

DO THE LITURGICAL USES OF PSALM 29 SUGGEST DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PSALM?

YAAKOV JAFFE

Biblical texts are known for their ambivalence and ambiguity; numerous portions of the prophetic texts of the Bible have been understood by different commentaries as speaking about different, widely divergent events. The Psalms in particular are often written ambiguously, such that the reader might apply their words in different circumstances. The ambiguity is often lost, however, when the Bible is used in liturgy. The decision to use a specific Biblical text in a specific liturgical situation often highlights one specific understanding of the Biblical text; if the text is understood differently, it would not belong at that point in the liturgy! To give two examples, it is well known that the selection of Isaiah 41 as the Haftara reading for Lech-Lecha (containing the stories of Abraham) essentially interprets that prophecy as referring to Abraham and not to the idolators, and the selection of Psalm 22 for recitation on the holiday of Purim (See Tosafot BT *Megillah* 4a) interprets the chapter as predicting the story of Esther. These chapters could easily be discussing totally different topics entirely, and so the way they are used in liturgy encourages the reader to adopt one specific interpretation of the chapter. Whenever a text of the Bible is repurposed from its original location and inserted into a particular time or junction in the liturgy, the passage is at risk of facing a questionable interpretation to justify or explain that specific insertion.

There are many examples of this phenomenon, but few as noteworthy as the different ways Psalm 29 has been included into the liturgy. Psalm 29 is inserted in three very different locations and occasions and each liturgical use of the Psalm encourages us to understand the Psalm in a slightly different way. This essay will show how the Medieval commentators, and perhaps even the Talmud and Midrash, themselves, understood the Psalm in different ways, and how the different understandings each match a different selected liturgical use.¹

Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Jaffe serves as the rabbi of the Maimonides Minyan and as the Director of Tanakh Studies at the Maimonides School. He received his ordination and doctorate from Yeshiva University, where he holds graduate degrees in Bible, Jewish History, and Jewish Education.

A SURVEY OF PSALM 29: PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

The title of Psalm 29 “A Song of David,” does not link it to any specific event or occasion in David’s life; the chapter consists of a series of broad praises of the Almighty. The praise that repeats most often is the praise of “The Voice of the LORD” which is praised for its general strength and glory (verses 4-5), its appearance over water (verse 3), its appearance over fire (verse 7), and the way it causes fear across the desert (verse 8-9) – although the Voice of The LORD is never truly defined. The Psalm’s conclusion focuses on God’s kingship (turning back to the time of the flood, verses 10-11), while the introduction calls the listener to give praises and bow to the LORD (verses 1-2). The interpreter is perplexed: is the focus the generic voice of the LORD or the specific occasion of the flood and the voice which appears over waters? Is the focus God’s kingship in general or the bowing before God in His Temple?

Turning away from content and focusing on structure, we note that the name “the LORD” is central to the chapter, as the Talmud observed (*Brachot* 29a). When the first 9 verses are broken into 18 clauses, two each verse, we see how the word “The LORD” is the second word of 13 of the clauses (72%): seven times “The Voice of the LORD,”² three times “Give-Praise to-the LORD”³ (in verses 1-2), and also “Bow-to The LORD,” “Breaks the LORD,” “Provokes-Fear the LORD.” The two concluding verses each begin with the name of the LORD. Is this Psalm a reflection about this name? The numbers 7 or 13? The 18 times the name appears in the short Psalm? The Psalm is open to many interpretations, and so various commentators take it in very different ways.

THE MIDRASH AND RASHI: PRAISE ON THE PAST OCCASION OF THE GIVING OF THE TORAH

Rashi (29:4-7, 10) follows the Midrash (BT *Zevachim* 116a) which interprets the Psalm as a reflection on the moment of the giving of the Torah. This downplays the presence of water in the Psalm but finds great support in the notion of the “Voice of the LORD” and the depiction of fire, both of which were central to the giving of the Torah (see for example Deut. 5:18-22 which mentions the voice and fire five different times each, across a mere five verses). The Torah was also given in the desert – the location where the “Voice of the LORD” echoes, although in the desert of Sinai and not the desert of Kadesh (verse 8).⁴

