Mayim Rabim:

The Prevalence and Power of Water Imagery in the Book of Psalms

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Introduction

Reflections on Water

There were very few moments of relief during the 30 hours that I was in labor with my first child. One such moment occurred when I finally checked into my delivery room at the hospital and went straight into the shower. My husband told me, after the fact, that I was in there for over an hour. The water helped -- sort of.

Pregnant with my second child, and fascinated by the healing and redemptive waters of the *mikveh*, I knew I wanted water to factor into my labor experience more directly. I decided on a water birth in a blow-up tub in the living room of my small Brooklyn apartment. My midwife mentioned that I should not go into the water until the active labor phase had begun. I think I asked my doula twenty times during the course of my labor if it was time yet. Finally, she said yes. The tub is known as the "midwife's epidural," and it truly was. The moment I sat down in that water, a feeling of relief that I have never felt before washed over me. I giggled, moaned and giggled again. Is this water magical, I wondered? My fascination with water deepened.

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A few months ago, I met with a leader in the New York Jewish community who had immersed in a mikveh to mark the first anniversary of her mother's death. She wanted an embodied ritual for the occasion and chose mikveh, saying, "I had done so much grieving and reflecting aloud over the past year. In the mikveh, the waters reflect for you… they hold you gently, embrace you with

their calming silence." Immersion in a mikveh, at its best, can be just this kind of experience. When words are not adequate, it can feel like the waters, personified and nurturing, do the reflecting for you.

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A bride went to the mikveh before her wedding with her mother and her mother-in-law to be. She prayed, “Thank you, God, for allowing us to reach this moment together, for two mothers to share their love and support, hopes and dreams, with a bride, a *kallah*, who is ready to hear them.” She later reflected, “The mikveh allowed me to wash away distractions, to be in the moment and express this prayer.” The water, a tangible substance one can see and feel, created an experience that was intangible, a spiritual cleansing.

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A Jewish woman, reflecting on her experience of mikveh as part of her conversion ceremony thirty years ago, asked, “Looking back, how do I feel about my conversion ceremony? Yes, I regret that it felt so completely other... And yet, despite it all, I am deeply grateful for the experience of the mikveh at that unique liminal moment in my life. I don’t remember the questions I was asked or the answers I gave. I do remember in my bones—and in the ends of my hair—the feel of the water enveloping me, the mundane and holy stammering of the blessings with my first Jewish breaths, and the profound sense that I was now ready to unfold as a Jew.”

How is it possible that a person can transform into a Jew by immersing in water? What is it about the waters that, despite their fluid nature, feel sturdy and enveloping?

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"Isn't it incredible," my father once remarked, "that all water, all of the water on the whole planet has existed since the beginning? There is no new water in the world."

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Water in the Psalms

From the primordial waters of Genesis to the description of human tears in Lamentations, water plays a prominent role in the Bible. Approximately six hundred literal and figurative references to water in its varied forms appear throughout the *Tanakh*, in association with a range of topics and types of texts.[1] The entry for "water" in the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* asserts, "The significance of water was heightened for biblical writers, who lived in a region where water was scarce, and drought a constant threat to life."[2] The importance of water for those living in the biblical lands cannot be understated. In their book, *Life in Biblical Israel*, Philip King and Lawrence Stager emphasize this importance, stating,

[1] Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit, Tremper Longman, eds, *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Intervarsity Press, 1998), 929.
[2] Ibid.

> The limited sources [of water] available in biblical lands, and its necessity for the subsistence of humans and animals make water and water conservation primary considerations in the daily life of Israel…Canaan depends upon the seasonal rains. The relatively short rainy season is followed by a long dry season.[3]

Thus, the prevalence of water in our people's story demonstrates its centrality in the Israelite psyche.

In this thesis, I will explore the symbolic significance of water in one specific corpus of biblical literature, the book of Psalms. Narrowing the scope of this project's focus does not, in any way, narrow the variety of water imagery. William P. Brown writes on the diversity of the Psalms' water imagery in *Seeing the Psalms*,

> Water can convey diametrically opposing nuances even within one verse or line of poetry… Whether as a hostile force or as a source of sustenance, water is as much a polyvalent image in the Psalter as it is a defining element in the diverse environment of Palestine…[4]

In order to demonstrate the variety and depth of water imagery in the Psalms, I chose four psalms to study closely, Psalms 6, 63, 65, and 93, each of which mentions or alludes to water. In Psalm 6, we encounter the water of the psalmist's tears. The psalmist of Psalm 63 "thirsts" for God in a "parched and weary land, without water" (v. 2). The extensive water metaphor in Psalm 65 describes a God who "stills the rushing seas" (v. 8) and "saturates" (v.11) the world with the blessing of rain. In Psalm 93, God's power is described in contradistinction to the power of the "floodwaters, powerful breakers of the sea" (v. 4). In the conclusion of this paper, I will

[3] Philip King and Lawrence Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 122-123.
[4] William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: a Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 105.

synthesize these disparate images of water, attempting to draw from them an understanding of the different ways that water functions in the Psalms.

Categorizing Psalms: Lament, Praise and Thanksgiving

Before closely considering each individual psalm's metaphors and imagery, it is helpful to understand each psalm as it fits into the larger whole of the book of Psalms. Each psalm is unique and worthy of close attention, yet most contain predictable features that associate that psalm with a particular genre. James Limburg defines an individual lament[5] in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* as a psalm containing an address to God, a complaint, a request for help, an affirmation of trust and a vow to praise God when the crisis has past.[6] Psalm 6 falls into this category, although it does not follow this rubric sequentially. The psalmist addresses God in v. 2, beginning simply by calling out, "Adonai." He outlines his complaint in vv. 3-4 when he describes his physical experience of being sick. He requests help from God in v. 3b, crying, "Heal me, Adonai," and again in v. 5a, beseeching God, "Turn Adonai, rescue my body." Verses 9a-10 demonstrate the psalmist's trust that God is listening, "Adonai hears the sound of my cries. Adonai hears my plea; Adonai accepts my prayer." The psalmist's vow to praise God is bound up in his request for help as he cries in v. 6, "In Sheol, who can praise you?"

Psalm 63, another psalm of lament, begins clearly with an address to God in v. 2, "God, You are my God." The psalmist describes his complaint as a fervent thirst for God, "I seek You,

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[5] James Mays refers to this category of psalms as "Prayer for help of an individual," in *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 21 while Claus Westermann calls this category, "Psalm of petition or lament of the individual," in *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta, GA: J. Knox Press, 1981), 66-67.

[6] James Limburg, "The Book of Psalms," David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol V, 532.

my throat thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You in a parched and weary land, without water" (v. 2). The psalmist's thirst implies a metaphoric request for water, yet later in the psalm, in v. 8a, we read that God has already come to the psalmist's rescue, as he writes, "For You were a help to me." The majority of the psalm, then, is an affirmation of trust and a description of how God responded to the psalmist's yearning.

Both Psalms 6 and 63 mention the psalmist's foes as part of the complaint, another distinguishing feature of the psalms of lament.[7] Psalm 6 refers to the foes only briefly in v. 9a, "Away from me all wrongdoers," and v. 11, "May all my enemies be shamed and tremble with fear. May they turn back, be shamed in an instant." Psalm 63 also introduces the foes towards the end of the psalm, in vv. 10-11, "But they demand my body for utter destruction, may they enter into the depths of the earth. May their blood be poured out by the sword, may they be the foxes portion." While the foes definitely factor into the psalmist's complaints, as we expect in this genre, the central need in both psalms is the psalmist's relationship with God.

Psalms 65 and 93, with their descriptions of a world content and fulfilled, can be categorized as hymns or psalms of praise.[8] Simply defined, psalms of praise list reasons why God deserves our devotion and appreciation. Their primary pattern often includes summons/invocation to praise followed by proclamation of praise.[9] James Mays succinctly describes this category, stating, "The hymn is a song of praise of which God is the sole subject. In language of exuberant joy, the hymn says what God is like and has done and characteristically does."[10]

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[7] As described by Claus Westermann in *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 64.
[8] James Limburg, "The Book of Psalms," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol V, 532.
[9] James Mays, *Psalms*, 26.
[10] Ibid.

In Psalm 65, God, who merits praise from the first few words uttered by the psalmist, is described as "hearer of prayer" (v. 3) and One who "rescues" (v. 6). Because God has bestowed "blessings" (vv. 5, 11) upon us, we are "content" and "sated" (v. 5). Psalm 93 depicts God as strong, "clothed in majesty" (v. 1), and "more powerful than floodwaters" (v. 4). The word "praise" is not directly mentioned in Psalm 93; yet, the God portrayed in it certainly merits praise.

James Limburg's psalms' rubric delineates a third category of psalms, Psalms of Thanksgiving,[11] which he describes as

> A grateful response to God for a specific act of deliverance, such as healing from illness… deliverance from enemies or simply rescue from trouble… These psalms assume the presence of the congregation…[and] at the heart of these psalms is the story of deliverance.

Psalms 30, 92 and 116 provide clear examples of this genre, as they tell the stories of God healing the psalmist, God defeating the psalmist's foes, and how the psalmist overcame his sorrow, respectively. While I have categorized Psalm 65 as a hymn above (as does Goldingay, p 273), Hakham and Mays consider this psalm one of thanksgiving. Hakham proposes,

> From the language of the psalm it would appear that it was originally recited in the Temple as a prayer of thanksgiving for good rainfall and for a year of fruitfulness and plenty… [potentially] after a period of drought.[12]

Mays assumes that there was a congregation that "stands in the presence of God in gratitude, awe and joy"[13] as this psalm was recited; as such, he entitles this psalm, "A Psalm for

[11] James Limburg, "The Book of Psalms," *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* vol V, 532.
[12] Amos Hakham, *Bible Psalms with Jerusalem Commentary: Da'at Mikra series* (Judaica Press, 2003), vol II, 57.
[13] James Mays, *Psalms*, 219.

Thanksgiving."[14] Perhaps this psalm was read after a drought period in front of a congregation. However, since the psalm does not explicitly mention the hardship that had to be overcome, I will retain the psalm in the category of praise while acknowledging that some psalms do not fit neatly into one category or the other.

Categorizing Psalms: Securely Oriented, Disoriented and Reoriented

Walter Brueggemann proposes language for understanding the main categories of psalms that differs from that of Limburg and other scholars. He divides psalms into three categories that focus on the psalmist's state of being as either "securely orientated," "painfully disorientated," or "surprisingly reorientated."[15] Secure orientation reflects a "situation of equilibrium" and an experience of "confident well-being"[16] as exemplified in Psalm 93, with its assertions of stability and of God's presence manifest on the earth for all time.

