they exalt themselves and crush others. If verses 5 and 6 are parallel, they imply that God's "people" are the widow, resident alien, and orphan, a fine touch. In verse 6, "they kill the resident alien" is a play on words, a reverse echo (*ger yaharogu*). Verses 2 through 6 may recall Deuteronomy 10:18, where God is said to do justice (same root as "judge," v. 2) for the orphan and widow, and to love the resident alien (all v. 6), as Ibn Ezra pointed out. He is thus asked to live up to His previously articulated qualities. In verse 8, "pay heed, you dolts among people," is in assonance (*binu bo'arim ba'am*), enhancing the striking quality of the verse. "When" in verse 8 echoes and completes the thought of "until when" in verse 3. The use of "people" and "heritage" in verse 14 is a proper response to the oppression described by the same two words in verse 5.

Additional Notes

The opening verse has yet another level of meaning. I have translated it as a title, similar to a number of other psalms, such as Psalm 91. As translated, "appeared" is in the perfect mode. However, since medieval times, most interpreters have understood the sentence to be in the imperative, approximately, "appear!" The basis of this is more a matter of context than grammar, but it is possible to interpret it that way (an absolute form used as an imperative). Both might be implied, the verse communicating two levels at once.

I also note that many commentators translate "vengeance" for "retribution" in verse 1. However, as Sarna points out and as NJPS translates, "retribution" better captures the sense of justice and equity that is emphasized, as opposed to a personal call for revenge. Further, the speaker is first concerned here with the suffering of others, for which "vengeance" is inappropriate.

The final verse is in the imperfect mode and may imply the future, as translated, or a hope, "May He...etc." I assume that the reader was meant to hear both hope and assurance.

פרק צה

א לְכוּ נְרַנְּנָה לַה׳ נָרִיעָה לְצוּר יִשְׁעֵנוּ׃
ב נְקַדְּמָה פָנָיו בְּתוֹדָה בִּזְמִרוֹת נָרִיעַ לוֹ׃
ג כִּי אֵל גָּדוֹל ה׳ וּמֶלֶךְ גָּדוֹל עַל כָּל אֱלֹהִים׃
ד אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ מֶחְקְרֵי אָרֶץ וְתוֹעֲפֹת הָרִים לוֹ׃
ה אֲשֶׁר לוֹ הַיָּם וְהוּא עָשָׂהוּ וְיַבֶּשֶׁת יָדָיו יָצָרוּ׃
ו בֹּאוּ נִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנִכְרָעָה נִבְרְכָה לִפְנֵי ה׳ עֹשֵׂנוּ׃
ז כִּי הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ וַאֲנַחְנוּ עַם מַרְעִיתוֹ וְצֹאן יָדוֹ הַיּוֹם אִם בְּקֹלוֹ תִשְׁמָעוּ׃
ח אַל תַּקְשׁוּ לְבַבְכֶם כִּמְרִיבָה כְּיוֹם מַסָּה בַּמִּדְבָּר׃
ט אֲשֶׁר נִסּוּנִי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם בְּחָנוּנִי גַּם רָאוּ פָעֳלִי׃
י אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה אָקוּט בְּדוֹר וָאֹמַר עַם תֹּעֵי לֵבָב הֵם וְהֵם לֹא יָדְעוּ דְרָכָי׃
יא אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי בְאַפִּי אִם יְבֹאוּן אֶל מְנוּחָתִי׃

PSALM 95

I Was Disgusted

1. Go forth, let us intone joyously to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the rock of our deliverance;
2. let us greet His presence with thanksgiving; chanting praise, let us shout aloud to Him!
3. For the LORD is the great Deity, a great king over all gods,
4. in Whose hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks are His;
5. His is the sea and He made it, and the land, His hands created.
6. Come, let us prostrate ourselves and let us kneel, let us bend the knee before the presence of the LORD who made us,
7. for He is our God, and we are the people He tends, His hand's flock, this day, if you would but heed His voice:
8. "Harden not your heart as at Meribah, as on the day of Massah[1] in the wilderness,
9. as your forebears tested Me, they tried Me, even though they had seen My work.
10. Forty years I would be disgusted by a generation,[2] declaring, 'a people of straying hearts are they, and they did not know My ways.'
11. So I took an oath in anger, 'They shall never come to My resting place!'"

Introduction

Rarely does a psalm lead, ostensibly, to such a reversal. Although it is possible to read Psalm 95 smoothly, owing to the bridging phrase between the two very different sections, one is nevertheless taken aback by the quick change from celebration to (recalled) disgust. How could these the two fit together?

[1] Means "place of testing," the same term is used in the next verse.
[2] Indicates the people living in a certain period of time.

(Note Scroggie's wonderfully alliterative overviews of the two: privilege/peril; looking on/looking back; exultation/examination; worship/warning.) In what follows I discuss, in order, the first section, the bridge, and the second section, and finally the psalm as a whole, which gains a different unity in the course of reading.

An Invitation to a Celebration

Psalm 95 is divided by subject. Verses 1 through (most of) verse 7 offer invitations to celebrate and acknowledge God the Creator and the Lord of Israel. This section holds together beautifully, marked by a repetition pattern (two parts, each opening with an invitation to celebrate followed by the reasons for the celebration, each including "hand" and "made"). There are seven calls to joyfully worship (each introduced by "let us"), as Schaefer notes. Both groups of invitations reflect a sense of excitement, in that the verbs seem out of order: singing preceding the arrival in God's presence and bowing of the knee coming after prostration.

Within this opening section, the first part is louder and broader. Singing and shouting dominate, and the reason given (with its own enclosure, "His hands," vv. 4, 5) is God's Creation. As Murphy and Schaefer point out, breadth is emphasized by vertical (depths and peaks) and horizontal (sea and land) extremes. Further, as Weiser notes, the depths and peaks are associated in the Bible (and in surrounding cultures) with the realms of foreign gods, so it is appropriate to celebrate the rule of the One God over these areas.

The second part of the opening section speaks of the people Israel. The singing gives way to quieter worship with a hint of submission (bowing, prostration), and the background is now the connection to the people. (The term "made" in this context is taken from Deuteronomy 32:6, 15.) Greater intimacy may be reflected by the change in the opening verb – in the first part "go forth" and in the second "come," reflecting a closer association between the speaker and the group. As the opening section concludes, then, it becomes more specific, more directly related to its audience, the call to worship based on intimacy and submission.

The Bridge

A brief statement connects the first section to the second: "this day, if you would but heed His voice." At first, "this day," seems to be part of the foregoing call for celebration. However, it also is a part of the next phrase, an immediate demand to listen and obey. Surprising, owing to the sharp change of content, the verse also sets the audience back on its heels with the use of "you." There had been a growing intimacy between the speaker and his audience. Suddenly, they are no longer together, as he speaks at them.

The Recollection of Disgust

The seriousness of the second section increases as it progresses. Through verse 8, the reader and audience might well assume that the words are those of the speaker. With the appearance of the first person in verse 9, it is clear that God is being quoted. "Voice" in verse 7, first understood as a general word for commandment, now takes on its literal implication.

The tone of this section is unmistakable and makes the sense of the second part of the first section, which added a note of submission, clearer. The progression is stark. (Note how, in the Hebrew, *im*, which means "if only" in the bridging section, in the final verse means "they shall not.") In this section, all is rebellion and dissociation between God and His people. Previously the speaker had asked them to "come" and celebrate, but now they are banned from "coming" to His "resting place" (v. 11). Indeed, "My resting place," a term for the land (Deut. 12:9–10), is also a pun, for the term is literally "My peace" to which they will not come, a reflection of the extremely cold relationship between God and Israel.

The specific rebellion referred to is related in Exodus 17:1–7 – Moses' hitting the rock to bring forth water. (This may then retroactively create a subtle reference, for in verse 1, God is "rock of our deliverance." This is uncertain, since "rock" is a repeated term in Deuteronomy 32, the literary background to the first section.) However, this section is clearly symbolic, and a certain telescoping is implied. In fact, the punishment of remaining forty years in the desert was not a result of the incident cited, but rather of the rebellion against God on another occasion (see Num. 13, 14). In any case, the true concern of the second section is not the past but the present, as the people are told to not rebel with "*your* heart" (v. 8) as their forebears did with their "heart" (v. 10). Thus Psalm 95 ends on as negative a note as the beginning seemed positive.

An Overview

Early biblical academic scholars tended to split Psalm 95, claiming that the two sections could not originally have been part of the same poem. However, since neither section reads as a complete psalm alone, that view has been almost universally abandoned. With the second section's emphasis on the desert period, one retroactively notes that the first section includes a number of terms that reflect back to Moses' exhortation to the people in Deuteronomy 32, at the end of that era ("make," "rock," "anger," and "this day," see Deut. 32:4, 6, 15, 22, 31, 37, and 46). This might also hint at the unity of the psalm, with both sections harking back to the desert period.

