

Form and Meaning in Psalm 131

Which should come first, form-critical analysis or exegesis? Many commentators first attempt to establish the literary form of a text, and then interpret it accordingly. On the face of it, this is the common-sensical thing to do: until we know what sort of literature we are dealing with, how can we analyse its meaning? The trouble with doing this with ancient biblical literature is that the genres are not easy to establish. All too often, a scholar decides that a text belongs to a particular genre and then has to rewrite it because some parts sit rather uneasily with what the characteristics of the genre are supposed to be. Thus, with our present Psalm, one recent commentator decides that because, as it stands, it begins with an address to God but lacks a petition, it must be incomplete, “a fragment”⁽¹⁾. There are no ancient handbooks of Hebrew rhetoric to tell us what the genres actually were. We have to deduce them from the text, and then read the text in the light of the hypothetical genres; a somewhat precariously circular procedure. For this reason, I shall begin with an attempt to expound the text of our Psalm, and defer a verdict on the Form (and related matters, such as dating) for the time being. For the moment I shall simply observe that this short Psalm — “surely one of the most beautiful prayers in the psalter”⁽²⁾ — is usually styled a Psalm of Confidence, like Psalms 16, 23 and 62⁽³⁾. Mowinckel thought it a national Psalm of Lamentation, uttered by an individual on behalf of all⁽⁴⁾. There are those who take the

⁽¹⁾ L.D. CROW, *The Songs of Ascent (Pss 120-134): Their Place in Israelite History and Religion* (SBLD 148; Atlanta 1996) 94.

⁽²⁾ S.J.L. CROFT, *The Identity of the Individual in the Psalms* (JSOTSS 44; Sheffield, 1987) 149.

⁽³⁾ Gunkel thought the Psalm of Confidence an adjunct of the Psalm of Individual Lament: in effect, the Certainty of a Hearing, without the Lament itself. Day, however, among others, sees it as a Gattung in its own right. See J. DAY, *Psalms*, (OT Guides; Sheffield 1990) 52.

⁽⁴⁾ S. MOWINCKEL, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, transl. D.R.Ap-Thomas. 2 vols. (Oxford 1962) I, 216, 222. (“An individual (‘I’) speaks on behalf of the congregation, identifying himself with its distress: he is, in fact, the liturgical representative of the congregation — the chief priest, or somebody similar”: 222).

"I" to be the King. It is commonly believed, however, e.g. by Anderson⁽⁵⁾, that the "I" in this Psalm is a private individual. Some think that v. 3 was added later. The original *Sitz im Leben* is controverted. Vv. 1-2 are regarded by Michel⁽⁶⁾ as written in imitation of the sort of moral interrogation that we find at the beginning of an entrance liturgy (e.g. in Psalms 15 and 24). Quell accepts this for 1-2a, but 2b he thinks had a separate origin, being a sentiment to be sung by a female worshipper. The two poems may, in his view, have been deposited (as Mowinckel had suggested that texts may sometimes have been) in the Temple. The two brief poems were subsequently joined together, and v. 3 added, to make the Ascent Psalm that we now have⁽⁷⁾. Seybold also strikes a feminist note, arguing that vv. 1-2, if not v. 3 too, are "a personal expression of piety made at the gates of the temple by a woman pilgrim carrying her child"⁽⁸⁾. H. Seidels, however, takes the Psalm to be a professional pilgrimage song emanating from the circle of the Levites⁽⁹⁾.

I. Exegesis

V.1a. It has been observed by several commentators that it is remarkable that a Psalm so apparently individual as 131 should have the expression לידך in its superscription, whereas the following Psalm, which is very much concerned with the Davidic king and his dynasty, should lack it. It seems conceivable that it has wandered through scribal inadvertence from the one Psalm to the other,

⁽⁵⁾ "The speaker in the Psalm seems to be an individual rather than the personified Israel, because of the intensely personal language of the composition": A.A. ANDERSON, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. II (NCB; London 1972) 878.

⁽⁶⁾ "Hier liegt wohl eine vergeistigte Form des Beichtspiegels vor": D. MICHEL, *Tempora und Satzstellung in den Psalmen* (Abhandlungen zur evangelischen Theologie 1; Bonn 1960) 119.

⁽⁷⁾ G. QUELL, "Struktur und Sinn des Psalms 131", in F. MAASS (ed.), *Das Ferne und Nahe Wort* (Fs. L. Rost) (BZAW 105; Berlin 1967) 173-185.

