Psalms

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PSALMS, together with Proverbs and perhaps the Song of Songs, is distinguished from all other biblical books by its manifestly anthological nature. We know little about how the anthology was made or when most of the pieces included in it were composed. Some rather general inferences, however, about the contexts of these poems can be drawn and may help us get a bearing on the kind of literary activity reflected in the collection.

The composition of psalms was common to most of the ancient Near Eastern literatures that have come down to us. (See the essay by Jonas C. Greenfield, "The Hebrew Bible and Canaanite Literature," in this volume.) From the Ugaritic texts that antedate the earliest biblical psalms by at least three or four centuries, we may conclude that the Hebrew poets did not hesitate to borrow images, phrases, or even whole sequences of lines from the Syro-Palestinian pagan psalmodic tradition, written in a language closely cognate to Hebrew. The borrowing occasionally may have gone in the opposite direction as well: a recently deciphered text from second-century B.C.E. Egypt, composed in Aramaic and written in Egyptian demotic characters, looks as though it might be a pagan, or rather syncretistic, adaptation of Psalm 20.

As these two widely separated instances of borrowing in different directions may suggest, psalms were a popular poetic form in the ancient Near East for a very long stretch of time. The biblical collection is composed of poems probably written over a period of at least five centuries. A few late poems, such as Psalm 137 ("By the waters of Babylon . . ."), refer explicitly to historical conditions after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. Other psalms may well go back to the early generations of the Davidic dynasty, that is, the tenth and ninth centuries B.C.E. It may not be an anachronism, moreover, for the author of the Samuel story to put a psalm of thanksgiving (not one included in the canonical collection) in the mouth of a pre-monarchic figure such as Hannah, Samuel's mother (1 Sam. 2), though the reference to the king in the last line (v. 10) is obviously anachronistic. It seems plausible enough that psalms quite similar to the ones in our collection were already in use at local sanctuaries such as Shiloh before the cult was unified in Jerusalem; and

the recitation of the psalm by Hannah, a woman of the people who in her barrenness had improvised her own simple and touching prose prayer (1 Sam. 1), may reflect an assumption by the writer that the psalm was a profoundly popular form, a vehicle accessible to all for crying out in distress, or, as here, for expressing gratitude to God.

Precise dating of most psalms is impossible, though certain features of later biblical Hebrew can be detected in some of the poems. (Some psalms appear to allude to specific historical events, but in ways so teasingly elliptical that scholars rarely agree about what the actual events might be.) In any case, psalm composition through the whole Old Testament period is stylistically conservative; there is a sense of a densely continuous literary tradition, evolving very slowly over the centuries. In narrative, when you read a late book like Esther or Daniel, you at once know you are engaged with a different style, a different set of literary techniques and conventions, from those that inform Genesis or Samuel. On the other hand, you can read two psalms that, for all anyone can tell, may be as far apart in time as Chaucer and Wordsworth, and yet justifiably perceive them as virtual contemporaries in idiom, poetic form, and generic assumptions.

Authorship, as with all biblical books except the Prophets, is even more of an unsolvable puzzle than dating. Although the tradition embodied in 1 and 2 Samuel in fact conceives King David as both poet and warrior, scholarship long ago concluded that the superscription "a psalm of David" which heads many of the poems is the work of a later editor, as are the ascriptions of other psalms to Asaph, Ethan the Ezrahite, and so forth. Indeed, it is not at all clear that these superscriptions were intended to affirm authorship, for the Hebrew particle *le* in these formulas that is usually rendered "of" does not necessarily imply an authorial "by" and might rather indicate "in the manner of," "according to the standard of," or sometimes "for the use of."

The sociology of psalm composition also remains a matter of conjecture. It has been proposed that there was a professional guild of psalm-poets associated with the Temple cult in Jerusalem and probably recruited from Priestly or Levitical ranks. Such poets would have composed liturgical pieces for the rites in the Temple and would have also produced supplications and thanksgiving psalms for the use of—perhaps for purchase by—individual worshipers. All this is plausible but undemonstrable. In any event, the popular character of the Psalms, the fact that the psalm-poets never developed the kind of complex and innovative style found in Job or the shrewd intellectuality of the poetry of Proverbs, makes one suspect that psalm composition may not have been exclusively limited to a small professional circle in Jerusalem.

The organization of the book is the work of editors in the Second Temple period. That work was completed by the time the Septuagint

translation of the Bible into Greek was prepared in the second century B.C.E., because the Septuagint has essentially the same order and chapter divisions as those that have come down to us in the Masoretic text. There is, in the various traditions of late antiquity, a little wobbling as to whether certain individual psalms are actually single poems or conflations of more than one psalm, and so the total number of pieces in the collection wanders between 147 and 150, with the normative Hebrew textual tradition finally settling for the roundness of the latter number. It is highly likely that there were originally competing anthologies of psalms which the later editors then spliced together, occasionally leaving a little duplication between different groups of poems (as in the doubling of Ps. 14 in 53). The oldest of these collections is thought to be the so-called Davidic Psalms (Ps. 3–41, with Ps. 1 and 2 serving as a preface to the whole collection), and the most recent, Psalms 107–150. Tradition divides the poems into five books, marking the end of all but the last with an editorial formula of closure that begins with "blessed" and ends with "amen." It would appear that this division into five was superimposed on what was initially an assemblage of four small collections in order to effect an alignment with the Five Books of Moses. For the ancient Hebrew literary imagination, numbers had more of a symbolic than a purely quantifying function, and this piece of editorial symbolism would have borne witness to the centrality that Psalms had come to enjoy in national consciousness by the time of the Second Temple.

