

## **The Verbal Usage of עָבַד in the Book of Psalms: Exploring its Contextual Meaning and Theological Implications**

Melak A. Tsegaw  
Adventist University of Africa, Kenya

### **Abstract**

The Hebrew word עָבַד, commonly translated as “serve,” holds significant theological implications in the Book of Psalms, particularly concerning worship of God. This article addresses a notable gap in scholarship by examining the contextual meanings of עָבַד in its verbal form across the Psalms and exploring its theological implications. Contrary to previous limited interpretations, this research reveals a broader semantic spectrum including total submission, gratitude expression, offering gifts, trust in God, and proclamation of His name.

Furthermore, this study explores the theological implications derived from the contextual analysis עָבַד in Psalms. It highlights the significance of divine kingship in messianic Psalms where עָבַד appears frequently. The importance of knowledge is emphasized as essential for genuine worship, providing a basis to understand God’s nature and actions. Additionally, the study reveals the interconnectedness of submission, trust, and praise, forming a holistic framework for faithful service to God.

**Keywords:** עָבַד, serve, worship, Book of Psalms, Divine Kingship.

### **Introduction**

One of the Hebrew words translated as “worship,” particularly in relation to God, is עָבַד. Craig Broyles notes that Biblical Hebrew lacks a direct equivalent to the generic English term “worship,” but the word translated as “serve” (עָבַד) may come closest to it.<sup>1</sup> Despite עָבַד having an entry in lexicons and Bible dictionaries, there is a dearth of studies specifically focusing on its usage in the Book of Psalms. Recognizing this gap, Edward Bridge observes, “...little study has been done on the context of the use of עָבַד in the Psalms. As a result, meanings for the term are often determined without adequate reflection of its contextual use.”<sup>2</sup> Although Bridges’ article extensively

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<sup>1</sup> Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 386.

<sup>2</sup> Edward J. Bridge, *Loyalty, Dependency and Status with YHWH: The Use of ‘bd in the Psalms*, *Vetus Testamentum* 59 (2009), 361.

addresses the usage of עבד in the Book of Psalms, he primarily emphasizes its noun form.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, the verbal form of עבד warrants further investigation. This article aims to contribute to filling that gap. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the study of עבד in the Book of Psalms and elucidate its theological implications by asking: What are the possible contextual meanings of the verbal usage of עבד in the Book of Psalms, and what are the theological implications of these meanings?<sup>4</sup>

Using exegetical methods, this article first presents the lexical meaning of the word and its usage in the Book of Psalms. Subsequently, all verbal occurrences of עבד in the Book of Psalms are studied to ascertain their contextual meanings. Finally, theological implications are drawn from these contextual meanings.

### **The Meaning and Usage of עבד in the Psalter**

Various lexicons provide the meaning of the root word in its different conjugations. The Qal conjugation of the verbal root עבד encompasses the following range of meanings: 1) to toil (such as tilling the ground or working with animals); 2) to work for someone or serve; 3) to serve someone as a slave; 4) to serve in order to acquire; 5) to accomplish or do; 6) to yield to or

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<sup>3</sup> Bridge posits that all verbal occurrences of עבד in the Psalms are metaphorical, with their meanings intricately linked to the object to which the word is attached. When the object of the verb is deity, Bridge interprets it as referring to worship. However, if the object is kings, the word signifies “to be subject to.” (Ibid., 363). This dichotomy faces two challenges: Firstly, even when עבד is employed in the worship of a deity, it inherently entails the notion of subjecting oneself to the deity, a point acknowledged by Bridge. Secondly, the psalms containing instances of עבד with kings as their object are royal psalms (Psalms 18 and 72), which are also regarded as messianic, implying reference to more than just an earthly king but pointing to the Divine King. This article posits that the royal psalms should be viewed as messianic, with the Divine King being considered a plausible object for the verb עבד in these occurrences.

