

An Analysis of Psalm 91

SS 508 – Psalms and Wisdom Literature

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Introduction

Few psalms are as familiar, even if one does not know he is thinking back to this psalm, as psalm 91. It is the inspiration for a common hymn used in Christian funerals. It is one of the sources for Satan's temptation of Christ in the desert. Psalm 91 is also prayed in the Liturgy of the Hours as the psalm for Sunday Compline after Second Vespers every week. At times, though, such familiarity can invite the trap of a superficial reading of the text such that the vivid images and promises are not fully appreciated. This brief discussion will reflect on the formal structure and meaning of the psalm within the ancient Hebrew and contemporary Christian contexts.

I. Structural Analysis

Psalm 91 is a hymn expounding trust in the Lord and the promises made to the man who puts his trust in the Lord. The Septuagint, Clementine Vulgate, and Douay-Rheims preserve a superscript of “Αἶνος ᾠδῆς τῷ Δαυίδ” (Ps 91:1, LXX) or “Laus cantici David” (Ps 91:1, Vulg) or “The praise of a canticle for David,” (Ps 91:1, D-R) respectively. However, this superscript is no longer included in most modern scholarly translations, notably including the Nova Vulgata.¹ Most broadly, the psalm is divided into three sections; Verses 1-2 introduce the psalm and identify the one who rests in the Lord. Verses 3-13 describe the promises and protections to be offered by the Lord. Verses 14-16 conclude with an oracle from the Lord himself, making those promises.² Verses 1-13 are spoken by a psalmist with the exception of a short quote in verse 2 that is the profession of faith of the man about whom the psalm is written, quoted by the

¹ Lancelot C. L. Brenton, *The Septuagint Version: Greek* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1851); *Biblia Sacra Juxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, Electronica. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005); *The Holy Bible, Translated from the Latin Vulgate* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009).

² James Limburg, *Westminster Bible Companion: Psalms*, 1st ed., Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 312.

psalmist. The speaker shifts in verses 14-16 to God himself who makes promises to the man who “cleaves to me in love” (Ps 91:14, RSVCE).³

At a more detailed level, verses 1-2 identify the person who will be protected under the promises in this psalm. Verses 4-8 describe the protection that person can expect from the Lord, even amidst destruction. Verses 9-10 echo verses 1-2 as a sort of thematic, if not linguistic, refrain, and again identify the beneficiary of these promises. In verses 11-13, the psalmist shifts from the protection from evil to the power over evil that the one who trusts in God will have. For example, “You will tread on the lion and the adder, / the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot” (Ps 91:13). Finally, in verses 14-16, the Lord makes his promises of closeness and protection.

Samuel L. Terrien proposes an alternate division of the psalm into “five regular strophes consisting of three elements each.”⁴ In this structure, he sees the key to understanding the psalm as found in the second and fourth strophe, the imagery of feathers or wings and angels, which are frequently imagined as winged beings, as the agents of the protection promised by the Lord. By using this balance, the center strophe is seen as a sort of apex of this protection wherein man takes his refuge and dwelling in the Lord. In creating this division, he excludes verses 15c-16 and presents that portion as an envoi to conclude the psalm; it “transforms the conjunction of refuge and dwelling place with rescue and glorification.”⁵ This approach has the advantage of an elegant symmetrical structure for the psalm, which Terrien describes as follows:

³ Catholic Biblical Association (Great Britain), *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version* (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994). Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotes come from this translation.

⁴ Samuel L. Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary*, The Eerdmans critical commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2003).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 649.