Genre

Probably no single aspect of Psalms has received more scholarly attention in recent generations than the issue of genre. The pioneer studies were done early in the century by the German founder of biblical form-criticism, Hermann Gunkel.[1] He discriminated seven general categories of psalms and a variety of mixed types. As might have been expected, his successors tried to refine his divisions and variously multiplied or redivided the categories. The efforts of form-criticism have clearly enhanced our understanding of Psalms because in no other area of biblical literature is genre so pronounced, with such compelling consequences for modes of expression. There are, nevertheless, certain ways in which the form-critics misconceived the phenomenon of genre in Psalms.

Gunkel himself, being concerned with dating and development, like so many modern biblical scholars, tended to assume one could plot a curve from simple versions of a particular psalmodic genre, which must be early, to complex versions, which must be late. By this logic, of course, one could demonstrate that Imagist poetry considerably antedated *The Faerie Queene*, and Gunkel's evolutionist notions of literary history have been generally rejected by subsequent scholarship. His determination to

uncover the so-called life setting for particular psalms has proved more stubbornly contagious.

Now, it is obvious enough that some of the Psalms were designed for very specific liturgical or cultic occasions. A particularly clear instance is the pilgrim songs, which appear to have been framed to be chanted by, or perhaps to, worshipers as they ascended the Temple Mount and entered the sacred precincts (Ps. 24) or as they marched around the looming ramparts of Zion (Ps. 48). But there is surely a good deal of misplaced concreteness in the energy expended by scholars to discover in psalm after psalm the libretto to some unknown cultic music-drama. The result in some instances has been to weave around these poems a kind of historical romance under the guise of scholarship, using the tenuous threads of comparative anthropology, as in the persistent conjecture that the psalms referring to God's kingship were used for an annual enthronement ceremony in which the Lord was reinvested as king. In fact it is by no means self-evident that all the psalms were used liturgically, just as it is far from certain that they were all actually sung, though of course some obviously were, as the indications in the text of musical instruments, antiphonal responses, and the like make clear. Though some of these poems were surely "performed" in various Temple rites, we need to bear in mind that the psalmists, like other kinds of poets, often expressed a strong vision of reality through the imaginative leap of metaphor, and it is surely unwise to seek to reduce all these metaphors to literal cultic facts.

The most pervasive form-critical misconception about psalmodic genre is the notion that genre, apart from the occasional mixed type, is a fixed entity. This leaves the critic chiefly with the task of identifying formulaic sameness from one instance of the genre to the next. The evidence of literary history elsewhere and later suggests that, quite to the contrary, writers tend to be restive within the limits of genre, repeatedly find ways to juggle and transform generic conventions, formulaic or otherwise, and on occasion push genre beyond its own formal or thematic limits. We are likely to perceive the poetic richness of Psalms more finely if we realize that there is a good deal of such refashioning of genre in the collection, even when the recurrence of certain formulas tells us that a particular generic background is being invoked. I shall try to make this process clearer through illustration, but first a brief outline of the principal genres of Psalms may be helpful.

The usual Hebrew title for the collection is *Tehillim*, "Praises," a noun derived from a verb frequently used by the psalmists, *hallel*, "to praise," and familiar to Western readers in the form *hallelujah* ("praise the Lord"). Perhaps this designation was chosen because of the prominence of poems celebrating God's greatness in the Temple rites, or even because of the sequence of five hallelujah poems (Ps. 146–150) that forms a kind of coda to the collection. In fact, however, the total number of supplications—

well over a third of all the poems in the collection—is slightly larger than the number of psalms of praise. These two categories are the two principal kinds of psalms; together they make up more than two-thirds of the collection. Each may reasonably be divided into subcategories. Some supplications have an individual character (for example, entreaties to God in the throes of physical illness) and some are collective (pleas for help in time of famine, plague, siege, or exile). Psalms of praise may be general celebrations of God's majestic attributes, of his power as Creator manifested in the visible creation, or they may be thanksgiving poems, which, again, can be either individual or collective in character.

In addition to these two dominant categories, there are various lesser genres, most of which are represented by only half a dozen or so psalms: Wisdom psalms (there are actually a dozen of these, Psalms 1 and 37 being particularly clear examples, and Wisdom motifs also appear in a good many supplications); monarchic psalms (for example, Ps. 21 and 72); pilgrim songs (in addition to the two mentioned above, the most poignant is probably Ps. 84); historical psalms (essentially, catechistic recapitulations of the major way-stations of early Israelite history, such as Ps. 68 and 78). One might also argue for the profession of faith or innocence (for example, Ps. 23 and 62) as a distinct genre.

