

# PSALM 22: THE ESTHER CONNECTION

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Many communities associate Psalm 22 with Purim. Sephardim and Oriental Jews use it in the evening service; they are joined by such Ashkenazim as follow the rite of the Vilna Ga'on in making it the special psalm for Purim.<sup>1</sup> The Purim link is the main issue which is addressed in this paper, but first we must consider the psalm itself, which presents several difficulties in regard to the heading, the first verse of the text and the change of mood after verse 22. Once these aspects have been considered we will be in a position to examine the Purim connection.

## THE HEADING

The psalm is headed, *For the leader, on ayyelet ha-shahar. A psalm of David.* No-one is quite sure what the hapax *ayyelet ha-shahar* means. The JPSA version says merely, “Meaning of Heb. uncertain.” The words indicate “hind of the dawn”, which might be a musical instrument<sup>2</sup> or a melody, the nature of which is no longer known. Because the psalm moves from sad, morbid content to a happier segment of praise, we can presume that the melody does likewise, moving from a minor to a major key.

Samson Raphael Hirsch<sup>3</sup> sees the psalm as a hymn to the morning, deriving *ayyelet* from a root that means to be strong or vigorous. Hirsch thinks the heading means “concerning the vigor of the dawn” and the psalm contrasts the darkness and fear of the night with the hope and brightness of the dawning of the next day. According to Franz Delitzsch<sup>4</sup>, there is a picturesque link between a hind and the dawn; the coming of dawn sees the sun emitting rays like the horns of a deer.

## THE FIRST VERSE OF THE TEXT

In the first substantive verse the psalmist emits an agonized cry, *My God, my God, why (lamah) have You abandoned me?* (verse 2). A great deal hangs on the word “why.” Taken literally it is a bold accusation, not a mere inquiry

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for information. Since God is called a stay and support<sup>5</sup> the psalmist feels let down, lost and forsaken. His mood echoes Lamentations 1:5, *The Lord has become an enemy!* It seems that God has ignored His promises and abandoned the psalmist to his fate.

However, a qualification is suggested by Samson Raphael Hirsch. He suggests that the psalmist is asking “For what purpose”, not “For what reason”<sup>6</sup> – i.e. how and where does God’s apparent inaction fit into His overall strategy? If, which expresses a cardinal principle of Judaism, there is movement and progress in history, God’s apparent abandonment of the psalmist seems quite scandalous. Whoever is the sufferer from whom bursts forth this expression of despair, it is a moment of absolute anguish – but the psalmist gets over his trauma in the final verses of the poem.

#### THE CHANGE OF MOOD

The psalm has two sections – the first, up to verse 22, being bitter and agonized; the second, from verse 23 to the end, calm and exultant. In the first section the psalmist is in pain; in the second he has been released. In the first he says his cry has not been answered; in the second he has received an answer, and he now – more calmly - praises God. The psalm moves from the sour to the sweet. In the first section the psalmist cannot understand why God is apparently absent and unconcerned and has let him down; in the second He has re-appeared and supported man’s cause. The question now is not so much God’s care and concern for the psalmist but His timetable. He has come out of hiding (verse 25), but why did He not do so earlier?

#### THE DAVID CONNECTION

Though the psalm is headed *A psalm of David*, there is no proof that the author was indeed David himself. True, other Biblical books (e.g. I Samuel 16:18) describe David as a musician and say that he composed large numbers of poems. The era of the First Temple is regarded as a period of poetry, generally because of David. But less than half of the 150 psalms claim to be written by him, and even those that do, might well be saying, “In Davidic style” or “From a (or *the*) Davidic collection.” Jewish tradition has a widespread opinion that some of the Davidic psalms reflect events in David’s career, e.g. Psalm 3 which echoes the time when *he fled from his son*

*Absalom.* It could therefore be that Psalm 22 is a historically-based poem deriving from David's ups and downs. But tradition also has an opinion (especially in the *Midrash Tehillim*) that it reflects the difficult period of Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus. If then the psalm comes from a later period, it may be a prophetic poem: Rashi avers that it is an indication of the future, which will bring both suffering and salvation.

