the burning bush, a name, the staff, and a leprous hand (Ex. 3–4). Such signs were pointers of assurance and empowerment. Israel was also made to see the signs God performed in Egypt to confirm their faith in the One who had called them. The stories about the plagues in Exodus 7-12, in a sense, were meant as a proof for Israel (see especially Ex. 7:3; 8:19; 10:2).[10] In fact, Durham sees the plagues as "The Proof-of-Presence" for Israel.[11] Furthermore, Stackel explains that the signs served as a memorial in that Israel's response to listen to Moses, celebrate the Passover, and leave Egypt was because of the signs that they saw.[12] In addition, the Israelites left Egypt as transformed people who were dressed "in Egyptian valuables, a sign of their new status as free persons, no longer slaves."[13]

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[9] F.J. Helfmeyer, "אות," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and H. Rinngren; trans., John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 1:172.

[10] John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 87; Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 109. Fretheim, however, downplays the wondrous nature of the acts that proved God's presence and adds that idea of miracle or wonder is of marginal value in interpreting these narratives.

[11] Durham, *Exodus*, 84.

[12] Jeffery Stackert, "Why does the Plague of Darkness Last for Three Days? Source Ascription and Literary Motif in Exodus 10:21-23. 27," *Vetus Testamentum* 61 (2011): 669.

[13] Terence E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch*. Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 104.

The signs were also meant to transform the people of Egypt. One can see the plagues as a "blow" upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians.[14] The signs caused Pharaoh and Egypt to change their mind towards the God of Israel.[15] In such a case, the signs serve as pointers for the people of Egypt to conform to the words of God and be transformed.

Commentators on Psalm 86 who see the content of the sign as an event for the psalmist to learn something from after the litany of praise may be missing something. And why would the enemies function secondarily to the plot of the lament? Psalm 86:17b gives two rhetorical functions of the plea as: (1) "that those who hate me may see it," (2) "and be put to shame." With such a proposition, one can say that the psalmist was praying that the Lord make him a sign and visible manifestation of wellbeing and not necessarily show him some divine intervention.

Scholars like Tate go too far to claim the clause "that you, O Lord, have helped me and comforted me" (v. 17c) expresses a revelatory response to a sacrifice and thus is an assurance of being heard.[16] Such a position assumes that the worshipper heard a response from the priest after presenting his plea, resulting in a kind of confidence expressed in the element of the certainty of being heard. There is, however, no indication that the rapid change from plea to vow is because the one at prayer is assured of a response. Such changes from plea to vow or vice versa, it is argued, are not schematically bound to any formula.[17] Ee Kon Kim argues that such changes cannot prove that the priest has given an assurance of God's help to the one at prayer. In fact, the propositions about salvation oracle, psychic struggle, or cultic actualization for *Heilsgeschichte* are all not sufficient explanations for the sudden transitions.[18] What can be seen here is praise that emerges as a natural

[14] R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: The Tyndale Press, 1973), 89.
[15] There is no doubt that the disasters did not affect only the Egyptians. What marks the last plague – the death of the Egyptian firstborn – from the rest is its effect on the Egyptians rather than the Israelites. See Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, Old Testament Literature (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1974), 132. 133.
[16] Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 383.
[17] Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1965), 65; Temper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove: InterVasity, 1988), 42; Federico G. Villanueva, *The 'Uncertainty of a Hearing': A Study of the Sudden Change of Mood in the Psalms of Lament* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 30.
[18] Ee Kon Kim, *The Rapid Change of Mood in the Lament Psalms: A Matrix for the Establishment of a Psalm Theology* (Seoul: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1985), 126-129, 156-158.

sounding in closing a prayer rich in confessional praise. Such praise is based on a personal testimony and on an assurance from an oracle that God has accepted the prayer offered. Bratcher and Reyburn, however, observe that the rapid change in Psalm 86:17c is a switch from exclusion to inclusion that draws the hostile others who see themselves as having nothing to do with God to give due recognition to what God is doing in the life of the one at prayer.[19]

