



**Interpreting Psalms:  
Why Jews and Christians  
Say Such (Different Things**

**The Introductions and Commentaries of  
Kimhi, Meiri, and Ishodadh of Merv**

**Michael Joseph**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for ordination.**

**Referees:  
Prof. Alan Cooper  
Prof. Isaac Jerusalmi**

**Hebrew Union College  
Jewish Institute of Religion**

**1989.**

## DIGEST

In this thesis I present translations of the introductions to the commentaries on the Book of Psalms by three medieval commentators: David Kimhi, Menahem ben Solomon Ha-Meiri, and Ishodadh of Merv. In addition to the introductions, I translate the actual commentaries by these men to Psalm 2, Psalm 8, Psalm 45, and Psalm 110. These four psalms constitute the locus of messianic interpretation in Ishodadh's exegetical tradition that extends back to fifth century Antioch. I also present brief biographical introductions to each of these commentators.

In a concluding analytical essay, I abstract from this material the basic exegetical frameworks employed by these three commentators. Their hermeneutics are found to turn on two key questions:

- 1) Who was/were the author(s) of the Psalms?
- 2) What kinds of divine revelation were involved in the composition of the Psalms?

The answers to these questions determine the historical anchor of a psalm and its prophetic reach: in what historical setting was it composed, and to what historical setting is it referring? I also examine questions of polemics: to what end, in the view of our commentators, were these psalms originally composed, and to what end do the commentators employ them in pursuit of their own polemic agendas?

These questions are explored in depth in the essay, in an attempt to answer the larger question "why do Jews and Christians say such different things about the Psalms?"

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It never occurred to me that serving as a thesis advisor would be so much work — but it was, at least in this case. For working alongside me at every step of the way, many thanks to my advisors Dr. Isaac Jerusalemi ("the J-Man") and Dr. Alan Cooper.

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Debbie, for her encouragement and help, certainly, but even more for her refusal to take me or it more seriously than we deserved.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Cor.	Corinthians
Chron.	Chronicles
Deut.	Deuteronomy
EJ	<i>Encyclopedia Judaica</i>
Ex.	Exodus
Gen.	Genesis
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
Lev.	Leviticus
LXX	Septuagint
NCE	<i>New Catholic Encyclopedia</i>
Prov.	Proverbs
Ps.	Psalms
Sam.	Samuel
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift fuer die Altestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	.....	1
 <b>Kimhi</b>		
General Introduction	.....	6
Introduction to Psalms	.....	10
Psalm Commentaries	.....	15
 <b>Meiri</b>		
General Introduction	.....	55
Introduction to Psalms	.....	57
Psalm Commentaries	.....	85
 <b>Ishodadh</b>		
General Introduction	.....	119
Introduction to Psalms	.....	121
Psalm Commentaries	.....	144
 <b>Analytical Essay</b>		
Authorship	.....	167
Prophecy	.....	179
Polemics	.....	195
Conclusion	.....	209
 <b>Bibliography</b>	.....	 212

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a renewal of scholarly interest in the hermeneutics of traditional Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation. Some of the new attention focused on this field has come from those who advocate a canonical approach to the study of the Bible. These scholars seek to learn a technique from their predecessors, and to apply that technique in new and original ways. They "self-consciously adopt traditional strategies of interpretation, because they produce interesting and illuminating results, and because they ground the reading solidly in the religious community."<sup>1</sup>

Other scholars come by their interest in this field because of their devotion to the study of the Bible as literature. As these scholars delve ever more deeply into the fundamental literary structures of the biblical text, they seek a sort of authenticity in the alleged knowledge that their great forebears recognized and gave importance to just such structures as they do.<sup>2</sup>

Still others approach the study of traditional interpretation from the standpoint of modern literary theory. Perhaps a fair statement of the general aim of this group of scholars is provided by these words from one of its foremost members, Susan Handelman:

It is an appropriate moment to try to illuminate some of these theological specters haunting contemporary criticism. In this work, I have examined the conflict of interpretations in light of its theological background. I have

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Cooper, "The Life and Times of King David According to the Book of Psalms," *Harvard Semitic Studies* 26 (1983) p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the study of the Bible as literature, as well as of other trends in recent Bible scholarship, see S. Geller, "Through Windows and Mirrors Into the Bible. History, Literature, and Language in the Study of the Text," *JQR Supplement* (1982) pp. 3-40.

sought not so much to trace the *historical* influence of Christianity or Judaism on the history of criticism as to examine by a comparative method the general *structural* models of interpretation, which may roughly be modelled *Rabbinic* and *Patristic*, and their relation to theories of meaning in certain modern thinkers.<sup>3</sup>

What these three schools share in common is an approach that looks at traditional interpretation not for its results -- the results of traditional Jewish and Christian exegesis remain as radically divergent as we might expect -- but for its method. We gain from this approach, in the service of whichever school of thought it is employed, an understanding of how thoroughly our own interpretative results are conditioned by methodological assumptions that often go completely unexamined. At its best, this kind of approach "allow[s] us to entertain seriously those creative distortions offered by minds capable of looking at the past with the same seriousness as ourselves but with different affective and intellectual orientations."<sup>4</sup> This appreciation of the equal validity of "conflicting" systems of interpretation that are faithfully developed and consistently applied is crucial, in my opinion, to any true interreligious, or even interpersonal, understanding.

In this thesis I hope to further our appreciation of the interrelationship between different systems of interpretation. I will translate the introductions of three traditional commentators, two

---

<sup>3</sup> S. Handelman. *The Slayers of Moses. The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982; p. xv.

<sup>4</sup> E. White. *Tropics of Discourse.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1978; p. 47.

Jews and one Christian, to their commentaries on the book of Psalms. I will also translate their commentaries on a small number of the psalms themselves. This material will open a window into the hermeneutical assumptions of these commentators, allowing us to examine and compare their interpretative frameworks in order to demonstrate how and why they reach such different conclusions as to the meaning of these certain psalms.

The three commentators whose work we will examine are David Kimhi (1160?-1235?), Menahem ben Solomon Meiri (1249-1316), and Ishodadh of Merv, a Syrian Christian of the ninth century. These commentators will be introduced more thoroughly before I present their translated works. Here let us simply note that there is relatively little in common among these three commentators, and certainly very little indeed between Ishodadh and the two Jewish commentators. In fact, these commentators were chosen precisely because of their differences; I will be making no attempt to prove any contact or influence between them, though there certainly were points of contact between Kimhi and Meiri. The focus of this study is not historical. Rather, the focus is on defining the hermeneutics of these commentators, and demonstrating how their different methodologies became manifest in the commentaries themselves. For this reason it was thought helpful to choose commentators whose approaches to the text could be expected to be especially different from one another.

Along with their introductions, I will translate the commentaries of these three figures to Psalm 2, Psalm 8, Psalm 45, and Psalm 110. These psalms have been chosen because they form the locus for Ishodadh's messianic interpretation of Psalms. This choice helps limit our scope of inquiry, and it assures us of a wide divergence between Jewish and Christian interpretations.

Throughout this work, I have tried to maintain a sharp focus on the particular texts that are translated in the central section of the thesis. I have tried to answer the large question that prompted this thesis - why do Jews and Christians say such different things about the Psalms? -- in the most narrow and precise way possible: based on the answers provided by these texts alone, how do Kimhi, Meiri, and Ishodadh construct the exegetical frameworks that lead them to their varying interpretations? Two issues were found to be paramount in this process: their judgments as to who was/were the author/s of Psalm, and as to what kinds of divine revelation were involved in the composition of the Psalms. These issues are discussed at some length in the analytical essay that concludes the thesis. The polemics in which these commentators engaged on the basis of their interpretations of these psalms is also discussed in that essay.

DAVID KIMHI:

Introduction and Commentaries

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In a state of divine inspiration, the perfected man busies himself with matters of God, all the while retaining his senses. . . . He speaks in a normal human fashion, except that a supreme spirit stimulates him, making the words upon his tongue emerge as words of praise and thanksgiving to his God, or as words of insight and instruction. . . .<sup>1</sup>

David Kimhi was born in Narbonne, in Provence, in about the year 1160, into a distinguished family of scholars who had immigrated there from Andalusia in 1148. Throughout his life he always signed his letters and writings as David Kimhi, "the Spaniard," in adherence to the traditions of his father and brother.

His father, Joseph Kimhi, upon arriving in Narbonne, undertook to import from Spain "the dual curriculum -- Torah and science -- to a land where 'they did not occupy themselves with other sciences because their Torah was their [sole] possession and because books about other sciences were not available in their regions.'"<sup>2</sup> Joseph Kimhi translated such works as Bahya's *Duties of the Heart* and Ibn Gabirol's *Choice of Pearls* for the local audience; he wrote original commentaries on the bulk of the Hebrew Scriptures; he studied and taught philology; he wrote Hebrew grammars to acquaint Provencal Jewry with Spanish philology.

---

1 From the introduction to Kimhi's commentary on Psalms; p. 11 below.

2 F. Talmage. *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentator*. Harvard University Press, 1975; p.

5. Talmage quotes I. Twersky, "Aspects of the Social and Cultural History of Provencal Jewry," *Journal of World History* XI (1968), p. 195.

It was these latter two activities that seem to have had the greatest influence on his son David, whose greatest and most widely known work is his *Mikhlol* (Constantinople, 1532), a grammatical treatise is two parts, one primarily lexical and the other grammatical. Kimhi styled himself "a gleaner after the reapers" in this book, for which his stated aim was merely to order and arrange the great works of the Spanish grammarians of previous generations. Yet Talmage notes various higher qualities that characterize the *Mikhlol*: "synthesis of divergent sources, clarity of language, manageability of length, topical order, an air of finality and conclusiveness. [Kimhi's] aim is revealed in the very title he adopted for his work: the *Mikhlol*, the *Summa*."<sup>3</sup>

The above qualities could all be noted in regard to a work by a different author that undoubtedly exhibited them: Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. It is no accident that Kimhi's *Mikhlol* in some ways echoes the tones sounded by the *Mishneh Torah*: Kimhi was an early and devoted disciple and advocate of Maimonides. Kimhi's bible commentaries also sound the Maimonidean tone. In the words of Talmage:

There are the affairs of the upper world: God, spheres, and angels. There are the affairs of the lower world: man, Torah, commandments. There are -- above all -- the interworld affairs: prophecy, providence, the life of the soul in this world and the next. Yet as thoroughgoing and pervasive as these expressions and manifestations of Maimonideanism are, their principle significance lies in their representation of a common commitment.

---

<sup>3</sup> Talmage, p. 56.

They are an oath of allegiance -- not to Maimonides but to [Kimhi's] and Maimonides' common advocacy of the rationalist conception of Judaism.<sup>4</sup>

Each of these concerns is quite apparent in Kimhi's commentary on Psalms.

Kimhi's commentaries are characterized by an extensive and subtle use of a technique of paraphrase, in which the word *wid* ("that is to say") becomes a key technical term. As Talmage describes it, "he builds his remarks around the biblical text itself so that text and commentary are interwoven. The impression is thus created that the commentator has withdrawn and that the Bible has undertaken to explain itself."<sup>5</sup> While Kimhi is widely regarded as being a commentator who always strove to reach the *peshat* interpretation of the text, it is nevertheless clear that he included in his commentaries much more homiletical material than did Ibn Ezra, for example. Talmage attributes this to Kimhi's conception of the *peshat*, which was "a fusion of all those sides of [Kimhi] to which we have been exposed: the grammarian and literary critic, the rationalist, the social observer, the preacher and pedagogue." Thus the legitimacy of an interpretation was measured by its compatibility with this conception. *Peshat* was simply the term given to those interpretation that measured up; *derash* to those that did not.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Talmage, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Talmage, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> Talmage, p. 126. See R. Loewe, "The 'Plain' Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis," *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies* vol. 1, J.G. Weiss, ed. (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 140-185 for a discussion of the meaning of the term *peshat*.

Kimhi's commentary on Psalms was one of the earliest printed Hebrew books, first published in Bologna in 1477. My own translation was prepared without reference to existing translations, from the Hebrew text edited by Abraham Darom, published in Jerusalem by the Mossad Ha-Rav Kuk in 1971. Other available translations include A.W. Greenup, *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi on the Book of Psalms, I-VIII* (London: Palestine House, 1918); R.G. Finch and G.H. Box, *The Longer Commentary of R. David Kimhi on the First Book of Psalms (I-X, XV-XVII, XIX, XXII, XXIV)* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919); and J. Baker and E.W. Nicholson, *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi on Psalms CXX-CL* (Cambridge, 1973). Critical editions of all or part of the commentary in Hebrew have been prepared by S. Esterson, *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi on Psalms 42-72* (HUCA X, 1935) and J. Bosniak, *The Commentary of David Kimhi on the Fifth Book of Psalms, CVII-CL* (New York, 1954).

## INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMENTARY ON PSALMS

David b. Joseph b. Kimhi the Spaniard said:

Our Rabbis, may their memories be a blessing, said that King David of Israel wrote his book דָּוִד ten elders, these being Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, Moses, and Korah's three sons, Asir, Elkanah, and Abi-asaph.<sup>1</sup> What they meant by this was that these ten had composed the songs that have been ascribed to them.

They also said that Adam composed the "Song for the Sabbath Day" [Psalm 92]<sup>2</sup> -- i.e., that he was created on the eve of Shabbat, and he arose early on Shabbat morning and recited the "Song for the Sabbath Day." Our Rabbis, may their memories be a blessing, also said: "Eitan Ha-Ezrahi was our father Abraham" [i.e., he recited Psalm 89].<sup>3</sup> And they said that Melchizedek recited the song "The Lord said to my master" [Psalm 110].<sup>4</sup> The remaining [authors] are explicitly named [in the psalm titles].

They also said: "Just as Moses our teacher divided the Torah into five books, so David divided the Book of Psalms into five books."<sup>5</sup> They said: "this book was uttered in ten types of praise:

---

<sup>1</sup> Baba Batra 14b-15a.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis Rabbah 22:13.

<sup>3</sup> Baba Batra 15a.

<sup>4</sup> Rashi, in his comments on Baba Batra 14a-15b.

<sup>5</sup> Midrash Tehillim 1:2.

נצוח נאמן שיה צמרה האל השכל תהלה תבליה ברכה  
הוא דאקא

They said that this book was divinely inspired,<sup>7</sup> and therefore it was included among the Writings and not among the Prophets; for its words were not uttered in prophecy but rather were divinely inspired.

Let us clarify something of the difference between prophecy and divine inspiration. Prophecy comes upon a man who is wise and perfect in all his faculties, generally in a dream. In the event that prophecy comes upon him while he is awake, his senses are suspended, and he becomes removed from all the ways of this world. In the prophetic vision it might appear as though a man were speaking with him and saying one thing or another. Or he might see images in this vision, or he might not see anything at all, but rather hear a voice speaking with him.

In a state of divine inspiration, the perfected man busies himself with matters of God, all the while retaining his senses, without a single one of them being suspended. He speaks in a normal human fashion, except that a supreme spirit stimulates him, making the words upon his tongue emerge as words of praise and thanksgiving to his God, or as words of insight and instruction. He

---

<sup>6</sup> Pesachim 117a. These descriptions derive from technical terms in certain psalm superscriptions. For a discussion of these terms, see N. Sarna, "Book of Psalms," EJ vol. 13 (col. 1319-22).

<sup>7</sup> Berachot 4b; Pesachim 117a.

may even speak about future events, with divine support of his intellect, with all of his faculties of expression.

It was by this rational faculty that the Book of Psalms was composed. And even though those who composed it were called prophets -- as it is said of David, "[singing] praise and thanksgiving hymns by the ordinance of David the man of God" (Nehemiah 12:24) -- the title "man of God" is given only to prophets -- and as it is said concerning Jeduthun, "[who] prophesied, praising and extolling the Lord" (I Chron. 25:3); and as it is said, "Heman, who prophesied the words of God for the king" (I Chron. 25:5); and as it is said, "the sons of Asaph, of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who prophesied to the accompaniment of lyres, harps, and cymbals" (I Chron. 25:1); and as it is said, "under the charge of Asaph, who prophesied by order of the king" (I Chron. 25:2) -- in any case their "prophecy" was along the lines we have explained. For there are different degrees of prophecy, one above the other. Thus even though Daniel saw visions both in dreams and while awake, his potential and knowledge in those visions did not equal the potential of Isaiah or Ezekiel or the other prophets. Therefore his book is not included among the Prophets but rather among those books called Writings, to indicate that they were divinely inspired.

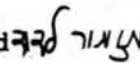
David composed this book with his own words together with those of the aforementioned poets. Also, David gave those songs that he wrote to the singers to sing, like the song "Praise the Lord" (Ps. 105), of which it is said, "then, on that day, David first

commissioned Asaph and his kinsmen to give praise to the Lord" (I Chron. 16:7); and as it is said, "for the leader, for Jeduthun, <sup>לְיָדוּתוּן</sup>" (Ps. 62:1) -- i.e., [a song] that David wrote and gave to Jeduthun.

There are some songs which were composed about [David's] or Israel's encounters with enemies. There are also those which are simply prayers and hymns, without reference to any event. Those songs which bear the superscription "<sup>לְדָוִד</sup>" were composed by David, along with those that do not name any other author. But there are cases in which "<sup>לְדָוִד</sup>" means "about David," such as "for the leader, a song about David: May the Lord answer you in time of trouble" (Ps. 20:1-2), or "about David, a song: The Lord said to my lord" (Ps. 110:1). He also included in his book a prayer that had already been written, traditionally ascribed to Moses our teacher, peace be upon him, as it is said, "A Prayer of Moses" (Ps. 90:1).

[David] also predicted future events that occurred after his time when he spoke about the Babylonian exile and the other exiles, as well as many consolations, such as the restoration of the kingship of the house of David.

Some of the melodies, psalms, and songs were recited with musical accompaniment, some without, but today the distinction between the titles that are appended to these psalms is not known to us. Our Rabbis, may their memories be a blessing, said: "<sup>לְדָוִד</sup>" and "<sup>לְיָדוּתוּן</sup>" introduce psalms relating to the future; "<sup>לְדָוִד</sup>" indicates that it was spoken through an interpreter; "<sup>לְיָדוּתוּן לְדָוִד</sup>" means that he

was inspired and afterwards uttered the song; and  means that he uttered the song and then was inspired."<sup>8</sup> We will further clarify this matter in connection with Psalm 4.

Now I will begin to interpret to the best of my ability, with the help of the One who teaches man understanding.

---

<sup>8</sup> Pesachim 117a.

## COMMENTARY ON PSALM TWO

[1] *Why are the nations in a tumult?* This must be the second psalm, for we find that in all of the fine editions this [verse] marks the beginning of a psalm. In the sequence [of psalms] it is written second, although several of our Rabbis said: "'Happy is . . .'" [Ps. 1] and 'Why...' [Ps. 2] are actually one". They also said: "every episode that was delightful for David he opened with 'happy' and closed with 'happy,' and this episode he opened with 'happy is the man' (Ps. 1:1) and closed with 'happy are all who take refuge in Him' (Ps. 2:12)."<sup>1</sup>

The reason why these two psalms are juxtaposed is not known to us, nor why he arranged them in the order in which they are compiled, for they are not arranged according to the order of the events which they describe. For indeed, the third psalm concerns the incident with Absalom, although several of the psalms following it have as their subjects incidents which occurred long before the incident with Absalom. And note Psalm 142 at the end of the book: "while he was in the cave," which occurred during the lifetime of Saul. Therefore we cannot assume that the psalms are arranged in the order of the events which they describe.

---

<sup>1</sup> Berachot 9b-10a.

And so, David composed and uttered this psalm at the beginning of his reign when the nations gathered against him, as it is said, "when the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king over Israel, they came up in force against him" (II Sam. 5:17). So he said *Why [are the nations] in a tumult?*, for all of the Philistines had risen up. *Tumult* is a word relating to the gathering of a great multitude, as in "the tumultuous mob of evildoers" (Ps. 64:3), or the *Targum* of "I will make an end of Egypt's hordes" (Ezekiel 30:10) which uses the root *לח*.

And *peoples plot vain things*: for in coming to fight they were speaking arrogantly, because they had defeated Israel in the war against Saul when Saul and his sons died and a great plague afflicted the people.<sup>2</sup> Since the death of Saul until now there had not been another king in Israel. So he said *vain* in regard to all their words.

[2] *The kings of the earth take their stand*: all of the Philistine princes stood together in single council and agreed to go to war with David. He called them *kings* and *regents*, although nowhere else do we find that he called them anything other than ministers of the Philistines, for they were haughty and thought themselves kings even though they were not. It is also possible that kings from other nations allied with them.

And *regents intrigue [לְרִיב] together*: they all took counsel together as one. The idea of counsel is expressed by the term *yesod*

---

<sup>2</sup> I Sam. 31.

("foundation"), for counsel is to action as a foundation is to a building.

*Against the Lord and against His anointed one:* for they knew that David was king by the command of the Lord, and that Samuel the prophet of the Lord had anointed him king.

[3] *Let us break their bonds:* they were saying, "let us break the bonds of Israel and the cohesiveness by which they banded together and agreed to make David their king." For seven years Israel had not agreed upon him as king, but now everyone agreed upon him, so the Philistines said, *Let us break their bonds.*

*And let us shake off their chains:* this is a repetition of the previous matter in different words, which is a rhetorical figure. *Bonds* and *chains* are strong ropes, a metaphor for their counsel and strong agreement.

[4] *He who is enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord mocks at them:* following that which he said, *they intrigue together against the Lord*, in order to nullify His word, he now states that "because He is enthroned in heaven and hears their words, He laughs and mocks at them." And when he says *laughs* and *mocks* concerning God, may He be blessed, this is figurative language, as in language concerning humans, when a man laughs and mocks at someone who despises him, and whom he considers as nothing. This is like "but You, O Lord, laugh at

them; You mock all the nations" (Ps. 59:9), or "the Lord laughs at him, for He knows that his day will come" (Ps. 37:17).

And when he says *He who is enthroned in heaven*, the meaning of *enthroned* is "endures," as in "but You, O God, are enthroned forever; Your fame endures throughout the ages" (Ps. 102:13), and similarly in all other uses of the word "enthroned" referring to God, may He be blessed, as in "enthroned in heaven" (Ps. 123:1), or "enthroned on high" (Ps. 113:5). And when he says *in heaven*, it is because heaven exists and endures forever, and its personages do not pass away like earthly personages.

[5] *Then He speaks to them in anger:* when He hears their boastful words He speaks to them in anger.

*Terrifying them in His rage:* His words with them are the anger and the rage that He hurls at them. And there are those who interpret *קָדַר* in the sense of "a very severe pestilence" (*קָדַר* *קָדַר*; Ex. 9:3), and thus "she promptly did away [*קָדַר*] with all who were of the royal stock" (II Chron. 22:10). They interpret *לַמְּשִׁכִּים* to mean "to the notables of the land [*לַמְּשִׁכִּים*]" (II Kings 24:10), which means "the mighty ones of the land." But the first interpretation is closer to the mark.

[6] *But I have installed My king.* He said: "how can they think to uproot the monarchy from the house of David when I have made him king and installed him?!" The word *installed* [*יָסַד*] has the connotation of leadership and greatness, as in "the

princes [יְסִיכֵי סִיחֹן] of Sihon" (Joshua 13:21), and also "their gods with their princes [אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְעִמָּכֶם יְסִיכֵי הָעַם]" (Daniel 11:8).

And by *My king* He meant to say "My king whom I caused to be king," as it is said, "I have decided on one of his sons for Me to be king" (I Sam. 16:1), which means "for Me, for My service" -- and thus he said *My king*. Now the converse is also found: "O God, my King from of old" (Ps. 74:12), which means "the One who rules over me." This [reflects] the usage of pronominal suffixes: compare, for example, "take away Your affliction from me" (Ps. 39:11) with "[my friends and my companions] stand back from my affliction" (Ps. 38:12), or "and I will let them rejoice in My house of prayer" (Isaiah 56:7) with "I have heard your prayer" (I Kings 9:3), and the like, as we explained in the grammatical section of the *Mikhlol*.

*On Zion, My holy mountain:* because the fortress of Zion had not been conquered until David conquered it, Zion and Jerusalem are called the city of David. After he conquered it, the Philistines banded together to make war against him.

[7] *Let me tell of the decree:* these are the words of David, who said: this story I deliver as decree and established fact. And what is the story? That *the Lord said to me, "You are My son"*, and from Him the monarchy came to me. Therefore let no man object to it, for the Lord has taken me as a son, as He said to Samuel, "I have decided on one of his sons for Me to be king" (I Sam. 16:1); as if to say, "this king is Mine; he is

My son and My servant, and he listens to Me." For anyone who harkens to the service of God is called "His son," just as a son harkens to his father and is prepared to do his bidding. In a similar vein are [the verses] "you are the sons of the Lord, Your God" (Deut. 14:1), "I shall be a father to him, and he shall be a son to Me" (II Sam. 7:14), and "sons of the living God" (Hosea 2:1).

*I have fathered you this day:* the day he was anointed was the day God took him as a son, as He said, "to Me for a king" (I Sam. 16:1). And he said *I have fathered you this day*, for on that very day the spirit of God was born within him, as it is written: "the spirit of the Lord gripped David from that day on" (I Sam. 16:13) -- and from that day on [David] recited songs and psalms with the divine inspiration that had been born within him and with which he was inspired by God. And thus the spirit of the Almighty was added to him from that day on.

Similarly when it says, "you neglected the Rock that begot you" (Deut. 32:18), the meaning is: that raised you and put wisdom and intelligence in your heart on the day you stood before Mt. Sinai. And for that reason it says "is He not your Father who created you?" (Deut. 32:6). For if it had said "who begot you, who created you" with respect to creation, this would apply no more to Israel than to the rest of humanity. Do you not see what is written: "do you thus requite the Lord?" (Deut. 32:6) -- as if to say that this is the reward you give Him for the good things He has done for you! "Is He not your Father

who created you?" (Deut. 32:6). And it says "You neglected the Rock that begot you; forgot the God who brought you forth," just as it says "your Father," for He is like a father to you, and [like] your mother, the one who bears you.

[8] *Ask it of Me*: it was He who said to me *ask it of Me*.

*And I will make the nations your domain*: just as He said to him, "I have cut down all your enemies before you; and I will give you great renown like that of the greatest men on earth" (II Sam. 7:9), and, "all Edom became slaves to David; Aram too became David's slaves" (II Sam. 8:14), and, "David became famous throughout the lands, and the Lord put the fear of him in all the nations" (I Chron. 14:17). That is why he said *I will make the nations your domain*.

*Your estate, the limits of the earth*: that is, the ends [גְּבוּל] of the earth. "Limit" [גְּבוּל] and "end" [סוֹף] are synonymous.

[9] *You may smash them with an iron mace*: thus He said to me concerning all the nations that may rise up against me -- *you may smash them with an iron mace*.

*Shatter them like potter's ware*: the meaning of "smash" [שָׁבַר] is to shatter, and thus "can iron smash [iron and bronze]?" (Jeremiah 15:12), or "He smashes mighty men [without number]" (Job 34:24). Now the word שִׁבְרָה also has the meaning of shatter, but with the connotation of scattering the debris, as one who breaks a clay vessel so that the fragments are scattered. And

thus "he shattered [שִׁבַּר] the jars" (Judges 7:19). One who makes clay vessels is called a potter [כֹּסֵף].

[10] *So now, O kings:* David said to the kings who had come to make war with him, "O kings, be prudent and understand that you have no chance of undoing God's work. It was He who commanded that I become king -- how dare you intrigue against the Lord?"

*Be prudent:* take heed, for you will not be able to undo God's work.

*Accept discipline, you rulers of the earth:* even if until now you have been foolish and of evil counsel, [now] be prudent and accept instruction and do not be boastful.

[11] *Serve the Lord:* desire that which He desires and serve Him.

*In awe:* so that you fear Him and know that power and might are His and not yours, though you have come with a great multitude.

*Rejoice:* do not be angered by my sovereignty, but rather be glad and rejoice, for it is the will of God.

*In trembling:* and tremble before Him.

[12] *Kiss the son* [נִשְׁקֵן בֶּן]: as in "he kissed [נִשְׁקֵן] all his brothers" (Gen. 45:15). And בֶּן is similar to בֵּן, and thus "No, my son! No, son of my womb!" (Prov. 31:2). Or its meaning is similar to that of "to those whose heart is pure [בְּרִיָּה]" (Ps. 73:1). If its meaning is "son," then the interpretation of the verse is: kiss this man whom God calls son, as He said *you are*

*My son.* In this case the meaning of "kiss" is like the servant's custom of kissing the hand of his master. But if the meaning of  $\text{קִּיֵּץ}$  is purity, then the interpretation of the verse is: "what is there between you and me that you come to make war with me, for I am pure of heart and without sin. Rather you should kiss me and acknowledge that I am king by the commandment of God." It is also possible to interpret  $\text{קִּיֵּץ}$  from "choose yourselves a man [  $\text{קִּיֵּץ אִישׁ} \text{ } [ \text{I Sam. 17:8} ]$ ", along the lines of "Saul, the chosen of the Lord" (II Sam. 21:6).

*Lest He be angered:* if you do not quickly turn from your evil ways God will become angry with you.

*And your way be doomed in the mere flash of His anger:* if you remain wicked His anger will burn against you -- that is, if you do not quickly repent.

The meaning of *your way [will] be doomed* [  $\text{תִּשְׁמָד דְּרֹכְךָ} \text{ } [ \text{Ps. 1:6} ]$  is like that of "the way of the wicked is doomed" (Ps. 1:6). Now, the way is doomed, so they are doomed with respect to their way. This is like "wilted of leaf [  $\text{נִשְׁמָד לַעֲנַף} \text{ } [ \text{Isaiah 1:30} ]$ ", where the leaves are wilted and it is termed "wilted of . . ." A similar expression is "rent of clothes [  $\text{נִשְׁמָד בְּשָׂמַיִם} \text{ } [ \text{II Sam. 13:31} ]$ ", and other instances, where the clothes are rent but not [the people], and they are called rent ones with respect to their clothes. Thus [we also find] "shaved of beard and torn of clothes" (Jeremiah 41:15) and other examples.

*Happy are all who take refuge in Him:* like I do, who today take refuge in Him and am saved by Him, while you are doomed.

But if you, too, were to take refuge in Him, "Happy are you" would also be said about you.

There are those who interpret this psalm to be about Gog and Magog, and for them "the anointed one" (verse 2) is the King Messiah. This is the interpretation of our Rabbis, may their memory be a blessing.<sup>3</sup> The psalm can be explained in this way, but the correct interpretation is that David recited it about himself, as we have explained.

The Christians consider it to be about Jesus, and the verse from which they derive evidence and support for their error, *the Lord said to me: you are My son*, is for them a stumbling block. If they should say to you, "he was the son of God," reply to them: it is impossible to use the term "son of God" concerning a mortal, for a son is of the same substance as his father. You could not say "this horse is Reuben's son," and so anyone to whom the Lord said *you are My son* can only be one who is of the same substance, and God must be like him. And furthermore, he said *I have fathered you this day*, and the one who is born must be of the same substance as the one who sires. Say to them that concerning divinity there is no father or son, for divinity is indivisible, there being no body to divide. On the contrary, God is one in every respect of unity; He is neither extendable nor reducible nor divisible.

---

<sup>3</sup> Berachot 7b.

And say further to them: a father precedes a son in time, and the son comes forth by the effort of the father. Even though in terms of language there cannot be one without the other -- one is not called a father until he has a son, and one would not be called a son unless he had a father -- in any case, anyone who is called a father doubtless existed in time prior to the son. If that is so, then regarding the God that you call "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" -- the part that you call "Father" must have existed prior to the other part that you call "Son." For if the two of them had always existed as one, you would have called them twin brothers, not "father and son" or "begetter and born," for the one who begets is without doubt prior to the one who is born.

And if they say, "it is not possible to say 'Son of God' concerning anything that is not of the divine substance," say to them: we can only speak figuratively of God, may He be blessed, as it is said concerning Him, the mouth of the Lord, the eyes of the Lord, the ears of the Lord, etc. It is well known that these statements are only by way of *mashal*. And likewise it was a *mashal* when he said "son of God," or "children of God." Anyone who performs His commandments and carries out His missions is called His son, just like any son who performs the deeds of his father. That is why He called the stars "children of God" as in "all the children of God shouted with joy" (Job 38:7). And likewise a man is called a son, on account of the spirit of the Most High which is in him when he performs God's commandments at the urging of the wise soul that instructs him. And therefore He said,

*You are My son and I have fathered you this day*, and "Israel is My first-born son" (Ex. 4:22), and "You are children of the Lord your God" (Deut. 14:1), and "is He not your Father who created You?" (Deut. 32:6), and "I will be a father to you, and you will be a son to Me" (II Sam. 7:14).

