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Introduction

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Psalm 29 is a Hebrew poem. Beyond that flat comment it can be stated that this poem forms a part of the biblical book of Psalms and thereby becomes more than simply an ancient verse. Judaism and Christianity have accepted this poetic creation as part of their sacred text engendering a myriad of interpretations for the meaning of the short piece. Unlike many other biblical passages, Psalm 29 has a secure textual form. That is, the Hebrew of the poem is almost universally agreed to have been transmitted with little or no changes. Variant spellings of the Hebrew words notwithstanding, the words that form the psalm are certain.

What is not certain is the meaning of the words themselves at the time of the poem's composition. Indeed, the time of composition of the poem remains a debated question among biblical scholars with a range of roughly a thousand years marked by the twelfth century BCE as the earliest seriously suggested date to the third century BCE as the latest. Most attempts to date the poem range more narrowly from the tenth to the seventh centuries BCE, but no one knows when or by whom the text was written. On the other hand, it is generally agreed that the poem had its origin in the religious circles of the Jerusalem temple.

Since the poem's incorporation into the book of Psalms, the meaning of the work has been analyzed by every branch of Judaism and Christianity. This volume of essays seeks to demonstrate for the interested reader how such an uncomplicated biblical text has been read through time and by different traditions in an effort to illustrate the diversity with which the Bible as a whole has been treated. It is

imperative that anyone reading the Bible understand that no matter what tradition they themselves inhabit, from devout Orthodox Judaism to radical secular materialism, however they read the text, it is neither how everyone else reads, nor others have understood, the same words. Indeed, the majority of people look at the same words on the page and do not see what any given reader sees. This diversity can be confusing, but ought to be understood by anyone reading biblical texts for any purpose from idle curiosity to doctrinal meditation.

This confusion may be seen beginning simply with the numbering of the psalm. For this volume the psalm is numbered 29 with the Jewish (adopted by Protestants) numbering system. While most, but not all, Christian Bibles have the same basic Psalms text divided into 150 psalms, in traditions based on the Greek Septuagint Psalter some psalms have been combined into a single psalm and others divided into two psalms thereby changing the numbers assigned particular psalms. Thus, in the Vulgate (the traditional Latin Bible of the Roman Catholic Church) and in many Eastern Orthodox Churches this psalm is numbered 28. Fortunately, the verse numbers within Psalm 29 are not among those in the book of Psalms that differ radically between the Jewish and Christian Bibles. Save for the heading to the psalm (*mizmor ldawid* = psalm of/for David), which is included in verse one of the Hebrew text, but unnumbered in Protestant texts, the verse numbers correspond to the same poetic lines.

In most traditions that have used the book of Psalms as a sacred text Psalm 29 is a liturgical text. The psalm remains a part of the liturgy in both Jewish and Christian worship. The earliest record of Psalm 29 in a worship setting comes from the Talmud (*b. Rosh HaShanah* 30b; *Sukkah* 55a) where it is reported that Psalm 29 was the ritual recitation for sacrifices in the temple on Rosh Hashanah (New Years) and The Feast of Booths (Tabernacles). Of course, in these services Psalm 29 was recited from memory and in Hebrew. Moreover, the rabbis deemed speaking the sections of the psalm concerning water (verses 3–5, 7–9) sufficient remembrance of God to allow the safe drinking of water on the Sabbath (*Pesahîm* 112a). The final line of the psalm was understood to promise that students of Jewish wisdom would bring peace to the world (*b. Berakhoth* 64a) and that there would be peace in the world to come (*Uqtzin*).

Leaping ahead a millennium, the psalms were widely known in the European Christian Middle Ages as wisdom literature, read in their entirety as religious texts and for meditation. Psalm 29, like all of the psalms, was known among the devout in adapted literary formations composed for religious reflection. For those who wanted the meaning of their Scripture more transparent as well as more readable, there were Latin rhyming poems for the literate devotional set. These poems rewrote the psalms with an intent to display the basic themes to be meditated upon by the pious Christian and interestingly enough for Psalm 29 (the medieval European church's Ps 28) this meant mostly the opening and closing sections of the psalm. From the thirteenth-century the following shortened form of Psalm 29 concentrated on praising God, in the person of Jesus, as king:

> Afferte arietum filios afferte,
> Et offerte domino laudis uota certe
> Vox uirtutis domini personat exerte.
> Sedebit rex dominus iudicans aperte
> Sed tu, Ihesu domine, ut saluemur per te,
> Nostris a nequiciis faciem auerte. (Colker, 345)

The emphasis on honoring God and the resulting peace on earth, to the exclusion of the glorious storm imagery of the original Hebrew, also distinguishes this fifteenth-century rendition:

> Trinum deum adorate,
> Vora laudis ymmolate
> Vere, dei filii!
> Cuius rex in septem donis
> Corda replet cunctis bonis:
> Nostri spes exilii.
>
> Huic laudem et honorem
> Omnes iusti per amorem
> Dicant in ecclesia
> In eternum qui regnabit,
> Cum uirtute ministrabit
> Pacem in victoria. (Orbán, 426)

It is important to remember that Psalm 29 for a large portion of the Protestant population of Europe and North America was not in Hebrew, nor was it in Latin and it was not read from the book of Psalms,

but was known from the Psalter as sung. And for many, particularly in Reformed traditions, the text of Psalm 29 simply *was* that of the Geneva Psalter. The 1560 English lyric incorporated both traditional Christian and contemporary Calvinist translation elements:

> Giue vnto the Lord, ye sonnes of the mightie; giue vnto the Lord glorie and strength. Giue vnto the Lord glorie *due* unto his Name: worship the Lord in the glorious Sanctuarie. The voice of the Lord *is* vpon the waters: the God of glorie maketh it to thunder: the Lord *is* vpon the great waters. The voice of the Lord *is* mightie: the voice of the Lord *is* glorious. The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedres: yea, the Lord breaketh the cedres of Lebanón. He maketh them also to leape like a calfe: Lebanón *also* and Shirión like a yong vnicorne. The voice of the Lord deuideth the flames of fyre. The voice of the Lord maketh the wilderness to tremble: the Lord maketh the wilderness of Kadésh to tremble. The voice of the Lord maketh the hindes to calue & discouereth the forests: *Therefore* in his Temple doeth euerie man speake of *his* glorie. The Lord sitteth vpon the flood, and the Lord doeth remaine King for euer. The Lord shal giue strength vnto his people: ye Lord shal blesse his people with peace. (*Geneva Psalter*)

Some interpretations of the psalm will no doubt strike any modern reader as just incomprehensible. Having verse six explained as a reference to monotheism can only make sense if one realizes that this interpretation by Theodoret of Cyrus was based on the Septuagint Greek translation which included a "unicorn." Then one would need to understand that for many in the early church the entire psalm was a commission for Christian baptism. Finally, the symbolic reading of Old Testament poetry by Christian pastoral clergy for use in congregational life produces imaginative and creative meanings. So, for Theodoret, the single horn of the unicorn represents the monotheism now a part of the Christian convert being baptized. Finding the seven Catholic sacraments in the psalm can only strike non-Catholic readers (and no doubt many Catholic readers as well) as absurd, but Robert Bellarmin (1542–1621) found Psalm 29 a fine scriptural authority against Protestant reformers who were reducing the sacraments to only two. Again, for many Protestants the reading of the seven voices in the poem as the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, a tradition of the "Spiritual Reading" of the psalm, will be just as foreign; though for Pentecostals a reading that

finds spiritual gifts here might well seem quite natural. On the other hand, for most Christian readers, the traditional reading of Revelation 10:2–4 as a reference to Psalm 29 should not cause surprise.

In academic circles it is not uncommon for biblical texts to be divorced from religious traditions more recent than the first century CE. The psalms have been and remain central to most Jewish and Christian faith communities, so chapters on Psalters and liturgy have been included. In adapting psalms for use in Christian choral settings it has not been unusual to find the text adapted accordingly. A long train of theological, exegetical, and compositional traditions combined to produce a lyric such as that by Charles Wesley (1707–1788):

Ye worms, that wear an earthly crown,
Before the King of kings bow down,
Glory to God and worship give:
Honour is due to God alone;
Fountain of power your Maker own,
And happy in his service live.

With joy the Lord of hosts proclaim,
Extol the great Jehovah's name,
His praises let your lives declare;
His image be your costly dress,
Your beauty be his holiness,
His love your royal diadem wear.