<sup>4</sup> While the broader biblical context provides a backdrop to this study, the paper specifically focuses on the Book of Psalms. Within this scope, the primary emphasis is on the term עבד, although related words are also considered. Furthermore, the verbal form of עבד in the Psalms receives greater attention. Additionally, it's important to note that this paper does not delve into issues related to source criticism; rather, the Book of Psalms is approached in its final form.

gratify; 7) to perform service in the cult, to worship Yahweh by sacrificing to Him.<sup>5</sup>

In the Psalter, the Psalmist frequently refers to himself as the servant of God.<sup>6</sup> Helmer Ringgren labels this usage as “self-designation in Psalms” and comments: “By using this self-designation, the petitioner hopes to portray himself as someone dependent on Yahweh’s goodness, and perhaps to adduce precisely his identity as *‘ebed* as a reason for intervention.... Synonyms show that in Ps. 119 *‘ebed* is above all someone who keeps the law.”<sup>7</sup> Ringgren compares this self-designation with the “aradka style of Akkadian penitential psalms”<sup>8</sup> and notes that this kind of self-designation occurs only rarely outside the Psalms.<sup>9</sup>

Bridge presents a relatively lengthy discussion on the study of עִבַד in the Psalms. Affirming that the metaphorical use of עִבַד in Psalms is built on the literal meaning of the term, Bridge shares similar observations to Ringgren, such as the frequent occurrence of this word as self-designation (which Bridge terms “term of deference”) and its frequent use in the context of supplication. The contextual analysis of these occurrences of the noun עִבַד in the Psalms led Bridge to conclude that the word indicates submission, dependency, and loyalty to Yahweh.<sup>10</sup>

The verb form of עִבַד in the Qal stem occurs eight times (Pss 2: 11; 18:44; 22:31; 72:11; 97:7; 100:2; 102:23; 106:36), and the word does not appear in

<sup>5</sup> William Lee Holladay, Ludwig Köhler, and Ludwig Köhler, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), s.v. “עִבַד”. See also Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, M.E.J Richardson and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Volumes 1-4 Combined in One Electronic Edition., electronic ed. (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1999, c1994-1996), s.v. “עִבַד”.

<sup>6</sup> The expression your servant, עִבְדֶּךָ, is used 28 times in the Psalter. (Pss 19:12, 14; 31:17; 69: 18; 86:2, 4, 16; 89:40; 109:28; 116:16 (2x); 119: 17, 23, 38, 49, 65, 76, 84, 122, 124, 135, 140, 176; 132:10; 143:2, 12).

<sup>7</sup> Helmer Ringgren, “עִבַד,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT)*, eds. G.J. Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. By David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 10: 393.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> See Abraham (Gen 18:3), Lot (Gen 19:19), Moses (Num 11:11), Solomon (1 Kgs 3: 7-8).

<sup>10</sup> Bridge, 360-378.

other conjugations in the Psalter.<sup>11</sup> Now we turn to the grammatical analysis of the passages in which the verbal form of the word appears.

### Psalm 2:11

Psalm 2 is thematically categorized as belonging to the genre of royal psalms. The term מְלִיךָ is prominently featured three times within this Psalm (vv 2, 6, and 10). Additionally, other titles alluding to the regal office are employed, including “anointed one” (v 2) and “my son” (vv 7 and 12).<sup>12</sup> In this Psalm, the anointed king rebukes and redirects earthly rulers to the right path.

The term עֲבַד is situated within the concluding strophe of the Psalm, delineated in verses 10 through 12. Notably, the two pivotal terms in verse 10 exhibit a discernible placement at the central point of an A-B-B<sup>1</sup>-A<sup>1</sup> structural pattern:

“[A]Now therefore, O kings, [B]be wise (הַשְׂכִּילוּ);  
[B<sup>1</sup>]be warned (הוֹסִרוּ), [A<sup>1</sup>]O rulers of the earth.”<sup>13</sup>

The first verb, שָׂכַל, is commonly translated as “understand,” “have insight,” or “comprehension.”<sup>14</sup> Notably, in the Psalms, this word (in its various forms) is consistently related to the knowledge of God himself, with

<sup>11</sup> There are two occurrences of the substantival form of עֲבַד--Ps 104: 14, 23. Both are not used in the context of worshipping God.

