PSALM 92, SHABBAT, AND THE TEMPLE

JONATHAN L. FRIEDMANN

The apparent absence of Shabbat-specific language in Psalm 92 has long puzzled scholars.[1] Although it is the only psalm in the Hebrew Bible assigned to a specific day, connections between Psalm 92 and Shabbat seem ambiguous at best.[2] Even so, the psalm's superscription, *A song for the sabbath day* (v. 1), has served as an interpretive lens, guiding readers to glean relationships between the text and the day, however tenuous they may be. This could be a case of description as construction: because the psalm is assigned to Shabbat, we are directed to read it as such.[3]

A better understanding of the psalm's appropriateness for Shabbat emerges when it is read in the Temple context. Its themes of victory, enthronement, the Temple, and creation were central to the Levites' conception of Shabbat. This paper seeks to uncover these connections, as well as the psalm's possible liturgical performance alongside Genesis 1:1-2:3 in Temple ritual.

A MIXED PSALM

Several of the psalm's presumed Shabbat themes are expressed more strongly elsewhere in the Book of Psalms. For instance, while verses 5-6 reference God's "deeds," "handiwork," and "designs," other psalms deal more directly with the creation of the world (e.g., Ps. 8, 19, 104, 139, and 148). The theme of thanksgiving, often cited as a link between Psalm 92 and Shabbat, was appropriate for a variety of occasions, not just Shabbat.[4] The opening praise formula, *It is good to praise the Lord* (v. 2), was likewise typical of post-exilic psalms of praise.[5]

Questions about the psalm's relevance for Shabbat inspired a range of rabbinic answers. Several *midrashim* attribute the psalm to Adam, the first man, who composed it "on the first Sabbath of creation."[6] The Targum calls Psalm 92, "A psalm and song which Adam uttered on the Sabbath day."[7] According to Radak, Shabbat provides time to reflect on God's ways – one of the topics of the psalm (vv. 2-8). Rashi does not connect the text to the weekly Shabbat, but rather to the world to come, when every day will be Shabbat.[8] Rashi's

Cantor Jonathan L. Friedmann, Ph.D., is professor of Jewish music history and associate dean of the Master of Jewish Studies Program at the Academy for Jewish Religion, California.

interpretation builds on earlier commentaries, which view Shabbat as a "foretaste of the world to come" and frame the text as "a song for the time to come, for the day will be all Sabbath and rest for everlasting life."[9] Such readings focus on the second half of the psalm, which describes the ultimate defeat of wickedness and victory of righteousness (vv. 9-16).

The diversity of interpretations speaks to both the subjectivity of the poem and to its mixed character. Hermann Gunkel categorized Psalm 92 as a thanksgiving psalm. According to Gunkel, such psalms follow a general four-part form: (1) intention to thank; (2) narration of trouble, call on God, and prediction of deliverance; (3) acknowledgment of deliverance; and (4) thank-offering.[10] Yet, Psalm 92 has its own distinct four-part construction: (1) verses of praise (vv. 2-6), defined by Gunkel as a "call to praise, sing, and rejoice"[11]; (2) verses of wisdom, similar to those found in Proverbs (vv. 7-9); (3) prediction of deliverance (vv. 10-12); and (4) proverb-like verses of wisdom (vv. 13-16). Aside from the third section, Psalm 92 diverges from the typical thanksgiving pattern. What emerges instead is a mixed psalm, containing elements of Gunkel's praise, wisdom, and thanksgiving genres. Depending on which concept or section is highlighted, the interpretation can go in multiple directions. Additionally, as an "open text" with a guiding superscription, the psalm invites readers across the ages to draw out different Shabbat themes, which themselves evolve and accumulate over time.

SITZ IM LEBEN

Major contributors to the scholarly analysis of Psalms, including Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel, consider psalmic superscriptions to be late editorial additions, and thus irrelevant to understanding the meaning and function of the texts. Despite their presence in all classical biblical manuscripts and translations, such as Dead Sea Scrolls, Targum, Septuagint, Hebrew Bible codices, they are habitually ignored as secondary or unrelated to the original *Sitz im Leben*, or life setting, of the psalms.[12] As a result, superscriptions are underappreciated in biblical criticism, despite being in place by at least the middle of the Second Temple period.[13]