His voice upon the waters is,
(What monarch hath a voice like his?)
Loud as ten thousand seas it roars;
Above the firmament he sits,
And earth to the Great King submits,
And heaven its sovereign Lord adores.

The glorious God majestic speaks;
From the dark cloud his terror breaks,
And waving sheets of lightning shine.
The' impetuous hurricane of sound
Rives the strong oaks, and shakes the ground:
For thunder is the Voice Divine.

Jehovah's voice the cedar rends,
And all the pride of Lebanon bends,
And strips and tears the scatter'd trees;

The hinds affrighted calve and die,
While mix'd with flames the thunders fly,
And rock the howling wilderness.

Creation hears his voice, and quakes;
Sea, earth, and hell, and heaven he shakes,
Firm on his everlasting throne!
But all who in his temple praise,
And love and thank him for his grace,
Shall never, never be cast down.

High above all their Savior sits,
And earth to the Great King submits,
And heaven its sovereign Lord adores;
Jehovah sends his succours thence,
Arms them with his omnipotence,
And all their strength divine restores.

Jesus, to all who dare believe,
The fulness of his power shall give;
The gospel hope, the glorious prize,
The perfect love, the perfect peace,
The everlasting righteousness,
The heaven-insuring Paradise.

It is hoped that reading the contributions collected here will allow one to reread Wesley's Psalm 29 and understand in a much better way how he understood the biblical text and what he was attempting to do with it.

As one of the "Nature Psalms" in many Orthodox Christian traditions, Psalm 29 has been recently enlisted in the eco-theology of the twenty-first century church. Here God is the lord of nature; humanity is called to recognize divine sovereignty over the earth and accept responsibility for caring for the world. In many Christian Orthodox traditions the experience of God's presence in the wildest regions of God's world has a long and honored history; Psalm 29 displays this connection through the vivid juxtaposition of the "Word of the Lord" and the frenzied behavior of the natural world. So, for example, a Russian Orthodox reading of Psalm 29 understands the work as reflecting the majesty of God in a thunderstorm (Lopukhin). The "sons of God" are understood to be the human rulers being invited to worship God in the temple. The "voice of the Lord" is thunder and the "fiery flame" of verse 7 is lightening. Verses 5–10 are all understood as events of a ferocious

storm: cedars broken to kindling, winds blowing up sand and dust, animals trembling and giving birth prematurely in terror, a forest denuded of leaves, flood waters pouring from the clouds. Yet the Lord reigns as if on a throne over it all and, for those who pay homage to the divine majesty and power, there will be peace and protection from enemies.

While introductions to the history of the interpretation of Scripture have become common in the past couple decades, these works by necessity have been general surveys of movements and outstanding biblical exegetes. This volume hopes to provide a quite specific example of biblical interpretation in several religious traditions by exegetes both famous and little-known outside of their own tradition. A background in some of these traditions therefore becomes necessary to understand the place of psalms and of Psalm 29 in diverse cultures and short contextual surveys are provided for traditions less known in the western church. The following chapters will give a sampling of Jewish and Christian understandings and uses of Psalm 29. A concerted effort to deal with the text at a close level is intended to provide the reader with material to consider, with biblical text in hand, how others have understood this text through time and traditions.

The origin of this book itself has a history of a quarter century. In 1974 I finished my masters thesis at the University of Iowa on "The Origin and Conversion of Psalm 29." The department informed me that the final proposed chapter was not to be included as the work was too long already. I had hoped, as the final display of "converting" the psalm, to show how Jewish and Christian commentators had understood the psalm. I never gave up an interest in the topic, but realized through the years, that no one, certainly not I, had the competence to cover even a fraction of the material. So this work, still a mere wee fraction of a percent of the interpretations of Psalm 29, is in a sense that final chapter and I wish to thank the contributors for their work on this project. When I first wanted to write the history of interpretation of Psalm 29 such histories were not in fashion. Things have changed. This book arose from the Bible through Time and Tradition section of the 2004 Midwest Region of the Society of Biblical Literature. Four chapters are expansions of section papers by Stacy Davis, Jeffrey Gibson, Lowell Handy, and Esther Menn presented at that conference. As a final irony, the 2007 flood waters of Des Plaines, Illinois, engulfed my copy of my M.A. thesis, but not the manuscript pages for this book.

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