<sup>12</sup> Commentators often employ the consideration of the *Sitz im Leben* of the Psalm as one method for identifying its literary type. However, decoding the *Sitz im Leben* of most Psalms proves to be a challenging task. Krause presents two potential occasions that could define the setting of this Psalm. The first occasion proposed is the “king’s enthronement festival.” Nevertheless, Krause critiques this possibility, stating, “But it is in no way possible to reconstruct from this text.” The second suggestion regarding the occasion for this Psalm is the “annual enthronement festival” Hans-Joachim Krause, *Psalms 1-59* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 126.

<sup>13</sup> All biblical quotations are from the ESV, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>14</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, ed. Richard Whitaker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), s.v. “שָׂכַל”.

only one exception.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is plausible to associate the knowledge that the kings of the earth are commanded to obtain with knowledge of God.

The second verb, יָסַר, can be seen as parallel to שָׁכַל. It is translated as “discipline,” “chasten,” or “admonish.”<sup>16</sup> A review of its nine usages in the Psalter reveals two facts: (1) all occurrences are in connection with God, and (2) both negative and positive connotations are found. When this action of God is assumed to be done in His anger, it is depicted negatively, but it is also used positively to depict actions leading to rejoicing. John Goldingay comments on the usage of these two words:

In verse 3, they were throwing off the constraints designed to keep them on the right path (*moserot*); now they are urged to allow themselves to be put on the right path (*yasar*). There is a condescending but realistic tone to verse 10, which, in speaking of good sense and openness to correction, addresses the kings like a parent addressing a child, akin to the teacher in Proverbs.<sup>17</sup>

Verse 11 and the first part of verse 12 further explain what it means to obey the imperatives given in verse 10—namely, to be wise and instructed. Three actions can be identified: (a) serving with reverence (עָבַדוּ אֶת־יְהוָה (בִּירָאָה), (b) rejoicing with trembling (וּגִילוּ בְרֵעֵדָה), and (c) kissing the son (וּשְׁקוּ־בֵר). However, the meanings of the Hebrew words in this passage are

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<sup>15</sup> Out of the ten occurrences of this word, aside from Psalm 2, nine of them directly relate to knowing or seeking God. In Psalms 14:2 and 53:2, understanding is linked with seeking God; Psalm 32:8 illustrates that God grants this understanding; Psalm 36:4 portrays the wicked, who lack fear of God, as having lost their wisdom. The concept of understanding is depicted as directed towards various aspects of God: His work (Pss 64:10 and 106:7), His nature (Ps 94:8), His perfect way (Ps 101:2), and His testimonies (Ps 119:99).

<sup>16</sup> Holladay, s.v., “יָסַר.”

<sup>17</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1: 102.

understood differently by different scholars. While some disregard the word for “rejoice” and “son,” others interpret it differently.<sup>18</sup>

It is noteworthy to see the connection between these three actions—serving ascribed to the Lord, kissing due to the Son—both metaphorically referring to submission and paying homage. “Rejoicing in trembling” vividly describes the outcome of serving the Lord and kissing the Son, reflecting a unique nature of rejoicing found through proper knowledge of God. The final part of verse 12 presents the ultimate fate of those who resist the rulership of the king of heaven and His anointed—the Son. Yet, the Psalm does not end with a dismal picture of unavoidable judgment but calls for trust in God.

In summary, the contextual meaning of עִבַּד in Psalm 2 can be stated as submitting oneself to God and to His anointed in reverence and rejoicing stemming from accurate knowledge of His rulership.

