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PSALM 68 EXEGETICAL PAPER

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**“Let God arise, let His  
enemies be scattered...”**

Psalm 68 is a lengthy expression of God’s power and glory. This Psalm expresses a triumphant and conquering God that other nations will pay tribute to or fall beneath. This Psalm figures in important feast day prayers in both the Jewish and Christian tradition and is used as a proof text in the New Testament letter to the Ephesians.

PSALM TEXT

The RSV translation below provides our base text for the discussion. For purposes of the analysis of Jewish and Christian usage and interpretation the reference text is sufficient. However, as noted by the Jewish Publication society translation “The coherence of this psalm and the meaning of many of its passages are uncertain.”<sup>1</sup> Outlined below are the uncertain terms and divergences of the LXX for this text. None provide a point of theological or liturgical controversy in the use or interpretation of the Psalm between Christians and Jews.

- 1 To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David. A Song<sup>2</sup>. Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him!
- 2 As smoke is driven away, so drive them away; as wax melts before fire, let the wicked perish before God!
- 3 But let the righteous be joyful; let them exult before God; let them be jubilant with joy!
- 4 Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds;<sup>3</sup> his name is the LORD,<sup>4</sup> exult before him!<sup>5</sup>
- 5 Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.
- 6 God gives the desolate a home to dwell in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity; but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.
- 7 O God, when thou didst go forth before thy people, when thou didst march through the wilderness, Selah
- 8 the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, at the presence of God; yon Sinai quaked at the presence of God, the God of Israel.
- 9 Rain in abundance, O God, thou didst shed abroad; thou didst restore thy heritage as it languished;

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<sup>1</sup> JPS, p 1182.

<sup>2</sup> The titles in Greek follow the normal LXX translations of the Hebrew, “For the end, a Psalm of a song of David.”

<sup>3</sup> MT Hebrew term is עַרְבֹהַ, steppelands or desert but is emended to עַרְבֵה, clouds in most translations given the context of verse 33 “to Him who rides the ancient highest heavens”. NET Bible, p 978. The LXX translates this to εἰς δυσμῶν, from the west. The term is used generally for being in the vicinity of some region or the setting of the sun. Lust, Volume 1, p 122-123. See Genesis 15:12. This also suggests an understanding of sky imagery.

<sup>4</sup> MT text reads “in the Lord his name” with a predicate bet. Rendering as “The Lord is his name” typical in translations of the MT requires emendation of the bet to kaf and haplography of yod, yielding, כִּי יְהוָה שְׁמוֹ. NET Bible, p 978.

<sup>5</sup> The LXX contains an additional διαψαλμα in verse four, not present as סְלֵה in the MT. But the evidence is divided with Sinacticus missing the first two at verse 4 & 8 and Psalterium Graeco-Latinum Veronense missing those following verses 14, 20 & 33. Only Alexandrus has all of them. Swete, Old Testament in Greek Volume II, p296-299

10 thy flock<sup>6</sup> found a dwelling in it; in thy goodness, O God, thou didst provide for the needy.  
 11 The Lord gives the command; great is the host of those who bore the tidings:  
 12 "The kings of the armies, they flee, they flee!" The women<sup>7</sup> at home divide the spoil,  
 13 though they stay among the sheepfolds--the wings of a dove covered with silver, its pinions with green gold.<sup>8</sup>  
 14 When the Almighty scattered kings there, snow fell on Zalmon.<sup>9</sup>  
 15 O mighty mountain, mountain of Bashan; O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan!<sup>10</sup>  
 16 Why look you with envy,<sup>11</sup> O many-peaked mountain, at the mount which God desired for his abode, yea, where the LORD will dwell for ever?  
 17 With mighty chariotry, twice<sup>12</sup> ten thousand, thousands upon thousands, the Lord came from Sinai into the holy place.<sup>13</sup>  
 18 Thou didst ascend the high mount, leading captives in thy train, and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.  
 19 Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up; God is our salvation. Selah  
 20 Our God is a God of salvation; and to GOD, the Lord, belongs escape from death.  
 21 But God will shatter the heads of his enemies, the hairy crown of him who walks in his guilty ways.  
 22 The Lord said, "I will bring them back from Bashan, I will bring them back from the depths of the sea,

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<sup>6</sup> The meaning of the Hebrew is unclear. The text appears to refer to animals living in the land, the flock in the RSV translation above. But many take the text as a rare homonym for community or dwelling place, as the JPS translation "Your tribe dwells there." NET Bible, p 978. Tanak, p 1183.

