

VARIATIONS ON A THEME IN BIBLICAL PSALMODY

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Repetition is vital to speech and to music for cognitive and aesthetic reasons respectively. In speech, one's interlocutor may not have heard or grasped what was said and asks that you repeat your words. In music, repetition is the heart of rhythm as in the simple beat of a drum, and is what enables a recurring theme to impart a sense of unity to a symphony of many movements. Often, however, in both speech and music, and for the same reasons mentioned above, the repetitious element may be rearranged or added to. Thus in speech, if one has heard what was said but did not understand, the speaker may have to express his meaning using different words. Analogically, in music harmonic variations may be introduced to the theme in order to enhance the aesthetic quality of the sound. In all of these cases what has transpired may be called variations on a theme.

In what follows, I shall show that biblical Psalmody, which is known to make extensive use of simple repetition in liturgical responses such as "Amen," "Halleluyah," "For His kindness lasts forever,"¹ as well as poetic parallelism in verses which state the same idea in different words, also uses another technique. There are instances of what I would suggest is a form of "variations on a theme" between verses in different chapters of Psalms, and even between Psalms and similar poetic verses elsewhere in the Bible. The use of this literary device in such a context can have both aesthetic and cognitive effects.

I wish to present three examples of biblical Psalmody which I believe exhibit significant "variations on a theme."

I

1) *For the Lord will not cast off His people, neither will He forsake His inheritance* (Ps. 94:14).

2) *For the Lord will not forsake His People, for His great namesake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people unto Him* (II Sam. 12:22).

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Clearly both of these verses have as their theme a proclamation of God's guardian- relationship to Israel. *For God will not forsake His people.* What follows in each verse, however, is something entirely different in terms of both language and syntax, which is in the relationship of the subordinate clause to the theme. In 1) we seem to have a repetition of the theme only in somewhat different language: "neither will He forsake His *inheritance*." Actually, however, the term "inheritance" emphasizes the inherent importance of the people themselves, they, being His precious *inheritance*, will never be forsaken! In 2) the subordinate clause is actually an explanation of the theme. The reason why God will not forsake His people is because of "His Great Name." God is so closely bound to the people of Israel that their condition at any point in history is seen as a reflection of God's power and ability to bring about the fruition of His plans and the fulfillment of His promises. Indeed, both Moses and Ezekiel have argued that the destruction of the people of Israel would constitute a desecration of God's name.² In noting the variation on the common theme in verses 1) and 2), the Rabbis commented: At times God acts for the sake of His People and His inheritance and at times for the sake of His Great Name.³ That is to say that the redemptive acts of God are not always to be interpreted on the basis of the principle of desert but may be prompted by the need to further the goals of God in history.

II

1) How great (gadlu) are your works O Lord, your thoughts are very deep (amku) (Ps. 92:6).

2) How manifold (rabu) are your works O Lord, you have made all of them in wisdom (b'chochma) (Psalms 104:24).

Using the same exclamatory form, the Psalmist in both verses is moved to extol the "works" of God: *How . . . are your works, O Lord!* However, a different adjective is used in each verse: "great" in 1) and "manifold" in 2). The reason for this is that the particular "works" of God that are referred to are different in each verse. Psalm 92 is speaking about the events of history, while Psalm 104 is about nature in its entire variegated splendor. In Psalm 92 we read of the struggle between good and evil, between the "righteous ones" and the "evil ones." We see the *wicked ones spring up and flourish* (92:8) while a bright future for the righteous is only a hope (92:13). In this context, the Psalmist suggests that we perceive the "big picture" –"big" in both space

and time. He therefore uses the metaphor of space – *gadol: how (gadlu) great (large, big) are your works, O Lord*. But “great” also means “praiseworthy.” Thus, the subsidiary clause offers an explanation: *your thoughts are very deep*. Maintaining the space-metaphor, we are told that God’s “thoughts” (intentions and plans) are “deep,” that is, many events in personal life and history, although distinct from each other in space and time, may be linked to produce significant and beneficial outcomes. For God “works” deep below the observable surface. Ultimately, *the righteous shall spring up like a palm tree (92:13), and the wicked shall be destroyed (92:8)*.

Psalms 104, however, is an elaborate poem to nature so that “the works of God,” referred to here are the entire visible universe: winds and storms, mountains and rivers, heaven and earth. The Psalmist is overcome by the sheer multiplicity and variety of nature’s sights and sounds: *How manifold are your works O Lord!* Indeed, the lush variety, particularly of plant and marine life, is one of the most striking features of nature. Therefore, in order to account for the variety, the Psalmist in his subordinate clause adds: *All have been made in wisdom*, that is to say, there is method in the multiplicity. It is not all mere uncontrolled fecundity. This unique planet shows signs of being a self-correcting eco-system with all the elements necessary for life and the development of human civilization. Ever new discoveries are being made of new materials, new sources of energy and medicine. Indeed, *all have You made in wisdom*.

III

- 1) (*Let all the trees of the forest sing*). *Before the Lord for He comes, for He comes to judge the earth: He will judge the earth: He will judge the world with righteousness and the people in His faithfulness (b'emunato) (Ps. 96:13).*
- 2) (*Let the mountains exult together*). *Before the Lord, for He comes to judge the earth: He will judge the world with righteousness, and the people with equity (b'meisharim). (Ps. 98:9).*

As can be seen above, preceding these two verses with their common theme of God’s coming to judge the world, are descriptions of all of nature exulting at the prospect. For the Psalmist “Judgment Day” signifies the end of the tyranny of evil and the advent of universal justice and righteousness: trees are singing, mountains are joyful. This is because the vision of world-wide jus-

tice is seen by the Psalmist as the goal of all of Creation. While the two verses are almost identical, the variation in the last word stands out. In verse 1) we read that (God will judge) *the people in His faithfulness*, while verse 2) reads that (God will judge) *the people with equity*. Is this change of expression just for the purpose of poetic variation only or does this particular choice of words suggest some new idea? At first glance, it would seem that *in His faithfulness* of verse 1) should be interpreted like its corresponding term, *with equity* in verse 2), which is to say, as a quality of God's judgment. Just as God's judgment will be equitable so will it reflect God's faithfulness, in remaining committed to His moral values.

Homiletically, perhaps we might explain that the attributes "equity" and "faithfulness" can be seen not as referring to God but as the standards by which "the peoples" are to be judged: the Psalmist in verse 2) asserts that God will judge them solely by their adherence to the values of morality (equity). Whereas the Psalmist in verse 1) maintains that morality, if it is in a theological vacuum, is not strong enough and must be anchored in faith in God. Hence verse 1) asserts that the peoples and cultures of the world will be judged primarily by their "faithfulness", their rejection of idolatry and their faith and acceptance of the moral Creator God.

As to how the text of the Torah should be studied, the Rabbis advocated: "Turn it, turn it, over and over, for *all* is in it" (*Pirkei Avot* 5:25). Perhaps it was this method that was followed by the Psalmist. The basic themes are examined from every which angle, from every aspect, and repeated with a small but significant variations that would reveal some of the "*all* that was in it" which added to the cognitive and aesthetic value of the text.

NOTES

1. Psalm 136. See Psalms 150 and 29, where you have simple forms of repetition and variation.
2. Exodus 32:12; Ezekiel 2:9, 36, 20.
3. *Yalkut Shimoni* on Psalms 94:14. Another interesting view given there is "Outside the country [Israel] God acts for the sake of His Name, inside the country God acts for the sake of his people."