

WRITINGS

Psalm 92:1-2

“A Psalm for the Sabbath Day”

“A Psalm, a Song for the Sabbath day. It is good to give thanks to the LORD and to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; to declare Your lovingkindness in the morning and Your faithfulness by night.”

The Book of Psalms is broad and diverse, with German theologian Hermann Gunkel having divided Psalms into five distinct *Gattungen* or literary types: hymns, communal laments, royal psalms, individual laments, and individual psalms of thanksgiving, with scholars today often providing more categories.¹ There are certainly many Psalms that could be considered in evaluating the significance of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*. Psalm 92 stands out because it is *mizmor shir l'Yom haShabbat* (מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר לַיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת), being labeled specifically for the Sabbath. This should mean, at the very least, that its major theme(s) should be considered in our remembrance of the weekly Sabbath. However, it should also contain a message regarding the wider significance of the Sabbath for the people of God, which we can surely take with us during the six working days.

Psalm 92 is strictly anonymous, although according to Jewish tradition recorded in the Mishnah, certain Psalms were recited by the Levites in the Temple each day of the week, with Psalm 92 being designated for *Shabbat*:

“The singing which the Levites did sing in the sanctuary: On the first day they did sing, *The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof, the world and they who live therein* (Ps. 24). On the second day they did sing, *Great is the Lord and highly to be praised in the city of our God, even upon his holy hill* (Ps. 48). On the third day they did sing, *God stands in the congregation of God, he is a judge among the gods* (Ps. 82). On the fourth day they did sing, *O Lord God to whom vengeance belongs, thou God to whom vengeance belongs, show yourself* (Ps. 94). On the fifth day they did sing, *Sing we happily to God our strength, make a joyful noise to the God of Jacob* (Ps. 81). On the sixth day they did sing, *The Lord is king and has put on glorious apparel* (Ps. 93). On the Sabbath day they did sing, *A Psalm, A song for the Sabbath day* (Ps. 92)—A psalm, a song for the world that is to come, for the day which is wholly Sabbath rest for eternity” (m.*Tamid* 7:4).²

The tenor of Psalm 92:1-2, “It is good to praise the LORD and make music to your name, O Most High, proclaiming your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night” (TNIV), is hardly one which communicates a Sabbath observance where a person spends the entire day loafing around his or her home. Instead, “It is good to praise the LORD, to sing hymns to Your name, O Most High” (NJPS), depicts a scene of public worship directed to God. Derek Kidner notably concludes, “This *Song for the Sabbath* is proof enough, if such were needed, that the Old Testament sabbath was a day not only for rest

¹ If necessary, do consult the entry for the Book of Psalms, appearing in the workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

² Neusner, *Mishnah*, pp 872-873.

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but for corporate worship ('a holy convocation', Lv. 23:3), and intended to be a delight rather than a burden."³

How did a text like Psalm 92 get prefaced with "A song for *Shabbat*" (CJB)? Leslie S. M'Caw and J.A. Motyer suggest, "The association of this psalm with the sabbath is probably due to its spirit of joyful praise and its outlook upon a world cleansed of sinners and evil-doers. In this latter sense, the psalm may be anticipatory of the eternal sabbath rest for the children of God which in its fullness is yet to come (*cf.* Heb. 4:9ff)."⁴ The themes of Psalm 92—even with various details not always agreed upon by readers or examiners⁵—are intended to direct God's people to a plane where they focus upon Him and His glory:

"A Psalm, a Song for the Sabbath day. It is good to give thanks to the LORD and to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; to declare Your lovingkindness in the morning and Your faithfulness by night, with the ten-stringed lute and with the harp, with resounding music upon the lyre. For You, O LORD, have made me glad by what You have done, I will sing for joy at the works of Your hands. How great are Your works, O LORD! Your thoughts are very deep. A senseless man has no knowledge, nor does a stupid man understand this: That when the wicked sprouted up like grass and all who did iniquity flourished, it *was only* that they might be destroyed forevermore. But You, O LORD, are on high forever. For, behold, Your enemies, O LORD, for, behold, Your enemies will perish; all who do iniquity will be scattered. But You have exalted my horn like *that of* the wild ox; I have been anointed with fresh oil. And my eye has looked *exultantly* upon my foes, my ears hear of the evildoers who rise up against me. The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree, he will grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still yield fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and very green, to declare that the LORD is upright; *He is* my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him" (Psalm 92:1-15).