In Psalm 86, the object of the sign is shaming – "so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame" (v. 17b). As earlier indicated, the nature of shame referred to here has a transforming character since it is intended to cause the enemies to come to the realization that God has intervened in the life of the psalmist. Social scientists and psychologists claim that shame can be understood in relation to honour. It is believed that honor and shame are the two pivotal values that define reputation in the ancient Mediterranean world.[20] Within that collectivist society, an individual is expected to meet social norms to be honourable. Shame on the other hand is considered as a diminishment of honor.[21] The shameless person does not meet social expectations or observe social boundaries. Such an understanding of shame gives credence to the psychological categories of "discretion shame" (in French, *pudeur*) that prompts and warns a person against an action, and "disgrace shame" (in French, *honte*) which is a condition that sets in after an action. Carl Schneider explains that while discretion shame sustains the individual to conform to social order, disgrace shame is an experience of the disintegration of one's world in such a way that it is difficult to find a way to conform to social order thereby positioning the individual for some

[19] Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reyburn, *A Handbook of Psalms,* UBS Series (London: United Bible Society, 1991), 225.

[20] J. G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965); David D. Padmore, ed., *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean,* American Anthropological Association 22 (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1987); Rosemary J. Coombe, "Barren Ground: Re-conceiving Honour and Shame in the Field of Mediterranean Ethnography," *Anthropologic* 32 (1990): 221-38.

[21] Malina, *New Testament World*, 38; E. Mahlangu, "The Ancient Mediterranean Values of Honour and Shame as a Hermeneutical Procedure: A Social-Scientific Criticism in an African Perspective," *VE* 22, no. 1 (2001): 90. See also Eric Ortlund, "Shame in Restoration in Ezekiel," *SEEJ* 2 (2011): 2; Saul M. Olyan, "Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations in Ancient Israel and its Environment," *JBL* 115, no. 2 (1996): 208.

positive action.[22] In the view of James Fowler, discretion shame sustains one's personal and social ordering while disgrace shame is a negative disorienting affect that makes one aware of who he or she really has become and opens possibilities for transformation.[23] One who suffers from discretion shame is seen as having lost the sense of good shame or does not have a sense of that positive shame that influences transformation.[24]

It is in this light that I propose that the shaming in Psalm 86:17 falls within the context disgrace shame: a kind of painful experience that is meant to disintegrate the world of the enemies and position them to acknowledge the creative power of God. From a theological perspective, Jacqueline Lapsley avers that, "disgrace-shame is a gift from God because it strips the people of their delusions about themselves. Their old self disintegrates, paving the way for the people's identity to be shaped in a new way by the self-knowledge that results from the experience of shame."[25] That is to say, transformation is the focus of disgrace shame. Something positive must happen in the life of the individual who is put to disgrace shame but whether this is always the case is another matter. As such, the sign is illustrative, didactic, instructive, and portentous. Although disgrace shame has a negative disorienting effect, Lapsley cogently argues about its positive role in bringing self-knowledge and motivating good social relationships.[26] With such an impact from disgrace shame, the enemies will come to acknowledge God as the creator and the Lord of the psalmist.

One may also say that the psalmist is not just seeking a symbol of God's favour necessarily to prove that God's steadfast love abounds or that God is already at work but rather is seeking a wondrous and miraculous sign. In Psalm 86:17, the psalmist desires that the sign may serve as לטובה "to a good effect". God's acts in creation attract praise as "good" (טוב), not only for its beautiful quality but also for its functional

[22] Carl D. Schneider, *Shame, Exposure and Privacy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 22. See also James Fowler, "Shame: Towards a Practical Theological Understanding," *The Christian Century* (Aug 25 – Sept 1, 1993): 816.
[23] Fowler, "Shame," 817.
[24] Jacqueline E. Lapsley, "Shame and Self-Knowledge: The Positive Role of Shame in Ezekiel's View of the Moral Self," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed., Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong, SBLSS 9 (Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 161.
[25] Lapsley, "Shame and Self-Knowledge," 159.
[26] Lapsley, "Shame and Self-Knowledge," 152.