Disorientation, described by Brueggemann, is the awareness that,

> Life is not whole, that it is not the romantic well-being that we may have been comforted with as children… Indeed the world is a dangerous, frightening place, and I am upset for myself… The Psalter knows that life is dislocated.[17]

Such a state of disorientation is clearly articulated by the psalmist in Psalm 6, who is "trembling with fear" (v. 3), afraid of his own death, begging God to notice his suffering, and rescue him from his affliction. In this experience of sickness, the psalmist is surely, as Brueggemann puts it, "upset for himself." The psalmist concludes by asserting that God hears his prayers, but we, as

[14] James Mays, *Psalms*, 219.
[15] Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2007), 2.
[16] Ibid., 3.
[17] Ibid., 9.

readers, do not know the true outcome of this psalm. We, too, are left in a state of disorientation, unsure if the psalmist re-entered the land of the well, unsure if his prayers were answered.

There is surely a component of disorientation in the psalms of reorientation. Yet, within these psalms, the psalmist experiences a form of *nechemta*, solace and comfort. This move – from disorientation to reorientation – is not "a return to normalcy as though nothing had happened."[18] Instead, the reorientation takes into account the challenges of disorientation, and thus is "always a gift of graciousness, and always an experience that evokes gratitude."[19] Psalm 63, with its description of the psalmist "thirsting" and "yearning" for God (v. 2), illustrates the experience of disorientation and suffering.[20] Yet, God's support for the psalmist is also clear in v. 8, "For You were a help to me, and in the shadow of Your wings, I shout for joy." God may have been absent in v. 2, but God swoops into action by v. 8, lifting God's wings and protecting the psalmist underneath them. The psalmist of Psalm 63 clearly experiences the "wondrous gift"[21] of reorientation.

Since Psalm 65 does not seamlessly fit into Limburg's categories, it is not surprising that this psalm does not definitively line up into Brueggemann's categories either. Psalm 65 describes a momentary experience of sin (v. 4), but overall, the psalmist is confident in a God who forgives his transgressions, listens to his prayers, and makes the world overflow with abundance. Such a description may mean that the psalm merits placement in the category of secure orientation, which is where I choose to place it. However, if we take into account Hakham and Mays' assertions that the context of this psalm is one of thanksgiving after drought, this psalm may fit

[18] Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 11.
[19] Ibid., 11.
[20] I discuss the recognition that the psalmist may necessarily be experiencing or describing different orientations within the same psalm on p 31 of this paper.
[21] Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 11.

better into the category of reorientation. These rubrics and categories are helpful in establishing expectations of patterns within a psalm, yet, of course, as stated above, there are psalms which defy neat categorization.

In order to understand each psalm in a deeper and more nuanced way, I created an outline, translation and analysis of each of the four psalms studied here. The outlines help the reader understand how the psalm is demarcated, as well as the psalm's shifts in focus and language. The annotated translations explain, in depth, the reasons for and context in which I chose the English words to correspond to the Hebrew. In the analyses, I provide an overview of the psalms and a brief study of their key components. In the conclusion, I examine the varied instances of water in our psalms, both literal and metaphoric, and discuss how these psalms connect to each other and other psalms in the Psalter. Lastly, I focus on how this synthesis can inform our present-day understanding of the meaning and power of water.

Psalm 6

Outline

I) **Superscription – Music for David** (v. 1)

II) **Plea for Rescue from Three Kinds of Assault**[22] (vv. 2-8)

a. Physical – his trembling body (vv. 2-5)

b. Spiritual – his weary and fearful spirit (vv. 6-7)

c. Social – his enemies (v. 8)

III) **Rescue from the Assault** (vv. 9-11)

a. Physical – God hears (v. 9)

b. Spiritual – God accepts prayers (v. 10)

c. Social – God thwarts the enemies (v.11)

[22] Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 19.

Translation

1 To the leader, with instrumental music[23] on the *sh'minit,* a psalm for David.

2 Adonai, do not, in Your anger, reprove me,
and do not, in Your ire, chastise me.[24]

[23] Hakham asserts that *n'ginot* "is probably [included] to inform us that this psalm is to be recited with an accompaniment of musical instruments" (vol I, p 16). More specifically, one might speculate that such music probably brought the listener hope and comfort. The playing of *neginot* is referred to in Is 38:20 as a method of thanking God for salvation. In 1 Sam 16:23, *m'nagen* describes the playing of the stringed instrument, by which David would comfort Saul.

[24] This sentence's construction is paradigmatic of the psalm as a whole. Throughout the 11 verses, the first person singular ending on both verbs and nouns indicates the personal, intimate nature of this psalm (e.g., reprove me, chastise me, my tears, my bed). The first person complaint can also be indicative of an individual lament.

3 Be gracious to me, Adonai, for I am withering;[25]
heal me, Adonai, for my bones are trembling with fear,[26]

4 my body[27] is trembling with great fear.
And You, Adonai, how long?[28]

5 Turn, Adonai, rescue my body,

[25] In Psalm 37:2, the root *mem-lamed-lamed* describes the grass as it dies; and in Psalm 90:6, the same root is found with *yavesh*, meaning, "to dry up." Thus, *mem-lamed-lamed* describes something that is close to its death, but not yet void of life.

[26] In 1 Sam 28:21, *nivhal* describes Saul's horror upon hearing from Samuel's ghost that he will be killed the following day. In the context of Ezekiel 7:27, which describes a city's complete destruction - most of its inhabitants slaughtered, the rest suffering with grief and hunger - we find the root, *bet-hey-lamed,* to illustrate what is happening to the hands of the people of this city. In 1 Samuel, Saul experiences panic about his impending death, and in Ezekiel 7, the panic about impending death is manifested physically in the hands of the people. Our psalmist is having a physical reaction to the intense fear he is experiencing. In 1 Sam 28:21 and Ezekiel 7:27, the word *nivhal* implies imminent death; these examples help us understand both how close to death the psalmist believes he is, and how fear of his death affects him physically.

[27] I translate *nafshi* here as "body" to emphasize the corporeal nature of the psalm; the psalmist seems to be describing a sickness that has seeped into his bones.

[28] The psalmists of Pss. 80:5, 82:2, 90:13, 94:3 pose the same question, *ad-matai*, "how long," when wondering how long they will have to wait for God to change their experience, which they deem unjust.

save me for the sake of Your covenantal love.[29]

6 For there is no thought of You among the dead;
in Sheol, who can praise You?[30]

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[29] There are two possible, related ways to understand this instance of *hesed*. Schaefer discusses *hesed* in his commentary's introduction, stating, "Steadfast love, *hesed,* is indeed the characteristic of the Lord that informs all the others and constitutes the goodness of the Lord…*hesed* means the reliable helpfulness of the Lord to any and all that are dependent on him" (p 33). Hakham furthers Shaefer's argument stating that the psalmist is asking for God's help so that "it may become know that [God] helps, rescues and defends those who fear [God]" (vol I, p 29). Hakham presents another way of interpreting this request for *hesed* in that it has a "similar meaning to the word, *brit*, covenant" (vol I, p 29). Our psalmist is then reminding God of what God already promised - according to Goldingay help must come not only on the basis of the "suppliant's need, but also on the commitment Yhwh has made and cannot escape" (vol I, p 138). Thus, *hesed* here is the help God committed to provide as part of God's covenant with God's people. Others translate this noun as "kindness" (Alter), "faithfulness" (JPS), and "commitment" (Goldingay).

[30] God's role in the covenantal relationship with humankind is to help; the psalmist's role is to praise God. Thus, he appeals to God to save his life since he cannot fulfill his part of the deal in Sheol.

7 I am weary[31] in my sighing.
I make my bed swim[32] every night;
With my tears, I melt[33] my couch.

8 My eye is dimmed[34] from vexation,

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[31] The sounds of the words in this second half of the psalm are worthy of our attention. As previously noted, the first person singular ending ("ee" or "ay") is prevalent in this psalm. In verses 7-8, a new key sound is introduced: "ss/sh". Perhaps this is the sound of breath leaving the psalmist's body as he withers or the sound of the sighing described in v. 7.

[32] This is an extreme, unexpected way to describe the sorrow experienced by the psalmist. Schaefer understands this phrase as "exaggerated…aptly displaying internal anguish and desperation" (p 18). Goldingay states that for vv. 7b-c, the psalmist's "hyperbole [may] seem laughable to us, but hardly to the people who used the psalm" (vol I, p 138). If the reader did not quite understand how much the psalmist is suffering, the image of a bed soaking wet and melting away from tears, paints quite a picture of weeping and misery.

[33] Hakham teaches that the root of this verb is not always consistent, as the conjugation sometimes follows the pattern of roots whose last two letters are the same, as if the root were *mem-samech-samech*, and sometimes as if the root were *mem-samech-yud* or *mem-samech-hey* (vol I, p 30-31). In Ps 22:15, this root is used in a similar context as our psalm - the psalmist feels his life is being poured out like water and his heart is likened to wax that melts. Perhaps this intertextuality affects Hakham, Goldingay and JPS's understanding of this word, since they all agree that this root is best translated as "melt" in the context of our psalm.

[34] Verse 8 is a turning point in this psalm and presents a challenge to the translator since both verbs occur rarely in the *Tanach*. In terms of the verb, *ayin-shin-shin*, Pss. 6:8a and 31:10b contain the same clause, "*as'sa v'chaas eini*," both in the context of a person who is

worn out[35] from all my foes.

9 Away from me, all wrongdoers,
for Adonai hears the sound of my cries.

10 Adonai hears my plea;
Adonai accepts my prayer.[36]

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experiencing distress in his body (sickness). In our psalm, this clause follows the description of the psalmist's tears so the reference to his eyes is not unexpected. However, Goldingay argues, "The psalms often refer to the eyes in connection with looking for God to act…" (vol I, p 139), as in Ps. 25:15, "My eyes at all times to the Lord, for he draws my feet from the net" (Alter). Thus, v. 8a connects us back to God's *hesed* in v. 5b; the psalmist has been looking for God to act, based on the covenantal relationship the psalmist believes he has established with God. Yet, he is, so far, still suffering, and is growing angrier since God is not upholding God's commitment.

[35] There is perhaps purposeful ambiguity about whether the psalmist's anger is directed at God or at the newly introduced foes, in v. 8b. In addition to this ambiguity, the verb *at'ka* is also unclear considering that it seems in our psalm to be in parallel with *as'sa,* while appearing to mean the opposite in Job 21:7, when Job asks, "Why do the wicked live on and prosper (*at'ku*)?" What is clear is that the psalmist is weary from suffering and growing angry that he is still experiencing such all-encompassing sorrow. To capture this mood, I adopted Alter's "is worn out" to translate *at'ka*.