### Psalm 18:44

Psalm 18 is widely accepted as one of the Psalms composed by David himself, exhibiting a striking resemblance to 2 Samuel 22 and is regarded as ancient.<sup>19</sup> It is a royal psalm and the reference to the king as the anointed one or messiah in both Psalms 2 and 18 (18:51; cf. Psalm 2:2) foreshadows the coming of the Christ. Therefore, Psalm 18:44 can also be interpreted with the messiah in mind. The verbal form of עִבַּד is attested in verse 44:

<sup>18</sup> Artur Weiser disregards the word for “rejoice” and “son” when he translates it as “with trembling kiss his feet,” (Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 184. While Mitchel Dahood prefers to translate it as “and live in trembling, O mortal men!” Mitchell Dahood, S.J., *Psalms I: 1-50: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 13. The difficulties in these passage and other various interpretations are discussed concisely by Peter Craigie. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary. 52 vols. (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1983), 64.

<sup>19</sup> Regarding the Messianic nature of Psalm 18, scholars hold divergent views. Goldingay, aligning with Kraus, denies the possibility. Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 266; Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 279. However, Derek Kidner takes the opposite stance, stating, “...much in this psalm ‘agrees better with Christ’, as Calvin said, than with David; and in Romans 15:9 Paul needed no argument to support his treating verse 49 as part of a prophecy of the Messiah.” Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction & Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D .J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-varsity Press, 1973), 90.

You delivered me from strife with the people;  
 you made me the head of the nations;  
 people whom I had not known served me (יעבדוני).

In this context, the significance of the term עבד can be elucidated by considering the semantic nuances of adjacent verbs in verses 45 and 46. Corresponding to עבד in verse 45, the term כהש connotes “to come cringing,”<sup>20</sup> signifying a posture of profound humility or servility. This lexical choice recurs thrice within the Psalms (Pss 66:3; 81:16; 109:24), portraying the subjugated stance of adversaries in the presence of the Divine. Similarly, the verb נבל in verse 46, while rendered as “brought gifts”<sup>21</sup> by Weiser, more aptly signifies “to fall like a leaf,” a connotation congruent with its usage in other psalmic contexts (1:3; 37:2). Lastly, the final term in conjunction with עבד is הרג. It translates to “trembling,” further underscoring the sense of awe and reverence encapsulated within the broader thematic scope of the verse.

When considering these three words in conjunction with עבד, a progressive narrative of comprehensive surrender unfolds. The initial term portrays a condition of vulnerability (כהש), succeeded by a depiction of decline and descent (נבל), culminating in the relinquishment of one's fortress and absolute submission (הרג). Thus, the contextual meaning of עבד is intimately linked to the notion of complete surrender and deference to the authority of the King. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that their understanding of the king's authority precipitated this act of service, as evidenced by the assertion, “When they heard they obeyed.”

### Psalm 22: 31

In accordance with its literary genre, Psalm 22 is classified as a prayer song, specifically belonging to the genre of lament. However, akin to other lamentations, it culminates in expressions of praise and assertions of confidence. The discernible structural divisions within this Psalm are evident between verses 1-21 and verses 22-31. While the former segment constitutes a profound lamentation, the latter transforms into an exalted hymn of praise. Furthermore, the latter section of the Psalm can be subdivided into two

<sup>20</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, ed. Richard Whitaker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), s.v. “שכל”.

<sup>21</sup> Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 184.

distinct parts: verses 22-26 resemble a thanksgiving Psalm, whereas verses 27-31 proclaim Yahweh's kingship.<sup>22</sup> Notably, it is in verse 31 where the psalmist envisages the forthcoming generation as devoted servants (עבד) of the Lord.

“Posterity shall serve him (יעבדנו);

it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;”

In order to comprehend the contextual significance of עבד in this verse, it proves beneficial to examine its parallelism with the adjacent line in verse 32. The two verbs juxtaposed with עבד are ספר, meaning “to tell,” and נגד, meaning “to declare.” This juxtaposition distinctly illustrates that the act of serving entails the proclamation of the righteousness of the Lord and His mighty deeds to the succeeding generation. Consequently, the contextual connotation of עבד encompasses within its scope the action of recounting and disseminating information regarding God and His righteousness.

