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The Interpretation of Psalm 11

by W. H. Bellinger, Jr.

Professor Bellinger of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, here demonstrates with a concrete example how the interpretation of the Psalms must take into account both their original cultic and their later more 'spiritual' setting and shows how this approach can be helpful in interpreting them for today.

PSALM 11

In Yahweh I seek refuge; how can you say to me:
'Flee to the mountains like a bird,¹
for look! The wicked bend the bows; they fit their arrow(s) on the string
to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart.
When the foundations are destroyed,
what can the righteous do?'
Yahweh is in his holy temple; his throne is in heaven;
his eyes see, his eyelids test humankind.
Yahweh tests the righteous and the wicked²
and he hates the one who loves violence.
He sends down upon the wicked coals of³ fire and brimstone
and a raging wind will be the portion of their cup.
For Yahweh is righteous; he loves righteous deeds;
the upright will behold his face.

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Psalm 11 provides a good example of the difficulties encountered when seeking to determine the form and setting of a psalm, and consequently the text before us has not gone without some bizarre interpretations.⁴ The worshipper appears to be addressing friends in the midst of persecution. Walter Beyerlin has recently argued that the persecution stems from false accusation.⁵ He understands the worshipper to have been granted asylum and to be seeking a divine decision in his case in a cult-sacral procedure of divine judgment; so he places the psalm in an institutional setting. This explanation is possible but would not appear to be necessary. Kraus also finds plausible some kind of ordeal as the background of the psalm though this has past over into metaphor in the present text.⁶ The purpose of this paper is to examine Ps. 11 in an attempt to determine its form, setting and meaning and so to test such interpretations.

The first problem is the question of form. This psalm is not actually a

¹ Read *nūdi hārīm kē mō šipōr* with Septuagint, Targum, Vulgate.

² Transfer the *'atnāh* to *wē rāšā'.*

³ Read *paḥ^amē* with Symmachus.

⁴ As in Julian Morgenstern, 'Psalm 11', *JBL* 69, 1950, 221ff.

⁵ Walter Beyerlin, *Die Rettung der Bedrängten in den Feindpsalmen der Einzelnen auf institutionelle Zusammenhänge untersucht* (Göttingen, 1970), 101-105.

⁶ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen I* (Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1960), 89ff.

prayer addressed to Yahweh, but speaks of him in the third person. It is often called a psalm of trust,⁷ though we wonder if it has the hymnic quality usually associated with such psalms. A crisis is clearly involved but it is not certain whether the problem is still at hand or has passed its peak. The decision hinges on the verb *ḥāsītī*. If it is translated as above, the worshipper is still in the midst of his crisis; on the other hand, the perfect tense may mean 'I have sought refuge'. This would imply that the protection has been found and that the crisis is past. The former alternative has been chosen here because it appears to be more appropriate in the context of the dialogue described. Given these considerations, perhaps it is best to say that the text belongs to the complex of compositions including individual laments, songs of trust and songs of thanksgiving. They share many of the same concepts and elements. The text needs to be considered in this milieu. The psalm could be classed as a dialogue between an individual worshipper and his friends, since their words are quoted and he responds to them. This dialogue is placed between the opening phrase and the last verse which gives the theme of the psalm and furnish it with a clear framework of introduction and conclusion. We will now look more closely at this dialogue in order to respond to the questions we have posed concerning its interpretation.

V. 1 plunges us into the problem of determining the cultic setting of the psalm.⁸ Does the phrase *baYahweh ḥāsītī* refer to the practice of seeking asylum in the sanctuary? It seems most likely that this would refer to some kind of institutional practice in ancient Israel, at least originally. Asylum does appear to play a part in the setting of some psalms (*cf.* Pss. 7; 17; 36; 61);⁹ however, it is difficult to go beyond that. The rest of the verse begins the quotation of the worshipper's friends who have advised him to flee from the problems at hand, and he mildly derides them for this. They have suggested that he take to the hills which were very rough and no doubt would offer good protection. He is to flee there like a bird would fly away (*cf.* Pss. 55:7; 91:3; 124:7). This is clearly a figure of speech but does that suggest that the opening phrase on refuge in Yahweh is also to be understood in a metaphorical way? The institutional interpretation of

⁷ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen I* (Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1960), 89; A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms I* (London, 1972), 119. Contrast the interesting work of Marina Mannati, 'Le Psaume IX', *VT* 29, 1979, 222ff.

⁸ The psalm's superscription *lamnaṣṣēah lēdāwīd* is a liturgical note which is of little help in interpreting the psalm.

⁹ *Cf.* Lienhard Delekat, *Asylie und Schutzorakel am Zionheiligtum* (Leiden, 1967); Joachim Becker, *Wege der Psalmexegese* (Stuttgart, 1975), 34ff.; A. A. Anderson, *Psalms I* (London, 1972), 120; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen I* (Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1960), 89.

the opening phrase is in no way precluded by the use of metaphor later in the verse. However, this observation does alert us to the intertwining of literal and figurative language, a characteristic which may be important in properly interpreting the psalm.