However, according to the "Levitical-singer hypothesis," proposed by Sarah E. Gillingham, the Levites not only compiled and arranged psalms for liturgical use, but also modified their language to better fit their assigned

place in the cultic ritual.[14] This hypothesis is rooted in the Chronicler's depiction of the Levites as "co-founders," along with King David, of the Temple cult and its liturgical-musical apparatus (1 Chron. 15-24), as well as their penchant for teaching and preaching (e.g., during Jehoshaphat's reforms in 2 Chron. 17 and 19). Specific to Psalm 92 is both its liturgical designation for Shabbat and the presence of didactic verses of wisdom, which add teaching and preaching to a psalm generally categorized as "thanksgiving." Gillingham writes: "Rather than presuming that these [didactic] psalms originated from wisdom teachers or scribes at private, wisdom-influenced gatherings, the locus of such psalms could originally have been the Temple."[15] From this perspective, Levitical singers not only played an active role in selecting how and when a psalm would be sung (e.g., Shabbat), but also in ensuring that the psalm conveyed an intended message. Consequently, the superscriptions and psalm texts are not as independent as many scholars maintain.

The assignment of Psalm 92 for Shabbat is crucial for understanding its *Sitz im Leben* during Temple times. For example, many have noted the centrality of the number seven in the psalm, which suggests a numerological link to the seventh day: seven iterations of the tetragrammaton (four-letter divine name) in verses 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 14, and 16; the transitional or pivoting function of verse 9 (*But You are exalted, O Lord, for all time*), which is seven verses from the beginning (minus the superscription) and seven verses from the end; and seven epithets each for the wicked and the righteous (vv. 10-16).[16] These sevens might indicate that the psalm was originally written for Shabbat, or that its selection for Shabbat was informed, at least partly, by their presence. Another possibility is that the sevens "resulted from a later attempt to polish the already selected psalm for its role on Shabbat."[17]

Similarly, the words, *To proclaim Your steadfast love at morning, your faithfulness at night* (v. 3), may have been a poetic insertion to connote *tamid*, or always ("morning" and "night" form a merism for "always"). Classical interpreters picked up on this language, envisioning the Levites singing Psalm 92 at the morning *tamid* offering on Shabbat.[18] Others see "morning" and "night" as a reference to morning and evening Temple offerings, which would have been accompanied by songs and instruments, as mentioned in the psalm's fourth verse.[19]

Whether Psalm 92 was originally intended for Shabbat or, as some claim, edited to comport with Shabbat observance, the transmitted text is consistent with its performance in the Temple.

TEMPLE IMAGERY

The Temple setting is an important hermeneutical key to understanding the relationship between Psalm 92 and Shabbat. The psalm's explicit and implicit themes of victory, enthronement, the Temple, and creation connected the text to Shabbat as the day was conceived by the Levitical editors and presenters.

In Near Eastern cultures, the victory of a god over enemies was believed to bring about the god's eternal enthronement. Specific to the Canaanite mythological tradition, which the Israelites shared, the high god assumed the throne only after the eradication of enemies. Such a victory is described in Psalm 92:8-10: *[The wicked] may be destroyed forever. But You are exalted, O Lord, for all time. Surely, Your enemies, O Lord, surely, Your enemies perish; all evildoers are scattered*. This appears to be a revision of material known from the Canaanite Baal epic, wherein Baal defeats the rebellious sea: "Look, your enemies, O Baal; look, your enemies you will smash; look, you will destroy your foes."[20] Significantly, this is followed by a story of the building of Baal's temple.[21]

In Psalm 92, victory and enthronement similarly precede the Temple, referred to as *the house of the Lord* (v. 13). This progression is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The psalm-like Song of the Sea (Ex.15), which was presumably sung in cultic ritual, begins with the defeat of the Egyptians and concludes with God's enthronement at the Temple: *The place You made to dwell in, O Lord, the sanctuary; O Lord, which your hands established. The Lord will reign for ever and ever* (vv. 17-18). Psalm 93, which the Septuagint and *Tamid* 7:4 identify as a psalm for Shabbat eve, builds on the enthronement imagery with God ascending the Temple throne after defeating the primordial forces of chaos (represented by the sea). Psalms 92 and 93 can thus be read as "companion psalms"; one follows the other "with good reason."[22]

This leads to another central theme of Shabbat: creation. As noted, Psalm 92 extols God's "deeds," "handiwork" and "designs" (vv. 4-5). In numerous Near Eastern cultures, the enthronement of a deity was synonymous with both the building of a temple and the creation of the world. For instance, the

