

# A Thematic Approach to the Translation of the Psalms<sup>1</sup>

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## 1.1 Challenges in the book of Psalms

The book of Psalms is a wonderful and inspirational book to translate, but it is also one of the more difficult and complex books of the Bible. There are several reasons for this. First of all, with 2,461 verses, it is the longest book of the Bible. At ten verses a day, the first draft would take 246 days to complete. The second draft would take approximately 82 days. If the work of the review committee and the consultant checking take a minimum two weeks, the entire amount of time spent on completing the translation of the book of Psalms would be a total of 342 days or more, an estimated work time of over a year and a half<sup>3</sup>!

In addition, the poetic nature of the Psalms, with its rich imagery and sometimes ambiguous language, requires special training. They contain such a wide variety of vocabulary and expressions that sometimes the translator wonders if it is possible to match all the Hebrew synonyms with words in his language.<sup>4</sup>

These factors are further complicated by the fact that the Psalms contain an assortment of many themes: political plots, liturgy, social life, the nature of God and our relationship with Him, and so on. A translator must also be very familiar with the historical and geographical background of the Bible, because the psalmist may suddenly allude to a distant event without making any explicit reference to the historical context<sup>5</sup>.

The variety of genres in the Psalms also presents challenges. Certain songs were written to praise God, others were complaints or pleas, and still others give advice or warnings, promises of

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<sup>3</sup> Calculations here are based on a United Bible Societies model for translation progress.

<sup>4</sup> For example, it is not easy for a translator to distinguish and translate the nuances of the different words for ‘praise’.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, in Psalm 132, the Psalmist alludes to events described in 2 Samuel 6 and 7.

blessing or threats of punishment. This complexity constitutes yet another layer of difficulty for the translator, especially if he decides to translate them in canonical order (i.e numerical order), starting with Psalm 1. This first Psalm gives advice. In contrast, Psalm 2 talks about nations plotting against God's chosen people, while Psalm 3 describes how the psalmist trusts in God in a dangerous situation. Psalm 4 and onwards call on God for help. If a translator translates a Psalm according to its canonical order, the genre and language change so frequently that he/she struggles to remember how he translated certain key words and expressions of a Psalm of the same genre some weeks or days earlier.

However, as we read through the Psalms, we recognize that the themes and the vocabulary are often repeated. For example, Psalm 8 is the first of many praise Psalms; Psalm 10 has the same theme of calling on God for help as Psalm 4. Because of these repeated themes, the suggestion arose to regroup the Psalms according to genres and themes in order to facilitate translation. If one translates by grouping all the Psalms with the same themes, he/she will be able to exegete the passages with the same vocabulary and discourse features together, producing a higher quality text with a higher consistency in the translation of terms and expressions. Furthermore, the translation will be done more rapidly since repeated expressions will come in quick succession within the thematic group, facilitating rapid recall and, in some cases, copying and pasting.

This article presents an organization of the Psalms by genre and by theme, which will facilitate both the exegesis and the translation task. We propose that, instead of translating the Psalms in canonical order, the translators translate them in order of their genres and themes. The task remains to classify the Psalms in a way that would best suit the needs of the translator.

## 1.2 Classifying the Psalms by genre and theme

There are several ways in which scholars have classified the Psalms.<sup>6</sup> Each classification follows certain criteria: theological theme, historical context, literary form, etc. In the biblical text itself, there are organizational indications at the beginning of a number of Psalms, identifying the author, a particular collection, the historical context of the composition, and sometimes the accompanying instruments or the melody to which the Psalm must be sung.

The most useful classification for translators is that which groups the Psalms according to discourse type, communication goal, grammatical features, themes, and vocabulary.

The first and primary criterion is classification according to the **communicative goal** of the Psalm: Is it written to praise God (Ps 8), to ask for God's help (Ps 4), to teach (Ps 1), to invite God to bring forth judgment (Ps 2), to express joy (Ps 138) or distress (Ps 13), or to give a promise (Ps 89) or some information? This classification allows us to group together the Psalms which share the same or similar characteristics of *discourse, language, and grammar*.