An additional support to this interpretation can be found in the literary parallel to the start of Psalm 96. Each of these two Psalms begin with the three-part call to give praise to the LORD. In Psalm 29: [1] *Give [praise] to the LORD O you sons of the strong ones,*⁵ [2] *Give to the LORD honor and might,*⁶ [3] *give to the LORD the honor appropriate to his Name, and bow before the LORD in the holy place, the sanctuary.*⁷ Though we do not know the occasion for which Psalm 29 was composed, 1 Chronicles 16 relates that Psalm 96 was composed to be recited before the Ark of the Covenant. Judging by the literary parallel, Reuven Margoliot suggests that Psalm 29 was also recited at that occasion, as the Ark sat in its tent, commemorating the occasion wherein the contents of the Ark – the Torah and 2 tablets, were first given to the Jewish people.⁸ LXX also begins with the observation that the Psalm connects to “εξοδίου σκηνης” (roughly translated as “going forth of the tent” – Psalm 28 in the LXX) which links the Psalm to the tent or Tabernacle, the Mishkan that held the Torah within it.

IBN EZRA: A MAJOR STORM

If Rashi focused on the voice and the fire, Ibn Ezra (29:1-3, 6-7, 9-10) focuses on the role of water in the song, central at the start and ending of the Psalm. The 3rd verse reads: *The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders,*⁹ *the LORD, over the mighty waters,* while the penultimate verse reads: *The LORD sat enthroned at the Flood; the LORD sits enthroned, king forever.* The voice of the LORD refers to thunder, and the fires refer to lightning, as the focus of the Psalm is the fear and the emotional response of the Psalmist to a major rain. Indeed, when considering what might be the moment that *breaks cedars.... He makes them skip like a calf, [the forest of] Lebanon and Siryon*¹⁰ *like a young wild ox,*¹¹ a major storm with wind, thunder, and lightening seems to be the best possible interpretation. Though the idea is not developed in detail, BT *Brachot* 29a, also dubs this chapter the praises of G-d “upon water.”

For the Midrash and Rashi, the chapter is most connected to a singular past event in the history of the Jewish people, the moment when the Torah was given. In contrast, for Ibn Ezra the song describes one event that may have occurred at one particularly salient moment in David’s life, but which also recurs many other times in the present – every few years if not annually.

RADAK: THE FUTURE REDEMPTION

Rashi looked at the past and Ibn Ezra at the present, and Radak (29:3-7, 9-11) offers a third view, understanding this Psalm as referring to an era of the Messianic future. The end of the Psalm resonates most with Radak's approach: *The LORD sits enthroned, king forever. May the LORD grant strength to His people; may the LORD bestow on his people wellbeing.* It is at that Messianic moment when God's rule is finally recognized for eternity and the people of Israel finally achieve this true, everlasting peace. For Radak, all the descriptions of God's might – be them the voice, the fire, or the water are just metaphors for the strength that will be shown at the moment of the redemption and the punishment of God's enemies. There are no specific deer¹² which are stricken in fear; it merely is a metaphor for God's tremendous strength. Literarily, Radak's view is supported by the movement of The LORD's name from the second word in each clause throughout the Psalm to the first word of each of the final two verses. The song builds to the climax of God ruling for eternity and ushering an era of Messianic peace.

Radak might argue that the parallel to I Chronicles 16 and the link between this Psalm and the Ark of the Covenant also conform to this view. Perhaps the Psalm looks forward to a Messianic era when the Ark of the Covenant will one day return to the Temple, when God's rule is revealed to all of humanity.

Radak's view is also supported by the textual parallels between this chapter and the 96th chapter of Psalms; as noted above 29:1-2 matches 96:7-8. The 96th chapter is part of a lengthy section of Messianic Psalms (95-99) which describe the universal celebration accompanying the future day of judgement. Those Psalms focus on the moment when God is proclaimed as king and comes "to judge the land;" an era when God is revealed and removes the present-day injustices from our hitherto unredeemed world.¹³ If the same language of praise is used in both, it is reasonable to consider that the two Psalms both address the same messianic future.

APPLICATION TO LITURGY

This Psalm is used in three very different points in the standard Jewish liturgy. Each Shabbat, it is sung or chanted while the Torah is returned to the Ark in most congregations.¹⁴ Additionally, the Psalm has been part of the Kabbalat Shabbat ritual since the inception of Kabbalat Shabbat just under 500 years ago.¹⁵ The oldest liturgical use for this Psalm is on the holiday of Sukkot, as is evidenced by the Talmud (BT *Sukka* 55a), and how some

understand the note in the Septuagint. Why would one Psalm be used in so many different contexts?