Babylonian creation myth ends with a temple being built for the god Marduk and his retinue.[23] The Ugaritic Baal epic places the post-creation temple construction on the seventh day.[24] This is suggested in Exodus 31:12-17, where the commandment to observe Shabbat on the seventh day appears after the completion of the Tabernacle, the proto-Temple, implying a link between the erection of God's abode and Shabbat.[25]

Temple imagery comes to the fore with the cedars of Lebanon. Psalm 92:14 states that the sturdy and durable trees were *planted in the house of the Lord, [and] flourish in the courts of our God* (v. 14). As intimated with the "planting" metaphor, cedars of Lebanon were used to construct the Second Temple (Ezra 3:7), just as they were for Solomon's Temple (1 Kgs. 6:9; 15; 16; 18; 20; 36). Furthermore, the psalm likens the cedars to the righteous, who desire to be in God's presence at the Temple (vv. 13-14; cf. Ps. 23:6).

PSALM 92 AND GENESIS 1:1-2:3

Connections between Psalm 92 and Temple Shabbat observance are deepened through an intertextual reading of the psalm and the creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:3. Just as Psalm 92 was presumably performed on Shabbat in the Temple, so too was the creation story likely composed or edited for liturgical use on Shabbat. Some scholars contend that the Genesis account, which outlines the six-day creation story and seventh-day rest, was a liturgical text intended to link Shabbat and the Temple.[26] As one source argues, the text "is a sabbatogony more than a cosmogony."[27] This cultic function is consistent with Babylonian and Persian creation myths, which were also presented in temple ceremonies.[28]

The liturgical character of the Genesis creation account is assumed from its prose-poetic language and structure, which includes several features common to psalms sung in the Temple.[29] In addition to internal poetic devices, such as assonance (e.g., *tohu va-vohu v'choshech al-p'nei t'hom* in Gen. 1:2), ploce (e.g., *or* and *choshech* in Gen. 1:5-6:), and formulae (e.g., "And there was evening and there was morning…" in Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, and 31), the text has a chiastic pattern (cf. Pss. 38; 62; 67; 68; 70; 101; 140).[30] The first three days describe separation: God separates light from dark on day one (Gen. 1:3-5); water from sky on day two (Gen. 1:6-1:8); and dry land from water on day three (Gen. 1:9-13). God fills the separated areas on days four

through six: light filled with sun and dark filled with moon on day four (1:14-19); water filled with fish and sky filled with birds on day five (Gen. 1:20-23); and land filled with animals and humanity on day six (Gen. 1:24-31). These verses are followed by a coda, wherein God finishes separating and filling, and sanctifies the seventh day (Gen. 2:1-3).

The creation prose-poem affirms two important aspects of Shabbat. The first is the divine modeling of the six-day workweek and seventh-day Shabbat. Second is an allusion to the Temple itself. According to Moshe Weinfeld, God's rest on the seventh day implies his "resting-place" at the Temple (cf. Ex. 20:11). Like other creation myths of the region, the Genesis account concludes with the Temple and God's enthronement, albeit more subtly. As Weinfeld writes: "The Israelite historical consciousness was such that Israelite temples could not be traced back to primordial times….However, several hints scattered throughout the Bible [such as Genesis 2:1-3] suggest that a connection between the Creation and the Temple was recognized."[31] Although connections between creation, enthronement, and the Temple are, as Weinfeld notes, more clearly stated in Psalm 93, they are nonetheless discernable in Psalm 92, its sequential and thematic companion.

As we have seen, the elements of creation, the number seven, the Temple, and enthronement are complemented in Psalm 92. Moreover, some view *tov* ("good") in verse 2 of the psalm as a linguistic bridge to the various iterations of *tov* in the Genesis account (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).[32] It is, then, reasonable to imagine the Levites performing Psalm 92 and the creation prose-poem as a liturgical pair on Shabbat. This Temple setting, which rarely factors into readings of Psalm 92, is perhaps the best explanation for its ostensibly cryptic superscription.

NOTES

1. See, for example, W. Brueggemann and W. H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014) p. 399; R. Apple, "Psalms of the Day," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 42:2 (2014) p. 118.

2. *Tamid* 7:4 assigns psalms to the other days of the week: Sunday, Ps. 24; Monday, Ps. 48; Tuesday, Ps. 82; Wednesday, Ps. 94; Thursday, Ps. 81; Friday, Ps. 93. The Greek translation of

the Psalter in the Septuagint (third century BCE) includes these additional assignments, excluding Tuesday and Thursday.