Is there a reading that brings the two sections closer together? An acquaintance, Yehuda Waksman, suggests that one of the effects of the second section is to force a reinterpretation of the first. When read initially, the tone of the

first section is one of celebration, the speaker initiating or orchestrating it, as it were. Given the second section, however, the first can be seen instead as a confrontation, the assumption now being that the speaker is not addressing a sympathetic audience, but rather implores those who are in fact refusing to celebrate to do so. The speaker seeks to move them first by citing Creation and, failing that, he then tries to reach them on a more personal basis – God's intimate relationship to the people. Again (one presumes in this reading) they refuse, eliciting the angry "bridge," approximately, "Would you listen already?!" A major failure is implied here. The very descendants of the people who disobeyed in the desert (the rebellion he will recall in the second section) now do not understand the need to acknowledge through worship! Once they failed facing a crisis. Now they fail facing well-being.

A further development from rereading the first section as chastisement would be to allow the bridging verse to be applied equally to both sections. After the first section, it would be a cry of frustration by the speaker. Such a reading is indeed negative. The psalm becomes a particularly dark reflection on the people. The initial reading of the first section as celebration, then, in retrospect also becomes a poignant reminder of what might have been, but is not.

Additional Comment

Since the seventeenth century, Psalm 95 has been the first of a series of psalms (through 99, and in some traditions, through Psalm 100) recited to welcome the Sabbath on Friday night in the Jewish liturgy. It may be that the psalm's association with both Creation and (indirectly) the Exodus was one reason for its inclusion, as Creation and the Exodus are the two basic reasons in Jewish tradition for observing the Sabbath. (I comment further on this group of psalms after Psalm 100.)

פרק צו

א שִׁירוּ לַה׳ שִׁיר חָדָשׁ שִׁירוּ לַה׳ כָּל הָאָרֶץ׃

ב שִׁירוּ לַה׳ בָּרְכוּ שְׁמוֹ בַּשְּׂרוּ מִיּוֹם לְיוֹם יְשׁוּעָתוֹ׃

ג סַפְּרוּ בַגּוֹיִם כְּבוֹדוֹ בְּכָל הָעַמִּים נִפְלְאוֹתָיו׃

ד כִּי גָדוֹל ה׳ וּמְהֻלָּל מְאֹד נוֹרָא הוּא עַל כָּל אֱלֹהִים׃

ה כִּי כָּל אֱלֹהֵי הָעַמִּים אֱלִילִים וַה׳ שָׁמַיִם עָשָׂה׃

ו הוֹד וְהָדָר לְפָנָיו עֹז וְתִפְאֶרֶת בְּמִקְדָּשׁוֹ׃

ז הָבוּ לַה׳ מִשְׁפְּחוֹת עַמִּים הָבוּ לַה׳ כָּבוֹד וָעֹז׃

ח הָבוּ לַה׳ כְּבוֹד שְׁמוֹ שְׂאוּ מִנְחָה וּבֹאוּ לְחַצְרוֹתָיו׃

ט הִשְׁתַּחֲווּ לַה׳ בְּהַדְרַת קֹדֶשׁ חִילוּ מִפָּנָיו כָּל הָאָרֶץ׃

י אִמְרוּ בַגּוֹיִם ה׳ מָלָךְ אַף תִּכּוֹן תֵּבֵל בַּל תִּמּוֹט יָדִין עַמִּים בְּמֵישָׁרִים׃

יא יִשְׂמְחוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְתָגֵל הָאָרֶץ יִרְעַם הַיָּם וּמְלֹאוֹ׃

יב יַעֲלֹז שָׂדַי וְכָל אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ אָז יְרַנְּנוּ כָּל עֲצֵי יָעַר׃

יג לִפְנֵי ה׳ כִּי בָא כִּי בָא לִשְׁפֹּט הָאָרֶץ יִשְׁפֹּט תֵּבֵל בְּצֶדֶק וְעַמִּים בֶּאֱמוּנָתוֹ׃

PSALM 96

A New Song

1. Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.
2. Sing to the LORD, bless His name; proclaim His salvation day after day.
3. Relate His glory among the nations, His marvels among all the peoples.
4. For great is the LORD and much acclaimed; He is more awesome than all[1] gods.
5. For all the peoples' gods are idols, whereas the LORD made the heavens.
6. Grandeur and Majesty are before Him; Strength and Splendor are in His sanctuary.
7. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
8. Ascribe to the LORD the glory of His name; bear tribute and come to His courts.
9. Bow down to the LORD with the majesty of sanctity; tremble in His presence, all the earth.
10. Say among the nations, "It is the LORD Who reigns! Indeed, firm stands the world, it cannot be shaken; He judges the peoples with equity."
11. Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea and all within it roar;
12. let the field and all that is in it exult; thereafter all the forest trees shall intone in joy
13. in the presence of the LORD, for He comes, for He comes to govern the earth; He will govern the world with justice and peoples with His faithfulness.

[1] Also means "held in awe by all."

Introduction

Within Psalms, Psalm 96 stands out both for its focus on other peoples (i.e., not Israel) and for its close association between human and ecological celebration of God. These characteristics are all the more remarkable because the poem sounds so familiar; it includes, perhaps more than any other psalm, phrases found elsewhere. Seybold calls it "an anthology of classical quotations" (p. 58) and Gillingham (p. 183) cites Culley, who notes that fully sixty-five percent of the psalm is "formulaic." Nonetheless, the psalmist still managed to create a unique poem.

There are two breaks in Psalm 96 and they are of very different natures. The first is created by a rhythmic refrain (as opposed to a refrain of words – one recalls Beethoven's use of rhythm, not notes, as the theme of the Fifth Symphony). The opening triple repetition, "Sing to the LORD," is echoed by the triple repetition "Ascribe to the LORD" (vv. 7, 8).

The second break occurs in verse 10. This final section opens with the last of fourteen (twice seven) imperative verbs that dominate the psalm to that point, and the phrase belongs both with what precedes and what follows. Indeed, there is an *inclusio* to the first nine verses, "all the earth" (as Dahood notes), and thereafter both the subject matter and the format change. The text moves radically toward the world of nature in a structure of two verses dealing with governance (vv. 10, 13) around two verses dealing with natural phenomena.

Each break brings with it a major surprise that redefines what came before. I describe the psalm in terms of its three units.

Sing a Song (Verses 1–6)

The first section, a call to laud God, expresses the joy of proclaiming God's grandeur and supremacy. The triple repetition at the beginning is an old, pre-Israelite literary opening technique. There is a tone of something very exciting having happened recently ("a new song," v. 1).

Ascribe to the LORD (Verses 7–9)

Psalm 96 is characterized by a "clear-cut universalism" (Dahood), although this is not apparent through the first section. One of the most international psalms, its second section begins the focus on all peoples, forcing the reader to reinterpret the first section in those terms as well. Indeed, one becomes aware of the same international emphasis through repetitions that occur throughout the psalm: five times "peoples," four times "earth," twice "world," and twice "nations."

Phrases in the first section also gain new import, particularly "all the earth" and "among the nations," which now seem deliberate choices. In verse 6, the "sanctuary," which first seemed to refer to the Temple in Jerusalem now seems to refer to heaven as well. (So interpreted Radak, citing the use of sanctified place in 2 Chron. 30:27. Note also the use of "sanctuary" as a metaphor for God during the Exile, Ezek. 11:16.)

Of course there is no hint here of acceptance of other religious systems. Quite the opposite is the case. All others are called to worship the true God, even as their idols are derided. Indeed, verse 5 stating that God made the heavens names Him creator precisely of those spheres containing the principal deities of these other peoples: the moon, the sun, and the stars (so, again, Radak). The peoples are welcomed in, but not their religion. It is possible that the triple repetition that opens the psalm and the second section, a technique borrowed from pre-Israelite societies, is used specifically to address these others. (Note the triple use of "ascribe to the LORD" in Psalms 29, where the statement is made to other gods!)

The Grandest of Celebrations (Verses 10–13)

Perhaps even more radical is the change that comes with verse 10. The third section announces God's kingship as encapsulated by two qualities: a solid, orderly universe and just governance. The former is reflected in verses 11 and 12, as nature celebrates in a grand panorama of personification, and the latter in verses 10 and 13, as justice is extolled.

Just as the content of the first section seems to change radically after rereading the second (from Israel to the world), so too the third section reframes the tone of the whole psalm from just human society to all of nature. Indeed, the scope is enormous: heaven and earth, sea and dry land, and the contents of all. Beyond previously named repetitions, "all" is repeated exactly seven times. The theme of universal celebration is complete.

There is, however, as noted by Hacham and Schaefer, a slight differentiation in verbs. All human audiences are addressed with imperatives – told to celebrate. Nature is invited to do so (in the jussive, "let it exult," etc.). Thus, people and nature are connected, yet differentiated. All celebrate, but primacy is given, appropriately, to humankind. The final section thus expands Psalm 96 into a renewal for the whole world. Here is a broad vision of the ultimate unity of man and nature within the unity of the one God. There is no direct mention of the people of Israel, even as the psalm celebrates the "LORD," the name by which God is known to Israel.

Turns of Phrase

In verse 6, many understand, as do I, that "grandeur," "majesty," "strength," and "splendor" are personified. One should also note that the last two qualities are once paired as representations of the Ark (Ps. 78:61). This again indicates possible reference to Israelite formats of worship (the Temple), even as the psalm studiously avoids singling out the Israelite people.