appropriateness.[27] The *BDB*[28] provides a comprehensive definition of טוב by including that which is ethically, morally, aesthetic, and functionally good, and understands לטובה as bounty benefits. In relation to the functionality proposition, Claus Westermann asserts that the noun "good" in Genesis 1 "does not contemplate the sheer beauty of what exists prescinding from the function of what it contemplates."[29] That is to say, the use of "good" may connote the purpose of an action. In this light, לטובה (Ps. 86:17) can as well point "to a good effect."[30] Stoebe underscores a functional creation of a status of blessing and salvation and further argues that "Yahweh need not act to bless; he can also act to judge."[31] If the particle ל (*l*) functions adverbially, then it will show how God should do the sign. If adjectivally, then it will tell what the result must be. Hence the psalmist literally pleads that God uses him as a good sign that would be of enormous benefit to persuade the enemies of the omnipotence of God to a good effect. I, therefore, suggest a reading:

> Make with me a sign to a good effect,
> that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame;
> For you, O Lord, has helped me and comforted me.

The historical identity of the insolent and ruthless, and adversary is not the most significant issue.[32] It is about what they do and how they

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[27] P.D. Miller Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 73. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*: A Continental Commentary, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 166, however, claims that טוב used in Gen 1:31 could be understood as "beautiful, nice," as in the case of describing an event.

[28] Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 375.

[29] Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 167.

[30] Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 2:66; H. J. Stoebe, "טוב" in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (eds. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann; trans. Mark E. Biddle; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 2: 495.

[31] Stoebe, "טוב", 495.

[32] Form Critics usually identify the one at prayer as the king and the enemies as either a malicious group of foreigners or in few cases Israelites. For a discussion on the identity of the enemies, see A. R. Johnson, "The Psalms," in *The Old Testament and Modern Study: A Generation of Discovery and Research*, ed., H. H. Rowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), 197-203; Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogaski (Macon, Georgia: Macon University Press, 1998), 140-150; Stephen Croft, *The Identity of the Individual in the Psalms*, JSOTSup 44 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1987):15-48; Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 129-134; Dharmakkan Dhanaraj, *Theological Significance of the Motif of the enemies in Selected Psalms of the Individual Lament* (Gluckstadt: JJ Augustin, 1992).

attack. One cannot belabor the identity of the enemy as either spiritual or physical. Overgeneralizations of the enemies as political oppressors, demons, or sorcerers (as in Akkadian laments) may not be helpful at this point. In the Psalms, the psalmist calls the hostile other as "proud people" (זדים; Ps. 86:14), "violent people" (עריצים; Ps. 86:14) and "those that hate" (שנא; Ps. 86:17) the psalmist. In terms of what they do, Modupe Oduyoye opines that in African thought anyone who falls into such a category and frustrates another person's ambition, fights others arbitrarily, plans against another's interest, and inspires others to fall into trouble may be described as "one who satan's (sic) another."[33] From the above, one can simply take the enemies to be those who oppose the wellbeing of the one at prayer.

The psalmist's diminishing honor enhances the power of his plea and serves as a rhetoric strategy. Since the enemies are seeking the life of the righteous, they are not fulfilling that which brings *shalom*. The one at prayer wants the enemies to see that God has intervened and comforted him in his time of distress. As W. Dennis Tucker posits, God's image as patron in the psalms is built around the conception of cosmic and social order of a system God has created and sustains by His love.[34] God must fulfill His patron duties by working wonders in the life of His people. Celebrating God as the one who created nations (v. 9), in essence, influences the psalmist's call for the enemies to be shamed, that is, to be officially sanctioned because they do not acknowledge what God has done.[35] Before God, the psalmist's identity as "poor and needy" (v. 1) and as a "servant" (vv. 2,4,16) reinforces how the enemies see him. The attractiveness of the metaphor of "shame" (v. 17) is largely to cause the enemies to see God's acts and also reveal their own unworthiness. So the accent of shaming here is not only on how the

