

RESTRUCTURING PSALM 47

DAVID J. ZUCKER

PSALM 47

- 1 *For the leader. Of the Korahites. A psalm.*
- 2 *All you peoples, clap your hands,
raise a joyous shout for God*
- 3 *For the Lord Most High is awesome,
great king over all the earth;*
- 4 *He subjects peoples to us,
sets nations at our feet.*
- 5 *He chose our heritage for us,
the pride of Jacob whom He loved. Selah.*
- 6 *God ascends, midst acclamation;
The Lord, to the blasts of the horn.*
- 7 *Sing, O sing to God;
sing, O sing to our king.*
- 8 *For God is king over all the earth;
sing a hymn [maskil].*
- 9 *God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on His holy throne.*
- 10 *The great of the peoples are gathered together,
the retinue of Abraham's God;
for the guardians of the earth belong to God;
He is greatly exalted.*

In the Book of Psalms, only Psalms 47, 49 and 85 bear the identical four-word Hebrew superscription: *La-menatzeah li-v'nai Korah Mizmor* [For the leader. Of the Korahites. A psalm]. This study offers a schema and an explanation for the restructuring of Psalm 47. When restructured, this psalm's messages are more obvious, emphatic, and make greater sense. The reformulation follows a pattern similar to one suggested earlier for Psalm 49, which ar-

David J. Zucker, PhD, is Rabbi/Chaplain at Shalom Park, Aurora, Colorado, a continuum of care/retirement center. He is the author of Israel's Prophets: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Paulist, 1994), and American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction (Jason Aronson, 1998), His latest book is The Torah: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Paulist, 2005).

gued that restructuring does not change the psalm's essential message; rather it underscores it more fully.¹ Restructuring also indicates a similar literary pattern that links Psalms 47, 49 and 85.²

Yet, if rearranging these psalms makes greater sense, why did they remain as they are for millennia? Psalmody has a long history: It was part of Israelite tradition for hundreds of years, going back before the Babylonian Exile. Consequently, it carries with it the weight of tradition. Yehezkel Kaufmann explains that psalmody was stylized at an early period. Though in its original form it was the

product of a personal need and a private sentiment, a given psalm might be adopted by others as articulating better than they could their own feeling. Such a psalm acquired fixed form and was utilized time and again on similar occasions and in like situations.

The intent of a later reader or speaker of the psalm may have diverged from that of the original author(s), but this did not "stand in the way of the devout. For two thousand years, Jews and Christians in the most varied circumstances have poured out their souls to God through the Psalter."³

For the pious, the Bible is God's word, immutable and inerrant. It is *Torat Moshe Mi-Sinai* – God's word given to Moses on Mount Sinai. While in the rabbinic period the sages noted contradictory passages, generally they strove to reconcile them. The occasional commentator was perplexed by a problematic text (see Ibn Ezra on Genesis 12:6), but this was the exception, not the rule. Serious emendations or rearranging the sacred texts to offer a more compelling message is a recent phenomenon.

PSALM 47 RESTRUCTURED

The restructured parallelistic configurations look like this:

1 For the leader. Of the Korahites. A psalm.

*2 All you peoples, clap your hands,
raise a joyous shout for God.*

*6 God ascends midst acclamation;
the Lord, to the blasts of the horn.*

3 *For the Lord Most High is awesome,
great king over all the earth;*

*7-8 Sing, O sing to God;
sing, O sing to our king;
for God is king over all the earth;
sing a hymn [maskil].*

4 *He subjects peoples to us,
sets nations at our feet.*

*9 God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on His holy throne.*

5 *He chose our heritage for us,
the pride of Jacob whom He loved. Selah.*

*10a The great of the peoples are gathered together,
the retinue of Abraham's God;*

*10b For the guardians of the earth belong to God;
He is greatly exalted.*

Many scholars categorize Psalm 47 as an enthronement psalm.⁴ It is a joyous song. It celebrates God's rule over all peoples. "Using the style of a hymn, it praises with an almost passionate enthusiasm [the Lord's] kingship over the nations."⁵ The proposed reading makes two small adjustments to the transmitted text. Verses 7 and 8 are read together, as is suggested in NJPS, and verse 10 is divided into its two component parts. The rationale for these modifications is explained in the appropriate sections below.

As with Psalm 49, there are echoes of both "emblematic" and "stair-like" qualities, as suggested in the scholarly work of C.A. and E.G. Briggs.⁶

This restructured reading has many of the thoughts expressed in the first part of the "set" echoed in the second "set." In a number of places, the same terms will be repeated, which strengthens the case for this revised reading.

VERSES 2 AND 6: THEME

2 raise shout for God ~ 6 midst acclamation, God, horn blasts

In both verses, the Deity is referred to as God. In verse 2, the people are called upon to give acclaim. This acclaim is mentioned in the second set, in verse 6. Similar words are used: *Hariyu . . . b'kol rinah / Bitru'ah . . . b'kol shofar*. The phrase *with the sound of* [b'kol] is exactly the same in both verses. The words *Raise* [hariyu] *a . . . shout* and *God midst acclamation* [bitru'ah] both come from the root *r-v-'a*.

