

# OF DAVID, A PSALM ON CARRYING THE ARK INTO THE CITY OF DAVID

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In their commentaries on Psalm 24, Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Bretler<sup>1</sup> and Robert Alter<sup>2</sup> infer that the first half of Psalm 24 is a liturgy to accompany individuals as they ascend to the Temple. They presume the second half to be an accompaniment as the Ark of the Covenant is brought into the Temple following a battle, citing I Samuel 4 as evidence of the practice of bringing the Ark to battles. While I do not dismiss the possibility that Psalm 24 was recited during pilgrimages, in checking the context of the citation, it appears to me that the psalm is, rather, a unified composition that is far more closely tied to the Ark's journeys in Samuel and Kings generally and to the moment of the Ark's entry to the City of David specifically.

*Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not taken a false oath by My life or sworn deceitfully* (Ps. 24:3-4). In I Samuel 2:12-17 and 22-25, the sons of Eli the Priest are described as scoundrels, using the sacrificial cult for personal gain and committing sexual improprieties. In essence, Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, fail the test of Psalm 24:4. Accordingly, God determines that they will die. If Hophni and Phinehas were lacking in integrity, they were not lacking in courage. As Israel faces defeat at the hands of the Philistines (I Sam. 4), Hophni and Phinehas bring the Ark of the Covenant down from Shiloh to accompany the army in battle at Even Ezer. But, borne by priests of ill repute, the Ark offers no victory. The Israelites are routed; the Ark is captured, and Hophni and Phinehas are slain (I Sam. 4:11). They will not ascend the mountain of the Lord.

Initially deeply fearful that the Ark would be the vehicle of God's wrath against them, *the Philistines were frightened; for they said, "God has come to the camp." And they cried, "Woe to us! Nothing like this has ever happened before. Woe to us! Who will save us from the power of this mighty God? He is the same God who struck the Egyptians with every kind of plague in the wilderness!* (I Sam 4:7-8). The Philistines now conclude in the wake of *Arthur Sandman holds B.A.'s from Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and an MPA from New York University. His career is in Jewish communal service, and he lives in Springfield, N.J.*

battle that there is nothing to fear. They carry off the Ark as booty into the very precincts of the Temple of Dagon in Ashdod (vv. 5:1-2). Rather than enjoying the spoils of their battle, the Philistines find they instead have stolen a Trojan Horse; God the Warrior now erupts in their midst.

God inflicts humiliating defeat upon the Philistines – with the emphasis on humiliating. First, mischievously toppling the statue of Dagon (v. 5:3), escalating to plagues of hemorrhoids in Ashdod (vv. 4-6), then in Gath (to which the Ark was moved like a hot potato; v. 9), and then in Ekron, where the fortunate were merely stricken with hemorrhoids (and according to 6:5, mice as well) while the less fortunate slain (vv. 5:10-12). The Philistines, defeated, resolve to return the Ark to Israel (v. 6:2).

By deferring His victory from the Israelites' combat until the Ark was carried back to Philistia, God leaves no room for doubt. Not by man's hand was victory secured, but only by the Hand of God. So it echoes in Psalm 24:8: *Who is the King of glory? The LORD, mighty and valiant, the LORD, valiant in battle.*

Now begins the ascent of the Ark toward Zion. In I Samuel 6, the Philistines set the Ark on its way to Beit Shemesh in the care of two cows. The Israelites in Beit Shemesh, stricken (v. 19) because they disrespected the Ark by looking at its contents, ask in an eerie evocation of Psalm 24's interrogatives: "*Who can stand in attendance on the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall He go up from us?*" (I Sam. 6:20).

Perhaps recognizing that they, like Hophni and Phinehas, have failed the test of Psalm 24:3-6, the Beit Shemeshites call on the men of Kiryat Yearim to take the Ark. It then resides in Kiryat Yearim for 20 years (I Sam. 6:21-7:2).

II Samuel 6 picks up the story, recounting how King David reclaims the Ark from Kiryat Yearim to complete the journey to Zion: *Then David and all the troops that were with him set out from Baalim of Judah to bring up from there the Ark of God to which the Name was attached, the name **LORD of Hosts** Enthroned on the Cherubim* (II Sam. 6:2).

Again, the Samuel narrative evokes Psalm 24, similarly identifying *Ha-Shem Tzevaot*, the Lord of Hosts: *Who is the King of glory?– the **LORD of Hosts**, He is the King of glory!* (Ps. 24:10).

As the Ark begins its ascent to Jerusalem, God the Warrior, described in the Psalm (v. 8) as **HaShem Izuz** [the Lord mighty], again manifests, striking **Uzzah**, who impermissibly grabs the Ark – setting up an intriguing wordplay between the narrative’s Uzzah and the Psalm’s *Izuz*. David, chastened by Uzzah’s death, delays bringing the Ark farther to Jerusalem for three months. When he does complete the journey, David dances, with the text extending the wordplay: *David whirled with all his might [oz] before the LORD* (II Sam. 6:14).