3. H. P. Nasuti, *Defining the Sacred Songs: Genre, Tradition, and the Post-Critical Interpretation of the Psalms* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999) p. 21.

4. Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, p. 399; I. Abrahams, *A Companion to the Authorized Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1966) p. 127.

5. For example, Pss. 106:1, 107:1, and 118:1. See also, 1 Chr. 16:41 and 2 Chr. 7:6.

6. The earliest rabbinic source linking Adam to Psalm 92 is *Genesis Rabbah* 22:13.

7. A. Cohen, *The Psalms* (London: Soncino, 1965) p. 304.

8. Hillel Danzinger, *The Artscroll Tehillim* (New York: Mesorah, 1988) pp. 200-01.

9. BT *Berakhot* 57b; *Tamid* 7:4.

10. According to Gunkel, Psalm 92 is an individual psalm of thanksgiving, a category that includes: Pss. 18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 41, 66, 92, 100, 107, 116, 118, and 138. H. Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1967); and H. Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyrics of Israel* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998). See also T. F. Williams, "A Form-Critical Classification of the Psalms According to Hermann Gunkel," *Resources for Biblical, Theological, and Religious Studies* (October 2006) pp. 1-4.

11. T. F. Williams, "A Form-Critical Classification of the Psalms According to Hermann Gunkel," p. 1.

12. J. A Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004) p. 227. See B. S. Childs, "Psalm Title and Midrashic Exegesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16:2 (1971) pp. 137-49. Some mainstream English translations, such as the New English Bible, omit superscriptions altogether.

13. J. H. Newman, "The Form and Settings of the Prayer of Manasseh," in *Seeking the Favor of God, Vol. 2: The Development of Pentateuchal Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*, ed. M. J. Boda, D. K. Falk, and R. A. Werline (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007) p. 118.

14. S. E. Gillingham, "The Levites and the Editorial Composition of the Psalms," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. W. P. Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) p. 207.

15. Gillingham, "The Levites and the Editorial Composition of the Psalms," p. 206. For an analysis of the Levites' role in Temple ritual, as presented in 1 and 2 Chronicles, see J. W. Kleinig, *Lord's Song: The Basis, Function and Significance of Choral Music in Chronicles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993).

16. P. Trudinger, *The Psalms of the Tamid Service: A Liturgical Text from the Second Temple* (Boston: Brill, 2003) p. 150; and J. Bazak, "Numerical Devices in Biblical Poetry," *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988) p. 335.

17. Trudinger, *The Psalms of the Tamid Service*, p. 150.

18. BT *Tamid* 33b.

19. A. Berlin and M. Z. Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999) p. 1387.

20. Translation from R. Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007) p. xiv.

21. R. E. Clements, *God and Temple: The Idea of the Divine Presence in Ancient Israel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016) p. 9.
22. M. Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple and the Enthronement of the Lord: The Problem of the Sitz im Leben of. Genesis 1:1-2:3," in *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M. Henri Cazelles*, ed. A. Caquot and M. Delcor (Kevelaer: Butzer & Becker, 1981) p. 510.
23. Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple and the Enthronement of the Lord," p. 501.
24. Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple and the Enthronement of the Lord," p. 504.
25. The command to observe Shabbat also follows six commands related to the construction of Tabernacle: Ex. 25:1; 30:11; 30:17; 30:22; 30:34; 31:1.
26. L. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist, 1984) p. 399; W. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1982) p. 22.
27. Phillippe Guillaume, *Land and Calendar: The Priestly Document from Genesis 1 to Joshua 18* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010) p. 42.
28. Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple and the Enthronement of the Lord," p. 510.
29. J. M. H. Gaines, *The Poetic Priestly Source* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2015) pp. 310-16; M. D. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part 1: From Adam to Noah*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961) pp. 8-11; F. H. Polak, "Poetic Style and Parallelism in the Creation Account (Genesis 1.1-2.3)," in *Creation in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. H. G. Reventlow and Y. Hoffman (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002) pp. 2-31.
30. N. Declaissé-Walford, R. A. Jacobson, and B. L. Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2014) pp. 355, 538, 540, 542, 563, 742, and 967.
21. Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple and the Enthronement of the Lord," p. 502.
32. D. L. Bartlett and B. Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) p. 57.

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