[36] The covenantal relationship the psalmist has been alluding to throughout the psalm is reestablished. This is an affirmation of trust, often a key component of an individual lament.

11 May all my enemies be shamed[37] and tremble with fear.[38]
May they turn back, be shamed in an instant.

[37] The psalmist plays with the letters *bet* and *shin* in this verse with *yevoshu* appearing twice and *yashuvu,* once. The harsh bet/vet sound of his anger at his enemies, perhaps, is in contrast to the sighing a few verses before.

[38] The psalmist wants his enemies to experience the same terror he describes experiencing in vv. 3 and 4.

Analysis

Psalm 6 is a sick person's fervent plea for God's grace, love and healing. The psalmist assumes that God inflicts illness as a sign of God's anger. Therefore, a cure from the illness can come from an appeal to God's better nature. The reader is not privy to the causes of God's anger, or the psalmist's specific illness; the general nature of this psalm makes it more broadly applicable to those who suffer from ailments and afflictions of all kinds - physical, emotional, spiritual, or interpersonal.

The prevalent emotions in the second section (vv. 2-8) of the psalm are fear and a rising sense of desperation, couched in the psalmist's pleading for God. The psalmist exclaims that his body is "withering" and "trembling with great fear." In this context of "anxiety and urgency"[39] he asks God, "How long?" How long will God allow him to suffer? In verse 5 the psalmist argues that God must act *right now*, since he seems to be on the verge of death.

Although God's character traits are implicit in the psalm, there are only three attributes of God mentioned explicitly: God's anger (v. 2), ire (v. 2) and covenantal love (v. 5). Such anger and ire are, presumably, due to something the psalmist did. In mentioning God's *hesed*, the psalmist appeals to God's sense of moral responsibility and obligation. This last ditch effort serves to remind God that the covenant is two-ways – the psalmist can only praise God if God turns and saves him (v. 5). Taken to its logical conclusion, this understanding of the Divine/human relationship challenges the notion of an immortal soul. Goldingay argues that the suppliant needs deliverance from death because "Yhwh has made a commitment to a relationship

[39] Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, 18.

that will not continue in the realm of death."[40] This may be a particularly challenging theology for the modern reader - that one's relationship to God ends with the final breath - and certainly helps us understand why the psalmist is so desperate to live.

The covenant seems straightforward: praise God and God will hear your praise and grant you life. This psalm muddles that straightforward assertion. As if to reinforce God's wanton omnipotence, the psalm begins with the intonation that God actively decided to cause the psalmist's illness, and ends abruptly with God's acceptance of his prayer. No reason for the change of heart is provided, but in v. 10, we know that "God hears my plea," implying that either the psalmist has already been granted healing or will be healed.

Was there a transgression for which the psalmist was being punished initially? Why did God listen to the psalmist and accept his prayer in this moment? The reader, perhaps a person desperately suffering from illness him/herself, can speculate that the pleas of the psalmist did, in fact, have an impact on God and changed God's mind. Or maybe, God responds only to absolute desperation – the moment when his foes were closing in on him. Or perhaps, God decided to heal him for no reason we can understand. In any case, this psalm records the desperate pleas of a sick man, and his experience of a God who eventually turns toward him and accepts his pleas.

[40] John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 1: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 138.

Psalm 63

Outline

I) **Superscription: David in the Judean Wilderness** (v. 1)

II) **Seek and You Shall Find: The Sensory Experience of God's Presence** (vv. 2-9)

a. Thirsting for God in the dry land (v. 2)

b. Sated by God's *hesed* in the holy sanctuary (vv. 3-6)

c. Strengthened through God's support (vv. 7-9)

III) **Turning the Tables on the Enemies** (vv. 10-12)

a. The enemies seek to destroy (v. 10)

b. The enemies are destroyed instead (vv. 11-12)

Translation

1 A Psalm for David, when he was in the Judean wilderness.[41]

2 God,[42] You are my God,
I seek[43] You,
my throat[44] thirsts for You,

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[41] This superscription may point to a specific incident in David's life. Hakham argues that this refers to the narrative of 1 Samuel 23-25 when "David fled from King Saul [and] hid in several places in the Judean desert" (vol II, p 38). Schaefer supports this assertion, noting that this psalm connects, "dry land with the Judean desert and recalls texts that report that Saul sought David's life there" (p 154). Hossfeld and Zenger disagree with this theory, and instead situate this psalm in the context of 2 Samuel 15, in which David flees from Absalom (p 123). In either case, David's fear and desire to be close to God provide enough of a context to understand the inspiration to write this psalm.

[42] *Elohim* appears twice in this psalm, in verses 2 and 12, forming an inclusio. If there was any doubt as to the theme of this psalm, the inclusio clearly points out that God is our subject.

[43] This verb appears in Isaiah 26:9 with the same subject, *nafshi.* In the Isaiah passage, the writer looks for God at night, which gives the sense of a person groping around in the darkness. The instance of *shachar* from Isaiah, as well as other instances found in Hosea 5:15 and Psalm 78:34, demonstrate more of an urgency to find God than the simple translation, "search for."

[44] *Nafshi* can have a host of meanings depending on context. Here I chose to translate *nafshi* as "my throat" since it is set in poetic parallel with *b'sari* "my flesh" – both are physical descriptions of how the psalmist yearns for God. As James Kugel points out in *The Great Poems of the Bible,* "*nefesh* sometimes refers specifically to the neck or throat… [as in Ps. 69:2 where

my flesh yearns[45] for You
in a parched and weary[46] land, without water.

3 Thus, in the holy sanctuary, I beheld You,
seeing Your strength and Your glory.

---

the psalmist] means to say… that the rising waters have reached his neck and are about to drown him …[or in Num 11:6, the Israelites'] throats are dry with hunger and thirst" (p 50-51).

[45] This word is a hapax legomenon, defined in the *DCH* and the *HALOT* as "long for, yearn for." The construction of the clause, *cama l'cha b'sari,* rhymes with and mirrors the construction of the clause preceding it, *tzama l'cha nafshi.* Both *tzama* and *cama* describe a physical and emotional desire to be close to God.

[46] *Ayefa,* when describing land, takes on the meaning of "weary through exhaustion, hunger or thirst" (*DCH*). In Isaiah 32:2, *eretz ayefa* is in parallel with a *tzayon,* desert (see also Isaiah 25:5 for *tzayon*); a desert, by definition, lacks water, and may be described poetically as 'thirsty.' In Psalm 143:6 the psalmist reaches out his hands to God and compares his *nefesh* to an *eretz ayefa*; just as a thirsty land yearns for water, so too does the psalmist reach out for God. The dry land described in this verse of our psalm also points us back to the superscription, as we imagine David hiding out from Saul in the wilderness, desperately seeking God's help. In Psalm 107:35, we learn that God has the power to "turn the wilderness into pools, parched land into springs of water." This sentiment appears in Deutero-Isaiah as well. Perhaps the psalmist petitions God with this recognition in mind: he knows that God has the power to transform his longing into fulfillment.

4 For Your loving support[47] is better than life,
my lips praise You.

5 Thus, I bless You while I live,
in Your name, I lift my palms.

6 As with a rich feast,[48] my body[49] is sated,

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[47] As discussed in my translation of Psalm 6, Schaefer discusses *hesed* in his commentary's introduction, stating, "Steadfast love, *hesed,* is indeed the characteristic of the Lord that informs all the others and constitutes the goodness of the Lord…*hesed* means the reliable helpfulness of the Lord to any and all that are dependent on him" (p 33). In Psalm 103:4, the psalmist is redeemed from the pit because of God's *hesed*. Psalm 136 lists the myriad ways God has helped and redeemed God's people, each followed by the refrain, *ki l'olam chasdo,* "His *hesed* is eternal." Psalm 107:8 insists that we praise God for God's *hesed,* and then describes how God fills a hungry and thirsty body with good things. The most helpful and inclusive way to understand *hesed,* therefore, is God's "loving support" - God will support and save God's people in the many ways we need to be supported and saved. Hossfeld and Zenger further help us understand *hesed* by explaining that it is the "good that gives joy to life and at the same time transcends it" (p 124).

[48] Lit. "animal fat and rich food." Goldingay asserts, "The image is that of a rich meaty feast abounding in suet and fat…Perhaps the fact that passages such as Lev. 3:16-17 do not allow worshippers to eat suet heightens the sense of how rich this meal is" (vol II, p 259). This rich feast that satiates the psalmist is in contrast to the hunger and thirst he experiences in v. 2.

[49] Although *nafshi* was already translated in this psalm as "my throat," here *nafshi* takes on the more general meaning of the psalmist's whole body since it is the body that experiences the satiation described in this verse.

and with lips of joyous song, my mouth praises.

7 When I recalled[50] You on my bed,
in the night watches, I dwell upon You.

8 For You were a help to me,
and in the shadow of Your wings[51] I shout for joy.

9 My being[52] clings to You,

---

[50] Both in Psalms 77:12-13 and 143:5, we find the same verbs in parallel: *zayin-chaf-resh* and *hey-gimmel-hey*. In those two instances, the verbs describe a person who is remembering all of the wonderous deeds God has done for him (in our psalm, we do not read a description of wonderous deeds, but v. 8 does describe an instance in which God helped the psalmist). These two verbs are found in this order in all three instances as well, suggesting that *hey-gimel-hey* is an intensification of *zayin-chaf-resh*. I adopted Robert Alter's translation for *e'geh*, since it captures this element of intensification.

[51] In the *Tanakh*, the phrase, *tzel k'nafecha*, only appears in the Psalter (Pss. 17:8, 36:8, 57:2). This location, under God's wings, is a place where humankind can seek refuge, shelter, and God's protection. Liturgy picks up on this theme of God's sheltering wings, notably in *El Malei Rachamim*, the memorial prayer recited at Jewish funerals.

[52] *Nafshi* cannot mean "throat" here, nor can it literally mean "body" since a physical body cannot cling to God. Yet, I wanted to maintain the somewhat physical character of the noun since it is in parallel with *y'mincha* "your right hand," a physical description of God. "Being" is appropriately ambiguous as it could imply a physical body or the person's life as a whole. Kugel picks up on the paradoxical nature of *nefesh*, stating, "However much our own times may seem to have obscured it, the *fundamental duality of each person's inside cannot be altogether suppressed* (emphasis mine)… the idea that that which is most inside is also the only way to the

Your right hand buoys me.

10 But they pursue my being for utter destruction,[53]
may they enter into the depths of the earth.[54]

11 May [their blood] be poured out[55] by the sword,

Outside, that deep within each human being is a little room, and on its far wall, a tiny door" (Kugel, *The Great Poems of the Bible*, p 53).