If Psalm 92 depicts God's vindication of His people and the vanquishing of evil, then it does represent an important word of comfort for the future—a future which to a substantial degree is to be a reality lived out today by the redeemed. The observations of Jewish commentator A. Cohen, on Psalm 92, are highly useful:

"The Psalmist lived in a world wherein *workers of iniquity do flourish* [Psalm 92:8], bringing hardship and anxiety upon the righteous. How, in such circumstances, could they sing praises to God for His goodness? Their minds were beset by the perplexing problem of reconciling the facts of life with Divine Providence. On the hallowed day, man's spiritual nature is heightened and fortified, and his vision rendered clearer. He then views the character of the material and the permanence of the spiritual is borne in upon Him. His eyes are turned away from the physical world with its cares and trials to the world which is ever radiant with the glory of God. Exalted by so glorious a vision, he is able to sing His praises even before the wicked are overthrown."⁶

³ Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 334.

⁴ Leslie S. M'Caw and J.A. Motyer, "The Psalms," in *NBCR*, 509; also James L. Mays, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), pp 297-298.

⁵ Consult the analysis of Psalm 92:7 in the publication *Why Hell Must Be Eternal* by J.K. McKee.

⁶ A. Cohen, *Soncino Books of the Bible: The Psalms* (London: Soncino Press, 1945), 304.

Psalm 92:1-2 Sabbath and Rest in the Tanach

It is hardly surprising that Psalm 92 has been employed in diverse worship traditions. It does appear in the *Shabbat* liturgy of the *siddur*, meaning that it is very likely that if one attends an Orthodox service, one could hear Psalm 92 recited or canted.⁷ Kidner⁸ makes note of the 1719 Isaac Watts' hymn, "Lord, 'tis a pleasant thing to stand," based on Psalm 92:

Lord, 'tis a pleasant thing to stand
In gardens planted by Thine hand;
Let me within Thy courts be seen,
Like a young cedar, fresh and green.

There grow Thy saints in faith and love,
Blessed with Thine influence from above;
Not Lebanon with all its trees
Yields such a comely sight as these.

The plants of grace shall ever live;
Nature decays, but grace must thrive;
Time, that doth all things else impair,
Still makes them flourish strong and fair.

Laden with fruits of age, they show
The Lord is holy, just and true;
None that attend His gates shall find
A God unfaithful or unkind.⁹

As is noted in the *TLV Psalms* commentary on Psalm 92, provided by Paul Wilbur, our own Messianic community has a frequent praise song that is likely to be sung at our *Shabbat* services (although not exclusively), opening with the word, "It is good to praise the Lord...and give music to Your name O God Most High." As Wilbur attests,

"What a joy-filled celebration! It is a song of praise intended to thank *El Elyon* for His lovingkindness, especially as we rest on *Shabbat*...So way back in 1981 when I read this Psalm in my quiet time, I picked up my stringed instrument—my guitar—and sang it back to *HaShem*, then shared it with my congregation on *Shabbat*! *Israel's Hope* recorded it on our first album, and people have used it many times since in approaching the throne."¹⁰

Many of us, including myself, have praised the Lord in a Messianic setting with a song which we can now formally know is taken from Psalm 92, a passage used in ancient time to praise the God of Israel on *Shabbat*.

⁷ J.H. Hertz, ed., *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, revised (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1960), pp 430-431; Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Nusach Ashkenaz* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1984), pp 388-389.

⁸ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 334.

⁹ Accessible online at <<http://hymntime.com/tch/htm/l/o/r/d/lordtisp.htm>>.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Seif, Glenn Blank, and Paul Wilbur, *TLV Psalms With Commentary: Hope and Healing in the Hebrew Scriptures* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2012), 246.