The figures of speech continue in v. 2 with the description of a battle or hunting scene. Beginning with *hinnēh* friends alert the worshipper to the fact that the wicked prepare their bow and arrow to shoot at the righteous in the dark. This kind of depiction of an ambush of the righteous, which is a common description of the enemies in the Psalter (*cf.* Pss. 9-10; 64), gives little indication as to just who these enemies might be.

V. 3 concludes the quotation of the friends and statement of the reasons for their advice to flee. The first difficulty is the meaning of *haššātōt*. What are 'the foundations'? This apparently refers to the legal or moral order of society, perhaps society itself. There are two interpretations possible for the second half of the verse. The translation above takes this verse with the preceding verse and as a part of the friends' words. They are indicating that the circumstances of the present are hopeless. It is impossible to conquer the wicked now; thus the worshipper is advised to flee. The text allows this interpretation. However, because the perfect tense is used, another view is possible: 'What has the righteous person done?' What has he done to deserve this? This rendering, of course, raises the problem of evil as a matter of reflection. Such a view seems less suitable to a context of crisis. However, the interpretation of the verb tense must again remain uncertain.¹⁰

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The next verse begins the reply of the worshipper to his friends. It presents a stark contrast to the preceding verses. He begins by affirming that Yahweh is firmly established in the temple. This is the basis for seeking refuge there. Then he suddenly declares that God's throne is in heaven. Could it be that a later 'editor' of the text has added this phrase in order to ensure that no one gets the impression that Yahweh's presence is limited to the temple on Zion? This would certainly reflect a later view in Israel and a quite understandable concern on the part of a later reader. Perhaps this offers a clue that as this psalm moved to its present canonical state it came to be seen in a broader and more 'spiritual' light. It affirms the spiritual care of Yahweh for the trusting righteous rather than reflecting an institutional cultic setting which required Yahweh's presence in the temple. The other credible possibility is that the earthly abode of God, the temple, is here seen as the counterpart of heaven. It represents heaven since it is assumed that God dwells in the heavens.¹¹ In

¹⁰ Yet another possibility is offered by the *NIV* margin, 'what is the Righteous One doing'.

¹¹ R. E. Clements, *God and Temple* (Oxford, 1965), 68.

this view, which is probably the prevailing one, the verse reflects an underlying theological principle but perhaps the first view is more natural in a psalm of this kind. In the second half of the verse, *bēnē ādām* serves as the object of two verbs but this is acceptable. In the affirmation of God's sovereignty, he is said to judge humanity. The words 'ēnāw and 'ap'apāw are taken as parallels; 'ap'apāw has no special significance. The point is that God executes judgment. The question for the interpreter of Psalm 11 is whether this judgment is to be described as a cult-legal procedure in the temple or as primarily a reality transcending any liturgical setting.

The next verse continues the theme of God's judging of humanity and concludes that his decisions are against those who are violent. This, no doubt, refers back to the description of the enemies in v. 2; they are the lovers of violence. The verse contrasts the righteous and the wicked but it still only raises the question of whether this psalm has its cultic setting in an institutional judgment proceeding.

98 V. 6 describes God's judgment of the wicked vividly and with a harsh tone.¹² It may be that the references to the fiery coals and brimstone are a part of the theophany tradition and related to volcanic phenomena. Some commentators connect them with the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.¹³ In the last line of the verse, the raging wind is probably a scorching, burning wind. Weiser notes that identifying this wind as the portion of the wicked gives a striking contrast to the originally peaceful background of the custom of the cup. The custom evidently came from the practice of the father's pouring or distributing the drink at the family meal.¹⁴ These are clearly penetrating figures of speech. At the same time, the choice of the metaphors would seem to indicate a background in what was originally an ordeal procedure of some kind. However, this procedure does not seem to be present in the text as we have it for metaphor is certainly the primary source of meaning now. The verse does cement the attitude of certainty concerning the salvation of the righteous though it is not clearly discernible whether this deliverance is past, present or future.

The final verse then describes the result of God's judgment for the righteous. God decides in favour of the upright who are accepted by him and brought into his presence. This is in marked contrast to the

¹² *Yamīṭēr* functions as the regular imperfect; cf. G-K, par. 109k. It may refer to the future or God's constant judgment of the wicked.

¹³ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen I* (Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1960), 91; A. A. Anderson, *Psalms I* (London, 1972), 122; Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (London, 1959), 157.

¹⁴ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (London, 1959), 157; cf. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen I* (Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1960), 91.

destruction of the wicked. The contrast between vv. 5b, 6 and v. 7 is clearly drawn. There may even be a kind of parallel structure with v. 5b corresponding to v. 7a and v. 6 to v. 7b:

v. 5b:	God hates the lover of violence	v. 6:	God harshly judges the wicked and destroys them
v. 7a:	God loves those doing righteous deeds	v. 7b:	God blesses the righteous and accepts them into his presence.