[53] In Ps 35:8, *shoah* is described as an event that causes one's enemies to fall into their own net; likewise, Pr 3:25 describes *shoah* as a fear-inducing experience that befalls the wicked. In Is 47:11, *ra'ah*, evil, and *hovah*, disaster, are synonyms of *shoah.* The depraved nature of the word *shoah* is also exemplified by the fact that Modern Jews chose this word to describe the decimation of European Jewry by the Nazis during the Second World War.

[54] The "depths of the earth" likely means Sheol (Goldingay, vol II, p 261) or, similarly, "the underworld" (Hakham, vol II, p 41). Hakham notes that this phrase "is the opposite of the situation depicted in the previous verse…since those who descend into the depths of the underworld are considered far away from God" (vol II, p 41).

[55] Psalm 75:9 supports the assertion that this word in the *hiphil* means "to pour," as it refers to what God does with wine. The challenge in our verse is that there is no subject, so there is nothing to be poured out. The root, *nun-gimmel-resh*, presents a similar challenge in Jeremiah 18:21 within a similar context: a person's petition to God to brutally destroy his enemies. From the context, we can understand that this is a further description of what will happen to the psalmist's enemies as they "enter into the depths of the earth." Goldingay states that "the reference to the sword may suggest it is blood they are pouring" (vol II, p 262). Thus, it seems the verb is best translated idiomatically as "pour out the blood," while understanding that this

may they be the foxes' portion.[56]

12 But the king will rejoice in God,
all who swear by Him shall praise,
for the mouth of liars is shut up.[57]

was a "fixed expression in ancient times" (Hakham, vol II, p 42) and the word "blood" does not actually appear in the verse. Perhaps there is a connection here between the thirst for water in the beginning and the pouring out of blood here at the end – both are liquid, life-sustaining and the lack thereof causes death.

[56] The enemies will "die violently and remain without burial, which is the worst disgrace" (Shaefer, p 153-154). Their bodies will be food for the foxes, and will "never reach their proper rest" (Goldingay, vol II, p 262). Both Shaefer and Goldingay point to the enemies' eternal misery that v. 11b illustrates.

[57] *Yisacher* is in the *niphal*/passive form here, implying that God is the actor and will do the action of stopping up the mouths of liars. Since this seems to be a very deliberate verb form, one of only two *niphal* verbs in our psalm, I wanted to underscore the action of something *being done to* the liars with this translation.

Analysis

Psalm 63 describes a person's emotional, sensory experience of God, and his desperate and fervent desire for God's presence. The second section of the psalm, verses 2-9, describes physical experiences: thirsting for God, seeing God's strength and glory, lifting one's palms with praise, and the physical satiation that comes from feeling God's *hesed*. Why does the psalmist emphasize the sensory nature of his experience of God? Such an embodied description of both the need for God and praise of God underscore the fact that the psalmist is alive - "Thus, I bless You while I live" (v. 5a). *Nafshi*, repeated three times in this psalm, is translated not as breath, spirit or soul, but as the psalmist's physical "being" (vv. 9, 10), "my throat" (v. 2) and "body" (v. 6). He is here, in his body, on this earth, with a clear understanding that it is God who put him here, and God who can send him "into the depths of the earth" (v. 10b). Such physicality exists in the third section as well; verse 11 describes a miserable death, and then the suffering of the body even after death.

One might assume that if the psalmist is described corporeally, God would then be described as the opposite, but that is not the case in this psalm. It is actually the conception of an embodied God that seems to give the psalmist comfort, as exemplified in the description of God in the holy sanctuary (v. 3), God's wings (v. 8) and God's right hand (v. 9). The psalmist lifts his hands to God and God buoys him with God's hands. The psalm describes a relationship between God and the psalmist that is complementary and mutual.

The psalm exhibits an interweaving of fear and confidence. Verse 2 describes the psalmist as a desperate person in the wilderness, but very quickly the psalmist gains comfort

from his knowledge of God's presence in verses 3-6.[58] The psalmist implies an experience of fear when he describes lying in bed at night, his thoughts dwelling upon God. For the modern reader, this is reminiscent of the bedtime *Sh'ma*, recited in bed, in order to assert God's oneness and omnipresence in a time when the world is dark and we are more aware of our human fragility. Elliott Dorff states, in *My People's Prayer Book*, that the nighttime prayers "reflect the pre-scientific belief that losing consciousness in sleep is dangerous, for there is no guarantee that we will continue living during that state, and regain consciousness when sleep is over" (p 84, 87). In that scary time of darkness, perhaps it is the recalling of God's past help that leads to the psalmist's belief that God will once again stand up for him against his enemies.

The Hebrew tenses in this psalm are not always clear or consistent. The way I chose to translate the verbs of this psalm tells the story of a person who is currently in a challenging situation. Yet, his memory of God's support during past trying times in his life serves as evidence that God will support him now by destroying the enemies who are trying to destroy him. This demonstrates that Walter Brueggemann's tripartite distinction between psalms of secure orientation, disorientation and reorientation does not describe a static system. Instead, the orientations can, at times, be more fluid, like a description of the waves of the sea that continually rise, crash to the shore, recede, and then begin the cycle again. Our psalmist has experienced secure orientation (vv. 3-6), disorientation and reorientation (vv. 7-9), and is now experiencing disorientation again (v. 2), with the hopes that he will once again feel reoriented (vv. 10-12). This psalm teaches that to be alive, human and embodied is to experience a mix of the various orientations at different stages. Yet, the confidence that God is somehow reachable,

[58] The thirst described in v. 2 is likely metaphoric rather than literal, as in Psalm 42. I discuss this thirst, and how it compares to Ps. 42, in the conclusion.

even if at moments God seems just out of our reach, brings joy to “all who swear by Him” (v. 12), and ultimately, hopefully, quenches the psalmist’s painful thirst.

Psalm 65

Outline

I) **Superscription: A Song** (v. 1)

II) **Humankind's Relationship with God: Praise for God's Beneficence** (vv. 2-5)

a. Devotion to God through silence, vows, and prayer (vv. 2-3)

b. Despite our shortcomings, our gracious God forgives us, draws us near and provides us with the bounty of God's temple (vv. 4-5)

III) **Nature's Relationship with God: Praise for God's Power and Bounty** (vv. 6-14)

a. Displays of God's power in the mountains, the seas, the sunrise and the sunset (vv. 6-9)

b. God's bounty rains down and produces abundance (vv. 10-14)

Translation

1 To the leader, a psalm for David, a song.[59]

2 To You[60] quiet[61] is praise, [62] God in Zion,[63]

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[59] While many psalms begin with an inscription containing the word *shir* (e.g., Pss 30, 45, 46, 48, 67), this instance of *shir* forms an inclusio since the last word of the psalm is *yashiru.*

[60] In verses 2-5, the second person singular suffix appears six times. This repetition emphasizes the intimacy between God and the psalmist. This intimacy is even more apparent in verse 5, when the psalmist describes being drawn near to God.

[61] Hakham understands *dumiyah* as "expressing anticipation" (vol II, p 51). Likewise, the *JPS Tanakh* translates *dumiyah* as "waits quietly" in Ps 62:2. Alter recognizes that there are divergent views of this root and its meaning, and settles on the translation, "silence" stating, "The speaker begins this psalm of praise… by affirming that the subject of the poem, God's greatness, is beyond what language can express, so that silence alone is due praise" (p 221). I chose to adapt Alter's translation using the word, "quiet," to demonstrate the many ways one can praise God - through song in v. 1 and through quiet in v. 2.

[62] Both offering praise and paying vows are public ways of giving God what God needs in order to be satisfied (see also Ps 22:26). In this psalm of secure orientation, this verse asserts that the relationship between the psalmist and God is still an active one - offering praise and paying vows is the psalmist's role. God's role, as will become evident later in the psalm, is to sate the psalmist with blessings and rescue him from adversity.

[63] The active role one must take to show appreciation to God (as noted above) is best exemplified in the Temple rituals. Later in the psalm, God's courts and temple are mentioned explicitly. God is situated in Zion (for example, *Elohim b'tzion* in Ps 84:8, and *Adonai b'tzion* in Pss 99:2;

and to You, a vow will be paid.

3 Hearer of prayer,[64]
and to You all flesh will come.

4 Deeds[65] of sin overpower[66] me;
our transgressions, You forgive them.

5 Content[67] is the one You choose and draw near,

132:13), in God's proper place, to emphasize the psalmist's sentiment that all is right with the world.

[64] Since sound is already so important in this psalm, we should note the sound of the Hebrew here – v. 2: *dumi'a t'hilah*, v. 3: *shome'a t'filah.*

[65] Here *davar* connotes action rather than simply words, as it does in Pss 112:5 and 141:4. Also, see note 8.

[66] The preposition *meni* in this context is one of comparison (*DCH*, vol II, p 312). The verb is used with the same preposition in 2 Sam 1:23 to indicate that Saul and Jonathan are more powerful than lions. Translating *gavar* as "overpower" also strengthens the argument for *davar* to be translated as "deeds," since deeds are stronger and have more of a capacity for overpowering a person.

[67] I translated *ashrei* here as "content" instead of "happy" to echo the meaning of its parallel, *nishbah*, "sated" in v. 5b.

he will dwell in Your courts.[68]
May we be sated with the bounty[69] of Your house,
the holiness of Your temple.

6 With awesome deeds, in righteousness, You answer us,
God of our rescue,
Trusted One[70] of all the ends of the earth and the distant seas.[71]

7 Who makes mountains firm with His power -

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[68] Goldingay argues that v. 5a is specifically about a priest who is "brought near to God by virtue of his role in the Temple worship" (vol II, p 277). Verse 5b then expands on the priest's joy and generalizes his happiness to the people as well. Schaefer understands v. 5a differently, asserting that Israel is the chosen representative, the "one" of whom the psalmist speaks, whose role is to "confess sins…and worship in the temple" (p 159). Hakham introduces another possibility, asserting, "This verse has been recited by pilgrims entering the Temple courtyard to fulfill their vows" (vol II, p 52). The psalmist allows for these interpretive differences since the Hebrew simply states, *ashrei,* "content is the one" (v. 5).

[69] Both this psalm and Ps 128:5 situate God in Zion and use the same word *tuv* to describe the bounty God bestows upon God's people. For both psalms, the *HALOT* defines *tuv* to mean "the best things of a place, country or person" (vol II, p 372). Surely the highest attainment one strives for when praising God in God's Temple in Zion is God's blessing. This word appears again in v. 12 in the context of the abundant harvest, an example of God's blessing.

