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Poetic & Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament

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Textual Paper: Psalm 91

Long ago, Athanasius wrote to Marcellinus encouraging him to recite Psalm 91 and said, “If you desire to establish yourself and others in devotion, to know what confidence is to be reposed in God, and what makes the mind fearless, you will praise God by reciting the ninetieth (ninety-first) Psalm” (Mays 296, cf. Neale and Littledale, 3:103). This anonymous Psalm has long been a shelter, shadow, refuge, and fortress to those hurting. It points to God as the source of all strength, protection and victory. To understand the Psalm in its entirety, we must dive deeper than surface level and go to the Old Testament context and eventually the New. Then will we be able to fully understand this Psalm and allow it to testify of who God is for his glory and our benefit.

Psalm 91 can be broken up into five different sections: Psalm 91:1-2 as an invitation to the protection of God, 91:3-8 as the forms of protection, 91:9-10 as another invitation to the protection of God, 91:11-13 as the forms of protection, and 91:14-16 as the oracle of salvation (Longman). This textual paper will focus on each section and give the reader a fuller understanding of Psalm 91 as a whole. The first invitation to the protection of God by the anonymous author says:

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’”

The “opening line announces the psalm’s theme, the place of protection God can provide” (Goldingay 41). Within the first two verses, the reader is encountered with four metaphors for security (shelter, shadow, refuge, fortress) and four divine names of God (Most High, Almighty, Lord, God) (Kidner). The language within the first two verses tells the reader that they can experience protection/security in and from God. The protection language of shelter and shadow “suggests the imagery of a bird under whose wings baby birds find safety [cf. v.4; 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 63:7]” (Longman 697). This language also points forward to verse four. Such references are seen throughout the Psalms (see W. VanGemenen’s verses above) and drive home the image of God sheltering us under the shadow of his wings. This should become a consolation and joy to think about God this way; that he longs to provide himself as our shelter. The protection language of refuge and fortress “suggest a stronghold or military installation [cf. 18:2; 61:3]” (Longman 697). It will help to look at one of the cross verses referenced by Longman to understand this metaphor adequately. Psalm 18:2 (Psalm of David) says, “The Lord is my rock, my *fortress* (emphasis own) and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take *refuge*. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my *stronghold*.” Both words of protection are used in this verse and are pointing toward God as David’s stronghold. God is also a shield, therefore speaking of battle. God is our refuge and fortress and can

protect us from battle. In other words, in the heat of life, in both physical and spiritual battle, God is our stronghold.

The first two verses also give four divine names for God. The name “Most High” speaks of the Lord’s kingship and points us to Psalm 47:2: “For the Lord Most High is awesome. He is the great King of all the earth.” (Futato) God as King allows us to trust and not try to rule our own lives. The name “Almighty” is associated with power and points us to Psalm 68:14: “When the Almighty scattered the kings in the land, it was like snow fallen on Zalmon” (Futato). Psalm 68 “calls upon the Lord as king to use his power to vanquish the enemy” and since Psalm 68 is the only other place in the psalms where “Almighty” is used, we can know that this name is associated with power (Futato). God, being powerful, takes the weight off of us to try and be the same. God is powerful for us and in the Almighty we trust. The name “Lord” or Yahweh refers to the “endearing love of the covenantal God” (Longman 697). The Lord, Yahweh is the one who has proven his love to his people Israel and proves his love to us today. We can rest and trust in the love of God as Lord (Futato). Lastly, the name “God” in Psalm 91 says, “my God, in whom I trust” (v. 2b). “My God” makes it personal and must to some extent speak of his faithfulness, because the author “trusts”. This trust becomes personal and after verse two moves to speaking of God as “your refuge”. The author introduces Psalm 91 with his faith in the Lord, thus inviting all others to have the same faith.

Section two of Psalm 91 is God’s forms of protection. This section talks about what God saves us from and how he does it. It reads:

“Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.”