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<sup>6</sup> For a survey of the different classifications of the Psalms, see Alfred Kuen, *Encyclopédie des difficultés bibliques : Vol. 3, Livres Poétiques*. Saint-Légier : Éditions Emmaüs, 2009, p. 247-251 and Philip S. Johnston and David G. Firth, eds. *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and approaches*. Leicester: APPOLLOS, 2005, p. 295-300. Our classification here most closely resembles that of W.H. Bellinger, *Psalms : Reading and Studying the Book of Praises*. Peabody: 1990.

A secondary criterion classifies Psalms according to **theme** or the content of the Psalm. It answers questions such as: Why does the psalmist praise the Lord? What kinds of needs motivate a request? What does it teach? What information does it give? This type of classification groups together Psalms which share the same *vocabulary*.

There are several **communication goals** in the book of the Psalms. The most widespread category is **praise** to God. The majority of the Psalms have at least one verse or two that constitutes praise, but there is a large group of Psalms of which the primary classification is *praise*<sup>7</sup>, for example, Psalms 111, 113, and 117. Once a few praise psalms have been translated, it will be easier to translate other poems of the same type.

A second widespread category is **didactic**, for example, Psalms 1, 15, and 112. This type of Psalm offers teachings, exhortations, words of wisdom and warnings, sometimes words of blessing and condemnation. Not many Psalms are purely didactic but many of them contain didactic verses.

The third large category is **petition**, which includes any supplication or requests addressed to God. Indeed, these Psalms outnumber all the praise Psalms and didactic Psalms combined. They are also more complex than the others, for they often contain didactic portions, praises and petitions. If a translator translates the praise and didactic Psalms first, the translation of the petition Psalms will be made easier.

Finally, there is a small category of **wish** or **promise** Psalms, which often deal with themes of royalty and Jerusalem.

Each large category has its typical themes. For example, the praise Psalms highlight the following topics about God: His creative acts, His relationship with His creation, and His holiness. The didactic Psalms talk about people's good or bad behavior and the consequences of their behavior. The petitions express the need for help as well as pleas for forgiveness.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Translation by genre and theme

In order to facilitate a thematic approach to the translation of the Psalms, the Psalms have been grouped together in lists below. In each group, the short, simple Psalms are presented before the longer more complex Psalms. The number of verses in each Psalm is indicated in parentheses.

For each genre, a number of typical features concerning its organization, themes, and language are presented. Translators would do well to familiarize themselves with these features in order to optimize the quality of the translation.

### 2.1 Psalms of praise

Most praise psalms contain a particular type of vocabulary:

1. **Terms to express praise**, for example: *rejoice, sing, bless, celebrate, psalms, exalt, praise, lift up God's name, call on His name, dance, exult...*

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<sup>7</sup> Some scholars use the term 'hymns' for praise songs.

<sup>8</sup> A dominating theme throughout all the categories of Psalms is the theme of "the enemy".

2. **Expressions of joy:** *jubilant, pleasure, cheerfulness*
3. **Terms concerning the glory of God:** *glory, great, splendor, king, holy name, your pride, my glory, radiance, eternal, fearsome, good, beautiful, supreme...*
4. **Terms concerning the character of God:** Ps 89.14-19): *faithfulness, justice, salvation, trustworthy, help, shelter, protection, grace, loyalty, righteousness, giving, deliverer, holy, shield, wisdom, sacred, strength, power, steadfastness, truth, goodness, compassion, fairness, integrity...*
5. **Reasons for praising God:** *His creation, His goodness and loyalty towards His people, His justice, life...*

Psalm 113 is a good example of a Psalm of praise (ESV)

<b>Organization and themes</b>	<b>Psalm 113</b>
Call/Expression of praise	<i>1 Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD, praise the name of the LORD! 2 Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time forth and forevermore! 3 From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the LORD is to be praised!</i>
The glory of God	<i>4 The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens! 5 Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, 6 who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?.</i>
Reasons for praising the Lord	<i>7 He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, 8 to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. 9 He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children.</i>
Call/Expression of praise	<i>Praise the LORD!</i>

The praise Psalms are subdivided according to four **major themes**, which consist of reasons for praising the Lord:

1. **God of the universe:** Psalms whose major theme is the activity of creation, or other acts of God such as the rain, earthquakes, etc.
2. **God, King of the world:** Psalms whose language relates to God's domination over people groups, His power, His acts of bringing freedom and justice, etc.
3. **God and the people of Israel:** specific historical recall of the way God acted towards His people.
4. **God in His sanctuary:** Psalms which speak especially about the presence of God, either in the temple or in heaven.