The contrast is emphasized in every way possible, including repetition in the vocabulary. The particle *kî* beginning v. 7 also adds to this emphasis. Because of the parallelism indicated in this contrast, the righteous acts in v. 7a probably refer to acts of the upright in heart rather than judging acts of Yahweh. The last line could also be translated 'his face beholds the upright'. It is not clear which word is the object of the verb. The fact that the verb is in the plural and the form of the suffix on *pānēmō* could support such a translation. The verb would then carry the meaning of looking upon with favour. However, this would be in contrast to normal usage.¹⁵ With either translation the upright is brought into God's presence and blessing in contrast to the wicked (v. 6). The reference here is probably also metaphorical deriving from the cultic idea of seeing Yahweh over the ark in the temple. Could this mean that the worshipper is accepted into the asylum of the sanctuary? This appears to be the most likely interpretation. The use of the root *šādeḫ* might also indicate a cultic background in some type of legal procedure. It can carry the force of 'innocent', but such a reference is not certain. The verse offers a fitting conclusion to the short psalm giving a general picture of God's judgment for the righteous and against the wicked. So the structure of the worshipper's reply to his friends (vv. 4-7) is clear: v. 4a is the basis for this affirmation of trust—Yahweh is king; the worshipper then announces Yahweh's judgment (vv. 4b, 5a); the decision goes against the wicked (vv. 5b, 6) and in favour of the righteous (v. 7). Thus the worshipper expresses strong trust in Yahweh as the righteous judge.

So the cultic setting of the psalm appears to have been related to the practice of asylum in ancient Israel. There may have been some type of judging procedure to follow but this is not easy to determine. Traces of

¹⁵ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (London, 1902), 242f.; cf. G-K, par. 103f., note 3 on *pānēmō*.

such a procedure have been indicated but only traces at certain points. We must be cautious in going further in answering this question. The inability to identify the enemies with any precision confirms this view. There are no convincing reasons to define them as false accusers. Their description is too vague for that kind of specificity.

Another important consideration is the kind of language found in the text. The psalm is clearly cultic but there are clues in vv. 4, 6, 7 and the other figures of speech which indicate that the psalm had come to be viewed as a strong spiritual affirmation of trust in the midst of difficulty: God will protect the faithful. The language has no mythical component but both a literal and a figurative element are present. Perhaps it has been reinterpreted and 'redacted' as it was used through the years in worship to allow a more metaphorical, 'spiritual' meaning. However, any editing would only have been slight and gradual. Thus, it may very well be that at least two levels of meaning are still present in the text as we have it—the cultic and 'spiritual' or figurative. The general language of the psalm is ideal for just this kind of understanding. The institutional background is still present but so is a broader affirmation of faith.

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This leads us to ask if we could also read other psalms in a similar way. For example Ps. 6 probably came from a crisis related to sickness, but its language facilitates its application to any major crisis. Further the 'enthronement hymn' in Ps. 22:28ff. enabled Israel to read that psalm in relation to the crisis of the people as well as the archetypal crisis of an individual described in the first part of the psalm. Ps. 130:7, 8 also relate the crisis of an individual (*cf.* vv. 1-6) to Israel. These examples along with the language of Psalm 11 indicate that the question of whether psalm language is cultic and literal or 'spiritual' and metaphorical does not need to be answered in only one way. The language appears to be sufficiently ambiguous to allow and even facilitate its understanding on various levels, including cultic and figurative. Such universal applicability of psalm language is part of the genius of the Psalter.

Our conclusions can now be summarized. It is best to consider Psalm 11 within the complex of lament-trust-thanksgiving psalms dealing with a crisis. The setting of the psalm in Israel's cult apparently referred to the practice of asylum in the sanctuary (and thus protection from enemies) and perhaps a further judging procedure there. However, the text appears to have been reinterpreted and prepared for reading in a more figurative or 'spiritual' light. The language of the psalm reflects this view. This kind of approach to the study of the psalms with more attention to their 'redaction' and reinterpretation through the years of their use in worship in order to apply them to later situations, such as those after the destruction of the temple, is an important tool in reading the Psalms

which could offer a great deal more help in interpreting them. Hopefully this approach will be given more attention in the future.

Such a reapplication of the psalms in ancient Israel also offers further encouragement for the application of psalms to contemporary faith. The description of the crisis of faith in Ps. 11 is clearly applicable to the pilgrimage of faith in today's world which is increasingly characterized by 'chaos knocking at the door'. This might relate to an aging parent who is forsaken by family and friends or to the employee who is dismissed as an innocent 'scapegoat' in a scandal involving the misuse of a corporation's funds and who has no real recourse in the corporate structure. The cry for justice and vindication from false accusation in a prayer such as Ps. 17 is relevant to the believer today who consistently has doors closed in her face because of her race or because of a handicap. She is falsely accused of inadequacy. Thus the Psalter itself gives us clues for the contemporary application of its faith. Our task is to delineate those clues.