And say further to them: the God whom you call "Father" said to the "Son": *Ask it of Me and I will make the nations your domain*. But why would the son ask that of the father if he is a God like him, with power over the nations to the ends of the earth like him? And furthermore, were the nations not his domain even before the question? Or was God's power less at the beginning and greater later? But this cannot be said of God.

And if they say to you: He said it with reference to the flesh after the divinity was incarnated, i.e., He told the flesh to ask it of Him and He would give him nations as his domain -- then this could not have been the case, for the flesh did not have sovereignty or authority over a single nation.

And if they say to you: He said it concerning faith that should be accepted -- behold, most of the nations have not accepted faith in him, neither Jewish nor Muslim.

I have instructed you how to answer them concerning this psalm, and you may add to it anything of your own understanding that is in accordance with these words. If they ask you its

interpretation, interpret it in whichever of these two ways you choose: as concerning David or the King Messiah, as I have interpreted it for you.

## COMMENTARY ON PSALM EIGHT

[1] *For the leader, on the gittith.* A psalm of David: we have already explained (in connection with Psalm 4:1) that gittith is a type of musical instrument. There are also those who say that David composed and recited this psalm while he was in Gath. Still others maintain that he gave it to the sons of Obed-edom the Gittite (cf. II Sam. 6:10-11). This psalm is comprised of praise, glorification, and thanks to God, and an account of His greatness.

[2] *O Lord, our Lord:* because You are the master of the upper and lower creatures.

*How majestic is your name* [ *מַגִּד אֱלֹהִים* ]: similar to "how majestic are You [ *מַגִּד אֱלֹהִים* ]" (Ps. 76:5), for the name denotes the thing named. The name that is not an adjective [i.e. *מַגִּד*] has four letters, and it is majestic [ *מַגִּד* ].

*Throughout the earth:* which means, "Your might is visible throughout the earth." Whether in inhabited places, in the wilderness, or at sea, Your might is manifest everywhere. But Your greatest splendor and enormous power are seen in the heavens, for the earth is but a small thing compared to heaven, like a point within a circle.

*You who have covered* [ *תָּכַח* ] *the heavens with Your splendor:* the word *תָּכַח* is an infinitive used in place of *תָּכַח*. The infinitive can be used in place of the past tense, as in "Even the hind in the field forsakes her newborn fawn [ *וַתִּשָּׁק וַתִּשְׁכַּח* ]" (Jeremiah

14:5), where *אֵלֶּם* is used instead of *אֵלֶּם*, and in other like instances. The infinitive can also be used in place of the future or the participle, as we have explained in the grammatical section of the *Mikhlol*.

So the meaning of this verse is: *How majestic is Your name*

*throughout the earth*, and how majestic that You have covered the heavens with Your splendor.

The meaning of the word *כִּי* is "power and glory." It is possible to interpret *You have covered the heavens with Your splendor* as being the reason for *How majestic is Your name throughout the earth*; that is, because You placed power in the upper regions to direct the lower regions, for the earth and the sea and everything they contain are under the direction of the upper regions.

[3] *From the mouths of infants and sucklings You have founded*

*strength*: the first wonder of human life after a person emerges into the air of the world is nursing. A man must acknowledge the Creator and recognize His power and capability in regard to His doings which are manifest on heaven and earth, and including the development of the body created from a drop of seed transformed into blood, whence man grows slowly until his limbs are complete, and he emerges into the world's air. This has already been mentioned in the psalm "O Lord, You have examined me and know me" (Ps. 139). This psalm says, "from his first emergence into the world and his days as a nursling, the wonders and compassion of the Creator

are made known to man." That is why he said *You have founded* [נִסְּדָה], for just as a foundation is the start of a building, so is nursing the start of man's recognition of his Creator's compassion after his birth. For the Holy One has made for him an opening in the breasts like the fine eye of a needle -- not too wide for him, lest the milk flow without any pressure being exerted and he choke on the excess milk being delivered; and not too narrow, lest the required pressure hurt the child's lips; but everything is arranged in an appropriate amount and measure. It is a wonder for the rest of one's life that He placed his mother's breasts at the place of understanding, as our Rabbis said, may their memories be a blessing.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore he said *From the mouths of infants and sucklings You have founded strength*, for anyone can recognize that everything has been deliberately prepared, as opposed to that which the enemies of the Lord maintain, that everything is by nature and chance, without direction or intention.

That is why he says *on account of Your foes, to put an end to enemy and avenger*: even though this mercy extends to beasts and animals, to man God gave understanding and intelligence to recognize the work of God and to thank Him and praise Him for everything. For everything was created for his benefit, and thus he is obliged to consider and recognize the work of God and to thank Him for everything.

---

<sup>1</sup> Berachot 10a.

And the sage Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra interprets as follows: because man is honored above all the created beings of the earth he spoke in this way: that as soon as a child begins to speak, which is the meaning of *From the mouths of infants*, he begins in accordance with his nature to acquire a spiritual faculty that eventually discerns the power of its Creator, for the soul becomes stronger day by day, which is the meaning of *You have founded strength*. And the meaning of *on account of Your foes* is to negate the words of the deniers who maintain that there is no God.

Rabbi Moses Ibn Gikatilla the Kohen interprets *From the mouths of infants* to mean those who do not speak about You with words, but who demonstrate the greatness of Your compassion by virtue of the fact that You sustain them and make their bodies grow in length and in breadth.

[4] *When I behold the heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You set in place:* but he does not mention the sun. Some hold that he uttered this psalm at night, while looking at the moon and stars and contemplating the wonders of the Creator. Others explain that during the day one sees only the sun, while at night one sees a vast array, and that therefore he did not mention the sun. Still others maintain that his statement *You who have covered the heavens with Your splendor* is an allusion to the sun, which is the greatest creation.

*When I behold Your heavens:* that is, when I see Your great creations in the world, and then I look at man, I am astounded and say:

[5] *What is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that you have taken note of him:* *אֵלֶּךָ נָח* is the opposite of *נִחַלְתָּ*, for the former denotes belittlement while the latter denotes aggrandizement.

He said *when I see Your heavens . . . the moon and the stars* -- which are the great creations endowed with intelligence -- [and] *What is man?:* that You remember him and provide emanations for him from the splendor of the incorporeal intelligences of the upper realm For even of those that are corporeal I see that man is as nothing compared to their magnitude and value.

He said *The work of Your fingers . . . that You set in place* in order to repudiate the heretics who say that the world is formed of eternal matter. That is why he said *the work* and *that You set* -- because You created them all *ex nihilo*.

*I behold Your heavens:* even though only the [sphere] adjacent to us is visible to us, because each one surrounds the other until the eighth sphere, which is the sphere of the zodiac, and because each one illuminates all the others, like something inside a glass vessel that is seen from the outside.

The sage Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, may his memory be a blessing, wrote that he said *Your fingers* to indicate that there are ten fingers [just as there are] ten spheres -- seven heavens each

with seven planets, then the zodiacal sphere, then the ninth sphere above the zodiacal sphere, and the tenth sphere which is the Throne of Glory.

*What is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that*

*You have taken note of him* are two ways of saying the same thing. Or perhaps he means to say, *that You have been mindful*, that You remember at his creation that You have poured out upon him from Your splendor; and *that You have taken note*, that every day of his life You examine his deeds in order to give each man his just recompense.

[6] *That You have made him a little less than angels* [ מ'נ'ל'ק ]:

these are angels, because the human soul is of angelic quality in that it is incorporeal just as they are incorporeal. The "little less" is because the soul is contained within the body.

*And adorned him with glory and majesty*: with the higher soul You have placed in him.

[7] *And with it You have made him master over Your handiwork*: the lower creatures. Or perhaps it means even over the higher beings. The mastery is that man understands by his intelligence the movement of the spheres and the stars.

*Laying the world at his feet*: all the earthly realm is under him, as it says: "the fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky" (Gen. 9:2).

[8] *Sheep and oxen* [שׂוֹכְרִים]: the *alef* of שׂ has disappeared in the written form שׂ, and in the word "your sheep [שׂוֹכְרִים]" (Numbers 32:24), the *heh* of שׂ may be seen to change to *alef*.

*Sheep and oxen* [שׂוֹכְרִים]: they are domesticated animals that man employs for work, food, and clothing. שׂ are sheep and goats, and שׂ are oxen.

He said *all of them* to include the rest of the domesticated animals; namely, horses, asses, and camels.

*Wild beasts, too*: they are the beasts of the field. He said *too* to include the non-domesticated animals, over whom he rules by virtue of his intelligence and cunning.

[9] And he said furthermore *The birds of the heavens, the fish of the seas*: man rules over even those animals that do not dwell on land with him, such as the birds that fly in the air and fish that swim in the water, and he hunts them with his cunning. And also with his intelligence and cunning, he *travels the paths of the seas* -- that is, he builds ships and travels the seas with them.

[10] *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth*: he once again offers thanks when he has finished describing the lovingkindness God has bestowed upon man and the power He gave him over everything, even though man is small and insignificant in comparison to the great heavenly creations with whom he shares the faculty of intelligence. Again he is thankful and says: *O Lord, etc.*

COMMENTARY ON PSALM FORTY-FIVE

- [1] *For the leader; on shoshanim. Of the Korahites. A maskil. A love song:* there was a musical instrument called a *shoshanim*. This psalm was spoken concerning the King Messiah. It is called a *love song*, meaning the Lord's love for His Messiah.

- [2] *My heart is astir [with gracious words]:* i.e., my heart moves. According to our Rabbis, may their memories be a blessing, "*astir* refers to the trembling of his lips"—that is, [the poet] moved his lips but the speech was not heard.<sup>1</sup> Therefore this was spoken in the heart's speech that is not heard until it passes through the lips. The heart is the source of words just as a spring is the source of water. The poet opened his words with praise, because the words which his heart gushed concerning the King Messiah were *gracious words*.

*I speak my poem [לְמֶלֶךְ] to a king:* that is, I say right at the outset that my *לְמֶלֶךְ* concerns a king; i.e., the poem that I am about to compose.

*My tongue is the pen of an expert [דִּבְרֵי נֶגֶד] scribe:* that is, my tongue speaks fluently (דִּבְרֵי נֶגֶד) about him, just as the pen of an expert scribe is fluent, writing without delay. That is how I speak these words concerning the King.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sanhedrin 90b; Megillah 27b.

- [3] *You are fairer* [  $\text{ךָ} \text{יָדָבָר}$  ] *than all men*: I have already explained in the *Mikhlol* that every case of doubling intensifies the meaning of a word, such as  $\text{יָדָבָר}$  (dark green) or  $\text{דָּמָה$  (dark red). He said: I see that you are much more beautiful in form than any other human, and also that when you speak your words are gracious, as though *your speech is endowed with grace; rightly has God given you an eternal blessing*. Thus I say that God has given you an eternal blessing, for you have found favor in everyone's eye. And this is truly the blessing of God.

- [4] *Gird your sword [upon your thigh]*: some swords are girded to the waist, as it is said concerning Joab, "with his sword girded over [his uniform] and fastened around his waist" (II Samuel 20:8). There are also those who gird their swords to their thighs, as it is said concerning Ehud, "which he girded on his right thigh under his cloak" (Judges 3:16).

The word *hero* is a vocative, meaning "You! O hero!"

*Your splendor and glory*: the sword will be your splendor and glory. Even though there will be peace in the time of the Messiah, as has been prophesied, the war between Gog and Magog will occur at the beginning of his reign. My father, of blessed memory, interpreted *your splendor and glory* as a metaphor: the *splendor and glory* are the sword, as if to say that the peoples will fear you on account of your splendor and glory, just as they fear a mighty warrior armed with a sword.

[5] Similarly, *והדרק צלח רכב*: i.e., his riding (*מרכבתו*) will be truth, meekness, and right. Our Rabbis, may their memories be a blessing, interpreted this verse with respect to the words of the Torah as a metaphor for [disputes over the *halachah*].<sup>2</sup> But they also said that its meaning is in accordance with its plain sense.

*והדרק צלח רכב*: what is *your glory*? That you will *צלח* and ride on account of truth, meekness, and right. *צלח* is like *צלחו הירדן* (II Sam. 19:18), which is another way of saying that they crossed [the Jordan]. That is, when you cross over your enemies and ride on, your riding will not be in conceit and arrogance, but rather in *truth, meekness, and right*.

*And let your right hand lead you to awesome deeds*: while you are riding on in truth and meekness, your right hand will lead you to wondrous and awesome deeds which you will do against your enemies.

The word *צלח* (*meekness*) spelled with a *heh* is the same as *צלח* spelled with a *tav*, because it is in the construct state. Similarly, [we find] *כא'פה שלור'ם* ("it was about an *ephah* of barley" -- Ruth 2:17), and *אסבי אסיר* ("as captives are gathered" -- Isaiah 24:22), and other examples which we noted in the *Mikhlah*. Or perhaps *צלח* is of a different pattern and is in the absolute state, along the lines of *אסר* and *אסור*. [In that case] the word *דרק* would be lacking a *vav* [*דרק*]: his law would be one of *meekness and right*, like *שמש וירח* ("sun [and] moon" -- Habakkuk 3:11) and similar instances.

<sup>2</sup> Shabbat 63a.

[6] *Your arrows, sharpened:* your arrows will be sharp, not dull.

*In the breast of the king's enemies:* the meaning of this is connected with *your arrows, sharpened*, as if he had said, "your arrows fall into the enemy's hearts until all *peoples fall beneath you* and no longer raise their heads. There are also those who hold that the meaning of *fall* is connected with both what precedes and follows it; and therefore it is vocalized with a *shewa* even though it occupies the pausal position, in order to connect its sense with *the breast of the king's enemies*, as if he had said, your arrows will fall into the hearts of your enemies.

[7] *Your divine throne* [ *ס'נ'ד'ך פלג* ]: Rav Saadya Gaon interpreted this to mean "God established your throne," while the sage Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra interpreted it to mean "your throne is the divine throne," as in "Solomon took over the divine throne" (I Chron. 29:23).

*A scepter of equity:* because your royal scepter is a scepter of equity, your [divine] throne will be everlasting.

[8] The meaning of *oil of gladness* is that the whole world rejoices when *God anoints you*.

*From among your peers* [ *פגנך* ]: i.e., when He elevated you from among your peers and chose you to be king. Or this could mean that He loved you more than your peers. This word is a plural even though it is written without a *yod*. There are many similar instances.

[9] *Myrrh and aloe [and] cassia* [קצ'צות ואהלות מור]: as if it said וקצ'צות, and likewise we find מ'לל ("sun [and] moon" — Habakkuk 3:11), and many similar instances.

מור is musk, according to most of the commentators. Our Rabbi Hai Gaon says that this is charred wood that has a pleasing scent, which is [now] called מובן in Arabic.

אהלות is interpreted to mean the perfume [now] called מובל in Arabic.

The *Targum* of קצ'צות is ק'צה קצ'צות. This is [now] called מ'ר in Arabic.

*All your robes:* they have a pleasing scent, as though they were made of these perfumes.

*From ivoried palaces:* these robes are removed for you from the ivoried palaces where they are stored.

*Which delight you* [מ'לל מ'חוק]: the yod is superfluous, like the yod in מ'לל מ' ("from Ephraim" — Judges 5:14). The interpretation of [this phrase] is "which delight you," as if to say "the ivoried palaces delight you, for beautiful accommodations make a person happy." This entire verse should be interpreted as a *mashal* for good works, along the lines of "let your clothes always be freshly washed, and your head never lack ointment" (Ecclesiastes 9:8).

[10] *Royal princesses are your favorites* [ב'יקרו תיך]: the hireq under the bet and the yod are not pronounced in reading, and the qof is written with a dagesh. The meaning is "there will

be princesses among your precious wives, for every heathen king will be proud to give his daughter to you."

*The consort stands at your right hand, decked in gold of Ophir:* he said that even though there are [foreign] princesses among your wives, the queen, who is an Israelite, sits at your right hand *decked in gold of Ophir*. She is called the *consort*, because she is the only one who always has a right to his bed, although the others do come to him from time to time when they are called to the king. But the queen is always [welcome] in his bed-chamber, and thus she is called the *consort* [עֲרֵבָה], from "another man shall enjoy her [עֲרֵבָה]" (Deut. 28:30), or "with the consort [עֲרֵבָה] seated at his side" (Nehemiah 2:6).

[11] *Take heed, lass:* he is speaking to each and every one of the princesses. It means "hear the instructions I am giving you." The interpretation of *and note* [וְהִנֵּה] is "understand," i.e., the seeing [וְהִנֵּה] of the mind. There are many similar instances.

[12] *And let the king be aroused by your beauty, since he is your lord:* you have no other master, even though you are from a foreign people.

[13] [וְהָיָה כְּנֶגְדָּךְ]: the meaning is "the people of Tyre," just like  $\text{נֶגְדָּךְ}$  or  $\text{נֶגְדָּךְ}$ . He told each princess that the Tyrians would always come to [her] with gifts.

*With gifts:* at all times.

*The wealthiest of all people will court your favor: i.e., each and every people. The reason for the specific reference to the Tyrians is that Tyre borders the Land of Israel, and the Tyrians will always come with gifts for each of the king's wives.*

[14] *All the good things* [כָּל-טוֹבוֹתָיִךָ]: written with a vav despite the *dagesh* [in the *dalet*].

He said *all the good things of the royal princess: who stand within the palace.*

[15] *Her dress embroidered* [שָׂרָק מִזָּהָב] *with gold mountings:* as if it said שָׂרָק מִזָּהָב. Similar to this is יָרַחְתִּי שָׁכָר ("I have slain a man for wounding me" — Gen. 4:23), where שָׁכָר is like יָרַחְתִּי, and other cases. This is as if to say that each princess is led to the king in *embroidered clothes* when he wishes to take pleasure with her.

*And maidens:* who are the companions of each princess.

*In her train are presented to you:* that is, to the king.

[16] *They are led in:* they are guided, brought to the king.

*With joy and gladness they enter the palace of the king:* that is, [they enter] the palace where the king resides, for they live in their own palace — the women's quarters — until the king desires to see them and summons them by name to come before him.

Now it is correct to interpret the all these verses as being a

*mashal*. In that case, the princesses are nations that turn to hearken to the King Messiah. The consort, who is the queen, is a *mashal* for the congregation of Israel, who will be the mistress of all the nations. And he said *take heed, lass* to all the nations so that they would do only the will of the King Messiah, and come before him with gifts, for he is lord over all of them. The mention of the nation of Tyre is as we explained — because it borders the Land of Israel. *Maidens* is a *mashal*, as in the expression Fair Maiden Judah. The nations are like maidens in that they have not known a man until they come to their husbands. Similarly, it is as if the nations do not know Torah or any law until they accept the religion of Israel, or [at least] the Seven Mitzvot, at the command of the King Messiah.

[17] *[Your sons will] succeed your ancestors:* for the monarchy will come to the King Messiah through his ancestors, from David generation after generation until it reaches him, and thereafter it will not depart from his sons. That is why he said *your sons will succeed your ancestors*.

[18] *I commemorate your name for all generations:* *your name* refers to the King Messiah, for in every generation his name is remembered and his coming is awaited.

*So peoples will praise you:* so that your monarchy and greatness will be unlike any other.

All *the peoples will praise you*: that is, they will praise you as their king, as in "you, O Judah, your brothers shall praise" (Genesis 49:8).

Now the Christians who err by understanding this psalm to be about Jesus the Christian, and who take *royal princesses* to be a *mashal* for the nations that returned to his faith (that is, to the Christian religion), and who base their words on the verse *Your divine throne is everlasting* [לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד יְהוָה כִּסֵּיךָ], point out that the psalm calls him מֶלֶךְ (king) and then calls him אֱלֹהִים (God).<sup>3</sup> But there is an answer for them: [the phrase means] "your divine throne," as we have already explained.<sup>4</sup> Even if they say that *your throne* refers directly to God,<sup>5</sup> אֱלֹהִים must be interpreted as a vocative, so that the verse is a petition — "O God, may Your throne endure forever." But אֱלֹהִים כִּסֵּי means the throne of the king, as in "Solomon took over the [king's] divine throne" (I Chron. 29:23).

You should respond to them by saying: how could he say *with oil of gladness over all your peers* (verse 8) in reference to God, when God has no peers? And he did not say *the consort stands at your right hand* (verse 10) as a *mashal*, for the word *consort* refers to cohabitation, just as we interpreted it, so it cannot refer to God. And furthermore, how could he have said *your sons will succeed your ancestors* (verse 17)? If they reply that God does have sons, meaning those who believe in Him, as in "You are children of the

<sup>3</sup> That is, verse 6b and 7a read מֶלֶךְ אֱלֹהִים. Thus, in Kimhi's version of the Christian argument, Jesus is here referred to as both king and God.

<sup>4</sup> I.e., David's divine throne.

<sup>5</sup> Taking the suffix of אֱלֹהִים as referring directly to God; i.e., Your divine throne.

Lord your God" (Deut. 14:1), say to them: "perhaps He does have sons, but He certainly has no parents!" And if they say that they mean "father" in the sense of "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," we have already refuted them in connection with the psalm "Why are the nations in a tumult?" (Ps. 2).

The errant Christians understand Psalm 2 to be about Jesus, and the verse from which they derive evidence and support for their error, "the Lord said to me: you are My son" (Ps. 2:7), is for them a stumbling block. If they should say to you, "he was the son of God," reply to them: one could not say "this horse is Reuben's son," and thus anyone to whom the Lord said "you are My son" (Ps. 2:7) must be of His substance, and so must be God like Him. And furthermore, since he said "I have fathered you this day" (Ps. 2:7), the one who is born must be of the same substance as the one who sires. Say to them that concerning divinity there is no father or son, for divinity is indivisible, there being no body to divide. On the contrary, God is one in every respect of unity, neither extendable nor reducible nor divisible.

And say further to them: a father precedes a son in time, and the son comes forth by the effort of the father. Even though in terms of language there cannot be one without the other — one is not called a father until he has a son, and one would not be called a son unless he had a father — in any case, anyone who is called a father doubtless exists in time prior to the son. If that is so, then the God that you call "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" — the part which you call "Father" must have existed prior to the other part

that you call "Son." For if the two of them had always existed as one, you would have called them twin brothers, but you would call them neither "father and son" nor "begetter and born," for the one who begets is without doubt prior to the one who is born.

And if they say, "it is not possible to say 'Son of God' concerning anything that is not of the divine substance," say to them: we can only speak figuratively of God, as our holy Torah spoke of the mouth of the Lord, the eyes of the Lord, the ears of the Lord, and the Lord crossed, and the Lord came down, etc. It is well known that these statements are only by way of *mashal*. And likewise it was a *mashal* when he said "son of God," or "children of God." Anyone who performs His commandments and carries out His missions is called His son, just like any son who performs the deeds of his father. That is why He called the stars "children of God" as in "all the children of God shouted with joy" (Job 38:7). And likewise a man is called a son, on account of the spirit of the Most High which is in him when he performs God's commandments at the urging of the wise soul that instructs him. And therefore He said "You are My son" (Ps. 2:7) and "Israel is My first-born son" (Ex. 4:22), and "You are children of the Lord your God" (Deut. 14:1), and "is He not your Father who created You?" (Deut. 32:6), and "I will be a father to you, and you will be a son to Me" (II Sam. 7:14).

And say further to them: the God whom you call "Father" said to the "Son," "Ask it of Me and I will make the nations your domain" (Ps. 2:8). But why would the son ask that of the father if he is a God-like him, with power over the nations to the ends of

the earth like him? And furthermore, were the nations not his domain even before the question? Or was God's power less at the beginning and greater later? But this cannot be said of God.

And if they say to you: He said it with reference to the flesh after the divinity was incarnated, i.e., He told the flesh to ask it of Him and He would give him nations as his domain — then this could not have been the case, for the flesh did not have sovereignty or authority over a single nation, but rather he was despised all the days of his life.

And if they say to you: He said it concerning faith, that they would accept faith in Him — behold, most of the nations have not accepted faith in him, neither Jewish nor Muslim.

I have instructed you how to answer them with this psalm, and you may add anything of your own understanding to it that is in accordance with these words. If they ask you its interpretation, interpret it in whichever of these two ways you choose: as concerning David or the King Messiah, as I have interpreted it for you. And one final point: if they say "Father" (א/ל), then even according to their own view it is impossible to speak about "fathers" (א/ל/א) in the plural (as in verse 17).

# COMMENTARY ON PSALM ONE HUNDRED TEN

[1] *Of David. A Psalm. The Lord said to my lord, "Sit at My right hand while I make your enemies your footstool":* our Rabbis, may their memories be a blessing, understood this psalm to be about the patriarch Abraham when he went forth to battle the four kings (Gen. 14).<sup>1</sup>

They interpreted *You are a priest* in reference to God Most High, for the priesthood had been designated to go forth from there with Melchizedek, as it is said, "he was a priest of God Most High" (Gen. 14:19). However, because in his blessing [Melchizedek] gave precedence to Abraham rather than to God Most High, the Holy One, blessed be He, took the priesthood from him and granted it to Abraham, as it is said, *You are a priest forever*.<sup>2</sup>

*After the manner of Melchizedek* [על דברת מלך צדק]: on account of the words that Melchizedek spoke.

But the correct interpretation of this psalm according to its plain meaning is that it was recited by one of the poets about David. The *lamed* of צדק means "about," just like the *lamed* of אמר ("Say there about me: [he is my brother]" -- Gen. 20:13), or the *lamed* of אמנצח מלך צדק יהוה ברוך ("For the leader. A Psalm about David. May the Lord answer you in time of trouble" -- Ps. 20:1-2), as we have interpreted it.

<sup>1</sup> Nedarim 32b.

<sup>2</sup> That is, Melchizedek said ברוך אתה יהוה, thereby giving precedence to Abraham. For this reason the priesthood was taken away from him.

The wise Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra explained that he composed this psalm at the beginning of his reign, when the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king and they marched up in search of him. God, may He be blessed, promised that He would deliver them into his hands, which he did at Baal-perazim and at Rephaim (II Sam. 5:17-21). At that time the poet uttered this psalm.

And he said *The Lord said to my lord* to mean that God, may He be blessed, spoke to my lord; i.e., to David.

*Sit at My right hand*: this is similar to "the Lord will be going in front of you" (II Sam. 5:24), which means: sit, and rest assured at My right side, for My right hand will help you. I will not rest until I *[have made] your enemies your footstool*.

[2] *The Lord will stretch forth from Zion your mighty scepter*: for in that same chapter (II Sam. 5) David had captured Zion at the beginning of his reign. And [the poet] said: from Zion, which was a very strong fortress, God, may He be blessed, began to send you the scepter and the staff in which your power resides, and God gave them into your hands. So henceforth *Hold sway and govern in the midst of your enemies* -- do not fear them.

He said *in the midst* to mean, "there is no need to think that you will rule [only] over the Philistine cities adjacent to the Land of Israel, for you will indeed rule in the midst of their land. There are those who explain that he wrote *from Zion* because the Divine Glory resides in Zion.

[3] *Your people come forward willingly on your day of battle:* on the day that you prepared to do battle against them, your people came to you willingly.

*In majestic holiness:* in Jerusalem, which is the majesty of holiness, as it is called "holy land" (Zechariah 2:16). The meaning of *הדר* is "glory and beauty," as [Jerusalem] is also called "fair-crested, joy of all the earth" (Ps. 48:3). *הדר* is a plural form of *הדר*, for [Jerusalem] is good and beautiful in many respects.

*From the womb, from the dawn, yours was the dew of youth:* from the very morning on which you were born it was yours; that is, for your well-being. The dew that fell when you were born was for you — you were destined from the womb to reign. The dew was a blessing for you on that same morning.

[4] *The Lord has sworn:* His word is His oath.

*You are a priest:* i.e., both a king and a prince, as in "and David's sons were priests" (II Sam. 8:18), or "He makes priests go about naked" (Job 12:19); i.e., great men and ministers.

He said *forever* because Saul's reign was not forever.

*Because you are a righteous king* [ *למה זרתי מלכי צדק* ]: that is, "Why did I choose you as king forever? Because you are a righteous king." As it is written, "David executed justice and righteousness for all his people" (II Sam. 8:15). The *yod* in *זרתי* and the *yod* in *מלכי* are superfluous.

[5] *The Lord [יְיָ] is at your right hand:* it is the Lord (יְיָ) who was at your right hand when you were victorious in battle.

*He crushes kings in the day of His anger:* by your hand has He crushed the kings of the nations who came to fight against you.

*In the day of His anger:* that is, on the day His anger was turned against them, and His favor was with you.

[6] *He works judgement upon the nations:* He works justice and judgment upon the nations until the battlefield is *Heaping up bodies:* i.e., corpses.

*Crushing heads far and wide* [כְּרַס רִגְלֵי רַחֲמָנָא]: crushing many heads.

כְּרַס is a collective noun, and רַחֲמָנָא is like "greatly dreaded in the council of holy beings [רַחֲמָנָא מִלְּפָנֵי קְדוֹשִׁים]" (Ps. 89:8). There are those who interpret רַחֲמָנָא as referring to Rabbah of Ammon (II Sam. 12:26ff), saying that he uttered this verse in connection with that battle.

[7] *He drinks from the stream on his way:* so many were slain that a river of their blood was flowing.

*He drinks:* figuratively speaking, [as in] "[he] drinks the blood of the slain" (Numbers 23:24).

*Therefore he holds his head high:* when he was victorious in battle over all his enemies he raised his head above them. And similarly he said, "David made a great name for himself upon his return from slaying Aram in the Valley of Salt" (II Sam. 8:13).

Now the Christians understand this psalm to be about Jesus. They maintain that the first verse describes the "Father" and the "Son," reading *The Lord* [  $\text{יהוה}$  ] *said to my Lord* [  $\text{יְיָ}$  ], as though there were a *kamatz* under the *nun*. They say, "how could the Lord address the Lord unless they were two, with the Spirit making a third?" They also make another error, reading  $\text{אֵלֶיךָ יְיָ}$  (*Your people come forward willingly* — v. 3) with a *hireq* under the 'ayin:  $\text{אֵלֶיךָ יְיָ}$  ("come forward willingly with You"). And they say that *in majestic holiness, from the womb* (v. 3) refers to the "Holy One" born from the womb.

You should speak to them about their misreadings, for their copyist  $\text{לְיִשְׂרָאֵל}$  has erred, in that  $\text{יְיָ}$  is spelled with a *hireq* under the *nun*, and so [this psalm] was uttered about David, as we have interpreted it. How can they maintain the error of one man in the face of the majority? For from East to West we find the *hireq* under the *nun* in all the books, and similarly we always find  $\text{יְיָ}$  with a *patah* under the 'ayin. Don't they claim to accept our textual evidence? Then they must accept this evidence.

Concerning the error of their faith say to them: if the "Father" and the "Son" are both divine beings, then one cannot be dependant on the other, for that which depends on something outside of itself cannot be deemed a god. But then how could the "Father" say to the "Son," *sit at My right hand while I make [Y]our enemies [Y]our*

3 Probably referring to Jerome, known in Hebrew sources as  $\text{הירושלמי}$  (Hieronymus).

*footstool*, unless He was needed at His right hand, to help Him? For that to be the case He must be weak — but there can be no weakness or lack of ability in God.

And how could He have said to him, *You are a priest forever*? Was he not a priest before that? If they should reply: a *priest* in a certain sense, for from that day onward the priesthood became something different, [priests] no longer offering up flesh and blood as they had done previously, but now offering up bread and wine as Melchizedek had done, as it is said, "and Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High" (Gen. 14:19), then say to them: to whom did He say *you are a priest*? Was He addressing the "Son," as He [supposedly] had been doing since the psalm's beginning up until this point, and from this point to the end? But it is a priest who makes offerings, not God — others make offering to Him. And if He said it to a mortal man — and this is not the way they interpret this psalm — then to whom did He say it? For the priests among them do not have families, each one being independently consecrated. So then to whom did He say *the Lord has sworn and will not relent. You are a priest forever*?

And furthermore, why did He change His will? For if originally He had commanded offerings of flesh and afterwards He commanded offerings of bread and wine, then why did He say *will not relent*, when He did relent?! Was not the Torah given for all time? Indeed, Malachi, the seal of the prophets, said, "be mindful

of the Torah of My servant Moses, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules" (Malachi 3:22). And he said, "Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you [before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord]" (Malachi 3:23). But Elijah has not yet arrived, and he will not arrive until the time of the Messiah.