[70] *Mivtach* is a construct noun and the subject in this part of the verse. Both in this verse, and also in Ps 71:5, the psalmist gives God another name, 'One whom I give my trust,' helping the reader to recognize another way the psalmist understands God.

[71] This verse begins the personification of nature in this psalm. Nature puts her trust in God and nature is shaped by God's hand.

He is girded with might.

8 Who stills[72] the rushing[73] seas,
their rushing waves, and the raging of nations.

9 Those who dwell at the ends of the earth[74] will fear your signs,[75]
the going out of morning and evening, You make them shout for joy.

10 You take special notice[76] of the earth, and make it overflow.[77]

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[72] We find this verb in reference to God's ability to calm surging waves in Ps 89:10, although in a different construction. Hakham remarks, "Our verse is referring both to things that occur every day, and to the act of creation itself" (vol II, p 54).

[73] *HALOT* defines *sh'on* as "the roar of water, crowd or the raging of kingdoms" (vol IV, p 1370). This noun is also used in Ps 89:10 to describe the waves of the sea. *Sh'on* and *hamon* sound the same in Hebrew so I used an alliteration in English (rush and rage) to allude to that sound play.

[74] "Of the earth" is not written here but implied based on *kol katzvei eretz* in v. 6.

[75] The signs referred to here are the "awesome deeds" described in vv. 6-14. God's signs are manifest in nature since this psalmist believes God manipulates our world to demonstrate whether or not we are in God's favor.

[76] When God is the subject of *pakad*, (as in Gen 21:1 when God takes note of Sarah, and Ex 3:16; 4:31; 13:9 when God takes note of the Israelites' suffering) the word connotes an action God will take on behalf of the person. When God *pakad* Sarah, she conceived; when God *pakad* the Israelites, they were freed from slavery. In the instance in this psalm, God takes special note of the land and gives it water to live and thrive, in only the special way God can do.

Greatly, You enrich it,
God's stream[78] is full of water,
You provide their grain, for so You provide it,

11 Saturating[79] its furrows,[80]
smoothing out its ridges.[81]
With showers, you melt it,
its growth, You bless.[82]

12) You crown[83] the year with Your bounty[84] -

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[77] Hakham argues that *vat'shokeka* "signifies great quantities of water as in Joel 2:24 'and the vats will overflow with wine and oil'" (vol II, p 54-55). Part b of this verse augments this claim since it refers to God's stream as one that is full of water.

[78] For further analysis of God's stream, see p 61-62 of this paper.

[79] This verb does not appear often in the *pi'el* form in the *Tanakh*. In Pr 5:19, the verb refers to a woman's breasts that should be satisfying to her lover; in Is 34:7, we read of land soaked with blood. Since this verse follows after v. 10's description of the earth overflowing and God's stream full of water, it seems that the best translation is "saturate," thus continuing the water metaphor. *DCH* defines the verb *resh-vav-hey* in the *kal* as "drink one's fill, or have one's fill of" (vol VII, p 426) further buttressing our choice of a water word.

[80] One of the possible definitions of "furrow" in the Webster's dictionary is "a natural or artificial watercourse for drainage or irrigation" (p 924). This seems like the most likely meaning here, since a furrow is designed to speed along irrigation, and v. 10 refers to the abundance of grain that God provides, in part because the land must be well irrigated.

[81] Translated with the help of Robert Alter's note on "smooth out its hillocks" (p 223).

[82] Verses 10-11 are very specific about the kind of blessings the psalmist is hoping to receive in return for praising God: blessings of an abundant harvest brought about by abundant water.

Your paths drip richness,[85]

13 the pastures of the wilderness drip,[86]
and the hills are girded in joy.

14 The meadows are clothed with flocks,
the valleys are covered with grain.[87]
They raise a shout; they even sing.

[83] When mentioning a crown, Goldingay cautions, "We should perhaps think not of a gold crown that sits on top of someone's head but of a wreath around their shoulders…" (p 282). Such a wreath is indicative of a year of a fruitful harvest, which the past few verses have emphasized.

[84] Hakham elaborates, stating, "You have made the good year that You have given us… with an annual harvest blessed both in quantity and in quality." Both the 'crowning' and 'bounty' speak to the psalmist's praise for God for a plentiful harvest.

[85] In Ps 36:9, *deshen* is the food that makes up a feast; likewise, in Ps 63:6, *deshen* is the food that is satisfying to the psalmist, akin to *chelev*, animal fat. Based on these citations, our verse paints a picture of a land saturated with satisfying, rich food ready to be harvested.

[86] The richness of v. 12 continues in v. 13, as Goldingay states, "The rains make the pastures in the wilderness flourish with natural growth of grass… Now it is as if they too are overflowing" (vol II, p 282-283). This verse continues to illustrate the effects of the abundance of water as they ripple through the land.

[87] Hakham states, "Although *ya'atfu*, 'wrapped,' is in the *kal*, it is to be understood as a reflexive, like *hitatef* in the *hitpa'el*" (vol II, p 57). We can imagine that the valleys are covering themselves in grain, much like a person covers herself in a prayer shawl.

Analysis

The psalmist of Psalm 65 experiences satisfaction and abundance, despite his imperfections. The psalm describes a quid pro quo relationship between God and the psalmist: the psalmist praises God, and he is then rewarded with a close relationship with the Divine. Yet, the psalmist is not the only one who experiences God's grace. Time ("the going out of morning and evening…shout for joy," v. 9) and space ("the valleys….raise a shout," v. 14) respond in joyful praise for God's actions and blessings. Such is the formula for a psalm of secure orientation, in which each player in God's world seems to be in its proper place, experiencing the fruition of its being.

Psalm 65's inscription (v. 1) informs the reader that this is a psalm as well as a song. Throughout the psalm, the rhyming scheme does, at times, seem to have a rhythm: *ta'aneinu Elohei yisheinu* (v. 6), *sh'on yamim…vahamon l'umim* (v. 8), *t'lameiha…g'dudeiha…t'mog'geina* (v. 11). In addition to exemplifying the artistry of the psalmist, perhaps this rhythm also subtly helps the reader feel the music of the psalm.

Verses 2-5 form the second section of this psalm, which explores the psalmist's relationship with God. In verses 2 and 3a, we learn about who God is - the One in Zion, and the One to whom vows are paid - and how the psalmist relates to God. Psalm 116's description of how vows to God are paid gives us a richer understanding of our psalm. In Psalm 116 we read, "I will sacrifice a thanksgiving offering to You; my vows to Adonai, I will pay…in the courts of Adonai's house" (vv. 17-19). Our psalm also mentions God's courts, house and temple, thus connecting it to Psalm 116 and painting a picture of God in the Temple in Jerusalem, and the people going up to the Temple to pay their vows, or give their offerings to God.

Not only did the people raise physical offerings to God, they also raised prayerful praise to God. Surprisingly, whether this praise was spoken aloud or murmured quietly (such quiet is described in v. 2, "quiet is praise") is not important since in verse 3, God is described as "Hearer of prayer" in its many forms.

In verse 4, the psalm shifts slightly from the psalmist's praise of God to his recognition of his imperfect existence. Yet, this psalm is not a lament of our human qualities (see, for example, Pss 55 and 69); instead v. 4 briefly mentions our shortcomings to highlight the contrast to God's ever-beneficent nature. In verse 5, the psalmist returns to the sentiment of praising God that began the psalm, and therein, captures the crux of this psalm, "May we be sated with the blessing of Your house." The house he specifically refers to here is God's temple, mentioned directly thereafter. The rest of the psalm refers to the wonders and blessings of 'God's house' writ large – God's powerful presence manifest on earth.

While the second person singular suffix characterizes the second section of this psalm, emphasizing that the psalmist speaks directly to God. The third section is primarily an account of God's "awesome deeds…and signs" (vv. 6, 9) described through a subtle personification of the natural world. Verse 6 praises God as one who is trusted by "all the ends of the earth and the distant seas;" this merism implies that every being that exists, including the earth, the seas, and everything in between, has faith in God. Just as vv. 1-2 described the range of ways a person could praise God (through song and quiet) so too do vv. 7-8 describe the range of ways God controls the world – strong and firm with the mountains, a calming presence for the sea.

Waves and seas have already been mentioned in the psalm, but in vv. 10-13a, the psalm focuses specifically on water. The psalmist states, *Peleg Elohim malei mayim* (v. 10), and in those four short words, four verses are summarized (vv. 10-14): God fills the world with life. An

abundance of water in the natural world means an abundant harvest. As if to quash any doubt about who causes grain to grow from the ground, v. 10 asserts that God provides it, and then repeats the assertion for emphasis. Furthermore, v. 11 reminds the reader that God knows exactly how to provide such an abundant harvest. If vv. 10-11 is the recipe for how to create an abundant harvest, "saturate its furrows" and "smooth out its ridges" are the ingredients needed. The finished product? Our world, dripping with God's blessing, as detailed in vv. 12-14.

The last verse is perhaps purposefully ambiguous. Who "raises a shout" – the meadows, the flocks, the valleys, the grain? Is there a loud chorus of 'baa-ing' coming from the multitude of sheep that have come to graze? Or is nature personified as one who sings, unable to contain her excitement about God's goodness? Or maybe "they" refers to the hills and the pastures from vv. 12-13 as well? The psalm does not provide definitive answers. What we know for sure is that from the psalmist's quiet praise in the beginning of this psalm to the shouting at the end, the earth is buzzing with appreciation that God has taken special notice of it.

This psalm of praise describes the interdependence between our world, the creatures in it and God. We humans praise God, and God answers us by providing rain. This rain in turn produces grain and fields of grass, which are the pastures on which flocks graze. The produce of the fields, and the flocks that graze on them, will then clothe and feed human beings who will then praise God for such abundance. The psalm ends in song, just as it began, and the cycle continues.

Psalm 93

Outline

I) **God is King Everlasting** (vv. 1-2)

a. God's strength strengthens the world (v. 1)

b. From the Beginning until forever (v. 2)

II) **God is More Powerful than the Floodwaters** (vv. 3-4)

a. The waters are strong (v. 3)

b. God is stronger (v. 4)

III) **God Rules Forever** (v. 5)

Translation

1 Adonai reigns,[88]
clothed in majesty.[89]
Clothed is Adonai,

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[88] The tenses in this psalm are fluid, since the psalm as a whole discusses what has been true forever, and will continue to be true for all times. In v. 1, we can understand that while the actual action was in the past, its implications are true today as well. This opening statement, Goldingay argues, is a "declaration about Yhwh's long ago asserting authority in a way that ensures the world remains stable" (vol III, p 66). This is the only instance in the *Tanakh* that *lavesh* is vocalized this way (usually the perfect is *lavash*).

