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# THE POETIC STRUCTURE OF PSALM 42-43

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Psalm 42-43 exhibits a clear formal structure, marked by a threefold occurrence of the refrain. This has been noticed by all the commentators, and prior to them by any reader who possessed a sensitivity to poetry or a rudimentary knowledge of rhetoric (Eusebius had realised that here we are dealing with a single psalm). In this respect, the psalm resembles others, such as 46, 57, 67, 107 (with a double refrain).

Considerable progress is possible in the structural analysis of this poem with the use of techniques or attitudes which currently find only a tentative place within the field of biblical criticism. First, the formal repetition of the refrain does not necessarily signify an exact repetition of its meaning, since depending on the context, it is open to variations of tonality or intensity, which are qualities pertaining to poetry. Second, in addition to the formal repetition we have indicated, the poem may contain other significant factors in its composition which cannot be explained through a simple classification of type. (Identification of the "form" of a psalm should serve to advance understanding of an individual poem and not to dissolve it in general categories.)

## 1. Image Structure

Apart from the personification of "light and truth" as messengers, two images dominate the poem: water as life, in the first strophe, and water as death, in the second.

The first image: The strophe opens with a simile which conjures a desert land. (Representations in Byzantine apses show a gentle domestic scene, like a garden; this must be erased from the memory in order to grasp the basic dramatic atmosphere of the poem, which has nothing gentle about it.)

We may imagine, with various commentators, that the poem originated in a concrete setting: the author finds himself in the mountainous region south of Hermon, and across his field of vision passes a hart in desperate search of water. Into the anxious search of the animal the poet projects his own state of mind, describing himself as anxiously searching for God. Of course, this hypothetical reconstruction is relatively unimportant: the poem cannot be

identified with its origin, nor does the "I" of the poem exactly correspond to the physical "I" of the poet /1/. Poetically, the author projects his experience into the image of a hart, and the use of a simile may soften somewhat the impact which the image creates by its appearance ex abrupto at the beginning of the poem. It is noteworthy that no other psalm opens with a simile, not even the kaph-strophe of Ps. 119: the opening of Ps. 23 is more of a title than a simile (or metaphor) in the strict sense. Had this psalm opened with the description of the hart but without the comparative particle, the effect would have been stronger.

Psalm 84, which, unlike 42-43 sings of the joy of being in the temple and recalls a past mood of nostalgia, also draws a comparison from the animal world: "Even the sparrow has found a house, and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young; your altars...". The image does not begin the psalm, and does not employ the comparative particle; yet poetically it sustains a function and an effect similar to that of the hart in Ps. 42. Kraus thinks of an actual observation on the part of the poet: "In casting his eyes round the temple precincts, the singer's gaze falls upon birds' nests... These birds meeting in the sanctuary symbolise for the singer the joy of refuge and permanent security close to God's presence ...". Gunkel takes the same line: "In these birds, admitted by God himself to his very presence, and kindly protected, the poet perceives something he cannot express directly but - as is obvious from the continuity with what follows - through this symbol of how God graciously welcomes anyone who seeks his protection." Schmidt, however, suggests another origin for the poetic vision, in commenting: "He searches for an image to convey his sense of tranquility ..."; and similarly Delitzsch remarks that the poem gives no hint of whether the image had its origin in a real situation.

Poetically, the hart anxiously searching for water and the swallow nesting peacefully are cousins; they both give expression to the "I" of the poem, and thus, to an extent, the "I" of the poet.

The image of Ps.42 is of water in the countryside, like Ps.63.1 except that here it is associated with an animal. For the image thus conjures up an anxious, living being, for whom God is desired, longed for, like water. Water is that which is life for the animal in the desert land; the search for God comprises something of the instinct of self-preservation. /2/ The soul of the poet is devoured by an animal's thirst for God, his water, his life. This, then, is how the psalm opens.

The second image: Almost at the beginning of the second strophe, and without the comparative particle, we find the second image of water. Scholars disagree in explaining its meaning and origin. The alternatives can be reduced to two lines of approach: (a) a picture of the scenery as symbolising a state of mind (b) a description of a serious illness by a metaphor of the abyss of Sheol.

Interpretation (a). The poet finds himself (or conveys that impression) in mountainous country, alone, listening. The throbbing beat of the waterfalls, and perhaps also the sight of them, overwhelms him, and through them he contemplates his own self.

This reconstruction follows the traditional reading, already attested in the LXX, with the geographical data somewhat vague. The image of the thirsty hart occupies the same terrain. According to Schmidt's interpretation of the psalm as the prayer of one unjustly accused and condemned, the psalmist is exiled amongst the heathen (cf. 79.10) as the result of an unjust sentence, and prays to God for his case to be reconsidered (43.1); thus his physical distress is a symptom of his spiritual state.

The direct form of comparison, omitting the comparative participle, is extraordinarily powerful:

> Deep calls to deep
> with the noise of cataracts:
> Your torrents and your breakers
> have engulfed me.

