

## PSALM 118

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Of the 150 chapters of the Psalms only very few have an introductory heading describing their setting or purpose (e.g. 30:1, 34:1, 51:1-2). For the vast majority of them, it is left to the reader to explore the different moods, feelings or situations which the author describes or expresses, and which vary from chapter to chapter. Failure to explore these sometimes minute differences reduces these beautiful poetic creations to a repetitive praise of the Lord.

Everyone is familiar with Psalm 118 from the recitation of *Hallel*. As recited in the liturgy, the chapter is broken up with responsive readings and repetitions. However, in Psalms it is one organic chapter with one theme. What is this theme? I have chosen chapter 118 as an example to demonstrate the extra value that can be extracted by the assignment of a superscription and simultaneously explain the switch from singular to plural as found therein.

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 54a) understands Psalms chapter 107 as describing the situations where one should bring a Thanksgiving Sacrifice (*Korban Todah*). This sacrifice is the forerunner to what in our days is the *Birkat hagomel*, the benediction we offer when a person had a life-threatening experience and expresses his gratitude for having survived. During the time when the Temple existed, such a person expressed his feeling of gratitude by bringing an animal to the Temple and surrendering it to the priests as a sacrifice. Chapter 118 appears to be a description of the ceremony connected with the bringing of this sacrifice.

It is safe to assume that on holidays, when many out-of-towners came to Jerusalem, a number of them wanted to carry out this obligation and that a special time was set aside to receive them. The author of this chapter has poetically described the ensuing ceremony. The introductory heading can be "A Ceremony for the Bringing of the *Korban Todah*."

It begins when the gates had not yet been opened. The celebrants are assembled outside and the priests stand in readiness inside the Temple area to serve them. Naturally, a group of onlookers has assembled to watch the pro-

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ceedings. A small choir of Levites is placed near the gate. They open the ceremony by singing:

*Give thanks to the Lord for he is good.*

To which all the participants and bystanders reply:

*Indeed, His grace lasts forever.*<sup>1</sup>

The leader then turns to the group waiting for the opening of the gates and repeats the same request receiving the identical reply from them. The next time, the leader addresses the waiting priests and after that the entire audience, eliciting the same reply:

*Indeed, His grace lasts forever.*

The poet then turns to the waiting crowd and records a condensed version of their conversation and the description of the various dangers from which they had escaped.

Each of the following sentences represents the utterance of a different person.

*Out of my distress I called upon the Lord and He answered me with deliverance.*

*The Lord is with me I need not fear. What can a man do to me?*

*The Lord takes my part with those who help me; therefore I can gaze upon those who hate me.*

*It is better to rely on the Lord than to put your confidence in men.*

*It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.*

*All the pursuers surrounded me, with my prayer to the Lord I cut them off.*

*They surrounded me totally but with prayer to the Lord I cut them off.*

*They swarmed around me like bees quenched like the fire of thorns, with prayer to the Lord I cut them off.*

*I was threatened to fall, but the Lord helped me.*

*The Lord is my strength and song and he was my salvation.*

*The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tents of the righteous, the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.*

*The right hand of the Lord is exalted; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.*

*I shall not die, but live and declare the works of the Lord.*

*The Lord has chastened me, but He has not given me over unto death.*

The time has come to enter the Temple ground and the group demands the beginning of the ceremony of the sacrifice. They impatiently call out:

*Open to me the gates of righteousness, I will enter through them to give thanks to the Lord.*

To which the gatekeepers reply, while the doors are swung open:

*This is the gate of the Lord, the righteous shall enter into it.*

The procession of sacrificers slowly moves forward and enters the Temple grounds. As they proceed and are inspired by the holiness of the ground they are about to enter, they offer short prayers:

*I will give thanks unto Thee, for Thou have answered me and have become my salvation.*

*The stone which the builders had rejected became the chief corner-stone.*

*Thus is the Lord's doing, it is marvelous in our eyes.*

*This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad on it.*

On arrival, and before they deliver their sacrifices, the group offers a prayer asking that the future shall be as safe and successful as the past has been:

*Please, oh Lord (continue to) help me.*

*Please, oh Lord (continue to) let me succeed.*

The poet now records the welcome extended to the group by the priests.

*Blessed be those that come in the name of the Lord.*

*We bless you out of the house of the Lord.*

To which the sacrificers reply:

*Mighty is the Lord and he appeared to us.*

*Bind up the sacrifice with strings that reach up to the corners of the altar.*

Having thus surrendered their sacrifice to the priests, who perform the prescribed rituals, the participants, while watching the priests, offer a last prayer:

*You are my God and I give thanks to you, My God and I will exalt you.*

Following this is the last sentence of the chapter, identical with the one chanted at the very beginning of the ceremony. The repetition probably refers to the fact that the crowd was often too numerous to be admitted all at once. It therefore required a second or even third repetition of the ceremony described.

#### NOTES

1. The Hebrew word *ki* in this case, as very often in biblical texts, should be translated "indeed" (compare Ps. 128:2, etc).