

"NOS AUTEM IN NOMINE DOMINI..." ?

PSALM 20¹

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Psalm studies have undergone many changes in recent times. Most of these changes are a matter of emphasis, building on late 20th century biblical scholarship. Two of these emphases are of particular interest. Firstly the (re)emergence of an interest in the history of the religion of Israel and, secondly, the study of the editing and structure of the book of psalms as a whole. The history of the religion of Israel has much to offer to an understanding of the Psalms. The structure of the book of psalms has yet to prove its usefulness beyond emphasizing the “final form” of the text and the interrelatedness of many psalms.

Psalm 20 is of considerable interest on many levels. It is a good example of the technique used in classic psalmody. It reflects many elements of the early religion of Israel both in its theology and in its ritual. Of particular interest to many readers of this periodical is verse eight in the Hebrew text which, in some form, is reflected in the Latin “Nos autem in nomine Domini”, the motto of St. Stanislaus’ College, Bathurst.

The psalm is a “royal psalm”, clearly belonging to the context of the monarchy in Israel. It is addressed to a king of Israel and to Yhwh. The God of Israel, is seen in his rôle as a warrior king defending his anointed one. There does not seem to be any good reason to date the composition of the psalm outside the period of the late monarchy in Israel, around 750-500 BCE.

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the Rev. R.J. Barry cm.

In the mid 1980's an Aramaic hymn was published which was shown to have close parallels to Psalm 20.²

1. May Akhru answer us during our siege;
May Adoni answer us during our siege!
2. May Sahar in heaven make (it) true!
3. Let him send what is needed from the city of Resh,
From Saphon may Akhru help us!
4. May Akhru give us according to what is in our heart;
May the Lord give us according to what is in our heart!
5. All counsels may Akhru fulfil,
may Akhru fulfil;
May Adoni not leave wanting any request in us!
6. Those with the bow, those with the spear;
behold we – the Lord, our god, Akhru will elect us!
7. May our ... answer us later!
8. Betel! Ba'al Shamen! (Our) Lord! May he bless;
For your pious men (be) your blessing!
(The) end.

The god Akhru is unknown, but mention of the other gods and certain linguistic indicators make it likely that the hymn is to be dated to the first half of the first millennium. This Canaanite hymn may very well be the basis for Ps. 20.³ Certainly it points to the antiquity of the psalm and contributes to an understanding of Ps.20 as a ritual text.

Ritual elements are reflected throughout Ps.20. The psalm begins with a series of invocations, petitions, calling upon Yhwh to bless the king (vv.2-5)⁴. The sanctuary is mentioned (v.2) along with the sacrificial offerings of the king (v.3). The petition that these offerings may be

² K.A.D Smelik, "The Origin of Psalm 20," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31 (1985).

³ *Ibid.*: 78f. The Canaanite origins of the hymn are not certain but seem probable.

⁴ Verse numbering is that of the New Revised Standard Version.

accepted by Yhwh (v.3) is expressed in ritual language: "may they be as (acceptable as) fat". It seems likely that some type of prophetic oracle was pronounced in the ritual. It is prepared for in v.5 and takes place before v.6. This accounts for the sudden change of perspective in the psalm. There is also the oscillation between singular and plural pronouns. In the context of this psalm, this may very well reflect a communal ritual.

While it may not be apparent from an English translation, as with most of the psalms, there are many variants in the Hebrew text of Psalm 20. Previous scholarship would tend towards conjectural emendations based on retro-translations of the versions, particularly the Greek but also the Latin. Emendations also were made based on suppositions about the poetic meter of the psalms. More recently scholars are far less willing to correct the Hebrew text, most do not go beyond suggestions. Psalm 20 has a number of difficult grammatical and textual problems. These need to be dealt with individually, including v.7, but the overall meaning of the psalm is clear.