And note that [Malachi] said to be mindful of the Torah of His servant Moses in order to do it as He commanded it on Mt. Sinai, and not as Jesus commanded! From this you see that the Torah will never change; just as it was given to our teacher Moses, so it shall remain forever.

[The psalm] also says: *He crushes kings in the day of His anger*. But where are the wars that Jesus fought? Where are the kings he defeated? How could it say, *He works judgement upon the nations, heaping up bodies*, when Jesus came only to judge souls and save them? It also says, *therefore he holds his head high*. But we must say that to this very day he has not raised his head.

May the blind open their eyes and declare: "our fathers have bequeathed us falsehood, emptiness without purpose."

**MENAHM BEN SOLOMON HA-MEIRI:**

**Introduction and Commentaries**

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Then You spoke to Your faithful ones in a vision and said: "I have conferred power upon a hero; I have exalted one chosen out of the people."<sup>1</sup>

Menahem ben Solomon Ha-Meiri, like David Kimhi, was a native of Provence, though without Kimhi's familial connection with the Jewry of Spain. He was born in Perpignan in 1249, and died there in 1316. Little more than that is known of his personal life. He adopted a moderate position as regards the polemic of his colleague Solomon b. Abraham Adret against Maimonides, upholding, against Adret, freedom of thought for scholars. Meiri has been called "the embodiment of the highest qualities which characterized Provencal Jewry: greatness in Torah combined with a leaning toward, and an appreciation of, philosophy, secular erudition, and the sciences in general; unswerving attachment to custom and tradition coupled with a high-minded tolerance of gentile society, and brilliant Torah creativity."<sup>2</sup> Meiri's devotion to custom and tradition was such that he devoted an entire treatise (*Magen Avot*, edited by Last, 1909) to a defense of the customs of his native land as against those of Spain.

Meiri is best known for his massive commentary on the Talmud, the *Bet Ha-Behirah*. In this commentary he summarized and explicated the subject matter of the Talmud, and allowed himself, as

---

<sup>1</sup> Ps. 99:20.

<sup>2</sup> I. Ta-Shma, "Meiri," *EJ* vol. 11 (cols. 1257-1260).

well, an ample discussion of particular *halachot*. Meiri summarized the teachings of the previous three centuries in this work, including in it the views of a number of important German, Provencal, and Spanish scholars. Meiri made extensive use of the Jerusalem Talmud to clarify parallel passages in the Babylonian Talmud. He was one of very few scholars in his day to utilize this technique.

Meiri's commentary on Psalms has remained relatively little known. It reflects a knowledge, certainly, of the work of his fellow Provencal native, David Kimhi, with which it agrees word-for-word in a number of places. Meiri's Hebrew style, as illustrated by the texts here translated, is difficult, sometimes verbose and often betraying an Arabic influence. Joseph Hayyim Ha-Cohen, editor of the edition used to prepare this translation, traces this influence not to any direct knowledge of Arabic, but to Meiri's wide reading in philosophical and natural treatises that had been translated from Arabic into Hebrew.

As just stated, I have used a edition of Meiri's commentary on Psalms prepared by Joseph Hayyim Ha-Cohen from Codice Vaticano Ebraico #527, published as *Meiri's Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Hebrew -- Jerusalem, 1970). No other editions or translations were consulted, and indeed, no other translations were even located.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMENTARY ON PSALMS

Menahem b. Solomon of the House of Meir said:

The sweet singer of Israel said, "Then You spoke to Your faithful ones in a vision and said, 'I have conferred power upon a hero [גִּבּוֹר]; I have exalted one chosen out of the people'" (Ps. 89:20). [Now] it is known that the word גִּבּוֹר is an adjective derived from גִּבּוֹרָה, and that גִּבּוֹרָה is a word which generally denotes force and triumph, but which in a specific instance may have two connotations.

In its first sense, it refers to force and triumph over enemies, whether [one] learns about this through experience with others, in always overcoming an enemy; or through personal experience, by learning quickly to gird on a sword and by training oneself in other skills of גִּבּוֹרָה; or else it may concern sturdiness of limb and stockiness of flesh and thickness of neck, as reflected in whatever daring is displayed, until those watching such a man recognize his readiness to prevail over his enemies if he is only given a chance.

With this [first] connotation, each of these verses containing the root גִּבּוֹר may be clarified: "an able warrior" [גִּבּוֹר חַיִּל] (Judges 11:1 etc.); "stronger than lions" [גִּבּוֹר מִלֵּיּוֹנִים] (II Sam. 1:23); "they were the heroes" [הֵמָּה הַגִּבּוֹרִים] (Gen. 6:4); and "they are courageous fighters" [הֵמָּה הַגִּבּוֹרִים] (II Sam. 17:8). And in a metaphorical sense this word is also applied to the blessed God: "He yells, He roars aloud, He charges upon His enemies" [עָלָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְתִגְבֵּר] (Isaiah

42:13); "the Lord goes forth like a warrior, like a fighter He whips up his rage" [  $k3'$   $\text{יְהוָה כְּבָרוֹר}$  ] (Isaiah 42:13); and "the Lord, mighty and valiant, the Lord, valiant in battle" [  $\text{יְהוָה גִּבּוֹר וְנָאֵם}$  ] (Ps. 24:8).

This sense of the word also applies in the manner of a *derash*, to one who uses wisdom to prevail over those whose opinions differ from his, as for example in the Rabbinic saying "He who fixes a set place for instruction, adversaries fall before him." Here the "adversaries" are those whose opinions differ, as the Rabbis said: "Even a father and son, a master and disciple, who debate matters of *halacha* with one another are turned into adversaries, as it is said, ['Like arrows in the hands of a  $\text{בֶּן־אָדָם}$  are sons born to a man in his youth. Happy is the  $\text{אָדָם}$  who fills his quivers with them:] they shall not be put to shame when they contend with the enemy in the gate (Psalm 127:4-5)'"<sup>1</sup> And the Rabbis similarly interpreted the verse "Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite [who is skilled in music and a  $\text{בֶּן־אָדָם}$  and a man of war" (I Samuel 16:18) to mean a  $\text{בֶּן־אָדָם}$  in the war of Torah.<sup>2</sup>

This sense of the word  $\text{בֶּן־אָדָם}$  may also apply to the suppression of bodily desires and the struggle of a man to subdue the sensory faculties which seek physical pleasure in place of restraint. And admirable is his behavior, as the Rabbis said, "Who is a  $\text{בֶּן־אָדָם}$ ? He who controls his passions," and likewise as they explained the

<sup>1</sup> Kiddushin 30b.

<sup>2</sup> Sanhedrin 93b -

שִׁיבְעָה עָשָׂר וְיָמִים בְּמַלְאכָה שֶׁל תּוֹרָה

verse, "Better to be forebearing than mighty [נִלְחָם], to have self-control than to conquer a city" (Prov. 16:31).<sup>3</sup> This is certainly in accordance with the first connotation of the word.

It was already known from the saying of the philosopher that there are three types of kingship: [that of] the ruler over a country, the ruler over a household, and the ruler over oneself. Just as the ruler over a country must discipline its citizens and guard them against slavery, destruction, and doing evil things, so must the ruler over a household guard its members and lead them on the straight path, admonishing those who deserve it with an appropriate reprimand, and aiding whoever might see it fit to encourage one of his brothers to stray from the straight path, as it is written, "For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity [to keep the way of the Lord]" (Gen. 18:19). And similarly each man himself must suppress his base desires until his good inclination prevails over them, as is already known from the Rabbinic saying that transforms with a *mashal* the verse "there was a little city, with few men in it; and to it came a great king, who surrounded it and built mighty siege works against it. Present in the city was a poor wise man who saved it with his wisdom, etc." (Ecclesiastes 9:14-15).<sup>4</sup> This is the full meaning of the נִלְחָם which is called *k'38/k61* in the vernacular.

<sup>3</sup> Pirke Avot 4:1.

<sup>4</sup> Nedarim 32b: "The little city is the body, and the few people are the limbs [of the body]. The great king who comes and surrounds it is the evil inclination [רָעָה]. He built mighty siege works against it -- these are sufferings. The poor wise man is the good inclination [טוֹבָה]. The poor wise man who saved the city by his wisdom -- this refers to repentance and good works. . . ."

The second connotation refers, on the other hand, to the matter of the increase of a thing, and thus to the increase of a divisible quantity such as the increase of a number, as it says, "[the span of our life is seventy years,] or, given the strength [לם בגבורות] eighty years" (Ps. 90:10), or "their transgressions are excessive [כשעריהם כי יתגברו]" (Job 36:9). And similarly this meaning refers to the increase of a continuous quantity, as, for instance, "the waters increased [ו'גברו המים]" (Gen. 7:17); and also to [the increase of] the two kinds of quantity together, as in "the blessings of your father surpass [גברו] the blessings of my ancestors" (Gen. 49:26).

This [second] connotation [of the word גבורה] has nothing to do with the first, and it is expressed in the vernacular by the word "apoderamyente" (empowering). Thus a person is described by this usage of the word גבורה as in the saying, "His descendants will be mighty in the land [גבור בארץ יהיה זרעו]" (Ps. 112:2), whose interpretation is "His descendants will be many" — in the vernacular, "apoderat" (empowered).

This sense of the word may also apply to a person's doing his work vigorously, with power and strength, as in "[if the axe has become dull and he has not whetted the edge,] he must exert more strength [וְיִתְּנֵהוּ כֹחַ יָדָיו]" (Ecclesiastes 10:10) where the plain meaning of "if the axe has become dull" is that if the blade with which he is to chop wood has rusted, he must exert more strength and increase

in power, although we have explained it more precisely in its context.

And from this, the sense extends to everything which comes by way of emanation, whether by verbal emanation, as in the saying "by our tongues shall we prevail [לשוננו נצא]" (Ps. 12:5); or by intellectual emanation; or concerning the recipient of emanation; i.e., a person receiving [emanation] with power, strength, and vigor, as it says concerning the incorporeal forms, "[Bless the Lord, O His angels,] mighty creatures [גבור כח] who do His bidding, ever obedient to His bidding" (Ps. 103:20). And there is an allusion in "who do His bidding" to their being drawn to His will in order to influence others, each one to the one beneath him. And similarly there is an allusion in "ever obedient to His bidding" to their reception of emanation from His glory, may He be blessed. And thus when it says "a wise man ascends to a city of the mighty" [על גבורם עיר חכם] (Prov. 21:22), [the Rabbis] interpreted the "city of the mighty" to refer to the angelic realm, as they said in *Genesis Rabbah*, "a city in which there are males but no females," hinting that there is nothing material there, for matter is feminine.<sup>5</sup>

And it is also said concerning the blessed God, "[for as the heavens are high above the earth,] so great is His steadfast love to those that fear Him [גדול חסדו על יראיו]" (Ps. 103:11), and "for great is His love toward us [גדול אהבתו עמנו]" (Ps. 117:2), and concerning

<sup>5</sup> *Leviticus Rabbah* 31:5. See Maimonides, *Guide* 1:17 on the femininity of matter.

the strength of the oath and the covenant, "He will make a firm covenant with many [וְהָיָה בְרִית עֲלֵיהֶם]" (Daniel 9:27).

Now this adjective; i.e. גִּבּוֹר, occurs in this verse [Ps. 89:20] in order to teach that it refers to a complete man, to whom apply both connotations of the word גִּבּוֹר with all of their implications: the first connotation, of victory over enemies in war, over adversaries in the arena of wisdom, and over sensuality; and also the second connotation, of increase in the worship of God, in strengthening oneself to do the Lord's work, and in determination to receive emanation from others and to influence others. And joined with all this is divine assistance in the achievement of one's perfection, as it says "I have conferred power upon a גִּבּוֹר" (Ps. 89:20). In other words, together with being a גִּבּוֹר from the standpoint of preparation and nature, there must also be an element of divine assistance for גִּבּוֹר to be multiplied. This is similar to a contrary phrase, "Let them be as chaff in the wind, the Lord's angel driving them on" (Ps. 35:5), the intention of which is to say "may the wanderings [imposed upon the poet's adversaries] be severe, and may [they] be as insubstantial as chaff which is by nature light and [driven] before the wind" -- and yet whose lightness, of course, is only the secondary reason for its motion and movement. For to all of this must be added "the Lord's angel driving them on." Thus likewise here in a contrary situation: a person possessing a full measure of גִּבּוֹר by nature and disposition must also have divine assistance directed toward him by the Blessed One in order to attain abundant success.

All of the foregoing indicates that the matter [of נְיָאָה] depends upon a person distinguished by a higher purpose, perfectly prepared to bestow upon others through his actions abundant and true success. And on this point [we reach] the Rabbinic dispute over whom this verse refers to.<sup>6</sup> Now even if this psalm, Psalm 89, appears to have been uttered concerning David, nevertheless it is a characteristic of prophecy that occasionally an isolated word in the midst of a prophetic episode alludes to a singular matter without connection to what comes before or after it. Thus in a few instances our Rabbis interpreted this verse as referring to our patriarch Abraham. And they similarly interpreted the verse following it, "I have found David, My servant" (Ps. 89:21) to mean "I found him in Sodom;" i.e., as alluding to the time of Abraham, as if it said that the might [נְיָאָה] of Abraham protected Lot who dwelt there, and that from [Abraham] were made the nations from which David issued.<sup>7</sup>

Now the truth is that our patriarch Abraham, peace be upon him, possessed every measure of נְיָאָה which you find in the writings when you arrange the stories of his behavior and examine them one by one. [Thus] his נְיָאָה with respect to triumph is clarified by "when Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken prisoner, he mustered his retainers, men born in his household . . . and he surrounded [his enemy] by night and he attacked them and

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Leviticus Rabbah 1:4.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis Rabbah 50:10; Yebamot 77a.

pursued them as far as Hobah, etc." (Gen. 14:14-15). And concerning his triumph over adversaries in the pursuit of wisdom, it is well known that everyone in his father's household were idolators, while Abraham, when he came forth from his mother's womb, was born in a natural state of readiness, in the same sense as "before I formed you in the womb I knew you for my own; before you were born I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5), as if to say, "I prepared your nature in such a way for you to be fit and ready to reach the level of prophecy."

As soon as he had acquired a little knowledge and practiced idolatry along with the rest of his father's household and his family, he grew indecisive and he inwardly mocked how it could be that they worshipped the star, yet not the One who direct it. Now there was no one teaching him, neither a herald nor a portent, and he was sunk in the faith of Ur of the Chaldees, as it says, "You are the God who chose Abram and brought him forth from Ur of the Chaldees" (Nehemiah 9:7). Concerning this the Rabbis comment that Abraham was three years old when he recognized his Creator.<sup>6</sup> This [comment] was essentially an elegant expression of the fact that this was the time he began to learn, as if they had said that at the beginning of his learning there arose from his activities indications for all to see that he recognized his Creator. He took pains to investigate and endeavored to gain wisdom, until he understood and grasped that there is a god who directs and creates

---

<sup>6</sup> Nedarim 32a.

everything. He was then forty years old, and it is said elsewhere that at forty years of age Abraham recognized his Creator.<sup>9</sup>

It was also the opinion of the Rabbis that "happy is the man who has not followed the counsel of the wicked" (Ps. 1:1) refers to Abraham, who did not follow the counsel of the wicked men of the Tower, as it is said, "come, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower with its top in heaven" (Gen. 11:4).<sup>10</sup> We have already explained in a few of our essays that their interest was in denying the reality of God and the reality of any incorporeal beings. So they built a tower with its top in heaven, but they did not see the Lord standing upon it nor the angels of God ascending and descending on it, as we have expounded at greater length in several essays. But Abraham, peace be upon him, comprehended all this with his fine mind and powerful intelligence, and then he began to investigate and debate with those who opposed him, until they desired to kill him. But he became a fugitive and went to Haran, where he preached in public until thousands and myriads were gathered about him and he implanted faith in the heart of the entire world.

Now there is no need to go into detail about his triumph over all sensuality, for he was wholly devoted to the service of God and he was refined by withstanding several trials which we have already

---

<sup>9</sup> See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Elchot Av. Zara 1:3.

<sup>10</sup> Midrash Tehillim 1:13.

explained in [our commentary on] *Masechet Avot*, and particularly the trial of the *Akedah*.

And the second connotation of the word *נִצָּח*; i.e., the increase of his worship of the blessed God and the strength and diligence in doing His exalted work, is demonstrated with reference to [Abraham] by the verse: "and Abram set out as the Lord had said" (Gen. 12:4) -- that is, he did not delay an instant in doing that of which the Lord had spoken. And it also says: "and they went forth toward the land of Canaan" (Gen. 12:5), which means that their thoughts were devoted to doing this, and they did not rest until the thought was realized in action. His great receptivity to emanation attests to his profound perfection, as does the completeness of his influence over others, as in the verse, "I am giving you a very great reward" (Gen 15:1). And David said "then You spoke [to Your faithful one]<sup>11</sup> in a vision [ *בְּחִזְיוֹן* ]" (Ps. 89:20) alluding to the verse, "after these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision [ *בְּחִזְיוֹן* ]" (Gen. 15:1).

[To those who maintain that] David, may peace be upon him, was hinting with this psalm at the destruction of the Temple and the wandering of the exiles, they [i.e. those who hold that refers to Abraham] reply that these things had already been foretold to Abraham, His earlier faithful one, in the vision between the pieces,<sup>12</sup> and that "I have exalted one chosen from among the

<sup>11</sup> Notice here Meiri's implication that *בְּחִזְיוֹן* refers to a single person.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 15. See also *Pesikta* 18:4.

people" [refers to Abraham], as if to say that He chose him and exalted him from among a foolish, ignorant people.

In a few instances [the Rabbis] interpreted this verse (Ps. 89:20) as referring to our teacher Moses, may peace be upon him, and there is no doubt that all aspects of מוֹשֶׁה likewise apply to him.<sup>13</sup> His triumph over enemies through mightiness is known from his zeal over the distress of the people, as in the verse: "He went out to his brethren and saw them at their hard labor" (Ex. 1:11), which means that he observed their distress, and, pitying them, killed the Egyptian who was beating [the Israelite], as it is written, "He struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Ex. 1:11).

Concerning the remaining aspects of מוֹשֶׁה there is no need to go into detail about him, except [to say] that the Rabbis interpreted the giving of the Torah as centering around him particularly. That is why they interpreted "then You spoke in a vision to Your faithful one [ מוֹשֶׁה ]" as referring to Moses, who devoted himself to obedience of the Holy One in giving the Law, and who bore His power to a greater extent than all of Israel was able to bear, as it is said: "the voice of the Lord is power" (Ps. 29:4), and "when you heard the voice . . . [all the heads of your tribes and the elders] approached me [i.e. Moses] . . . and they said, 'the Lord our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice. . . . If we hear the voice of the Lord our God again, we

---

<sup>13</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 1:4.

shall die'" (Deut. 5:20-22). And about this matter the Rabbis said<sup>14</sup> that "their soul went forth," which is to say that in their understanding, the soul fled from the embrace of the material as if it had been entirely removed from it, and thus they said "you speak with us that we might hear, but may our God not speak with us [again] lest we die." This matter is alluded to in the words of Solomon, "my soul fled at his word" (Song of Songs 5:6).

And it says "I have conferred power upon a נִרְדָּ" (Ps. 89:20) in accordance with "and God answered in thunder" (Ex. 19:19), in the sense of "and the earth shall answer with new grain and wine and oil" (Hosea 2:24) and "money answers every need" (Ecclesiastes 10:19). Or perhaps its interpretation [is along the lines of] "He gives the wisdom to the wise" (Daniel 2:21).<sup>15</sup>

And it says "I have exalted one chosen from among the people (Ps. 89:20)" alluding to a unique people, as if to say that although he was in the midst of a chosen people, he was set apart from them, as is known from the one who disputed that "all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourself above the Lord's congregation?" (Numbers 16:3). It was [Korah] who was the subject of the Rabbinic statement: "they asked him: [if a man wears] a *tallit* that is entirely blue, is he exempted from or required to [wear] fringes? And

<sup>14</sup> Shabbat 88b.

<sup>15</sup> The point here is that in each case, God's particular gift is an extra measure of abundance, just as "a person possessing a full measure of נִרְדָּ by nature and disposition must also have divine assistance directed toward him by the Blessed One in order to attain abundant success" (p. 61).

likewise, need there be a *mezuzah* on a house full of [holy] books?"<sup>16</sup>. [Was the Rabbi's] implication that because [the *tallit*] was entirely blue, there would be no need for fringes, and because the house was full of sacred books there would be no need for a *mezuzah* -- and therefore that because the entire community was holy there would be no need for a leader? It is well known that this [challenge by Korah] was a malicious and confusing [action], the ruination of every support for leadership.

And as for the explanation that the psalm alludes to the wandering of the exiles, they [i.e., those who hold that *pa'on* refers to Moses] reply that these things had already been foretold in a prophecy, as is known from the testimony of the Torah that "when you have borne children . . . and make a sculptured image . . . the Lord will scatter you" (Deut. 4:25-7).

In a few instances [the Rabbis] interpret [this verse] as referring to Elijah or to Adam, but these [interpretations] are not in accord with the plain meaning of the verse.

[Some] commentators refer the verse to David himself, which is to say that he uttered it about himself.<sup>17</sup> According to their opinion, the *š* in *pa'onš* means "for the sake of." He called himself a faithful one after the fashion of his saying "preserve my life for I am faithful" (Ps. 86:2). This is if to say: my reign will

<sup>16</sup> Tanhuma Korah 2.

<sup>17</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 1:4.

not come about by chance; it has already been determined in a prophecy to the chosen father; i.e. our patriarch Jacob, may peace be upon him, and his vision "the scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet" (Gen. 49:10). This verse hints that the reign of Saul was not the intention of God and did not reflect His choice of him.

Or it is also possible according to this theory that [the verse] was spoken about Jacob, who is called "the faithful one" because of his surpassing mildness, as in the saying "Jacob was a mild man, who stayed in camp" (Gen. 25:27). And if we were to apply to him the title *אֱמִינִי*, there is no doubt that every aspect of the first connotation [of *אֱמִינִי*] would be found in him, as one sees from "he rolled the stone [off the mouth of the well]" (Gen. 29:10), and from his saying "if Esau comes to one camp and attacks it" (Gen. 32:9), and from the matter of Simeon and Levi, about whom the Rabbis said, "they relied upon the strength of the old man,"<sup>15</sup> and according to the matter of "a man struggled with him" (Gen. 32:25), whether this is taken in the plain sense or in the esoteric sense, according to which the destroying angel, minister of Esau, was unable to overcome him in the struggle. And it is even clearer [that Jacob meets the standards] of the second connotation [of *אֱמִינִי*], as may be seen from the prophecy of the ladder.

It is possible that the literal meaning according to this theory is that the word *אֱמִינִי* was spoken about Jacob, while "I have

<sup>15</sup> Genesis Rabbah 80.

conferred power upon a מלך " was spoken about Judah, as if to say: You said in a vision to Jacob that Your power would be [conferred] upon Judah, who was a מלך among his brothers, as is known from all the stories about him. The significance of this is as we have explained, that the monarchy befit Judah because of his previous inheritance of the scepter according to the prophecy of his father Jacob, may peace be upon him, and that it would not come to him by chance, as was the case with Saul's monarchy.

Although we have already alluded to this matter in our commentary on *Masechet Horayot*, let those words be cited here in regard to this matter: you already know what [the Rabbis], may peace be upon them, said: Israel was issued three commandments in regard to their entry into the land [of Israel] -- to appoint a king, to blot out the memory of Amalek, and to build the Temple;<sup>19</sup> the exact citations being "you shall appoint a king over you" (Deut. 17:15), "you shall blot out the memory of Amalek" (Deut. 25:19), and "you shall seek Him and come there" (Deut. 12:5). You also know that the commandment to appoint a king came prior to the commandment to cut off the descendants of Amalek, as they interpreted from "the Lord sent me to anoint you king [over His people Israel] . . . Go now and strike Amalek" (I Sam. 15:1-3). And similarly the commandment to cut off the descendants of Amalek preceded the commandment to build the Temple, from "as soon as the king was established in his house and the Lord had given him security from his enemies on all sides, he said to Nathan the prophet, 'Here I live

---

<sup>19</sup> Sanhedrin 20b.

in a house of cedar, while the Ark of God is housed behind curtains'" (II Sam. 7:1).

From this the ancients found occasion for further speculation as to why the Blessed One became angry with Israel when they requested a king for themselves, until the reply came from Him, may He be blessed, that "it is not you whom they have rejected but Me" (I Sam. 8:7). They understood this to mean that He was not angry with them because the request was inappropriate, but rather because their motivation was not to fulfill a commandment -- they were disgusted with the prophet Samuel, despite his reputation for perfection and the strength of his confirmation by signs, wonders, and mighty deeds.

But I am surprised by their interpretation, for they had not asked anything of Samuel until he was old, and it was well known that age weakens the faculty of governing. Also, he had already appointed his sons over them, although they were neither deserving nor fit for this. And behold, it is written by way of explanation, "when Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges over Israel. . . . But his sons did not follow in his ways; they were bent on gain, they accepted bribes, and they subverted justice" (I Sam. 8:1-3). About this it is said, "all the elders of Israel assembled . . . and they said, 'You have grown old, and your sons have not followed your ways. Therefore appoint a king for us'" (I Sam. 8:4-5).

So indeed, it was clear to [Samuel] that they had made their request properly, with wisdom, intelligence, purity of heart, and innocence, when he had grown old, as soon as they saw that he had appointed his sons and that there were grounds to suspect that it had not come about in that way from God, may He be blessed, but that it had happened only because he had chosen to bestow authority upon his sons. His sons, however, were not deserving of this -- in fact, they actually were deserving of immediate punishment without any special consideration.

Instead, in my opinion the reason for God's anger was that the monarchy had already been intended for the tribe of Judah, according to our patriarch Jacob's prophecy, as it is said, "the scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes and the homage of peoples be his" (Gen. 49:10). The word "until" [כִּי] does not teach about the duration of the decree, as if to say "until Shiloh comes, but after his coming it will depart," but rather it means "I will not leave you until I have done all that I promised you" (Gen. 28:16) -- that is, My providence will not depart from you until that of which I assured you reaches you, and then My providence over you will be perfect in every regard. It is like the word of a father to his son, "I will not cause my love to turn from you; rather, I shall benefit you constantly until I have enriched you greatly." And likewise here: the scepter of authority will not depart from Judah, nor the emblem of the monarchy from his descendants, as you see from the order of march,

his standard moving at the fore,<sup>20</sup> and in the episode of the concubine of Gibeah when Judah marched first into battle,<sup>21</sup> and similarly in every regard, until the anointed one comes who springs from [Judah], and the kingdom has established a sound reputation.

This anointed one, according to several commentaries,<sup>22</sup> is an allusion to David, and it is he that suits us here. For in the time of the prophet Samuel there was no one in the tribe of Judah worthy of being king, and it was an unfortunate matter to appoint as the first [king] someone other than a man fit and honored by his noble purpose. For this reason it was difficult in the eyes of God, may He be blessed, because the request could not be put off until a Judahite worthy of the kingship would emerge. Rather, they could do nothing but justly press their demand while Samuel was yet alive, occupied in his old age with rebuking his sons in order to guide them toward upright conduct, or with appointing others in their stead. And God, may He be blessed, did not refrain from acceding to their request, insofar as was possible, and He permitted them to appoint as king one who merited the choice from among the other tribes, until such time as there would arise in Judah one fit for this, and "then the Lord would grant Judah his portion" (Zechariah 2:16).

In my opinion, there is a grammatical point that helps and aids [us] in this matter, and that is that when He instructed the prophet

---

<sup>20</sup> Numbers 10:4.

<sup>21</sup> Judges 20:18.

<sup>22</sup> Sanhedrin 90b; Jerusalem Berachot 2:24.

to establish Saul as king, [Scripture] says, "the Lord had revealed to Samuel . . . 'at this time tomorrow I will send a man to you from the territory of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him ruler [מֶלֶךְ]" (I Sam. 9:15-6) -- but He did not say "king" (מֶלֶךְ). And when he came before him [He said] "this one shall govern [יִשָּׁלֵט] My people" (I Sam. 9:17) -- but He did not say "he will be king [מֶלֶךְ] over My people." And at the moment of anointing he said, "the Lord anoints you ruler [מֶלֶךְ]" (I Sam. 10:1), in the same way that it was spoken about Zerubbabel in Daniel's prophecy: "[from the time that the word went forth] that Jerusalem should be restored and rebuilt, until the appearance of an anointed one, a ruler [מֶלֶךְ], seven weeks [shall pass]" (Daniel 9:25).

The final word [on this matter] is that the word "kingship" was not applied to [Saul] until he sinned in regard to the burnt offering, at which time the tearing away of his kingship was prophesied,<sup>23</sup> when [Samuel] said to [Saul], "you acted foolishly . . . [Otherwise] the Lord would have established your dynasty over Israel forever. . . . But now your dynasty will not endure" (I Sam. 13:13-14). And likewise [he said] "I am the one the Lord sent to anoint you king . . . Now go, attack Amalek" (I Sam. 15:1-3), even the end of the matter was known to him from the start because of his prophecy, and he said concerning him, "[the Lord] has rejected you as king . . . and has given it to another who is worthier than you" (I Sam. 15:26-28).

<sup>23</sup> I Samuel 15:28. Cf. I Kings 11:11 and I Samuel 10:8.

And he said concerning this, "and moreover, the Glory of Israel neither deceives nor comforts" (I Sam. 15:29). Now "the Glory of Israel" may allude to God, may He be blessed, or to prophecy. [Prophecy] is called "the Glory of Israel" insofar as it is something unique to the Chosen People, as in the saying: "[Moses] asked that prophecy not dwell among the nations, and it was granted him."<sup>24</sup> And do not find any difficulty in their saying that a prophet did arise among the nations, and designating that it was Balaam, for we have already explained this in our commentary on *Masechet Avot* and elsewhere.

Now there is an allusion in his statement, "the Glory of Israel neither deceives, etc." (I Sam. 15:29) to the prophecy, "the scepter shall not depart from Judah" (Gen. 49:10), as if to say that the time had arrived to transfer the monarchy to his [brother tribe]. So when it came about that there was a righteous sprout in the tribe of Judah, God designated it for His kingship and applied to it in its time the name מלך, [as] in His statement, "[I am sending you] to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have decided on one of his sons to be king" (I Sam. 16:1), even though He had previously called this one, too, a נביא, in the statement of Samuel to Saul, "[the Lord] will seek out a man after His own heart and appoint him ruler [נביא]" (I Sam. 13:14).

But this was by way of etiquette, that he not compare him in his presence with one superior to him. And that, in my view, is

---

<sup>24</sup> *Serachet 7a.*

why this verse (Ps. 89:20) is juxtaposed with "I have found David, My servant; anointed him with My sacred oil" (Ps. 89:21) -- that is, "as soon as I found him I anointed him, for sovereignty had been coming to him from of old," because of his being the first worthy one to arrive from the tribe of Judah. [Thus] the intention of the verse "then You spoke" (Ps. 89:20a) is that you promised in a prophecy for the sake of Your faithful one to establish him as king, and You have kept Your word. [The verse] "I have exalted one chosen out of the people" (Ps. 89:20b) refers to his being chosen from among the other sons.

And it also appears to me that this is the matter about which the Rabbis spoke, may their memories be a blessing, when they said: "Over the downfall of Saul you sing? Had you been Saul and he David I would have wiped you out just like Saul."<sup>25</sup> Someone else has interpreted this to mean: "if you had been born under his [astrological] sign and he under yours." But it does not appear to me thus, especially since the principles of religion do not permit it, as we have explained elsewhere. But it seems to me correct to interpret it as we have written: if he had been from stock specified for sovereignty, as you are, or if you had merely been appointed, as he was, then I would have wiped you out, even though you are David. But you alone are the rightful heir to the kingdom, and an heir who occasionally sins is forgiven and is not scrutinized so closely. But one who is only appointed, or who is like a caretaker, is scrutinized for even the smallest of transgressions.

---

<sup>25</sup> Me'od Qatan 16b.

For this reason it also seems to me that Saul was anointed with anointing oil, as it is written, "Samuel took the flask of oil and poured some on [Saul's] head and kissed him" (I Sam. 10:1). Now certainly this was anointing oil, because he said "the flask of oil" -- that is, oil known and chosen for this, as it was said concerning David, "Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers" (I Sam. 16:13). But it is well known that the kings of Israel were not anointed with anointing oil, not even the first among them; or that if this was done then it was an abuse of the anointing oil. When Elisha anointed Jehu [he did not use] anointing oil but rather balsam oil, as it was said there, "the prophet Elisha summoned one of the disciples of the prophets and said to him, 'Tie up your skirts and take along this flask of oil'" (II Kings 9:1), which indicates that it was not anointing oil. And if that is the case, then Saul was not anointed with anointing oil because he was judged worthy of it, but because he was appointed in the place of the tribe that was worthy of it.<sup>26</sup>

It is [also] possible to interpret this verse (Ps. 89:20) as alluding to the prophecy of Samuel concerning [David]: i.e., "[then] You spoke in a vision to the prophet Samuel for the sake of Your faithful one, to make him successful in sovereignty."