Inclusion of the Psalm in Kabbalat Shabbat is best understood in consonance with Radak's view. All of the Psalms of Kabbalat Shabbat speak of a Messianic, redemptive, future moment (92-93, 95-99, see BT *Tamid* 33b) and including Psalm 29 among them positions it as another one of the Psalms that speak of the Messianic future. In this regard, the comparison to Psalm 96 is particularly important, as the latter Psalm already participates as one of the redemptive Psalms of the start of Shabbat. Kabbalat Shabbat was always as much about the Sabbath of Messianic redemption as the Sabbath of creation (as is evidenced from the liturgical poem *Lecha Dodi*), and this reading fits with that context.

Recitation of the Psalm on Sukkot supports the view of Ibn Ezra. Sukkot is the holiday upon which the Jewish people is judged (BT *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 16a) and prays for (BT *Ta'anit* 2a) rain. Also, the temple water libation of Sukkot and the four species are understood to be further parts of the ritual for the prayer for rain. If that holiday is already focused on the importance of rain, then Psalm 29 is a fitting recitation to reflect on a torrential downpour.¹⁶ As Rashi to *Sukka* notes "this day is the start of the celebration of the water drawing, as that is 'honor and might;' in that Psalm is 'The voice of the LORD is over the waters' on the occasion of the water libation."

Finally, reciting the Psalm upon the return of the Torah works with Rashi's view that the Psalms true nature is a reflection upon the moment of the giving of the Torah. As the Torah was given by tradition on Shabbat (BT *Shabbat* 86b), then Torah reading each Shabbat recreates the giving of the Torah (*She'urei Ha-Rav [Tefilah]* Essays 33-35), and the Psalm that celebrates that moment is recited when the Torah scroll is returned to the Ark.¹⁷

One might even wonder further if the use of this Psalm for a specific purpose bespeaks a larger approach to the faith itself, more generally. Some Jews might be predisposed to see ambivalent texts as thoughtful prayers for vital necessities like water, while others might see in ambivalent texts the stirrings of Messianic fervor. Still others might see the ambivalent words as a reflection on the Torah, particularly if they see Torah study as a major, defining element of their Judaism.

LIVING WITH INCONSISTENCY

Can a Jew recite a Psalm multiple times on one day, each time selecting a different focus of resonance or interpretation? Yes, there are seventy faces of

the Torah and texts are sometimes intentionally ambiguous in order to lend themselves to multiple interpretations. Still, some might find some discomfiture to the idea that each time we say these words we aren't entirely sure how we mean to take them. Others might argue that the ambivalence of the Psalms is a feature, not a fault of the writing, as the authors of the Psalms may have intended for their words to carry different resonances for different times.

All three uses are subject to custom; indeed, some might say this Psalm on none or only one of the three available occasions! But Jews who recite it multiple times likely need to be cognizant and aware of some of the implications of using it in such varied situations, meaning something different each time the Psalm is recited.

NOTES

1. A similar exercise is also warranted for Psalm 121, which has been used in at least eight different liturgical contexts: the monthly blessing of the moon (Eliyahu Rabba 426), the prayer for travelers (Eliyahu Rabba 110), the ancient fast day liturgy (BT *Ta'anit* 15a), as a response to feeling scared (Responsa Rav Pe'alim 4:Yesharim:19), the Shabbat afternoon prayers (Orach Chaim 292:2), the blessing of the sun, the daily evening prayer, and the affixing of the Mezuzah (based on BT *Menachot* 33b, *Avodah Zara* 11a).

2. Phonologically, the *cholam* center vowel of “kol,” voice, echoes across the Psalm, appearing an additional 24 times beyond the 7 times it appears in the word *kol* and the 18 times it appears in the name of the LORD.

3. The single word “Havu,” is an unusual Hebrew verb, from the root “Hav” which appears in the Bible 33 times but only in the imperative form. The literal translation is “Give!” based on the noun *yahav* (Psalm 55:23, see BT *Megillah* 18a); in this case it means to give [praise]. The word appears three times in this chapter, and three times in the parallel Psalms (Psalms 96 and Chronicles 16) and so more than a quarter of the times the root appears are in different versions of the same verse.

4. Rashi takes *Desert of Kadesh* to refer to the desert of Sinai, however, based on the Talmud BT *Shabbat* 89a, *Zevachim* 116a.