[89] *Ge'ut* can describe a positive attribute of God or something wonderful God has done (as in Is 26:10 and Is 12:5, respectively). In Ps 89:10, *ge'ut* describes the chaotic rising and falling of the sea that God completely controls. In this psalm, God wears this power and splendor, which juxtaposes him with an earthly king, who wears physical garments (Mays, p 300). I chose to translate *ge'ut* as majesty in order to maintain the "king" metaphor.

With strength, He has girded Himself.[90]
Yes, the world stands firm,
It cannot be shaken.[91]

2 Your throne stands firm from of old,[92]

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[90] In Is 8:9 (the only other instance in the *Tanakh* of this verb in *hitpa'el*), Isaiah cautions the people to gird themselves because they will be punished. Our psalm expresses the exact opposite sentiment, God girds Godself not out of fear, but as a display of God's ultimate strength. Goldingay helps tie v. 1 together, stating, "The psalm refers not to a mere ceremonial robing in regalia, but to Yhwh's taking up impressive battle equipment in connection to asserting kingly authority" (vol III, p 68). The language depicts God in an anthropomorphic manner as a warrior/king. However, the collocation of the concrete, human verbs (clothe, gird) with abstract qualities (majesty, strength) highlights the limits of the metaphor and God's unique, non-human, qualities.

[91] Psalms 96:10 and 104:5 echo the language and sentiment of our psalm, stating, respectively, "The world stands firm; it cannot be shaken," "He established the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken." The same language is used to reflect the opposing sentiment in Is 24:19 when Isaiah cautions the people that the earth is in fact breaking apart, crumbling and shaking because of their behavior, and in Ps 60:4, which describes a world that God has broken open. Hakham helps the reader understand the verse, stating, "And with the might of God's kingdom, and the revelation of His majesty and strength, the world was established and fixed in its place, so that it cannot collapse" (vol II, p 379).

[92] *M'az* plays off of the "z" sounds of *oz hitazer*, perhaps the firmness of the sound echoes the firmness described in these two verses. In Is 45:21, *m'az* is in parallel with *mikedem*, also meaning from the past. Is 48:8 seems to express *m'az* to mean an incident that did not transpire

From forever, You are.

3 The rivers[93] raised up, Adonai,
the rivers raised up their voice,
the rivers raise up[94] their pounding.[95]

---

in a person's lifetime. Hakham reinforces the definition of *m'az* in Is 48:8, stating, "The psalmist means to say that God's kingdom manifested itself when the world was first created" (vol II, p 380). Perhaps this word has a sense of forever ago, while *m'olam* means forever into the future, thus encompassing the totality of time, and the totality of God's reign.

[93] Many of the commentators assert that these waters may refer to the Canaanite story of the "conquest of a primordial sea monster" (Alter, p 329). A more important allusion, for our purposes, is one between this verse and the biblical creation story. In Gen 2:10, a *nahar* springs forth from the Garden of Eden; in Ps 24:2, we read that God founded the world on the *n'harot*. However, the *n'harot* can also be destructive. In Is 44:27, we read that God dries up the *n'harot* that wrought havoc on the land. Commentators present a range of translations for this word: Hakham uses "floodwaters," Goldingay "rivers," JPS "ocean." Since these waters seem to have both positive and negative connotations depending on the context, I chose to translate *n'harot* with the neutral term, "rivers," following Goldingay's example. *N'harot* represent the totality of what water has been from of old, bearing both life and destruction in its wake.

[94] The verb *nas'u* repeats in the perfect in v. 3a and b, and then changes slightly in v. 3c to imperfect. Goldingay comments on this change stating that "the yiqtol in the third colon…may indicate a recognition that the rivers continue to assert themselves in this way" (vol III, p 70). The totality of time that was commented on in reference to v. 2 continues as a theme in this verse, as we hearken back to the primordial waters *and* refer to the waters' actions in the future, all with the change of one letter.

4 More than voices of floodwaters,[96]
powerful[97] breakers of the sea,

[95] The root *daled-caf-aleph/hay* can be translated as "crush," as in Ps 143:3 when the psalmist is pursued by his enemy and then crushed to the ground. In Ps 51:19, the same root is used in parallel with *nishbar*,"broken," to describe a heart. When the same root describes an action of water, we can translate it as "pounding," since that connotes both the crushing of the waves and the sound of the waves alluded to in v. 3b. Lastly, *doch'yam* rhymes with *yam* found at the end of v. 4b. The rhyming and wordplay, and the repetitive nature of the psalm, reinforce Alter's suggestion of a "wavelike movement in the formal pattern of the verse."

[96] In Ps 18:17-18, the psalmist needs to be saved from both *mayim rabim* and his enemies. From this citation, we learn that the waters are both powerful and fear-inducing. Ps 29 is most linguistically resonant with our psalm; there, the powerful, majestic voice of Adonai hovers over the *mayim rabim*. Our verse teaches that no matter how powerful the waters may be, God is infinitely more powerful. Therefore, I chose to translate *mayim rabim* as "floodwaters" since this connotes waters that exhibit great strength.

[97] In Psalm 29:4, the voice of God is described as full of both *koach,* "power" and *hadar,* "majestic." In the Song of the Sea (Ex 15:10-11), *adir* is used to describe *mayim*, "water," as well as God's holiness. The *mayim*, in the Exodus example, has significant strength considering that it just parted and then drowned the Egyptians. From these citations, we understand that *adir* expresses a sense of holy power, translated by Hakham as "mighty," by Alter, Goldingay, JPS and Schaefer as "majestic." Schaefer observes that the "multivalent word associates God's robe of strength [from v. 1] and the divine power over rebellious powers" (p 233). In our psalm's context, therefore, I chose to translate *adir* as "powerful," acknowledging that while the

powerful on high is Adonai.

5 Your decrees[98] are very enduring;[99]
holiness suits Your house.

floodwaters and the breakers of the sea are strong, God is stronger and more powerful than them all.

[98] Psalm 19 lists what God provides God's people: *torah, eidut, pikudim, mitzvot,* and *mishpatim.* Conversely, Jeremiah admonishes the people in Jr 44:23 for not following the *torah, chukim* and *eidut* that God established, resulting in the people's punishment. Based on these citations, *eidut* are part of a God-given package that also includes God's teachings and laws. Why does our psalm mention these *eidut* after two verses about God's dominion over nature? Perhaps the concrete, orderly aspect of the decrees is to be understood as a contrast to the fluidity and chaos of the water. Mays argues, "In the view of the psalmist, the commandments that order human life are the decrees of the sovereign of the universe" (p 301). Alter furthers this juxtaposition between God as ruler of order and the waters as reapers of chaos, stating, "God's supreme power over nature is followed by His giving to Israel a set of laws that can endow their lives with stable order and moral coherence" (p 330).

[99] Goldingay writes, "Fortunately for people who live in the world God created and ordered, over the millennia those declarative commands have been totally *firm, reliable and true*" (emphasis mine, vol III, p 71). Those three adjectives help us understand *ne'eman.* In Ps 89:29, *ne'eman* and *l'olam* seem to have a similar meaning; in that case, it is God's *hesed* and *b'rit* that are firm, reliable and true. "Enduring" captures the meaning of firm and reliable, while also emphasizing the theme of our psalm: God is forever.

Adonai is for the length of days.[100]

[100] *L'orech yamim* is yet another way this psalm indicates that God reigns forever (also found in relation to God's *bayit* in Ps 23:6). Hakham, reading this phrase as a completion of the assertion in v. 2, *m'olam ata,* states, "Taken together, the two verses teach that the Lord is king from everlasting to everlasting" (vol II, p 382). God is from of old, from forever, enduring and for the length of days; these phrases buttress Goldingay's understanding that our psalm teaches the "reign Yhwh implemented at creation will continue into the future forever" (vol III, p 71).

Analysis

Psalm 93, a psalm of secure orientation, begins without superscription, describing a powerful, everlasting God. In the five verses of the psalm, the divine name "Adonai" is repeated five times – an expression of the centrality of God both in the psalm and in the psalmist's world. God's dominion over the earth is stated declaratively and succinctly in verse 1a, "God reigns." The rest of the psalm is an elaboration on that statement.

The most important pattern in this psalm begins by setting up God as similar to a powerful worldly entity and then surprises the readers when God breaks the expected mold. The first verse speaks of God's royal clothes; such a description emphasizes God's role as king of the world. However, God does not wear purple robes or carry a scepter; God, instead, is clothed in *ge'ut*, "majesty," and *oz*, "strength." God, dressed in power, is not like any earthly king we can imagine. The mention of God's "throne" (v. 2) also emphasizes the difference between God and an earthly king. God's throne is not situated in a place; instead it is situated in time (forever). Even when, in v. 5, the psalmist mentions a place where God dwells, "God's house," it is not specific to one particular location in space. God is king, and God's kingdom exists above and beyond time and space.

Water is introduced in v. 3 as part of this pattern. The psalmist describes water as raised up, only to lower the status of water by insisting that it is truly God who is on high. In v. 4, the *mayim rabim* are introduced; yet, in contrast to the "many waters/floodwaters," there is one powerful God. In addition, the rhyme of *mayim rabim* and *l'orech yamim* (v. 5) links those two phrases. Perhaps, the psalmist means to juxtapose God's firm, enduring nature with the fluidity of water.

There are two instances in the footnotes of the translation in which an Isaiah citation is introduced to help buttress the reasoning for a translation (Isaiah 8:9 and 24:19). Notably, the contexts in the Isaiah citations are exactly the opposite of the contexts of our psalm. In Isaiah 8:7, God raises up the waters (as opposed to the raising up that the waters do to themselves in our psalm) in order to destroy an earthly king. The people under that king's rule are instructed to "gird yourselves" because God will break them. In v. 1 of our psalm, God is the supreme King that girds Godself. God then seems to gird the world just as God girds Godself, since the end of v. 1 reads, "The world stands firm, it cannot be shaken."

Isaiah 24:19 may allude to the end of days when the earth's foundations open up and everyone will be judged and, possibly, punished. Yet, our psalm describes a world that will never be destroyed, that will endure forever. The world of Psalm 93 is *bal timot* "cannot be shaken," which stands in stark contrast to Isaiah 24's world that is *mot hitmot'ta*, "truly shaken."

The last verse of the psalm introduces God's decrees, which many seem to bring the reader down to the earth after the lofty language of the first four verses. Yet, Mays argues that the decrees clearly connect to the theme of this psalm, stating, "To confess that the Lord reigns is to believe that the decrees of God are as given a part of reality as the very continuity and stability of the world" (p 302). The decrees, therefore, take on a lofty quality when they are considered part of the package the psalmist accepts when he asserts that God's world endures.