A relatively simple use of the technique of "parallelism" is used in the psalm. Usually one line is echoed, repeated to some extent, in the following line (vv.1-4). The expectation is that the second of two lines will be similar in meaning to the first, even if it is expressed in a negative way (vv.7-8). This technique is a basic feature of ancient Near Eastern poetry. Previously, scholars concentrated on the similarity of the meaning of the parallel lines, recently they have taken much more notice of the differences and the subtleties that are employed. (For instance the difference between "answer" and "protect" in verse 1.) Some verses of the psalm are chiasmatic, reversing the word order in the second line. (So verse 2 "May he send you help^a from his sanctuary^b; and from Zion^b may he support^a you.") There are a number of words that are repeated in the psalm (For instance "answer" in vv.1, 9; "the name" vv.1, 5, 7; "remember", "zākar" vv.3, 7.) These repetitions bind the psalm together and at the same time offer indications of its principal themes.

For purposes of explanation, the psalm may be conveniently divided into three sections based on the meaning or content of each section. The Psalm opens with an introductory superscription; vv. 1-5 a series of petitions; vv.6-8 prayers of confidence and trust; v.9 a summarizing petition bringing the psalm and its ritual to an end.

The meaning, or even the English equivalence of the first word of the psalm is unknown. It is usually translated as "for the choirmaster" but that is only a reasonable guess. The superscription, before v.1, identifies the psalm as a "mizmor" of David. Again, the exact meaning of this term is unknown. It probably indicates a type of song, a psalm. Equally uncertain is the term "of David". It is highly improbable that the psalm was composed by David. Perhaps the psalm belonged to a collection called "Psalms of David" or, more likely, the psalm at a late (Jewish) stage of its usage was applied to incidents narrated in the biblical story of David. Despite all this, at least it can be said that the superscription points toward references to royalty in the psalm.

Verses 1-5 form a unit. The verses are addressed to the king but they are also petitions addressed to Yhwh. The wording of the four petitions is quite common in the bible. Yhwh is asked to answer the petitioner, to send help from his "sanctuary", from "Zion". This is not a casual use of these two terms, "sanctuary" and "Zion". They form a word pair often found together in this type of poetic prayer. Here they witness to a very old, well established theology. In its origin, this "Zion theology", as it is sometimes called, predates the Israelite occupation of Jerusalem; it is Canaanite theology. Zion is seen as the mountain on which the supreme god dwells in his palace or temple. It is from here that god, ever present, reigns as king and may look to the well being of his vice regent, the earthly king. After the occupation of Jerusalem the Israelites linked this theology to their understanding of the Davidic monarchy and a core theological tradition of the Old Testament was born. The opening petitions of vv.1-5 set the theological context for the whole psalm.

The petitions cover cultic, personal and community desires and all of them can be associated with prayers for the success of a military campaign. The people pray for the success of the king; at the same time they are praying for their own well being. The successful outcome of the military campaign will result in their rejoicing and further commitment to Yhwh (v.5)

Verse 6 takes the form of a confession of trust, a declaration that success would be achieved. This assurance of salvation follows on the argument of the previous verses. The psalmist now affirms that the Lord will care for his people through victories granted to his "anointed one." It is not at all clear why or how this declaration can be made. Why this sudden shift from petition to confession? There are several possibilities. The ritual sacrifices have been completed and thus success is assured. More likely, a prophetic oracle indicating that Yhwh would intervene on the king's behalf has been pronounced by a cultic functionary, a priest or prophet. There is a certain ambiguity in the declaration. The verb "to deliver" may be translated in the past tense (the Lord has delivered) or in the future tense (the Lord will deliver). This is not an uncommon phenomenon in Hebrew, especially in prophetic literature. Interestingly, the presumed deliverance takes on a cosmic dimension. Yhwh will deliver the king from the heavens. This will be achieved through the power of Yhwh ("by his right hand") in a series of mighty acts (perhaps an allusion to the tradition of the delivering acts of the Exodus).

Verses 7-8 logically follow v.6. Through a series of contrasts, the consequences of the declaration in v.6 are elaborated. The first of these contrasts is contained in v.7, the verse from which the motto of Stanislaus' college is taken. The Hebrew text of this verse is somewhat difficult although the overall meaning of the verse is fairly clear. The New Revised Standard Version has:

*"Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God."*

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The translation “take pride in” or elsewhere, “boast” is disputed. The problem centres on the Hebrew verb “*zākar*”. This verb is usually translated “to remember” or by some other selection from the same semantic field, such as “to call to mind”, “to make mention of” or “to confess”.