A brief consideration of the supplication will suggest the range of uses to which a single psalmodic genre may be put. The supplication is essentially a poetic cry of distress to the Lord in time of critical need. It may be short or long; it often refers to enemies, but these may be either actual military adversaries, or shadowy underhanded types somehow scheming against the speaker, or simply mean-spirited detractors who would crow in triumph were he to succumb to physical illness. Psalm 6, in which the enemies bridge the second and the third of these three types, offers a neat generic paradigm of the supplication:

For the leader, with instrumental music on the *sheminith*,
a psalm of David
Lord, chastise me not in your anger,
punish me not in your wrath.
Have mercy on me, Lord, for I languish,
heal me, Lord, for my bones are shaken.
My very life is sorely shaken,
and you, O Lord, how long?
Return, O Lord, and rescue my life,
deliver me for the sake of your faithfulness.
For there's no praise of you in death,
in Sheol who can acclaim you?
I am weary from my groaning,
each night I drench my bed,
with tears I melt my couch.

My eyes waste away with vexation,
  are worn out from all my foes.
Depart from me, all evildoers,
  for the Lord hears the sound of my weeping.
The Lord hears my supplication,
  my prayer he will grant.
Let all my enemies be shamed, sorely shaken,
  let them turn back, be shamed, at once![2]

This supplication begins with a plea that God relent from his fury, making abundant use of verbal formulas that also mark many other instances of the genre: "Have mercy on me," *ḥoneini*, a verb cognate with the noun *teḥinah*, "supplication," in verse 9; "heal me"; "return, O Lord"; and that most imperative formula of the genre, often used elsewhere with repetitive insistence, "O Lord, how long?" The argument that God should save the suppliant because in the oblivion of the underworld none can praise the Lord is a conventional motif shared by dozens of supplications. Equally conventional is the concluding affirmation of the Lord's responsiveness to the suppliant's prayer and the evocation—the verbs of the last verse could be construed as either a wish or an actual prediction—of the enemies' dismay. Another, final instance of convention is the neatly antithetical closural effect in which the evildoers are "sorely shaken," just as the speaker's bones and inner being were shaken at the beginning.

Psalm 6 thus gives us a clear picture of the supplication in terms of structure, theme, and formulaic devices; and in fact a good many psalms are built on precisely this plan. But more interesting are the repeated divergences—sometimes rather surprising ones—from the paradigm. Psalm 13 begins with an anaphoric series of "how long" and conjures up a desperate image of the suppliant's imminent demise, yet it concludes on this note:

But I trust in your faithfulness,
  my heart exults in your deliverance.
I sing to the Lord,
  for he has requited me. (vv. 5–6)

There is nothing optative or predictive about the verbs here: the deliverance is stated, in the surge of faith at the end, as an already accomplished fact. What this means is that the poem, though it is an exemplary instance of the supplication, is retrospectively transformed by the last verse into a thanksgiving psalm. The poetic process at work here is more dynamic, less mechanical, than what is implied by the usual scholarly notion of hybrids or mixed types.[3]

Often, when the types are in fact mixed, there is actually a tight interweaving of different generic strands from the beginning of the poem

to the end, which produces a mutual reinforcement of different thematic emphases and expressive resources. Thus, Psalm 26 strongly qualifies as a supplication, for the speaker begins by asking God to vindicate him, invokes the malicious enemies from whom he pleads to be rescued, and concludes with a prayer that he will once more be able to walk a smooth way, praising the Lord. But the poem is also formally a profession of innocence; and in the language the speaker uses, proclaiming that he has never sat with the wicked or entered the assembly of evildoers, Wisdom motifs are prominent as well. These introduce a notion of causal logic into the supplication, for one knows from the Wisdom psalms proper (compare Ps. 1), as well as from Proverbs, that he who avoids the council of the wicked will, by virtue of the divine scheme of justice, be blessed with length of days.

The most intriguing instances of the expansion of the limits of genre in Psalms involve a displacement or reordering of the expected themes. Psalm 39 is a supplication in time of sickness, properly concluding with a plea that God hear the speaker's prayer, but the sole mention of illness does not occur till the tenth of the psalm's thirteen verses. Before that, the suppliant stresses his need to stay silent and the impossibility, in his anguish, of doing that, and from silence he moves to a meditation on the terrible transience of all human life. Instead of the formulaic imperatives "have mercy on me," "heal me," he implores God, "Let me know my end/and what is the measure of my days,/I would know how fleeting I am" (v. 4). The last note of this somber, moving poem, then, is not an image of frustrated foes but an evocation of the speaker's own imminent end, the final word in the Hebrew being "I-am-not" (*'eyneni*).

Psalm 90 pushes still further this realignment of emphases in the genre. By degrees, we learn that the poem is a collective supplication—first, from the allusions to God's wrath and then, late in the poem, through the use of the formula "return, O Lord—how long?" (v. 13). But before we become aware of the occasion for the plea, which is some unspecified affliction that has befallen the community, the psalm is manifestly one of the great biblical evocations of the ephemerality of mere human existence against the backdrop of God's eternality, and this, rather than the plea for help, seems its most urgent subject: "For a thousand years in your eyes/are like yesterday gone,/like a watch in the night" (v. 4).