There is no agreed upon derivation for the term "idols" (v. 5). This word, *elil*, is thought by some to be related to one of the Hebrew terms for a god, *el*, (translated "deity" in the present volume), possibly a mocking term indicating a diminutive ("godlet" or the like) or non-God, as a pejorative.

In verse 13, the repeated "*for* He comes," may imply two meanings of *ki* (for, that): "that he has come; for he has come").

Additional Note

One is reluctant to ascribe significance to the placement of individual poems within Psalms because we know little of the anthologizing process and there is also some doubt about the divisions among the psalms. However, it is fascinating that Psalm 95 ends with God's brutal rejection of the people of Israel and Psalm 96 includes no explicit reference to them whatsoever. (In my comments on Psalm 100 I reflect further on these thoughts.)

פרק צז

א ה׳ מָלָךְ תָּגֵל הָאָרֶץ יִשְׂמְחוּ אִיִּים
רַבִּים׃
ב עָנָן וַעֲרָפֶל סְבִיבָיו צֶדֶק וּמִשְׁפָּט
מְכוֹן כִּסְאוֹ׃
ג אֵשׁ לְפָנָיו תֵּלֵךְ וּתְלַהֵט סָבִיב צָרָיו׃
ד הֵאִירוּ בְרָקָיו תֵּבֵל רָאֲתָה וַתָּחֶל
הָאָרֶץ׃
ה הָרִים כַּדּוֹנַג נָמַסּוּ מִלִּפְנֵי ה׳ מִלִּפְנֵי
אֲדוֹן כָּל הָאָרֶץ׃
ו הִגִּידוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם צִדְקוֹ וְרָאוּ כָל
הָעַמִּים כְּבוֹדוֹ׃
ז יֵבֹשׁוּ כָּל עֹבְדֵי פֶסֶל הַמִּתְהַלְלִים
בָּאֱלִילִים הִשְׁתַּחֲווּ לוֹ כָּל אֱלֹהִים׃
ח שָׁמְעָה וַתִּשְׂמַח צִיּוֹן וַתָּגֵלְנָה בְּנוֹת
יְהוּדָה לְמַעַן מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ ה׳׃
ט כִּי אַתָּה ה׳ עֶלְיוֹן עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ
מְאֹד נַעֲלֵיתָ עַל כָּל אֱלֹהִים׃
י אֹהֲבֵי ה׳ שִׂנְאוּ רָע שֹׁמֵר נַפְשׁוֹת
חֲסִידָיו מִיַּד רְשָׁעִים יַצִּילֵם׃
יא אוֹר זָרֻעַ לַצַּדִּיק וּלְיִשְׁרֵי לֵב
שִׂמְחָה׃
יב שִׂמְחוּ צַדִּיקִים בַּה׳ וְהוֹדוּ לְזֵכֶר
קָדְשׁוֹ׃

PSALM 97

Light, Sown for the Righteous

1. It is the LORD Who reigns! Let the earth be glad, let the many distant lands[1] rejoice.
2. Cloud and storm-cloud round about Him, righteousness and judgment are the foundation of His throne.
3. Fire goes before Him, burning His foes round about.
4. His lightning bolts have lit up the world; the earth saw it and trembled;
5. mountains melting like wax in facing the LORD, in facing the Lord of all the earth.
6. The heavens have proclaimed His righteousness and all the peoples have seen His glory.
7. Let all who worship a graven image, who boast of their idols, be dismayed; all you gods, prostrate yourselves to Him.
8. Zion heard and rejoiced; the towns[2] of Judah were glad because of Your judgments, O LORD.
9. For You, O LORD, are Most High, above all the earth; You have taken the highest place,[3] above all gods.[4]
10. Lovers of the LORD, hate evil! He is the guardian of the souls of His devoted ones; from the hand of the wicked He saves them.
11. Light is sown for the righteous and for those who are upright of heart, joy.
12. Rejoice, O righteous ones, in the LORD and give thanks to His holy name.[5]

[1] Literally, "isles," implying distant overseas locales.
[2] Literally, "daughters."
[3] Others, "He is greatly exalted." Verb here is seen as reflexive, that God takes Himself up, as is found in Numbers 16: 24, 27 and Jeremiah 37:5, 11 (and possibly in Psalm 47:10).
[4] In verse 9, the four uses of "high" or "above," are all from a single root (*'-l-h*). The verse is possibly a quotation from the towns of Judah, in which case "for," would be translated "indeed."
[5] Alternatively, "at the remembrance of His holiness." Both are possibly implied.

A Psalm of Changing Focus

Psalm 97 calls for joy at God's dominance and possibly His (or Israel's) victory over other nations. However, the focus of the psalm changes constantly, as if in a search for a viable point of concentration, which it eventually finds. The poem opens in heaven with a call to earth, with God's presence, physically obscured but morally clear (v. 2), dominating the scene. The setting quickly shifts into movement, as fire comes forth. The locale becomes the world, trembling at the Lord's appearance. The heavens speak and the peoples observe. The literary camera then veers sharply, zooming in on subgroups: idolaters, lesser "gods," and the cities of Judah. The joy of the last and the recollection of God's judgment change the focus back to the Lord above all, who is then addressed directly (v. 9).

The most radical shift comes with verse 10, with two addresses to the righteous (vv. 10a, 12), these framing four statements of God's beneficence (vv. 10b, 11). The second address, appropriately, calls upon them to respond with praise. The earlier section (vv. 1–9) is enclosed by the word that is also its guide word, "earth."

Another Turning Point

By word count, verse 7 is at the center of Psalm 97, and it is further emphasized by a chiasm. The enclosing terms of the psalm are "joy" (same root as "rejoice") and "righteousness," each appearing three times (vv. 1, 2, 11, 12). Further, "lit" and "light" (vv. 3, 11) and "all the Earth" (vv. 5, 9) also close in on this middle verse. Further, verse 7 appears between the two other uses of the enclosing terms, "righteousness" (v. 6) and "rejoiced" (v. 8).

Verse 7, the sole negative statement in Psalm 97, is scarcely a summary, but is certainly a turning point. Until that verse, the stage was the wide world. With verse 7, idolaters and their gods are dismissed, and the poem moves to a very particularistic emphasis, even if the Israelite nation is not mentioned by name. The towns of Israel are the celebrants and the addressees are His devotees. Verse 8 then appropriates three terms used previously (vv. 1, 2) in relationship to the world, "gladness," "joy," and "judgment," and reapplies them to Zion.

What began high in heaven ends in an intimate relationship, the progression moving down or up depending on one's theology and emphasis. If verse 9 is said by the towns of Judah (see note), the direct address would be another expression of intimacy. The psalmist used several other striking literary techniques to move the poem forward. I focus on these in the following three sections.

The World of Darkness and Light

The emphasis on light evolves throughout the psalm. At first, darkness coexists beautifully with light in the single image of the lightning storm. God remains hidden, the isolated flashes engendering fear and quaking, but, nevertheless, the peoples are able to "see" His glory (v. 4).

All of this quaking and shaking is balanced by light being "sown for the righteous" (v. 11), a most gentle phrase, both contributing to and befitting the tone of the last three verses. (See below on those verses.) The light stored for the righteous evidently allows them to see in greater depth than those who only saw through the lightning – the reaction of the latter is trembling, but that of the righteous is joy (vv. 4, 11).

Poetic Turns of Phrase

Psalm 97 contains a number of striking poetic turns of phrase. I note a few of these here (apart from the final three verses, which I treat separately). Schaefer writes about a beautiful balance in verse 2: "The meteorological twins, clouds and darkness, parallel the ethical twins, righteousness and justice." The Hebrew contains an echo that closely identifies idolaters with their "gods" in the phrase "who boast of their idols" (*hamit'halelim ba'elilim*). (For the derivation of "idols," see "Additional Comments" in Psalm 96.) Verse 6 has the heavens *speak*, but the peoples only "see" the glory of the lightning. In verse 8, it is Zion that "hears." This perhaps testifies to the openness of Zion to "hearing" the details of God's righteousness, as opposed to these other peoples.

The earth has a dual task, a point made by a poetic echo (vv. 1, 4): it must "be glad" (*tagel*) and "tremble" (*tachel*). Ultimately, it is only the former that is demanded of the cities of Judah (v. 8). The imagery of verse 5, the mountains melting like wax, is particularly effective. Interpreters variously suggest a physical disintegration, lava flow from a volcano, mudslides from the storm, and fire from lightning, but the metaphor is probably best not reduced to any one physical phenomenon.

Idolatry is attacked subtly. References to mountains melting recall the locale of other "gods" in their myths, and the sky which bespeaks God's glory is also the location of the leading gods of paganism. At the same time, the phenomena that God cites and employs are particularly intangible – clouds, storm clouds, fire, lightning, and light, for God Himself is not physical.

The Poetry of Conclusion

The ending of Psalm 97, as of so many others, changes the psalm's complexion. As noted, the purpose of God's kingship is shifted from Creation and the worldwide scale to focus on His relationship with the righteous. The poem is built of phrases found in many other psalms and other books of the Bible. (By one estimate, forty-two percent of the psalm is "formulaic.") However, as

can be seen, the psalmist's use of language is particularly creative, although there are few phrases as striking as verse 11, "light is sown for the righteous." Undertones of the metaphoric sown seed include concealment, inevitability, enlightenment, warmth, and depth.