#### THE PURIM CONNECTION

If the Midrash is right that the historical context of the psalm is the period of Mordechai and Esther, it may be bound up with the emergence and development of the festival of Purim. Since Purim was the first post-Pentateuch festival to enter the Jewish calendar, it needed texts to give it status. The problem is that the Book of Esther told its story without mentioning God. True, He is hinted at in the verse, *relief and deliverance will come for the Jews from another quarter* – literally, *another place*. (Esth. 4:14). “The Place”, *HaMakom*, was a rabbinic name of God, indicating His omnipresence (*Gen. Rabbah* 68:9). The author of Esther could have implied this notion when he wrote his fourth chapter: Ginzberg says the idea that *Makom* refers to God was not unknown at this period and was certainly known to Philo and Josephus if not earlier.<sup>7</sup>

In the debates about the Book of Esther, some voices must have offered Psalm 22 as a supplement or counterweight that introduced the Name of God, since it began with the opening address in verse 2, *My God, my God*, and contained other mentions of God. It should be noted that many, probably all, of the alternative or additional versions of Esther are full of references and prayers to God.<sup>8</sup> In these extra texts Mordechai prays, “O Lord and King who rules over all things, spare Your people, pity Your inheritance, that we may live and sing praise to Your Name.” Esther prays, “O Lord and King, help me, alone with no Helper but You.” She calls on God to remember the merits of the patriarchs and protect their descendants. “If Israel should cease to exist,” she says, “who would come and exclaim *Holy, Holy, Holy* (Isaiah 6:3) thrice daily before You?” Mordechai says, “Your beloved people is about to be destroyed... who will be left to read the Torah and call upon Your Name?” He even says, “O Lord, it was not in insolence, pride or vainglory

that I did not bow before proud Haman. I would have kissed the soles of his feet for the sake of Israel."

Whom did the psalmist have in mind when he wrote the poem, who was the sufferer who was in such pain, who had the nerve to argue with God and complain at the apparent Divine unconcern, who was it for whom God finally acted? There is no unanimous answer, but the rabbis said the sufferer was Esther, the "morning star." Her light, they said, lit up the world.<sup>9</sup> Living in a palace did not save her from suffering; Mordechai warned that her Jewishness would be discovered and she would not escape the Jewish fate (*Esth.* 4:12-14). She was ill at ease in the palace and did not like her husband. People spoke about her. She felt unsafe and alone. God did not appreciate that she was careful to obey the commandments. Marrying a gentile was not her choice but a transgression "for the sake of Heaven" (*TB Nazir* 23b). One tradition avers that she was married to Mordekhai and had no sexual relations with the king.

#### PURIM

When did Purim enter the Jewish calendar? The basic elements were there by the time of the Mishnah, since there is so much *tannaitic* material about the public reading of the Megillah.<sup>10</sup> Josephus says the festival was widespread in his days.<sup>11</sup> II Maccabees knows of a "Mordechai Day" (15:36), though this might not have been Purim as we know it.<sup>12</sup> Purim must have spread from Shushan, where the Book of Esther probably began as an explanation of the celebration – maybe the year after the dramatic events – and became widely known later in the period of the Second Commonwealth (perhaps as late as 77 BCE); it is difficult to know precisely when. The reservations in Judea about observing the festival (*TB Megillah* 7a) were probably outweighed by popular sentiment.

The pull of the festival increased, for deeper reasons than what Israel Abrahams<sup>13</sup> calls its frolicsomeness. The story resonated in an age when Judea was embroiled in political restlessness, when there was both suffering and the hope that the messianic advent would give the antisemitic enemy its just desserts: God's promise would be fulfilled and the pain would turn to praise. The first section of Psalm 22 spoke for the sufferers in their agony; the second section assured them that in the end all would be well.