<sup>7</sup> The Hebrew pasture (גרה) makes little sense in context and is usually taken as a corruption of beautiful woman (נצרה). NET Bible, p 978. This fits well in the immediate context verse 11 where the host spreading the news is in the feminine gender. The JPS translation takes this as a host of women. JPS, p 1183.

<sup>8</sup> In verse 13 the word Sheepfolds (שפת) is uncertain in the MT. NET Bible, p 978. This is translated as lot or inheritance (κληρων) in the LXX. Brenton, p 736.

<sup>9</sup> LXX shows a different text in verse 14. "The mountain of God is a rich mountain, a swelling mountain, a rich mountain." (ορος του θεου ορος πιον, ορος τετυρωμενον, ορος πιον). Brenton, p 736-737. The Dead Sea Scrolls follow the current MT rendering with the addition of "this" mount Bashan. Abegg, p 532

<sup>10</sup> Meaning of Hebrew uncertain in the second description of Mount Bashan, many peaks or rounded peaks (גבני). This is the only occurrence in scripture of this word. NET Bible, p 979.

<sup>11</sup> Meaning of Hebrew uncertain in verb look with envy (רצה). This occurs only here in scripture. NET Bible, p 979. The LXX takes this as conceive or consider without stating the object (υπολαμβάνετε). Swete, Old Testament in Greek Volume II, pp 296-299.

<sup>12</sup> "Twice" (שנאי) occurs only here in the OT, the meaning is uncertain. RSV and BDB take this as reduplication of the thousands. BDB, p 1041. With emendation to "at ease" (שנאי) this could be translated held in reserve, so the NET bible. NET Bible, p 979.

<sup>13</sup> "The Lord came from Sinai to the holy place," is syntactically difficult. NET Bible, P 979.

23 that you may bathe<sup>14</sup> your feet in blood, that the tongues of your dogs may have their portion from the foe."  
 24 Thy solemn processions are seen, O God, the processions of my God, my King, into the sanctuary--  
 25 the singers in front, the minstrels last, between them maidens playing timbrels:  
 26 "Bless God in the great congregation, the LORD, O you who are of Israel's fountain!"  
 27 There is Benjamin, the least of them, in the lead, the princes of Judah in their throng,<sup>15</sup> the princes of Zeb'ulun, the princes of Naph'tali.  
 28 Summon thy might, O God; show thy strength, O God, thou who hast wrought for us.  
 29 Because of thy temple at Jerusalem kings bear gifts to thee.  
 30 Rebuke the beasts that dwell among the reeds, the herd of bulls with the calves of the peoples. Trample under foot those who lust after tribute; scatter the peoples who delight in war.  
 31 Let bronze<sup>16</sup> be brought from Egypt; let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out her hands to God.  
 32 Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth; sing praises to the Lord, Selah  
 33 to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens; lo, he sends forth his voice, his mighty voice.  
 34 Ascribe power to God, whose majesty is over Israel, and his power is in the skies.  
 35 Terrible is God in his sanctuary, the God of Israel, he gives power and strength to his people. Blessed be God!  
 (Psalms 68:1-35, RSV).

LITERARY GENRE

Form critics place Psalm 68 among the ancient cult songs, or Hymns.<sup>17</sup> This Psalms purpose was a Morning Prayer prior to battle, a call to victory in the Lord. The Genre includes the great "Song of the Sea" in Exodus 15. These hymns have a linguistic form with the following elements:<sup>18</sup>

- 1) **Pronounced introduction** —a call to rejoice or sing using a plural imperative. This can be repeated at new sections of the hymn and in the conclusion. (*verses 1-4*)
  - a) Main words accented in the hymn concern mood (rejoice, exult) or form of performance (sing, play) or movements by performers (raise hands, fall down). These are artifacts of the original rubrics for performances by sacred choirs. (*verse 3-4*)

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<sup>14</sup> Bathe (בָּתַח) by emendation from stomp (בָּתַח). NET Bible, p 979.

<sup>15</sup> The meaning is unclear. RSV has "in their throngs" (בְּרִגְשׁוֹתָם) this requires emendation from "in their heaps" the MT original (בְּרִגְטוֹתָם). Others emend to in their garments (בְּרִגְמֵתָם). NET Bible, p 979.