5. In Psalm 29 “*Bnei Eilim*” and in Psalm 96 “*Mishpichot Amim*.” Literally, the phrase “*Bnei Eilim*” can be translated as “Young Rams” or as “sons of the strong ones.” In the context, and based on the parallel to Psalm 96, Rashi translated “Children of the Patriarchs.” Other translations include children of ministers (Menachem in Rashi), stars (Ibn Ezra, reading “Children of God”), or forces of nature (Malbim). The word “*Eilim*” meaning “the powerful” also appears at Psalms 89:7, Daniel 11:36 and Exodus 15:11.

The Talmud (BT *Rosh Hashanah* 32a, *Megillah* 17b) derives the themes of the first three blessings of the Amidah from this three-part call to praise: Children of the Forefathers, Might, and Name=Holiness.

6. The word “*Oz*” is generally translated strength or might, and it appears prominently in this chapter in both the first and the last verse. Midrash Mishlei (21) takes *Oz* in this verse and in Proverbs 21:22 to refer to the Torah, and this may also be the understanding of BT *Berachot* 64a. Rashi does not cite this view in his commentary to Psalms, but he does in his commentary to *Zevachim*. See also *Genesis Rabba* 59:2 explaining Proverbs 31:16. Of the 93 times that the word *Oz* appears in Tanach, more than a dozen are taken to mean the Torah by one Midrash or another.

What is the basis of this view? *Mechilta Be-shalach* cites this view to explain Exodus 15:2 and cites Psalms 99:4 as a proof-text. Ibn Ezra (Tehillim 78:61) endorses this view in at least one occasion and cites Psalm 132:8 as a possible proof-text that the Ark of the Covenant is called “*Oz*.” Sifri to Deut. 33:2 cites Job 12:16 as a proof-text.

7. The 9th verse also speaks of how all proclaim God’s honor in his sanctuary, in his “*Heichal*.” Rashi takes it to refer to the temple which is consistent with his approach, Ibn Ezra cites that view, and the view that it refers to the heavens.

8. Reuven Margoliot “A Song upon the Occasion of the Groundbreaking of the Tabernacle to David” (16-20) in *Ha-Mikra Ve-Hamesorah* 3rd. Ed. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989), pp. 19-20. He posits that Psalm 24 was also written at the same time, on the basis of Shabbat 30a, and the prevalent use of the word “*Kavod*” and “*Melech*” in both Psalms.

9. “*Hiri’m*,” the verb form of the more common noun for thunder *Ra’am*

10. The name the Phoenicians used for Mount Hermon, see Deut. 3:9.

11. The *re’em* is known across the Bible for its majestic horns; some identify it with the ancient aurochs. This word may be intended to serve as a pun with *hiri’m* in the third verse of the Psalm, as the third verse and the penultimate verse seem to be in dialogue with each other, much as the word *oz* tied together the first and last verse.

12. The word “*ayalot*” refers to deer, not gazelles as some translate the word. See Rashash to BT *Yoma* 29a and Yehudah Felix, *Chai Ve-Tzomeiach Ba-Torah* (Jerusalem: Young Israel Press, 1984), p. 12.

13. Psalm 95 serves as an invocation to the entire section of 5 Psalms, calling upon the listener or audience to come and praise God. Psalms 96 and 98 describe the “new song” that the nations will sing at the occasion of God’s judgment, each song ending with the climax that the song is sung at the moment of justice (96:13 and 98:9). Those Psalms segue into 97:1 and 99:1 which begin with the notion of God becoming recognized as king at that Messianic moment. Psalm 92 and 93 have a similar relationship where the former Psalm speaks of a song sung at a moment of judgment and the latter Psalm begins with the reflection that God has become king; these Psalms have long been considered Messianic in nature, see the final words of Tractate *Tamid*.

14. This does not appear to have been the view of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, however, according to a letter by Dr. I. Halberstam, postmarked July 28, 1986.

15. See Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* trans. Raymond Scheindlin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), p. 92.

16. See Rashi to BT *Sukka* 55a. The Talmud only provides the songs for the intermediate days of the holiday, so we do not know whether a song related to rain was also recited on the first days, see Yaakov Jaffe, “The Psalm of the Day in the Prayer Service of the Vilna Gaon” [Hebrew] *Beit Yitzchak* 42 (2010), pp. 103-109. On the remaining intermediate days Psalms 50, 94, 81, and 82

are recited. None of these Psalms relate to rain, however, see Rashi *Ibid* who finds connections between those Psalms and the holiday of Sukkot.

17. See also BT *Brachot* 29a, which further connects this Psalm specifically to the Shabbat day.