#### **Suggested order for the translation of the praise Psalms:**

Here is the suggested order for translating Psalms of praise. The number of verses for each Psalm is indicated in parentheses.

1. God of the universe: 148 (14); 147 (20); 29 (11); 8 (10); 104 (35). (See also 18.8-16; 19.2-7; 33.6-15; 65.6-14; 74.12-17; 77.17-20; 89.6-14; 136.2-9).

2. God is King: 117 (2); 47 (10); 76 (13); 93 (5); 96 (13); 97 (12); 98 (9); 99 (9); 113 (9); 145 (21); 146 (10); 149 (9). (See also 9.5-9; 22.28-32; 24.7-10; 86.8-10; 102.13-23).
3. God in the history of His people: 111 (10); 114 (8); 135 (21); 136 (26); 105 (45). (See also 44.2-4; 68.8-15; 80.9-17; 77.6-21, 78.3-72; 106.6-46).
4. God in His sanctuary or in Jerusalem 134 (3); 100 (5); 150 (6); 63 (12); 84 (13) 48 (15); 87 (7); 122 (9); (See also 27.4-6; 68.16-19, 25-32; 74.2-8; 132.1-10).
5. A complex praise poem: 68 (36).

## 2.2 The didactic Psalms

The language of the didactic Psalms is quite varied. They speak of the knowledge and wisdom of God, and of His laws. They also give advice and exhortations about good behavior, which leads to a life of blessing, as well as describing in detail the activities of sinners and the judgment that awaits them. Psalm 1 is a good example:

Organization and themes	Psalm 1
Declaration of blessing	<i>1 Blessed is the man</i>
Bad behaviour	<i>who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;</i>
Good behaviour	<i>2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.</i>
Blessing	<i>3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.</i>
Judgment	<i>4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;</i>
Knowledge of God/Blessing	<i>6 for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,</i>
Judgment	<i>but the way of the wicked will perish.</i>

A lot of didactic terms are also found in other types of Psalms, notably in petitions and praises. Here are some of the frequently used didactic expressions in the Psalms: *words of wisdom, reveal His words, poem, riddle, warn, advise, instruct, make known, enlighten, give intelligence, learn, led by your counsel, direct, show the way, to prepare the way, shepherd, light, take someone's right hand, law, testimony, commandments, covenant, instructions, rule, statute, etc.*

For the work of translation, this group is subdivided into several major themes:

1. **The knowledge of God:** Psalms which speak about the knowledge and the wisdom of God.
2. **God's instruction:** Psalms which speak about the God's laws and instructions.
3. **Good behavior and its consequences:** Psalms which deal with the good actions of human beings and with the divine blessing that ensues. Since the topic of 'confidence in God' makes up the major part of a few Psalms, these have been grouped separately.

4. **Bad behavior and its consequences:** Psalms which deal with the bad actions of human beings, and with the divine judgment against sinners. This group can be subdivided according to following themes: confidence in riches and idols, acts of injustice, the enemy's actions, and rebellion (of the Israelites).

The list of the didactic psalms ends with a little group in which we also find some expressions of praise.