One final example should suffice to illustrate the general principle that genre in Psalms is very often not a locked frame but a point of departure for poetic innovation. Psalm 85 is a collective supplication, imploring God to restore Israel to its land after the nation's defeat and exile. But, quite remarkably, it begins not with a plea but with a series of verbs in the perfect tense, confidently presenting the restoration as an accomplished fact:

You have favored, Lord, your land,
  you have restored Jacob's condition [others: turned back
    the captivity of Jacob],
you have forgiven the iniquity of your people . . . (vv. 2–3)

It is only in verse 4 that the poet finally uses the expected imperative "return, God of our deliverance," followed by the formulaic "will you forever be incensed against us?" But just four brief verses are devoted to such language of actual entreaty, and then, in keeping with the ringing optimism of the initial lines, the last half of the poem (vv. 7–13) is a luminous vision of national restoration, very much in accord with the messianic theme of the literary Prophets, and hardly what one would expect in a supplication:

Faithfulness and truth will meet,
  justice and well-being kiss,
truth springs up from the earth,
  justice looks down from heaven. (vv. 10–11)

Style

What most characterizes the style of Psalms is its pointed and poignant traditionalism. Figurative language is abundantly used (though occasionally there are poems, such as Ps. 94, that avoid it), but there are few surprises of the sort encountered in the imagery of Job or of the Prophets. Wordplay and other virtuoso effects of invention are less prominent than in other kinds of biblical poetry, and for the most part the power of the poem does not depend on brilliant local effects but builds cumulatively through sequences of lines, or from the beginning of the poem to the end.

There are, to be sure, individual lines that are in themselves quite arresting and as such have become part of the Western treasure-house of memorable bits of poetry. But even a single instance of these will suggest the link between the force of such striking moments and the traditionalism of the poetic idiom:

As a hart yearns for channels of water,
  so my soul yearns for you, God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
  O when shall I come to appear before God? (42:1–2)

In a semiarid climate where wadis turn into dry gulches in the summer and the parched, rocky landscape is enlivened by the occasional lush miracle of an oasis, it is understandable that poets should make running water a conventional figure for refreshment, restoration, life itself. Animal imagery is also common enough in Psalms, though it is more often attached to beasts of prey and used to represent situations of menacing

violence (for example, in an urgent supplication, such as Ps. 22, the speaker's enemies are a pack of sharp-toothed curs). It is not so common to compare the soul or inner being (*nefesh*) to an animal, and in the first line here that simile gives the conventional image of longing for water a small but crucial shock of immediacy. The thirstiness is then spelled out in the second verse with a simple, striking metaphoric equation: the living God equals fresh water, which in fact would be called "living water" in biblical Hebrew. And since, for the Israelite imagination, the living God has chosen for himself in Zion a local habitation where one "appears before God" at the pilgrim festivals, Jerusalem itself, in the implied metaphor of the second half of the line, is conceived as a kind of oasis in the wilderness of the world, the sacred wellspring of water/life/God.

As happens at later points in literary history—there are analogues, for example, in medieval Arabic and Hebrew poetry, French neoclassical drama, English Augustan verse—this is a kind of poetry in which the strength and beauty of the individual poem are usually realized through a deft restatement or refashioning of the expected. Thus the speakers in these various poems represent the state of protection they seek from God or for which they thank him as a shield or buckler, a tower or fortress, a sheltering wing, a canopy or booth, cooling shade; the dangers that beset them are ravening beasts, serpents, arrows, burning coals, pestilence. The poets seem perfectly comfortable with this set repertoire of images, only rarely attempting to reach beyond it. Indeed, the familiarity of the metaphors and of the formulaic locutions through which they are often conveyed is precisely their chief advantage. The counters of poetic idiom have been worn to a lovely smoothness by long usage, and that is why they sit so comfortably in the hand of the poet, or—perhaps more relevantly—in the hand of the ordinary worshiper, in biblical times and ever since, for whom these poems were made. Psalm 91 is a characteristic instance of how a psalmist shapes from the elements of this traditional repertoire a poem with an individual character stamped with the eloquence of faith.

You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High,
  in the shadow of Shaddai abide!
I will say of the Lord: my refuge and fortress,
  my God in whom I trust.
For he will save you from the fowler's snare,
  from the blighting plague.
With his pinion he will cover you,
  beneath his wings you'll take refuge,
    his faithfulness, a shield and buckler.
You shall not fear from terror at night,
  from the arrow that flies by day,
From the plague that stalks in the dark,
  from the scourge that despoils at noon.

A thousand at your side will fall,
 ten thousand at your right,
  yet you it shall not reach.
You will soon see it with your eyes,
 the requiting of the wicked you'll see.
—For you, O Lord, are my refuge!—
 The Most High you have made your abode.
No evil will befall you,
 no illness enter your tents.
For he will order his messengers
 to guard you on all your ways.
They will bear you on their palms
 lest your foot be bruised by stone.
You will tread on cub and viper,
 trample the lion and asp.
"Because he delighted in me, I shall deliver him,
 I shall safeguard him for knowing my name,
Let him but call me and I shall answer—
 I am with him in distress,
  I shall rescue him and grant him honor.
With length of days I shall sate him
 and show him my saving strength."