The “fowler’s snare” is to be thought of us as a trap of the enemy and “deadly pestilence” as an epidemic/sickness (Goldingay). More specifically, “fowler’s snare” is “adversity perpetrated by evil persons” (Longman 698). Because God provides his people with a place of protection, he rescues us from all these things. Verse four goes on to describe how God saves. The Lord’s “divine protection is likened to that of a bird that is kept from being trapped by the ‘fowler’s snare’” (Longman 698). Verse four continues, saying, “and under his wings you will find refuge”. God is again portrayed as a place of refuge with the imagery of wings that provide that refuge. Verse four proceeds to drive home the same point. The words “shield” and “rampart” “develop the imagery of ‘refuge’ and ‘fortress’” (Longman 698). Though having just established the Lord as a refuge (v. 2), Psalm 91 reiterates itself and reminds us the significance of the Lord as a refuge and how he gives us the refuge we so desperately need.

Verses five and six begin to name off “terrors” that Yahweh protects his people from, when they seek protection “in his sacred area” (Kraus 223). Demonic powers are believed to be referenced in this verse and “the arrow that flies by day”

as “destructive forces that cause sickness” (Kraus 223). Sickness has been mentioned twice now just in the first part of the Psalm and Kraus believes that this is significant. “In all probability, it can be assumed that Psalm 91 belongs among the psalms of sickness and healing; i.e., we would have to assume that the psalm is a prayer song which was presented as a formulary to a sick person – and that obviously after his recovery” (Kraus 221). Kraus brings up a good point and it speaks to the healing nature of God and even his saving purposes to keep us from all sickness, all pestilence. This saving nature of God gives us protection “at night and day” and “gives security from all natural and supernatural causes of fear” (Longman 698). Thinking of this verse practically and in its context also adds a lot more meaning. In our American culture, we don’t really worry about night, or arrows, or plagues, but when this psalm was written, those things were destructive and night could have meant attacks (Jer. 6:5, Gen. 14:15).

Verses seven and eight speak of God’s deliverance and greatness. We will only be able to properly interpret verse seven and eight by looking at two others verses in psalms that shed light (Kraus). Psalm 3:6 reads, “I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side” and Psalm 34:7 reads, “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.” These verses are important to understanding the nature of God’s deliverance. Psalm 3 speaks of how David will not fear the thousands around him and Psalm 34 speaks of how those who fear the Lord will be delivered. “From the Lord comes deliverance” (Psalm 3:8). Psalm 91:7-8 shows God’s deliverance and that in the end, “You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked”. The greatness

of God is shown in that his “protection is further amplified by the ration of ‘a thousand’ or even ‘ten thousand’ to one” (Longman 698).

Verse seven and eight can’t be read standing alone but in light of other verses (Grogan). For example, the promise in verse seven depends upon the action in verse 9 (“If you make the Most High your dwelling... then no harm will befall you”) and verse 14 (“Because he loves me,” says the Lord, I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name). Verse seven and eight are beautiful promises but they are dependent upon our response to God. Verse eight also shows that God is a God of justice. The “punishment of the wicked” is real and shows “that Yhwh is not arbitrarily taking sides in this conflict but sees that justice is done in relation to people who are faithless in their stance toward Yhwh” (Goldingay), which also suggests that those who are “faithless” will not experience the promises of verse eight and nine or any of the protection which God promises in Psalm 91.

Section three of Psalm 91 is the second invitation to the protection of God. Verses nine and ten are about God’s protection as king, as the Most High, and are again dependent on our “dwelling” in him:

“If you make the Most High your dwelling – even the Lord, who is my refuge –
then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent.”

Verse nine marks the importance of dwelling in the Most High and points the reader back to verse one. To dwell with and in the Most High must be an important action, especially for the protection of God. The use of “you” and “my” directs the reader, “for the psalmist is encouraging him to follow his example of trust (Grogan 160).