<sup>16</sup> Bronze (בְּרִיזָה) occurs only here in the OT, the meaning is uncertain. Some take this to be bronzed articles or tribute, others as nobles or envoys. Could be emended to the robust ones, leaders. NET Bible, p 980.

<sup>17</sup> Gunkel, p 10.

<sup>18</sup> Gunkel, pp 22-41.

- b) Mentions made as to whom should perform the Psalm (sons of Jacob, servants of YHWH, or the righteous). (*verse 3*)
  - c) A summons to those called to praise God. (*verse 3*)
  - d) Besides this group or chorus we find an individual singer (I).
- 2) **The main portion** —the whole of which is between the introduction and conclusion. (*verses 5-31*)
- a) Often begin with statements of “for, that” giving reason for the introductory postures. (*verse 5*)
  - b) The main person in the Poem is YHWH in the third person. (*verse 6*)
  - c) Consists of short statements about God and the delight of the poet in these attributes. (*verse 9-10*)
  - d) Statements about regular or repeated actions transition into historical deeds. (*verse 7*)
  - e) Frequently, expressions of rejoicing, trust, or fear (*verse 4*)
  - f) Rhetorical questions about YHWH. (*verse 16*)
- 3) **Conclusion** (*verses 32-35*)
- a) Manifests the same forms as the introduction (*verse 33*)
  - b) Expanded form of introduction (*verse 35*)

The pattern plays out without deviation of form in Psalm 68.

#### POETIC STRUCTURES

In this longer Psalm, there are multiple ways to understand the poetic structure. These poetic organizations follow generally fall in line with the form analysis above, but there is some disagreement on the borders of the introduction. The two basic organizations are one based on chiasm and one based on internal poetic meter. In addition, there are a number of common poetic elements in Psalm 68, image fields, parallelism, and aural markers.

In the overall organization of Psalm 68 there appears a chiastic structure:<sup>19</sup>

A—Hymnic invocation (4-6)

B—From Sinai to Zion (7-18)

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<sup>19</sup> Schaefer, p 163.

C—Acclamation and oracle (19-23)

B’—Procession toward the temple (24-31)

A’—Conclusion (32-35)

The details of the Hebrew poetry in parallelism and vocabulary complement the structure. The borders of this poetic structure match with the nicely with our form critical outline of a liturgical hymn, except the introduction is blurred with the A portion of the chiasm.

An alternative view of the organization of Psalm 68 is the stress accent model of poetry. Here two or four stresses yield a colon, two to three colon yield a verse, two to three verses form a strophe and two to three strophe form a stanza.<sup>20</sup> The stanzas can be further organized into sections in the longer Psalms, like Psalm 68. This larger organization is by thematic content, not the number of accents. Here the structure plays out as follows:

POETIC VERSE STRUCTURE <sup>21</sup>			
VERSES	DIVISION		
1-3	Strophe	Stanza	Section
4-6	Strophe		
7-8	Strophe	Stanza	
9-10	Strophe		
11-13a	Strophe	Stanza	Section
13b-14	Strophe		
15-16	Strophe	Stanza	
17-18	Strophe		
19-20	Strophe	Stanza	
21-23	Strophe		
24-25	Strophe	Stanza	Section

<sup>20</sup> Fokkelman, pp 37-39.

<sup>21</sup> Fokkelman, p 215.

26-27	Strophe		
28-29	Strophe	Stanza	
30-31	Strophe		
32-33	Strophe	Stanza	
34-35	Strophe		

Within these poetic structures there is generally a double parallelism at work. Strophe A has a basic statement and parallels while strophe B either echoes or reverses the parallelism. Successive stanzas build on a single them and new section divisions mark the change in theme. In addition, the strophes and stanzas are generally balanced in both meter and number of syllables throughout the work.<sup>22</sup> These patterns are all present in Psalm 68. The borders of these three sections part from the form critical outline in the introductory section as well. The introduction is considerably longer and the middle section shorter than the form model, and different from the chiasmic model as well.