The poem's imagery is a kind of small thesaurus of the very stockpile of coventional figures we have just reviewed, but the effect of the whole is a strong and moving poetic statement, not a facile rehearsal of the familiar. This power may be due at least in part to the mutual reinforcement that occurs among related images. If there is a hidden nerve center in the poem, it is the verb "cover" (*yasekh*) in verse 4, a cognate of the noun *sukkah*, a thatched booth in which one takes shelter from the sun. The poem begins with "shelter" (literally, "hiding place") and "shadow," terms of protection that are immediately stepped up into "refuge" and "fortress," just as the gentle covering of "wings" in the first two versets of verse 4 becomes the weightier "shield and buckler" of the end of the line. This local move participates in a general tendency of biblical poetry toward an intensification or concretization of images and themes both within the line and in the poem as a whole. (See the essay "The Characteristics of Ancient Hebrew Poetry" in this volume.) In a similar fashion, the repeated assertion of shelter in the opening lines becomes a more sharply focused representation of the divinely favored man walking about untouched as thousands fall all around him. This is followed by the active intervention of an agency of protection, God's messengers or angels, who carry the man on their palms, allowing no sharp stone to hurt his feet—which, in a final intensifying maneuver, in fact can safely trample the most savage beasts. The psalm then ends climactically with three lines of direct discourse by God—who, in the shifting grammatical voices of the

poem, was referred to only in the second and third person until this point. The divine source and guarantor, in other words, of all the remarkable safeguarding that has been imaged in the poem, now reveals himself directly, affirming his immediate involvement with the God-fearing man ("I am with him in distress") and the unswerving resolution to protect him and grant him long life.

What often accompanies this traditionalism of poetic idiom in Psalms is a bold simplicity of language. The notion of simplicity, however, must be adopted with caution because it has been used too readily to attribute to these poems a kind of sublime naiveté, to see in them a purely spontaneous outpouring of feeling. In fact many of the psalms show evidence of fairly intricate rhetorical and structural elaboration. The "simplicity" of Psalms is rather the ability of subtle poets, sure in their tradition, to call on archetypal language, to take unabashed advantage of the power of repetition, and, when the occasion seems to require it, to displace figuration by stark literal assertion. Psalm 121, a very different sort of poem about divine protection, displays just these stylistic features:

A song of ascents
I lift my eyes to the mountains—
  from whence will my help come?
My help is from the Lord,
  maker of heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot stumble,
  your guardian will not slumber.
Look, he neither sleeps nor slumbers,
  the guardian of Israel!
The Lord's your guardian,
  the Lord's your shade at your right hand.
By day the sun will not strike you,
  nor the moon by night.
The Lord will guard you from all evil,
  he will guard your life.
The Lord will guard your going and coming
  now and forevermore.

The archetypal sweep of the poetic landscape in this brief piece is remarkable. The speaker lifts his eyes to the mountains and, in a characteristic biblical association of terms, moves from mountains to heaven and earth and their Maker. A second binary pair that harks back to Genesis 1 is quickly introduced, day/sun and night/moon. The poem is a powerful realization of the meaning of "guarding" and "guardian," the terms recurring, with anaphoric insistence, six times in eight lines. Metaphoric elaboration is not allowed to intervene in this process of realization. The only weak candidates for figures of speech in the poem are the minimal synecdoche of the slipping foot in verse 3 and the conventional "shade"

for shelter in verse 5, which is immediately literalized in the next line as a protection against sunstroke and moonstroke (the latter perhaps referring to madness supposedly caused by exposure to the moon). The point of the poem is that the Lord is quite literally a guardian or watchman who never sleeps, who always has his eyes open to keep you from harm. The concluding note of benediction on "forevermore" is, it might be argued, a formulaic device for ending a psalm, but here it ties in beautifully with the beginning of the poem because an arc has been traced from the eternity behind mankind when heaven and earth were made to the eternity stretching out ahead. Altogether, the poem is a quintessential expression of the poetic beauty of Psalms in its artful use of a purposefully limited, primary language to suggest a kind of luminous immediacy in the apprehension of the world through the eyes of faith.

Structure

Elsewhere in the biblical corpus, the boundaries of poems are often ambiguous. Where the traditional chapter divisions might seem to imply a single poem in Proverbs or the Prophets or the Song of Songs, scholars have often argued for a splicing together of two or three poems or for a collage of fragments from several poems. In Psalms, on the other hand, there are very often clear markers of beginnings and endings in the formulaic devices we have already noted in connection with genre, and in almost all instances the chapter divisions dependably indicate individual poems. Since many of the psalms were, after all, fashioned for public use, it is not surprising that the psalm-poets should by and large favor symmetrical forms in which poetic statement is rounded off or tied up by an emphatic balancing of beginning and end.

