RESTRUCTURING PSALM 85

DAVID J. ZUCKER

Psalm 85

1. *For the leader. Of the Korahites. A psalm.*

2. *O Lord, You will favor Your land,*
   restore Jacob's fortune;

3. *You will forgive Your people's iniquity,*
   pardon all their sins; Selah.

4. *You will withdraw all Your anger,*
   turn away from Your rage.

5. *Turn again, O God, our helper,*
   revoke Your displeasure with us.

6. *Will You be angry with us forever,*
   prolong Your wrath for all generations?

7. *Surely You will revive us again,*
   so that Your people may rejoice in You.

8. *Show us, O Lord, Your faithfulness;*
   grant us Your deliverance.
9. *Let me hear what God, the Lord, will speak;*
   He will promise well-being to His people, His faithful ones;
   may they not turn to folly.
10. *His help is very near those who fear Him,*
    to make His glory dwell in our land.

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11. *Faithfulness and truth meet;*
justice and well-being kiss.

12. *Truth springs up from the earth;*
justice looks down from heaven.

13. *The Lord also bestows His bounty;*
our land yields its produce.

14. *Justice goes before Him*
as He sets out on His way.

Though there are many variations in the superscriptions found in the Psalter, only Psalms 47, 49 and 85 bear the identical four Hebrew words: "*La-menatzeah Li-v'nai Korah Mizmor* [For the leader. Of the Korahites. A psalm*"*.] While the three psalms reflect different moods, they share a similar phenomenon. When restructured in a certain manner their messages are more obvious, more emphatic, and make greater sense. Restructuring does not change each psalm's essential meaning; rather it underscores it more fully. This article considers Psalm 85,[1] Other articles dealt with Psalms 47 and 49.[2]

The restructured parallelistic configurations look like this:

1. *For the leader. Of the Korahites. A psalm.*

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restore Jacob's fortune;

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revoke Your displeasure with us.

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6. *Will You be angry with us forever,*
prolong Your wrath for all generations?

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He will promise well-being to His people, His faithful ones;
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10. *His help is very near those who fear Him,*
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Psalm 85 in theme and content is more closely related to Psalm 47 than to Psalm 49. Like the former, it offers both comfort and hope. Having granted this, however, there is an undertone that God's salvation will be some time in coming. The closing verse is as much a statement of anticipation as it is a sure expression that God will be preceded by Justice.

Weiser, in his commentary, states the case for an antiphonal reading of the

psalm.[3] He suggests that it was sung by members of the congregation, and then supplemented by individual voices. In brief, the psalm addresses the people's return to Judah, and forgiveness for their wrongdoing. This is followed by a prayer for full restoration, and the psalmist's anticipation that God will bring peace and salvation.

Several divisions are suggested for Psalm 85. The usual sections are 2-8 and 9-14, with 2-8 being further divided into 2-4 and 5-8. Oesterley, in his characterization, suggests that the divisions refer respectively to the past, the present, and then a present/future. Weiser follows a similar orientation, as do others.[4]

The restructuring of Psalm 85 recognizes these divisions, but offers a slightly altered form of reading. Verse 8 summarizes the preceding verses, much as verse 14 will summarize the thrust of the whole psalm. Verse 9 then serves as an introduction to the next set of verses.

Key words or thoughts are repeated within the "set" itself, and often there is a carry-over to the next set. This is a form of what the Briggs' refer to as "emblematic" and "stairlike" qualities.[5]

VERSES 2 AND 5: THEME

2. *restore Jacob's fortune* ~ 5. *restore us, revoke displeasure*

God is spoken of as favorable to the land and its people. In verse 2, the people are called by name, Jacob. The synonymous term in verse 5 will be *with us* [people of Jacob]. In both verses, the same root is used for "restore/return [*sh-v-b*]." Likewise, the Deity is specifically invoked by name.

VERSES 3 AND 6: THEME

3 *forgive iniquity* ~ 6 *will* [God] *always be angry?*

In these two opening sets the people articulate their request for a loving and caring God in the first part (vv. 2 and 3) and then explain their expectations in the corresponding verses (vv. 5 and 6). Consequently, in verse 3 the request is made that God forgive their wrongdoing, hence (in v. 6) the Divine anger should abate.