[33] Modupe Oduyoye, *The Psalms of Satan* (Ibadan: Sefer, 1997), observes that in African thought anyone who frustrates another person's ambition, fights others arbitrary, plans against another's interest, and inspires others to curse and/or to lie is described as "one who satan's another."
[34] W. Dennis Tucker Jr., "Is Shame a matter of Patronage in the Communal Laments," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31, no. 4 (2007): 477. 478.
[35] Lyn Bechtel, "Shame as a Sanction of Social Conduct in Biblical Israel: Judicial, Political and Social Shaming," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 49 (1991):62; T. M. Lemos, "Shame and Mutilation of Enemies in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal for Biblical Literature* 125, no. 2 (2006): 228.

enemies see themselves in the eyes of the psalmist but also how the enemies see themselves in the presence of God.[36]

With the striking evidence showing in the life of the psalmist, nothing can possibly deny the wonders of God causing the enemies to be covered with shame for not acknowledging the privileged position of the worshipper. The power of the psalmist's prayer is his ability to confess the nature of God.[37] Loyalty and mercy undergird the language of request throughout the poem. The psalmist's personal relationship to God, however, is put to test because the enemies refuse to set God in His rightful place as the one who makes things happen. This alludes to the liturgical tradition of Sinai where God discloses who he is – a faithful God who is good, forgiving, merciful and abounding in loving kindness (Cf. Ex. 33:6-7).[38]

Again, the combination of the two verbs in Line C – that the Lord has "helped me" and "comforted me" – reinforces the interpretation of "make with me a sign" in Line A as a divine action. Such an action made visible in the life of the psalmist to provide a new insight for the enemies toward self-knowledge. Perhaps, the psalmist desires that his life becomes a testimony, a mechanism of instruction to counter the actions of the enemies. Hence, the request for God to "make me a sign" may be understood as distinct and miraculous evidence within the life of the psalmist so that the enemies will come to know that their actions are in vain. The psalmist thus prays that there must be a performance leading to a transformation. The focus of the performance is the enemies. They are the object of what God is being asked to do since they do not know the wonders of God (Ps. 86:14c). In any case, when the enemies are put to shame, the faith of the psalmist in God will grow stronger.

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[36] For a discussion on the perspective of shame as God sees people and not necessarily on another human person's perception, see Gideon M. Kressel, "An Anthropologist's Response to the use of Social Science in Biblical Studies," in *Honor and Shame in the World of the Bible,* ed. V. H. Matthews and Don Benjamin, Semeia 68 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1994), 153-160 [esp 160]; Jacqueline E. Lapsley, "Shame and Self-Knowledge: The Positive Role of Shame in Ezekiel's View of the Moral Self," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives,* ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong, SBLSS (Atlanta: SBL, 2000): 143-173 [esp 159].

[37] Amy C. Cottrill, *Language, Power, and Identity in the Lament Psalms of the Individual,* Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Series 493 (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 53.

[38] Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective,* Overtures in Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 96.

The hostile others who have no regard for God's graciousness must encounter a potent sign. Helfmeyer says a sign can be a divine power used to warn or inspire fear.[39] It has a miraculous function to arouse action, and in this case the action is to cause the enemies to be afraid of the psalmist.[40] Such fear may cause the enemies to refrain from attacking the psalmist. Furthermore, Goldingay posits that the sign must prove that the enemies are wrong.[41]

In sum, the sign in the psalmist's rhetoric represents a symbol by virtue of its nature and a climax of the communicative core that conveys a visual impact and a persuasive act. God does wondrous things (v. 10). Many are the works of the Lord and no other work can be comparable (v. 8). The sign, therefore, becomes for the psalmist a metonymy that creates meaning for the wonderful works of God. It needs to be noted that the psalmist did not specify the characteristics of the sign. Rather, the emphasis was on the function of the sign and its objective rhetorical value – to put the enemies to shame. It is God the worker of miracles who makes the sign for a specific function.