### Psalm 72:11

Psalm 72 is a royal psalm that presents a prayer for the king's reign. It has also been widely acknowledged as having messianic significance in both Jewish and Christian writings.<sup>23</sup> Structurally, the entirety of the Psalm can be comprehended through an ABA' framework, as succinctly articulated by Dorsey:

A- prayer for justice, prosperity, and the king's long life (72:1-7)

B CENTER: prayer for ascendancy over all the nations (72:8-11)

A<sup>1</sup>- prayer for justice, prosperity, and the king's long life (72:12-17)<sup>24</sup>

Following this structure, it is observed that עבד is found in verse 11 at the center of this Psalm.

Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him;

<sup>22</sup> Broyles, *Psalms*, 121.

<sup>23</sup> Allen Ross elucidates the psalm's language by stating, “The language of the psalm appears idealistic; it looks far beyond the experience of any king in Israel's history but harmonizes with the prophecies of the anticipated glorious reign of the Messiah.” Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2013), 533.

<sup>24</sup> David A. Dorsey. *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 1999), 175.

All nations shall serve Him (יעבדוהו).

A closer investigation of the central strophe shows that verse 11 recaps the three main themes found in verses 8-10. Firstly, verse 8 emphasizes the universality of the depicted action, a concept mirrored in verse 11 with the mention of “all kings and nations” (גוים-כל מלכים-כל). Secondly, verse 9 addresses the act of bowing down and paying homage, a motif reiterated in verse 11, where all are enjoined to prostrate before the king. Lastly, verse 10 introduces the notion of presenting gifts, a theme paralleled by the concept of serving in verse 11. This parallel suggests that “serving” can aptly be understood to encompass the act of presenting gifts to God within this context.<sup>25</sup>

A juxtaposition of מנחה with חזה and עבד further elucidates the correlation between these actions. In 1 Chronicles 16:29, offering is paralleled with prostration before the Lord. Similarly, in Isaiah 19:21, it is prophesied that the Egyptians will acknowledge the Lord and serve Him with sacrifices and gifts (מנחה). Therefore, serving the Lord can also manifest through presenting gifts. However, this must be done with understanding and voluntary willingness, as the Lord says, “I have not caused you to serve with grain offerings,” indicating that He has not compelled them to offer sacrifices against their will (Isa 43:23, NKJV).

### Psalm 97:7

The literary type of Psalm 97 is identified as “enthronement Psalm” together with Psalms 47; 93; 96-99.<sup>26</sup> It is also possible to observe a fivefold division of the Psalm: Verses 1-3, 4-6, 7, 8-9, 10-12, with verse 7 as the central verse.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> It is noteworthy to observe that King Solomon received tribute from his subjects as they served him. Consequently, the terms for “gift” and “to serve” are juxtaposed in 1 Kgs 4:21.

<sup>26</sup> “The common feature of all these psalms (in addition to the cultic cry, ‘The Lord has become king’) is that God is praised for his majesty, with special emphasis put on the reign of Israel’s God over the entire world....” Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, content and message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing house, 1980), 114.

<sup>27</sup> Though Tate points out this division, he prefers to work with two main sections: 1-9 and 10-12. Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary, 52 vols. (Dallas, TX: Word Incorporated, 2002), 518.

“Let all be put to shame who serve (עבדי) carved images,  
Who boast of idols.  
Worship Him, all you gods.” (NKJV)

The term בוש, denoting “to be ashamed,” stands in stark contrast to the sentiment held by idol worshippers—הלל, signifying “to be boastful.” Consequently, the Psalmist petitions that their pride in their idols transforms into shame, as these idols hold no value. It is noteworthy that אליל, the subsequent term employed by the Psalmist, parallels פסל, the graven image, and can denote both “worthless” and “idol.” Indeed, the Psalmist underscores that boasting about these futile idols is inherently shameful.

Moreover, it is insightful to note the juxtaposition of the words עבד and הלל. Serving these idols and boasting about them, or placing one's trust in them, are intertwined in this passage, making the connection evident. Therefore, the contextual interpretation of עבד in this instance could encompass trusting or placing one's confidence in these idols. However, the only being worthy of our complete allegiance is Yahweh, who is described as “most high above all the earth” and “exalted far above all gods” (v. 9).