⁽⁸⁾ L.C. ALLEN, *Psalms 101-150* (WBCy 21; Milton Keynes 1987) 198, referring to K. SEYBOLD, *Die Wallfahrtspsalmen*. Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Psalm 120-134 (Biblische-Theologische Studien 3; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1978) 34, 37-38, 54, which I have not been able to consult.

⁽⁹⁾ See W. BEYERLIN, *Wider die Hybris des Geistes*. Studien zum 131. Psalm (SBS 108; Stuttgart 1982) 11-13.

particularly since the Targum, the Lucianic recension of LXX, and Jerome's *Psalterium Juxta Hebraeos* lack the phrase in this Psalm. The need, however, for kings to be humble is a favourite theme of the "Davidic" Psalms: cf 18,28 [EVV18,27] ("You deliver a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down"), 34,7 [EVV 34,6] ("This poor man cried..."), and 101,5 ("A haughty look and an arrogant heart I will not tolerate"). There are other connections too with the monarchy. As noted by de Boer, in 2 Chr 32,25 several of the terms found in our Psalm are used of Hezekiah. Being a proud man (גבה לבו), he was not grateful for the good done to him (גמל עליו), that is, his recovery from illness⁽¹⁰⁾. We shall say more of this text later, but at the moment it is sufficient to note that a royal reading of the Psalm has a certain plausibility. We may add that Ps 62, with which it has affinities (especially with vv. 2.6 [EVV1.5]): (אך לאלהים דומי נפשי and אך אלי־אלהים דומיה נפשי), is confidently identified by Eaton⁽¹¹⁾ as a Royal Psalm. These considerations favour the retention in 131,1a of לרוד.

V. 1b. ידוה. The Psalm begins with an address to the deity, but ends (v. 3) with a call to Israel to trust in God. If v. 3 is integral to the Psalm, rather than a liturgical addition, it is quite possible that the initial invocation to YHWH is redactional and that the addressee throughout is Israel. In which case, the Psalm could originally have been more in the nature of a personal reflection than a prayer to God. We shall return in due course to the question of the Psalm's unity.

V. 1b. The Psalmist here, as Beyerlin notes, employs the figure *synecdoche*, the part (heart; eyes) standing for the whole person. The part mentioned, however, as he shows, is not chosen at random: the Psalmist is speaking of his whole self, but with special reference to his heart and his eyes. He is not haughty in his heart — that is, probably, in his thinking; he is not lifted up in respect of his eyes — that is, probably, in his way of looking at things. The two expressions thus add up to a single thought, the renunciation of arrogance⁽¹²⁾.

⁽¹⁰⁾ P.A.H. DE BOER, "Psalm CXXXI 2", VT 16 (1966) 287-292.

⁽¹¹⁾ J.H. EATON, *Kingship and the Psalms* (SBT 2nd series 32; London 1976) 49-50.

⁽¹²⁾ BEYERLIN, *Wider die Hybris*, 56-60.

V. 1c. הלכתי בגדלות. The Psalmist could easily here have continued the *synecdoche* by saying that his feet have not stood on high ground; what he has written is, however, perhaps more elegant. If 131 is a Royal Psalm, the implication may be that it belongs more to a king to serve than to seek self-aggrandizement and glory. Greatness and the marvellous pertain more to God than mankind: God is דגול and works נפלאות, Ps 86,10; he alone works גדלות נפלאה, Ps 136,4; it is for the Psalmist to meditate on and recount God's נפלאה, Pss 9,2 [EVV 9,1]; 26,7; 105,2; 145,5 and his גדלות, Ps 145,6. (See also Job 5,9: God's גדלות are unsearchable, his נפלאה innumerable.) Probably, therefore, whether one is a king or not, "to 'go about' (הלך ב) these normally divine activities is to arrogate divine attributes to oneself"⁽¹³⁾. In course of time the *great matters* came to be interpreted as the problems of Greek philosophy (Sir 3,21-24); Keet, indeed, who believes the Psalm to be post-exilic, supposes this to be quite probably the original meaning⁽¹⁴⁾. Quell, for whom the speaker is a woman, takes the sense to be that she has forsworn theological or cultic reflection, being an unlearned person⁽¹⁵⁾.