Making the Church a Sign

The larger implication of such a reading for our world is how the interpreter moves on to bridge the gap and show what the exegetical discussion means for the contemporary church. The image of the sign stimulates multiple meanings and evokes an emotional response. A divine sign has a real meaning throughout scripture and sets apart or distinguishes something from the norm. I concur with William Brown who bemoans how religious reading has become a lost art for the contemporary church, and also notes how the psalms through their imaginative images set boundaries for the community of faith posing a new life force to challenge issues that confront humanity.[42] Interpreting scripture is always a daring act where the biblical text destabilizes our world

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[39] Helfmeyer, "אות", 169

[40] Helfmeyer, "אות", 175. See also Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 383.

[41] Goldingay, *Psalms 2*, 628, However, Goldingay (*Psalm 2*, 629) claims that in v 17 the sign is an expression of the master's commitment to show those who are against the psalmist that they are wrong. It should be noted that the psalmist was not necessarily looking for YHWH's commitment but a real answer. Since the psalmist already claims he has experienced the wondrous acts, an answer to his prayers will be made visible in the sign.

[42] William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 13.

and makes a case of retrieval for envisioning and structuring life as God's people.[43] Making the Christian a sign has several implications for the church.

First, the request to give the one at prayer a sign serves as motivation to the church to acknowledge and revere God, and also as *evidence* to help the world see the seriousness of the divine judgment.[44] The church needs to stand before the world as a sign of good favor to fight against evil. Erich Zenger says, "It is precisely the language of images that the psalms are open to many concrete realizations that life brings in its wake, and creatively available for the demands of each day: to find a way to take up, again and again, the struggle against violence and suffering, in a prayerful stance of appeal to God to come forward and to act."[45]

Also, the New Testament shows Christians whose life experiences speak clearly of their identity and have become an example for others to acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Yet, it strongly oppose those who rise up against the power of God. An imaginative application of Psalm 86 can help the church to be a sign for the world to bring it to self-knowledge about the power of God and acknowledge what God is doing in the life of the church. For Paul, the life of the Christian is clear evidence of salvation, a testimony of the wonderful works God can do – "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by all" (2 Cor. 3:2 Cf 1 Cor. 14:25). Peter also admonishes women whose husbands do not believe in God to set an example by their conduct (1 Pet. 1:1-2).

Furthermore, Psalm 86 is a confession of God's victory over the enemies. The allusions to creation and redemption are clearly related. The vitality of a sign is the shame intended to abash the enemies. That is to say, the build-up of the whole prayer culminates in the request for

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[43] Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Psalms," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (1990):178,179; Walter Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life* (ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 199-203; William Bellinger, "Portraits of Faith: The Scope of Theology in the Psalms," in *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature and the Psalms: Festschrift Marvin E. Tate*, ed. H. Wayne Ballard, Jr. and W. Dennis Tucker, Jr. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000), 113.

[44] Helfmeyer, "אות", 175.

[45] Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? – Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 77.

shaming. In our world where the struggle with "evil powers" knows no bounds, God's people stand in a precarious position to make visible a potent sign. Taking the stance as committed people of God must be nothing short of a destabilizing presence that reassures other people of the God who is in control. The God who creates impossibilities can also make the church a sign to the world.

Again, the church must be a portent that will cause the enemy to be ashamed. So much evil is happening in our world and believers of God are frequently at the mercy of their enemies. This, in effect, is not the time to call the church to see a sign but rather for the church to be a sign. Indeed, the issue of persuasion is a necessary element in the rhetoric of the psalmist, structuring the prayer to convince God to act. The purpose of the prayer, by no means, is not only to persuade God to intervene on behalf of the worshipper. But also the church must persuade the enemies that it is God's help and comfort that sustains it. Such can be found in how the confessional claims and language of praise in the movements of the prayer color, blend, and interpret the pleas.