Now everything that we have written about the word מְלִיכָאֵל assumes that it applies to an individual; that is, as if there were no

<sup>26</sup> See Maimonides, *Milchot Melachim* 1:37.

yod, and thus we heard in it an exact number. But you may find that the *yod* hints, according to this, to the prophecies of Jacob and Samuel — that is, "You already spoke on the subject of my monarchy to Jacob [in Genesis 49] and to Samuel, and You designated it to come to me by means of Your faithful ones [i.e., Jacob and Samuel]." [But] in any case, we wrote that it was spoken concerning an individual, and that the *lamed* in the word  $\text{לְיָדוֹ}$  meant "for the sake of" Your faithful one," or "concerning" Your faithful one, according to its meaning. But [  $\text{לְיָדוֹ}$  ] may actually allude to Jacob or Samuel, or to the two of them together, with the stress not being upon him; that is, not upon David.

According to this view it may be discerned that [David] is not counted among the prophets but only among those who speak with divine inspiration. Now you already know what we have learned from the words of our Rabbis, may their memories be a blessing, that the holiness of the biblical books is divided into degrees; i.e., the holiness of the Pentateuch is of the highest level, and the Prophetic books are of a lower level of holiness than the Pentateuch but higher than the Writings, and the Writings are of a lower level of holiness than either of them. It appears that their idea, may peace be upon them, was that the Writings were not strictly speaking prophetic [compositions], but rather they were written with divine inspiration. The difference between prophecy and divine inspiration is that prophecy does not come except to one who is perfect from the root of his existence in the preparation of the two necessary faculties, which are the imagination and the intellect, and

this person comes as close as possible to the highest perfection of human intelligence. At the moment of prophecy, for most prophets, the sensory faculties are suddenly suspended, and his imagination sees as if someone is speaking with him, or he hears a voice speaking similes, and he understands among them that which is to be conveyed in his prophecy. There is division among the prophets at this level, as well, some ranking above others in various facets by a great deal or by a little. And in particular, the prophecy of Moses, may peace be upon him, was not of the same type as that of any other prophet; he was different from all of them, higher than them in many regards [which have] already been clarified in several of our essays.

Divine inspiration is of a lower level than prophecy. [It occurs] when the divine spirit awakens a complete man who is occupied with divine matters, and praise and thanks, or words of insight and instruction appear upon his tongue. This was the understanding of the ancient ones concerning King David, may peace be upon him, that he was not included among the prophets but [among those who speak] with divine inspiration.<sup>27</sup>

But it is appropriate to inquire [about this], for indeed we find in several places in this Book of Psalms full-fledged prophecies of the future, particularly of the destruction of the Temple and its rebuilding, and other future things, to the extent that several Sages explain that everything like this in [the book] are psalms of

---

<sup>27</sup> Berachot 4b; Pesachim 117a.

various [other] prophets which David wrote in his book. As [the Rabbis] said,<sup>28</sup> David wrote his book <sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> ten elders: Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, Korah's three sons, and Moses. We find psalms in the names of seven of them: the sons of Korah (whose names, according to the Rabbis, were Asir, Elkanah, and Abi-asaph), Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, and Moses, the man of God. And as for the remaining three who are not mentioned, Adam, Melchizedek, and Abraham, the opinion of the Rabbis, may their memories be a blessing, was that Adam recited the Song for the Sabbath Day (Psalm 92) — [he was created] on the eve of Sabbath, and he arose early on Sabbath morning and recited the Song for the Sabbath Day.<sup>29</sup> And they said that "Eitan Ha-Ezrahi was our father Abraham" [i.e., he recited Psalm 89],<sup>30</sup> and that Melchizedek recited the psalm, "the Lord said to my lord" (Ps. 110),<sup>31</sup> from [the verse]

וְיָשַׁב מִלְכִּיזֶדֶק (Ps. 110:4).

But all this was in the fashion of a *derash*, for if Asir, Elkanah, and Abi-asaph were prophets, their prophecy could not have been unknown before David. Rather, "sons of Korah" was what David generally called the Levites.<sup>32</sup> All of this is clarified along with other general matters concerning the book in the commentary on the word *mizmor* (Ps. 3:1).<sup>33</sup> Similarly, various other matters

<sup>28</sup> Baba Batra 14b-15a.

<sup>29</sup> Genesis Rabbah 22:13.

<sup>30</sup> Baba Batra 15a.

<sup>31</sup> Rashi, in his comment on the passage in Baba Batra 14b-15a.

<sup>32</sup> I.e., Korah's sons were not psalm-writing prophets; they were merely Levites to whom David gave his psalms.

<sup>33</sup> See p. 85 below.

need to be explained with specific reference to the *peshat* of the text, as each psalm in turn is explained.

Also, in their opinion, Daniel [delivered] powerful prophecies, marvelous in their revelation of secrets, some of which were clear and some of which are hidden until the end of time when the time arrives to clarify and elucidate them. But they also explained that both David and Daniel were prophets, without, however, being like the other prophets, and therefore [their books] are not included among the books of the prophets. But this, in my opinion, is wrong, for even the other prophets differed one from another in various degrees, and in any case, any prophet whose words were spoken in prophecy would have had to be included in the order of the Prophets. The key fact, in my opinion, is that the words of any prophet who was not sent to the people to reprove them for wicked behavior or to guide them in upright behavior or to command them in public affairs and in war are not included among the prophetic books, even though he may have been a prophet. [Thus] the Book of Joshua is found to command and guide the people in matters of war involving the conquest of the land and the vanquishing of enemies, which is likewise the central concern of the Book of Judges, conjoined with the matters of Deborah and Gideon. In the Book of Samuel the kingship is prophesied and established through his prophecy together with that of the prophet Nathan, and all the more so in the Book of Kings with the great prophecies of Elijah and Elisha and the others which are recorded there. And there is no need to speak about the four last books, all of which prophesied

about their people, and whose length is in their reproofs and admonitions.

But David and Daniel are not of this type, their prophecies being of future events only. And the intention of Ezra's book, with his being, as is well-known, the prophet Malachi,<sup>34</sup> was only to describe the return from Exile and how it was hurried along, and what it includes by way of reproach is only part of the story, for [the reproaches] had already been written in the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (who was Ezra). And this was likewise the central concern of Chronicles. The words of Solomon are certainly not on a par with those of Samuel, for Song of Songs is nothing other than the story of the great affection between the nation and God, while Kohelet is concerned with wisdom, and Proverbs with wisdom and ethics. Similarly, Job was written to inform [us] about the traditional controversy over divine providence and its resolution, and Ruth is merely a story whose sole purpose is to inform us of the ancestry of King David, may peace be upon him. Esther tells us about the great miracle, and Lamentations is a lamentation over the destruction [of the Temple].

Now surely all of these were uttered and written through divine inspiration, and thereby they are all included among the Writings, even though David, Daniel, and Ezra were themselves prophets, and in spite of what our Rabbis said of Daniel concerning the verse in which it says "the men who were with me did not see

---

<sup>34</sup> Negilah 15a.

the vision" (Daniel 10:7): "Who were these men? — Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Did he rank higher or they? They explained: they ranked higher than he, for they were prophets and he was not a prophet; and he ranked higher than they, for he saw the vision and they did not."<sup>35</sup> Thus the meaning of the words "Daniel was not a prophet" was precisely as we have explained, that it did not happen that his words would be included among the books of the prophets.

And now, with God's help, let us begin our explanation of the book, and we say . . .

---

<sup>35</sup> Megillah 3a.

# COMMENTARY ON PSALM THREE — EXCERPT

. . . The understanding of the Rabbis, may their memories be a blessing, appears to be that it was possible to use the term *שירה* to refer to words uttered in anguish or as supplication during distress only insofar as they possessed an element of consolation or gladness. In their opinion, there was reason to be puzzled over how to treat several *שירי שירה* that were uttered purely in anguish or by way of supplication, such as "When Doeg the Edomite came" (Ps. 52), or "When the Ziphites came" (Ps. 54). And if [David] was glad because of [his] trust and because of the shining of the divine spirit upon him concerning his deliverance, then what do we make of all the *שירי שירה* uttered as laments over the exile and the destruction of the Temple? Perhaps even these contain within them the hint of a prophecy of consolation.

In any case, according to the plain sense, they were not designated as *שירי שירה* at the moment of the event [that occasioned their composition]. Rather, after [David] escaped he would compose his song; ultimately he gathered them together and set them to be sung in the Temple — including those that were uttered concerning the exile, in order to give knowledge of the final redemption.

Now because you are familiar with [our] introduction, you must recall our previous discussion of the Rabbis' opinion, may peace be

upon them, that David composed [  $\gamma\alpha\eta$  ] this book '  $\gamma$  '  $\delta\gamma$  ten elders.<sup>1</sup> What they meant was that each of these ten wrote [  $\gamma\alpha\eta$  ] a few psalms, and David compiled [  $\gamma\alpha\eta$  ] them in this book along with the psalms that he himself had written. We have already explained that the ten elders were Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, Moses, and the three sons of Korah.

Now this statement is to be taken figuratively, for even if according to the plain sense it was possible in a few instances that this was the case, such as with "the prayer of Moses" (Ps. 90), which [David] might have found and written [  $\alpha\eta$  ] in his book, it must be understood, nevertheless, that David wrote the rest of them and gave them to the Levites — whom he generally called "the sons of Korah" — to sing before the Ark. From among the Levites he specifically mentioned the most important: Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, and Eitan Ha-Ezrahi. That is why it is written: "then on that day David first commissioned Asaph and his kinsmen to give praise to the Lord" (I Chron. 16:7). This is also the reason why he said: "To the leader,  $\delta\gamma$  Jeduthun, a psalm of David" (Ps. 62:1). And even in regard to Moses [i.e., in reference to Psalm 90] — it is possible that this was a particular Levite in [David's] generation. Thus David wrote all of them [that bore the names of others], along with those not bearing any name and those bearing David's name alone. . . .

---

<sup>1</sup> Baba Batra 14b-15a.

## COMMENTARY ON PSALM TWO

[1] *Why are the nations in a tumult, etc.:* you must understand that the psalms were not written in this book according to the order of the occurrences that befell David. For instance, the psalm after this one was clearly uttered during his flight from his son Absalom, yet several psalms were uttered afterwards which concern matters that befell him before the incident with Absalom. Thus they were not uttered in the order of occurrence, and perhaps he did not even compose them [מאן] in this order, but rather he would write them [מאן] in the order in which God placed them in his mouth — the same order in which he composed them -- and not in the order of their occurrence.

This is the psalm, according to most commentators, that David uttered at the beginning of his reign, or which someone else composed about him, concerning the time when the nations gathered against him, as it is written: "when the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king over Israel, the Philistines marched up in search of David, and he went to the fortress, and the Philistines came and spread out over the Valley of Rephaim . . . And David defeated them there and he said, 'the Lord has broken through my enemies before me as waters break through [a dam]'" (II Sam. 5:17-20). And similarly a second time it is said there, "once again the Philistines marched up . . . and he routed the Philistines from Geba all

the way to Gezer" (II Sam. 5:22-25). For these miracles and for the victory he achieved at the beginning of his reign, [David] praised God and sang -- he or another about him.

*Why are the nations in a tumult* means "why do they create an uproar," and *plot vain things* means that they spoke arrogantly of vain and empty things.

[2] *Kings of the earth take their stand*: i.e., the rulers of Philistine.

He called them kings because of their prideful self-image, and thus *and regents intrigue together*, they took counsel together, *against the Lord and against His anointed* -- against David, who had been anointed by the command of God.

[3] And they were saying *Let us break their bonds*; i.e., the bonds forged between all of Israel when they agreed to make David their king. And he himself is the referent of *and shake off their ropes from us*.

[4] And he said *He who is enthroned in heaven laughs*, likening God to one who mocks something which he considers utterly insignificant.

[5] *Then He speaks to them* refers to God in His anger -- He who placed them in the hand of David. And there are those who interpret the word *רָצַח* to mean "kills," as in "she killed [*רָצַח*] all who were of royal stock" (II Chron. 22:10), and the word *מַלְכֵי* has the same meaning as in "the nobles of the land [*מַלְכֵי הָאָרֶץ*]" (Ezekiel 17:13), that is, "their mighty ones."

[6] *But I have installed My king:* they understood this as a statement of the poet in the words of God; that is, "how can they think to abolish his monarchy when I have made him king?"

*Installed* (׳נ׳׳) is to be derived from the word ״׳׳ ("princes"), and *My king* means "the king who is Mine" -- he is king and he is Mine. The opposite of this is "O God, my king from of old" (Ps. 74:12), which means "the one who rules over me." This ambiguity always occurs in the use of pronominal suffixes, as in "I have heard your prayer [״״״״״]" (I Kings 9:3), "[I will] let them rejoice in My house of prayer [״״״״״]" (Isaiah 56:7), "take away Your plague from me [״״״״]" (Ps. 39:11), and "my friends and companions stand back from my affliction [״״״״]" (Ps. 38:12).

So he said *I have installed My king* to mean "I have anointed you to be king over Israel." Now it is possible to understand that this was David's statement, as if to say, "how can they think of unseating me, while I am God's servant and I glorify Him and declare His unity and exalt His kingdom over Zion, etc."

[7] David or one speaking for him said *Let me tell of the decree*, that is, "let me tell of this matter. I take upon myself an obligation to tell of this matter and make it known; that is, *the Lord said, etc.*" Now I interpret this to mean: *let me tell* of that which seems to be a decree in my view; that is, something for which there is no reason except the declaration of the [heavenly] king. This was an example of humility, for [David] did not consider himself worthy of ruling. But this

was the decree: *the Lord said to me, 'You are My son',* meaning, "I have singled you out to be king before Me" — in the same way that a son is reserved for the service and love of his father, or as it was said of all Israel, "You are children of the Lord your God" (Deut. 14:1).

And the statement *I have fathered you this day* alludes to the day on which He anointed him king, and it means "I have raised you and formed you to the extent that you have become worthy of this." We find here a word for childbearing [נָאָה] that concerns upbringing and chastisement, as in "before the mountains were born [יָלַד הָרִים] (Ps. 90:2) and "the Rock that begot you [יָלַד יְהוָה] (Deut. 32:18), in place of [a word for] forming [בָּרָא].

There is perhaps a hint in *You are My son; I have fathered you this day* that on that very day divine inspiration flickered on [within him], as in the statement "the spirit of God gripped David from that day on" (I Sam. 16:13). We also find that just as righteous people are called children, so it is said concerning them that God fathered them, as in the verse "you neglected the Rock that begot you; forgot the God who brought you forth" (Deut. 32:18) — God is like a father to you, and like a mother, who is called the one who brings forth. And it is in regard to human affairs that God, may He be blessed, is the One who raises and chastises, as in the verse "I have reared children and brought them up" (Isaiah 1:2), and as it is said about Solomon in the Book of Samuel in the prophecy of Nathan, "he shall build a house for My name . . . I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to Me" (II Sam. 7:13).

[8] *Ask it of Me, etc.*: that is, God said to him *ask it of Me, and I*

*will give you nations as your domain, etc.*, as He said, "I will cut down all of your enemies before you" (I Chron. 17:18).

And thus it also says there, "David became famous throughout the lands, and the Lord put the fear of him in all the nations"

(I Chron. 14:17). And the interpretation of *the limits of the earth* [ג'לע 'ארץ] is "the ends [קצות] of the earth."

[9] And similarly He said to him *You can smash them*, which means that God said to David that he could smash and shatter the nations *with an iron mace* — that is, with strength and might. *Shatter them like potter's ware* means break them and smash them, so that they be like scattered straw or earthen vessels made by a potter. This points out [David's] heroism and the weakness of those fighting against him.

[10] And David, or the poet writing about him, said as if he were speaking directly to his enemies, *So now, O kings, be prudent*: that is, look closely, because this is from the Lord: how can you hope to overturn it?

[11] *Serve the Lord in awe* means "you must be humble before Him." *Rejoice with trembling* means "show yourselves to take delight in that which you tremble from, inasmuch as it is God's will." Or it may be interpreted as "you must be thankful to God, for even your deliverance He has granted you, so rejoice in it with trembling;" that is, with the thought that He is able to take it

away from you just as He gave it to you. Or we may interpret *in trembling* to mean that "even when you serve Him in awe, you must rejoice rather than tremble" -- that is, unlike those of whom it is said, "the godless are seized with trembling" (Isaiah 33:14).

[12] [  $\aleph$   $\aleph$  ]: it appears that  $\aleph$  is related to  $\aleph'$  ["bearing arms," perhaps after I Chron. 12:2), and  $\aleph$  is related to purity, as if to say, "arm and clothe yourselves with dignity and integrity." Because weapons [  $\aleph$  ] and armaments are instruments with which a man may cover himself from head to toe, he likened this dressing [with integrity] to being armed.

*Lest*, i.e., if you do not do this, *He will be angered and your way be doomed; i.e., from the straight path. Or it can be interpreted* like one who has lost his way and does not know where to turn towards his destination.

*In the mere flash of His anger:* if you persist in your evil ways for even a little while longer.

And the conclusion of the matter is *Happy are all who take refuge in Him.*

There are those who interpret  $\aleph$  from "kisses of the mouth" (Song of Songs 1:2), and  $\aleph$  as "son," as if to say "acknowledge the reign of this son," along the lines of His saying *You are My son. He said kiss the son* as an exaggerated praise for the monarchy, like a kiss on the hand in praise of the king. But the first interpretation seems preferable.

Our Rabbis, may peace be upon them, interpret the entire psalm to be about the future redemption to be enacted by the King Messiah.<sup>1</sup> *Why [are the nations] in a tumult* refers to the war of Gog and Magog, and certainly the psalm can be fully explained according to this view. As far as I am concerned it is as he said, *Happy are all who take refuge in Him*, although the time has become long, to the point that the nation has practically lost hope in Him. In any case, happy is the one who takes refuge in Him and He arrives; "happy the man who waits and lives to see the completion" (Daniel 12:12).

---

<sup>1</sup> Berachot 7b.

## COMMENTARY ON PSALM EIGHT

[1] *For the leader, on the gittith, etc.:* it appears that gittith was the name of a particular kind of musical instrument. It was called that because it was manufactured in Gath, or perhaps because it was invented by one of the expert musicians in Gath.

This psalm is directed against those who deny the creation of the world *ex nihilo* and Divine Providence, and against those who deny the other fundamental principles and dogmas which have become known through the prophecies of the Torah. In my opinion he said gittith in reference to the Torah; that is, the ark of God containing the Torah which was placed in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite (II Sam. 6:10). After three months David brought it up to his city and his house with great joy and singing. At that time he recited this psalm in honor of the Torah, and as a statement against those who deny the doctrines of faith written and alluded to in it.

Concerning this he said: *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth.* He said this in amazement and extravagant praise of the abundant manifestation of His providence in the lower realms, as if to say, "how widely recognized and well-known is Your providence in the world! Who could deny it!?"

The word וְכִ is used in place of the word כִּ ("if"), as in וְכִי־עָלָה (Lev. 4:22), which means, "if a prince should sin."

The word וְיִ is an infinitive used in place of a past tense, for an infinitive may be used in place of a past tense, as in "even the

hind in the field forsakes her newborn fawn [חַיָּלָהּ בְּיָדָהּ] (Jeremiah 14:5), which means that she bore [her fawn] and then abandoned her. Thus it is as if he had said, "if You had covered the heavens with Your splendor," which means: even though You have covered the heavens with Your splendor, Your providence does not end there. Rather, Your honor and providence are spread throughout the earth, and Your great exaltation does not prevent You from extending Your providence even to the lowly.

It is also possible to understand *How majestic is Your name*

*throughout the earth* to mean that created beings multiply Your praise as much as they are able, and Your name is majestic among them, as in "praise of Him covers the skies, adoration of Him fills the earth" (Habakkuk 3:3).

[3] With *From the mouths of infants and sucklings You have founded strength*, he alludes to the creation of the world *ex nihilo* described at the beginning of the Torah, so that from the very beginning of his education, the suckling would grow up believing in creation *ex nihilo*, which then entails faith in all the fundamental principles. *Strength* is that faith in these fundamental principles that is founded in accordance with them.

*On account of Your foes*: it was His wisdom, may He be blessed, to concentrate their [i.e., the infants and sucklings] attention on this article of faith, so that they would grow up strong in it from their youth, and so that those who oppose them would be unable to get them to follow their ideas. And this is why he said: *to put an end to enemy and avenger*.

The word *avenger* is applied here to one who, in his self-righteousness, denies faith because he perceives an absence of order, with evil surrounding him, and he becomes aggravated at these arrangements of the living God, to the point of ascribing weakness and lack of governance to Him, and he attributes everything to chance or to astrological determinism. This is the meaning of *avenger*. That is to say, he seeks for himself an occasion for vengeance against the decrees of God. The word is in the *hitpa'el* form according to one of the meanings of the reflexive sense, but it is unlike the sense of *הִתְפַּלֵּל* ("to become poor"), or *הִתְעַלֵּל* ("to become rich").

- [4] After relating faith in creation *ex nihilo* and in providence, David, in extravagant praise of His exalted status and recognition of his own lowliness in comparison with other created beings, says *When [ 'ו ] I behold Your heavens, etc.*: that is, when (-ל) I behold Your heavens, I recognize my own lowliness.
- [5] *What is man that You have been mindful of him*: that is, to extend Your providence to him. And [David] himself is the referent of *mortal man that You have taken note of him*.
- [6] *You have made him little less than the angels*: it is not only that You have extended Your providence to him, but that You have also granted him a discerning soul that is conjoined with that of the upper beings, so that he is little short of being an angel. This is the significance of *[You have] adorned him with*

*glory and majesty*, which means that You have crowned him and made him ruler and director of the lower regions.

[7] *You have made him master, etc:* i.e., [he has] authority over all the beasts and animals and birds, to cross with them *the paths of the sea*, to rule from one end of the earth to the other.

[8] O Lord, our Lord: I see nothing in this but the universal extent of Your providence and Your unity throughout the world. That is how it appears to me, although other commentators expound upon it in others ways, as you may understand from their commentaries.

## COMMENTARY ON PSALM FORTY-FIVE

[1] *For the leader, etc.*: concerning the word shoshanim it seems that this was a particular musical instrument.

The word maskil means to arouse a person's heart to devote full attention to a matter.

*A love song*: this is a *mashal* about great love and special affection.

This entire preamble [i.e. verse 1] indicates that this psalm concerns a highly important topic, and that it alludes to a great man. That is why [others] have interpreted it to be prophecy concerning the monarchy of Solomon: his success, his wisdom, his having been chosen from among the other brothers, the parade of princesses testing him with riddles, and the many women who gained notoriety due to his passion for them.<sup>1</sup>

Now it is certainly true that these words may be applied to [Solomon]. But the correct interpretation is that because the preceding psalm [Psalm 44] is a lengthy exposition of the sorrows of Exile, and [this psalm] dwells on the consolation of Redemption, it must then allude to the King Messiah for whom we all hope.

[2] It says in this regard: *My heart is astir* [לִנְדָּד] *with gracious words*. *Astir* indicates a light and small movement, from "the trembling of his lips."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, an insect may be called a לִנְדָּד because of the lightness of its movement.

---

<sup>1</sup> Midrash Tehillim 45:6.

<sup>2</sup> Sanhedrin 90b; Megillah 27b.

*My heart* [לִּבִּי] is in place of "my intellect" [מוֹחִי], as if to say,

"He has moved my intellect with the power of prophecy" —

i.e., with the *gracious words*.

*I speak*: this is spoken as a preface. That is, לְמַלְכִּי — this poetic work — is *for a king* — the chosen king who will arise in the future.

*My tongue is the pen of an expert scribe*: that is, it speaks according to an outline, and its words are arranged in the manner of [words written by] a pen placed in the hand of an expert scribe.

[3] *You are fairer* [יָפְיָךְ], etc.: there are those who interpret any instance of the doubling of letters as an intensification, as in this case, or as with קִרְקָר [dark green], סָמָסָם [dark red], or חִחִחִח [dark black]. In any event, several authorities maintain that any doubling of the first two letters of the root serves to intensify the meaning of the word (as in the example before us), but any doubling of the second and third letters of the root serves to weaken the meaning, as in סָמָסָם [light red] and קִרְקָר [light green]. This is as the Rabbis said, may their memories be a blessing: "it is a mixture of the two," that is, it is a combination of colors tending to redness.<sup>3</sup> But according to all of them, this instance serves to strengthen the expression of beauty and to ascribe to him a beauty beyond that of any other mortal.

<sup>3</sup> Mishnah Nega'im 1:2.

After praising the beauty of his form he praises the sweetness of his speech. This is what is meant by *grace is poured out by your lips*. That is, it is as if grace were poured out from his mouth. And since the tongue is the emissary of the mind, it turns out that he praises him for three qualities: for beauty, for intellect, and for pleasantness of speech.

That is why he said that God has blessed him, [to indicate] that his kingship would be eternal [*rightly has God given you an eternal blessing*]. Now if this had been said regarding Solomon, then *סלוד* would mean whenever sovereignty would be restored to Israel it would be restored to him; i.e., to his descendants. Or it could refer to all the days of his life, for *סלוד* sometimes refers to eternal time, as it is with God; sometimes to the lifetime of a mortal man; and sometimes to a protracted period of time. If [this was said] regarding the Messiah, *סלוד* would allude to the eternity of his reign; that is, to the establishment of "a kingdom that shall not be transferred to another people" (Daniel 2:44).

[4] Afterwards, he praised his might and righteousness, saying *gird your sword upon your thigh* [ *ק* ]. This means "on the hips [ *סני* ]," for they are part of the thigh.

And then *your splendor and glory* will be in your victory.

[5] *In your glory [win success; ride on in the cause of truth and meekness and right]:* your glory is that you shall triumph and ride on, not for the purpose of malice or victory, but that you might restore *truth and meekness and right* [ *אמת ורחמים וצדק* ].



הארון / הברית ["the Ark of the Covenant" — Joshua 3:14] and  
 הצבא המלחמה ["the fighting force" — Joshua 8:11].

*Is everlasting:* as long as the world stands upon its foundation.

*Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity:* because *you love righteousness and hate all evil.*

[8] *Rightly has God, your God, chosen to anoint you:* the God of all the world is in particular your God, in that His providence is attached to you especially with extra intensity.

*Oil of gladness:* that is, select oil, which delights God and men *over all your peers.* This is a metaphor for the establishment of the monarchy, in accordance with "the Lord has anointed you as king" (I Sam. 15:17).

Afterwards [verse 9] he praises him as possessing the finest qualities that can be suggested by clothing, such as "may your clothes always be white" (Ecclesiastes 9:8), or "take the filthy garments off him! . . . You shall be clothed in priestly robes" (Zechariah 3:4). And as my father taught, may his memory be a blessing, "the fragrance of the garments of the righteous is a foretaste of the world to come."

[9] The foregoing is the meaning of *All your robes are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.* That is, anyone who approaches [your clothes] will smell the fine fragrance as though all those perfumes were really there. All of this is a *mashal* for the sweetness of his qualities.

*From ivory palaces:* that is, the clothes are brought out for you from a place where they were hidden in ivory palaces. The

allusion here is that these qualities will come to you from the One who prepares them, in order to perfect you and dispatch you to enliven the redemption of His people. He likens the heavens to ivory palaces by way of hyperbole for the listener, which is why he says again *lutes entertain you*.

*מִן שְׂמֵחָם*: the *yod* of *מִן* is superfluous. The meaning of the phrase is "from where they delight you," i.e., from the place where your delight and success issue forth."

[10] *Royal princesses are your favorites* [ *בָּנוֹת מַלְכִים בְּיָקָרְתֶּיךָ*]: the word *בָּנוֹת* is used to indicate that they are under his authority, just as a wife is turned over to the authority of her husband. The word *בְּיָקָרְתֶּיךָ* is spoken concerning a gathering of notables; that is, "those under your governance and authority" [i.e., the nations]. The congregation of Israel, however, holds the highest rank and is the special recipient of your assistance above any of the others, just as a man's special consort is always [welcome in] his bedchamber, and she stands *at your right hand, decked in gold of Ophir*. The image is that she is the queen, while the others are young women who only infrequently come before the king when they are summoned by name.

[11] Thus he arouses the nations to repent and join us beneath the wings of our Torah, wholeheartedly, without deceit, on account of fear of God alone.

And he says concerning each one of them: *Take heed, lass, and note*. That is, "think carefully," and *incline your ear* to hear

the truth, and completely *forget your people and your father's house.*

- [12] And in such a way as to *let the king be aroused by your beauty*, that he recognize you, *for he is your lord* — he alone — *so bow down to him.* Now if the psalm is interpreted as pertaining to Solomon, this refers to the foreign wives who should convert to his faith. But the essential interpretation is that it pertains to the messiah.

- [13] He continues by saying *O Tyrian lass, [the wealthiest people will court your favor with gifts]*: that is, "as for you, O Tyrian lass, who are the greatest of the princesses, the wealthiest people will court you and offer you gifts. And so too, along with you, the remaining maidservants who are akin to you" [i.e., because of your access to the king].

- [14] And that is the sense of כֶּלֶם כְּבוֹדָהּ בֵּית מַלְךְ בְּנִמְנֵם: that is, delicate, delightful, their dresses covered with gold brocade.

- [15] And each one of them *is led inside to the king in embroidered [dress — שְׂרָקְמֹת]*. The lamed of שְׂרָקְמֹת is in place of a bet, as in הִרְגֹתִי אֶפְצָדִי ["I have slain a man for wounding me" — Gen. 4:23].

Afterwards it says that the lowly maidservants who have no religion, like virgins who have not known any man, are drawn to the great nation, and *her companions* — all of them — *are presented to you.*

[16] *They are led in with joy and gladness; they enter the palace of the king:* to be sheltered under his wings.

[17] And as an assurance of the continuation of his reign generation after generation to eternity, he said by way of prophecy: *Your sons will succeed your ancestors; you will appoint them princes and rulers throughout the land.*

[18] He will *commemorate your fame for all generations . . . Peoples will praise you:* that is, they will accept his sovereignty and acknowledge that none will ever contest him, as it says, "You, O Judah, your brothers shall acknowledge" (Gen. 49:8).

Now this is the subject of the psalm, although the Rabbis interpreted it to be about Abraham.<sup>4</sup>

They said: *You are fairer than all men* [ *אֲדָרְבָּי* ]: adorned [ *אֲדָרְבָּי* ] in the upper realm — "I am your shield" (Gen. 15:1) — adorned in the lower realm — "you are God's prince among us" (Gen. 23:6).

*Your speech is endowed with grace:* behold, "I venture [to speak]" (Gen. 18:27-31).

*Rightly has God given you an eternal blessing.* "And the Lord blessed Abraham in all things" (Gen. 24:1).

*Gird your sword* refers to his victory over the four kings.<sup>5</sup>

To these the following are added:

<sup>4</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 50:5.

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 14:1-12.

*Win success, ride on:* i.e., to return the nations to the worship of God, not out of a desire for authority or for victory, but only *in the cause of truth*. And not boastfully, but in *meekness*. He told of his love for righteousness and his hatred of evil, for which reason he was chosen.

*Take heed, lass, and note* refers to his having dispatched a mission to find Rebecca for his son Isaac. It refers to her worthy qualities that made her suitable to be his wife, along the lines of the praises written in the book of instruction for women of valor.<sup>6</sup> She abandoned her household, her people, those who spoke her language, their customs of adornment, [even] her longings for her father's house. All this could be said of Rebecca, as a number of our sages have explained. Therefore all other women should be constrained to listen to her.

And again he blessed and said, *Your sons will succeed your ancestors, etc.*

There are also some who interpret this psalm in a esoteric manner. They give to the intellect the name "king," because it is the intellect that rules over wisdom until it is perfected in the upper realm. [The intellect] is like the image of a bridegroom, and the soul, which yearns for the intellect, is like a bride. [Thus] he said  $\aleph' \partial' \partial'$  rather than  $\aleph' \partial'$  to indicate that it was not initially created that way, but that it slowly improved itself. *Your speech is endowed with grace:* this is all a continuation of the

---

<sup>6</sup> i.e., Prov. 31, according to Meiri's interpretation.