VERSES 3 AND 7-8: THEME

3 awesome king over the earth ~ 7-8 sing to God, king over the earth

In the Hebrew text, verses 7-8 repeat the word "sing [zamru]" a total of five times out of only thirteen words. "God" is featured twice, and the root for "king [m-l-kh]" appears twice. The repetition of these words, especially the word "sing," is stylistically effective, and also suggests a form of a dittograph. The technical term *maskil* which appears within the text of this verse is found internally in only one other psalm, and there the clear meaning is to be "thoughtful" or "pay attention" (Ps. 41:2). In this context in verse 8 the meaning of *maskil* is uncertain (so NJPS). It may reflect a scribe's note of puzzlement over the unique repetition of "sing" in these double verses, suggesting that in an earlier transmission, words (or a whole verse?) came to be inadvertently added.⁷

The statement in verse 8 that the Deity rules over the earth [*kee melekh kol ha-aretz*] echoes these same words in the same exact order found in verse 3: *For* [the Lord] *. . . is . . . King over all the earth* [*kee . . . melekh . . . kol ha-aretz*].

VERSES 4 AND 9: THEME

4 God's power over nations ~ 9 God's power over nations

As the preceding verses featured the name of the Deity, and likewise the term "king," so in the next doublet both of those terms will be found in the

second set, where verse 9 begins *God reigns* (cf. 3, 7, 8).

These two verses stress God's power over the nations. In these verses three separate synonyms, each in plural form, describe groups: verse 4 *peoples* [amim]; *nations* [umim]; verse 9 *nations* [goyim]. In verse 4 the root word *tahat* [t-h-t] appears twice, signifying "subdues" and "setting under." This corresponds to the concept that "set under" God is the holy throne, upon which the Deity sits, an image found in verse 9.

VERSES 5 AND 10a: THEME

5 [God] *chooses pride of Jacob* ~ 10a *retinue of Abraham's God*

Verses 5 and 10a are closely connected by their reference to the two most famous patriarchs, Jacob and his grandfather Abraham. Weiser makes a convincing case for an eschatological interpretation of this psalm. He suggests that at the end of time the Kingdom of God will embrace the whole world. In this judgment he is preceded by Kirkpatrick and Oesterley.⁸ The eventual world rule of God, however, is a secondary development. God's rule over the people Israel and the land Israel, either or both of which are reflected in the phrase *pride of Jacob*, naturally and appropriately precedes mention of Abraham, for Abraham symbolizes the age-old "future" promise that the nations shall be blessed through the first patriarch (cf. Gen 12:3; 22:18). Indeed, in this latter promise (Gen. 22:18) it specifically states that the *nations of the earth* shall be blessed through Abraham's descendants (the pride of Jacob). These selfsame "nations" were referred to in the preceding set of verses [amim, umim, goyim].

The repetition of key words such as *nations* [amim] here (in verses 4 and 10) and in the next set is a literary mark of these three connected psalms.⁹

VERSE 10b: THEME

10b *Earth and exalted God*

This half-verse serves to sum up the direction of the whole preceding psalm. It functions like a musical coda. This "summary" verse is visibly and consciously placed as a separate concluding section in Oesterley's work.¹⁰ It is an integral part of this kind of a Korah psalm, for the concluding verse(s) of Psalm 49 serve(s) a similar summary function, as does the final verse in

ideas of the particular psalm.

NOTES

1. David J. Zucker, "The Riddle of Psalm 49," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, XXXIII:3 (July-September 2005) pp. 143-152.
2. David J. Zucker, "Restructuring Psalm 85," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, XXXV:1 (January-March 2007) pp. 47-55.
3. Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* [trans and abridged by M. Greenberg] (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1960) p. 310.
4. W. Oesterley, *The Psalms* (London: SPCK, 1962) p. 258; A. Weiser, ed., *The Psalms: A Commentary* (trans. Herbert Hartwell, (Philadelphia: Old Testament Library, Westminster, 1962) p. 375; A. Cohen, *The Psalms*, (London: Soncino, 1945) p. 148; A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 2 Vols, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) Vol. 1, p. 360; M. Dahood, *The Psalms* (Garden City, NY; Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 1966) Vol. 1, p. 283.
5. Weiser, p. 374. Whether the psalm is eschatological, historical, or cultic, or whether it was used in a variety of ways during the period of the First Temple is not the concern of the present analysis. Many of the scholars cited in the notes deal with those issues.
6. C.A. and E.G. Briggs, *The Book of Psalms*, 2 Vols., (New York: Scribner's, International Critical and Exegetical Commentary, 1906) Vol. 1, pp. xxxiv-xxxvii.
7. Briggs, Vol. 1, p. 399 speaks of a "copyist error" and would transpose some of these words.
8. Weiser, p. 376 ff.; A. F. Kirkpatrick, ed., *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957 [1902]), p. 259; Oesterley, p. 259.
9. In a similar fashion, Psalm 49:8, 16 repeated the word for redemption [*fadah, yifdeh*], and its same root [*f-d-h*] was found in the next "set" in 49:9 [*pidyon*]. Likewise, the root for life [*h-v-h*] was found in 49:10 and again in the next set in 49:19. Similarly, in Psalm 85, the word *Your wrath* [*apekha*] in verse 6 of the "set" of 85:3 and 6, is repeated exactly in 85:4, for the next "set". Likewise, the word *truth* [*emet*] appears in the "sets" 85:10 and 12, followed by 11 and 13.
10. Oesterley, p. 259.