The most common expression of this formal predilection is the so-called envelope structure—in fact a structure popular in many biblical genres—in which significant terms introduced at the beginning are brought back prominently at the end. The extreme version of the envelope structure would be the use of a refrain at the beginning and end of a psalm, as in Psalm 8, which opens with the declaration "Lord, our master, / how majestic is your name in all the earth," then scans creation vertically from heaven to man at the midpoint to the land and sea "beneath his feet," and concludes by repeating the opening line.

A longer and more complicated instance of envelope structure is offered by Psalm 107. This thanksgiving psalm, which reviews God's mercies in rescuing his people from the trials of exile on land and sea, begins with a formula that occurs in other poems: "Praise the Lord, for he is good, / for his faithfulness is forever." The division between the first and second movements of the poem (verse 8) is marked by a refrainlike variation on this opening line: "Let them praise the Lord for his

faithfulness, / his wondrous deeds for the sons of man." These words recur verbatim as a refrain marking discrete segments of the poem in verses 15, 21, and 31. The very last verse (43) sums up the imperative to celebrate God's many bounties in the following words: "He who is wise will heed these things, / he will take note of the faithfulness of the Lord." The poet thus avoids the regularity of an explicit concluding refrain, but the key concept that began the poem, the *faithfulness* (or "loving-kindness," *ḥesed*) of the *Lord,* rings forth at the end, with the order and syntactic relation of the two component nouns changed, and "faithfulness" used in the plural (in the Hebrew), perhaps as a concluding indication of all the different mercies of the Lord that the poem has evoked.

The role of the refrain in Psalm 107 points to a more general possibility of structuration in Psalms, the subdivision of individual poems into strophes. This is an aspect of Psalms that we are just beginning to understand, but it may be that there are strophic divisions in many of the longer poems. The perception of such formal poetic structure could in some cases provide a key to otherwise elusive meanings. To cite an extreme instance, Psalm 68 has posed such problems of seeming incoherence that many scholars have embraced W. F. Albright's suggestion that it is not a poem at all but a catalogue of first lines from no longer extant psalms. J. P. Fokkelman, on the other hand, makes a plausible case for a cogent structure here in formal divisions: going from small to large, he designates them as strophes (a term he uses to designate a cluster of two or three lines), stanzas, and sections.[4] Almost all of the small units he discriminates are marked by a term for God—usually, *'Elohim*—at the beginning of the first line and at the end of the last line, and triadic lines are used to indicate the ends of many of the strophes. The three large sections Fokkelman identifies in the poem (vv. 2–11, 12–24, 25–36) are organized thematically around three different mountains, first Sinai, then Bashan, then God's new chosen abode, Zion. The atomistic habits of philological analysis have tended to divert attention from such larger principles of organization, but formal symmetries of this sort may be present in a good number of the longer psalms.

In any case, envelope structure is the one clearly discernible structural pattern that recurs with inventive variations in many different psalms. Beyond that, it is probably not very helpful to attempt a taxonomy of psalmodic structures (chiastic, antiphonal, and so forth), because the evidence of the poems suggests that for the most part structure was improvised in the poet's impulse to create an adequate form for the subject at hand in the individual poem. Envelope structure, in other words, is an explicit convention of biblical literature, a recognized way of organizing material in both poetry and prose, and it could be exploited with emphatic effect in the closed form of the psalm. Other structures, by contrast, seem to have been tailor-made for particular poems rather than applied as

a convention, and so our task as readers is not to attempt to classify them but to observe their varying operations in shaping the meanings of individual psalms. Let me illustrate this point briefly.

Psalm 12 is a supplication spoken by someone beset by insidious schemers. What the suppliant stresses is the treacherous use of language by his adversaries, who seem to him in his distress to be virtually all of mankind: "Lies do they speak to each other, / smooth talk, / with a double heart do they speak" (v. 3). In the semantic parallelisms from line to line, "tongue" and "lips"—both of which mean "speech" in biblical idiom—recur, the suppliant praying that the Lord "cut off all smooth-talking lips, / every tongue speaking proudly" (v. 4), while the arrogant are imagined saying, "By our tongues we'll prevail, / with these lips of ours, who can lord over us?" (v. 5). The poem pivots neatly on verse 6, as we hear, after this characterization of the treacherous language of humankind, God speaking in direct discourse that affirms divine justice, announcing his resolution to rise up and rescue the oppressed from their persecutors. In the balanced antithetical structure of the poem, the duplicity of human speech, to which the first four verses are devoted, is set off by the redemptive emergence of God's perfect speech in the last four: "The words of the Lord are pure words, / silver purged in an earthen furnace, / refined sevenfold" (v. 7).[5] The point of the neat antithetical structure is to embody in the shape of the poem the speaker's sense that, all dismaying appearances to the contrary, there is in the very nature of things an ethical counterweight to the triumphal arrogance of the wicked.