- I. Imagery of Secret Places and Fortress (vv. 1-3)
- II. Under the Shadow of the Divine Wings (vv. 4-6)
- III. Dwelling Place and Refuge (vv. 7-9)
- IV. Committed Protection (vv. 10-12)
- V. Steadfast Love and the Name (vv. 13-15ab)
- Envoi: Recue and Glorification (vv. 15c-16)⁶

It is notable that the psalm opens in third person and quickly shifts to second person, a shift that is removed in several modern translations; NRSVCE and NABRE both convert verse 1 to second person. Depending on the translation, verse 3 is either in first or second person, but the latter seems more common in modern translations, including RSVCE, NRSV, NABRE, and Nova Vulgata; this is in line with the extant Hebrew text. In LXX, Clementine Vulgate and D-R, verse 3 is taken as a continuation of the quote from verse 2, the declaration of the righteous man to set the stage and claim the protections and rewards described in the remainder of the psalm. When the Lord speaks in verses 14-16, the text again shifts to third person such that these promises can be claimed by any person who defines himself by the declaration of submission and trust made in verse 2.

II. Poetic Parallelism

- 1A You will not fear the terror of the night,
- 1B nor the arrow that flies by day,
- 2A nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
- 2B nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

These four lines are comprised of two bicolon lines of poetry. These lines reflect several aspects of poetic parallelism seen in Psalm 91. Each line reflects two intralinear parallels, one echo and one contrast. Terror in 1A echoes Arrow in 1B. This could also be seen as an example of metonyms wherein the flying arrow, that is, war, is seen as one source or type of terror. Both cola of line 2 could be seen as metonyms, further examples of sources of terror building on and

⁶ Ibid. I have adjusted the spacing of his chart to reflect a combination of both of his charts describing the structure of this psalm.

extending 1A. Each colon ends (at least in the English rendering) with a contrast parallel. Night in 1A contrasts day in 1B; darkness in 2A contrasts noonday in 2B.

Cola 1B, 2A, and 2B all ballast the ellipsis of “You will not fear” in 1A. These ballasts come in the form of an act that the evil from which the righteous is released from fear by entrusting his protection to the Lord: flying, stalking, and wasting.

Furthermore, the structure of these two lines themselves is an example of interlinear echo parallelism. Each describes something to be feared in the night or darkness followed by something to be feared in the daytime, both under the assurance that there is no cause for such fear when one is under the protection of the Lord.

III. Modern Exegesis

Psalm 91 is a clear example of the trust to be placed in God encouraged by the wisdom tradition.⁷ Unfortunately, the historical context surrounding the authorship of the Psalm is disputed, and no certainty can be reached.

The first question that is raised regarding the content of the psalm is what is meant by the idea of “[dwelling] in the shelter of the Most High” (Ps 91:1). Scholars are divided on this matter. Some argue that the voice is that of a person who has sought physical refuge in the temple from persecution or attack. Another interpretation posits that it is the voice of one who is expressing thanksgiving for overcoming illness. It has even been proposed that “Psalm 91 may have been the verbal accompaniment to the purification rituals prescribed in Leviticus 14 for restoration of persons to the community.”⁸ While it is not entirely unreasonable to interpret

⁷ Walter J. Harrelson, ed., *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 836.

⁸ Leander E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible: The First Book of Maccabees; the Second Book of Maccabees; Introduction to Hebrew Poetry; the Book of Job; the Book of Psalms*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 1046.

Psalm 91 as a reference to the physical temple, it seems more likely, with Terrien, that it refers to a more interior dwelling, a secrecy, that does not lend itself to describing a physical fortress or even the temple as a reflection of a physical fortress. The shortcoming of the temple interpretation is further supported by verses 7-8; the image of thousands being stricken down in the immediate presence of the righteous does not lend itself to the idea of sheltering from evil within the physical temple. Rather, “the comparisons summon the legendary hyperbole of an open-air battlefield.”⁹ Indeed, such an interpretation would limit the psalm’s applicability to the modern reader, but that will be discussed in section IV.