### **Suggested order for the translation of the Didactic Psalms**

1. The knowledge of God: 139 (24) (See also: 33.13-15; 94.7-11).
2. God's instruction: 119 (176); (See also: 19.8-13).
3. Good behavior/blessing: 15 (5); 112 (10); 125 (5); 127 (5); 128 (6); 133 (3). (See also: 24.3-6, 34.8-23)
4. Confidence/Trust: 131 (3); 23 (6); 46 (12); 62 (13).
5. Bad behavior/judgment: 1 (6).
  - a. Trust in the wrong things (riches, idolatry): 49 (21); 115 (18) (See also: 135.15-18).
  - b. The unjust, the enemy: 11 (7); 14 (7) = 53 (7); 50 (23); 52 (11); 37 (40); 73 (28); 58 (12); 75 (11); 82 (8); 94 (23); 26 (12); 101 (8); (See also 10.2-11).
  - c. Rebellion: 78 (72); 106 (48).
6. Didactic Psalms with praise 19 (15); 24 (10); 33 (22); 36 (13); 81 (17); 95 (11) (See also: 34.8-23).

## **2.3 Psalms of petition and thanksgiving**

It may seem contradictory to combine the categories of 'petition' and 'thanksgiving', since they represent two different genres. It would seem more natural to group the thanksgiving and praise psalms together since they are so similar that it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between them. However, thanksgiving is a special kind of praise: praise to God for responding to petitions and requests. As a result, thanksgiving and petition psalms contain the same *themes*. The subjects of petition are also the subjects of thanksgiving and therefore the two genres share a lot of the same vocabulary. Furthermore, there are several Psalms which contain a request followed by words of thanksgiving as is the case in Psalm 56 below. For these reasons, we suggest grouping them together.

The petition psalms contain several features in common: they often begin with a simple call for help or with a complaint in the form of a rhetorical question, such as, "Why, O LORD, do you stand far away?" (Ps 10.1). This can be followed by expressions of distress, and reasons for this distress (enemies, sickness, consequences of sin, exile, war, etc.)

The petition psalm often includes an expression of trust, as well as expressions of praise, and sometimes of thanksgiving accompanied by a vow. A vow is a promise to do something if God answers the petition. In some petition psalms, there are also didactic verses, affirmations of innocence, a confession of sin or recognition of the fragility of human life. Psalm 56 is a typical example of a petition:

<b>Organization and themes</b>	<b>Psalm 56</b>
Call	<i>1 Be gracious to me, O God</i>
Complaint/Situation that brings about the petition	<i>for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; 2 my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly.</i>
Confidence	<i>3 When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. 4 In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?</i>
Complaint (continued)	<i>5 All day long they injure my cause; all their thoughts are against me for evil. 6 They stir up strife, they lurk; they watch my steps, as they have waited for my life. 7 For their crime will they escape?</i>
<b>Subject of the Petition</b>	<i>In wrath cast down the peoples, O God!</i>
Distress/Lamentation	<i>8 You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?</i>
Confidence	<i>9 Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me.</i>
Praise	<i>10 In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise,</i>
Confidence	<i>11 in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?</i>
Promise/vow	<i>12 I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you.</i>
<b>Subject of thanksgiving</b>	<i>13 For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.</i>

A psalm of thanksgiving often begins with a proclamation of thanksgiving or an expression of praise, followed by an account of the psalmist's distress and of how God answered his request. The Psalm often ends with a promise to fulfill a vow in the presence of God's people. See, for example, Psalm 116.

The language of the petition may include the following expressions: *I lift my eyes towards you, hear me, I beseech you, I call on you, receive my prayer, turn towards me, I am waiting, lend me your hear, rise up, Lord do not keep silent, awaken, wake up*

Petition and thanksgiving psalms are grouped together and then subdivided according to two predominant themes: *petitions and words of thanksgiving for the help given*, and *petitions and words of thanksgiving for forgiveness and healing*. The psalms of these two major themes are then subdivided further, as seen below.

## **I. Psalms of petition and thanksgiving for help**

1. **A call for help:** Psalms which cry out for help, but without giving a lot of details about the problem concerned.
2. **Distress:** Psalms which express acute distress, the psalmist complains extensively about his situation.
3. **Confidence:** Psalms which demonstrate an assurance that God will act
4. **Petition that God will judge one's enemies and those who are unrighteous:** This is the most important group. These psalms contain a lot of complaints about persecution from enemies, about wicked men oppressing the poor, etc. As a result, there are a lot of wishes and petitions for the destruction of those people. Another widespread theme throughout these psalms is the theme of shame and honor.
5. **Thanksgiving/praise for help:** Psalms that express thanksgiving towards God who answered a cry for help.