A recurring theme is return/restoration, and by extension repentance [*teshuvah*]. The repentance is doublefold: The people will repent, therefore should God repent of the Divine anger. In these verses a cluster of concepts is

found, words that are also found in the liturgy for the Day of Atonement. That particular liturgy was developed around the narratives of the High Priest found in Leviticus 16, but also included the attributes of God as enunciated in Exodus 34:6-7. There is an association between the implied repentance/return of verses 3 and 6 and the words in Exodus 34, where in both instances the words "forgive iniquity [*nas'a avon*]" and "sin [*hatat*]" are found. The words "faithfulness and truth [*hesed ve-emet*]" which are part of God's attributes in Exodus 34 are also found in just that phrasing later on in verse 11.

VERSES 4 AND 7: THEME

4 [God] *withdraw Your anger* ~ 7 *revive us, people rejoice in You* [God]

Verse 4 follows on the thought expressed in verse 6. It carries out the hope stated there that God's anger will retract. In verses 6 and 4, the same word for "Your anger [*apekha*]" appears. Likewise, the word for "turn away" and the words for "revive us again (lit. return our lives)" in verses 4 and 7 respectively, contain the same root, and that is also the root seen in verses 2 and 5 [*sh-v-b*]. Verse 4b, which asks God to "*turn away from* [Divine] *rage*" features the same idiom, with the same three words in the same order that Moses addressed to God shortly before the revelation of the Divine attributes (see 85:4 and Exodus 32:12).[6]

VERSE 8: THEME

8 *Lord, show faithfulness/grant deliverance*

This verse summarizes the preceding verses, and anticipates the succeeding ones. The word "Lord" appears in verse 2 and will reappear in verses 9 and 13. The root for "deliverance [*y-sh-a*]" is used for "help" in verse 5, and again in verse 10. Verse 8 also anticipates the rest of the psalm, for it introduces the word "faithfulness [*hasdekha*]" which will be seen again in different forms, "*hasidav*" in verse 9 and "*hesed*" in verse 11.

VERSE 9: THEME

9 *God/Lord promise of well-being, faithful ones*

Verse 9 begins the second section of the psalm. It acts as a solo voice. It introduces the cluster of Godly concepts that saturate the next four verses, much as God's rain in its due season will saturate the land so that it will yield

its produce.[7] The words "hear" and "speak," both of which appear in Psalm 49, are prominent. The parallel mode of communication in Psalm 47 is "sing" and "raise a shout."

VERSES 10 AND 12: THEME

10 [God's] *help is near, glory in our land* ~ 12 *truth/earth; justice/heaven*

These two verses suggest the ongoing tension between God dwelling on high, and mortals inevitably earthbound. The word "land" figuratively and concretely joins the two verses. In verse 10, God's presence is near, and the psalmist would have God's glory dwell in the land. By verse 12, God's glorious "truth" does appear on earth and it springs heavenward even as "justice" looks down from above. The early mention of Jacob in verse 2 suggests the stairway to heaven with the angels going up and down, much as truth is springing **up**ward and justice looks **down**ward (see Gen 28:12). Verse 10 states unequivocally that help is near for those who "fear" God. The word "fear" has the same root as "awesome [y-r-a]" when Jacob says *'How awesome is this place and I did not know i*t' (Gen 28:17). The root words awe/fear also appear prominently in Psalm 47:3 and Psalm 49:6, 17.

VERSES 11 AND 13: THEME

11. *faithfulness/truth/justice/well-being* ~ 13 *Lord, bounty, land yields produce*

The juxtaposition of goodly (and Godly) qualities enunciated by the voices in verse 12 are now echoed in verse 11. The words "truth" and "justice" are actually repeated from verse 12. In the same way, "land" will be carried over from verse 10 to verse 13. This is a very deliberate recurrence, for in verse 13 the corresponding set repeats the use of that word in verse 12. The deliberate recurrence of certain key words is further seen by the implied sense of the Deity in verse 10 and the actual word "Lord" in verse 13.

10. [The **Lord**'s] *glory in the **land***	12. ***Truth*** . . . ***Justice***
11. . . . ***Truth*** . . . ***Justice***	13. *The **Lord** . . . **land***

The inter-relational connections between these four verses can be also heard and seen in another way where the same *b/v'artzenu* is used (10,13) and like-sounding verbs appear (*nishkaf, nashku,* 12, 11).[8]

10. *b'artzenu*	12. *nishkaf*

11. *nashku* 13. *v'artzenu*

There is also a sense of natural progression. When God's glory dwells in the land, truth and justice are present, as are faithfulness and well-being. Consequently, in bestowing God's bounty, the land yields its produce.