Early translations or versions of the Hebrew text reflect the problem with “*zākar*”. To take the vulgate (Ps.19:8):

*Hii in curribus et hii in equis
Nos autem nominis Domini Dei
Nostri recordabimur*⁵

Some in chariots some in horses
But we will remember the name of the Lord our God

*Hi in curribus et hi in equis,
Nos autem nomen Domini Dei nostri invocavimus*⁶

Some in chariots and some in horses
But we invoked the name of the Lord our God.

Currently there are three principal suggestions for a translation of the problem verb *zākar*. The first is that the verb means something like “to

⁵ Bonifatius Fischer and others, eds., *Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem* (Stuttgart: Wurttembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969). Note that three Manuscripts (R0L) have “...nos autem in nomine Domini...” The Latin is here following the standard Hebrew text.

⁶ *Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum editio*, Typica altera ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1986). some manuscripts (IL) have “... magnificabimur” (“... will be magnified) Here the Latin is closer to the standard Greek text, a version of the Septuagint.

boast⁷ or "to take pride in." It seems that this translation is based on dubious etymological arguments and is usually rejected.⁸

Another suggestion is "to be strong."⁹ The argument here is that the Hebrew *zākar* is a verb derived from the noun *zākār*, a "male". This meaning, "to be strong" is, to some extent, reflected in the Greek of the Septuagint "to magnify" and the Syriac of the Peshitta "to overcome". This second opinion is quite acceptable and has the advantage of maintaining the Hebrew text. No emendations are called for. It could be argued that "Yhwh" (Lord) is an addition since it disrupts the supposed meter of the verse and should be removed. Perhaps this is so, but emendations based on *metri causa* are generally speculative.

A third suggestion is "to swear by", "make an oath on".¹⁰ This proposal, is based principally on ancient near Eastern studies in comparative religion and on an etymology based on the Akkadian *zakāru* "to swear [by, on the name of]".¹¹ The advantage of this third point of view, "to swear by," is that it places v.7 in the clearly ritual context of the rest of Psalm 20 and indeed in the general context of ancient near Eastern religion. It is acceptable also from an etymological point of view.¹² Thus an acceptable translation of Ps.20:8 would be:

⁷ G. R. Driver, "Hebrew Homonyms," in *Hebraische Wortforschung: Festschrift zum 80. Geburtstag von Walter Baumgartner*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (Leiden: Brill, 1967).

⁸ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19 (Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1983), 184.

⁹ Mitchell J Dahood, *Psalms* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966-1970), v.1.p.129.

¹⁰ W. F Smelik, "The Use of *hzkyr bšm* in Classical Hebrew: Josh.23:7; Isa. 48:1; Amos 6:10; 4Q504 iii 4; 1Q S 6:27," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118 (1999).

¹¹ Moshe Greenberg, "The Hebrew Oath Particle *Hay/ He*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76 (1957).

¹² Good arguments can also be mounted from Qumran, Targumic, Old Aramaic and Jewish Aramaic texts. This understanding of the verb may also

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*Some [swear] by [their] horse drawn chariots;
But we swear by the name of Yhwh our god.¹³*

Some further explanation is necessary. There is only one verb in the Hebrew text, “we swear”. This verb is found in the second line, but it also serves as the verb for the first line of the verse (This is an example of ellipsis, a common technique in Hebrew poetry). “Chariots and horses” is best understood as a single term “horse drawn chariots” (hendiadys).

The religious context is that of consulting, offering sacrifices and swearing allegiance, to a patron god before a battle in order to secure victory. There is an amount of evidence to suggest that the standards or banners which, if they were not considered divine at least represented the divinity, were carried in chariots. (Compare the Israelite Ark of the covenant and the reference to “banners” in v.6).