In the details of the poem a military image field predominates. The view of God in the sphere of military affairs through the lens of Israel’s history provides the bedrock of the Psalmist’s faith. The historical lens takes us on a procession from Sinai to the temple.<sup>23</sup> This overarching theme can play out in subtle ways as well. The military image is alluded to even in the rain blessing of verse 9. “Rain in abundance, O God, thou didst shed abroad; thou didst restore thy heritage as it languished;” (Psalms 68:9, RSV). Here the verb shed (נָרַךְ) is a homonym for the military term, brandish a weapon.<sup>24</sup>

#### VOICE

The voice in the poem shifts throughout but is never ambiguous. The action of the poem fluctuates between command, exclamation, God in the second person, God acting in the third person, God speaking in the first person and third person actions by the people. The ebb and flow of the voice follows the shifting action of the Psalm.

#### LIFE CONTEXT IN ISRAEL

Psalm 68 is among the oldest strata of Hebrew poetry in scripture. These earliest poems include, the Song of Miriam, the Song of Deborah, the blessing of Moses, the song of Moses, the blessing of Jacob and Psalms 29 & 68.<sup>25</sup>

Modern cult criticism sees these hymns performed in the assembly preparing for battle. Exodus 32 is his example for the original place in the life of Israel.<sup>26</sup> “When

<sup>22</sup> Fokkelman, pp 15-21

<sup>23</sup> Rozenberg, pp 400-401

<sup>24</sup> Net Bible p 978

<sup>25</sup> Bright, p 147.

Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, ‘There is a noise of war in the camp.’ But he said, ‘It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear.’” (Exodus 32:17-18, RSV). The sound of the assembly singing was the preparation for war. Psalm 68 is part of the repertoire that the traveling army would use in such a camp. The Psalm later becomes associated with a future victory festival and deliverance festival. Here Israel processes around the walls of Jerusalem to celebrate the deliverance of the city. Psalm 68 assumes an arrangement by tribal territories. During these times of occupation, the assembly can experience the future time of victory, the Psalm is understood in an eschatological sense.<sup>27</sup>

Cult critics view the entire Psalter in terms of liturgical use and expression in the cult practice of Israel. Even those Psalms that don’t have explicit ritual purpose will find there true meaning and interpretation in cult practice. In short, Psalms are exclusively liturgical by nature.<sup>28</sup> In terms of Psalm 68, this is classified as a hymn of praise. Psalm 68 is among “the Oldest and most characteristic, the most artistically superior and poetically powerful hymns in the Old Testament.”<sup>29</sup> The hymn of praise is introduced by and contains laudatory elements throughout. Psalm 68 is placed at the New Year festival as the processional Psalm. This is the epiphany of LORD, who conquers the enemies of Israel. In the mythic sense, the Psalm plays out the war between death and God. “Our God is a God of salvation; and to GOD, the Lord, belongs escape from death.” (Psalms 68:20, RSV). In Ugaritic mythology death is Mot, the demonic being that threatens the world with chaos. In Canaan, the conflict between Baal and Mot was ritually remembered. In Psalms 68 & 48, Israel picks up this myth and appropriates it to the LORD on the New Years festival.<sup>30</sup>

In a similar vein, they see verses 24 & 25 suggest the procession into the sanctuary by the king is an enthronement ceremony or annual renewal of the kingship of Israel. “Thy solemn processions are seen, O God, the processions of my God, my King, into the sanctuary-- the singers in front, the minstrels last, between them maidens playing timbrels:” (Psalms 68:24-25, RSV). The Psalm plays out like a Greek chorus in five acts:<sup>31</sup>

- Prelude (1-3)
- March of the King (4-14)
- Entrance into Zion (15-18)
- Rule over Israel & nations (19-31)
- Exhortation to kingdoms (32-35)

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<sup>26</sup> Gunkel, p 41.

<sup>27</sup> Gunkel, p 44.

<sup>28</sup> Mowinkel, p 5.

<sup>29</sup> Mowinkel, p 97.

<sup>30</sup> Mowinkel, pp 152-153.

<sup>31</sup> Buttrick, pp 353-354.

This division assumes the historical notes are a preparation and allegory for the enthronement or rededication to the current king. The weakness of the position is the lack of evidence of enthronement or renewal ritual in Israel. There is evidence in surrounding cultures, but not in the Jewish State. The further weakness is a dramatic shift from a play about history to an actual procession in the last act. The first four acts are a play about the history of God with Israel, then in act five we shift into liturgical description of a real procession at the actual mount Zion. The weakness of the position is four out of five sections are taken as drama, and the fifth becomes literal liturgical action.