In addition, Brueggemann has emphasized the place of lamentation in the contemporary church with the recovery of texts, and this call ought to be taken seriously.[46] The church needs to create spaces for lamentations about those who hate the people of God so that they may come to self-knowledge about the power of God. Shaming of enemies may as well draw them closer to God. In that way, the enemies will "set" God before them in all that they do.

The believer in God must not sit unconcerned for evil to rule the world. Wicked people who do not regard God must not rise up against the people of God. A sign of salvation to break down the wall of evil is of utmost importance. The church in its simplicity must dare and insist on the "sign of God's favor" in the private lives of believers.[47] Eugene March's words are thus worth quoting:

> In Psalm 86 the psalmist longs for a sign of God's favor. There are many people around our world and within our own nation who cry out to God from a position of powerlessness. They too long for a sign that God cares, that God loves. We know these voices. We hear them

[46] Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 98-111.
[47] Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 61. 62.

> everyday. Palestinian voices, Central American voices, Chinese voices, African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, inner-city Americans, rural Americans. And in all groups across our world the majority of the voices are those of women and children. A sign of God's favor, a sign of God's love is their plea.[48]

Finally, the church must insist on the fascinating conceptual image of a potential tool that can shame "evil" instead of overgeneralizing the favour of God in everyone's life. The redeemed image of the church can go a long way to show the reality of God who is on the side of the oppressed and also puts the enemies to shame. If Christians are to be like clay in the hands of the Potter and be useful in the service of God, they must be open and receptive to the transformation work of God (Cf Jer. 18:1-11;19:1-13) and be the sign for the enemies to come into self-knowledge of God's favour on His people. As long as the church has abandoned the lamentation of Christians and does not pray for a sign, the enemies are likely to continue pursuing the life of the innocent.

Conclusion

This essay, using a rhetorical reading that moves from a literary analysis to a radical psychological and theological location of the contemporary reader, has proposed that the psalmist's plea to "make with me a sign of good effect" makes sense and also has its place in our contemporary religious experience that seeks to overcome evil and distress. An appreciation of God, who works wonders, lies in the visibility of a sign in the life of the one at prayer. The psalmist wants to be a tool in the hands of the Miracle Worker to shame the enemies. This wondrous sign of God is not only for those who want to experience it but also for those who refuse to acknowledge God. The world ought to see these signs of God's goodness in those who are loyal to him. The psalmist's confession that God has been good to him will have little impact on the enemies without the visible signs that support it. Especially since God's role in transforming His people have far more reaching consequences (such as making God's people affirm their faith) than only being "signs of God's goodness".

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[48] W. Eugene March, "Psalm 86: When Love is not Enough," *Anglican Seminary Bulletin* 105, no. 2 (1990): 24.

The enemies who have no regard for God's graciousness in the life of the psalmist must encounter a potent sign that warns, inspires fear, judges them that have taken a wrong path so that they can come to self-knowledge and set God above everything else. Disgrace shame has a tendency to influence positive behaviour that brings self-knowledge and motivates good social relationships. Although it is a kind of painful experience that is meant to disintegrate the world of the enemies, it has the potential of orienting the enemies to acknowledge the creative power of God. The sign cannot only be relevant in a divine-human relationship but also in interpersonal relationships.

The contemporary church must be a portent that will cause the enemy to be put to shame. The church also needs to persuade the enemies by its prayers that it is God's help and comfort that sustains it. The church has more to gain if the sign is taken seriously in its ethos. By ignoring the laments, the church falls short of depicting the goodness of God. Thus, the sense of integrating power and meaning to confessions that connect with Psalm 86 must be the focus of the militant church.

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