VERSE 14: THEME

14 *Justice precedes God, Who then follows*

Verse 14 summarizes the preceding four or five verses, just as verse 8 summarizes those before it. Perhaps a solo voice pronounced here that justice will go before God, even as God sets out on a Divine mission. Verse 14 also serves as a summary for the whole psalm. Where in the opening verses requests were made and answers sought, here the answer is stated. God has favored (or will soon favor) the land, Jacob's fortune is (or soon will be) restored, for God is present and a just society prevails.

In this closing verse something else is apparent. Not only does it summarize the psalm, but also essential thoughts from the psalm are found in that one sentence. The word "justice [*tzedek*]" is directly repeated from verses 12 and 11. The whole thrust of the verse is that God is present on (or in) the land, and the word "land" (or the thought of the land which is where the people dwell) is found throughout the psalm (vv. 2:6, 4, 8; 10; 12; 13).[9]

The specific inclusion of key words from the psalm in the final line appears as a literary device used in Psalms 47, 49, and 85.

In Psalm 47, 10b is the summary verse. The Deity as "Elohim" is mentioned there, as God is found throughout the psalm (vv. 2, 6, 7, 8, 9 [twice], 10a, and in vv. 6 and 3 as "Lord"). Likewise, the "land [*aretz*] is mentioned in 10b as it was above (in vv. 3 and 8). Finally, God is greatly "exalted [*na'alah*]," a direct echo of the same root words found earlier in verses 3 and 6.

In Psalm 49, the same phenomenon holds true. Of the seven words in verse 21, four are found directly in the psalm itself. "*Adam* [man, human being]" appears in verses 3 and 13, and the parallel word "*ish* [man]" appears in verses 3, 8, and 17. The root "honor [*y-k-r*]" is found in verses 9 and 13. The root word for "like [*m-sh-l*]" is present in verses 5 and 13.

CONCLUSIONS

Psalm 85, like its counterparts, Psalms 47 and 49 contains the same exact

superscription. Restructured, its voice is more direct and persuasive. The repetition of so many words in the second part of the set supports the theory of reformulation. These three psalms are closely linked by common literary styles, which include the deliberate recurrence of words, roots of words, or sounds in either the corresponding or adjacent verses. In each case, the final verses contain central ideas of the particular psalm.

NOTES

1. The translations herein are based on the New Jewish Publication Society version (NJPS). The versification follows the Masoretic Text (MT), which differs slightly from Revised Standard Version (RSV); New Revised Standard Version (NRSV); New International Version (NIV); King James Version (KJV); Jerusalem Bible (JB); and New English Bible (NEB). In NRSV, NIV, KJV, and JB, the superscription and the first verse are considered as one verse, in NJPS they are separate verses, 1 and 2. NEB eliminates the superscriptions in its translation.

2. See "The Riddle of Psalm 49," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, XXXIII:3 (July-September 2005) pp. 143-152, and "Restructuring Psalm 47" *Jewish Bible Quarterly,* in press.

3. A. Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia: Old Testament Library, Westminster, 1962) p. 571. Whether the psalm is eschatological, historical, or cultic, or whether it was used in a variety of ways during the period of the First Temple is not the concern of the present analysis. Many of the scholars cited in the notes deal with those issues.

4. W. Oesterley, *The Psalms* (London: SPCK, 1962) p. 381; Weiser, p. 571; A. Cohen, *The Psalms* (London: Soncino, 1945) pp. 277-278; A. F. Kirkpatrick, ed. *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957 [1902]) p. 511.

5. C.A. and E.G. Briggs, *The Book of Psalms,* 2 Vols., *International Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (New York: Scribner's, 1906) Vol. 1, pp. xxxiv-xxxvii.

6. The root of the verb involved [*sh-v-b*] is the same in both passages. The verb form is different.

7. M. Dahood, *The Psalms* in Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY; Doubleday, 1966) Vol. II, p. 286.

8. The words *nishkaf* and *nashku* share, in Hebrew, the same three initial letters [*n-sh-k*], and therefore sound alike, though they come from different roots: *nishkaf* [*sh-k-f[p*] and *nashku* [*n-sh-k*].

9. Dahood suggests that the "anger of God" is understood by the people as fierce burning anger, bringing a drought, which is affecting the land, hence the need for rain. Dahood, Vol. II, pp. 286-287.

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