### Psalm 100:2

Psalm 100 is a succinct yet profoundly majestic expression of praise towards God. While traditionally labeled as a “thanksgiving Psalm,” Kraus refines its categorization as a “processional hymn,” endeavoring to contextualize it based on verses 2 and 4.<sup>28</sup> This Psalm comprises a series of imperatives, inviting analysis through a concentric structure as follows:

- A Make a joyful shout (הריעו), v. 1
- B Serve (עבדו), v. 2a
- C Come (באו), v. 2b
- D Know (דעו), v. 3
- C<sup>1</sup> Come (באו), v. 4a
- B<sup>1</sup> Be thankful (הודו), v. 4b
- A<sup>1</sup> Bless (ברכו), v. 4c

In this structural analysis, the pivotal action at the core of the arrangement is דעו, which commands individuals to acquire knowledge of the true God. Subsequently, this acquired knowledge directs worshipers to adhere to the

<sup>28</sup> Krause, *Psalms 1-59*, 160.

directive באו, which entails entering the dwelling place of God. The act of <sup>29</sup> entering then culminates in “serving God” (עבד), a concept that may also encompass “thanking God” (הודו) within this particular context. The final two parallels demonstrate the expression of this act of thanksgiving: through making a joyful noise (הריעו) and blessing His name (ברכו שמו). Consequently, the contextual interpretation of עבד in Psalm 100 denotes an expression of gratitude to God accompanied by exuberant jubilation.

### Psalm 102:23

Psalm 102:19-23 encapsulates the theme of praising God. This segment delves into the question of who praises God and elucidates the reasons behind their praise. In verses 19 and 23, which bookend the section, the query “who will praise God?” is addressed using language that transcends temporal bounds, encompassing individuals yet to come into existence (v. 19), and surpassing geographical confines, encompassing all kingdoms (v. 23). Then, in the central verses (20-22), the Psalmist delineates the acts of God as the impetus for His people’s adoration. These actions follow a logical progression: God observes from a celestial vantage point (v. 20), attends to the cries of prisoners (v. 21a), liberates those sentenced to death (v. 21b), and finally, the liberated ones proclaim the name of the Lord (v. 22).

Reading verses 21 and 22 together will further enlighten us that the declaration of the name of the Lord and His praise will take place in Zion when the people and the kingdoms assemble to serve the Lord. Hence, the contextual meaning of עבד in this instance, encompasses declaring the name of the Lord and His praises.

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<sup>29</sup> The use of the word “entering” appears twice, first in verse 2 and then in verse 4. However, the subsequent occurrence in verse 4 provides more specific details regarding the location of this entry. Grogan suggests that these verses (v. 4 and 5) likely address Israel exclusively, as the reference to gates and courts pertains to the temple, accessible only to the nations in its outer court. Additionally, verse 5 pertains to the covenant, wherein Yahweh’s enduring love and faithfulness are articulated. (Geoffrey Grogan, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 169, 170.

### Psalm 106: 34-38

Scholarship does not offer unanimous consensus regarding the genre classification of Psalm 106.<sup>30</sup> However, structurally, the psalm exhibits a discernible pattern, outlined as follows:

- A Invocation to praise (vv. 1-3)
- B Remember me, O Lord (vv. 4-5)
- C Retelling of Israel's history of rebellion and God's faithfulness (vv. 6-45)
- B<sup>1</sup> Beseeching for salvation, O Lord (v. 47)
- A<sup>1</sup> Concluding invocation to praise (v. 48)

The verbal usage of עִבַּד is found in verse 36:

“They served (עִבְדוּ) their idols,  
Which became a snare to them.”

To grasp the contextual meaning of עִבַּד in this Psalm, it is beneficial to analyze the connection between the key words appearing in verses 34-38. A logical sequence can be observed in the order of the words, revealing a cause-and-effect relationship. The disobedience of the Israelites, in failing to destroy the nations as commanded, resulted in their integration or intermingling with these nations. Subsequently, this mingling caused them to adopt the ways of these nations. As a result of this new learning experience, they began to serve the idols of these nations. The description further amplifies this idolatrous service by detailing how the Israelites engaged in human sacrifices to the idols of Canaan. Therefore, the juxtaposition of the words עִבַּד and זָבַח, as well as the cause-and-effect relationship evident in these words, suggests that the meaning of עִבַּד in this context pertains to offering sacrifices.