One example may be mentioned which, despite various differences presents one point of similarity: the prayer of Jonah, which combines realistic data with symbolic transpositions. It is noteworthy that tehôm does not necessarily carry a mythological or transcendental meaning (Dt. 8.7 combines it with ʿayānōt; or maybe the sense is much weakened, as in Job 41.24 (EVV 32); perhaps also the phrase kol-tehōmôt (Ps. 135.6; 148.7).

This first interpretation is the opinion of scholars such as de Wette, Delitzsch ("in 8a he was portraying his natural surroundings"), Kirkpatrick ("the metaphoric language is derived from the surrounding scenery"), Castellino ("he sees and feels the springs, the mountain torrents and the roaring of their cascades and cataracts"), Weiser, Duhm, Staerk, etc.

Interpretation (b). The psalmist, suffering from a serious illness, expresses his sense of the nearness of death with the

image of springs and torrents. The reasons given for this interpretation are: the geographical difficulties of v. 7, which have prompted new interpretations (Dahood); the similarity with intercessions of those gravely ill or of those in mortal danger, e.g. 2 Sam. 22.5 (with an explicit mention of death - miśberê māwet), Jonah 2.4 (which probably cites our psalm), Ps. 88.8. This interpretation takes v. 11, which is dubious, as referring to an illness and explains the "judgement" of 43.1 in a metaphorical sense. Further, Gunkel considers the sentimental projection of the poet into nature as anachronistic, regarding it as "a sentimental extrapolation of the inner life of the observer into Nature, which is quite impossible for ancient Israel" (a rather categorical assertion, and one which does not account for the different interpretation he gives at Ps. 84.4, quoted above).

Both these interpretations apply rather old-fashioned arguments to the text, assessing variously the arguments for and against. I personally find most satisfying the coherent interpretation of H. Schmidt, so far as the literary genre is concerned, and the comment of Kraus very appropriate: "Here the familiar picture of the area around the sources of the Jordan, with thundering mountain torrents, merges with a picture of the chaotic destructive primeval ocean".

The two hypotheses agree in seeing the image as that of a watery region, and as having symbolic significance; perhaps the former with more clarity. That is to say, the poet who desperately seeks water, finds it, but it is not life-giving water - it is destructive. God sends water, overwhelming, destructive of life. God, who was to have been the life of the psalmist, has become his death; he has become an elemental force, oceanic, irresistible. The possessive "your" is emphatic; it invites us to conclude that the psalmist suffers his exile because of God. The two contrasting images of water provide us with the substance of the poem: a dramatic tension in the soul between God and God /3/.

The two images of God as water have a structural value in the poem, even without appearing in the third strophe, where the tension is resolved in the form of hope. If the "light" of 43.3 retains importance as an image, it will be this image which corresponds to what went before: "your torrents and your breakers / your light and your truth"; the background of the image has completely changed, and the intensity of its realisation is now much less.

In Ps. 84, referred to above, the image of the bird which finds a nest corresponds to the marvellous image of the dry valley which

is turned into an oasis (the text is uncertain). The nomad who finds springs in his wanderings and the bird who finds a nest in the temple are clearly related images, but they lack tension and thus structural value. By contrast they allow us the better to appreciate Ps. 42-43.

## 2. Dialogue structure

In addition, there is a structural value in the dialogue, which expresses itself in the prominent position of the refrain and which seems to echo the mocking questions of the enemies (42.4, 11).

It is a simple matter to classify this dialogue as a psychological process, a monological counterpart to the "appeal-function" of language (following the terminology of K. Bühler and F. Kainz). It is also possible to classify it with other psalms, biblical and non-biblical, e.g. Ps. 116.7; one can even identify it with a term from a list of genres: "prayer for setting the heart at rest (Herzberuhigungsgebet)". Classification can be useful, but it is not enough.

The inner dialogue in the psalm is the expression of an inner drama, which in turn corresponds to the polarity of the psalmist's experience of God. At one level of consciousness nostalgia and dismay predominate; at a deeper level confidence and hope emerge and grow. At the upper or immediate level the psalmist feels God painfully absent; at the deeper level he dimly perceives his presence.

The terms employed by the various commentators are interesting: Peter Lombard: "Reason comforts the emotional soul (animam sensualem) through hope in God"; Kirkpatrick: "In this refrain the truer self chides the weaker soul, the emotional nature for its despondency and complaint"; H. Schmidt: "His soul: here, like a man's "alter ego" (Doppelgänger) thought to be like him and beside him, and perceptible to him only"; Delitzsch: "Three times sorrow breaks into lament and each time it is quelled by the warning voice of a higher consciousness ... the spiritual man overcomes the natural man". (This list of binary terms employed by the various commentators could serve as an interesting comparative study).

The manner of God's presence is awareness of his absence. Absence which is not noticed nor deeply felt is a simple absence which causes no grief. But absence which is felt is a means of being present in the consciousness, bringing anxiety and grief. Paradoxically, the taunts of the enemies sharpen the sensation of

God's absence and thus, in the form of nostalgia, increase the sense of his presence. This internal dichotomy corresponds, though not exactly, to the polarity of God in the double symbol of water. The internal dichotomy exists as a heartbreaking tension, and the inner dialogue is a lyrical expression of this internal drama. Thus the dialogue has a structural function in the poem, a function which is not merely formal.