Shortly, in II Samuel 7, David will consult with the prophet Nathan (vv. 1-2), only to find that (vv. 12-13) his dream of creating the ultimate resting place of the Ark, the Temple, will be deferred to his son. While we earlier discussed the general unfitness of Hophni and Phinehas with regard to Psalm 24’s test of “clean hands and a pure **heart**” [*Neki kapayim uvar levav*], this choice of words – closely mirroring Abimelech’s plea in Genesis 20:5<sup>3</sup> following that king’s near-adultery with Sarah [*betam levavi uvnikyon kapaï*] – points to David’s later adultery with Batsheva. The psalmist deems David unworthy to ascend the mountain of the Lord based on his violation of the Covenant secreted within the Ark.

Lacking the purity of heart to build the Temple, it is left to Solomon to speak of the intentions of his father: *And it was in the **heart** of David my father to build a house for the name of the LORD God of Israel. And the LORD said to David my father, ‘Inasmuch as it was in your **heart** to build a house for My name, you have done well, for it was in your **heart**’* (I Kgs. 8:17-18).<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the only reference to heart in the moment is when his wife Michal sees David’s joyful dancing *and she scorned him in her **heart*** (II Sam. 6:16).<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, it is David’s later coveting of and cohabiting with Batsheva – direct violations of the Ten Commandments enshrined in the Ark – that make him unworthy of bringing the Ark and its tablets to Mount Zion.

But at this point, upon entering Jerusalem, David sees himself and his subjects as Psalm 24:5-6 describes: *He shall bear **blessing** from the LORD and bounty from his rescuing God. This is the generation of His seekers, those who search out your presence, Jacob. selah.*<sup>6</sup> He does not yet apprehend that the “generation of His seekers” is not his own. After all, he has just retrieved the Ark from the house of Obed-Edom upon hearing, *The LORD has **blessed***

*Obed-edom's house and all that belongs to him because of the Ark of God* (II Sam. 6:12).

The Psalm, of course, reflects the reality. It sets as a parallel to “generation of His seekers” “those who search out your presence” [*mevakshey fanekha*]. I find few instances of this language in the Bible, but it does appear with reference to Solomon: *All the world came to pay homage to Solomon* [*mevakschim et peney Shelomo*] (I Kgs. 10:24, and similar at II Chron. 9:23).

Similarly, the psalm's reference to blessing could well evoke Solomon's celebration of the Temple and the Ark in I Kings 8, which employs “bless” (*bet-resh-khaf*) six times in the chapter (vv. 14, 15, 54, 55, 56, 66). The I Kings 8 account spans generations, harking back to the long interval since the Exodus during which the Ark was itinerant (v. 16), the delay in the Temple's construction from David's reign to Solomon's (vv. 19-20), and the future continuity of the people of Judah and the dynasty (v. 25). Ultimately, it is Solomon's that is the “generation of His seekers,” fit to carry the Ark into the Temple.

Unaware of all that will follow, David anticipates building the Temple himself – constructing its walls and mounting its gates, which will one day soon be lifted to admit the Ark and God's own presence into the Holy of Holies – a hope that resonates in the words of Psalm 24: *O gates, lift up your heads! Up high, you everlasting doors, so the King of glory may come in* (Ps. 24:7) and *O gates, lift up your heads! Lift them up, you everlasting doors, so the King of glory may come in!* (Ps. 24:9)

As I developed the correspondence between the Psalm and the Ark narrative, Rabbi Alan Yuter<sup>7</sup> brought to my attention that the Psalm contains six occurrences of God's name and that the verbal root *Nun-Sin-Aleph* (to raise) in various conjugations similarly appears six times. It is a fascinating observation, because there are six Israelite locations at which the Ark rests in the Samuel narrative: Shiloh, the army bivouac at Even Ezer, Beit Shemesh, Kiryat Yearim, the house of Obed-Edom, and the City of David.

Implicit in the six locations are six movements of the Ark, i.e., from Shiloh to Even Ezer, from Even Ezer to Beit Shemesh, etc. The last of the movements is anticipated but not consummated in Samuel – the movement from the City of David to the Temple Mount. David appears to ritually represent the six-stage journey on the departure from the house of Obed-Edom: *When*

*the bearers of the Ark of the LORD had moved forward six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling* (II Sam. 6:13).

It is no great leap to associate these six stages of the Ark's journey to its destined resting place with the six days of Creation, with its eventual seventh location representing the place of its Shabbat, its rest. Interestingly, the I Chronicles 15 account of the departure from the house of Obed-Edom cites the sacrifice of seven bulls and seven rams (v. 26).

The association of the Ark's dwelling and Creation is one with which the biblical narrative is familiar. The Exodus 39 account of the completion of the portable Temple [*Mishkan*] is told in seven paragraphs, each ending *as the LORD had commanded Moses* and concludes (vv. 32-43) with language strikingly evocative of Genesis 2:1-3.