Verses 10 through 12 are structured as imperatives surrounding God's relationship with the righteous, the latter described in two successive stages of two phrases each: immediate physical salvation and long-term reward. The imperatives to the righteous also build: "hate evil," "rejoice," and "acclaim." "Joy" is appropriately both a gift (v. 11) and a commandment (v. 12). By the last verse, Psalm 97 is focused on the righteous, yet it carefully echoes "rejoice" from the first verse, where it applies to all humankind. Even as intimate gestures have replaced grandiose displays, the comparison is left as somewhat ambiguous: is one joy better than another, or are they essentially the same?

If there are references to Israel here, they are indirect. It would be possible to interpret the righteous of the end section as part of all humanity even if the place references of verse 7 make this difficult. Whereas I believe that the reference is to the righteous of Israel, this ambiguity allows for a progressive overview of Psalms 95–100. (See my comments at the end of Psalm 100.)

Additional Comment

So effective is verse 11 that it was chosen by Ashkenazic (Occidental) Jewish tradition to be repeated thrice as the opening statement on the Day of Atonement.

פרק צח

PSALM 98

Rivers Clap Hands

א מִזְמוֹר שִׁירוּ לַה׳ שִׁיר חָדָשׁ כִּי
נִפְלָאוֹת עָשָׂה הוֹשִׁיעָה לּוֹ יְמִינוֹ
וּזְרוֹעַ קָדְשׁוֹ׃

ב הוֹדִיעַ ה׳ יְשׁוּעָתוֹ לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם גִּלָּה
צִדְקָתוֹ׃

ג זָכַר חַסְדּוֹ וֶאֱמוּנָתוֹ לְבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל
רָאוּ כָל אַפְסֵי אָרֶץ אֵת יְשׁוּעַת
אֱלֹהֵינוּ׃

ד הָרִיעוּ לַה׳ כָּל הָאָרֶץ פִּצְחוּ וְרַנְּנוּ
וְזַמֵּרוּ׃

ה זַמְּרוּ לַה׳ בְּכִנּוֹר בְּכִנּוֹר וְקוֹל
זִמְרָה׃

ו בַּחֲצֹצְרוֹת וְקוֹל שׁוֹפָר הָרִיעוּ לִפְנֵי
הַמֶּלֶךְ ה׳׃

ז יִרְעַם הַיָּם וּמְלֹאוֹ תֵּבֵל וְיֹשְׁבֵי בָהּ׃

ח נְהָרוֹת יִמְחֲאוּ כָף יַחַד הָרִים יְרַנֵּנוּ׃

ט לִפְנֵי ה׳ כִּי בָא לִשְׁפֹּט הָאָרֶץ יִשְׁפֹּט
תֵּבֵל בְּצֶדֶק וְעַמִּים בְּמֵישָׁרִים׃

1. A psalm.[1]

Sing to the LORD a new song, for He has worked marvels; His right hand has given Him deliverance,[2] so, too, His holy arm.

2. The LORD has made His deliverance known; in sight of the nations, He has revealed His righteousness.[3]

3. He has remembered His steadfast kindness and faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the deliverance of our God.

4. Shout aloud to the LORD, all the earth; open wide, and intone joyously, and chant praise!

5. Chant praise to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of chanted praise.

6. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make loud music[4] before the King, the LORD.

7. Let the sea and all within it roar, the world and its inhabitants;

8. let the rivers[5] clap hands, let the mountains intone joyously together

9. before the LORD, for He comes to govern the earth; He will govern the world with righteousness, and peoples with equity.

Introduction

Some psalms hint at tension below the surface, and a few hint at harmony where one might expect conflict. Psalm 98 is among the latter. Related to Psalm 96 through nearly identical openings and closings and many shared terms, the

[1] This term is from the same root as "chant(ed) praise" in verses 4 and 5.
[2] "Deliverance" in verses 1, 2, and 3 can imply victory.
[3] Can also imply victory.
[4] Same term as "shout aloud" in verse 4.
[5] Can mean "oceans."

two psalms have different emphases, and Psalm 98 calls for joyous celebration. Dominated by references to music and song, the poem describes, as it were, two overlapping harmonic structures: a three-part and a two-part harmony.

Three Voices in Harmony

Though a brief "song," Psalm 98 presents itself in three musical movements: (1) a song of deliverance (vv. 1–3), opening with the repetition of "song," *shir*, and dominated by three uses of "deliverance," *y-sh-'*, the right hand and holy arm recalling terminology from the Song of the Red Sea (Exod. 15:6, 12, 16); (2) a chorale, loud music with shouted chanting (vv. 4–6), dominated by "chant... praise"; and finally (3) nature's musical chorus (vv. 7–9), enclosed by "world," *tevel*. The progression is incremental. This is a crescendo of celebration.

Two Voices in Harmony

There is a second possible division of Psalm 98, indicated, as noted by Schaefer, not by word repetition but by a parallel structure. Twice there is a call to celebrate followed by a justification. In the first case the call is brief (v. 1a), with a longer justification (through v. 3); in the second case, the emphasis is reversed as there is a longer call (vv. 4–8) and a short justification (v. 9). The two sections are complementary. The first emphasizes the deliverance of Israel and the celebration is only in song. The second seems to reflect a much wider scale. The music gets louder and broader stage by stage, beginning with shouting and chanting, adding the accompaniment of strings, moving on to include trumpets and horns, expanding to the sea and dry land, and finally embracing even the highest mountain peaks making music together with the oceans. The puzzling aspect of this international celebration, of course, is that through verse 8 it seems to be in appreciation of Israel's victory!

However, this colossal celebration then leads into verse 9, clarifying that it is God's arrival, not a victory, that is the occasion for happiness. The focus is on neither grandeur nor might, but rather on just governance, albeit on a worldwide scale. (Again, a final verse in a psalm redefines what preceded it.) With the knowledge that the nations are celebrating God's governance, one acquires a new appreciation of the terminology used for God's actions in the first section, which has an overtone of military victories (see note 2). In retrospect, the terms seem to have been chosen primarily not for victory but for their root meanings of "deliverance" and "righteousness." The emphasis, as is clarified at the end of the psalm, is on the purpose – the righteousness – not the means – the military victory.

The two sections thus blend beautifully. The smaller scale applies to the people Israel and the larger to the universal celebration. The emphasis is on God's justice, and ultimately, Psalm 98 does not suggests any conflict (where

we might have expected it) between the God of Israel and the God of the world.

Turns of Phrase

Included in all parts of the three-section division is the term "earth," which is another factor that binds the psalm. Verse 8 includes the striking metaphor "let the rivers (i.e., oceans) clap hands." Clapping hands as a celebration is noted in Psalm 47:2, and elsewhere (Isa. 55:12) we find the metaphor of trees clapping hands. Here we have the broadest metaphor, possibly related to the sounds of breaking waves, but in any case apt for a worldwide celebration.

There is a punned *inclusio* to Psalm 98, in verse 1 we have "sing...song" (*shiru...shir*) echoed by "equity" (*meisharim*) in verse 9. The latter term has a plural ending, and reads almost as if it were a plural word built on the root of "song." (It is in fact not so, "song" being from the root *sh-y-r* and "equity" from the root *y-sh-r*.) In another pun, were "with equity" read as two words, it would resemble "through waters of songs," *b'mei shirim*, a pun on verse 8. An *inclusio* often encourages one to look at the middle verse (5), which also has an unusual structure (ABC/CDA), approximately "chant praise – LORD – lyre // lyre – voice – chant praise." When all is said and done, it is this firm call to celebrate with music that remains the heart of the psalm.

PSALM 99

Holy Is the Lord

1. It is the LORD Who reigns[1] – let peoples tremble; He is enthroned on cherubim – let the earth quake.
2. The LORD is great in Zion, and exalted is He above all peoples.
3. Let them thank Your name: "Great and awesome, holy is He."[2, 3]
4. Indeed, "A king's might is loving justice."[4] It was You who established equity; it was You Who made for justice and righteousness in Jacob.
5. Exalt the LORD our God and prostrate yourselves toward His footstool. Holy is He.
6. Moses, and Aaron among His priests, and Samuel among those who called[5] out His name: they called upon the LORD, and it was He Who would answer them.
7. In a pillar of cloud He would speak to them; they obeyed His statutes and the law He gave them.
8. O LORD our God, it was You Who answered them; for them You were a forgiving Deity, though exacting retribution for their misdeeds.
9. Exalt the LORD our God, and prostrate yourselves toward His holy mountain, for holy is the LORD our God.