It is noteworthy that the service to idols in this context is described as a snare (מוֹקֵשׁ) and harlotry (זִנָּה).<sup>31</sup> These two expressions depict both the cognitive and emotive elements involved in the act of service. When the

<sup>30</sup> Hence, “it is variously viewed as a song of praise (see vv. 1-2), a communal lament or prayer for healing (see vv. 4-5, 47), a liturgy of penitence (see vv. 6-7), and a sermon, as well as its more frequent designation as a historical psalm.” J. Clinton McCann, *The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, The New Interpreter’s Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon), 4:1110. Other historical Psalms include Ps 78, 105, 136.

<sup>31</sup> Commenting on the usage of the Hebrew word מוֹקֵשׁ Santrac points out that it “depicts a deadly bird trap, and highlights the people’s pitiful downfall.” Dragslova Santrac, *Psalms 76-150*, Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2022), 6:499.

covenant people deviated to serving idols, they succumbed to temptations appealing to their appetites. By yielding to these enticing scenes and beginning to serve the idols, they broke their commitment to God. Thus, עִבַּד in this context signifies offering a gift and rendering total allegiance to the object of worship.

In summary, the contextual meaning of עִבַּד in the book of Psalms embraces various dimensions of worship and devotion to deity. While the term is employed with other gods as its object, Yahweh is the sole deity deserving of the full extent of what עִבַּד entails. Consequently, עִבַּד encompasses total submission, placing trust in the Lord, expressing gratitude, offering gifts, and declaring God's goodness.

### **Theological Implications**

The following theological points are derived from the contextual analysis of the verbal usage of עִבַּד in the book of Psalms.

#### **1. Divine Kingship as the Basis of Service**

Among the occurrences of the term “עִבַּד” in the Psalter, four are found within Messianic psalms (Pss 2, 18, 22, and 72). These psalms anticipate the advent of a Divine King who merits service. Those called to serve this King are depicted through various compositions: “kings and judges of the earth” (Ps 2:10), posterity (Ps 22:31), all nations (Ps 72:11), all lands (Ps 100:1), and kingdoms (Ps 102:23). This suggests that Yahweh is the King of kings who should be served by the entire creation; from the exalted to the humble, all should render Him service. Westermann concurs with this notion, asserting that to be human without serving God is inconceivable. In the Old Testament, “serving God” entails one's complete relationship with God, representing an acknowledgment of God as Lord that permeates one's entire existence.<sup>32</sup>

#### **2. Knowledge as the Prerequisite of Acceptable Service**

In Psalm 2, before the kings of the earth are commanded to serve the Lord, they are summoned to gain wisdom and instruction (v. 10). The service of those nations foreign to Him results from their hearing of the mighty acts of the king and their obedience to what they have heard (Ps 18:43-44). Similarly, in Psalm 22, the posterity envisioned as rendering service to God does so by proclaiming God's nature and acts. Evidently, they first needed to

<sup>32</sup> Claus Westermann, “עִבַּד,” *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 2:829.

be familiar with what they would go and tell as a service to God. Therefore, their service was based on their knowledge. Notably, in Psalm 100, as discussed in the previous chapter, the verb *לָעָרַךְ* takes a central position and is claimed to be a prerequisite for proper service to God. Santrac concurs:

Worship of the Lord is intelligent, that is, one ought to know whom one worships and why. The Hebrew *yada'* "to know" depicts more than a theoretical knowledge. The knowledge of God comes from experiencing His love and faithfulness and implies an intimate relationship with the Creator (Isa 19:21; Jer 31:34; Hos 2:20; 1 John 4:8).<sup>33</sup>

### 3. The Integration of the Different Facets of Service

From the Book of Psalms, it has been observed that the action *עָבַד* could have different facets. Yet, these facets should not be viewed as fragmented pieces but as parts of a larger picture. Therefore, an integrative approach towards them is beneficial.