The author is making verse nine and ten into something of a testimony by including

himself and bearing witness to the fact that “If you make the Most High your dwelling - even the Lord, who is *my* refuge - then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent.” Since this section is somewhat of a testimony, we can know that “the Lord does not guarantee that no evil will befall those who trust him, but all who find ‘refuge’ (v. 2) in him will rest with the confidence that whatever happens on earth is with his knowledge” (Longman 699). Lastly, looking at verse ten closer will provide an understanding of that verse that fits into one of the recurring themes. The word “harm” or “hurt” in verse ten typically “refers to an illness”, a sickness; the same reference to sickness that we saw earlier throughout Psalm 91 that God saves his people from (Goldingay). In other words, verse ten is saying that, “no sickness/illness will befall you”. This fits into the recurring theme of the sickness that God protects us from. The second half of verse ten broadens the Lord’s protection. The word “tent” may refer to one’s home, one’s dwelling (Goldingay), and therefore be promising protection for the whole family.

Section four of Psalm 91 lays out the second form of protection. Verses 11-13 lays out specific protectors acting for God and by their protection we are given strength to conquer:

“For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.”

God’s protection remains the same and is reiterated throughout this section, but “this time God’s shelter is ascribed to God’s ‘angels’ or ‘messengers’. The celestial

creatures transmit to humans the divine intentions of benevolence” (Terrien). Not only do we have God on our side and fighting for us (The Almighty), but also heaven’s angels keeping us from harm. What better thing is there to “make the mind fearless” (Athanasius) than to know that God and the Angel’s armies are your protectors and will “guard you in all your ways”? (v. 11) The New Testament touches on this idea of angels being for us: “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14). The Most High shows his love and protection by charging “his angels with the protection of the godly and of their ‘tent’” (Longman 700).

Verse twelve shows a practical way in which angels will protect you, by “lifting you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” The Hebrew word for strike is *nagap* and is a verb that “suggests a serious smiting that can result in death, or a stumbling that has the same implication” (Goldingay 47). By this understanding, we can say that angels will even save us from death. Psalm 91 strongly shows that God rescues us from the worst things: illness, plague, demons, death, judgment and the like that have showed up thus far.

Verse thirteen shows how; by the protection of angels, we are given strength to overcome. This verse, along with verse twelve presents an interesting contrast, “for the foot that does not strike against a stone treads on the wild beast” (Grogan 160). This shows that while angels protect us from many things by holding us in their hands (v. 12a), they also protect us by giving us strength. This verse is key in beginning to understand how this Psalm anticipates Christ. Verse thirteen is pointing us way back to the beginning to point to Christ, rather than merely pointing

forward to him. It is “suggesting dominion as well as conquest, perhaps even reminiscent of Genesis 3:15 (protoevangelium), particularly in view of the serpent reference” (Grogan 160). Genesis 3:15, where God is addressing the serpent, is understood by many theologians to be the first sign of the new covenant. It reads, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” This sign of the new covenant is interpreted to mean that Satan will hurt Jesus (strike his heel), but eventually Jesus will destroy Satan and be victorious (crush your head). Psalm 91:13 is pointing us back to the first prophecy of Jesus’ death and resurrection. By saying that “you will tread upon the... cobra” and “you will trample... the serpent”, Psalm 91 is acknowledging our victory over Satan and death (the serpent), therefore implying that we must be united with Christ (Rom. 6:5, Rom. 8:37). Psalm 91:13 is truly fulfilled though in Luke 10:19, which reads, “I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.” Kraus understood this: “Taking refuge in the protective area and salvific might of Yahweh is in the NT fulfilled in the reality of the resurrection. Here the victorious power to overcome the world is granted to the individual (1 John 5:4)” (Kraus 225). It is through Christ and by him that we are given the power to overcome (1 John 5:4-5) Satan and death. We see some of the fulfillment of that promise in Paul’s life toward the end of Acts. “Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, ‘this man must be a murderer, for though he escaped from the

sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.' But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects" (Acts 28:3-5). Reading this section in Acts in light of Psalm 91:13 and Luke 10:19, we see the fulfillment of the Psalm's promise, evidenced by Paul's victory over a snake's bite, pointing to the fact that Jesus had victory and enables us the same. The last section of Psalm 91 shows God's relationship with us in light of this victory (the cross) and the promises he holds for us.