פרק צט

א ה׳ מָלָךְ יִרְגְּזוּ עַמִּים יֹשֵׁב כְּרוּבִים
תָּנוּט הָאָרֶץ׃
ב ה׳ בְּצִיּוֹן גָּדוֹל וְרָם הוּא עַל כָּל
הָעַמִּים׃
ג יוֹדוּ שִׁמְךָ גָּדוֹל וְנוֹרָא קָדוֹשׁ הוּא׃
ד וְעֹז מֶלֶךְ מִשְׁפָּט אָהֵב אַתָּה כּוֹנַנְתָּ
מֵישָׁרִים מִשְׁפָּט וּצְדָקָה בְּיַעֲקֹב
אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ׃
ה רוֹמְמוּ ה׳ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲווּ לַהֲדֹם
רַגְלָיו קָדוֹשׁ הוּא׃
ו מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן בְּכֹהֲנָיו וּשְׁמוּאֵל
בְּקֹרְאֵי שְׁמוֹ קֹרְאִים אֶל ה׳ וְהוּא
יַעֲנֵם׃
ז בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן יְדַבֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם שָׁמְרוּ
עֵדֹתָיו וְחֹק נָתַן לָמוֹ׃
ח ה׳ אֱלֹהֵינוּ אַתָּה עֲנִיתָם אֵל נֹשֵׂא
הָיִיתָ לָהֶם וְנֹקֵם עַל עֲלִילוֹתָם׃
ט רוֹמְמוּ ה׳ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲווּ לְהַר
קָדְשׁוֹ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ ה׳ אֱלֹהֵינוּ׃

Introduction

Psalm 99 is a striking assertion of certitudes masking complexities, a poem of solid structure that includes both disparate elements and sudden changes. Possibly this reflects the excitement of the opening announcement, for in light of

[1] Same term as "king" in verse 4.
[2] "He" could be "it," referring to "name" (v. 3) or "footstool" (v. 5). The same holds for "He" in verse 5.
[3] The quotation could alternatively (or additionally) be the speaker's words (…thank Your great and awesome name: it is holy).
[4] See the last section in the commentary on the translation of verse 4.
[5] "Called" both times in this verse is the participle in Hebrew, one who calls, a petitioner.

God's kingship the psalmist undertakes no less daunting a task than to poetically describe God vis-à-vis humanity. I first review the structure of the psalm, move on to aspects of growth and change, and then review basic contentions and consistent elements.

Two Overlying Structures

The structures of Psalm 99 become obvious only as the poem proceeds. In fact, the constant enallage of address to the nations, to Israel, and to God, combined with what seem to be radically different emphases and contents, confuse the first-time reader.

Order is finally recognized in the three appearances of "holy," identified by some commentators as a refrain (at the ends of verses 3, 5, and 9). This apparently delineates three foci: the worldwide scene, justice in Israel, and history. Some interpreters contend that the psalmist was inspired by Isaiah 6:3 ("Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts").

Just as obviously, however, verses 5 and 9 are almost identical (much closer to the term "refrain" than a single word) creating a two-part psalm (by combining the first two sections of the three-part division). These two sections would deal, respectively, with the present interaction between Israel and the other nations and then the historical interaction of Israel and God. Indeed, as Schaefer has pointed out, this division would make some sense of the enallage, with each half repeating a pattern of a declaration about the people of God, an address to God, and an invitation to the people.

Whatever the divisions, "holiness," not mentioned at the beginning, retrospectively becomes the leitmotif of the psalm and either structure allows the reader to note marked elements of development.

A Psalm in Ascent

Psalm 99 develops through its three sections. The application of "king" to God in the first section is clarified by the opening of the second, and the "justice" of the second section is historically detailed through the third. One is also struck by the tiered clarification of the term "holiness." In its first two appearances (see note 2) the term might refer to God or to one of His aspects, but at the end it is clear that holiness is the quality that derives from "the LORD our God." Moreover, each refrain is longer than the one that preceded it.

A second pattern is a movement into intimacy. The poem begins on a worldwide stage. In the first section only the place "Zion" (apart from God's proper name, "LORD") is particularistic. The second section goes on to the establishment of justice within Israel ("Jacob") and includes the possessive "our God." The third section is clearly all about Israelite history and its most important highlights. (Interestingly, verse 7 is the only verse in Psalms that refers to details, as opposed to just a recollection, of the Revelation on Mount Sinai.)

A parallel development is discerned in the objects of God's concern, moving from the peoples of the world to the people Israel and then to named individuals.

The Nature of God: Dualities and Paradox

One should note that each development is incremental, later points not replacing earlier ones. Psalm 99 thus paints a broad picture, typified by dual, almost paradoxical, descriptions of God. In this psalm, as in several others, the Lord is King over all the earth and yet is focused upon and in Zion. Here this is partially reflected in two levels of meaning of two terms: "cherubim" (v. 1) elsewhere can refer to celestial creatures or to the decorations above the Ark; "footstool" (v. 5) can refer either to the earth (as Isa. 66:1) or to Zion, the Temple, or the Ark (cf. Lam.2:1; Ps. 132:7; 1 Chron. 28:2).

God is conceived as relating to other nations, to Israel, and to Israel's leaders. Indeed, there is an interesting ambiguity in the latter part of verse 8 ("their misdeeds"). Logically, the reference is to the people, although grammatically, the referents are the leaders themselves. Of greater fascination is another duality: the expression of God's concern through both forgiveness and punishment (v. 8), a thought-provoking assertion. Weiser sees this as an expression of "the real nature of the God, Who takes sin just as seriously as the forgiveness of sins," which highlights the "coexistence of God's judgment and grace." This interpretation accords well with the previously mentioned emphasis on holiness, which throughout the Bible exhibits its own duality: it is a divine quality to be imitated and yet so dangerous as to be handled with incredible caution and care (cf. Lev. 10:3; 2 Sam. 6:7).

There may also be a two-edged sword in the mention of Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. These were the three outstanding examples of the different forms of Israelite leadership (see comments below). In citing God's response to these three, the psalm is, on the one hand, encouraging, in that God responds to human requests, but, on the other, discouraging, in that no reader would see himself on that level and indeed no generation would see itself as having leaders of that stature. The reassurance is bittersweet. In general, Psalm 99 guarantees God's presence and cites the proper reactions to it, even as it recalls the associated demands for caution. As Brueggemann puts it, "God's enthronement makes *holy presence* accessible and makes *righteous will* more urgent."

The Only Actor

Psalm 99 pictures God as the sole actor in this drama. Even the mention of Moses, Aaron, and Samuel is within the context of His responding to them and instructing them. Indeed, the reader will note that in a few places the translation reads either "it was You" or "it was He." This reflects the use of pronouns, more often indicated in Hebrew by suffixes or prefixes to verbs, but, as

Schaefer notes, in this psalm on fully seven occasions (three times, "You;" four times, "He") God is referred to by a separate pronoun. Indeed, "LORD" is also mentioned seven times. This emphasis on God the actor may also be reflected in the opening phrase, "it is the LORD Who reigns." Weiss (*Ideas*) contends that the unusual order of the terms (noun-verb, as opposed to the expected opposite) indicates a specific emphasis on God as the sole protagonist. Further, direct address to God is included in all the sections of either division. "Holiness" also serves to focus on this point, as it is a quality of God and things related to Him (or to imitating Him) in the Bible. The poet, then, has described God's interaction with humankind, possibly suggesting that the best way for humans to articulate it is through resort to duality and paradox.

Two Phrases

The beginning of verse 4 has puzzled translators. I take it as an independent sentence. In Hebrew, the four words read so succinctly that I understand it to be a well-known aphorism. The thrust of the whole verse is that God is the ultimate king, which one knows because worthy kings love justice, which in fact God created.

Much has been written about the connection among the three individuals named in verse 6. Some commentators seek to place them within a single category of prophecy, priesthood, or prayer. Although any such category might be justified, it seems to me that the text cites three *different* types of leaders, each peerless in his own way. Moses' uniqueness is self-evident, so it need not be defined. (Most interpreters contend that "among His priests," also refers to Moses, but he is not called a priest anywhere else, even if on occasion he performed priestly functions.) Aaron was the founding father of the priesthood. Samuel oversaw the transition of Israelite society from confederacy to kingship and was central to the establishment of independent, apostolic prophecy. (Note Jeremiah 15:1, which cites Moses and Samuel as the two exemplars of individuals who would have most influence on God!) Psalm 99 chooses the three models well. More simply, one could claim that the three represent political leadership, priesthood, and prophecy.

Sound Echoes: Evildoers profess goodwill toward their "fellows" (*re'eihem*), but speak "malice" (*ra'*) in their hearts. God is asked to repay them according to their "malicious acts" (*ro'a*), and thus He can "shepherd" (*r'em*) His people (vv. 3, 4, 9). They do not "consider" (*yavinu*), so God should never rebuild them (*yivnem*) (v. 5). In addition, the phrase "hears the sound of my supplications" (vv. 2, 6) is once a request and once a celebration, binding the two halves.

Repetitions as Emphasis: In verse 1 (an echo), "act...as if deaf toward me" (*techerash mimeni*) is followed by "act as if dumb toward me" (*techeshe mimeni*). (The translation reflects the pun through split use of the common phrase, "deaf and dumb.") In verses 3 and 4, "malice" is echoed by "malicious." In verse 4, "pay them according to" appears twice. In verse 7 and 8 "strength" or "strong" appears three times, echoed by two terms that include the root letters of strength (-'z): "I was helped" ('-z-r) and "rejoiced" ('-l-z). Further, if "His people" (v. 11, see the note) is the correct rendition, "people" is also echoed (vv. 11, 12).