Deut.17:16 forbids the acquisition by Israelite kings of large numbers of horses. Apparently the kings were to rely on the help of Yhwh in defense of the nation.¹⁴ Horses and chariots were the “hi-tech” weapons of the ancient near East. Could this be a reason for swearing by them? Maybe, but a more likely explanation lies in the association of horses with the sun god, Shamash. These horses were cultic objects, even attaining some form of divinity. The image is of the Sun (god) riding in a fiery chariot being drawn across the sky by (divine) horses. (Compare the biblical story of Elijah 2Kgs.2:12 and other references to

be reflected in Josh.23:7, Is.48:1, Jer.4:2, Am.6:10. See Smelik, "The Use of hzkyr bšm in Classical Hebrew: Josh.23:7; Isa. 48:1; Amos 6:10; 4Q504 iii 4; 1Q S 6:27," 323-326.

¹³ Interestingly the New Jerusalem Bible has “Some **call on** chariots, some on horses, but we on the name of Yahweh our God.”

¹⁴ The theological background is that of the “Holy War”. Some other relevant Old Testament texts would be Deut.11:4; 20:1; Jos.11:4; 1Kgs.20:1ff; 2Chron.14:10; Ps.33:16; Ps.147:10; Hos.1:7; Is.31:1.

solar worship in the Old Testament (2Kgs.23:11, Ez.8:16).¹⁵ It is worth noting that the Aramaic hymn cited earlier as a possible source for Ps.20, uses the terms "Those with the bow those with the spear..." Perhaps the mention of these weapons reflects an earlier stage in the technology of warfare. What is certain is that these also were divine weapons used by the gods.¹⁶ This verse in the Aramaic belongs in the same milieu as Ps.20:7.

To swear by or take an oath on the very name of Yhwh using the verb *zākar* may be an analogous usage based on the more usual formula for swearing in Hebrew, *šb' bšm*, "swear on/by the name (of)..." In the theology of the ancient near East the "name" of the divinity is almost equivalent to the divinity. To know the name of a divinity is to be able to contact even control the divinity. Often the name of a god or an attribute of the god almost becomes a separate entity – a type of hypostasis – a god in itself.¹⁷ (Compare the Old Testament "Voice" of God, "Word" of God, "Wisdom" of God, "Glory" of God or "Arm" of God.) Here the use of the "name" underlines further the ritual aspects of the psalm.

Verse 8 offers a second contrast, this time between those who swore by the sun god Shamash or other gods, and those who swore by the name of Yhwh. The enemy has been or will be crushed by the superior power of Yhwh. A victory achieved through the mediatorship of the

¹⁵ E. Lipinski "Shemesh" in Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst, eds., *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible (DDD)* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1995), 764-768. This article includes an extensive and recent bibliography. See also J. Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the sun: biblical and archaeological evidence for sun worship in ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Mark Stratton Smith, *The origins of biblical monotheism: Israel's polytheistic background and the Ugaritic texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 43f.

¹⁷ Sandra L Richter, *The Deuteronomistic history and the name theology: lešakken šemo šam in the Bible and the ancient Near East* (Berlin ; New York: De Gruyter, 2002).

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king. Strengthened through the pre-battle ritual and invocation of the Name (Yhwh) the followers of Yhwh are not laid low but stand erect in victory.

The concluding verse (v.9) is for the monarchists! It may be read as a final invocation of Yhwh on behalf of the king (and therefore, the people). It is a reiteration of the central theme of the liturgy (v.6) which is presented in this verse as the "call" of the loyal followers of Yhwh.

Much more could be said about this intriguing psalm. It reflects the ritual and beliefs of a very early stage in the religious history of Israel. The central figure of the psalm is not the king, priests or the people but Yhwh. As the theologians of early Israel gradually moved towards a type of monotheism¹⁸, Yhwh was seen, not only as a god more powerful than others but as the only God. The psalm, so full of references to the religious beliefs and practices of the ancient near East, was not jettisoned but re-read, re interpreted, in terms of later belief. The message remained the same. The God of Israel could be called upon in a time of crisis and could be trusted to come to the aid of the loyal ones who "were strengthened by him" or "swore by" him (v.7). Trust less in salvation brought about by human means and more in salvation brought about by the Lord. The message of trust in the Lord, repeated so many times by the prophets of the Old Testament, holds good for the prophets of the New Testament.

"...Nos autem in nomine Domini ..." !

¹⁸ Smith, *The origins of biblical monotheism: Israel's polytheistic background and the Ugaritic texts.*

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