

The Broken Snare (124:1-8)

Bibliography

Crüsemann, F. *Studien zur Formgeschichte*. Schreiner, J. "‘Wenn nicht der Herr für uns wäre!’ Auslegung von Psalm 124." *BibLeb* 10 (1969) 16–25.

Translation

- 1 One of the processional songs.^a Davidic.^b
 Were it not for ^c Yahweh (2+2+2)
 who took our side,
 let Israel declare—
- 2 Were it not for Yahweh, (2+2+3)
 who took our side
 when men attacked us,
- 3 then ^a they would have swallowed us alive,^b (3+3)
 so furious was their anger against us.
- 4 Then the waters would have overwhelmed us,^a (3+3)
 the torrent ^b would have gone above our necks,^c
- 5 then it would have gone above our necks— (3+3)
 those raging ^a waters.
- 6 Blessed ^a is Yahweh (2+2+2)
 who did not let us be
 a prey to their teeth.
- 7 We have escaped with our lives like a bird (3+2)
 out of the fowlers' trap.^a
 The trap is broken (2+2)
 and we have escaped.
- 8 Our help consisted in the name ^a of Yahweh, (3+3)
 maker of heaven and earth.^b

Notes/Comments

1.a. See the note on 120:1.

1.b. A few Heb. mss. and the oldest text of LXX lack this latter annotation. Its intent is not clear. It "may have been suggested by phrases resembling those of Davidic psalms, but the language points to a late date, and it can hardly be regarded as even an adaptation of an ancient poem" (A. F. Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 744). Perhaps similarity especially to Ps 118 (cf. vv 2–4, 5, 6, 10–13) suggested the annotation.

1.c. Cf. post-biblical Heb. and Aram. אִילּוּי (BDB, 530b; M. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 49a).

3.a. The form וַיִּרְאֵי occurs for וַיִּרְאֵי only in vv 3–5 in the OT. It has been found in a Hebrew letter of A.D. 134 or 135 discovered at Murabba'at (DJD, vol. 2 [1961] 156 [text 42, line 5]) in a similar context, introducing the apodosis after a conditional clause introduced by וַיִּלְלֵי. It also appears in a seventh-century B.C. Aramaic inscription (*KAI*, 3rd ed. [1971] 283–84 [Nr. 233, line 6]).

3.b. Cf. Prov 1:12. The enemies are compared with a monster which implicitly stands for Sheol.

4.a. As in v 3, there are again associations with Sheol: a fatal threat is posed. For the identification of Sheol with the waters of chaos cf. N. J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 59–66; O. Keel, *Symbolism*, 73. For allusion to Sheol under the images of both a monster and drowning waters in a single context see Jonah 2:3, 6 (2, 5).

4.b. For הַלְלֵי cf. GKC § 90f, P. Joüon, *Grammaire* § 93i. K. Seybold (*Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 40) plausibly finds here the influence of the Aram. emphatic state. The term evokes the Palestinian wadi, which winter rains turned into a raging torrent.

4.c. For this primary sense of Heb. וַיִּרְאֵי, referring to the organ of breathing see H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology*, 13 and cf. Jonah 2:6 (5).

5.a. Cf. Targumic Aram. אִילּוּי (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 391a).

6.a. For indirect cultic blessing of Yahweh see W. S. Towner, *CBQ* 30 (1968) 389–90.

7.a. Lit. "setters' trap." For discussion of the phrase see G. R. Driver, "Reflections on Recent Articles. 2. Hebr. *môqēs* 'Striker,'" *JBL* 73 (1954) 131–36; Keel, *Symbolism*, 89, 91.

8.a. Reference is made to the invocation of the all-powerful name "Yahweh" in the prayer of complaint (J. W. Wevers, *VT* 6 [1956] 86; cf. 118:10).

8.b. For this traditional formula associated with the Jerusalem temple see N. C. Habel, *JBL* 91 (1972) 321–37.