A relevant factor, though without a clear structural value, is the insistent repetition of the name of God, which occurs as follows: 8 times in the first strophe, 6 in the second (one of which as Yhwh), and 8 times in the third. The phrase "my God" occurs three times in the refrains and more frequently at the beginning and the end of the entire psalm. So there is a total of 22 occurrences of "God", to which we may add the possessive pronouns "your". The titles by which God is called are of the greatest interest: "the living God", "salvation of my face" (which can be translated "my personal saviour") "God of my life", "my rock", "my protector", "God of my strength".

The presence of God in the psalm is pervasive, his relationship with the psalmist personal and intimate. This means to say that God communicates most intensely by creating an awareness of his absence (as in the book of Job, throughout the entire construction of the poem on two levels, and explicitly in ch. 23). If communion with God is the meaning of worship, it is difficult to deny that the psalmist worships "in spirit and in truth".

## 3. Dynamic structure

Can we discover action and progress in this poem? Or is it a matter of simple rotation around an immovable axis, the refrain? The commentators who see in the refrain a simple formal value are not aware of a process taking place throughout the poem; those who apply a structural analysis (though they may not call it such) see it in a different way.

De Wette says that the refrain "mellows the experience of grief as an elegy"; Gunkel speaks of the monotonous repetition as a counterpoint to the turmoil; Kirkpatrick calls the structure "symmetrical and artistic"; Castellino says that "the refrain ... binds the various parts together and in some way carries the spirit through ..."; H. Schmidt says, "Beginning in the abyss of doubt ... and with the beginning of each strophe once again carried away into it, he lifts himself each time in his refrain to confidence, to a wonderful tranquillity ..."

Delitzsch, on the contrary, was able to appreciate the dynamics of the psalm: "Between the depiction of the present and the future there is unmistakeable progress. And for the first time in the third strophe lamentation, resignation and hope come to full expression & trustful petition takes over."

No one has succeeded as well as Weiser in capturing and expressing the movement of the psalm, already suggested in the subtitles he provides to the strophes: "Yearning for God and Recollection." "Desertion by God and Scorn of Enemies". "Petition and Hope". Some of the items in these subtitles are open to question; yet the observations of Weiser and Delitzsch about the past and the future are worth attention.

The structural indications are clear. The first and third strophes contain references to the cult: the house of God, jubilation and praise, sacred festival in the first; the sacred mount, dwelling-place, altar and praise in the third strophe. The tenses are inverted: for the first strophe recalls nostalgically a past which is remote and irretrievable (Dahood translates with the future tense); the third strophe longs and hopes for a future which is assured. Reminiscence is succeeded by hope, the God of the past becomes the God of the future, rather like the collective hope of the exile expressed by Second Isaiah (cf. especially 43. 18-19 and 43. 3-11).

What of the second strophe? Although not clearly defined, the present dominates here: the sight of the mountains (by contrast with the sacred mount), the taunts of the adversary, the enduring effect of "your torrents". At the exact centre of the strophe, and at approximately the centre of the poem, speaks the voice of hope in it, the painful continuity of "day and night" (v. 4a) is transformed into an alternating rhythm of grace and of praise, day and night.

Many scholars suppress or correct this verse. Rowley defends on structural grounds: in the centre of the poem, between two double qinahs, the interruption of the prevailing sentiment expresses the dynamics of the psalm; he rejects arguments based on metrical variation /4/. In the same strophe the sense of God's absence contrasts with the reminiscence of him of vv. 5 and 7. The psalmist dares to address God and reproach him for his desertion.

Between the first and third strophes an emotional transformation has taken place, as occurs in most psalms of petition. What has brought about this transformation? Not a priestly oracle, but an

inner voice which is at first experienced in the form of thirst, and then in the form of self-encouragement. In this voice God is already present, and emerging within the psalmist's consciousness. Let us say that the "light and truth", which later, in the third stanza, arrive as messengers to bring him word and testify to the success of his cause and lead him right to the temple itself, in some mysterious way are presented as already acting from a distance.

In line with the dynamics of the poem, the refrain at the end of the first strophe is a voice which is timid and stifled; the second time it is one of affirmation and reproach, and the third it amounts to a shout of triumph. Without any verbal alteration, the refrain undergoes a change of tone, and this should be evident when the psalm is recited.

With its wealth of structure, its dynamics, its lyrical and dramatic intensity, this psalm exceeds mere classification. In the theme of the eclipse of God and in the lucid consciousness which expresses this theme, the psalm is of especial relevance to our time.

1. Cf. George T. Wright, The Poet in the Poem (Berkeley, 1962) (with relevant bibliography); V. Ehrlich, "The Concept of the Poet as a Problem of Poetics", in Poetics (Warsaw & The Hague, 1961), pp. 707-717.

2. Weiser's comment, "for whom faith is the most basic function of existence", replaces a specific search with a general idea of faith.

3. In my book Estudios de poética hebrea (Barcelona, 1963) pp. 289-92, I explore this polarity of water as an image.

4. H.H. Rowley, "The Structure of Psalm 42/43", Biblica 21 (1940), pp. 45-55.

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