The psalm mentions temporality to express that God exists out of time (both "from old" and "forever" in v. 2); it alludes to acts of an earthly king to express that God is the supernal king. In mentioning the power of water, the psalm expresses that God is more powerful than even the mightiest waters. The psalmist of Psalm 93 describes how God reigns in our world by

setting up expectations and then allowing God to defy them. Such is the nature of an all-powerful, eternal God.

Conclusion

Water is prevalent in the book of Psalms (as discussed in this paper's introduction). This prevalence is not surprising: "Water was considered basic to the sustenance of life in Israel, and as such it soon acquired a strong cosmic importance in Israelite cosmology."[101] The diversity of water metaphors in the book of Psalms serves to illustrate water's "strong cosmic importance" as we read of the waters of creation, the water of the psalmist's tears, natural bodies of water like rivers and oceans, rain, and the psalmist's experience of thirst.

Water in the Beginning

> When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep, and God's breath hovering over the waters…God said, "Let there be a vault in the midst of the waters, and let it divide water from water." And God made the vault and it divided the water beneath the vault from the water above the vault, and so it was…And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered in one place so that the dry land will appear," and so it was. And God called the dry land Earth and the gathering of waters He called Seas, and God saw that it was good.
>
> (Gen 1:1-10)

The Torah opens with a description of a swirling, chaotic world. Robert Alter teaches that *tohu*, translated above as "welter," means "'emptiness' or 'futility,' and in some contexts is associated with the trackless vacancy of the desert."[102] The waters exist in this primordial, bleak, vacant expanse. We meet God in these first few days of creation as the One who imposes order

[101] Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol VIII, 267.
[102] Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2007), 17.

where there is none. God divides water from water, gives names to each section of the divided world, and then deems these acts "good" (vv. 4-31). Thus, God of Genesis demonstrates divine power by dominating the natural world, specifically the unruly water.

The writers of the book of Psalms understand God's ability to tame the chaotic waters of Genesis 1 as God's first expression of omnipotence. God's power in the Beginning reminds the writers that irrespective of their immediate situations, there is an order to the world and God's role has always been and will always be to impose this order. God's dominance over the world is relevant to the writers when they experience sickness as well as when they are comfortable and calm, when they are securely oriented and when they are in the pit of disorientation.

Psalm 24:2 begins by affirming God's relationship to the world, stating, "The earth is the Lord's and all that it holds, the world and its inhabitants. For He founded it upon the oceans, set it upon the nether-streams." These opening verses cite the creation story as the proof that supports the assumption of this securely oriented psalm: God is strong, powerful and full of glory. In his commentary on Ps 24:2, James Luther Mays writes,

> [Psalm 24 uses] creation language that speaks of the world as the product of an ordering power who provides stable and reliable existence out of formless and unstable chaos. In this view, the world is the result of an overpowering, an achievement that is finished but never simply an accomplished fact. Seas and rivers are names for the unstable chaos in the cosmology of the ancient Near East… The world exists because the Lord is and remains sovereign.[103]

In Psalms 65 and 93, two of the four psalms covered in detail in this paper, the water imagery corresponds to the creation story, as it does in Psalm 24.

The natural world is personified in Ps 65:6 when the psalmist imbues the earth and seas with the capacity to trust God: "With awesome deeds, in righteousness, You answer us, God of our rescue, Trusted One of all the ends of the earth and the distant seas." Hakham posits, "God is

[103] James Mays, *Psalms,* 120.

their trust because it is His strength and power that makes them last forever."[104] Thus, if the earth and the seas had the capacity to believe, they would assert their faith in God because they know that God has ruled over them since creation. Perhaps this verse also attempts to provide a concrete understanding of God's power, drawing a picture for the reader of a God that could control something as vast and powerful as the sea.

The psalmist continues to draw this picture of God's power in Ps 65:8, stating that God is the One "who stills the rushing seas, their rushing waves, and the raging of nations." Goldingay elaborates, arguing,

> Stilling the seas' roar was an aspect of the work God did at the Beginning. There were tumultuous dynamic forces of which God needed to gain control before creating the world as a safe and secure place. But those forces continue to assert themselves…[105]

Just the basic fact that the seas do not overcome the earth is a manifestation of God's hand in our world. Mays agrees with this assertion, arguing that "God's saving power is the power of creation. So the marvels of the created world are his 'signs,' the evidence of his power as God of the world."[106] God's dominion over the natural world, especially water, illustrates God's omnipotence.

The brief, compelling Psalm 93 begins by declaring "Adonai reigns," picking up on the theme of Psalm 65, God's power manifest in the world. The water imagery in Ps 93:3 helps flesh out the metaphor of God as king reigning over the earth, as the psalmist writes, "More than voices of floodwaters, powerful breakers of the sea, powerful on high is Adonai." Mays cites the

[104] Amos Hakham, *Psalms*, vol II, 53.
[105] John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol I, 279.
[106] James Mays, *Psalms,* 220.

Talmud to bring the disparate aspects of kingship and water together, building on his comment on Psalm 24 above,

> The Talmud sees this psalm as holding creation and reign of God together… the Talmud says that having completed his work…God ruled over them [his creatures]. The reign began when the world was peopled with subjects; by creation, God provided himself with a kingdom.[107]

Therefore, the synthesis of the depiction of God as eternal king with the metaphor of the pounding of the rivers and floodwaters (Ps 93:1-4) illustrates God's reign since creation. The psalmist takes heart that God, who is "from forever" (v. 2) and "for the length of days" (v. 5), rests in a throne on high and grants stability to the seemingly chaotic world.

If the first two verses of Psalm 93, as well as the last, represent stability, and the middle verses represent chaos and fluidity, perhaps we can see this psalm as a wave, starting out in the placid sea of confidence in vv. 1-2, rising in vv. 3-4, and then resting again in the calm certainty of v. 5. Schaefer writes about the sequence of the verses slightly differently, stating, "Framed within the references to stability and unbounded time is what is most unstable yet immense and ageless, the thundering breakers of chaos which constantly threaten to destroy creation but are checked by divine power."[108]

There are quite concrete theological implications resulting from the assertion that God controls the earth's water. If this is the case, then the extremes of drought and flooding are direct, intentional results of God's hand in our world. However, another possibility is that the brief moments when waters dry up or overtake land indicate God's temporary loss of God's grip on the powerful and unruly element. Goldingay struggles with this challenge in his commentary on Psalm 93, asking,

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[107] James Mays, *Psalms,* 301.
[108] Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms,* 232.

> The sea with its dynamic power crashes on the sandy shore: why does it never overwhelm it? Indeed from time to time it does. Storms buffet the land and wash away soil and rocks and anything else in their way: might they overwhelm the whole land? The raging of sea and storm are but the aftershocks or reminder of attempts to do this back at the Beginning… The world stays in being and stays secure, not because of inherent stability, but because Yhwh imposed such stability on it.[109]

In this worldview, floods and the destruction caused by them can remind us of what the world would be if God had not been so powerful and determined from the Beginning. Furthermore, we recognize that the waters are still immensely potent, and from time to time, still overwhelm even God. Below are reflections I wrote after two incidences of the waters breaching the land: the March 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami, and Superstorm Sandy of October 2012. When we grapple with the devastation that water can bring, we wonder: was God responsible for the floods or did the floodwaters emerge as more powerful than God in these moments?

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Order in the Heart of Chaos[110]

In the Beginning, there was darkness on the face of the black waters…

Last Friday, the east coast of Japan was enveloped by such darkness on the face of the black waters as those waters spilled and then rushed over the seawalls, sweeping away cars, lampposts, homes, buildings and an untold number of people. With the waters, came chaos…

[109] Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol III, 71-72

[110] Excerpted from a sermon I delivered at East End Temple in Manhattan on March 18, 2011, *Parshat Tzav*, Shabbat *Zachor*. The sermon attempts to help the congregants find meaning in the wake of the tsunami's devastation as well as to allow for and hold their shock and sadness.

How shall we order our world after the devastation of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan? We can't know for sure yet, since we are still firmly in the midst of chaos. Yet, an article in *The New York Times* about those who have been rendered homeless in the wake of the disaster speaks of this human desire for order, stating, "Those in the shelters try to maintain the orderly routines of normal Japanese life, seen in the tidy rows of shoes and muddy boots at the doorway to the shelters, where everyone is in socks."[111] A desire for order even in the heart of the chaos.

Our tradition teaches that out of chaos, order will arise. Order in the form of public rituals - prayer services, funerals, memorials every year. Also, perhaps order in the form of private rituals - every time I have seen the ocean since the tsunami of 2004, I utter a spontaneous, momentary prayer under my breath thanking God for the beauty of the water and also acknowledging my fear of its immense power to destroy…

We pray together that the *tohu vavohu* of this moment will soon give way to creation.

****

NYC, immersed.[112]

I decided to call my mikveh project, launched a month ago, ImmerseNYC.
Oh New York -- my birthplace, my home -- I didn't mean it quite so literally.

[111] Martin Fackler, "Misery and Uncertainty Fill Up Shelters," *New York Times*, March 16, 2011.
[112] On October 29, 2012, weeks after I launched *ImmerseNYC, a Community Mikveh Project*, New York City was devastated by Superstorm Sandy. The mikveh project's name seemed ironically synchronous with this devastation, as much of downtown Manhattan was literally under water. I reflected on this coincidence by writing this piece on November 2, 2012. For more information on the mikveh project, visit www.immersenyc.org.

When I said I wanted to introduce New Yorkers to the transformational potential of water, this is not what I had in mind.

The destruction abounds:
boardwalks that were,
a carousel that seems to be floating in the East River (hadn't my children just sat on those horse statues a few weeks ago?),
cars floating on the Lower East Side,
New Jersey stoops rising out of feet of sewage and sludge.

Immerse we did,
not on purpose, not to prepare for a wedding, or to become Jewish, or to celebrate retirement, or to mark the end of chemotherapy.

We were immersed against our will.

Rescue me, God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I have sunk in the slime of the deep,
and there is no place to stand.
I have entered the watery depths,
and the current has swept me away.
I am exhausted from calling out…[113]

A mother lost her grip for a moment and her two sons were caught in the current.
An elderly couple drowned in their car.

For these things, I sob,
my eyes, my eyes flow with water.[114]

Oh yes, there is water in me.
Recently, my baby daughter was crying, so I picked her up and held her
face-to-face, cheek-to-cheek.
One of her tears dropped onto my lip,
I tasted it.
My daughter's tear actually tasted sweet to me.
I knew she would not be crying for long, her delicious smile would return any moment.
I appreciated the intimacy of her tear, her water, a drip in my mouth.