Again, the correspondence between Creation and the Ark's resting place is seen in the sequel to the Samuel account. In I Kings 8, when Solomon delivers the Ark to the Temple, he does so (v. 2) in the seventh month and initiates a celebration that is to last (v. 65) "seven days and again seven days, fourteen days in all." He uses language of Shabbat [*shin-bet-taf*] in referring to the place of the Ark: *Makhon leshivtekha olamim* [a place where you may rest forever, v. 13], tying nicely to Psalm 24's "everlasting doors" [*pitkhey olam*, vv. 7 and 9], and the earthly counterpart to *Shamayim makhon shivtekha* [the Heavens, the place of your rest, I Kgs. 8:39, 43, 49].

And so, the introduction to Psalm 24, which extols God as the Creator of the world, now becomes evident: *The earth is the LORD's and all that it holds, the world and its inhabitants. For He founded it upon the ocean, set it on the nether-streams* (Ps. 24:1-2). If God's Creation was complete on the seventh day, so too will the Ark's journey to the Temple be realized.

But whatever his designs for the future, David is exultant as he settles the Ark in a tent that he has pitched for it in the City of David. He offers sacrifices and invokes the Lord of Hosts: *When David finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of Hosts* (II Sam. 6:18). It is not hard to imagine his words of blessing being the very words of Psalm 24.

Rather than the conflation of two psalms as some conclude,<sup>8</sup> Psalm 24 is an artfully crafted unity, as the correspondence to the Ark saga indicates. Its poetic structure reinforces that conclusion.

The psalm, of course, has two distinct sections, each ending in *Selah*. The first contains six verses, again corresponding to the six resting places of the Ark through its entry to the City of David. Thematically, it corresponds to the concerns of the Samuel narrative, speaking to the character of the people and their worthiness for holy service until this point and in the future. It draws its information from the past – i.e., Creation, the journey of the Ark, and the performance of the Israelites to date.

The section contains three occurrences of God's name (H) and two of the root *Nun-Sin-Aleph* (N) in the pattern: HHNNH. There are two versets in each verse of section one, with the exception of the three-part verse 4 – *He who has clean hands and a pure heart, // who has not taken a false oath by My life // or sworn deceitfully* – which is certainly the key sentence in this section, the answer to its one interrogative.

The second section of the psalm (vv. 7-10) now moves into the future, looking to the construction of the Temple and the relocation of the Ark to its final destination. The second section achieves heightened intensity by increasing the number of interrogatives – two in contrast to the one in the first section – and adopting an entirely tripartite sentence structure (assuming the Masoretic read of the *etnakhtah* under *tzevaot* in the final verse).

The keyword repetitions are patterned: NNHHNNH. The increased density of the keywords reflects that the past is merely prologue to the ultimate purpose of the journey, to deliver the Ark to Mount Zion. The last five occurrences repeat the HHNNH pattern of vv. 1-6, creating a neat envelope.

By verse, the keyword pattern is equally neat: NN (v. 7), HH (v. 8), NN (v. 9), H (v. 10).

In the climactic last verse – *Who is the King of glory?– the LORD of hosts, He is the King of glory! Selah* (Ps. 24:10) – the structure and sound of verse 8 is echoed but not repeated: *Who is the King of glory?– the LORD, mighty and valiant, the LORD, valiant in battle* (Ps. 24:8).

In verse 10's first verset, the interrogative *mi hu zeh* [who (he) is] is substituted for the *mi zeh* [who is] of verse 8. The insertion of the pronoun intensifies the specificity of the question. Verse 8's response is a cleanly parallel repetition of God's name (HH): *HaShem izuz vegibor, HaShem gibor milkamah* [the LORD, mighty and valiant, the LORD, valiant in battle]. In contrast, the drama of verse 10 is heightened by a different structure utilizing a

full response that restates the question again using the *Hu* [He] pronoun: *Ha-Shem Tzevaot, Hu Melekh HaKavod* [the LORD of Hosts, He is the King of glory!]. The subtly changed sentence structure of verse 10 facilitates the non-repetition of H in its third verset. The result: a solitary, final invocation of God's name, reflective of His oneness and primacy.

The two sections and ten verses of Psalm 24 are a celebration of the Ark of the Covenant – its odyssey to the City of David and the aspiration to settle it in the grandeur of the Temple on Mount Zion. But ultimately the value of the Ark is what resides within, the *Shenei Lukhot HaBerit* (the two tablets of the Covenant) represented by the two sections of the psalm, and the *Aseret HaDibrot* (the Ten Commandments) hewn into them, evoked by the psalm's ten verses.

Psalm 24 is too carefully constructed to be a spontaneous composition by David in the moment of entry to the City of David, and its awareness of the Batsheva incident would indicate later composition. But the structures and allusions of Psalm 24 strongly suggest it was written of that moment, when: *he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of Hosts* (II Sam. 6:18), *the LORD of Hosts, He is the King of glory! Selah* (Ps. 24:10).

#### NOTES

1. A. Berlin and M. Z. Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2014) p. 1294, note 10.
2. R. Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007) pp. 81-82, notes 3, 7.
3. Comparison to Genesis suggested by the editors.
4. Alter translation. Comparison suggested by the editors.
5. Alter translation.
6. Alter translation.
7. Rabbi Alan Yuter, private correspondence, Feb. 2021.
8. Alter, *op. cit.*