

## PSALM 68: ECHOES OF THE SONG OF DEBORAH?

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When reading through Psalm 68, one cannot help noticing that some of the phrases used by King David are reminiscent of phrases sung by the prophetess Deborah after the victory of the Israelites over Sisera, general of Jabin (Judges Chapter 5). This was noticed by Buttenswieser<sup>1</sup> and Pollack,<sup>2</sup> and briefly noted in the Soncino commentary on Psalms: "Verses 8f. are adapted from Judges 5:4f."<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, none of the classical commentators refer to these similarities of language, except for a very oblique mention by Radak (Ps. 68:8), who observes "like the verse in Judges 5:26" and Rashi (on Psalms 68:24), who states "like a verse in Judges 4:14." The only classical commentator who notes that the Song of Deborah has similarities with any psalm is Abarbanel on Exodus 15:1, referring to Psalm 18:1. Even Buttenswieser does not elaborate the similarities on a verse-to-verse basis.

Thus, verses in Psalms: *God, when You went forth before your people, when You marched through the wilderness; the earth quaked, even the heavens dripped... even Sinai before the presence of God* (Ps. 68:8-9) parallel verses in Judges: *Lord, when You went forth from Seir, as You strode out of the fields of Edom, the earth quaked . . . clouds dripped water . . . even Sinai before the presence of the Lord* (Judg. 5:4-5). This is an indication of the power and might of God as He protects His people throughout their history. The reference is most probably to the Revelation at Sinai, where the Israelites experienced an awesome closeness to God, becoming *a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Ex. 19:6). God's protection depends on Israel's acceptance of His laws.

There is a different reference however, to the idea that God was fighting for Israel. Ibn Ezra points out that *going forth from Seir* and *marching through the wilderness* indicate that God revealed His might after Sinai, when Israel met up with enemies like Sihon and Og and defeated them. The chapter of Psalms begins: *Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered; and may those who hate Him flee before Him* (Ps. 68:2). Both Deborah in her song and King David in this psalm acknowledge the hand of God in defeating their enemies.

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Deborah was obviously speaking of the recent battle with Sisera, while King David referred to an unspecified battle in which he had been victorious.

Both Psalm 68 and the Song of Deborah include an enumeration of, or reference to, certain of the twelve tribes. The reason is more obvious in Judges. Deborah praised the tribes which had rushed to defend the nation against the enemy, but chastised the ones that had stayed away: *Zebulun is a people that jeopardized its life, and Naphtali upon the high places of the field* (Judg. 5:18), *The princes of Issachar were with Deborah . . . so was Barak . . . But Reuben had great searchings of the heart – and Dan lingered by its ships* (Judg. 5:15-17). Compare this with Psalms: *There Benjamin, the youngest, rules over them* [the enemy], *the princes of Judah who command them, the princes of Zebulun and Naphtali* (Ps. 68:28). According to Ibn Ezra, this enumerates the tribes that fought with David in the battle hinted at in verse 2 of the psalm. According to others, *Benjamin, the youngest, rules over them* signifies that Benjamin produced the first king, Saul, as a reward for being the first tribe to cross the Sea of Reeds, leading the way after Israel's departure from Egypt (TB *Sotah* 37a). Benjamin was later united with Judah, the most powerful tribe, in one kingdom.

There are also some similarities in cadence between the two passages (more obvious in the original Hebrew). Psalms uses repetition when speaking of Bashan: *A mountain of God is the mountain of Bashan; a mountain of many ridges is the mountain of Bashan* (Ps. 68:16). This recalls a similar repetition in Judges: *The brook Kishon swept them away; that ancient brook, the brook Kishon* (Judg. 5:21). Also, although the following words have different meanings, they have a similar look and sound and rarely occur: *Why did you stay among the sheepfolds* [bein ha-mishpetayim] (Judg. 5:16); and *If you would lie quietly among rows of vessels* [bein shefatayim] (Ps. 68:14). Clearly, this psalm echoes the Song of Deborah.

Psalm 68, one of the most magnificent psalms of David, is a hymn to God in history. It is considered to be one of the more difficult psalms to interpret.<sup>4</sup> However, noticing the allusions to the Song of Deborah helps to clarify the theme and message of this psalm. It celebrates one undefined victory of David and hints at Deborah's victory over Sisera. David attributed his achievement of greatness to the Lord, *even the God who is our salvation* (Ps. 68:20). When Deborah said, *The heavens dripped, yea, the clouds dripped*

*water* (Judg. 5:4), she referred to the unexpected heavy rainfall that mired the enemy chariots – God's providential intercession on Israel's behalf. While heavy rainfall is not a miracle on the scale of the drowning of Egyptian troops at the Red Sea, Deborah recognized it as God's way of helping the Israelites as they faced their enemy. Her song is a model acknowledgment of Divine aid, even when a battle is fought by natural means, when victory may be attributed to strength, strategy and sheer luck. It is therefore no coincidence that Psalm 68, a psalm of victory, is replete with allusions to Deborah's own victory song.

#### NOTES

1. Moses Buitenhuis, *The Psalms: Chronologically Treated With a New Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938).
2. Aharon Pollack, *Al Ha-Setumot Ba-Mizmor* (Jerusalem: Nezer Publishing, 1991) p. 293.
3. A. Cohen, ed., *The Psalms: Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible (London: The Soncino Press, 1969 edition).
4. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Sefer Tehillim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990) p. 400.



## FOR OUR READERS IN ISRAEL ONE DAY TOUR OF HISTORIC ASHKELON

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#### NOTES:

1. Departure is from the Prima Kings Hotel (Jerusalem), corner King George and Ramban streets, at 8:30 AM sharp.
2. You need to bring your own sandwiches and drinks for lunch.
3. The cost will be only NIS 50 per head.
4. Prior registration is required; e-mail reservations to [wal-terz@netvision.net.il](mailto:walterz@netvision.net.il) First come, first served. The tour starts when the bus is full.