The fifth and last section of Psalm 91 is the oracle of salvation. These last verses (14-16) show the Lord coming on the scene verbally and promising wonderful things to he who loves him. It reads:

"Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation."

In this section, "the Lord announces his salvation oracle to all who love him (v. 14a). The word 'love' signifies here a deep longing or desire for the Lord. The fullness and depth of his redemption find reality in those who long for his redemption" (Longman 700). Given the progression of the Psalm, the reader and in particular, the author should both be longing deeply for the Lord's redemption, given that they have seen and/or experienced his shelter, shadow, refuge, and fortress. They have experienced God in all his protective nature and the Lord will confirm he is the God they have dwelled in. As verse fourteen progresses, it becomes blatantly clear that God is actually speaking, rather than the author

articulating God's actions, and God proves "that he is our refuge" (Futato 297). In doing so, God proves all of Psalm 91 to be true. By saying, "I will rescue him; I will protect him" (v. 14) God is validating the truths previously spoken about himself.

In verse fifteen, God speaks again and makes more promises. He promises to respond, to answer. God reverses what would be the normal, standard function of a master/servant relationship (Goldingay). Placing this verse in the Old Testament context, we know that servants had masters and came when they were called, "but Yhwh is happy for that exchange to take place in the opposite order" (Goldingay 48). God delights in hearing our call and actually responding, a complete reversal of roles. Yahweh then promises to be with the one who calls upon his name when he is in trouble. "Calling and having Yhwh answer means Yhwh acts to get him out of trouble" (Goldingay 48). God becomes one who acts on our behalf, for our good. This happens when we love him and realize our good is his good, for we begin to love what he loves. Finally, verse fifteen closes with God proclaiming that he will "deliver him and honor him." This is another reversal of roles but is also expressed as one of the benefits of our relationship with the Lord. He will answer us, be with us in trouble, deliver us and honor us.

The final verse of Psalm 91 (verse 16) stills one of humanity's deepest fears, that of death. "The Lord assures that his own will enjoy themselves as his children in this life and in the life to come" (Longman 701). The Lord promises not only long life on this earth, but an eternal one in the next. His salvation is not just something we experience in heaven, but it is something that God enables us, by his grace, to live in now (2 Corinthians 6:2, Romans 8:28-39) (Goldingay). God's salvation is "a

salvation no longer waited for but seen” (Kidner 334). Now, because of God’s salvation, we can say, “eternity is now”. We can begin living for Christ, in his protection and for His glory, for now and forevermore. God is revealing and confirming his salvation through verse 16. This verse should remind readers and point them to Isaiah 51:6: “But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.” These truths should still humanity’s fear of death. By looking to Christ and trusting in him, they are offered eternal life. Psalm 91:16 can only be said in light of Christ, for without him, we are left in our sin. This verse assures us a hope and a future.

To understand Psalm 91 as fully as possible, it is always significant to read and look for parallel passages that shed light on the Psalm. Kraus says, “Psalm 34 above all should be mentioned. Here too we find the didactic address that vividly describes the salvation of God” (Kraus 222). The language of Psalm 34 is similar in how it describes the Lord’s deliverance from evil; in fact it is the most used word in the Psalm. Psalm 34 also recalls the language of refuge: “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him” (Psalm 34:8). Reading Psalm 34 alongside Psalm 91 reaffirms and drives home the message and promise of God’s protection for those who “dwell in the shelter of the Most High” (Psalm 91:1).

This beautifully written, anonymous Psalm has been one of consolation and comfort to believers for hundreds of years and rightly so. Even when our situations don’t line up to how the Psalm predicts it will, we can draw assurance of God’s presence and protection in our lives regardless. There is something oddly comforting and soothing about the Psalm that leads us to God, even when our lives

seem to be diametrically opposed to the promises of Psalm 91. Regardless of your situation, allow the Psalm to bring you to Yahweh, for He is the Most High, the Almighty, the Lord, and our God who promised himself long ago and promises himself now through Jesus Christ as our shelter, shadow, refuge and fortress. He is our protection and it is in His name that we put our trust, for “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore” (Psalm 125:2).

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