The Third Section, Reread

Again, the last two verses might reflect back to the "song" (v. 7). If these last two verses are seen as a unit and set against the rest of the psalm, there is a reverse structure in terms of address: the first seven verses begin with direct address to God and move to third person; the last two verses begin with the third person and proceed to direct address. This somewhat isolates the third unit, and further highlights the movement from the individual to the group. The reader is left to ponder not only the mindset of the speaker, but also one's own thoughts concerning two issues: the degree to which one extrapolates from personal experience to community and the strength one can or does gain from such community when facing personal difficulties.

פרק כט

PSALM 29

His Voice, His Sound, His Thunder

א מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד הָבוּ לַה׳ בְּנֵי אֵלִים
הָבוּ לַה׳ כָּבוֹד וָעֹז׃

ב הָבוּ לַה׳ כְּבוֹד שְׁמוֹ הִשְׁתַּחֲווּ לַה׳
בְּהַדְרַת קֹדֶשׁ׃

ג קוֹל ה׳ עַל הַמָּיִם אֵל הַכָּבוֹד הִרְעִים
ה׳ עַל מַיִם רַבִּים׃

ד קוֹל ה׳ בַּכֹּחַ קוֹל ה׳ בֶּהָדָר׃

ה קוֹל ה׳ שֹׁבֵר אֲרָזִים וַיְשַׁבֵּר ה׳ אֶת
אַרְזֵי הַלְּבָנוֹן׃

ו וַיַּרְקִידֵם כְּמוֹ עֵגֶל לְבָנוֹן וְשִׂרְיֹן כְּמוֹ
בֶן רְאֵמִים׃

ז קוֹל ה׳ חֹצֵב לַהֲבוֹת אֵשׁ׃

ח קוֹל ה׳ יָחִיל מִדְבָּר יָחִיל ה׳ מִדְבַּר
קָדֵשׁ׃

ט קוֹל ה׳ יְחוֹלֵל אַיָּלוֹת וַיֶּחֱשֹׂף יְעָרוֹת
וּבְהֵיכָלוֹ כֻּלּוֹ אֹמֵר כָּבוֹד׃

י ה׳ לַמַּבּוּל יָשָׁב וַיֵּשֶׁב ה׳ מֶלֶךְ
לְעוֹלָם׃

יא ה׳ עֹז לְעַמּוֹ יִתֵּן ה׳ יְבָרֵךְ אֶת עַמּוֹ
בַּשָּׁלוֹם׃

1. A psalm. Of David.

Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of deities,
ascribe to the LORD glory and might.

2. Ascribe to the LORD the glory of His name; bow down to the LORD in the majesty of holiness.

3. The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the Deity of glory thunders, the LORD, over multitudinous waters.

4. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic.

5. The voice of the LORD breaks cedars; the LORD breaks apart the cedars of Lebanon,

6. and He makes them skip like a calf, Lebanon and Sirion, like a young wild ox.

7. The voice of the LORD forks as flames of fire.

8. The voice of the LORD convulses the wilderness; the LORD convulses the wilderness of Kadesh.

9. The voice of the LORD causes deer to calve and lays bare forests, while in His Temple, everything says "Glory!"

10. The LORD sat enthroned at the Flood; the LORD sits enthroned, King forever.

11. May the LORD grant might to His people; may the LORD bless His people with peace.

Introduction

Psalm 29 focuses almost exclusively on the Divine and is filled with sharp, explicit images. The circumstances, however, are less clear. Indeed, the powerful references lead interpreters to widely different assumptions. Kimche even suggested three alternative overviews – a thunderstorm, the theophany at Mount

Sinai, or the future apocalyptic war of Gog and Magog. All reflect the magnitude of the text. It is advisable, therefore, not to assume any context a priori.

Relying on more than just imagery, the psalmist interwove several techniques. These are best understood in isolation, so I concentrate, in turn, on the patterns of references to the LORD, on the base imagery (the storm), on word repetition, on the sharp reversal at the end, and on the place of the reader as audience. I try to integrate each pattern with those previously surveyed. In aggregate, they create a psalm unlike any other.

The LORD

Psalm 29 announces its point of concentration. In the first two verses, "to the LORD" is repeated four times, and in the last two verses, "LORD" is also repeated four times as a literal and numerical *inclusio*. In between, there are ten uses of "LORD," seven (an even more significant number) of these within the phrase "the voice of the LORD."

The enclosing framework bespeaks movement. The opening approaches the LORD as an indirect object, whereas the ending includes Him as the subject (enthroned) and the source of blessing. The opening invites the "sons of deities" (divine beings – see below) in and the end, by implication, dismisses them, as God sits alone, asked to act for His people.

The exclusive subject of the middle section is the sevenfold "voice of the LORD," as even the other three uses of "LORD" further define the voice. (The three expansions, indicated in italics, are, respectively: "*multitudinous* waters," "cedars *of Lebanon*," and "wilderness *of Kadesh*.") This voice is deafening and awe inspiring, towering above seas, mountains (Lebanon and Sirion), vast stretches of land, the sky, and all animal life. Fire, water, and earth are invoked, only to be dismissed. In other psalms, these elements sometimes bear witness, but here they are simply there, subservient and dependent. There is no letup. Beginning, middle, and end – there is the LORD.

The Storm

This psalm accurately reflects the weather patterns of Israel. Major storm fronts come in from the west, the Mediterranean Sea, and most often are first felt in the north (i.e., Lebanon), only then stretching south. A storm reaching as far south as Kadesh would indeed be severe.

The imagery, drawn from a storm, extends well beyond a tempest into hyperbole. The "multitudinous waters" elsewhere in the Bible imply not just the sea, but also the primordial deep that God overcame in creating the world. It is one of those few loci of power that can be used as a comparison to illustrate God's might. Similarly, mountains skipping like rams symbolize nature subdued, even cowed. The "convulsing" of the wilderness only adds to the exaggeration.

Thus the middle section defines the voice of the LORD, "voice" being the same Hebrew word (*kol*) as "sound" (and as "thunder"). One "hears" the thundering roaring, as it rolls across the terrain. Elsewhere in the Bible the phrase "the voice of the LORD" indicates a commanding or speaking voice, only once implying power (Isa. 30:31), and there in battle. In Psalm 18:14 "His voice" is clearly thunder. In Psalm 29, the psalmist either created or fully developed a less common implication for the phrase.

The Echoes

Appropriately, the individual words in this psalm echo and reverberate. The opening threefold repetition (an ancient technique, predating Israel) of "attribute to the LORD" sets the tone, as subsequently words continually bounce back from mountains and hills. The effect holds throughout, from the previously noted "LORD" (eighteen times), "voice of the LORD" (seven), and "attribute to the LORD" (three). In order of first appearance, other terms are: "glory," "might," "majesty," "waters," "breaks," "cedars," "Lebanon," "convulses," "wilderness," "sit enthroned," and "His people." There are further sound echoes "holy" (*kodesh*) and the place, *Kadesh*; "convulses" (*yachil*), and "causes to calve" (*yecholel*); a rhymed phrase, "His Temple, everything" (*heichalo kulo*); and "forever" (*le'olam*) and "to His people" (*le'amo*). In five cases ("glory," "waters," "break cedars," "convulses the wilderness," "sit enthroned"), the second use of the term enriches the first, as if the echo comes back stronger than the original. It is hard to imagine a more impressive display of ricocheting sound.

There are two enclosing terms apart from "LORD." "Might" begins and ends the poem. "Glory" appears right before and at the end of the sevenfold description of God's voice, reemphasizing the middle section. Further, the copious repetition serves to cement the tight structure of an already compact psalm, a poem of "raw, untamed power" (Brueggemann).

The Surprise Ending

In Psalm 29 the surprising last verse is inherently part of the psalm (notwithstanding the opinion of some interpreters who propose otherwise), given the opening and closing fourfold repetition (as above) and the framing word "might." This radical shift away from the storm and the world stage toward calm and the people of Israel demands close analysis. Indeed, the fact that a second framing word, "glory," appears not only at the end of the middle section but also in the first verse effectively creates a double ending to the psalm, isolating and highlighting the last two verses. (There is also an appealing double entendre to the last two verses, which, apart from their direct meaning, could also be understood as the content of the unusual phrase at the end of verse 9, "everything says 'Glory.'")

The storm disappears. Arriving from the west, extending north to south, it moves east, toward "His Temple" (i.e., toward Jerusalem), and there it simply dissipates, as calm reigns. (Alternatively or in addition, God sits in his abode in heaven, above it all, and from there bequeaths peace and calm to his people.) In the penultimate verse, God's action (twice) is to "sit," an act radically more passive than all that preceded.

With this change, the psalm takes on a new context, and the reader is challenged. Is the interaction with Israel (symbolized by the Temple) inherently different than that with the rest of the world? Is the storm "rejected"? To the opposite effect, is the point (as Bar Yosef writes) that "the power of the LORD as described in the body of the poem, a power that is capable of changing the natural order, is the historic defensive shield for this small nation, Israel"? Is the same phenomenon understood radically differently by one group or another or in one circumstance or another? Might several of the above apply? For the Israelite listener, these were, of course, basic questions concerning his religion.