Psalm 48, a pilgrim song, works out a tripartite poetic structure for the poet's perception of the double paradox of the particular and the universal, the historical and the eternal, focused in God's chosen city, Jerusalem. Zion, concretely imagined here as a distinctive stronghold towering on a Judean promontory, is also "the joy of all the earth" (v. 2), and the poem sweeps impressively from the particular site to a large geographic panorama, and back again to the particular site. After the introductory verses celebrating the bastions of Zion (1–3), the poem moves back in time (vv. 4–8) to the routing of a naval expedition at some unspecified point in the past, within which is recessed the memory of a more distant and archetypal past, since the report of the naval victory uses language alluding to the drowning of the Egyptians as it is described in the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15). Geographically, the poem moves not only down to the Mediterranean shore but to the known ends of the earth, for the invading fleet is said to come from Tarshish (Jonah's distant destination), in Cilicia, Spain, or who knows where to the west. The last of the poem's three segments (vv. 9–14) takes us back to Zion, "in the midst of your temple" (v. 9) and once more all around those ramparts that are testimony in stone to God's protection of his people. Moreover, the safeguarding that he provided in the event just recalled and at the time of

the Exodus before it, will continue for all time: thus the pilgrims are enjoined to tell of God's power to "generations to come" (v. 13), for he who has elected this city will remain "our God forever" (v. 14).

Finally, it is well to bear in mind that the architectural metaphor of structure, with its implication of something solid and static, inevitably does a certain injustice to poetic form, which reveals itself to us progressively in time as we read from line to line. The dynamic character of structure in Psalms is particularly evident in those poems where the utterances are organized in an implicitly narrative sequence. Thus Psalm 97 is not just an acclamation of God's variously manifested majesty, as it might seem to the casual eye, but a vivid narrative enactment of his power as the world's king. As in victory poems devoted to the Lord of Battles (compare Ps. 18), God is first seen on his throne enveloped in cloud, then sending forth fire and hurling lightning bolts across the earth (vv. 2–4). The very mountains melt like wax before this onslaught of divine effulgence (v. 5), and all peoples then acclaim his greatness; every conscious creature, from idolators to divine beings, does fealty to him (vv. 6–7). Israel is now inserted in this global picture, exulting in its God who is the God of all the world, as his fiery epiphany has just demonstrated. Furthermore, a nice symmetry of envelope structure is superimposed on the entire narrative sequence. The poem begins: "The Lord reigns! / Let the earth exult, / let the many islands rejoice." To mark the transition of the second half of the poem from all the earth to Israel, the paired verbs of the beginning recur: "Zion hears and *rejoices*, / the towns of Judea *exult*" (v. 8). The final verse picks up one of these two verbs, "rejoice," which as a noun, "joy," ends the previous verse:

> Light is sown for the righteous,
>   and for the upright, joy.
> Rejoice, you righteous in the Lord,
>   and praise his holy name. (vv. 11–12)

Thus the double structure of the poem, narrative and envelope, exemplifies the psalmodic fashioning of specific forms to match specific perceptions. We experience through the significant shape of this psalm a just order in creation, events moving in a sequence that compels appropriate response: Israel, the nations of the earth, the very angels above, are aligned in a hierarchy of correspondences that bears witness to the universal majesty of the Creator.

Themes

The Book of Psalms reflects certain distinctive and recurrent thematic concerns. These are not, as one might at first think, coextensive with psalmodic genre but, on the contrary, tend to cut across the different

genres. Many of the characteristic themes share the archetypicality we observed in psalmodic imagery, and the power with which these archetypal themes are evoked may explain a good deal about why the poems have continued to move readers, both believers and nonbelievers, in cultural and historical settings far different from those in which the poems were first made. Little will be served by attempting a comprehensive catalogue of the themes of Psalms, but a few representative illustrations may suggest something of this power of timeless reference that so many of the poems possess.

One of the most common themes in the collection is death and rebirth. It is equally prominent in the supplication and in the thanksgiving psalm, a fact that makes more understandable the element of fluidity or dialectic interplay noted earlier between these two seemingly opposed genres. The prehistory of the theme might justifiably be viewed as a monotheistic—and metaphoric—reworking of a pagan mythological plot, the death and miraculous rebirth of a god (in the Mesopotamian tradition, Tammuz). Most of the poems draw on a common repertoire of images: the gates of Sheol (the underworld), the darkness of the pit populated by mere shades, or, in an alternative marine setting, as in Jonah's thanksgiving psalm, the overwhelming breakers of the sea. Illness and other kinds of dangers, perhaps even spiritual distress, are represented as a descent into the underworld from which the Lord is entreated to bring the person back or, in the thanksgiving poems, is praised for having brought him back. The effectiveness of this vestigially mythological plot is that it can speak powerfully to so many different predicaments, in the psalmist's time and ever since—for those who believe in resurrection, for those who feel the chill threat of literal extinction here and now, for those who have suffered one sort or another of inward dying. Thus in a memorable line by that most psalmodic of English poets, George Herbert, "After so many deaths I live and write," the metaphor has the virtual effect of literal fact. In much the same way, the poet of Psalm 88, as his language makes evident, has a clear sense that he is conjuring with a metaphor, and yet his tale of descent into death has the force of experiential truth:

for my soul is sated with troubles,
  my life's reached the brink of Sheol.
I'm counted with those who go down to the Pit,
  I'm like a man with no strength,
Abandoned among the dead,
  like bodies that lie in the grave
whom you remember no more,
  from your hand are cut off.
You've thrust me into the bottommost Pit,
  in darkness, in the depths.
Your wrath lies hard upon me,
  with all your breakers you afflict me. (vv. 3–8)