*mashal*, the girding on of a weapon and the victory over opposing forces, until it calls them *the king's enemies*.

*Take heed, lass*: this concerns the soul, that she devote all her attention to the Lord and pay no heed whatsoever to anything else. This is what is meant by means her *father's house*, not that she should forget the Father Himself.

*O Tyrian lass*: this is a *mashal* based on the fact that Tyre was the most honored city at that time, of which it was said, "her profits shall go to those who abide before the Lord" (Isaiah 23:18). The *mashal* concerns the turning of the wise toward Him.

The remainder of the psalm continues this *mashal*. Now these words are fine in themselves, but they do not accord well with the plain meaning of the text.

## COMMENTARY ON PSALM ONE HUNDRED TEN

[1] *Of David. A Psalm. The Lord said to my lord, etc.:* it is well known that David used to compose the psalms by divine inspiration and give them to the Levites to sing in the courtyard in front of the altar, as is described in the Book of Chronicles, when the Ark was brought up from the house of Obed-edom to stand inside the tent which he had pitched for it (I Chron. 16:1). It is said there, "from among the Levites he appointed [before the Ark of the Lord] ministers to invoke, to praise, and to extol the Lord God of Israel" (I Chron. 16:4), and it is also said there concerning the psalm "Praise the Lord; call on His name" (Ps. 105), "he appointed Nathan [the prophet] at [their] head to praise the Lord through Asaph and his brothers" (I Chron. 16:8).

Thus David must have composed the psalms that he might give them to the Levites to recite. He composed this psalm about God's promise to him to establish him in an everlasting dynasty, so that regardless of who became king in Israel, the kingship would revert to him. Thus the word *to my Lord* [לַיְיָ לַדָּוִד] spoken here refers to David, for if he had said, "the Lord said to me," it would have been inappropriate for the Levites to recite it in the Temple Court.

Although many psalms were uttered concerning David and were written in the first person referring to him, such as "O Lord, my foes are so many" (Ps. 3:2), or "answer me when I call" (Ps. 4:2), or "How long, O Lord, will You ignore me?" (Ps. 13:2),

and many others, it nevertheless seems to me that the subject matter of these prayers might apply to many people who could use them for themselves, according to the nature of their distress. Or they might be applied generally to the community with reference to redemption or suffering, for the community is often spoken of in the singular. But this psalm is not a prayer; it is an acknowledgement of God's promise to prosper him and establish his monarchy, and the first-person voice was not possible.

Now although we find something like this in Psalm 2, "the Lord said to me, 'you are My son'" (Ps. 2:7), in that instance he first had said, "against the Lord and against His anointed" (verse 2), and "He who is enthroned in heaven laughs" (verse 4), so he had [already] connected God's words to David's monarchy, and in this way David's words were reflected back upon himself. But in this case it would not have been appropriate for a singer in the Temple Court to begin speaking in the first person, and thus he said *The Lord said to my lord*, which means that He spoke to him by way of prophecy, or that means "concerning my lord."

*Sit at My right hand:* [this is a *mashal*] which means, "trust in My right hand while I shield you from all your enemies."

This is the meaning of *until I make your enemies your footstool*: that is, you shall tread upon their high places and rule over them. The word <sup>רַחֵם</sup> (*until*) is used in the same way as "[I will not leave you] until I have done [what I have promised you]" (Gen. 28:15), as if to say, "you shall dwell in safety; I will not abandon you. And then after I have made your enemies your

footstool, you shall dwell in safety, because I shall shield you." He said this at the beginning of his reign against those who schemed to overthrow his monarchy.

- [2] *Your mighty scepter*: that is, the scepter of sovereignty, as in "the scepter shall not depart from Judah" (Gen. 49:10).

*The Lord will stretch forth from Zion; hold sway* -- i.e., rule -- *over your enemies*. That is, "You will reign within their borders."

- [3] *Your people come forward willingly on your day of battle*: when the time comes to gather your army to fight against your enemies, it will come forward willingly. Thus He promises him that he will be dear in the hearts and souls of his people. This is like the statement of a wise man to one of the kings: Appeal to the hearts of the people, that you may rule [their] hearts and not [their] bodies alone.

The meaning of *in majestic holiness* is "for the sake of majestic holiness." That is, for the sake of your great stature and majestic holiness in integrity and in the prevention of any iniquity, you will be beloved by your people. Most kings lust after the people's wealth and try to extract it in so many ways, but as for you -- the Lord your God has not appointed you for this purpose.

*From the womb, from the dawn* [ *מִבֶּטֶן מִדְּמַחַר* ]: it seems to me that the word *מִדְּמַחַר* denotes "ruling," as in the rabbinic expression *הִתְחַבֵּר לְרֹאשׁ הַבֵּית וְכָל הַבֵּית יִשְׁמָעוּ* ["Stick to the skipper and everyone will

bow to you"],<sup>1</sup> or "be swift [to do service] to a superior and kindly to the great!"<sup>2</sup> [And note] "I have not taken an ass from any one of them [יָקִיץ אֶת אֶתְמוֹן מִיָּד אֶתְמוֹן אֶתְמוֹן]" (Numbers 16:15), where יָקִיץ is translated by the *Targum* as

[And *From the*] womb [אֶתְמוֹן]: since the root meaning here refers to the place of birth, he refers metaphorically to any beginning.

*The dew:* since dew is pleasing to everyone, all good direction and right conduct is called dew, as in the statement "may my discourse come down as rain, my speech distill as dew" (Deut. 32:2), whether regarding a suitable or unsuitable disciple. This can be likened to rain, for when men are in need of it, and enough to satisfy them finally arrives, they immediately become disgusted with it. It is the same with a sage who has an unpleasant personality. Even though people may need him at times for matters of instruction, as soon as they are done with him they immediately become disgusted by him. But a suitable disciple with a pleasant personality is like dew that descends every day regardless of need. He is pleasing to others even when his instruction is not needed, and his words are pleasant, and they are accepted by all who hear them. Now it is well-known that in his youth David was congenial, with an engaging character, pleasant to deal with, as in the statement "a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skilled in music; he is a stalwart fellow and a warrior, sensible in speech and handsome in appearance, and the Lord is with him" (I Samuel 16:18). And just as other verses testify that he was admired and beloved by

---

<sup>1</sup> *Sifre to Deuteronomy, Piska 6.*

<sup>2</sup> *Avot 3:12, following Meiri's interpretation.*

all, so now at beginning of his reign, when it is the way of most new kings to boast of themselves and to rule harshly, as a way of publicizing their dominion and demonstrating their authority in the sight of all, [David] neither budged from his good conduct nor boasted of his sovereignty. As he said about himself, "today I am humane [יָרַךְ], even though anointed king; those men, the sons of Zeruah, are too savage for me" (II Sam. 3:39), as if to say: in spite of my being anointed king, I am still humane.

As I have interpreted all of this for you, to me *רָאִיתִי מִן* means: from the beginning of your reign when the way of the world would have been to boast, *yours was the dew of youth*. That is, the pleasant character and superior behavior which had been yours since your youth did not depart from you. Or we might interpret *מִן* to mean: from the very morning on which you were born, as in the verse "before you were born [מִן הַבֶּטֶן]" (Jeremiah 1:5). The image of dawn emerging from the womb is related to the notion of the dawn "bursting forth," as in "then shall your light burst through like the dawn" (Isaiah 58:8). For the dawn is something that comes forth from a hidden to an open place, as if to say: the preparation of your integrity and your pleasant character issued forth with you from your mother's belly.

- [4] *The Lord has sworn and will not relent*: this is an allusion to how He repented of Saul's kingship, and He says here that David's monarchy will not be like that. For the reign of Saul did not come about through prophecy, but rather because at

that time there was nobody in the tribe of Judah fit to reign, as we explained in our commentary on *Masechet Horayot*. But David's monarchy came about through the prior prophetic promise "the scepter shall not depart from Judah" (Gen. 49:10), and "Judah became more powerful than his brothers and a leader came from him" (I Chron. 5:2). [David] maintained that *the Lord has sworn, etc.* was a prophecy; that is, a matter that could not be changed or cancelled.

*You are a priest forever:* that is, "a ruler," as in "and David's sons were priests" (II Sam. 8:18), "He makes priests go about naked" (Job 12:19), and "[Jethro] priest of Midian" (Ex. 18:1).

*Forever:* this is a hint that although sin will bring about exile from the rightful borders, still when the monarchy returns to the people, it will return to his tribe and his descendants.

*A rightful king by My decree* [ *אֲנִי מְשַׁחֲךָ מִלְּפָנַי* ]: in my opinion this is an allusion to God, may He be blessed, as if to say that your kingdom is established by the word of God and the promise of the Righteous King — that is, God, may He be blessed. There are those who interpret this phrase as follows: this success has come to you because you are a righteous king, as in the statement "David executed justice and righteousness among all his people" (II Sam. 8:15). It seems to me that the title *priest* was applied to him because it refers to authority and to service in the House of God. Both of these were aspects of David's character, for alongside his monarchy and authority, he busied himself in the worship of God, and he dwelled always in His house.

[5] *The Lord is at your right hand*: this is similar to "because He stands at the right hand of the needy" (Ps. 109:31), which means that God stands by your right hand ready to help you. *He crushes* [שֶׁחַד] *kings in the day of His anger*: a past tense form is used in place of a future; that is, "He will crush" *in the day of His anger*, as vengeance against your enemies, *kings* and rulers. Or perhaps *in the day of His anger* is an allusion to the war between Gog and Magog at the end of days.

[6] *Heaping up bodies* [חֲבִילֵי בָשָׂר]: it seems to me that the word indicates an assembly or gathering, as in "they cry after you as a mob" (Jeremiah 12:6). Here, this is an allusion to a prophecy of the future. He said that God *will judge among the nations* a multitude of persons, meaning the assembly of peoples that will come to make war against Jerusalem.

And similarly, *crushing heads far and wide* [רַחֵק וְרָחֵק] means "in many lands." The word שֶׁחַח is a past instead of a future.

[7] *He drinks from the stream on his way*: he will strike down so many of their corpses that a stream of blood will flow.

*He drinks*: this is a *meshal* for great vengeance, like the statement "and drinks the blood of the slain" (Numbers 23:24).

עַל־כֵּן יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה : [its interpretation is] along the lines of "Now I will exalt Myself, now raise Myself high" (Isaiah 33:10). Or perhaps עַל־כֵּן refers to His people, for [Israel] is head of all peoples.

This is what the psalm means, in my opinion, though in various places others have explained it differently. Our Rabbis, may

their memories be a blessing, interpreted the psalm to pertain to the Messiah, saying that in the future the Holy One, blessed be He, will seat the Messiah at His right hand and Abraham at His left. Abraham will feel embarrassed and say "one of my children sits at His right, while I am at His left." And the Holy One, blessed be He, will pacify him, etc.<sup>3</sup>

All this is a *mashal* indicating that [the messiah's] governance will reach the highest degree of success, according to their statement elsewhere, "more uplifted than Abraham, more exalted than Moses, higher than the ministering angels,"<sup>4</sup> as we explained in our commentary on *Masechet Avot*. Thus the matter before us is that his success will exceed that of Abraham, who was the first of the nation and the originator of the religion. His embarrassment is an allusion to the great attenuation of his merit in comparison to the merit of the messiah, like the relative unimportance of sitting on the left as compared to sitting on the right. This is like the statement "then the moon shall be ashamed, and the sun shall be abashed" (Isaiah 24:23), or "the vine has dried up" (Joel 1:12).

Elsewhere they understood that [this psalm] pertains to Abraham, whom everyone called "my lord," [as in] "hear me, my lord" (Gen. 23:11), [and to] the election of his descendants to be priests and kings.

**Sit at My right hand** means "wait for My salvation," with *sit* meaning "be still and wait for My right hand's salvation."

---

<sup>3</sup> Midrash Tehillim 18:29.

<sup>4</sup> Tanhuma Toledot 4.

*While I make your enemies your footstool* is an allusion to the war of Amraphel and his compatriots.<sup>5</sup>

*Your mighty scepter:* to strengthen you.

*The Lord will stretch forth from Zion:* that is, Jerusalem, whence Melchizedek, king of Salem, came toward him.<sup>6</sup>

*[Hold sway] over your enemies:* i.e., in the midst of the war.

*Your people come forward willingly:* this is an allusion to "he mustered his retainers" (Gen. 14:14), and to Aner and Eshkol and Mamre<sup>7</sup>, who willingly came forward fight with him.

*From the womb, from the dawn:* Abraham was approximately three years old when he recognized his Creator, which testifies to the quality of his disposition from youth.

*You are a priest forever:* all those who worship God will claim descent from you.

*After the manner of Melchizedek:* who said to him, "blessed be Abram to God Most High" (Gen. 14:19), meaning, for His service, may He be blessed.

*He crushes kings in the day of His anger:* this is a reference to the four kings.<sup>8</sup>

*He works judgement upon the nations:* this alludes to the prophecy between the pieces,<sup>9</sup> and also to "I will pass judgement on the nation they shall serve" (Gen. 15:14).

*Heaping up bodies:* this concerns the Egyptians dying at the shore of the sea.

---

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 14:18.

<sup>7</sup> Gen. 14:13.

<sup>8</sup> Gen. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Gen. 15.

*Crushing heads:* this alludes to Pharaoh.

*In a great land:* an important and prominent [land]; that is, Egypt.

*He drinks from the stream on his way:* this refers to the Nile, which waters an entire land so that it has no need of rain.

And over it *he holds his head high:* that is, he is proud, and he says "my Nile is my own" (Ezekiel 29:3).

Even among those who understand the psalm to be about David, some say that it concerns the end of his reign, when [his men] said to him "you shall not go with us into battle anymore" (II Sam. 21:17). Thus *sit at My right hand* would mean: busy yourself with the worship of God, and He will be your helper and *your mighty scepter*. And *Your people come forward willingly* to go to war, although you no longer go with them. It is possible to go on [interpreting] the entire psalm in this fashion.

**ISHODADH OF MERV:**

**Introduction and Commentaries**

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

But we reply to thus who prattle thus that the blessed David was a sea of prophecy. . . . His gift of the Holy Spirit was multi-faceted, so that he stood on a high peak of divine knowledge. Just as Moses saw the Promised Land, [David] saw and contemplated all past and future things.<sup>1</sup>

Ishodadh was born in Merv in northeastern Persia (Khurasan) early in the ninth century, and by mid-century he had become bishop of Hedatha, on the Tigris River. Muslim historians note that upon the death of the Eastern Patriarch Abraham II in 850, Ishodadh was nominated to be his successor before Khalif Muttawakkil. However, Ishodadh did not receive the appointment, and he disappears from our histories. We know little else of his personal life.

Ishodadh did, however, leave us his commentaries. In these commentaries he revealed himself to be a disciple, albeit indirect, of Theodore of Mopsuestia, the renowned fourth century *Mephashkana* ("Interpreter") of the Christian Church in Antioch. Though the mechanism of influence across five centuries remains unknown, in many passages Ishodadh's Syriac exactly parallels Theodore's Greek, and several scholars have even tried to recover Theodore's work by an appeal to allegedly identical sections in Ishodadh.

The Antiochene school of exegesis is generally considered to have been literal and historical in approach, in contradistinction to

---

<sup>1</sup> From the introduction to Ishodadh's commentary on Psalms; p. 129 below.

such allegorists as Origen.<sup>2</sup> If that is so, then the four psalm commentaries here translated are a poor sample with which to demonstrate it, for Psalms 2, 8, 45, and 110 are, in that tradition, the quintessential messianic psalms. These psalms are the only psalms taken to have primary, literal messianic interpretations. Other psalms may sometimes have been applied by the New Testament writers to Jesus, but only, according to Theodore and Ishodadh, in a secondary sense, in that "they happened to be apt descriptions of what happened to him."<sup>3</sup> The primary historical reference of these other psalms is determined on the basis of Davidic authorship and the internal evidence of each psalm. That David was able to compose these messianic psalms is because of his being the prophet *par excellence*, "who was given by the Spirit a vision of the future dispensation of God for his people."<sup>4</sup> This point is made abundantly clear in Ishodadh's Introduction and commentaries. Ishodadh's particular distinction in his commentaries is frequent reference to the Hebrew text, of which Theodore was largely ignorant,<sup>5</sup> and the various Greek versions.

My own translation of Ishodadh's Introduction and Commentaries was prepared from the Syriac text edited by Ceslas Van Den Eynde (Lovanii, 1981), with reference to his French translation.

---

2 See section twelve of Ishodadh's introduction (p. 134) for his characterization of Origen and the allegorists.

3 M.J. Wiles, "Theodore of Mopsuestia as Representative of the Antiochene School," *Cambridge History of the Bible I*, Ackroyd and Evans, eds. Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 500.

4 Wiles, p. 498.

5 D. Tyng, "Theodore of Mopsuestia as an Interpreter of the Old Testament," *JBL* 50 (1931), p. 298.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMENTARY ON PSALMS

This is a commentary on the psalms of the blessed David, king and prophet, by that same pious one of God, Ishodadh of Merv. O Lord, help me in Your mercy. Amen. And may the readers charitably pray for the copyist.

### PART ONE

In the Hebrew Bible, the book of the blessed David is divided into five parts, just as is the Pentateuch. The first section is completed by Psalm 41, which ends with "Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, from eternity to eternity," etc. (Ps. 41:14). The second section is completed by Psalm 72, which ends with "Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, Who performs great miracles," etc. (Ps. 72:18). The third section is completed by Psalm 89, which ends with "Blessed is the Lord forever. Amen and amen" (Ps. 89:53). The fourth section is completed by Psalm 106, which ends with "Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel, from eternity to eternity, and let all the people say 'Amen and Amen'" (Ps. 106:48). The fifth section is completed by the last psalm, which ends with "May every soul praise the Lord" (Ps. 150:6).

By means of these five sections, [David] signifies the five exterior senses and the five interior faculties. And with the threefold "fifty's" [i.e., the 150 psalms], he indicates that we perform and fulfill [God's] commandments by our three parts: thought, speech, and action.

## PART TWO

From among the twenty-four priestly clans, David appointed 288 singers -- that is, musicians -- and three chief singers: Asaph, Heman, and Eitan. He also designated groups of twelve to sing every day before the Ark. It was from that time forward that the service was sung at the third, sixth, and ninth hours, although some contend that [the practice] began with Enoch, who "began to call on the name of the Lord" (Gen. 4:26). At any rate, when David would sing, the chief singers and their subordinates would gather and sing responsively with him.

## PART THREE

It is asked why certain psalms are recited by verse-pairs, while others are recited verse-by-verse. We reply that all of the psalms along with their melodies were composed by David. He would sing them like hymns and the people would respond. For those [psalms] that we recite verse-by-verse he composed one kind of melody, and for those [that we recite] by verse-pairs [he composed] a different melody. That is, sometimes [David] would recite one verse at the beginning of a psalm to be a response, and [the singers] would intone the rest, and sometimes he would recite two verses.

In order for [those who speak] other languages to understand something [of the service], the Apostles prescribed that the verse-

pair psalms be performed in keeping with their binary composition and the verse-by-verse psalms in keeping with their unitary composition. [Thus], even if they did not know the melodies with which [the psalms] were sung, they would still recognize the style of their psalmody. For those [psalms] which are recited by verse-pairs signify the body and the soul, while those which are recited verse-by-verse signify the unity of the human person, which is comprised of body and soul offering thanksgiving together.

Five psalms, corresponding to the five senses, were composed by David in the verse-pair mode to mark the five divisions of the Psalter.

#### PART FOUR

It is also asked why [David] composed the psalms with music. We reply that it was in order to draw the listeners easily to the love of his teaching by means great enjoyment -- just as lewd songs, on the other hand, bring down many [people] by leading them into error. For just as a sweet taste is pleasing to the palate, so high voices and musical modulation are pleasing to the ear.

Therefore, because the Jews are particularly stupid and in need of childish incentives, and because human nature is overcome by shameful desires that are bolstered by foul voices, [thus] preventing many from following straight paths, the blessed David was instructed by Divine Grace to thoroughly blend his words with desirable melodies.

[In this way] the chaste desire for the love of God would be better integrated within men thanks to the sweetness of the songs, and attention to the life-giving commandments would be better maintained, because man is naturally and willingly given to pleasure and enjoyment. Thus the soul rejoices in the contemplation of that which gives it life, while the body rejoices in the song which pleases its ears. Indeed, teaching which is imposed by force will not endure. It is like a twisted branch which is stretched: when it is released it returns to its former shape. But a teaching that stems from the beauty of lovely song will better adhere within the mind. That is why we too combine singing voices with the service, to add joy so that [our prayers] are received by the mind and retained by the memory. Even the philosophers constructed a great art called music from a variety of melodies, songs, and instrumental playing.

## PART FIVE

It is asked why the Church is bound to recite only [the songs] of David, as, simply put, no clergyman can attain any ecclesiastical rank without [the ability] to recite the psalms.

First, because they were composed by David with melodies and in verse, their words broken and arranged in verses suitable for recitation. The other books [of the Bible] contain things are not fit [for recitation] because they were composed by way of reprimand, or were transmitted with a mission to mankind, or were written as

historical accounts. Because they were not composed by their authors specifically to be chanted, they are less fit for this use.

Second, all the books of Scripture are divided into ten "theories," as we described in our introduction to the Book of Genesis, and each one of them speaks to one or more part. But the Book of Psalms includes all of the themes contained in Scripture. It is the fullness, the completion, and the summary of all the latter prophets and the bond between the two Testaments. It is the head upon the body of the Holy Scriptures.

Third, because the richness of all spiritual goodness is gathered and assembled in it; knowledge of the two worlds is joined in it; Creation and its divine economy are discussed in it. It contains comfort for the afflicted, chastisement for the wicked, exhortation for the feeble, and abasement for the arrogant, [all] as to withstanding desires and demons, and taking medicine for the healing of our pains. Indeed, it speaks about the incarnation of our Savior, the greatness of his divinity and the lowness of his humanity, his indivisible unity, and his characteristic manifold dispensation. All things past and future are found in it.

[The book of Psalms] resembles a paradise adorned by flowers, jasmine and other varieties. It is like the head where the various senses are gathered and where the mind which resides in the brain is active. It is like the portrait of a king that is painted with a profusion of colors. It is like a gate that opens upon the Divine Abode.

[For all of these reasons,] it is eminently suitable as a solid foundation upon which to establish the entire liturgical edifice. By reciting its verses, the holy ones drive away demons and welcome angels, drawing the Messiah near for their aid -- as witnessed by Saul, who was relieved of demonic torment by David's singing.

Fourth, because the leaders of the perverse heresies, among them Menandrius and Cerdon and others, composed volumes containing many psalms in which they uttered all sorts of wickedness, just as the foolish Apollinarius composed a thousand psalms in verse, it was therefore agreed by the holy Apostles that we worship and sing from the book of David when we pray, so that liars cannot mix deceit with truth under the guise of the Apostles' acquiescence.

Fifth, because the thrice blessed holy martyr Ignatius, most senior of the Syrian Patriarchs, heard the angels chanting the psalms in antiphonal choirs, he ordered that the choirs be arranged in lines, so that the verses would be intoned by opposing sides.<sup>1</sup>

## PART SIX

It is asked whether David received the revelation bit by bit and composed the psalms one at a time, or whether he received the knowledge of all of them from the Spirit at one time. We reply

---

<sup>1</sup> Probably referring to Saint Ignatius of Antioch, early second century bishop.

that there are four modes by which the knowledge of hidden things descends upon new preachers, sources of prophecy, and sages.

The first mode is revelation that is sensible to the eyes and the ears, such as the three men who appeared to Abraham (Genesis 18). The second mode is intellectual; that is, [the revelation] becomes manifest to the faculties of the soul. Its recipient at a certain moment stands in shock, out of the quiet and calm which overwhelm him. This is how Ezekiel saw the chariot, the resurrection of the bones, the torrent, etc.<sup>2</sup> While seeing nothing he thought that he saw, and [heard] a voice speaking with him. So, too, the blessed Paul, who while paradise was implanted within his heart, thought that he had [actually] escaped to paradise!<sup>3</sup>

In the third mode, without warning God fills the hearts of those who are worthy with His wisdom, such as when He gave Bezalel [the knowledge required to] construct the Tent of Meeting,<sup>4</sup> or when He gave [wisdom] to Solomon,<sup>5</sup> or to the Apostles. For them, although nothing was heard in later revelations, the first revelation sufficed to fill them with all that they needed. Now if someone were to say that the revelation to our Lord the Messiah was sensible or intellectual, it would be an impiety, for in his unity he received perfect knowledge in an incomprehensible fashion.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel chapters 1, 37, and 47.

<sup>3</sup> II Corinthians 12:3.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 31.

<sup>5</sup> I Kings 3:12.

The fourth mode is manifestation in a dream, such as with Joseph son of Jacob or Joseph, Mary's husband. This mode [of revelation] may also be granted to those who are unworthy, such as Pharaoh or the Babylonian.<sup>6</sup>

Now the blessed David received divine inspiration<sup>7</sup> on the same level as the Apostles, and just as they were instructed in all the mysteries of governance from the day of Pentecost, so David received knowledge of the future from the day he was anointed by Samuel. And so it was not through separate revelations that David composed each of the psalms, but rather as a man who had received a treasure full of blessings -- sometimes he prophesied and sometimes he admonished, etc.

## PART SEVEN

Some foolish Jews, and others, claim that David was not a prophet but a sage. Their "proof" is because of what he does not say: "the saying of the Lord came upon me," or "the vision . . .," or "the word . . .," such as the other prophets said. Nor does he speak about the modes of divine revelation. But Isaiah does say, "I saw the Lord sitting on His exalted throne," and thereafter he even records the time. Amos [saw God] on a wall [in] his vision of the diamond, and God appeared many times to Moses. Nor was there any dispatch or mission with David, like Moses being sent to Egypt, or the other prophets to their countrymen. On the contrary, from

<sup>6</sup> King Nebuchadnezzar, in Daniel 4.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase in Syriac is ܡܠܚܘܬܐ ܕܝܠܗ; elsewhere I have translated it as "Holy Spirit."

time to time the prophets Nathan and Gad would deliver to David their divine messages about the events of the day, and [David] would even direct questions to God through Abiathar!

But we reply to those who prattle thus that the blessed David was a sea of prophecy. And even though on the minor events of his own day he was spoken to through [other] prophets, David [himself] spoke about the great things and future events which were far beyond the house of Nathan. His gift of the Holy Spirit was multi-faceted, so that he stood on a high peak of divine knowledge. Just as Moses saw the Promised Land, [David] saw and contemplated all past and future things. When he sang with his zither "by the rivers of Babylon," there was a hint therein for the mind's eye of the Messiah and his blessings, the Resurrection, and the judgement of the peoples.

It was not said [of David] that "the word of the Lord came upon him," or "the vision . . .," etc., because he was not sent to others to say to them: "Thus saith the Lord . . .". His prophecy was not for his contemporaries, but for distant generations. Isaiah and his colleagues, on the other hand, were dispatched to rebuke evil-doers, and they quite correctly recorded the time and content of their revelations. And they were not required to prophesy constantly, but only when they [actually] received a revelation in which [God] commanded them [to do so].

But with David there was nothing like this. Rather, [he knew] "quiet" and "peace" and "calm joy" (Ps. 98:4). The Spirit dwelled in

him from the time he was anointed, revealing to him the secrets of the divine economy. As he said, "My tongue is the reed of a skillful scribe" (Ps. 45:1). Whenever he wished he could speak on any subject, for his word was adorned by the Holy Spirit which dwelt in him. And even if he did not say in his psalms, "I saw the Lord" or the like, in the book of Samuel it does say:

The man who held the yoke of the God of Jacob's anointed one, the sweet singer of Israel, said: "The spirit of the Lord has spoken through me, and His word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me . . ." (II Sam. 23:1-3).

In the psalms, sometimes [he would say], "God of gods, Lord, speak!" or "my tongue is the reed of a scribe." Therefore, "David was a prophet," as Paul attested (Acts 2:30).

## PART EIGHT

Now it is correct to understand that all of [David's] psalms were uttered with divine inspiration. However, some were spoken with the gift of prophecy; i.e., those that speak of the future, the best and greatest of them being those that concern the Messiah. Some, however, were spoken with wisdom, such as "Happy is the man . . ." (Ps. 1), "Do not be vexed . . ." (Ps. 37), and "Hear this . . ." (Ps. 49). And some were spoken with his gift for teaching; i.e., those that concern David himself, and his persecution by Saul and Absalom, etc. In sum, each psalm possesses something more and different than any other psalm.

## PART NINE

It is asked why the psalms are not arranged in the order of their composition, from early to late. We reply that neither the psalms nor the sections of the prophetic [books] are arranged in the order of their utterance. For it was not the prophets [themselves] who wrote down and completed their books in the order of their stories and teachings. Rather, others who came afterwards collected sections of their prophecies and wrote them down in books as they found them, not knowing what was early and what was late, either chronologically or in content.

Furthermore, the prophets did not receive all of their revelations at one time, but rather on separate occasions and concerning different subjects. During the Babylonian deportations, then, the prophetic books were torn, burnt, and destroyed. Many sections were lost altogether and their content is no longer known. Despite the fact that Ezra the Scribe, after the Return, reassembled the books according to his divine instruction, it is for the above reasons that there are chronological transpositions in the [prophetic books], as we also observe in the psalms.

For example, Psalm 139 [Psalm 140 in the Masoretic text], "Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men," should actually come before Psalm 6, "O Lord, do not punish me in Your anger," since [David's] persecution by Saul [preceded] his sin with Bathsheba. Similarly, the verse, "My God, my God, why have You abandoned me" of Psalm 22 should actually come before Psalm 18, because Psalm 22 was

uttered while David was being pursued by Absalom, while Psalm 18 [was uttered] at the end of his life! Many other psalms were arranged by their collectors in this same way.

## PART TEN

It is correct to understand that all of the psalms were originally composed without titles. They were given titles afterwards by other people as they saw fit, but their titles are not [always] in agreement with their themes. Thus Psalm 27, "The Lord is my light and my savior," bears the title "A psalm of David before he was anointed" [in the LXX]. But how could [David] have been worthy of the Holy Spirit before he was anointed, and how could he have been worthy of writing psalms for the instruction of the entire world? Similarly, Psalm 51 bears the title, "A psalm of David, when Nathan came to him concerning the wife of Uriah" [in the LXX]. If David wrote this psalm concerning himself, what matter required that he turn and say "May it please You to make Zion prosper" (v. 20)? And neither had the walls of Jerusalem been destroyed, that David should employ those words (see Ps. 51:21 -- "and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem").

Also, it is fitting for each psalm to have one design and one theme. It is not possible that a particular psalm be directed toward two or three subjects. Psalm 1 bears the title "Spoken concerning Joash who was raised to the throne over Yoyada the

priest."<sup>8</sup> But this is a contradiction: a man who pillaged the Temple of the Lord and sent an offering to the evil Hazael, king of Edom; and who, according to the Book of Chronicles, was ensnared by idolatry after the death of Yoyada; and who killed the sons of Yoyada, his savior and educator and advisor — how could a prophet grant him happiness? Therefore, it is appropriate that the titles of the blessed Interpreter be maintained and affirmed.<sup>9</sup>

## PART 11

It is asked why prophecy was necessary. We reply, first, that through the prediction of future events, divine knowledge became credible to all men. Second, when words of prophecy are realized, whether as punishment for evil or as approval for excellent things, those who experience them cannot think that they happened by accident or chance. Rather, both accident and chance derive from God. Third, [prophecy is necessary] in order that the compassion of God be abundantly known, who like a father calls and bids us to turn from evil and other things. Fourth, those who have prophecy on their side acquire no mean benefit, in that if the listeners are obedient and repent of their sins, they stave off future punishment, whether captivity or other chastisement[s]. And even those who are not obedient to the words of prophecy profit [by them], when they justly accept harsh punishment without looking for excuses for their punishments. And others will not fall to blaming or murmuring

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. II Kings 11-12. This title does not actually appear, however, in any of our standard versions.

<sup>9</sup> I.e., Theodore of Mopsuestia.

against God because of the harshness of their punishment and His lack of pity toward their shamelessness, because prophecy was first in calling them and carefully warning them, though they did not heed it. Neither foreknowledge nor prophecy are the cause of evil or its retribution. It does not lead necessarily toward things to come; it only sees them directly first.

## PART TWELVE

It is asked what is the difference between allegorical and historical exegesis. We reply that it is great, not small, for the former bears impiety and blasphemy and falsehood, while the latter bears truth and faith.