Within the actual tradition of Judaism, the targum places this Psalm with the giving of the law at Sinai. The law festival is Shavu'ot, Psalm 68 is assigned to the second day by the Vilna Gaon.<sup>32</sup> This association is maintained in the Sephardic ritual among Jews today. Before Arit on Shavu'ot this psalm is read since it describes the events on mount Sinai.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, in the Ashkenazic rite on Simhat Torah a hymn based on 68:35 is sung for the sixth Hakkafah. The poem is alphabetically arranged.<sup>34</sup> The prayer is also sung on Yom Kippur where the same Psalm 68:35 closes the Afsay Eretz prayer. This poem is Ashkenazic and also arranged alphabetically.<sup>35</sup>

The Mishnah in the agricultural division, Berakhot, we find Psalm 68:26 cited in a chain about prayer surrounding meals. In section 7:3 (J) Rabbi Yose the Galilean says, "According to the size of the congregation so they bless. As it says, In [accordance with the size of your] gatherings, bless God, the Lord, [you who are] from Israel's fountain."<sup>36</sup> This exegetical style expands the citation to fit the context. The bracketed words in the Psalm citation are expansions of the text. In this way, the Mishnah commentary continues the Targum tradition of interpretive translations. The text is the starting point to underline the responsibility of the observant Jew. The expansions help to make that responsibility clear in the current situation, while remaining true to the sense of the text.

In Jewish commentary Psalm 68 is connected with the Exodus experience. Interpreting the Psalm Rabbi Eleazer ben Azariah connects this to the Exodus experience through verse 6 "God gives the desolate a home to dwell in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity; but the rebellious dwell in a parched land." (Psalms 68:6, RSV). "There were both weeping and singing at the Exodus. The Egyptians wept because they had been despoiled, for the Israelites had emptied their houses, as it is said, they stripped the Egyptians. The Israelites, however, sang because they were carting away the spoil of their enemies."<sup>37</sup>

Psalm 68 is also found in a chain of verses supporting praise to God from children and the unborn. The singing of the Israelites extends to the womb. In the exegetical discourses concerning children and the unborn, Rabbi Meir says, "Even embryos in their mothers wombs opened up their mouths and recited a song before the Omnipresent:

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<sup>32</sup> Rozenburg, pp 400-401.

<sup>33</sup> Nulman, p 211.

<sup>34</sup> Nulman, p 23.

<sup>35</sup> Nulman, p 9.

<sup>36</sup> Neusner, The Mishnah, p 11. Brackets indicate text in the Mishnah that is an expansion of the original scripture verse.

<sup>37</sup> Nadich, volume II p 109.

‘Bless God in full assemblies, even the Lord you who are from the fountain of Israel’” (Verse 26).<sup>38</sup>

In scripture commentary, the Rabbis connect Psalm 68 to the Song of Songs. Here we connect the Exodus experience to later scripture. Rabbi Yuda bar Simon said, “It was stated at Sinai: ‘The Song of Songs’—the song that was sung by the singers: ‘The singers go before, the minstrels follow after’” (verse 27).<sup>39</sup> The Genesis Rabbah in late midrashic literature we find Psalm 68:4 in a chain of “another interpretations. “And willows of the brook’: this refers to the Holy One, blessed be he, concerning whom it is written ‘Extol him who rides upon the willows, whose name is the Lord.’”<sup>40</sup> In this style of commentary the base text is read phrase by phrase with other scripture citations. When pulling the citation from Psalm 68 in this series the commentator is looking for praises of God that match and support each phrase in the Rabbah. Here there are four supporting phrases chosen that connect with the tree theme. The Psalm 68 text is adjusted to place God on the willows, rather than the desert or clouds.<sup>41</sup>

While the cult critics see the role of Psalm 68 as a renewal or coronation of the King, the preserved use and development of the text within Judaism suggests the concentration is rather on Torah, with a strong secondary strain of community praise in general. The obvious connections of the text with the Exodus experience and mount Sinai where the Law was given support the use of the text in the commemoration of Torah, as is the case in modern Jewish prayer. The second theme of community praise in the commentaries of the Rabbis flows naturally out of the Psalms expressions of joy in God’s power. The connection of Psalm 68 to other texts of praise is a natural extension of the theme by the Rabbis. The cult critics are unconvincing in the attempt to apply the ritual of neighboring cultures annual enthronement of the king into the context of Israel and Psalm 68. The liturgical directives in the Psalm cited as support of this usage work equally as well in the context they are still used in Judaism. Further, there is no support in archeological evidence or literature for an annual enthronement of the king in Israel.