A word, then, is due about the often proposed Canaanite origin of this psalm (first by H. L. Ginsberg, *Ugaritic Writings* [Heb.], [1936], pp. 129–31). Noting both the use of techniques typical of earlier Canaanite poetry and the theme of a God's victory over nature, some see in Psalm 29 a direct borrowing from a Canaanite original. This requires, of course, excision of the last verses, which, as noted, would destroy the psalm's structure. Further, one notes the radically Israelite worldview in this psalm. There is no power struggle between nature and Deity here. This worldview is consistent with the Genesis story, a God above and in control of all nature (and here totally so, as the mountains skip like a calf, strong trees are shattered, and the wilderness is convulsed). The Canaanite background, therefore, is vital, *not* because the psalm duplicates it, but because Psalm 29 evolves radically away from it. (Scholars who see this psalm as a development from, rather than adoption of, Canaanite literature include U. Cassuto and, particularly, Y. Avishur, *Studies in Hebrew and Ugaritic Psalms* [Heb.], [Jerusalem 1969], pp. 25–51.) Implied in the relationship of nature and the Deity throughout, this change from the Canaanite to the Israelite environment is trumpeted by the final verses, bringing the poem into its new cultural context.

The Audience

Psalm 29 is an overheard address, on high. The addressees, "sons of deities," is a term used differently by Israel and surrounding cultures, although not well defined in the Israelite culture, which was, throughout biblical times, evolving toward a less adulterated monotheism. Even medieval commentators struggle for an exact definition (Rashi, officers on high; Ibn Ezra, stars; Kimche, angels), though a sense of beings below the LORD, but on high, above man, is accepted.

This places both the speaker and the reader in odd positions. The speaker is a total mystery. He presumably is in a position to instruct these divine beings. Who could such an individual be? Given this ambiguous identity, readers are puzzled by the conversation that is taking place.

Thus, in an odd twist, the psalm, wherein a "voice" calls out, is itself a voice calling out. We may hear this voice as roaring thunder (parallel to the rest of the psalm) or as something much calmer, but the content is crystal clear. Addressed to those who, being semidivine, might think of themselves as a challenge to the LORD, the message is pointed: the LORD is the All Powerful. It is He Who is invoked to grant Israel might (or glory) and peace.

Given the end of the poem, we have here a psalm of great optimism, for a God so powerful can surely provide Israel with the requested gifts. Given the polytheistic cultural environment, the psalm is theologically a profound affirmation of monotheism, and the reader is left only with the guess that the speaker, somehow, is "Truth" as the poet understood it. The end hammers the message home by the prominent absence of the original addressees, those "sons of deities." Instead, from the end of verse 9, the message of glory to God is delivered in His Temple and is a message of strength but also, according to the final word, a message of peace. The colossal hyperbole finds resolution in quiet, optimistic hope.

It should be clear from the above that the attribution of this psalm to any one historical situation only weakens it. The psalm is ahistorical, and that is its power.

Additional Note and Comment

"LORD" appears eighteen times. I am not aware of any attribution of special import to eighteenfold repetition in the Bible. However, I note that in my book *The Song of Songs: A Woman in Love* (Gefen, 2009), I found that the three most basic terms of the Song (the root *sh-l-m*, as in Solomon and Jerusalem; the root *'-h-v*, love; and the related terms *ro'eh* and *rei'a*, "shepherd" and "beloved") all appear eighteen times. I suspect that further scholarly research will find other instances of the significance of eighteen repetitions.

Liturgy: On the basis of these eighteen repetitions, the Talmud states that this psalm is the model for the daily central Jewish prayer of eighteen benedictions, and the Midrash on Psalms seeks to trace similarities between the benedictions and the psalm. A version of the same basic prayer, recited on the Sabbath, has only seven benedictions, this said to be based on the seven uses of "voice of the LORD." Psalm 29 is included twice in the Sabbath liturgy, probably owing to the sevenfold repetition. In any case, the psalm befits group prayer, being a statement of belief and hope, divorced from any individual concerns. It bespeaks congregational worship.

PSALM 92

Toward the Essence of the Sabbath

1. A psalm. A song. For the Sabbath day.
2. It is good to acclaim the LORD, and to sing hymns to Your name, O Most High,
3. to declare Your loving kindness at daybreak, and Your faithfulness every night,
4. with a ten-stringed instrument, with a harp, with voice[1] and lyre together.
5. For You have made me glad by Your deeds, O LORD; I sing for joy at Your handiwork.
6. How great are Your works, O LORD, Your designs are very deep.
7. A brutish man does not know, nor can a fool understand this.
8. When the wicked flourish like grass and all evildoers blossom, it is toward their eternal destruction.
9. But You – Height, O LORD, for all time.[2]
10. For, behold, Your enemies, O LORD, behold, Your enemies perish; they are scattered, all the evildoers.
11. You have raised my horn, like a wild ox; I am doused in fresh oil,
12. and my eyes have seen the defeat of my watchful foes; when the wicked rise against me, my ears hear [their downfall].
13. The righteous person will flourish like a date palm; he will grow like a cedar in Lebanon;
14. planted in the house of the LORD, they[3] will flourish in the courts of our God.
15. In old age they will still produce fruit, full of sap and freshness will they be,
16. declaring that the LORD is upright, "My rock, in Whom there is no wrong."

פרק צב

א מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר לְיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת׃
ב טוֹב לְהֹדוֹת לַה׳ וּלְזַמֵּר לְשִׁמְךָ עֶלְיוֹן׃
ג לְהַגִּיד בַּבֹּקֶר חַסְדֶּךָ וֶאֱמוּנָתְךָ בַּלֵּילוֹת׃
ד עֲלֵי עָשׂוֹר וַעֲלֵי נָבֶל עֲלֵי הִגָּיוֹן בְּכִנּוֹר׃
ה כִּי שִׂמַּחְתַּנִי ה׳ בְּפָעֳלֶךָ בְּמַעֲשֵׂי יָדֶיךָ אֲרַנֵּן׃
ו מַה גָּדְלוּ מַעֲשֶׂיךָ ה׳ מְאֹד עָמְקוּ מַחְשְׁבֹתֶיךָ׃
ז אִישׁ בַּעַר לֹא יֵדָע וּכְסִיל לֹא יָבִין אֶת זֹאת׃
ח בִּפְרֹחַ רְשָׁעִים כְּמוֹ עֵשֶׂב וַיָּצִיצוּ כָּל פֹּעֲלֵי אָוֶן לְהִשָּׁמְדָם עֲדֵי עַד׃
ט וְאַתָּה מָרוֹם לְעֹלָם ה׳׃
י כִּי הִנֵּה אֹיְבֶיךָ ה׳ כִּי הִנֵּה אֹיְבֶיךָ יֹאבֵדוּ יִתְפָּרְדוּ כָּל פֹּעֲלֵי אָוֶן׃
יא וַתָּרֶם כִּרְאֵים קַרְנִי בַּלּוֹתִי בְּשֶׁמֶן רַעֲנָן׃
יב וַתַּבֵּט עֵינִי בְּשׁוּרָי בַּקָּמִים עָלַי מְרֵעִים תִּשְׁמַעְנָה אָזְנָי׃
יג צַדִּיק כַּתָּמָר יִפְרָח כְּאֶרֶז בַּלְּבָנוֹן יִשְׂגֶּה׃
יד שְׁתוּלִים בְּבֵית ה׳ בְּחַצְרוֹת אֱלֹהֵינוּ יַפְרִיחוּ׃
טו עוֹד יְנוּבוּן בְּשֵׂיבָה דְּשֵׁנִים וְרַעֲנַנִּים יִהְיוּ׃
טז לְהַגִּיד כִּי יָשָׁר ה׳ צוּרִי וְלֹא עַוְלָתָה בּוֹ׃

[1] Possibly indicates musical sound, based on Psalm 9:17.
[2] See the commentary for the interpretation of verse 9.
[3] Hebrew has a plural verb, evidently treating "righteous person" as a collective or referring to the trees.

Introduction

Psalm 92, a passionate acknowledgment of the grandeur of the physical world and the moral order, declares its pedagogic goal ("to declare," vv. 3, 16) at the beginning and the end. It is a celebration of God's qualities and wisdom as reflected in His creation. The psalm is strikingly original. "For the Sabbath Day," is the only attribution of a psalm to a day of the week in Psalms, even though there is no apparent reference to the Sabbath in the poem. I suggest below that the title in fact reflects the author's original intention. To support that contention I survey the structure of the poem, which points toward the Sabbath, and then explore the central message. Thereafter, I touch on several of the poetic flourishes and offer some additional comments (including on previously suggested connections to the Sabbath). I proceed on the assumption that the first verse is original and accurate, but is meant as a separate title for the text (an assumption that the interpretation bears out).

Structure and Meaning

The Grand Chiasmus

There is a sizable chiasmus in Psalm 92, A-B-C-D-E-D-C-B-A, as follows: (A) At the beginning and the end, God is described (third person), whereas throughout the rest of the psalm, He is addressed in the second person. This encloses the psalm. (B) "Declare" also appears beginning and end (vv. 3, 16). (C) Moving toward the center, one finds Temple references, articulated at the end (v. 14) and implied at the beginning (the musical prayer service, v. 4), as noted by Magonet. (D) More toward the middle, one encounters verses 8 and 10, the only two verses with three parts each. Both include a reference to "evildoers" and both offer the same insight – the evildoers are present, but only for an instant, after which they are scattered/destroyed. As opposed to the many psalms in which the evildoers are an immediate cause of turmoil, here calm and assurance dominate. (E) All this is built around the central verse 9, a most unusual, terse presentation that has no verb.