The impious Origen of Alexandria was the inventor of this allegorical technique. Because he was versed in the books of the poets and the Platonists, he thought that even the Holy Scriptures should be interpreted in the manner of fables. And just as the poets and geometers -- because they are plagued by [the notion of] eternal, incorporeal matter and indivisible atoms, such as when they state that "just as these visible, recorded markings do not count, but rather their meanings [do], so also it is through the power of thought that created natures are gradually raised to their eternal natures -- were eager to raise their students step-by-step from the material and manifest toward the hidden and the unseen, so the foolish Origen wrote that souls preceded bodies in existence by an immeasurable time, and indeed all of Creation, and that no person wrote about the first creation but only about the second, which was

described at Horeb! These first beings fell into sin by chance, and these bodies were joined to them as a punishment. Because [Origen] had such a odd model in mind, he ruined all of his books with this strange interpretation.

Concerning the psalms and the prophets that depict the exile and the return of the nation, [Origen] understands them to concern the exile of the individual soul from truth and its return to faith. He overturns and empties the Scriptural narratives of their natural truth, transforming them into a fantasy of error, such as when he thinks that there exists neither creatures nor Creator. Indeed, [the allegorists] do not interpret Paradise as it is, nor Adam, nor Eve, nor anything else that exists as it exists. For example, in one place they take "horse" to mean "the wicked" only, such as "the chariots of Pharaoh, etc." (Ex. 15:4; see also 15:1), yet when they reach "the chariot of Zechariah" (Zech. 6:1-8), the context of the narrative compels them to interpret it as referring to "blessed people." It is the same with "ass." Once when one of them went up to preach in Constantinople, wanting to flatter the people before him with the affectionate name "ass," he said, "all of you are asses." But when the listeners looked at each other and saw that they were not asses, the foolish preacher was embarrassed. He soothed their opinion by adding, "I, too, am an ass like you." They accepted his assertion, if only their teacher also was an ass. Allegorical interpretation is full of such nonsense.

So as not to prolong the matter, I will bring only one proof that will suffice to demonstrate the nature of all [allegories]. [The

allegorists] say that when the Apostle said "that rock is Christ" (I Cor. 10:4), he clearly demonstrated that even if to [the Jews] it appeared to be a stone, nevertheless in truth it was the Christ, who secretly brings about the salvation of those to whom he is likened. And in the same way they say that even Melchizedek is the son of God. And they say that it was not only once but many times that our Savior has been in the world -- that He has been revealed to each generation according to its potential and He has been within each and everything. And He had even to come to the lifeless bodies of stones, in order to free those who were subjugated to them.

But these fools do not understand that the Apostles do not cite verses from the Old Testament in one manner only. Rather, some are meant to clarify the fulfillment of their theme and expand upon it; others are for the instruction and the correction of their listeners; and still others are appropriate for the doctrine of faith, although in their own time they may have been spoken for other reasons. Thus when our Lord interpreted Psalm 8 and Psalm 110 as referring to he himself,<sup>10</sup> and when Peter in Acts and Paul in his epistles understood both these and Psalm 2 and Psalms 45 as referring to our Lord, they interpreted them literally, as if they were truly spoken concerning Him. [But] when our Lord said from the cross, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me" (Matthew 27:46), or "Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46), which corresponds to "to You I commit my spirit" (Ps. 31:5), or

---

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 21:16ff.

when the Apostles compare statements with facts, such as "they have hacked off my hands and feet" (Ps. 22:16), or "they parcelled out my garments among them" (Ps. 22:18), or "they put poison in my food" (Ps. 69:21), or "You will not abandon me to Sheol" (Ps. 16:10) — or when Paul speaks against the Jews concerning rejection of the justice which springs from the Law, and the doctrine of faith, and the conversion of the nations, that "there is no just man, not one; no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (Romans 3:10), or "happy is the man whose crime is forgiven" (Ps. 32:1), or "praise the Lord, all you nations" (Ps. 117:1), or similar statements -- these are spoken in accordance with their factual origin, though in their contexts, their intents were different.

And to those who would follow the truth, the context clearly demonstrates the difference between these two analogous things. Thus when our Lord said to the Jews, "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," etc. (John 3:14), He offered them this as a type because of its resemblance to the fact, so that they would not doubt mankind's salvation through the cross, even though by His nature the Crucified One could be seen to be a man, whereas those who had been bitten by ferocious snakes had been saved by a bronze serpent devoid of life and feeling. In just such a manner did Paul name the Christ "the stone in the wilderness" (I Cor. 10:4) and "the propitiatory on the Arch" (Romans 3:25), so that through the mediation of that plate forgiveness was granted to the people. Thus by the Messiah are sinfulness and mortality lifted from the human species, and so just as the stone quenched the thirst of the Israelites by its flowing, all who drink from the Messiah's living

doctrine receive complete forgiveness, and the thirst for error no longer rules over them.

It is because of this that Paul does not erase and nullify the reality of the facts and set something else in their place. Otherwise, what would prevent David from not being David; or Saul or Absalom or any of the other historical figures mentioned in Scripture, they and their actions, from also being something else; in which case even the Messiah and His divine economy would be understood as something other than what they are? Furthermore, nothing can be compared even with itself in the manner of an example. How then could our Lord have compared His cruxifixion to the cruxifixion of the bronze serpent, if He himself was both here and there? Or perhaps the Israelites were right to worship the serpent during the reign of Hezekiah,<sup>11</sup> perceiving it to be the Messiah?! But why then did Hezekiah destroy it along with other idols and remove its worship? And if he did this without understanding, then why does divine Scripture praise him while branding them as strayers? Rather, this knowledge is nonsense, devoid of wisdom for the wise.

In fact, when Paul said, "these things happened to them as a type for us" (I Cor. 10:11a), he did not mean that those who became renowned because of these events did not themselves derive any profit from them, so that each deed was entirely for our benefit. Rather, he interpreted it by what follows it: "[they were]

---

<sup>11</sup> II Kings 18:3-5.

written down as a warning to us" (I Cor. 10:11b), namely, by the mention of that which taught them the fear of God, we, too, are corrected and trained in the fear of God and the endurance of those things that afflict us. Instead of the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Babylonians who oppressed the Hebrews, we must bring to mind the secret armies of evil spirits that contend with us concerning the heavenly places.<sup>12</sup> And just as [the Hebrews], because of their wickedness, were delivered to their enemies, so we, because of our inclination toward bodily passions and wishes, are ruled over by our enemies. But if we turn from our wickedness, we will be freed from servitude just as they were. So instead of Mt. Zion and the Promised Land, we long for celestial repose and for the heavenly Jerusalem. And instead of the sacrifices and offerings by which they repaid the graciousness of God, we offer spiritual sacrifices; i.e., rational confessions and pure praises which are pleasing to God.

And thus did [David] admirably shape and compose the psalms: that which is said concerning Hezekiah applies to every just person, and that which concerns Saul or Ravshake also pertains to every evil or wicked person. And concerning the rest, O reader, be similarly mindful. This is how the Apostles as well as the sages built their analogies from the ancients. Otherwise, what profit would there be in the histories of others, that for us would be irrelevant? Let us turn aside, then, from the stupidity and oddity of the allegorists.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 6:12.

## PART THIRTEEN

It is proper that we understand that though David composed his prophecy as history rather than as allegory, it nevertheless appears that he was speaking his prophecy allegorically, giving concrete form to things and personifying them and speaking corporeally of God, all for the sake of the instruction of his listeners, since bodily creatures could not otherwise grasp the subtlety of the things mentioned unless the subject matter was adapted for their weak minds. That is why [David] speaks of the unseen activity of God as if [it were performed] by bodily limbs. He calls His appearance "face," and His vision "eyes," and His activity "hand" and "right hand," whether bestowing good or inflicting suffering. He indicates His coming by "feet," and His swiftiness by "flying," and His patience by "sleep" and "silence"; His zeal by "stature" and His judgement and sovereignty by "throne" and "seat," similar to kings who pass judgement while seated on their thrones. [He names His] readiness by "girding" and His glory by "vestment" and his recognition through deeds by "exaltation" and "ascension." By "stability" he names the truth and immutability of His sovereignty, and by "voice" and "shout" and "hurling spears" and "thunder" His strong chastisement.

Now also when [David] speaks of mankind he continues this comparison based on similarity of actions. Indeed, mankind's "teeth are spears, etc." (Ps. 57:5), and "save me from the lion's mouth" (Ps. 22:21). He calls man's anger "fire," and an assembly of enemies "water," and human wrath "snake venom." He also followed the

practice of naming deeds after their contexts, such as "I do not sit with wicked men" (Ps. 26:5), which means "I do not act wickedly;" or "blessed is the man that has not walked the path of the wicked" (Ps. 1:1). Furthermore, there is his double usage of the same word: "Indeed I was born [ *וְיָסַף* ] with iniquity; with sin my mother conceived me [ *וְיָסַף* ]" (Ps. 51:7), and "Listen [ *הַשְׁמַע* ] to my words, O Lord; and heed [ *הַשְׁמַע* ] my voice" (Ps. 5:1-2).

[David] uses oaths as an indication of truth, and similarly, he indicates the decisiveness of a judgement by "the speech of God," as, indeed, "God speaks in His sanctuary" (Ps. 60:8), or "one thing has God spoken" (Ps. 62:12). And when he wishes to expose the thoughts of men from their actions, he gives voice to their thoughts, as when they said to him, "they thought: who will see us?" (Ps. 64:6), or "the wicked one thinks, etc." (Ps. 14:1), because they commit their deeds as if God does not see and judge them. He can even use the word "name" in place of the person, as in "may they know that Your Name is the Lord" (Ps. 83:19), which means "may they acknowledge Your Lordship."

David indicates that which is close by a comparison with others, as in "we were like those who rejoiced" (Ps. 125:1), which means "we were rejoicing." Similarly, he does not use the word "there" [ *שָׁם* ] only to indicate a place, but also in reference to deeds. "There," indeed, "I will show him the way of salvation" (Ps. 50:23b) -- that is, I will show the way to salvation to those who offer this sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise. And also, "there fall all evildoers" [ *שָׁם יִפְּלוּ כָּל הַרְשָׁעִים* ], that is, they are

requited with such a punishment (Ps. 36:13). In the same way, the name "justice" refers not only to God's governance but also to the righteousness of His testing, as in "the Lord paid me according to my justice" (Ps. 18:21), which means "when I was wickedly oppressed by my enemies, He freed me and saved me in righteousness." And thus he also gives the name "sleep" to repose, as in "if you sleep among thorns" (Ps. 68:14).

[David] concretizes insubstantial things, as in "justice and well-being kiss" (Ps. 85:11), and to things without life or sensation he ascribes sensation and even speech, as in "Let the rivers clap their hands" (Ps. 98:8), or "the mountains danced" (Ps. 114:4), or "the gates ask" (Ps. 24:8), etc. Things which are impermanent he terms "liar," as in "all men are liars" (Ps. 116:11), for a falsehood is a word that does not last while truth is something that endures. For this reason, while teaching about the permanence of God's mercy, he says "blessing and truth have met" (Ps. 85:11).

Sometimes [David] likens dumb animals to thinking creatures, and sometimes thinking creatures to dumb animals, because of the similarity of their actions, and he calls [thinking creatures] dogs, lions, oxen, foxes, and eagles. Sometimes he divides a single word in two, for it to be liked. Sometimes he inserts in the middle [of a verse] words without connection to those that come before or after because of metrical demands. Sometimes he repeats the same thing, as in "watchmen for the morning, watchmen for the morning" (Ps. 130:6).

Sometimes [David] will express one thing in two ways, as in "I was born in iniquity; and in sin [my mother conceived me]" (Ps. 51:7). Sometimes he uses a construct form to indicate a thing itself, as in "the son of an evildoer" (Ps. 89:23), which means "the evildoer," or "I said you are gods, and sons [of the Most High]" (Ps. 82:6), or "the son of your mother" (Ps. 50:20), or "son of Gehenna" (Matthew 23:15), or "son of the kingdom" (Matthew 8:12), [to indicate] those things which by their behavior bear a resemblance to this or that.

I declare that these are just a few of the many things which would be useful for a study of the meaning of the Scriptures as a whole, although that which is found here primarily concerns the Book of Psalms.

## COMMENTARY ON PSALM TWO

The Jews understand this second psalm to be about Zerubbabel and the House of Gog, although in truth it concerns the Passion and exaltation of our Lord.

- [1] The word *tumult* signifies the great sound of a large gathering, as in "a tumultuous uproar in the Valley of Decisions" (Joel 4:14). The LXX says: "Why are the nations arrogant?"

Indeed, [David] reproves their injustice with a question, saying:

*Why are the nations in a tumult?* -- what reason do they give for this assembly that has been incited to consider purposeless killing? He terms the House of Herod and Pilate and the soldiers *nations*, just as Peter explained: "Herod and Pilate along with the nations and the assembly of Israel" (Acts 4:27), or, with reference to our Lord, "they handed him over to the nations to be mocked [and flogged and crucified]" (Matthew 20:19). And *peoples* signifies the high priests and the elders.

- [2] Kings [of the earth] arose: following the great marvels of the Passion (cf. Matthew 27:45), all the kings arose from their thrones to ask why the sun and stars had darkened. This darkening, which was outside the laws of astrology, is even mentioned in the archives of the Roman and Egyptian kings. The astrologers say that a solar eclipse occurs between the twenty-seventh and thirtieth days of the [lunar cycle], because it is then that the vapor and the moon are in conjunction,

both of them standing in the face of the sun. But this eclipse of our Lord's was contrary to this, in that [the sun] was darkened during a full moon, while the moon was distant from the sun by the full width of the sphere. It is recognized by all that this was a miracle of God. Some of [the astrologers] even surmise that on that day one of the gods suffered on earth. It is recorded in their annals that a great earthquake occurred on that day, which overturned twenty cities in Bithynia.

It is proper, then, to read *kings of the earth arose* separately, and then to attach *and princes intrigue, etc.*; that is, the scribes and Pharisees.

[3] [*Let us break*] *their cords*: i.e., their servitude to the Father and the Son, just as an animal [breaks from] a yoke, etc.

[4] In prophesying about the wrath that would come upon them at the hands of the Romans for having crucified Him, [David] says: *He who is enthroned in heaven laughs, etc.*

[6-7a] That which is said by the Father — *I have installed my king upon Zion* — is instead attributed by the LXX to the Son: "I have been installed by Him as king upon Zion, His holy mountain; let me tell of His decree." Because [Jesus] resided in Judah, [David] rightly said "And on Zion I will tell of his decree"<sup>1</sup> concerning the kingdom of heaven.

---

<sup>1</sup> These words, absent from both the Masoretic text and the LXX, are found in several Greek texts. See Van Den Eynde's French translation, p. 26, footnote 10.

[7b] *I have fathered you this day:* some people maintain that this refers to His virgin birth, but in truth it refers to His birth from the grave. Indeed the subject of this verse is the Resurrection, that our Savior be known as the Son of God and the Lord of all, according to His precious saying, "full authority in heaven and on earth have been given to me" (Matthew 28:18), and to what David says here through the person of the Father: *Ask and I will give [it] to you, etc.* Again, because from the first this verse speaks of His Passion, without reference to His birth in the flesh, [David] speaks with this verse about His birth through resurrection. Indeed there are three births. The matter is known to us concerning the incarnated Messiah: [His birth] from the virginal womb, from the womb of the water, and from the womb of the grave.

[8-9a] When the prophet saw the disobedience of the Jews and the conversion of the nations to our Lord, he said in the person of the Father: *Ask it of me, and I will give to you -- i.e.,* because those to whom I sent you have no faith in you, *I give you the nations as an inheritance and the ends of the earth as your possessions.*

[9b-c] When [David], demonstrating the purity which the nations achieve through the governance of the Messiah, says: *You shepherd them with an iron staff, and like the potter's vessels You smash them,* he is not speaking about cruelty but about

the stability and invincibility of His kingdom, and [he declares] that He instructs and restrains those who disobey [Him].

And like a *potter's vessels*, full of dirt and filth, or [like those] which when baked in a furnace are purged of all moisture and attain firmness and tenacity, You smash [out of] them all the error with which they are polluted; with Your Resurrection You renew all Creation from the ravages of destruction; and You attain immutable perfection.

[12] *Kiss the Son [lest He be angered]*: he deems the kiss "love."

[All] this is what is meant by: "he who does not believe in the Son shall not see [eternal] life; [God's] wrath [rests upon him]" (John 3:36). The LXX has: "Love discipline, that the Lord not be wrathful."

The words *you will be removed from His path* mean "you will be denied His kingdom."

While describing the Second Coming -- the kind of wrath He will pour out upon the unbelievers, and the blessings to be prepared for those who love Him -- [David] says: *in an instant His wrath burns*: i.e., against the Jews, at the hands of the Romans.

And *happy are all those* [refers to] the nations, *who rely upon Him* and have faith in Him.

## COMMENTARY ON PSALM EIGHT

The quarrelsome Jews understand this eighth psalm to be about Adam. However, it was prophesied precisely about the Messiah and His governance on our behalf; and about His twofold nature; and the honor, glory, and authority over all things which He received into His humanity from union with the Word Become Flesh; and the diffusion of His Gospel throughout the entire world.

It is known that these [words] were spoken about our Lord for three reasons. First, from His own testimony concerning Himself in the reprimand of the Jews, "Have you never heard '*From the mouths [of children and babes]*'?" (Matthew 21:16). Second, because it is nowhere found that God Himself or any human being is praised by infants, except Jesus upon His entry into Jerusalem. And third, because "fingers" are not natural to God (cf. verse 3).

- [1] *How magnificent is Your name*: the prophet [i.e. David] marvels at the diffusion of His proclamation and His Gospel throughout Creation.
- [2] *From the mouths, etc.*: while heaven and earth are indeed full of Your glory, You are praised *from the mouths of infants and babes . . . on account of Your enemies* — the Jews — that *Your enemy* — Satan — be angered and made powerless. For it was through [the Jews that Satan] sought revenge against You for freeing human nature from his servitude.

[3] *Because they beheld Your heavens:* Your enemies the Jews were unwilling to have faith in miracles like these, so the peoples acknowledged You as the Creator of both heaven and earth.



[4-6] *What is man, that You guide him? etc.:* after His grandeur, You lowered Him somewhat for the three days of His death, as the Apostle said, "we see that it is Jesus [who was made] a *little lower than the angels*" (Hebrews 2:9). And also, *You honored Him with glory*; i.e., raising Him to immortality.

And everything, indeed even His enemies, *You laid at His feet*, for behold, You laid [before Him] everything in the heavens and the earth and under the earth, etc. -- just as the Apostle explained: "after abolishing every kind of domination, authority and power . . . the last enemy to be abolished is death" (I Cor. 15:24-26).

[7] And also, because of the weakness his listeners, [David] toned down his words with *sheep and oxen, all of them, etc.*, which point out the common dignity of human nature; for [David's contemporaries] were unable to grasp the hidden mystery of the Divine One's divinity, by union with which our nature is elevated to that degree of honor.

## COMMENTARY ON PSALM FORTY-FIVE

The Jews understand this psalm to be about Solomon and the daughter of Pharaoh, although it is not possible for them to maintain that these good words were said in praise of Solomon and his wife. Likewise, its words are infinitely superior to anything that might be said about Solomon. Furthermore, David must have composed these words as if they concern God.

[2] The LXX has  in place of  [i.e. a plural verb rather a singular verb].

*I speak my works to the king:* He calls his prophecy *my works*, just as the Apostle calls [his] teaching and episcopate "works": "whatever of his works shall burn he shall lose" (I Cor. 3:15), or "are you not my own work, in the Lord?" (I Cor. 9:1), or "he who aspires to the priesthood [aspires to] a good work" (I Timothy 3:1).

*To the king:* i.e., the Messiah: I tender words of prophecy to the King Messiah as an offering and a gift. But Henana<sup>1</sup> insists that it says: "the works of the king;" i.e., "I will recount His wonderful and glorious acts of governance on our behalf." And indeed, there is no *lamed* in the ancient Syriac texts --it is added on the basis of the meaning of the Greek.

Now because a person might say, "on what basis can you talk about his works when they are still hidden?", he says: *my tongue is*

---

<sup>1</sup> Late sixth century Syrian theologian who challenged the absolute primacy of the interpretations of Theodore of Mopsuestia.

*the pen of a [skillful] scribe* — "the holy spirit that is the *skillful scribe* from which all our doctrines flow seizes my tongue like a pen bearing intelligence in place of ink, and with it fashions names suitable to the greatness of the Messiah."

Now it is proper to understand that these three segments of verse one constitute a preface and introduction to the psalm, while the beginning of its teaching is:

[3] *Fairer in beauty, etc.*: this does not contradict that which Isaiah [said], "he had no beauty . . . he was despised, shunned by men" (Isaiah 53:2-3), for the former was said concerning His Passion, while the latter concerns the greatness of His deeds and His strength, etc.

*Grace is poured*: abundantly He astounds friend<sup>2</sup> and foe alike with His teachings, and with words of promise He extends compassion to sinners by His own authority.

[4] Because there were rebels who resisted the teaching of His Gospel, and it was necessary that they be corrected and made subservient to His authority with punishments, he said: *Gird Your sword upon Your thigh. Your Splendor and Your Glory.* That is, "arm Yourself like a warrior, with strong punishments against [Your] enemies; strengthen Your lordship even more

---

<sup>2</sup> The Syriac here is *ܠܚܝܬܐ* ("baytoya"), difficult to render in English. Perhaps the word "compatriot" is appropriate — the Jews had been Jesus' compatriots by birth, but they rejected him and became his enemies.

among Your friends;<sup>3</sup> and in all eyes appear splendid and glorious and victorious."

He repeats the words *Your glory* twice, because since the Passion He has many times appeared in glory. For indeed, You have been victorious over the double death, and You have received the same glories as before the Passion.

[5] *Ride in the cause [of truth and meekness and right]*: on account of the true word that He preached and *the meekness* that He taught, He has mounted the Cross. That is, "You have mounted the Cross because of the Gospel of the kingdom of heaven."

*Your Law is in fear*: that is, by the fear of hell which You promise and with the help of the kingdom of heaven, You establish Your Law with signs and mighty acts. In other words, You have no need for the help of others; rather, You are victorious over all Your enemies by Your own power and strength, and none may nullify even one of Your commandments.

*Your Law is in fear*: that is, by the strength of Your right hand and by miracles and teachings, You establish Your law by the fear of Hell, etc. And it is not observed negligently -- Hell is reserved for those who do not observe it, and the Kingdom for those who do.

[6] *Your arrows are sharp in the breast of the king's enemies, and peoples fall beneath You*: these words have been rearranged [from the order found in the text].

---

<sup>3</sup> Same as above.

*The king's enemies:* [to] Your enemies, O King, whether they be demons or men, as it happened to the Jews after His Ascension.

[7] So that it not be thought that now for the first time He tyrannically seized the monarchy, he said: *Your divine throne, etc.*

*A simple scepter:* that is, straight, without any crookedness *in your reign.* Because kings are accustomed to holding golden scepters in their hands as a sign, as it were, of the righteousness and excellence of their monarchies. Thus he spoke concerning Him that the uprightness of Your reign is comparable to the simplicity of Your nature.

[8] Similarly, he refers to His human nature, saying: *I love righteousness, etc.* The prophet attributes both of them; i.e., His divinity and His humanity, to one person, as an indication of the indivisible unity which those natures possess.

*Because of this has God, Your God, anointed You:* the reason why He anointed You, whereby the God-Word would be united with Him, is not because *You love righteousness and hate wickedness,* but [because] at the moment His flesh came into being in the womb, the union became fact. But it is the custom of Scripture, and particularly of the Hebrew Scriptures, to posit a cause when there is no cause, or to posit in lieu of a cause something from which the real cause is derived, as in "so You are just in Your sentence, and right in Your judgement" (Ps. 51:6).

*God, your God:* similar to "my God and your God" (John 20:37).

*He has anointed You over Your peers:* in that those who were in the Law [i.e., the Jews] did their anointing with oil composed of four factors, while He was anointed with the Holy Spirit, as it has been said (Acts 10:38). It is well-known that this was spoken about our Lord, for no one within the Law was anointed with an oil better than his peers -- they were all anointed with the same oil.

[9] *With myrrh:* this refers to His Passion, and also to the spices that Nicodemus brought for the honor of His holy body.

*And cassia:* that is, *كاسيا*.

*And aloe:* that is, *الاول*. This is an allusion to the glorious fragrance and perfume of His body. That is, after His Passion a pleasing fragrance from these [spices] flowed throughout the earth, "for we are a sweet savor in the Messiah" (II Cor. 2:15).

He calls His humanity *robes*, His divinity being interior, just as the Apostle called it a veil: "through the veil that is His flesh" (Hebrews 10:20). David, too, following the Hebrew and the Greek, called His humanity "body": he said "בשרו כבודו" in lieu of the "اول ورحم" of the Syriac, which the Apostle cites in imitation of the Greek. And Jacob [said]: "he will wash his robe in wine, [his garment] in blood of grapes" (Gen. 49:11). David says *Your robes* rather than "your robe," to signify "all the members of Your body."

A certain teacher explained it this way: *myrrh and cassia and aloe perfumed all [of Your robes] -- these were the three days [that*

Jesus was] in the grave, during which time their fragrance flowed over everything.

*From a choice temple*, that is, *from Me* -- i.e. God Himself -- *they gladden You* -- i.e., the Messiah. [That is,] all the nations build temples [dedicated] to You or Your martyrs. Though mentioning only a single temple, the Syriac alludes to many temples. The Hebrew has "ivory temples" rather than *a choice temple*. The LXX has "elephant-bone palaces, from which princesses delight You in Your honor."

[According to] others, [David's meaning was:] "because You rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, and You were recognized as being the Son of God, in the future many would *gladden You* with the hymns and praises they would sing before You in the splendid temples which would be built in honor of Your name and Your martyrs with many kinds of gold and precious stones, etc. By prophesying Your governance, I was first in stating that this prophecy would strengthen everyone with faith in You." This is what he meant by the words: *from Me*.

[10] Henceforth he turns his word toward the Church, and he says:

*a princess rose in His praise*. Though mentioning only one princess, he alludes to the many who stand and praise Him.

And just as he calls the Messiah "king," he calls the Church *Queen*, for in steadfast love and true faith she cleaves to the Messiah, and because all true believers are adopted into the Spirit as children through baptism, just as John and the Apostle called the Messiah "bridegroom" and the Church "bride."

With the words *at Your right hand*, he alludes to the great honor that the Church will receive in association with Him.

*In fine gold*: that is, she is adorned with spiritual blessing and showered with various wonderful gifts, by which she is more resplendent than by any robes woven of the finest *gold of Ophir*.

[11] Then he instructs and advises [the Church] concerning what she is obligated to do in order to repay His love for her.

*Take heed, My lass*: listen to the voice of the bridegroom, and *see* what He bore on your behalf, and *incline your ear* to hear His teaching. Abandon the pagan customs which your fathers observed so that when the King finds you to be pure and chaste, He will join with you all kinds of delight.

*Because He is your Lord, worship [him]*: do not despise His Passion, that was on your behalf, on account of the humiliation regarding the honor of His lordship. Rather, know that by His very nature He is your lord. Pay Him the worship due to the Creator of all.

[13] *All the glory of this princess is interior*: and not exterior, like [that of] Israel. That is to say, [the Church] is joined to her bridegroom, who calls her His glory, by the soul, and not by exterior beauty which encourages shameful deeds. The glory He gave her was not for the adornment of her body, but for spiritual blessing that renders the soul wise.

*Her robe is embroidered*: that is, He filled her with spiritual blessing, by which she can achieve virtue.

[14] *Is led [inside to the King]:* this concerns wealthy people, that is, the famous and victorious ones in the world who desire to see the glory of the Church. They offer [the Church] their virgin daughters and bring gifts and offerings to it.

While showing the offerings that the Church brings, he said: *they lead virgins [and] their companions.* They do not offer up something outside of themselves; rather they offer up their virgins as a sacrifice of their very essence. For even in the Pentateuch animal sacrifice was preferred to virgins; but David mentioned virgins as being the best of all, since virginity is more laborious, valuable, and excellent than any [other] virtue. From of old this [virtue] has been difficult to maintain, as it is hard enough even for righteous men to have [only] one wife. After our Lord's revelation, not only men but also delicate and frail women guarded their virginity. [The virtue of] virginity was placed upon the female sex, for chastity and modesty become [women] even more than men.

Thus he has woven his words, all of which extol the holy Church, as though they concern a queen whom young girls accompany for her honor.

[15] *They go in joy and sweetness:* that is, they rejoice and exult in following this difficult path of virginity willingly and not by force.

And when the course of the struggle has been completed, *they enter the Temple of the king:* that is, the Kingdom of Heaven, where they enjoy themselves as in a royal palace. This is what our

Lord said, "those who were ready [went in with Him]" (Matthew 25:10).

[16] Having spoken about virginity, he speaks about the priesthood:

*in place of your fathers*, O Church whose priests have been Aaronites or pagan priests and soothsayers from among the nations, *your sons will be* true priests, ordained from the people or from among the nations.

[By mentioning] this sublime priesthood, he points out all the spiritual gifts with which the Church is adorned.

*Obey these rulers over all [the earth]*: that is, [obey] the priests and teachers who have been invested with authority over kings and humble people.

## COMMENTARY ON PSALM ONE HUNDRED TEN

That this psalm was not uttered by David about Abraham or about Abraham's servant when he went to acquire Rebecca to be the wife of his master's son Isaac, as the Jews believe, but rather about our Lord Messiah, is evident even from the psalm's opening. For there are four letters in the Hebrew text with which "God" and "Lord" are exclusively written, and which are not used when one is called "Lord" by virtue of human authority. Here the words "Lord" and "my Lord" are both written in the same way with these letters.

[1] *The Lord said to my Lord*: this demonstrates that our "Son of Man" is also Lord and God, because of His union with the Word: "God has made this [Jesus whom you crucified] both Lord and Messiah, etc." (Acts 2:36). And it is also evident from the words of our Lord and His apostles that were spoken when He ascended to heaven.<sup>1</sup>

*Until I make your enemies [your footstool]*: he did not speak these words [to imply] any limitation, but rather [to say] that His sovereignty endures eternally. The verse is similar to "even until very old age do not abandon me, [O God]" (Ps. 71:18), or "he took her as his wife but did not know her [until her son was born]" (Matthew 1:24), or "so until her dying day Michal [daughter of Saul] bore no children" (II Sam. 6:23).

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Matthew 28:18, Acts 2:34, and I Cor. 15:25.

- [2] *Mighty scepter, etc.*: i.e., Your kingdom, which out of Zion makes its start, spreading rapidly to the ends of Creation by means of the Gospel. It will be powerful and mighty, and You will chastise and restrain those who try to oppose it as with a rod or a staff, as happened to the Jews after the Ascension. As for the others, the Lord will send you from Zion like a *mighty scepter*, as a Crucifier to the repentant nations, and You shall hold sway over all the kings and evil ones who persecute Your doctrine.

He calls Him *scepter* just as Isaiah [was called] (cf. Isaiah 11:1, translating the Hebrew שֶׁטֶן as "scepter"), as one to whom all of human nature inheres, but also in whom death and Satan are defeated.

The LXX has "mighty rod," after the image of kings who hold a straight scepter in their hands.

- [3] *Your glorious people on the day of strength*: by [mentioning] one particular day, he demonstrates that His strength is everyday and every place. And because this strength is constantly seen in the mighty acts which are performed by You among mankind, a glorious people and a holy congregation have been established for You, that in daily prayer praise the honor of Your kingdom.

Henana [says]: You render glory and brilliance to Your people and the believers who adhere to You on the mighty day of Your second appearance, in which Your eternal glory and strength are seen. Thus the word is fitting also for the divinity that executes judgement through the actions of mankind.

The LXX has: "with You is primacy on the day of Your strength."

*In magnificent holiness from the womb:* from the time of Your formation in the womb, you have appeared magnificent and holy, just as Gabriel said to the Virgin, "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the strength [of the Most High will overshadow you;] and for that reason [the holy child to be born will be called 'son of God']" (Luke 1:35), and to Joseph, "for the one who has been conceived within her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20).

Others [say]: the magnificence and holiness of Your nature do not emerge through time, as with the others whose origin is with You, but rather from the belly, within the womb and from birth; that is, by Your very nature. For just as it is the way with us that everyone born of the womb is of the same substance as the one who bore him, so he said concerning Him, to proclaim the equivalence of His nature with the Father. That is, by birth You are a magnificent and holy being, in the image of Your Father.

In place of [the words] *in magnificent holiness from the womb*, the LXX has: "in the splendor of the holy ones," meaning, in return for the trials and tribulations that they bear for the sake of Your name, Your faithful saints appear splendid through Your goodness, etc.