#### USE IN THEOLOGY & LITURGY

Christian usage of Psalm 68 runs the full gamut of possibilities. Right from the earliest preaching of the Church Paul finds Psalm 68 useful as a proof text in his letter to the Ephesians. Patristic preachers expound on Paul’s words from this context. They further preach Psalm 68 as prophecy pointing to the coming resurrection of Christ. Finally, Orthodox liturgy makes full use of psalm 68 in the various contexts. This Psalm is closely associated with Pascha, the Feast of Feasts. But certain verses find a home in other liturgical contexts as well.

The Christian view of the Psalms in general is one of prophecy. Father Philimon aptly sums up this position, “My son, God has impressed the power of the psalms on my poor soul as He did on the soul of the prophet David. I cannot be separated from

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<sup>38</sup> Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, p 265.

<sup>39</sup> Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, p 479.

<sup>40</sup> Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, p 408.

<sup>41</sup> As noted above, the vocabulary in Psalm 68 here is uncertain allowing the Genesis Rabbah commentator this latitude in this compilation substituting willows for dessert or clouds.

the sweetness of the visions about which they speak: they embrace all Scripture.”<sup>42</sup> The role of the psalms is vision in a double sense, the prophecy of Christ’s ministry, and the vision for the individual Christian soul’s journey to the life in Christ.

### *Ephesians Citation*

In Christian interpretation we find Psalm 68:18 used in the New Testament as a proof text by Paul in Ephesians 4:8 “But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it is said, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and<sup>43</sup> he gave gifts to men.” In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,” (Ephesians 4:7-12, RSV). Here Paul is linking the resurrection and ascension of Christ to the Old Testament descriptions of God. In general, in Christian proof texts from scripture we find a search for verses about rising to associate with the rising of Christ, here is one such example.

In the text of the citation there are a number of adjustments made in the form and content to fit the context of use. The voice shifts from second to third person singular, perhaps to more firmly connect this with the person of Jesus. The verb form of ascended shifts to a participle placing the action focus on the following verbs of carried off and giving. These shifts make the commentary that follows in the next verses in stronger parallel to the citation.<sup>44</sup> Jerome makes note of Paul’s textual adjustments, “Why this difference? Since in the psalm the act had not yet occurred but was promised in the future, the phrase was accordingly ‘he received’. But the apostle is seeing this as a promise earlier given and later fulfilled. At the time of this writing, Christ has already made the gift and churches have been established throughout the whole world.”<sup>45</sup>

When preaching on this passage, Chrysostom connects this descending and ascending with “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8, RSV). “In the same way as there, when exhorting them concerning lowliness, he (Paul) brings forward Christ as an example, so does he say here also, “He descended in the lower parts of the earth.”<sup>46</sup> The Psalm verse may focus on the resurrection, but the implication of the death on the cross and the self-emptying of Christ is present as well.

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<sup>42</sup> Palmer, p 347

<sup>43</sup> Hodges, p 588. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, p 605. Here many early witnesses and western texts omit the conjunctive καὶ in the text. The Byzantine text form is unanimous in the inclusion of καὶ and most critical texts omit this word. This opening portion of the second line varies from the LXX text which reads, ελαβες δοματα εν ανθρωπω.

<sup>44</sup> Schnackenburg, p 177.

<sup>45</sup> Oden, pp 163-162.

<sup>46</sup> Schaff, volume 13, pp 103-104.

In addition to these obvious Christological interpretations of this pericope, Kreitzer has proposed that these verses point to a Christian engagement with the myth of the abduction of Persephone by Hades. He further posits that the original letter to the Ephesians was directed towards the community in Hierapolis. The Plutonium of Hierapolis is a small cavern by the temple to Apollo known as a passage to the underworld.<sup>47</sup> Coins from the period Ephesians from Hierapolis depict the myth playing out in this location.<sup>48</sup> Further, the localized Phrygian mother-goddess has a consort Attis who was murdered and after three days rose from the dead.<sup>49</sup> These events are all associated with the cavern by Apollo's temple. Thus, this passage in Ephesians is a direct challenge by Christian preachers to the contemporary and local religious sense of the population. The pagan mystery religious background of these myths is being challenged by this Christian expression of a similar mystery.<sup>50</sup> Here Christ is able to accomplish in a better way, what is celebrated in the mystery religion of the region.