The fluidity of our world reminds us:
salty tears can taste sweet,

[113] Psalm 69:2-4, translation by Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 236.
[114] Lamentations 1:16, translation by Adele Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 44.

the waves recede, becoming the calm ocean once again,
the lights go back on, eventually,
even in the most remote places,
even for those who lost everything.

And on that day, we will immerse nyc.
On purpose.
For healing and to celebrate life.
To embody forgiveness of the element that leaves
death, life, and everything in between, in its wake.

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These reflections do not answer the theological questions posed by the psalms and Goldingay. Perhaps, this writing simply serves to illustrate the fluid nature of water and how water can represent such vastly different aspects of the world all at once. If we can understand the water as containing opposing qualities, perhaps that opens us up to understanding God this way as well. God is omnipotent, yet constantly battling the waters. God is mysterious as some people are miraculously rescued while others drown. God is Creator of all: the divided waters of creation, the healing waters of *mikveh*, and the floodwaters of storms.

God Rains Down Blessings

From our discussion of water in the Psalms so far, we can recognize that waters are never static, literally and metaphorically. In Psalm 65, the waters begin as raging seas and transform into God's stream.[115] Schaefer explains this transformation, stating, "The primeval seas are

[115] Similarly, in Psalm 46:4, the psalmist describes raging waters and then, in the very next verse, the waters become God's river "whose streams gladden God's city" (Ps 46:5).

harnessed into the 'river of God' and fertile rains."[116] Thus, rain, and the earth's subsequent fertility, is a consequence of God's ability to control the waters of creation. Since, as noted in this paper's introduction, the geographic conditions of Israel make rain the most important source of water, God's ability to harness the water of creation into rain is crucial to those living in the biblical lands.

Part of the delivery system for the God-given rain in Psalm 65 is God's stream. Hossfeld and Zenger help provide context for this understanding, claiming, "The idea of the 'river of God' is in the first place part of the OT worldview, in which a canal for rain links the heavenly ocean, through the firmament, with the airy space above the earth."[117] Goldingay also tries to help the reader visualize how this stream operates, stating,

> God is able to [provide rain] on the basis of possessing a fine irrigation system, with a stream or channel delivering water in a controlled way from God's storehouses or dams in the heavens to the places where it is needed on earth.[118]

These explanations allude to God's work of separating the waters in Gen 1:7; the waters above the vault seem to be part of God's stream.

As the water imagery shifts, God's role must shift as well. In Ps 65:8, God asserts control over the unruly waters; in Ps 65:10, God harnesses the waters in order to sustain life on earth. With the waters mostly (but not completely) tamed, God can demonstrate God's dominance over the natural world by 'irrigating' the land. Mays describes God, almost humorously, as a "cosmic farmer,"[119] in the context of Ps 65:10-14; these verses describe the abundant harvest that results from God's complex watering system by weaving "a tapestry of the land's beauty and

[116] Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, 157.
[117] Frank Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms: Volumes 2 and 3*, 140.
[118] John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 281.
[119] James Mays, *Psalms*, 220.

bounty."[120] Such bounty is created because "God looks after the earth and waters it."[121] Thus, we humans, are blessed with fertile land when God takes care of our world as a loving, diligent farmer, providing water from God's stream in the heavens.

Thirsting for God

God nourishes the earth with water from God's stream in Psalm 65. Likewise, the psalmist of Psalm 63 yearns for a similar feeling of nourishment. Since God controls the rain - the giving of water - then a lack of water, as in Ps. 63:2, can be understood as God withholding blessings. Yet, Psalm 63 does not describe a literal drought of the fields, but a metaphorical, spiritual drought, as the psalmist opens his psalm lamenting, "God, You are my God, I seek You, my throat thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, in a parched and weary land without water" (Ps 63:2). In Psalm 65, rain represents stability and order in the world. In Psalm 63, the psalmist's metaphoric thirst for God, symbolizing God's absence, causes the psalmist to feels unstable and unsure in the order and meaning of his existence.

Psalm 42:2-3 also describes a spiritual drought, and the ensuing thirst for God, when the psalmist cries, "As a deer yearns for streams of water, so I yearn for You, O God. My whole being thirsts for God, the living God."[122] The phrase, *tzama nafshi l'elohim/l'cha*, linguistically links Psalms 42 and 63. In the context of Psalm 42, Schaefer asserts, "The poet expresses the desperate condition of unslaked thirst, which is like the soul without God. He or she is restless,

[120] Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, 157.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms,* 148-9.

anxious, like a thirsty animal in a desert looking for water."[123] In the metaphors of Psalms 42 and 63, water is not provided or controlled by God - God is life-sustaining water itself.

Mays makes a powerful case that the pain of thirsting for God cannot be overstated,

> Here it is understood and said very clearly that life depends on God. The body cannot live without water. *Its lack, quicker than anything else except breath itself, is felt as desperate desire.* The soul cannot survive without God…[124]

The psalmist's experience of thirsting for God blurs the line between his embodied experiences and his emotional life, and it reinforces the argument that it is possible to physically feel a spiritual lack. In Psalms 42 and 63, each psalmist experiences a tangible desire for God. Moreover, just as the desire for God is embodied in Psalm 63, so too is God Godself: in v. 8, the psalmist is protected under God's wings, and in v. 9, he is supported by God's right hand. Psalm 63 teaches that when we connect with God, when we are in relationship with God, we are satiated emotionally, spiritually *and* physically, and, of course, the converse is true as well.

How can we, as modern readers, internalize what these psalms teach us about the fluidity between our physical bodies and our emotional lives? What must it feel like to thirst for God in such an embodied way, to need God the way one needs water? Below, I share a reflection on a moment when I experienced a physical *and* emotional thirst.

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[123] Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, 108.
[124] James Mays, *Psalms*, 173 (emphasis mine).

Tzama nafshi[125]

The moment my infant's mouth latches onto my nipple, I experience thirst.
Intense thirst.
It's really those first few seconds of nursing that evoke such desperation.
"Isaac!" I call out to my husband. "Can you make me a concoction?"
A concoction consists of one part cranberry juice, two parts water.
Truly the perfect thirst quencher.

Late last night, Isaac brought me a concoction - with lime -
while the baby was sleeping and I was writing a paper.
Just because.
It was even more delicious than usual since it quenched
an emotional thirst.

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Tears of Longing

Psalm 6 introduces a new form of water into our discussion: the water of the psalmist's tears. Psalm 6 discusses tears of loneliness and desperation, hyperbolically stating in v. 7, "I make my bed swim every night; with my tears, I melt my couch." In Psalm 42, the psalmist also describes his tears in an exaggerated fashion, lamenting in v. 4, "My tears have been my food day and night." The water of tears, depicted in the psalmist's sobbing in Psalms 6 and 42[126] is familiar to the reader; everyone has known the experience of crying. Goldingay asserts, in reference to Psalm 42, "The tears give a more literal suggestion of the depth of the suppliant's longing… Instead of eating, all the suppliant does is cry."[127] The tears described in Psalm 6 are not just falling down from the psalmist's eyes; instead, the psalmist drinks them and mixes them into food. Schaefer argues that this description helps crystallize the psalmist's feelings, stating,

[125] I wrote this reflection in March 2010 when my son, Caleb, was 5 months old.
[126] Psalms 56:9, 80:6, 102:10, and 126:4-6 also mention the psalmist's tears
[127] John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 24.

"Liquid tears, imaged as solid food, give shape to the [psalmist's] distress and alienation."[128] This unexpected description of eating and drinking tears[129] "carries on the thirst metaphor"[130] discussed above in reference to the psalmist's lack of water in Ps 63. This lack of water/absence of God is only made worse by the fact that the psalmist must imbibe his own tears - liquid that is useless as a thirst quencher.

Living Water

Genesis 1 introduces us to the complexity of water; the varied references to water in the book of Psalms reinforce this complexity. In terms of creation, as described in Genesis 1 and then alluded to in Psalms 65 and 93, water is both life-sustaining and life-threatening. Psalm 65 describes the nourishing qualities of water, illustrating the beauty of a world overflowing with the rain supplied from God's heavenly stream. In the beginning of Psalms 42 and 63, God's presence is likened to water; thus, the psalmist's description of thirst can be understood as a physical and emotional yearning for God's presence. Psalm 6 depicts a psalmist whose tears illustrate his desperate need for God's help. In *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* the entry for *mayim* contains this understanding of water,

> Throughout the ancient Near East water was recognized as a primal element of creation and as an indispensible part of the process by which life came into being… Alongside its beneficent potentialities for life and fertility, it could also appear as a negative force threatening to disrupt the very order of the world and challenging Yahweh's sovereignty.[131]

[128] Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms,* 108.
[129] Psalms 42:4, 80:6, and 102:10 also describe the eating and drinking of tears.
[130] Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms,* 149.
[131] Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* vol VIII, 282.

Clearly, as illustrated by the *Theological Dictionary's* above entry and this paper's discussion of the variety of water metaphors in Psalms 6, 63, 65 and 93, this powerful element cannot be contained by any one description. Water's meaning, as water itself, remains fluid.

This thesis has strengthened my understanding of the nuanced and multivalent meanings of water in the book of Psalms. Such an understanding deepens my appreciation both for the poetry of the psalms as well as for the power and potential of water, in general. I am interested in the topic of water both from an academic perspective and from the perspective of one who cares deeply about the reemergence and re-conceptualization of mikveh for modern Jews across the denominational spectrum. A mikveh is a pool of water infused with *mayim hayim*, "living water," created as a place to mark transitions and status changes in a Jewish context. As mentioned above (footnote 113), in October 2012, I launched *ImmerseNYC: A Community Mikveh Project*. The mission of the organization is first to educate New York Jews about the myriad ways mikveh can add meaning to their Jewish life, and second, to build a community mikveh in New York City.

In the introduction, I wrote about how Walter Brueggemann categorizes the psalms. Such categories can be enriched when we apply them to our own lives and states of being. This is, perhaps, a place where the waters of mikveh can connect to the psalms. Jews could recite the psalms that correspond to their lived experiences. Psalms of secure orientation could be part of immersion rituals marking weddings, *b'nei mitzvah*, or milestone birthdays. Psalms of disorientation may be appropriate for immersion rituals marking *shiva* or *shloshim*, at the end of a marriage, during an illness, or when experiencing infertility. Psalms of reorientation could be recited during immersion rituals marking remarriage, finding a job, healing from illness, or after an experience of losing faith and then returning to faith again.

It may seem that the waters of mikveh have magical qualities, that they transform a person from sick to well, from impure to pure, from not-Jewish to Jewish. Yet, it is not the water itself that is transformative. Instead, we have been, for centuries, imbuing the formless, clear element with "cosmic" [132] significance.

[132] Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* vol VIII, 267.

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