While it is difficult to determine the precise meaning of the shelter imagery with certainty, the historical literary setting of the psalm finds far more agreement. J. Clinton McCann, Jr., following A.F. Kirkpatrick, argues that Psalm 91 is set as a response to Psalm 90, a promise and reassurance to Israel who has called out to the Lord from Exile. This is supported by three facts. First, it is supported by the interpretation that Book IV of the Psalms is the conclusion to the cries of Israel from exile in Books I-III. Second, the Hebrew behind the English “dwelling place” is a relatively rare term, *mā`ōn*, and it is used in both psalms; it would be a rather large coincidence for this rare piece of vocabulary to be used in back-to-back psalms if the two were not designed to stand together. Finally, the promise of “long life” (Ps 91:16) can well be interpreted as a response to the petitions to the Lord in Psalm 90:13-17; indeed, God’s entire promise of Ps. 91:14-16 could be seen as such a response.¹⁰

The body of the psalm, verses 3-13, assures the righteous man protection under every circumstance, at all places, and at all times. He is to be protected both day and night, a safe place and a safe journey. These protections cover a plethora of possible evils that the righteous could

⁹ Terrien, *The Psalms*, 649–650.

¹⁰ Keck, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 4:1047.

suffer, war, pestilence, beasts, personal attack, and even falling down the rugged terrain and mountains.¹¹ This all-encompassing coverage of the Lord's protection is reflected by the multiplication of promises made over the course of the psalm. Terrien suggests "this accumulation of promises may reflect court style, when praise is multiplied on someone who is not divine but attains a ripe old age, like a patriarch."¹² While it would be going too far to say that the psalm sees God as nothing more than one of the patriarchs, even the greatest among them, it does stand to reason that, stylistically, this is the language that was familiar to show respect and trust, so it was applied to God par excellence. The concluding oracle in the voice of God himself promises all of these things that were entrusted to him through the course of the psalm.

IV. Theological and Spiritual Dynamics

As was noted at the outset of this discussion, this psalm is prayed by the Church every Sunday night. It is the perfect expression of the trust and protection that is, most perfectly and completely, found in Jesus Christ. "Here, there is neither lament nor petition, neither praise nor thanksgiving, but only fervent exposition."¹³

It seems likely that, even though the historical context of the psalm is unclear, as was noted above, Psalm 91 represented a similar expression of trust in the God of Israel. If the literary context proposed above is correct, then the ancient Israelite, either from exile or trusting in God thereafter, was expressing trust that God would deliver him and fulfill all of these promises that were made. It is notable that the psalm is not a petition to God to fulfill the promises; rather, that ancient Israelite calmly and trustingly named all the ways in which God

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Terrien, *The Psalms*, 652.

¹³ Laurence Kriegshauser, *Praying the Psalms in Christ*, Reading the Scriptures (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 202.

would protect him if he remains faithful and places his trust in his God. It seems likely that, as Israel progressed through the Second Temple Period, when their freedom and glory was never what it had once been, such trust in God's ultimate deliverance was a source of comfort despite the chaos they sometimes saw around them under the thumb of Macedonia, Greece, or Rome.

Some aspect of the understanding of Psalm 91 can also be seen in Jesus' temptation by Satan. Satan cites this psalm as a promise made by God such that Jesus should show his trust by flinging himself off a high mountain (cf. Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). In response, Jesus calls to mind another scripture, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God" (Matt 4:7). It seems likely that, even though the promises were reassuring to the ancient Israelite, he began to logically question them as he saw the destruction around him; this seems especially likely as the Temple, itself, was defiled and later destroyed. He must have been tempted to test God to see if the promise still stood. In the Christian context, we see Jesus explicitly reject such tests and, instead, expect trust that God has everything under his own providential care. This is important to the modern reader as well. It seems tempting, at least to me, to test God, to ask him to prove his love. Rather, it is important to call to mind, constantly, this psalm that is not a prayer for that protection, but rather a simple description of it and an oracle from God that it will be there. However, we must also remember that it will be there in the way that God knows is best, so the protection that we receive may sometimes be unclear at the time, just as it likely was to the ancient Israelite who watched the Temple defiled and destroyed.

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