*From of old, O Child, I bore You:* he speaks in the voice of the Father to the Son; that is, the [word of God] is born eternally through the Father, without beginning and apart from time. For if there had been something prior to Him, it would not have been said to Him *from of old*. This is similar to the

words, "I am the first and the last" (Isaiah 44:6); i.e., without beginning or end.

Now because those who are born to us lose the youthfulness with which they are born and grow older to become the fathers of others, he called Him *Child*, to show that He does not age like we do, and He does not lose that quality of being a son; rather He abides continually in the youthfulness and strength with which He was born.

Alternately: this holy body in which the [word of God] will appear at the end of days was intended and prepared for that glorious divine economy even from before the foundation of the world, as Peter said, "this was destined for Him by the deliberate will and plan of God, etc." (Acts 2:23), or Paul, "this mystery . . . was hidden for long ages and generations in God Who created all" (Ephesians 3:9), and also, "we speak God's wisdom in mystery, that which was hidden that He set aside in advance, etc." (I Cor. 2:7), and other [verses]. For had not His birth in a body been determined and prepared from of old and for eternity, how could David and the other prophets from earlier generations have prophesied about Him?

The LXX has: "from the belly, before the morning star I bore You"  
-- that is, before the sun.

[4] And he demonstrates the greatness of His priesthood, saying, *The Lord has sworn and will not relent; You are a priest forever [after the manner of Melchizedek], etc.* Now it is asked how the Lord swore concerning this. Some say that [David] said it as a recollection of words [which were spoken] to the ancient ones.

Others [say] that David appropriated that which God said about Samuel: "I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest" (I Sam. 2:35) and applied it to the Messiah. Others [say] that it was not spoken at all, but that David used the words [*the Lord*] *has sworn* as a sign of the stability of God's decree, that His promise not be thought false, and to show that the purpose of His governance does not alter.

Hence the Jews are proven wrong, for this word is not fitting for any [mortal] human, but only for the Messiah. For Abraham never practiced the priesthood, and he was never called a priest. And the priests of the Torah did not act as priests in the sense of the service of Melchizedek.

In four ways does Melchizedek serve as the *type* of the Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

One, by his being called priest, king, and righteous one. Two, he did not receive the priesthood as an inheritance from his parents, and he did not transmit it to anyone else. Three, he did not act as a priest through the sacrifice of dumb animals, but through the excellence of his person and through prayers and through the elements of bread and wine. Four, he was priest in Jerusalem, the *type* for the heavenly Jerusalem.

Because our Lord was a king and a priest, [David] demonstrated his royalty with the words *Sit at My right hand* through *scepter*; and concerning His priesthood, [with words] through *You are a priest forever*.

---

<sup>2</sup> See J. Blenkinsopp, "Type and Antitype," *NCE* vol. 14 (pp. 351-2) for a brief discussion of Christian typology.

- [5] *The Lord is at [يد] your right hand:* not by his own will but by the divine power that dwells within Him does He perform miracles, etc. The LXX has "the Lord is at [يد] your right hand."

*He crushes [kings] in the day of His anger:* because the Messiah's examinations are correct and His judgments are keen, He does not side with kings, if they anger Him.

- [6] *He works judgement upon the nations:* at the Last Judgement, *heaping up Gehenna with their bodies.*

In order to demonstrate that it is not only in the world to come that those who oppose His will are judged, but that they are also punished many times here, he says: *He cuts off the head [of many people] of the earth.* According to promise, in the final destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans, three hundred myriad Jews were massacred, in the time of Titus son of Vespasian and Aelius Hadrian and others.

- [7] *[He drinks] from the stream on His way:* [David speaks] about the painful and distressed life of humiliation and privation that [the Messiah] led, as He himself also attested -- "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay down" (Matthew 8:20). Or perhaps [he speaks] of the fact that he drank from streams when He wandered from the towns to the desert and the mountains with the crowds, so that it would be easier for them to hear His teaching while far from the world's tumult, or while He prayed alone. For indeed, He chose a painful life and [He] despised

worldly pleasures. *Therefore*, He conquered everything, and *His head is raised* above all His enemies.

In place of *He crushes [kings] in the day of His anger*, the LXX has "and He breaks," and in place of *the stream on His way* [it has] "He shall live a life of gloom to redeem our sins, etc."

**ANALYTICAL ESSAY:**

**Why Jews and Christians  
Say Such Different Things**

The purpose of this essay is to explicate and compare the opinions of Kimhi, Ishodadh, and Meiri on a number of exegetical questions that I have identified as being central to their interpretation of the Book of Psalms generally, and to Psalms 2, 8, 45, and 110 in particular. Four questions will be addressed in turn:

- 1) Who was/were the author/s of Psalms?
- 2) What kinds of divine revelation were involved in the composition of Psalms?
- 3) What polemic intent did the commentators perceive to be inherent in these psalms themselves?
- 4) What kinds of polemic did these commentators explicitly direct against their rivals?

Fundamentally, I am trying to highlight the basic hermeneutic differences between these commentators that lead them to their different interpretations of these psalms — why do Jews and Christians say such different things?

## I. Authorship

Authorship of the Psalms is the question around which many of the exegetical concerns of our commentators revolve. Though each of them, in varying degrees, accepts the ancient ascription of Psalm authorship to David — "the sweet singer of Israel"<sup>1</sup> — they do so with individual nuances that help determine much of the rest of their exegesis. Combined with the views of these commentators on the prophetic status of Psalm revelation, these nuances of authorship

---

<sup>1</sup> II Samuel 23:1. The exact meaning of this phrase has been much debated, but there can be little doubt as to Meiri's understanding as reflected in the opening lines of the Introduction to his commentary on Psalms (see p. 57).

provide us with a key for understanding the different interpretations translated in the central section of this paper.

The claim that David is the author of at least some of the Psalms stems from the biblical text itself. The phrase  $\text{לדוד}$  is found in the superscriptions to a number of psalms, sometimes along with brief descriptions of the context of their composition in terms of David's biography. In addition, other biblical books seem to corroborate the assertion of Davidic authorship of certain psalms. The strong biblical tradition of David's love of music and poetry only add to the impression that David was the primary, if not the sole, author of the Book of Psalms.<sup>2</sup>

It is certainly true, however, that the biblical text does not give us a crystal clear picture of David as author of all the Psalms. The meaning of  $\text{לדוד}$  is not understood with any real precision; and if that were not bad enough, there are psalms that seem to be attributed to authors other than David, while others bear no attributions at all.<sup>3</sup> Even at the earliest levels of interpretation the question of authorship was an open one. In Cooper's words, "the critic is thus forced from the outset to pass judgement on the

---

<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the various arguments for and against Davidic authorship of Psalms on the basis of the psalm superscriptions. An excellent discussion of this question may be found in N. Sarna, "Psalms," *EJ* 13, cols. 1313-14, 1317-22. On the origin of the psalm superscriptions, see E. Slomovic, "Toward an Understanding of the Formation of Historical Titles in the Book of Psalms," *ZAW* 91 (1979) pp. 350-360. The different psalm headings found in the LXX and the Peshitta are the subject of W. Bloemendaal, *The Headings of the Psalms in the East Syrian Church* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1960). The relationship between the psalm titles and interpretation of the psalms is discussed in A. Cooper, "The Life and Times of King David According to the Book of Psalms," *Harvard Semitic Studies* 26 (1983) pp. 117-131.

<sup>3</sup> see Sarna, *EJ*, cols. 1313-14.

reliability of the claims of text and tradition. To put the question directly: What do the Psalms have to do with David? And, conversely, what does David have to do with the Psalms?"<sup>4</sup>


It is difficult to find a definitive statement of the Talmudic opinion of the authorship of Psalms. A great number of opinions are expressed in the Babylonian Talmud itself and in the early *midrashim*. Because these statements tend to use a wide variety of verbs to describe the activity of psalm composition ( *Wlc, ncn, ncn* ), comparing and evaluating them becomes problematic. It is clear, however, that Kimhi and Meiri agree that the central Talmudic statement is found in *Baba Batra 14b-15a*:


David wrote [ *ncn* ] the Book of Psalms ' *z* ' *z* ' ten elders: ' *z* ' *z* ' Adam, ' *z* ' *z* ' Melchizedek, ' *z* ' *z* ' Abraham, ' *z* ' *z* ' Moses, ' *z* ' *z* ' Heman, ' *z* ' *z* ' Jeduthun, ' *z* ' *z* ' Asaph, and ' *z* ' *z* ' the three sons of Korah.

But just exactly what does ' *z* ' *z* ' mean? Rashi understood it this way: " ' *z* ' *z* ' *ten elders*: he wrote in it words that had been spoken by these elders who had [lived] before him, as well as those who were his contemporaries, such as Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun." In other words, certain psalms were actually written by other authors, on whose behalf David acted by including these psalms in "his" book. This understanding follows the usage of ' *z* ' *z* ' in, for example, *Mishnah Sheqalim 1:6-7*, and it will be seen that Kimhi later adopted this understanding as his own.

---

<sup>4</sup> Cooper, "The Life and Times," p. 118.

On the other hand, Rabbenu Gershom understands '3'  in a very different sense: David himself actually wrote all of the psalms, but he attributed some of them to various other biblical figures. This viewpoint accords more directly with R. Meir's statement in *Pesachim* 117a that "all the praises that are uttered in the Book of Psalms, David uttered all of them," and it is closer to the understanding later expressed by Meiri. Although Ishodadh does not explicitly mention either of these Talmudic passages in his commentary, he is uncompromising in his belief that David wrote all of the Psalms.

Let us now proceed to a more detailed exposition of the views of our three commentators. David Kimhi begins the introduction to his commentary on Psalms with a discussion of the previously cited passage of *Baba Batra* 14b-15a. As already noted, the meaning of the phrase '3'  is somewhat ambiguous; Kimhi quickly clarifies any doubt about its meaning by stating that "what [the Rabbis] meant by this was that these ten had composed the songs that have been ascribed to them." He then cites several other passages that explain which were the psalms written by authors other than David.<sup>5</sup>

Kimhi understands, then, that David wrote some but not all of the psalms. On what basis does he distinguish between those written by David and those written by others? To begin with, there are those psalms with superscriptions that appear to ascribe authorship to others. Kimhi accepts the testimony of these ascrip-

---

5 p. 10.

tions. There are also those psalms that seem to be attributed to David by the phrase  $\text{לדוד}$ . However, Kimhi acknowledges the difficulty of relying on this phrase; the meaning of the preposition is ambiguous: "those songs which bear the superscription  $\text{לדוד}$  were composed by David, along with those that do not name any other author. But there are cases in which  $\text{לדוד}$  means 'about David,' such as 'for the leader, a song about David: May the Lord answer you in time of trouble' (Ps. 20)."<sup>6</sup>

Kimhi has adopted a complex, flexible approach to the authorship of Psalms, one that maintains a degree of uncertainty because of the difficulty of the phrase  $\text{לדוד}$ . What has this approach yielded in terms of our four psalms?

Psalm 2, according to his approach, was definitely written by David, and it is interpreted correspondingly. Kimhi places this psalm in the context of II Samuel 5:17. He identifies it as having been composed at a very specific juncture of David's life, just after he had been anointed king.

The authorship of Psalm 8 and Psalm 110 is indeterminate; both bear the ambiguous title  $\text{לדוד}$ . Kimhi chooses, on the basis of the dynamics of the texts themselves, to relate one but not the other to David's life. Kimhi advances several suggestions concerning Davidic authorship of Psalm 8, without positively endorsing any of them. The main body of his interpretation essentially avoids the issue of

authorship; the psalm is taken to provide an account of certain metaphysical truths concerning God's relationship to humanity and the world.

In the case of Psalm 110, the question of authorship, or at least of personae, is unavoidable. The ambiguity of address at the psalm's opening, *The Lord said to my [l]ord*, demands comment: who was talking to whom? Kimhi states that this psalm "was recited by one of the prophets about David," without, however, specifying which prophet. It is interesting to note two things in relation to Kimhi's interpretation of this psalm: Kimhi makes no assertion of Davidic authorship, although his overall approach would allow such an assertion; yet he nevertheless sets this psalm, too, in a very specific context in David's life<sup>7</sup> -- it was not written by him but about him.

As for Psalm 45, the possibility of Davidic authorship is precluded by the superscription *למנצח*. Kimhi interprets this psalm as a messianic prophecy, as do Meiri and Ishodadh, but, it must be stressed, as a non-Davidic prophecy. This will have important implications for Kimhi's understanding of the prophetic status of the psalms.

For Meiri, as well as for Kimhi, the textual evidence of the psalms themselves and the testimony of such Talmudic statements as we have already discussed serve to establish David as, at least, the

---

<sup>7</sup> I.e., the events related in II Samuel 5.

primary author of Psalms. Similarly, the testimony of *Baba Batra* 14b-15a is central to Meiri's determination of which psalms were or were not written by David. But on this point Kimhi and Meiri part company.

Meiri's understanding of the troublesome phrase 'ז'ס in *Baba Batra* 14b-15a is actually the same as Kimhi's: "what they meant was that each of these ten wrote a few psalms, and David compiled them in this book along with the psalms he himself had written." But whereas Kimhi accepts this viewpoint and proceeds with his interpretations, Meiri rejects a literal reading of this passage. He steadily chips away at its assertions until he can finally declare his own belief that David wrote all of the psalms.<sup>8</sup>

Meiri begins by challenging the notion that the three sons of Korah mentioned in *Baba Batra* could have been inspired writers of psalms -- if they had been prophets, how could their prophecy have remained unknown until the time of David? Kimhi had understood that Korah's sons lived before David. David knew about their poetic compositions, and he included them in his Book of Psalms. But in Meiri's view "sons of Korah" was merely a title by which David referred to the Levites to whom he gave his psalms for recitation. The "sons of Korah" were contemporaries of David, and their appearance in certain psalm titles carries no implication of authorship.

In his commentary to Psalm 3, excerpted above, Meiri extends this line of reasoning to include Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, and Eitan Ha-Ezrachi. These figures were not authors of any psalms; they were simply leaders of the Levites who were specifically mentioned in the psalm titles by virtue of their prominent positions. Seven of the ten persons named in *Baba Batra 14b-15a* have thus far been eliminated from consideration as authors of psalms.

Meiri does not, in fact, decisively remove Adam, Melchizedek, and Moses -- the remaining three named in *Baba Batra* -- from consideration. He does manage to cast doubt on Moses' alleged authorship of Psalm 90, saying that "Moses" could have been the name of a particular Levite of David's generation. Here Meiri states his conclusion: "thus David wrote all of them [that bore the names of others], along with those not bearing any names and those bearing David's name alone."<sup>9</sup>

Meiri has articulated a viewpoint quite different from that of Kimhi, one that stops just short of a positive statement that David wrote all of the psalms. In three of the four psalms that particularly interest us, Meiri's approach yields only a slightly different framework for interpretation than that which we found for Kimhi.

Both commentators agree that David was the author of Psalm 2, and they both place it in the context of the beginning of David's

---

<sup>9</sup> p. 86. It must be admitted that within the body of his commentary Meiri retreats somewhat from this most radical statement of his position. He frequently uses the phrase "[this psalm] that David uttered . . . or that someone else uttered about him."

reign. Meiri insists on David's being the author of Psalm 8; while for Kimhi the authorship of this psalm must remain indeterminate. Both commentators stress metaphysical interpretations of this psalm, although Meiri is able to place it firmly within the biographical context of II Samuel 6:10, when David brought the Ark of the Lord up to Jerusalem from the home of Obed-edom the Gittite. We might expect the framework of Meiri's interpretation of Psalm 45 to be significantly different than Kimhi's, because Meiri is not precluded from attributing authorship to David. This, however, is not the case. Meiri considers the psalm to be a messianic prophecy, but he mentions no particular author.

It is in connection with Psalm 110 that Meiri's approach to authorship yields significant results. Meiri, like Kimhi, is compelled to comment on the form of address of the psalm's opening line. If David wrote this psalm, as Meiri would maintain, "about God's promise to him to establish him in an everlasting dynasty," then why does he refer to himself in the third-person: "The Lord said to my lord . . ." (Ps. 110:1)?

Meiri explains that David used to compose the psalms and give them to the Levites to sing in the courtyard in front of the altar. The third-person form of address is used here because of a sense of propriety: "thus the word *to my lord* [לַיהוָה] spoken here refers to David, for if he had said, 'the Lord said to me,' it would have been inappropriate for the Levites to recite it in the Temple Court." Meiri is not unaware that other psalms are written in the first-

person,<sup>10</sup> and he explains that the propriety of first-person address depends upon the subject matter of a particular psalm. Here he insists that "the first-person voice was not possible."<sup>11</sup> Meiri's interpretation of this verse reveals his notion of the relationship between David the writer and the Levite performers. He seems to imply that certain psalms were intended for liturgical use from the very moment of their composition, rather than being adapted for liturgical use at some later time. This assertion of a self-conscious sense of purpose to David's compositional activities has important ramifications for his understanding of the prophetic status of the psalms.

We have seen how, for our Jewish interpreters, Davidic authorship of the Psalms provides a framework for interpretation. Individual psalms are correlated with episodes from the life of David, who is the composer, or at least the subject, of these psalms. The actions and objects within each psalm are then explained in the light of actions and objects from the appropriate historical situation.

This technique of "historical correlation"<sup>12</sup> characterizes the work of Kimhi no less than it does the work of Meiri, with the exception of the relative handful of psalms for which Kimhi accepts neither David as author nor David as subject of the psalm. This approach is applied to those psalms that seem to be prophecies of

---

<sup>10</sup> From among these he cites Pss. 3, 4, and 13.

<sup>11</sup> p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Cooper, p. 121.

the future as well as to those that seem to speak of the past. Thus even the future prophecies in the Book of Psalms are recognizably the prophecies of King David. According to Cooper, "the Davidic attribution of the Psalms serves [for the Rabbis] as a productive interpretive strategy. It provides a firm anchor for the use of the psalms as either retrospective or prophetic accounts of the history of Israel."<sup>13</sup> The Davidic attribution, and the historical context that comes along with it, are the keys that unlock the meaning of a particular psalm.

Ishodadh also wants to find keys with which to unlock the meaning of the psalms, and he begins by taking an absolutely unequivocal stand on the authorship of Psalms: David wrote all of them. Ishodadh makes this assertion without argument or discussion. It is crucial to note, however, that he explicitly rejects the testimony of any psalm titles except those supplied by his great predecessor and mentor, Theodore of Mopsuestia. Thus he forswears a major tool that might have been used to locate psalms within the context of David's life. His attribution of psalm authorship to David is consequently lacking the kind of significance Kimhi and Meiri gave it: the psalms according to Ishodadh's interpretation have very little to do with David, and their details are not explained with reference to David's personal history. The biographical link between author and composition has been severed, and the effect of this separation is enormous.

---

<sup>13</sup> Cooper, p. 118. Although Cooper made this statement in regard to earlier eras of Rabbinic exegesis, I think that it applies equally well to Kimhi and Meiri.

Ishodadh considers all four of the psalms that concern us here to be messianic prophecies that were uttered by David but that bear no particular connection to his life story. The effect of this understanding on his interpretation is most striking in regard to Psalm 110. Kimhi and Meiri differ as to whether David himself actually wrote this psalm, but they agree in understanding it to be about David, a hymn to the glory of his reign. Ishodadh, on the other hand, while insisting most strongly that it was written by David, barely mentions David in his interpretation: "this psalm was . . . uttered by David . . . about our Lord Messiah, [as] is evident even from the psalm's opening.<sup>14</sup> But not a single verse of the psalm is interpreted with reference to David's life.

Ishodadh's interpretation of these psalm depends upon the technique of historical correlation to the same extent as does the work of our other commentators. The difference is that his key historical situation is not David's biography as narrated in I and II Samuel; it is the sacred history of Christ and the very early Church as narrated in the Gospels and the Letters of Paul. The prophecies in his Book of Psalms are also David's prophecies, but less recognizably so, because they are seen in the light of Christian sacred history.

Because of Ishodadh's notion of Davidic prophecy, the Davidic framework is less determinative of his interpretations than it is of

Kimhi's or Meiri's. The long shadow that David cast over Psalms -- that we saw, for example, in Kimhi's assertion that although David did not write Psalm 110, it must have been written by someone else about him -- is nowhere to be found in Ishodadh's interpretations. The shadow has been dispelled by the bright light of David's prophecy. For Ishodadh, David is a very different kind of prophet than he was for Kimhi or Meiri: "the blessed David was a sea of prophecy. . . . He stood on a high peak of divine knowledge. Just as Moses saw the Promised Land, [David] saw and contemplated all past and future things."<sup>15</sup>

## II. PROPHECY

It is becoming clear that in order to give an account of the "reach" of the Psalms, our three commentators share a need to define the type of divine inspiration involved in the composition of Psalms. Is a given psalm retrospective or a prophecy of the future? Does it contain chastisement or instruction? Should it be classified as prophecy or wisdom? Did it apply only to members of David's generation, or does it apply also (or only) to future generations?

To answer these questions we must know in what way David, or any other author to whom we might attribute particular psalms, was inspired when he undertook to write psalms. Because our three commentators understood David's life and their own Scriptures differently, they view this inspiration differently. And because they

---

<sup>15</sup> p. 129.

do so, they arrive at significantly different interpretations of the psalms.

Kimhi builds his answer to the question of the revelational status of Psalms around a distinction between prophecy and divine inspiration, two modes of receiving revelation. Kimhi accepts one traditional assertion and one canonical fact as the foundations of his argument: the Book of Psalms, whoever wrote it, was divinely inspired; and it was included among the Writings rather than among the Prophets.

The distinction between prophetic revelation and divine inspiration, according to Kimhi, is primarily in the mode of receiving divine communication. Prophecy most often arrives in a dream, but when it comes upon a person while awake, it is characterized by a momentary suspension of the normal senses. The prophet "becomes removed from all the ways of the world." The divine message is delivered as the prophet see images or hears voices speaking with him.<sup>16</sup>

In a state of divine inspiration, on the other hand, "the perfected man busies himself with matters of God, all the while retaining his senses, without a single one of them being suspended. He speaks in a normal human fashion, except that a supreme spirit stimulates him, making the words upon his tongue emerge as words of praise and thanksgiving to his God, or as words of insight and

---

<sup>16</sup> p. 11.

instruction. He may even speak about future events, with divine support of his intellect, with all of his faculties of expression."<sup>17</sup>

But is there any distinction to be made between prophecy and divine inspiration on the basis of content? Kimhi is somewhat vague on this point, and he seems even to back away from the sharp, qualitative distinction described above: "there are different degrees of prophecy, one above the other. Thus even though Daniel saw visions both in dreams and while awake, his potential and knowledge in those visions did not equal the potential of Isaiah or Ezekiel or the other prophets. Therefore his book is not included among the Prophets but rather among those books called Writings, to indicate that they were divinely inspired." Daniel's mode of reception would seem to characterize prophecy, yet the "potential" of his message did not warrant inclusion among the Prophets. Kimhi further clouds the issue by citing a number of verses demonstrating that those who composed the Psalms -- remember that Kimhi does not posit David as the sole author of the book -- were called prophets. Yet he states that "their 'prophecy' was along the lines we have explained" -- i.e., they uttered their psalms in a state of divine inspiration.<sup>18</sup>

Fortunately, this shadowy distinction becomes somewhat clearer as we examine Kimhi's interpretation of our four psalms and begin to see the interrelationship between theoretical concept and

---

<sup>17</sup> pp. 11-12.

<sup>18</sup> p. 12. Keep in mind that Meiri could not accept any kind of prophetic status for these other figures mentioned in Baba Batra 14b-15a. It was largely on the basis of this rejection that he posited David as the sole author of Psalms.

practical exegesis. Psalm 2, in Kimhi's opinion, contains a record of the very first revelation to David: *the Lord said to me, 'You are My son. I have fathered you this day* (verse 7): "on that very day the spirit of God was born within him, as it is written, 'the spirit of the Lord gripped David from that day on' [I Sam. 16:13], . . . and from that day on [David] recited songs and psalms with the divine inspiration that had been born within him and with which he was inspired by God."<sup>19</sup> Here we see how the details of David's life are correlated with statements in the Psalms. In this case, the effect is to corroborate a theory of the revelational status of Psalms. We see how this technique leads to an interpretation of Psalm 2 as a mixture of pure retrospective, containing words of insight and instruction,<sup>20</sup> and prophecy of the future -- that David would prevail over his enemies and firmly establish his monarchy.

This interpretation of Psalm 2:7 also seems to imply that once divine inspiration was "born within him," it became an abiding quality within David. "Divine inspiration" and "prophecy," in Kimhi's understanding, describe both the mode in which a person receives divine communication and the product of the poet or prophet's labor. We can conclude that whenever David or one of the other divinely inspired poets would "busy himself with matters of God," the result of the labor of composition would be divinely inspired. Prophecy, on the other hand, would not be an abiding quality of a

---

<sup>19</sup> p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the "insight and instruction" brought to light by Kimhi's comment on verse 4, "He who is enthroned in heaven" (p. 16).

person's speech, because true prophetic revelation comes upon a person only occasionally.

Psalm 8 is one of those psalms that Kimhi does not positively ascribe to the hand of David — yet nevertheless, like all psalms, it was composed in the mode of divine inspiration. The psalm, according to Kimhi, "is comprised of praise, glorification, and thanks to God, and an account of His greatness."<sup>21</sup> This account is interpreted to be an exposition of certain metaphysical truths — there is no prophecy of the future here, only words of insight and instruction. It is clear that Kimhi admits of a strong element of willful intent in the composition of psalms, for he says that certain verses within the psalm were uttered "in order to repudiate the heretics who say that the world is formed of eternal matter."

Psalm 45 is the only one of our four psalms upon which Kimhi, Meiri, and Ishodadh all agree that it is a prophecy of the future — specifically, of the messiah. And interestingly, in Kimhi's understanding it is the furthest removed from a Davidic context. It was uttered not by David but by the sons of Korah, yet it exhibits one of the higher qualities of divine inspiration as discussed in his Introduction, a quality that is usually associated with prophecy *per se*: "[the person experiencing divine inspiration] may even speak about future events, with divine support of his intellect, with all of his faculties of expression."<sup>22</sup> This is a non-Davidic prophecy of

---

<sup>21</sup> p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> p. 12.

the future. Such prophecies within the Book of Psalms are not the sole province of David.

Psalm 110 is also ascribed by Kimhi to an author other than David, and so whatever elements of divine inspiration it displays are reflected upon the non-Davidic authors of psalms. There is not a hint of future prophecy in this psalm, according to Kimhi's interpretation. The entire psalm is referred back to the incidents early in David's reign narrated in II Sam. 5. In fact, so thoroughly is this psalm situated in a historical context, it is difficult to see what is "left over" to comprise words of divinely inspired praise, thanks, insight, etc.

In Kimhi's work it is difficult to understand just what the "potential and knowledge" are that distinguish prophecy from divine inspiration. The technique of historical correlation, particularly in regard to Psalm 2, is used to buttress the traditional assertion that the psalms were divinely inspired. Kimhi adjusts his definition of divine inspiration so that it is broad enough to cover the range of speaking encountered in the Book of Psalms. Every kind of utterance it contains must be brought under this umbrella.

The connection between historical correlation and the question of prophecy is seen even more clearly in the work of Meiri. He exploits this connection to formulate a very different understanding of the distinction between divine inspiration and prophecy.

The greater part of Meiri's introduction to his commentary on Psalms is taken up with an elaborate discussion of the verse: "Then You spoke to Your faithful one[s]<sup>23</sup> in a vision and said, 'I have conferred power upon a hero [יִרְאֵה]; I have exalted one chosen out of the people" (Ps. 89:20).

Who is the hero that received this divine bounty, and who is/are the faithful one[s] that are informed of the fact? After carefully defining the term יִרְאֵה, Meiri entertains a number of possibilities as to the identity of the יִרְאֵה: Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Adam, Jacob, and finally, David. Meiri masterfully explains how each of these figures fulfill the criteria of יִרְאֵה which he established in his definition, and he just as masterfully leaves each possibility in play, so that the multiple-choice allusiveness of the verse increases geometrically. The implication is quite clear that it is up to the interpreter to choose from among these possibilities the one[s] that further his/her interests in a particular argument.

The interpretation Meiri finally chooses in the interest of furthering his discussion of the prophetic status of Psalms is this one:

*Then You spoke in a vision:* You already spoke on the subject of my [David's] monarchy -- to Jacob [in Gen. 49] and to Samuel.

*To Your faithful ones:* and You designated it to come to me by means of Your faithful ones [Jacob and Samuel].

---

<sup>23</sup> Though it will not further concern us here, on p. 79 Meiri touches on the question of whether יִרְאֵה should be translated as a singular or a plural.

*I have conferred power upon a נִאֲדָ : You have kept your word [by establishing me as king].<sup>24</sup>*

So — the technique of historical correlation has established David as the נִאֲדָ of Psalm 89:20, and Meiri's definition of נִאֲדָ speaks particularly of receptiveness to divine emanation. David is especially well prepared, because of his נִאֲדָ, to receive emanation, but he is not yet the נִבִּיָא who was spoken to in a vision; that is, he is not a true prophet. He is a נִאֲדָ; he receives divine inspiration. Meiri concludes that "according to this view it may be discerned that [David] is not counted among the prophets but only among those who speak with divine inspiration."<sup>25</sup>

Divine inspiration, in Meiri's view, is a lower form of revelation than prophecy. It is characterized both by its mode of reception and by its contents: "[it occurs] when the divine spirit awakens a complete man who is occupied with divine matters, and praise and thanks, or words of insight and instruction appear upon his tongue."<sup>26</sup>

Meiri does not explicitly mention prophecy of the future as being associated with divine inspiration, as Kimhi did. The question that must concern him here, then, is whether divine inspiration can account for those psalms that do seem to be "full-fledged prophecies

<sup>24</sup> p. 79.

<sup>25</sup> p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> p. 80. Meiri distinguishes this from the reception of prophecy, when "for most prophets, the sensory faculties are suddenly suspended, and [the] imagination sees as if someone were speaking . . . or hears a voice speaking similes, and he understands among them that which is to be conveyed in his prophecy."

of the future, particularly of the destruction of the Temple and its rebuilding."<sup>27</sup> That is, if David spoke with divine inspiration, rather than with prophecy, could he have uttered these prophecies of future events? And if he spoke with prophecy, what has become of our analysis of Psalm 89:20, and why were his writings not included in the category of Prophets? In other words, the interpretation of certain psalms as prophecies of the future depends the status of the revelation to David, as well as upon the identification of David as the author of Psalms.

Meiri solves this problem by positing a category between divine inspiration and the type of prophecy included among the Prophetic books. This intermediate category allows for prophecies of the future, such as were sometimes uttered by David. The key criterion for inclusion in the canonical category of Prophets is not now prophecy of the future; it is the criterion of *mission*: "the key fact, in my opinion, is that the words of any prophet who was not sent to the people to reprove them for wicked behavior or to guide them in upright behavior or to command them in public affairs and in war are not included among the prophetic books. . . . David and Daniel [were] of this type, their prophecies being of future events only."<sup>28</sup> David's "prophecies" include insight, instruction, praise, and thanks, and they include prophecies of the future. But his prophecies, by definition, do not include admonition or command.

---

<sup>27</sup> p. 80.

<sup>28</sup> p. 82.

This understanding is reflected in a number of ways in Meiri's commentary on individual psalms. David composed his psalms in either of two modes, divine inspiration or this intermediate kind of prophecy. In the four psalms that concern us here, Meiri is quite clear in specifying the mode in which David speaks. In regard to Psalm 2, for example, Meiri explains that "for these miracles and for the victory he achieved at the beginning of his reign, [David] praised God and sang."<sup>29</sup> This, then, is interpreted as a retrospective psalm, with only a hint of the future success of David's monarchy. It was composed in the mode of divine inspiration, which yields words of praise.

Psalm 8 also was written with divine inspiration. It is directed "against those who deny the creation of the world *ex nihilo*, etc.,"<sup>30</sup> yet it contains no direct admonition or reproof. Here a contrast arises between the intent of divinely inspired words and the *mission* that characterizes true prophecy. David knows, according to Meiri, that his words argue against a particular view of the creation of the world; there is no evidence, however, that he speaks out of a divine mission to eradicate that view. Rather, in Meiri's words, "I see nothing in this but the universal extent of Your providence and Your unity throughout the world."<sup>31</sup> This is praise and insight, which fall into the category of divine inspiration.

---

<sup>29</sup> p. 68.

<sup>30</sup> p. 94.

<sup>31</sup> p. 97.