## **II. Psalms of petition and of thanksgiving for healing and forgiveness**

Prayers for healing and for forgiveness are grouped together because they are often found in the same psalm.

1. **The fragility of human life:** a theme that occurs frequently in the Psalms, especially in those psalms where the psalmist recognizes his own weaknesses.
2. **Chastisement/distress:** Psalms expressing distress which is often associated with a feeling of chastisement or punishment coming from God.
3. **Request for forgiveness and for healing:** Psalms which express the confession of sin.
4. **Thanksgiving/praise for forgiveness and healing:** Psalms which speak especially about life that has been revived. Among the words of praise there are also often words of instruction.

## **Suggested order for translation of the psalms of petition and of thanksgiving**

1. Petition and thanksgiving for help :
  - a. Cry for help: 4 (9), 61 (9), 141 (10), 142 (8), 144 (15), 86 (17), 31 (25), 71 (24), 102 (29), 123 (4), 126 (6)
  - b. Complaint/distress: 13 (6), 22 (32), 42 (12), 43 (5), 44 (27), 55 (24), 69 (37), 74 (23), 77, (21), 79 (13), 80 (20), 129 (8), 137 (9), (See also: 89:39-53, 102:4-12)
  - c. Confidence: 3 (9), 16 (11), 27 (14), 57 (12), (See also the same category in Didactic/good behavior above)
  - d. Request for judgment of the unrighteous/one's enemies: 5 (13), 7 (18), 10 (18), 12 (9), 17 (15), 28 (9), 54 (9), 56 (14), 59 (18), 60 (14) = 108 (14), 64 (11), 120 (7), 140 (14), 35 (28), 70 (6), 83 (19), 109 (31)
  - e. Thanksgiving/praise for help: 9 (21), 34 (23), 92 (16), 116 (19), 118 (28), 124 (8), 138 (8), 18 (51)
2. Petition and thanksgiving for forgiveness and for healing:
  - a. The fragility of human life: 90 (17) (See also: 39:5-7; 49:6-21; 103:14-16)
  - b. Chastisement/distress: 6 (11), 38 (23), 88 (19), 143 (12)
  - c. Request for forgiveness and for healing: 39 (14), 51 (21), 130 (8)\*, 25 (22), 41 (14), 85 (14) \* Ps 131 is the continuation of 130

- d. Thanksgiving/praise for forgiveness: 30 (13), 40 (18), 32 (11), 65 (14), 66 (20), 103 (22), 107 (43)

## 2.4 Psalms of wishes and promises

A **wish** is a sort of indirect request, expressed in English by a third person imperative. An attentive translator will have already noticed wishes in other genres, especially in the category of petitions, where someone desires the destruction of his enemies (see for example, Ps 35.4-8, 19, 25-27; 69.7, 23-29; 109.6-15; 129.5-8)

**Promises** are also expressed in a variety of genres such as the petition, thanksgiving, and didactic psalms. Humans make promises to God in the form of an oath or a vow. In many of the petition and thanksgiving psalms, the psalmist often expresses a vow that he promises to fulfill once his petition is granted; for example, he promises to sing praises before God's people, to offer sacrifices, etc. (see for example Ps 50.14; 54.8; 56.13; 116.12-19). In the didactic psalms, there are promises that God makes to His people: He will do good to those who follow His ways; those who do not listen to Him will be punished.

The promises and wishes grouped together here speak of the city of Jerusalem and "God's anointed one", that is, the one God has chosen as king of Israel. God pronounces oaths concerning the king, and the people express their wishes for blessings for him. These Psalms are called the **Royal Psalms**. (Other psalms which deal with the theme of royalty have been classified with the petition and thanksgiving psalms (Ps 18; 61; 144) or with the didactic psalms (Ps 78.68-72; 101)).