Whom did the author of Psalm 22 regard as the enemy? He does not name them but likens them to beasts – dogs, bulls and lions. In the Esther interpretation the enemy is obviously Haman, and this accords with the view of the sages.<sup>14</sup> Haman didn't suddenly turn anti-Semitic. He was an Agagite, descended from people who had a vendetta against the Israelites. He had earlier conflicts with Mordechai and the Jewish people. Ezra 4 relates that when the Jewish exiles returned to Judea to rebuild the Temple *the enemies of Judah and Benjamin* made allegations against them and sought to have the building work stopped. This occurred *in the reign of Ahasuerus, at the start of his reign* (Ezra 4:6). The anti-Jewish allegations emanated, according to Rashi, from the family of Haman, already known as hostile to Jews (Esther 3:10, 8:1, 9:10 and 24). The events in Shushan are thus linked with events in Judea,<sup>15</sup> and involve both Haman and Mordechai.

#### A PSALM FOR PURIM

Once a connection was established between Psalm 22 and Esther, it was logical for the psalm to be ordained for reading on Purim. This echoed the tradition of reading an appropriate psalm on a Sabbath or festival evening before the statutory service. There is a remnant of this custom in the reading of Psalms 92 and 93 before *Bar'khu* on Sabbath eve. Tosafot to TB *Meg.* 4a (s.v. *pesak*) say Psalm 22 is appropriate for Purim because “it mentions the downfall of idol-worshippers.” The *Sefer HaManhig* of Rabbi Abraham HaYarhi prefers the explanation that Psalm 22 speaks of Esther. On the whole the Jewish people have read the psalm as referring to Esther but they have followed the Midrash in making it symbolic of Jewish suffering in every age.

#### NOTES

1. *Arukh HaShulhan, Orah Hayyim* 270:2; Ezra Fleischer, *Tefillah uMinhagei Tefillah Eretz Yisra'elim biT'kufat haGenizah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988), esp. chapter 3.
2. cf. *Shiggayon*, Psalm 7; *Al Mut LaBen*, Psalm 9; instruments listed in Psalm 150; cf. Mishnah Arakhin chapter 2 on the Temple orchestra.
3. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Psalms*, trans. Gertrude Hirschler (NY/Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1978) re Psalm 22; cf. Amos Hakham (ed.), *Sefer Tehillim* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 5744) re Psalm 22..
4. Franz Delitzsch, *Iris – Studies in Colour and Talks About Flowers* (reprint: Palala Press, 2015).

5. e.g. II Sam. 22:19, Psalm 18:19.
6. See note 3.
7. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Pa.: JPSA, 1946 ed.), vol. 6, p. 470
8. Greek and Latin versions of Esther include extra material and incorporate prayers for God's intervention. The Targumim, beginning with Esther chapter 1, regularly mention God. The rabbinic sages find hints of God in various verses, e.g. 4:14. Ibn Ezra and other Jewish commentators suggest reasons why the Masoretic text omits the name of God.
9. William G. Braude (trans.), *The Midrash on Psalms*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1959), vol. 1 re Psalm 22; TB Meg. 15b.
10. Mishnah *Megillah*, critical edition by Joseph Rabbinowitz (London: OUP, 1931). Rabbinowitz (p. 7) suggests that by late in the Second Temple period the reading of the *Megillah* was already an established custom.
11. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* II:6; Josephus inserts romantic elements into the Esther story and depicts Ahasuerus favorably (cf. JPS Bible Commentary: Esther, Pa.: JPSA)
12. Mordechai Day is mentioned in II Macc. 15:36 in the context of the fate of Nicanor. The date given for this day tallies with Purim, but it is not certain that they are the same. Mishnah *Megillah* (2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE) confirms this date for the reading of the Scroll of Esther; see note 20.
13. Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (NY: Meridian and Pa.: JPSA), 1960 reprint), Index s.v. "Purim"; *idem*, *Festival Studies* (London: Goldston, 1934), chapter 6; cf. Theodor Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition* (NY: Schuman, 1950).
14. Ahasuerus is not the real enemy even though Esther dislikes him and thinks he behaves like a dog (Midrash on Psalm 22:17 and 21). She also compares him to a lion (verse 22), but this may be because of his royal rank (TB *Megillah* 15b).
15. This is the view of *Seder Olam*, quoted by Rashi on Esther 9:10.



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