These facets are interconnected. Submission, one contextual meaning of *עָבַד*, can be seen as the foundation of all. This attitude sets the stage for proper service to God. As the creator, God is the owner of everything, and no one can serve Him as one serves fellow creatures. "If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it" (Ps 50:12). However, God has given humanity free will to choose and willingly submit to Him. "But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (Josh 24:15). This total submission is the foundational facet of *עָבַד*.

In connection with the attitude of submission, putting one's trust in God is another facet of *עָבַד*. Unfortunately, this shade of meaning is used in relation to idols in the Psalms. However, it was intended to be directed towards God alone, as serving idols was considered harlotry. Thus, serving God means trusting Him and remaining in a trusting relationship with Him. The usage of *עָבַד* in the Book of Judges amplifies this point, as the Israelites were reported to be "serving other gods" whenever they broke their covenantal relationship with God (Judg 3:6).

Perhaps the two facets of *עָבַד* seen so far, submission and trust, could be considered attitude-oriented. Yet, they do not remain solely in the mental

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<sup>33</sup> Santrac, *Psalm 76-150*, 453-54

state; they are accompanied by actions stemming from them. These actions are also part of the facets of עבד.

Bowing down and paying homage is an act that can be considered one of these facets of עבד. The Hebrew words for bowing down, חוה and עבד, are frequently juxtaposed. A comparison of the call to worship in Psalms 100:2 with Psalms 95:6 and 96:9 indicates further that עבד is, in effect, a synonym for חוה (Pss 95:6; 96:9) and two other terms, כרע (to bow down) and ברך (to kneel) (Ps 95:6).

Presenting gifts and offerings is another act that can be seen as a result of an attitude of submission and trust. As mentioned earlier, although God's existence is not dependent upon our offerings, He allows us to express gratitude to Him by bringing offerings and gifts to support His cause.

Listening to the praises of God by congregating with others, declaring His word, and blessing His name are also facets of עבד. Total submission leads to a life of praising the one to whom we have surrendered. The acts of bowing down and presenting offerings are usually accompanied by testimony of the greatness and goodness of God.

### Conclusion

The primary objective of this article was to elucidate the contextual significance of עבד in its verbal form within the book of Psalms. While Bridge has posited only two potential interpretations—worship when the object is a deity and “to be subject to” when the object is king—this study revealed that its semantic range encompasses broader notions. These include total submission, gratitude expression, offering gifts, placing one's trust in the Lord, and declaration of His name. In Psalms 2 and 18, עבד conveys the idea of submitting oneself to God and His anointed One, characterized by reverence and rejoicing stemming from a profound comprehension of His rulership. This contrasts with the portrayal of the submission of idol worshippers through offerings in Psalm 106.

Similarly, in Psalm 72, the contextual connotation of עבד suggests presenting gifts as an act of complete surrender and submission to the supremacy of the Divine King, symbolized by offerings from all corners of the earth. Conversely, in Psalm 97, עבד denotes trusting or placing one's confidence in idols, although Yahweh is the only being deserving of our complete allegiance. In Psalm 100, עבד signifies expressing gratitude to God with exuberant jubilation, while in Psalms 22 and 102, it encompasses declaring the name of the Lord and His praises.

Furthermore, the theological implications derived from the contextual analysis of the verbal usage of עבד in the book of Psalms illuminate fundamental aspects of serving God. Firstly, the prevalence of occurrences of עבד in messianic Psalms underscores divine kingship as the foundation of the service rendered to Him. Secondly, knowledge emerges as a prerequisite for acceptable service, emphasizing the importance of understanding God's nature and acts as a foundation for genuine worship. Finally, an integrative approach to the different facets of service reveals the interconnectedness of submission, trust, and praise, forming a holistic framework for serving God faithfully. Through these theological insights, the Psalms invite believers to engage in a life of worship characterized by wholehearted devotion, informed by knowledge, and expressed through various acts of submission, trust, and praise.