Form/Structure/Setting

At first sight Ps 124 has the form of a thanksgiving of the community. If so, it is a rare phenomenon indeed in OT literature. In fact, while individual thanksgivings abound, the presence of national thanksgivings in the Psalter is a matter of dispute. F. Crüsemann (*Studien zur Formgeschichte*, 160–68) has shown that the language of this psalm is characteristic of individual compositions and has little or no background of cultic usage in communal settings. For instance, the particle אִלּוּי "were it not" (vv 1–2), which belongs to colloquial usage, primarily in the context of an argument, is rare in cultic poetry: its closest parallel is in a passage of individual thanksgiving, 94:17 (cf. 119:92; Gen 31:42). Similarly the blessing formula of v 6 occurs in the Psalms generally in individual complaints and thanksgivings, though in 68:20 (19) it is used in a communal hymn. The expression in vv 1–2 concerning God's being on one's side belongs to an individual's statement of confidence (אִלּוּי־יְהוָה לִי 56:10 [9]; 118:6), although it is used once in a communal Song of Zion at 46:2 (אִלּוּי־לֵנוּ). The metaphorical description of distress in terms of hunting and drowning find close parallels only in individual compositions: it was the prophets who gave them a wider, national connotation (cf. Isa 8:8; 28:15; Jer 47:2; 50:24). Thus in the light of cultic usage elsewhere, the psalm exhibits individual language clothed in plural dress. If first singular references had been used throughout, the psalm would correspond well not only in terminology but in form to an individual thanksgiving. Its introductory summary of deliverance (v 2), retrospect to the situation of trouble (vv 3–5), report of Yahweh's deliverance (vv 6b–7) and expression of praise and testimony which passes into a generalization (vv 6a, 8) would comprise a model psalm of solo thanksgiving (cf. C. Westermann, *Praise*, 102–11).

The significance of the reference to Israel in v 1b requires discussion both in form-critical and in contextual terms. J. Schreiner, (*BibLeb* 10 [1969] 18–20) has compared this element with the summons found in the communal hymn of praise: the initial summons, the praise of vv 6–7 and the concluding statement of trust follow the pattern of the hymn (cf. Westermann, *Praise*, 123, 130), as the basis for a national song of thanksgiving. It is doubtful

whether this comparison is warranted or justified, especially since the summons of v 1b recurs exactly in 118:2 in an individual thanksgiving as a liturgical formula inviting a refrain of praise from those assembled for the service of thanksgiving in which the individual took part with testimony, praise and sacrifice. It is worth asking whether v 1b remained true to its formal origin as a living element of thanksgiving. Crüsemann (*Studien zur Formgeschichte*, 167), followed by Seybold (*Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 27, 61, 89) regards v 1aβ-b as secondary in a literary sense: the psalm, probably used originally by a group engaged in thanksgiving (cf. Ps 107), has been re-interpreted nationally and put upon the lips of the community. It is possible, however, that such a group, while testifying to their own deliverance, call upon the religious community to share their praise and to acknowledge that deliverance of the few has a representative character and demonstrates Yahweh's care for the people as a whole. This would give the psalm a viable role in a context of pilgrimage: a pilgrim group (cf. Ps 122) would encapsulate its local experience of threat and deliverance in such a psalm and invite communal praise. But there are two objections to such a reconstruction. It is difficult to explain a call to praise in identical terms to the group's own praise. The positioning of the summons after v 1aβ (contrast 118:2-4) seems to imply that v 1aβ is to be repeated and that vv 2-8 are to be recited communally or by a choir representing the community. Accordingly the first line is best understood as an introductory, priestly call for the psalm to be sung. This explanation corresponds to the structural unity of vv 2-8 (see below): v 1aβ-b appears to fall outside the psalm proper.

As Crüsemann urged, a group's song of thanksgiving, which not unreasonably uses the forms and terminology of an individual thanksgiving, has evidently been adapted to general, communal use. Form-critically, then, the psalm has a long history. Individual traits have been re-used to express the experience of a group, and then in turn the whole song of the group has been taken over into a communal setting. Was it then used solely for communal thanksgiving for particular experiences of deliverance? The presence of the psalm in the collection of Pss 120-134 suggests rather that it had a wider use, to express paradigmatically the community's sense of redemption as object of the divine Heilsgeschichte. Then Schreiner's comparison of the hymn of praise, though not helpful form-critically, is relevant as illustrating the eventual use to which the psalm was put. The positioning of the psalm next to Ps 123 may have been intended to assure that Yahweh answers his people's prayers.