*Patristic commentary on Psalm 68*

Theodore of Cyrus opens his commentary on Psalm 68 by placing the composition as targeted against the rising tide of evil people in the world during David's time. David is requesting that God send the savior for this world. The Psalm is an extended prophecy of the coming of Christ and the effects of this coming. The opening verses are David's cry for God to come.<sup>51</sup>

By verse 21 the Psalm depicts the temple in Jerusalem as the center of God's work for his people. Theodore connects this work to the name of Jesus where "every rule, authority, and power, above every name that is named, not only in this age but in the age to come."<sup>52</sup> This clear allusion to the description of Jesus in Ephesians 1:16-23 connects the humanity of Christ to this image of the temple. He closes with the observation that we must have "eyes that perceive," (θεωρία). This spiritual insight that allows the Christian to see the true nature of the prophetic utterance in scripture is a key theme in patristic literature. In Psalm 68 Theodore finds some of these insights. This underscores the patristic understanding of Psalms as prophecy. The term is used widely in patristic literature of the special features of Christian contemplation that is nourished by sound teaching and closely connected with Christ's humanity, as in this passage.<sup>53</sup>

By the end of the Psalm Theodore has the passing of the torch to gentiles. "The assembly of bulls in the calves of the nations so as to confine those tested with silver." (Verse 30)<sup>54</sup> The bulls are the chosen people of Israel in their stubbornness, while the calves are the gentiles coming to faith. This passage foretells the passing of salvation from Jews to gentiles. This leads to the ambassadors from Egypt in the next verse. Verse

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<sup>47</sup> Kreitzer, p 381.

<sup>48</sup> Kreitzer, pp 388-390.

<sup>49</sup> Kreitzer, p 391.

<sup>50</sup> Kreitzer, p 392.

<sup>51</sup> Theodore, p 380.

<sup>52</sup> Theodore, p 391.

<sup>53</sup> Lampe, p 648.

<sup>54</sup> Theodore, p 392. This text is an alternate translation in Theodore of "Rebuke the beasts that dwell among the reeds, the herd of bulls with the calves of the peoples. Trample under foot those who lust after tribute; scatter the peoples who delight in war." (Psalms 68:30, RSV).

31 specifically mentions that Ethiopia reaches out, the apostle Phillip in Acts 8 fulfills this.<sup>55</sup>

Augustine in his commentary on Psalm 68 opens with the consideration of the Greek translation of the title, “For the end.” As in much of the patristic consideration of Psalm titles, this is seen as a reference to Christ as the “end of the law” (Romans 10:4).<sup>56</sup> With this attachment of Christ to the Psalm by way of the title, many of the verses are then read allegorically as referring to Christ in some way. The opening verses become an allegory for the crucifixion of Christ and his ultimate triumph. The crowds cry, “crucify him” and appear to triumph but in the end they vanish “like smoke.”<sup>57</sup>

Working from the same translation of Psalm 68:30 as Theodorete, Augustine also sees Israel as the Bulls that are stubborn against God’s will. But here, the calves are not the gentiles but the people of Israel that are easily led astray by the bulls that are leaders. But he holds out hope for new leaders among the calves, because Psalm 35:18 promises “In a people grave I will praise you.” This division among the people is analogous to the work of heretics in the Christian Church. The bulls must be kept under control by the true followers of Christ.<sup>58</sup>

In the leading forth of captives in verse 18 provides a connection for the fathers with Christ’s leading forth those held in Hades at the Resurrection. The shackles of the Psalm are analogous to the chains of death. Augustine recalls this verses usage by the letter to the Ephesians and notes that Christ’s resurrection makes us one body with him.<sup>59</sup> Bishop Velimirovich expands the thought with his prayer, “My Lord is the One who resurrects. He resurrects the dead from morning until dusk, and from dusk until dawn.”<sup>60</sup> The captive are no longer the slaves of Egypt being led in the desert, but those united to Christ in his victory over death.

### *Liturgical Usage*

The Orthodox liturgical tradition places the opening verses of Psalm 68 prominently in the Paschal service cycle. They are the verses followed by the Paschal tropar refrain at the opening of Matins. These verses introduce the stichera at the kissing of the cross, (which are frequently repeating throughout the 40-day Paschal season). And they form the third Antiphon for the Divine Liturgy of Pascha.<sup>61</sup> No doubt the presence of the verb *αναστητω* as the opening word and its obvious connection with liturgical prayers on Christ’s resurrection influenced the selection. In addition, the triumphant description of God’s victory in the Psalm aptly fit the mood of the Paschal liturgical cycle. Another verse finds its way into the entrance hymn for Pascha, “Bless God in the great congregation, the LORD, O you who are of Israel’s fountain!” (Psalms 68:26, RSV).<sup>62</sup> Here the connection is with the entrance character of the liturgical moment. The

<sup>55</sup> Theodoret, p 392.