Numbers

The numerical counts of Psalm 92 are basic to its understanding. First, the LORD (God's name) is repeated seven times. Of these, three uses precede verse 9 and three follow, with one in that verse itself. If one assumes that the title is a separate piece, then verse 9 is framed by the same number of verses before and after – also seven! Although the verse division postdates the Bible by many centuries, the specific division here seems compelling, and one should not be

surprised to discover that verse 9 (again, apart from the title verse) is also surrounded by the same number of words before and after – fifty-two.

This use of seven (as in the seven days of Creation and the seven days of the week) and fifty-two (as in the weeks of the solar year) in a psalm titled for the Sabbath day is arresting. (The Bible uses a lunar calendar but reflects an awareness of the solar calendar as well. See "Additional Notes" below.) Together these indications are decisive: this psalm was indeed written for the Sabbath.

The Confrontation

However, one is still faced with the question of the content that the poet would associate with the Sabbath. Structure again points the way. All is centered on verse 9. This verse is among the shortest in the Bible. It has just four words, and (if one needs further indication of its uniqueness) each word has four letters, which seems purposeful, as one of the words, "forever," *le'olam*, almost always appears in Hebrew in the *plene* spelling in Psalms, which would have required five letters. Moreover, as noted, verse 9 has no verb. (Alter comments: "This verse...does not scan in the Hebrew.")

The message is neither trite nor simple, as befits its exceptional nature. Throughout the psalm God is described by His deeds, but in verse 9 there seems to be an attempt to describe Him directly. The grammar is strange, to say the least, and presents a prodigious challenge to translators. As it now reads, the pronoun is followed by a noun meaning "height" (which is used elsewhere for exalted place, but not as a name for God, "the Exalted One") followed by the term "forever," and then God's name. Had the verse meant to imply that God is "on high" (as some translate), it is missing a letter. As an adjective (exalted) from this root, a four-letter form is available (*muram* instead of *marom*). Rather than correct the text or assume rare grammatical structures, I conclude that the poet purposely joined the four terms in an awkward fashion.

It is unclear whether the challenge to the reader in confronting these four terms would be best designated blending, understanding, probing, confronting, or something else. This "Psalm for the Sabbath Day" leads to deep contemplation, extending beyond words. There is no struggle here, nor is there doubt, nor is there a request. Here words are used to move the reader to nonverbal thinking. Just as the laws of the Sabbath take one away from the normal hustle and bustle of life, so this poem suggests stepping away from the normal reflection of philosophy.

This is an intense demand. I cite four reactions among those that I have encountered. One interpreter (A. Cohen) finds four words in ascendance here, each reaching higher. A student shared with me that he finds four variations of God's name in these lines (but another student noted that each is slightly different). One colleague detected a chiasm in the verse itself – the two external terms, "You" and "LORD" bespeaking intimacy, the two internal terms signifying transcendence (one relating to place and one to time). Another reader disagreed, finding differentiation in all four terms – You (not us), height (not this earth), forever (not passing), and LORD (not other gods). In any case, the confrontation leads beyond words. As is often the case in distinguished poetry, the reader is not given some unambiguous message, but is challenged to find greater depth. Psalm 92, then, contends that the Sabbath is the proper time to engage in this profound confrontation.

Poetic Flourishes

Seen in the Translation

Two repetitions of "work" (vv. 5, 6) and three each of "do/deed" (vv. 5, 8, 10) and "flourish" (vv. 8, 13, 14) are subtle reminders of Creation.

The parallelism is particularly exciting in Psalm 92. Often, the second half-verse adds significantly to the first, creating a new combined understanding. Sometimes the parallelism is nuanced (e.g., v. 3, where "loving kindness," implying grace, is supplemented by "faithfulness," implying keeping the covenant, a common biblical combination); sometimes balancing (e.g., the combative and relaxing descriptions in verse 11), and sometimes progressive (e.g., v. 12, where the opposition is seen and then rises). Note also how verse 2 is carried forward by halves: 2a in verse 3 and 2b in verse 4.

The similes of verses 13–16, the cedar and the palm, are particularly tantalizing. Both are tall, straight trees and very long-lived (and therefore ideal opposites to the annually withering grass), but they are also different and their separate qualities are cumulative. The cedar is extremely resistant to damage, is majestic, and supplies beautiful strong wood. The date palm is lovely in flower and bears valuable fruit. The best cedars are in the mountains and the best date palms are in the valleys. To encompass the two together, one would have to include a vast territory, lending a tone of near fantasy to the next reference to God's house and courtyard, almost as if the whole earth is being referred to (at least on one level) rather than just the Temple. The similes move toward their application by degree, as the terms move in an intertwined fashion from the trees to the righteous people.

The speaker twice enters the psalm in the first person (vv. 5, 11f.). The first instance might refer to an enjoyment of creation, but the second clearly cites personal salvation or success, probably adding that tone to the first instance as well. It is unclear why the speaker includes reference to his own well-being. It may be that the calm and positive air of the psalm requires a narrator whose personal circumstances are secure. Alternatively, the positive air of the poem could lead the speaker to evaluate his life positively.

Hebrew Based

The poet clearly enjoyed word plays. Among these are "most high" and "with" (vv. 2, 4, *'elyon*, *'alei*, the first three consonants being identical); "sing for joy" and "fresh" (vv. 5, 11, 15, *aranen*, *ra'anan*); "You have raised...like a wild ox" (v. 11, *vayarem kireim*); and "watchful foes" and "upright" (vv. 12, 16, *shurai*, *yashar*).

Verse 12 is built on puns. In "I have seen the defeat of my watchful foes," the term for "foes" has a root that is also related to seeing (hence the translation), a pun that also occurs elsewhere in the Bible. The next pun evidently takes its inspiration from the first. "The wicked...my ears will hear" borrows the known usage wherein seeing one's enemies implies their defeat (used here and several other times in the Bible) and connotes that hearing them also implies their downfall (as the translation has in parentheses). Further, "the wicked" has a homonym that would mean "those who make noise," a parallel pun (approximately, "hear my noisy enemies") to the first play on words ("seen...watchful foes"). There is also another possible reading of verse 12, which does not include the assumed addition – "the downfall." In that case, what the speaker "hears" when he confronts the wicked would be the following four verses of reassurance (which would then have to appear within quotation marks in English).

The poetry is all-embracing, spanning day and night (v. 3) and great and deep (v. 6). In the Hebrew (not reflected in the English), three times the author used the well-known structure of beginning with a singular reference and continuing with a plural parallel, creating a feeling of expansion: morning/nights (v. 3); doings/handiwork (v. 5); a single righteous person followed by plural verbs and adjectives (v. 13).

The Locale

The poet wrote against the background of the flora of the Land of Israel. To clarify: the rain-dry cycle means that grass, always green in many parts of the world, is green only seasonally in Israel, and from even a short distance seems to disappear for half the year. If the evildoers spring up as grass, they may be many, but the primary implication is of a brief life. Further, residents of Israel would also be likely to know that a date palm lives for more than 100 years and often begins to bear its best fruit only after 10 years. One would scarcely know the cedar's longevity, given its ability to survive two thousand years, but it would be known as long-lived, perhaps as close a living picture of eternity as one could choose.

Additional Notes and Comments

Nahum Sarna mentions the seven verses before and after verse 9, and he and Bazak note the fifty-two words before and after verse 9 (although they did not connect that to weeks of the year).

There is widespread agreement that the biblical calendar was lunar and that months were intercalated to match the solar year. This is in itself an indication of a knowledge of the latter, as are the length of Enoch's life, 365 years (he never died, but was taken to God, Gen. 6:23f.) and the length of the Great Flood, 365 days. Egypt used a solar calendar.

Among modern interpreters, Sarna suggests that Psalm 92 is connected to Creation – not to the text of Genesis, but rather to the international myth, also known in Israel, of creation through victory of the Lord over sea gods in battle. The tone of this psalm, however, is not military, and there are only tenuous reasons to connect the number seven, which is the framework of the story in Genesis, to the battle myth.

Connections of the psalm to the Sabbath have been suggested across the centuries. A midrash cited by Rashi associates the Sabbath with this psalm by referring to that day "which is entirely the Sabbath," a reference to the world to come, when the righteous are to receive the reward pictured in the final verses. (Certainly this approach does accord with the psalm's idyllic description.) An imaginative tradition cited in the Jewish Sabbath liturgy suggests that the psalm was actually recited by the original Sabbath day at the time of Creation. Ibn Ezra and Kimchi both commented that only on the Sabbath does one have the time to meditate on such deep matters. Indeed, they may have been on the right track, for the implied contemplation does require a certain withdrawal from worldly concerns.

Subsequent to the canonization of Psalms, but before the Greek translation, other psalms were assigned for specific recitation in the Temple on each day of the week. These associations are noted in the Septuagint and in the later Mishna. One presumes that this practice evolved as an imitation of Psalm 92, and there is little connection between the other six psalms (in order, Pss. 24, 48, 82, 94, 81, 93) to the respective days of their recitation.