Structurally the psalm falls into two strophes with the break after v 5 (cf. S. Mowinckel, *Tricola*, 102). This poetic structure corresponds to its formal division into vv 1-5, 6-7, 8; v 8, as will be seen, belongs poetically with vv 6-7. Both strophes contain chiasmic passages: vv 4-5 exhibit a chiasmic order and so do the two lines of v 7. Moreover Heb. נַשְׁנוּ occurs both in vv 4-5 ("our necks") and in v 7 ("our lives"). Seybold's deletion of v 5 as secondary (*Wallfahrtspsalmen*, 29, 61, 89) damages the parallelism of the psalm. V 6 is clearly the counterpart of vv (1aβ), 2, 3 with its repetition of the divine name, negative elements (אָל, אָלֵל) and description of danger in terms of attacking

beasts. Vv 6-7, the material corresponding to vv 2-5, appear to have been squeezed into three lines, instead of the corresponding four, to make room for the last, climactic line of v 8. V 8 harks back to vv 1-2 as an inclusion, not only in its use of the divine name but also in its content which is both synonymous (cf. 94:17 לֹא יִהְיֶה עֲזָרְתָּה לִּי "unless Yahweh was my help") and antithetic ("man"/"maker of heaven and earth"). The psalm appears to have been composed as a pair of four-line strophes (cf. E. J. Kissane, *Psalms II*, 254), to which subsequently v 1aβ-b has been added as a consequence of its re-interpretation.

The post-biblical Hebrew and Aramaic elements in the psalm (see the *Notes/Comments* on vv 1, 3, 5 and observe too the relative ו in v 6) suggest that the origin of the psalm is late.

Explanation

A post-exilic song of thanksgiving composed for a group delivered from a perilous situation has been deemed worthy of wider use by the community at large. Its general terms, vivid metaphors and striking expression of heartfelt praise made it an irresistible choice for this honor. A priestly precentor introduces the first half-line; he urges the congregation, or a choir representing it, to take up the strains of the psalm. The very repetition serves to emphasize that they have no help but Yahweh. In vv 2-5 the pitting of his gracious help against otherwise fatal consequences is a colloquial and catchy way of expressing the conventional summary of deliverance and narration of the crisis from which one is delivered. The first complete line impressively begins with Yahweh and ends with man, a contrast found also in 56:12 (11); 118:6; Isa 31:3. Dire as it was, the threat inevitably dwindled away—from a divine perspective:

"Yahweh, what is man . . . ?
Man is like a breath,
. . . a passing shadow" (144:3, 4).

It is the people's joy that Yahweh has allied himself to them. The indefinite statement of vehement attack and the metaphors which represent the attacked as enshrouded by the pallid aura of Sheol have a particular aim: they forcefully express the conviction of the community that they are a saved people. They are acutely conscious that but for the grace of God they have no existence. Surveying their history, his people acknowledge that they owe their corporate life to his preservation from death's ravaging jaws (cf. Isa 5:14) and drowning waters (cf. 69:3, 16 [2, 15]: "Our helper he, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing" (Luther).

The second strophe begins by reiterating vv 2-3, but now in positive tones of praising testimony. Yahweh's protective grace is the secret of the community's survival till now, in face of the dangers that have dragged them down throughout their checkered history. The reversal of doom-laden danger by means of incredible rescue is dramatically described in terms of a pitiable

trapped bird that surprisingly regains its freedom. The praise is now less direct, but behind the passive verb of brokenness is implicit divine activity. Freedom is prized as the gift of God.

The closing verse bears witness to divine help, using a traditional formulation of temple worship (cf. 121:2). The cries of God's people, invoking the powerful name "Yahweh," did not go unheard. He graciously came to their aid. What are human enemies (v 2), when the divine creator is a friend (cf. Isa 51:12-13; 1 Pet 4:19)? The one who gives life and meaning to the world has kept death at bay and against all odds has preserved Israel as his people.

Here in one beautiful psalm of praise are brought together Yahweh's ever-repeated gifts of salvation and renewal. The people, never immune from suffering, celebrate the redeeming power of God and are encouraged and sustained thereby (cf. 1 Pet 1:3-9). An almighty savior is the savior still! This is the glad testimony of the psalm.

Immovable As the Mountains (125:1-5)

Bibliography

Hurvitz, A. "אימת נטבע בעברית הצירוף 'שלום על ישראל'?" *Leš* 27/28 (1964) 297-302. Wanke, G. *Die Zionstheologie der Korachiten*. BZAW 97. Berlin: A. Töpelmann, 1966.

Translation

¹ One of the processional songs.^a

Those who trust in Yahweh
are like Mount Zion,
which is immovable,^b abiding^c forever.