<sup>56</sup> Schaff, volume 8, p 285.

<sup>57</sup> Schaff, volume 8 p 286.

<sup>58</sup> Schaff, volume 8, p 297.

<sup>59</sup> Schaff, volume 8, p 293.

<sup>60</sup> Manley, p 242. Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich, *Prayers by the Lake*

<sup>61</sup> Liturgical Commission of Sisters of St. Basil, pp 2, 11-12.

<sup>62</sup> Farrow, p 112

procession with the Gospel is returning the “heaven” (the holy of holies) and the congregation joins with that ancient congregation of Israel in blessing God at his entrance to the temple.

The first antiphon on the Sunday of the cross during the Great Fast includes this verse; “Thou didst ascend the high mount, leading captives in thy train.” (Psalms 68:18, RSV).<sup>63</sup> In this Antiphon we see a collection of single verses from a variety of Psalms that point to the actions of the cross. In Psalm 68 the attraction is the same as Paul’s in the letter to the Ephesians, the rising to heaven. Even when the Orthodox tradition remembers the death of Christ on the cross, the resurrection is remembered at the same time, often in the same or very next breath of song.

This Prokeimenon and verse combination is found on three feasts during the Orthodox liturgical year:

Prokeimenon: “Ascribe power to God, whose majesty is over Israel.” (Psalms 68:34, RSV)

Verse: “Bless God in the great congregation, the LORD, O you who are of Israel’s fountain!” (Psalms 68:26, RSV).

On All Saints Day, the Sunday after Pentecost,<sup>64</sup> the emphasis is on the heavenly congregation. In liturgical translations of this verse for the Prokeimenon “Ascribe might to God,” is read as “God is wondrous in his Saints.” This adjustment in text pushes the connection between the earthly and heavenly congregations. In Orthodox liturgical understanding, our Divine Liturgy on earth is a participation in the eternal heavenly liturgy. This prokeimenon and verse capture the nature of this relationship and the feast of All Saints is the perfect home for the expression because we remember our deceased exemplars in that heavenly congregation. On the Sunday after the nativity of our Lord,<sup>65</sup> we see a continuation of the royal messiah themes of Christ’s birth. Jesus is born as the son of David, an heir to the throne of Israel. These Psalm verses reinforce the power of the king over the community of Israel. Finally, in the commemoration of Mary of Egypt on the fifth Sunday of Great Fast<sup>66</sup> we use this Prokeimenon without the verse. Mary of Egypt is the second commemoration this day; the first is the Resurrectional tone cycle. As a secondary commemoration the verse is dropped.

#### USE IN BYZANTINE TRADITION TODAY

In America today we are surrounded by Christian thought based on scientific reasoning. At the same time American culture generally looks for factors outside oneself that cause our flaws. Patristic exegesis of scripture in general is a skill worth reviving in this environment. This cultural bias is similar to the native Greek culture in which this understanding of scripture was born. The human need for a “contemplative vision” of God can be satisfied by this method. The Psalms are a perfect set of texts to engage both of these societal prejudices, the literal science and personal responsibility.

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<sup>63</sup> Farrow, p 89.

<sup>64</sup> Farrow, p 145.

<sup>65</sup> Farrow, p 57.

<sup>66</sup> Farrow, p 96.

Psalm 68 holds a wide range of images that this method can be applied to. In addition, this Psalm is intimately connected with the central mystery of the Christian faith, Christ's resurrection. I can reflect on bull in myself. Work to overcome these weaknesses. Then participate in the ascent and receive the gifts.

The method can only work when applied in a regime of personal prayer and meditation. The Psalms in general, and Psalm 68 in particular, require time to unpack and layer over ones own life experience. The large patterns that connect to salvation history are spelled out. But the individual must make the final step to connect that history to the life of a single soul today, the only soul that one can control, one's own. The Psalter is the meditative prayer book of the Christian church. Today, we need to reinstate the Psalter to this position.

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