Psalm 110, too, was written with divine inspiration: "he composed this psalm about God's promise to him to establish him in an everlasting dynasty." Meiri points out the divinely inspired character of the psalm in his comment on verse one.<sup>32</sup>

Psalm 45, on the other hand, is taken to be a prophecy of the intermediate type, about the character of "the King Messiah for whom we all hope." Its categorization as prophecy is made quite clear in Meiri's comment on verse two: "He has moved [David's] intellect with the power of prophecy." Similarly, his comment on the phrase *My tongue is the pen of an expert scribe* is illuminating: "that is, it speaks according to an outline, and its words are arranged in the manner of [words written by] a pen placed in the hand of an expert scribe."<sup>33</sup> There is no stumbling or confusion during the act of composition. This accords with Meiri's view of prophecy, in which the sensory faculties are suddenly suspended, and the prophet speaks divine words for which he is only a conduit, a pen in the hand of the divine author. This is different from the description of revelation by divine inspiration, which seems to imply a much more self-conscious relation between the human author and the word.

Meiri's rather complex view of the status of David's revelation emerges from a careful consideration of Psalms, and in turn it influences his interpretation of them. Tied up together in a tight

---

<sup>32</sup> p. 108. It is interesting to note that perhaps Meiri is hinting here that all of the liturgical psalms (i.e., those given to the Levites to be performed) were written with divine inspiration rather than prophecy.

<sup>33</sup> p. 99.

package are his attribution of authorship to David, his general theory of prophecy and divine inspiration, and the historical correlations that relate theory to text to interpretation.

For Ishodadh, in sharp distinction to both Kimhi and Meiri, prophecy of the future is the prime characteristic of the highest level of prophecy. Other prophets, whom the Jews hold most dear, such as Isaiah, Amos, or Nathan, prophesied only for their contemporaries. They "were dispatched to rebuke evildoers, and they quite correctly recorded the time and content of their revelations." But David, on the other hand, "spoke about the great things and future events which were far beyond the house of Nathan. His gift of divine inspiration was multi-faceted, so that he stood on a high peak of divine knowledge. Just as Moses saw the Promised Land, [David] saw and contemplated all past and future things."<sup>34</sup>

This judgement by Ishodadh rests upon a rather different analysis of divine inspiration and prophecy from that set forth by Kimhi or Meiri. In Ishodadh's understanding, the modes of receiving divine communication are distinct and independent of the modes of expressing that communication to others. All of the different modes of reception fall under the rubric of "divine inspiration," which may then be expressed to others in the form of prophecy, wisdom, instruction, or chastisement.

---

<sup>34</sup> pp. 128-129.

Ishodadh enumerates four modes of receiving divine communication. The first is revelation that is "sensible to the eyes and the ears." The foremost example of this mode was the revelation to Abraham of the three angels in Genesis 18. The second mode is intellectual revelation: "[the revelation] becomes manifest to the faculties of the soul." This mode was characteristic of the great revelations to Ezekiel: "while seeing nothing he thought that he saw, and [heard] a voice speaking with him." The third mode comes about when "God, without warning, fills the hearts of those who are worthy with His wisdom." This mode was characteristic of David's revelation, of God's gift of wisdom to Solomon, and of the revelation to the Apostles. The fourth mode of revelation is revelation in a dream, such as occurred to both the Old and New Testament Josephs.<sup>35</sup>

The revelation to David was of the third type. But we see that this mode of reception did not in any way determine the quality or content of his communication of that revelation in the Book of Psalms:

Now the blessed David received [divine] inspiration on the same level as the Apostles, and just as they were instructed in all the mysteries of governance from the day of Pentecost, so David received knowledge of the future from the day he was anointed by Samuel. And so it was not through separate revelations that David composed each of the psalms, but rather as a man who had received a treasure full of blessings — sometimes he prophesied and sometimes he admonished, etc.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> pp. 127-128.

<sup>36</sup> p. 128.

Thus David's gift of divine inspiration was of the highest level; he was granted knowledge of future things. But it was up to him, with willful intent, to express his gift in whatever way he chose:

Now it is correct to understand that all of [David's] psalms were uttered with divine inspiration. However, some were spoken with the gift of prophecy; i.e., those that speak of the future, the best and greatest of these being the ones that speak of the Messiah. Some, however, were spoken with wisdom, such as "Happy is the man" (Ps. 1) . . . And some were spoken with his gift for teaching; i.e., those that concern David himself . . . In sum, each psalm possesses something more and different than any other psalm.<sup>37</sup>

Ishodadh has articulated a theory of divine inspiration that admirably answers those same questions that troubled Kimhi and Meiri. It is important to note that Ishodadh's theory, like theirs, emerges from a combination of a *priori* theoretical considerations, such as we have already discussed, and from a close examination of the biblical text. With Ishodadh, this concentration on the text becomes apparent in his discussion of what he takes to be the incorrect, Jewish view, that David was not a prophet but merely a sage:

Their "proof" is because of what he does not say: "the saying of the Lord came upon me," or "the vision . . .," or "the word . . .," such as the other prophets said. Nor does he speak about the modes of divine revelation. . . . Neither was there any dispatch or mission with David, like

---

<sup>37</sup> p. 130. See also p. 130 above: "Whenever he wished he could speak on any subject, for his word was adorned by the Holy Spirit which dwelt in him."

Moses being sent to Egypt, or other prophets to their countrymen.<sup>38</sup>

Thus the essential nature of David's prophecy is revealed in the details of the text: "it was not said [of David] that 'the word of the Lord came upon him,' or 'the vision . . .,' etc., because he was not sent to others to say to them: 'Thus saith the Lord . . .'" His prophecy was not for his contemporaries, but for distant generations."<sup>39</sup>

Before we look at Ishodadh's interpretation of the four psalms that particularly concern us, it is important to note that they were chosen for consideration in this thesis precisely because Ishodadh identifies them as being the locus of messianic prophecy within the Book of Psalms. In terms of prophecy, then, these psalms are the *crème de la crème* -- the highest expression of the highest gift of divine inspiration.

It will not be a surprise at this point to learn that Ishodadh interprets these four psalms to be about the Christian messiah. His exegetical technique is strikingly similar to the technique of historical correlation used by Kimhi and Meiri in regard to those psalms that they took to be by or about King David, with one fundamental difference. No longer is the psalm situated in and interpreted with reference to the biography of David. Because of the excellence of David's prophetic gift, Ishodadh is able to dispel the shadow of David's personal history. His historical correlative is

---

<sup>38</sup> p. 128.

<sup>39</sup> p. 129. Note that this is precisely what keeps David's (and Daniel's) prophecies out of the Prophets, if we follow Meiri.

now the life of the Christ, to which David was undoubtedly referring in his prophecies.

There is scarcely a line of Ishodadh's interpretation of these psalms that does not reflect this point. Just a few examples should suffice:

Psalm 2:1 -- *Why are the nations in a tumult:* He terms the House of Herod and Pilate and the soldiers *nations*, just as Peter explained: "Herod and Pilate along with the nations and the assembly of Israel" (Acts 4:27).

Psalm 2:7 -- *I have fathered you this day:* some people maintain that this refers to His virgin birth, but in truth it refers to His birth from the grave.

Psalm 8:4 -- *What is man that You guide him:* after His grandeur, You lowered Him somewhat for the three days of His death, as the Apostle said, "we see that it is Jesus [who was made] a *little lower than the angels*" (Hebrews 2:9).

Psalm 45:3 -- *Fairer in beauty, etc.:* this does not contradict that which Isaiah [said], "he had no beauty . . . he was despised, shunned by men" (Isaiah 53:2-3), for the latter was said concerning His Passion, while the former concerns the greatness of His deeds and His strength, etc.

Psalm 110:7 -- *[He drinks] from the stream on His way:* [David speaks] about the painful and distressed life of humiliation and privation that [the Messiah] led, as He Himself also attested -- "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay down" (Matthew 8:20).

In his interpretation of these four psalms, Ishodadh is able to break away from the narrow circumstances of David's life because of the extraordinary quality of David's prophecy. Wiles' assessment of Ishodadh's "mentor" Theodore of Mopsuestia applies equally well to this aspect of Ishodadh's work: "[the answer] is to treat David as the archetypal prophet who was given by the Spirit [i.e., divine inspiration] a vision of the future dispensation of God for his people."<sup>40</sup> This vision of the future dispensation is the key with which Ishodadh unlocks the meaning of Psalms.

### III. Polemics

We have now in large measure sketched out the exegetical frameworks in which our three commentators worked. Kimhi, Meiri, and Ishodadh were each bound to interpret certain psalms in certain ways because of their judgments regarding psalm authorship and inspiration. Each commentator also felt the need to defend his own interpretations, based on these judgments, against rival claimants to the truth of the Psalms.<sup>41</sup>

Here we must distinguish between two separate, though related, forms of polemic found in these commentaries. First is the "natural" polemic intent which is posited for certain psalms. This is revealed in such comments as Meiri's on Psalm 8: "[this psalm was] directed against those who deny the creation of the world *ex nihilo*."<sup>42</sup> The

---

<sup>40</sup> Wiles, p.499.

<sup>41</sup> I am making no claim as to these commentators being aware of each other's work. Nor will I make any attempt to identify the particular, individual target of any polemic passage.

<sup>42</sup> p. 94.

psalm itself is understood as having had a polemic intent from the moment of its composition. This phenomenon has already been noted a number of times in this essay, and here we will only comment upon it briefly. The second form of polemic is the kind that the commentators themselves direct against those who advance contrary interpretations. This form of polemic is exemplified by statements such as Kimhi's on Psalm 2: "the Christians consider [this psalm] to be about Jesus, and the verse from which they derive evidence and support for their error, *the Lord said to me: you are My son*, is for them a stumbling block."<sup>43</sup>

It is clear that the idea of a natural polemic inhering within a psalm is related to the question of the status of its divine revelation. Does the intent belong to God or to the poet? When a psalm is composed, there is some mechanism of divine revelation at work -- the divine word is revealed to a psalmist. In one way or another, *My tongue is the pen of an expert scribe* (Ps. 45:2). Though our three commentators disagree as to the precise nature of this mechanism, they seem to agree that the divine inspiration through which the psalms were composed is an abiding gift within a person. The poet knows that he possesses this gift of divine inspiration, and it is not a sporadic, discontinuous gift, as is the case with prophetic inspiration.

Thus we reach a situation in which David or some other poet sits down deliberately to compose a psalm. To what extent is he

---

<sup>43</sup> p. 24.

aware of the full import of the words that emerge? In Kimhi's view, "the perfected man busies himself with matters of God. . . . He speaks in a normal human fashion, except that a supreme spirit stimulates him, making the words upon his tongue emerge as words of praise and thanksgiving to his God, etc."<sup>44</sup> Meiri's words on this subject are almost identical with Kimhi's,<sup>45</sup> while Ishodadh is even more explicit: "divine inspiration dwelled in [David] from the time he was anointed, revealing to him the secrets of the divine economy. . . . Whenever he wished he could speak on any subject, for his word was adorned by the divine inspiration which dwelt in him."<sup>46</sup> The question, once again, is this: in those instances where we detect a polemic intent inherent in the words of a psalm, whose polemic is it? Is it, for example, David himself railing against those who deny the creation of the world *ex nihilo*, taking advantage of the divine power with which he is able to speak? Or is it God speaking directly through David, using him to further His own purposes?

The traditional consensus on this issue, among both Jewish and Christian commentators, is that those who actually uttered the words included in Scripture were generally unaware of the deeper meaning of their words.<sup>47</sup> Thus God may have embedded in their words, without their awareness, messages to future generations, polemics

---

<sup>44</sup> p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> p. 80.

<sup>46</sup> p. 129-130.

<sup>47</sup> Just two of the many possible citations to offer here are, *Menachot* 29b, on the Jewish side, in which Moses is given to understand that the bewildering interpretations developed by Aqiba actually stem from Moses' own revelation at Sinai. On the Christian side we have Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* II, 11:44-45, where it is stated that Adam and Eve acted and spoke in ways "not intended by the persons in whom these actions took place, but intended by the all-powerful wisdom of God." These words and actions were recorded "because of their significance for the future."

that may only be suited for future disputes, and the like. There is insufficient evidence in the body of material translated for this thesis to overturn this judgement. There are, however, elements of human willfulness here that should keep us from too quick an acceptance of the traditional view.

To begin with, there can be no doubt, according to the view of these commentators, that David knew he was composing psalms for the Temple liturgy.<sup>48</sup> More than that, he was sufficiently aware of the purpose and importance of his compositions to tailor them for his specific audience. This is made quite clear in Meiri's comments on the impropriety of first-person address in Psalm 110, and in Ishodadh's understanding of why David composed his psalms with musical settings. Second, the choice of the style and subject of a given composition were seen to be left to the poet. This is clearly illustrated by Ishodadh's comment: "whenever he wished he could speak on any subject, for his word was adorned with the divine inspiration that dwelled within him."<sup>49</sup> And third, there is simply no hint among the commentaries we have translated that the poet did not understand the import of his words. Let us present just two examples in addition to the above-cited passage from Meiri's commentary about first-person address in Psalm 110:

Kimhi on Psalm 8:4 -- He said *The work of Your fingers . . . that you set in place* in order to repudiate the heretics who say that the world is formed of eternal matter. That is why he said *the work of* (  $\text{לְעֹלָם}$  ) and *that You set* (  $\text{כִּי יָצַקְתָּ$  ) -- because You created them all *ex nihilo*.

<sup>48</sup> Kimhi: p. 12; Meiri: p. 108; Ishodadh: p. 122.

<sup>49</sup> p. 130.

Ishodadh on Psalm 2:12 -- While describing the Second Coming -- the kind of wrath He will pour out upon the unbelievers, and the blessings to be prepared for those who love Him -- [David] says: *in an instant His wrath burns*: i.e., against the Jews, at the hands of the Romans.

We see that while there could have been a "secret" message from God embedded in David's words, the descriptions of our commentators give us no real reason for suspicion.

In a certain sense, the "natural" polemic of any psalm is the general thrust of its meaning according to a particular interpreter. Thus, in Kimhi's view, for instance, Psalms 2 and 110 uphold the power and legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty, Psalm 8 is directed against certain heretics, and Psalm 45 describes a particular vision of the messianic future. In the same way, the natural polemic of all four of these psalms according to Ishodadh concerns faith in Jesus the Lord Messiah. Continuing in this vein, it follows that the natural polemic posited by one commentator will often be the target of the "secondary" polemic of another. It is in this sense that we should understand such statements as Ishodadh's that "the quarrelsome Jews understand this eighth psalm to be about Adam. However, it was prophesied precisely about the Messiah and His governance on our behalf."<sup>50</sup>

The question we must ask about this second kind of polemic is this: to what extent do the disputants genuinely understand and legitimately contend with each other's positions? Are fundamental

---

<sup>50</sup> p. 148.

differences in exegetical framework considered in the course of the argument? Or are our commentators more like shadow boxers, conjuring up and defeating imaginary opponents?

In the discussion that follows we will be dealing primarily with the work of Kimhi and Ishodadh, who engage most vigorously in this kind of polemic. It will also be seen that Meiri's remarks within the body of his verse-by-verse commentary may be taken as implicit arguments against various Christian positions. Once again, it must be stressed that no direct contact or influence is alleged to have occurred among these three commentators, although Meiri's indebtedness to Kimhi is clear.

Ishodadh's explicit polemic against any non-messianic interpretation of these four psalms is largely confined to the short introductions he has supplied to his verse-by-verse commentary. There is a scholarly consensus that these introductions are heavily dependent upon the much earlier work of Theodore of Mopsuestia. Ishodadh himself acknowledges this dependance in his Introduction: "therefore it is appropriate that the titles of the blessed Interpreter be maintained and affirmed."<sup>51</sup>

Each of these four short introductions cites a traditional Jewish view of the psalm in question. These views correspond in a general way to opinions expressed in the *Midrash Rabbah* on Psalms, and in three of the four cases being considered here these views are

---

<sup>51</sup> p. 133. See also W. Bloemendael, *The Readings of the Psalms in the East Syrian Church* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960).

also cited by Kimhi and Meiri, although in no case are these the interpretations that they actually endorse. It is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate on the source or quality of Ishodadh's knowledge of Jewish midrashic interpretation.<sup>52</sup>

For three of our four psalms, Ishodadh also gives a brief account of why the Jewish interpretation he has cited is invalid. His comments on Psalm 8 and Psalm 110 are particularly important. In regard to Psalm 8, he explains that "it is known that these [words] were spoken about our Lord for three reasons":

First, from His own testimony concerning Himself in the reprimand of the Jews, "Have you never heard 'from the mouths of children and babes'?" (Matthew 21:16). Second, because it is nowhere found that God Himself or any human being is praised by infants, except Jesus upon His entry into Jerusalem. And third, because "fingers" (verse 3) are not natural to God.<sup>53</sup>

Ishodadh's first two reasons rely upon texts outside the Hebrew Scriptures -- so they are not really directed against any legitimate Jewish view, because any Jew would reject them out of hand. His third reason is more troublesome. Ishodadh takes the impossibility of God's literally having fingers as license to give a more figurative interpretation to the psalm as a whole. Ishodadh's difficulty with scriptural anthropomorphism is certainly not his difficulty alone; this had long been a problem for Jewish exegetes as well. We will soon see how Kimhi handled this difficulty.

---

<sup>52</sup> See Bloemendael, *The Readings . . .*, and also R. Loewe, "The Jewish Midrashim and Patristic and Scholastic Exegesis of the Bible," *Studia Patristica I* (1957) pp. 492-514.

<sup>53</sup> p. 148.

Ishodadh's introductory comment on Psalm 110 displays his characteristic interest in the relationships among the various versions (Hebrew, Septuagint, other Greek versions, and Peshitta) of the "Old Testament." He advances the explanation that this psalm is about the Messiah, rather than about Abraham, as the Jews believe, because "there are four letters in the Hebrew text with which 'God' and 'Lord' are exclusively written, and which are not used when one is called 'Lord' by virtue of human authority. Here the words 'Lord' and 'my Lord' are both written in the same way with these letters."<sup>54</sup> Now in the Masoretic text the phrase in question reads

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ — that is, using two separate words for "Lord" and "my [l]ord." But in the Peshitta this verse is rendered

ܐܠܗܝܢܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ, and the LXX has ΕΙΠΕΝ Ο ΚΥΡΙΟΣ ΤΩ ΚΥΡΙΩ. Ishodadh is thus true to his textual tradition in interpreting this phrase, but it is not a tradition that he would have any hope of convincing a Jew to accept.

Ishodadh is not, in truth, sparring with any real Jewish interpretation with his polemic. Out of his own exegetical framework, wherein David is the archetypal prophet and the key historical correlative for these psalms is the biography of Jesus, he rejects the Jewish interpretation and advances his own. But there is no real connection between his polemic and any credible Jewish viewpoint.

In the explicitly polemical sections of Kimhi's commentaries, he touches on some of these points made by Ishodadh, as well as a

---

<sup>54</sup> p. 189.

number of others. In essence, Kimhi's criticisms of Christian interpretation can be divided into two types: the theological and the historical. The theological criticisms are more basic to his position, so we will begin by examining those.

Kimhi's theological anti-Christian polemic focuses on the interpretation of Psalm 2:7: *[the Lord] said to me: You are My son; I have fathered you this day*. Kimhi, in accordance with his basic exegetical framework, explains this verse with reference to David's life history: these words indicated to David that the monarchy would come to him. As for being called God's son, "anyone who harkens to the service of God is called His son, just as a son harkens to his father and is prepared to do his bidding."<sup>55</sup> This is his response to the anthropomorphic question raised above: Kimhi accepts a figurative, analogical mode of biblical word use. The verse that Ishodadh used as a warrant for figurative exegesis in Psalm 8, *The work of Your fingers* (Ps. 8:4), is such a trivial example of this kind of biblical word use that it does not even bear comment.

Kimhi then takes the precise referent of *I have fathered you this day* to be the "implanting" of divine inspiration within David: "from that day on [David] recited songs and psalms with the divine inspiration that had been born within him and with which he was inspired by God. And thus the spirit of the Almighty was added to him from that day on."<sup>56</sup> Meiri offers us a nearly identical explanation of this verse, including the assertion that *You are my*

<sup>55</sup> p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> p. 20.

son is not to be taken literally; it applies "in the same way that a son is reserved for the service and love of his father."<sup>57</sup> But Ishodadh, on the other hand, quite typically refers this verse to the sacred history of the Christ Messiah. In fact, his comment displays a polemic interest in competing Christ-centered interpretations: "some people maintain that this refers to His virgin birth, but in truth it refers to His birth from the grave."<sup>58</sup>

Kimhi attacks what he understands to be the Christian interpretation of this verse by presenting us with a caricature of their theology. To the Christians, of course, the consubstantiality of Christ is one of the primary mysteries of the faith, beyond the full understanding of any mortal. But for Kimhi the issue is a simple one: there are only two possibilities, that the being whom the Christians call "son of God" is constituted of mortal or of divine substance. Not surprisingly, Kimhi can easily disprove either of those two possibilities, barely having to move beyond a consideration of this single verse.

The first possibility, that the "son of God" is of mortal substance, is disproved because "a son is of the same substance as his father," and the father, of course, is of divine substance. Any "son" of this "father" could only be of the divine substance. The second possibility, that the "son of God" is of divine substance, is disproved because it is impossible that the terminology of father and son be applied to divinity: "concerning divinity there is no father or

---

<sup>57</sup> p. 90.

<sup>58</sup> p. 146.

son, for divinity is indivisible, there being no body to divide."

Furthermore,

anyone who is called a father doubtless existed in time prior to the son. If that is so, then regarding the God that you call "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" -- the part that you call "Father" must have existed prior to the other part that you call "Son." For if the two of them had always existed as one, you would have called them twin brothers, not "father and son."<sup>59</sup>

Kimhi ridicules his own caricature of Christian theology, after which he proceeds to elaborate his own view, that the language of father of son is used figuratively. This is certainly polemic, and certainly ridicule. But there is no real connection between his polemic and any credible Christian viewpoint. Once again our basic question is answered in the negative: the disputants do not genuinely understand and legitimately contend with each other's positions.

The primary example of Kimhi's historical polemic against his perception of Christian interpretation focuses upon the very next verse of Psalm 2: *Ask it of Me and I will make the nations your domain*. Kimhi's own interpretation of this verse is completely in keeping with his style of correlating elements in Psalms with elements in David's biography. Thus this promise by God to prosper David's monarchy is related to such other passages as II Samuel 7:9, II Samuel 8:14, and, particularly, to I Chronicles 14:17: "David became famous throughout the lands, and the Lord put the fear of him in all the nations." Meiri cites these same verses in his commentary on Psalm 2:8. Ishodadh's treatment of this verse, just

---

<sup>59</sup> pp. 24-25.

as we might expect, uses as its historical correlative the biography of Jesus, and in this case, the early history of the Church as well:

When the prophet saw the disobedience of the Jews and the conversion of the nations to our Lord, he said in the voice of the Father: *Ask it of Me and I will give to you* -- i.e., because those to whom I sent you have no faith in you, *I give you the nations as an inheritance and the ends of the earth as your possessions.*<sup>60</sup>

Kimhi's polemic retort to this kind of Christian interpretation is threefold. His first response is both theological and historical in character: if both "Father" and "Son" are to be understood as divine, then "why would the son ask that of the father if he is a God like him, with power over the nations to the ends of the earth like him? And furthermore, were the nations not his domain even before the question?"<sup>61</sup>

But Kimhi continues in a more strictly historical vein: if the Christians maintain that God's offer of dominion was extended specifically to the incarnate Jesus, "then this could not have been the case, for the flesh did not have sovereignty or authority over a single nation." And furthermore, if the Christians try to interpret the verse to refer to the spread of their faith throughout the world (as Ishodadh interpreted it), Kimhi objects that "behold, most of the nations have not accepted faith in [Jesus], neither Jewish nor Muslim."<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> p. 146.

<sup>61</sup> p. 26.

<sup>62</sup> p. 26.

Kimhi does seem to have a certain appreciation of the historical correlative of Christian interpretation. He knows that Christians take these psalms to refer to the facts of Jesus' life and the history of the early Church, and he disputes the validity of the correlation more or less on its own terms -- Jesus' life, according to Kimhi, just wasn't like that. In this area his polemics are cogent, in contrast to his obdurate refusal (or inability) to come to grips with the complexities of Christian theology on its own terms.

On occasion, Kimhi also does battle with the Christians in the arena of text criticism. This is exemplified by his comments on Psalm 110:1, where he charges that the Christian interpretation stems from a misreading of the text: *The Lord* [  $\lambda/\lambda'$  ] *said to my Lord* [  $\gamma^3/c$  ], instead of the "correct" *The Lord said to my lord* [  $\gamma^3/c$  ]. Kimhi's argument here is quite cogent, though perhaps not utterly compelling: "from East to West we find the *hireq* under the *nun* in all the books . . . . Don't [the Christians] claim to accept our textual evidence? Then they must accept this evidence."<sup>63</sup>

Meiri does not engage in the kind of explicit polemic that Ishodadh and Kimhi did, yet it must be noted that on each of the verses we have examined, and on others as well, Meiri quietly offers the "correct" Jewish interpretation that could be expanded into an anti-Christian polemic very similar to Kimhi's, if that, indeed, corresponded to Meiri's overall style. For example, Meiri's rather extensive comments upon Psalm 2:7 provide a perfect backdrop for

---

<sup>63</sup> p. 51.

an explicit anti-Christian statement that never develops. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a finer refutation of Christian interpretations of this verse, and by extension, of Christian understandings of the various anthropomorphic passages in Psalms:

Psalm 2:7 -- *You are My son; I have fathered you this day: . . .* We also find that just as righteous people are called children, so it is said concerning them that God fathered them, as in the verse "you neglected the Rock that begot you; forgot the God who brought you forth" (Deut. 32:18) -- God is like a father to you, and like a mother, who is called the one who brings forth. And it is in regard to human affairs that God, may He be blessed, is the One who raises and chastises, as in the verse "I have reared children and brought them up" (Isaiah 1:2), etc.<sup>64</sup>

The proclivity of Ishodadh and other Christian commentators to understand certain kinds of phrases literally rather than figuratively reveals a fundamental stance regarding the religious uses of language. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss this issue, except to say that it is essentially "non-negotiable" in the context of interreligious polemic. There is no genuine point of contact between Christian willingness and Jewish unwillingness to interpret such phrases literally. Meiri, like Kimhi and Ishodadh, is boxing against a shadow rather than against a real opponent.

---

<sup>64</sup> p. 90.

## CONCLUSION

It has been the purpose of this essay to demonstrate how each of these commentators constructed an exegetical framework within which to interpret the Psalms, by means of decisions on the basic issues of psalm authorship and inspiration. These decisions are reached partly through reflection on the meaning of the biblical text, and partly through consideration of various issues *a priori*. The resulting frameworks, in turn, serve to determine the interpretations of the biblical text that follow from them, anchoring theory on the firm ground of biblical confirmation. Certainly other decisions went into the construction of our commentators' exegetical frameworks, on issues ranging from the understanding of religious language to the nature of biblical poetics, to the plain and simple meaning of certain words. I am confident, however, that with our explication of the positions of Kimhi, Meiri, and Ishodadh on psalm authorship and inspiration, we have taken a long step toward determining why these commentators say such different things, and in more general terms, why Jews and Christians say such different things.

In regard to the polemic exercises of Kimhi, Meiri, and Ishodadh, it should come as no surprise that the disputants do not truly dispute with genuine rivals; nor should there be any value judgement implied by their "failure" to do so. It is enough that each remained faithful to the framework that he developed. Beyond that, we ourselves can claim to have progressed very little: perhaps to an appreciation of the equal validity of faithfully developed and

consistently applied exegetical frameworks. Only when that kind of appreciation becomes second nature to us can we hope to engage in fruitful discussion over the deeper issues of faith, whether with members of our own faith or members of another.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alfred J. Keller, "The History of the  
Smithsonian Institution, 1846-1860,"  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1960.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### PRIMARY SOURCES

Ishodadh of Merv. *Commentaire d'Iso'dad de Merv sur l'Ancien Testament* VI. Psalms. (Syriac and French) Ceslas Van Den Eynde, ed. Lovanii, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1981.

R. David Kimhi. *Ha-Perush Ha-Shalem 'al Tehillim* (Hebrew). Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1967.

R. Menahem ben Shlomo Ha-Meiri. *Perush l'Sefer Tehillim* (Hebrew). Jerusalem, 1970.

### SECONDARY SOURCES

J. Baker and E. Nicholson. *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi on Psalms CXX-CL*. Cambridge, The University Press, 1973.

J. Blenkinsopp. "Type and Antitype" (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14), pp. 351-352.

W. Bloemendaal. *The Headings of the Psalms in the East Syrian Church*. Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1960.

J. Bosniak. *The Commentary of David Kimhi on the Fifth Book of the Psalms, CVII-CL*. New York, Bloch Publishing Company, 1954.

Alan Cooper. "On Reading Biblical Poetry".

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Act of Reading the Bible" (Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Panel Sessions) World Union of Jewish Studies, 1983.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Life and Times of King David According to the Book of Psalms" (*The Poet and the Historian. Essays in Literary and Historical Biblical Criticism*, Richard Elliott Friedman, ed.) Chico, CA, Scholars Press, 1983.

S. Esterson. "The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi on Psalms (42-72)" (Hebrew Union College Annual, X, 1935).

R.G. Finch and G.H. Box. *The Longer Commentary of R. David Kimhi on the First Book of Psalms*. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1919.

Stephen A. Geller. "Through Windows and Mirrors Into the Bible: History, Literature and Language in the Study of Text" (A

*Sense of Text: The Art of Language in the Study of Biblical Literature*). *Jewish Quarterly Review* supplement, 1982.

A.W. Greenup. *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi on the Book of Psalms*. London, Palestine House, 1918.

Susan A. Handelman. *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*. Albany, State University of New York Press, 1982.

R.P.C. Hanson. "Biblical Exegesis in the Early Church" (*Cambridge History of the Bible I*, Ackroyd and Evans, eds.). Cambridge University Press, 1970.

Roy J. Howard. *Three Faces of Hermeneutics. An Introduction to Current Theories of Understanding*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982.

James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer. *Early Biblical Interpretation*. Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1986.

James L. Kugel. *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1981.

Raphael Loewe. "The Plain Meaning of Scripture in Early Christian Exegesis" (*Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies*, J.G. Weiss, ed.). Vol. 1. Jerusalem, 1964.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Jewish Midrashim and Patristic and Scholastic Exegesis of the Bible" (*Studia Patristica*, Aland and Cross, eds.). Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1957.

W. Stewart McCullough. *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam*. Chico, Scholars Press, 1982.

F.X. Murphy. "St. Ignatius of Antioch" (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7) p. 353.

Henry S. Nash. "The Exegesis of the School of Antioch" (*JBL* 11, 1892) pp. 22-37.

D.M. Poshek. "Henana" (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6), p. 1016.

N. Sarna. "Psalms" (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 13) cols. 1303-1322.

Uriel Simon. *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms from Saadya Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra* (Hebrew). Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University, 1982.

Elieser Slomovic. "Toward an Understanding of the Formation of Historical Titles in the Book of Psalms" (*ZAW* 91, 1970) pp. 350-80.

Moshe Sokolow. "Saadia Gaon's Prolegomenon to Psalms" (*Proceed-*

*ings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, vol. 51, 1984).

J.M. Sola-Sole. "Ishodadh of Merv" (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7) p. 672.

I. Ta-Shma. "Meiri" (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 11) cols. 1257-1260.

Frank Talmage. *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentator*.  
Harvard University Press, 1975.

Dudley Tyng. "Theodore of Mopsuestia as an Interpreter of the Old Testament" (*JBL* 50, 1931) pp. 298-303.

Burton L. Visotzky. "Jots and Titles: On Scriptural Interpretation in Rabbinic and Patristic Literatures" (*Prooftexts* 8, 1988) pp. 257-69.

J.M. Voste. "Mar Ishodadh de Merw Sur les Psaumes" (*Biblica* 25, 1944) pp. 261-296.

\_\_\_\_\_. "L'Oeuvre Exegetique de Theodore de Mopsueste Au II Concile de Constantinople" (*Revue Biblique* 38, 1929).

M.F. Wiles. "Theodore of Mopsuestia as Representative of the Antiochene School" (*Cambridge History of the Bible* I, Ackroyd and Evans, eds.). Cambridge University Press, 1970.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Origen as Biblical Scholar" (*Cambridge History of the Bible* I, Ackroyd and Evans, eds.). Cambridge University Press, 1970.