(2+2+3)

² Jerusalem has mountains around it—^a
and Yahweh is around his people
henceforth and for evermore.^b

(3+3+3)

³ The scepter of wickedness
will surely not remain
over the land allotted^a to the righteous,^b
or else the righteous might turn
their hands^c to wrongdoing.

(2+2+2)

(3+2)

⁴ Do good, Yahweh, to the good,
to those upright in their hearts.

(3+2)

⁵ But those who turn aside to their crooked ways^a
may Yahweh remove^b
together with the evildoers.
Peace be upon Israel.^c

(3+2+2)

Notes/Comments

1.a. See the note on 120:1.

1.b. Cf. 46:6 (5). In the Songs of Zion Yahweh's supremacy is described in terms of victory over nations massed against Zion. Their attack is related to the threat of chaotic forces subdued at the creation of the world: cf. 93:1; 96:10; 104:5; G. Wanke, *Zionstheologie*, 68-70; H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen*, 499. The stability of the world and that of Zion are organically linked in Zion theology.

1.c. For the meaning of Heb. עָשָׂה "abide" cf. Mic 5:3 (4), unreasonably regarded by M. Dahood (*Psalms III*, 215) as "tenuous evidence."

2.a. "Zion is . . . a modest hill. Its top is not as high as the tops of surrounding mountains: it lies 66 meters below that of the Mount of Olives, 76 meters below that of Mount Scopus, 33 meters below that of the hill to its west . . . and 53 meters below that of *ras el-mekkaber*" (O. Keel, *Symbolism*, 114-15).

2.b. This phrase is often regarded as secondary, e.g. by H. Gunkel (*Die Psalmen*, 550); Kraus (*Psalmen*, 1028). But it is to be retained with A. Weiser (*Psalms*, 758): it provides a good external parallel to לעולם "forever" in v 1.

3.a. Heb. גִּרְלָהּ "lot, tribal allotment" is here used of the whole land.

3.b. Heb. צְדִיקִים refers to those in right relationship with Yahweh through the covenant, whose lives are lived in conformity with that relationship.

3.c. For the phrase שְׁלַח יָדְךָ "send (a) hand" see P. Humbert, "Étendre le main' (note de lexicographie hébraïque)," *VT* 12 (1962) 383-95.

5.a. Lit. "bend their crookednesses." For the concept of the purging of impure elements within the religious community see Weiser, *Psalms*, 64, 75-79; K. Nielsen, *Yahweh as Prosecutor and Judge* (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1978) 46-48.

5.b. Or "lead away": cf. Job 12:17, 19 for הָלַךְ used of Yahweh's punishment of leaders. "Allow to get lost" (D. Michel, *Tempora*, 115; cf. K. Koch, "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im AT?" *ZTK* 52 [1955] 16-17) is hardly strong enough. Here it appears to refer to exile: cf. Deut 28:36; 2 Kgs 24:15; Hos 2:16 (14).

5.c. The clause stands outside the metrical structure of the psalm; probably it was spoken by a priest as the answer to the choral prayer (S. Mowinkel, *Tricola*, 89-90). Gunkel (*Die Psalmen*, 549), Kraus (*Psalmen*, 1028); *et al.* regard as secondary. A. Hurvitz (*Leš* 27/28 [1964] 297-302) has surveyed the usage of the phrase in Hebrew literature and inscriptions and concluded that the formulation is post-sixth-century B.C. in origin.

Form/Structure/Setting

The psalm as a whole is a brief communal complaint. Its double petition and wish, directed toward selves and enemies, vv 4-5, follow an extended confession of trust, vv 1-3 (cf. C. Westermann, *Praise*, 52-55). The large proportion allocated to the confession of trust has encouraged classification of the psalm as a communal psalm of confidence (e.g. by Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 548). The formal structure of Ps 123 is comparable, except that this psalm exhibits only two elements of the complaint and Ps 123 has three.

The background of the psalm appears to be enemy occupation of the land (v 3, cf. Isa 14:5, 29; "evildoers," v 5). This situation suggests the post-exilic period as its time of origin. Gunkel's linguistic criteria (*Die Psalmen*, 549) are hardly decisive in confirmation; K. Seybold's tentative suggestion that עֲוֹלָתָהּ "wrongdoing," v 3, has been influenced by the Aramaic emphatic