It goes without saying that whatever themes the various psalms treat are caught in the heavily charged field of relationship between man and God. Thus, longing, dependence, desperation, exultation become elements in a series of remarkable love poems—once more, cutting across psalmodic genre—addressed by man to God. Religious experience attains a new contemplative and emotive inwardness in these poems. The radically new monotheistic idea that God is everywhere is rendered as the most immediately apprehended existential fact:

> If I soar to heaven, you are there,
>   if I make my bed in Sheol, again you're there.
> If I take wing with the dawn,
>   dwell at the end of the West,
> there, too, your hand guides me,
>   your right hand holds me fast. (139:8–10)

The hiding of God's face or presence is one of the greatest terrors the psalm-poets can contemplate, and the cry of many a suppliant in these poems is impelled by the urgency of a desperate lover: "I stretched out my hands to you, / my soul's like thirsty earth to you" (143:6).

One of the most ubiquitous themes in the various genres of Psalms is language itself. There seems to be a development from a formal organizing device to the self-conscious investigation of a theme. That is, as befits poems which may often have been recited in a cultic setting, many of the thanksgiving psalms begin and end with the declared intention of praising, extolling, thanking God, and many of the supplications begin and end by entreating God to hear the plea, pay heed, and rescue. But the poets very often proceed from these formulas of inception and conclusion to ponder the uses and power of the medium of language they employ. The supplication often quite explicitly raises questions about the efficacy of man's speech to God, the possibility of an answering speech from God to man, the tensions between speech and silence, the different functions of language for crying out in anguish and for exploring the enduring enigmas of man's creaturely condition. (Psalm 39, which we glanced at earlier, strikingly unites all these concerns.) The thanksgiving psalm stresses speech/song as the distinctive human gift for recognizing God's greatness, a gift that God in some sense seems almost to need. Psalm 30 is an instructive case in point because it juxtaposes the two kinds of discourse, entreaty and praise, underlining both the efficacy of the former (the speaker in his former plight had "cried out" to the Lord) and the necessity of the latter. Embedded in the narrative structure of this poem are two different instances of direct discourse—what the speaker said to himself in his complacency before disaster overtook him, and a brief "text" of his actual entreaty to God in the time of his distress. The common psalmodic theme that the dead cannot praise God is given special convic-

tion here: to be humanly alive is to celebrate God's bounties, which is what God has enabled this speaker to do by rescuing him from the underworld.

Finally, many of the psalm-poets, especially those who draw on Wisdom motifs, are acutely aware of the contradictory character of language. Psalm 12, which we touched on in considering possibilities of structure, nicely illustrates this consciousness of the double nature of speech. There is never any radical skepticism about the efficacy of language in the Bible because God, the cosmogonic language-user and the planter of the linguistic faculty in man, remains the ultimate guarantor for language. But if speech can be used to express true feelings (the supplication) and to name the truth (the thanksgiving psalm), it may also be turned into a treacherous instrument of deception. These two divergent possibilities are often expressed through two opposing clusters of images—language as a weapon, a sharp-edged arrow, or burning coals (compare Ps. 120), and language as a perfect vessel, a beautifully unalloyed substance, "refined sevenfold" (12:7).

All in all, the preoccupation with language tells us a great deal about the kind of poetry that has been brought together in the Book of Psalms. The vision of a horizon of "pure speech" suggests a confident effort to make poetry serve as adequate, authentic expression, from the lips of man to the ear of God, and hence the frequent sense of powerful directness, of unadorned feeling, in these poems. But the awareness of language as an instrument, an awareness often made explicit in the texts, reflects a craftsman's knowingness about the verbal artifices through which the poet realizes his meanings. Both these perceptions about language and poetry need to be kept in mind if we are to be able to gauge the greatness of the poems. The sundry psalms are finely wrought with the most cunning turns of poetic artifice, subtly and consciously deploying and reworking a particular set of literary conventions; and yet in their stylistic traditionalism and archetypal range they often manage to convey the persuasive illusion of a perfect simplicity beyond the calculations and contrivances of art.

NOTES

1. For a concise English summary of Gunkel's views, see Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction,* trans. Thomas M. Horner (Philadelphia, 1967.)

2. All translations in this essay are my own [AT] because the KJV does not sufficiently represent the formal design of the poetry.

3. Jack Sasson has pointed out to me that this fluidity between genres is nicely reflected in the insertion of a thanksgiving psalm into the Book of Jonah

at a point in the story which actually calls for a supplication, when Jonah is in the belly of the fish.

4. Professor Fokkelman has been kind enough to show me an outline of an unpublished study of this psalm.

5. This antithetical structure has been aptly observed by A. L. Strauss, *Bedarkhei hasifrut* [In the ways of literature] (Jerusalem, 1970), pp. 89–94.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, 1985), chap. 5.
Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction,* trans. Thomas M. Horner (Philadelphia, 1967).

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