Wishes and promises use the same verbal form in Hebrew, the imperfect form (*yiqtol*) of the verb. This verb form is the source of potential problems of ambiguity. Only the context will indicate whether the *yiqtol* verb expresses a wish or whether it expresses a promise. However, the context is not always clear, as is the case in Psalm 72. Certain versions translate the *yiqtol* in 72.2 as a promise (*He shall judge your people in righteousness, and your afflicted ones with justice.*<sup>9</sup>); other versions translate this verse as a wish (*May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice!*<sup>10</sup>). Grouping the psalms with these potential ambiguous interpretations could help translators to reflect more carefully on this problem (See also Ps 45.5, 17; 50.3, 6; 144.12-14).

### Suggested order for translation of the Psalms expressing wishes and promises

1. Promises/Wishes of Blessing: 67 (8), 121 (8); 91 (16) (See also 144.12-15)
2. Praise and Wishes/Promises for the King/Jerusalem 20 (10), 21 (14), 45 (18), 72 (20), (See also 91.3-16; 115.14-15; 122.6-9)
3. Promises/Oaths for the King/Jerusalem 2 (12), 110 (7), 132 (18), 89 (53), (See also curses 7:4-6; 137:5-7)

There are also several wishes for enemies classified elsewhere: 35:4-8,19, 25-27; 69:7, 23-29; 109.6-19, 129:5-8).

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<sup>9</sup> NIV; also NET, GNT

<sup>10</sup> ESV; also CEV, NJPS, NLT, REB, NRSV, RSV

### 3 Conclusion

The notion of translating scripture in order of theme and genre is not new. Translation programs often translate books of the same genre together, for example, the books of Law in the Old Testament, or the Gospels in the New Testament.

The translation of scripture in non-canonical thematic order within books seems to be a more recent innovation. It has not yet become a widespread practice; however, it has already been promoted for the Proverbs by Cynthia Miller<sup>11</sup>. Our proposed thematic classification and translation order for the Psalms is a further step in this direction. Other possible applications of a thematic approach would be to translate various types of similar texts together, as for example, parallel passages<sup>12</sup>, passages containing the same sub-genres such as oaths and vows<sup>13</sup> and genealogical notices and lists, or passages with frequent key themes in the Bible such as the grapevine and its products<sup>14</sup> or siege warfare. A kind of topical index especially suited for the needs of translators could likewise be developed to allow translators to choose their own topics for thematic translation<sup>15</sup>.

While the advantages of putting similar texts side by side for translating have been clearly stated above, there are nevertheless a few points of caution when translating the Psalms thematically. First of all, it will still be necessary to read through one's translation of the Psalms canonically, as some Psalms in the collection were originally placed together for specific reasons of logical continuity (for example, Psalms 1 and 2; Psalms 130-131).

Translating thematically also creates more challenges in keeping track of the work progress than does translating in numerical order. The progress will need to be marked on a chart for each stage that the thematic approach is used, in order not to lose one's place. Such a chart is provided in the appendix to this article.

However, in spite of these cautions, using the thematic approach to translate the Psalms will contribute positively to a good quality translation and to efficient use of the translator's time.

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<sup>11</sup> Cynthia L. Miller, "Translating Proverbs by Topics", in *The Bible Translator, Practical Papers*, Vol. 57, No. 4, 2006, p.170-194. For an abridged French version of this article, see « Traduction des Proverbes par thèmes », in *Le Sycamore*, Vol, 2, No. 2, 2008, p. 30-35.

<sup>12</sup> Paratext (translation software) has begun developing a tool that facilitates the translation of parallel passages.

<sup>13</sup> The author is working on a list of oaths of the Old Testament, to be accompanied by interpretational and translation advice.

<sup>14</sup> An extensive list of passages concerning the grapevine and its products is provided with Powerpoint presentations on the topic titled, *The Story of the Grapevine and its Fruit - according to the Bible*, by A.G. Kompaoré.

<sup>15</sup> The author is working on such a topical index for use within Paratext. Details are available upon request.