V. 2a. אמת-לא. This is normally here (as in e.g. 2 Kgs 9,26; Job 1,11) taken to mean "verily, truly, indeed": GKC 149b. (Originally, when used in this sense, the words were supposedly followed by an imprecation.) So, for example, apart from the majority of modern commentators, David Kimhi⁽¹⁶⁾. G.R. Driver, however, argued for it here meaning "but" (cf the Peshitta and the Syrohexaplar), like the Aram. אלא, Syriac 'ella'⁽¹⁷⁾ (cf Ezek 3,6). I favour, however, the usual interpretation. The idiom was no doubt chosen because the לא

⁽¹³⁾ CROW, *Songs of Ascent*, 95.

⁽¹⁴⁾ C.C. KEET, *A Study of the Psalms of Ascents: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary upon Psalms CXX to CXXIV* (London 1969) 82.

⁽¹⁵⁾ QUELL, "Struktur und Sinn des Psalms 131", 185. He thinks that הלכתי should perhaps be vocalized as a *qal*.

⁽¹⁶⁾ "Used idiomatically to introduce an imprecation or oath, as in [Isa 5,9; 14,24], the meaning being: if such a matter does not come to pass, then let such and such a thing happen, as in 'God do so to me (and more also)' (2 Sam 3,35; 19,14; 1 Kgs 2,23; 2 Kgs 6,31)": D. KIMHI, *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi on Psalms CXX-CL*, ed. and transl. by J. Baker and E.W. Nicholson (Cambridge 1973) 41.

⁽¹⁷⁾ G.R. DRIVER, "Notes on the Psalms. II. 73-150", *JTS* 44 (1943) 12-23, 21.

would pick up the threefold use of the word in v. 1. We may follow Beyerlin⁽¹⁸⁾, therefore, in here translating it “No!”

שׁוֹרֵה is usually taken, I think rightly, to come from שׁוֹרָה I, to be even or level, giving the meaning “I have made level” (as with the ground, in Isa 28,25; and perhaps of quieting mental disturbance at Isa 38,13, though the text and meaning of that verse are very uncertain), or “I have calmed.” Jerome (*proposui*) seemingly took it from שׁוֹרָה II = “to set or place”, as did Kimhi, who rendered it by the verb שׁוֹמֵם⁽¹⁹⁾, but this is less satisfactory. Emendations such as שׁוֹרֵה I have cried out [cf Ps 30,3 (EVV 30,2)], or שׁוֹרֵה I have bowed down [cf Ps 38,7] (Cheyne), are unnecessary. LXX and Peshitta (I humbled) and Vulgate (*humiliter sentiebam*, I felt humble) probably have the MT reading, and take the verb to be שׁוֹרָה I.

It should be noted, however, that שׁוֹרָה I can also mean “to resemble” (cf 2 Sam 22,34; Ps 18,34 [EVV18,33]; Prov 26,4; Dan 5,21), and was taken so here by Symmachus (ἐξίστωσα). We shall return to this point.

Loretz⁽²⁰⁾ believes that a noun (perhaps לִבִּי) has fallen out after שׁוֹרֵה. This is an attractive suggestion, since it would give a more regular structure to the Psalm, or at least to vv. 1-2, which would consist of four bicola, each displaying parallelism:

- 1b *O LORD, my heart is not haughty,
my eyes are not lifted up.*
- 1c *I have not occupied myself with great matters,
with things too wondrous for me.*
- 2a *I have indeed (?) calmed (?) [? my heart]
and I have quieted (?) my soul.*
- 2b *Like a weaned child on its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul to me.*

His understanding of 2b is doubtful, but otherwise the analysis is attractive. I am not persuaded, however, that he is right to emend. The fact that an emendation produces a more regular structure is not conclusive. How do we know that the Hebrew Psalmists operated with strict rules about such things? The text of many of the Psalms

⁽¹⁸⁾ BEYERLIN, *Wider die Hybris*, 33-35, 61.

⁽¹⁹⁾ KIMHI, *Psalms CXX-CL*, 40-41.

⁽²⁰⁾ O. LORETZ, “Zur Parallelität zwischen KTU 1.6 1128-30 und Ps. 131,2b”, *UF* 17 (1986) 183-187, 185.

that has come down to us must suggest otherwise. It might have been better to write Loretz' version of 2a; but that does not mean that that is what the Psalmist wrote. I think that the Psalm does use parallelism, but that 2a is an imperfect bicolon (or a colon with internal parallelism).

V. 2a. וְדוּמְמתי is supposedly a *polal* form from דָּמָה I = be silent, quiet. So Jerome: *silere feci*. Peshitta does not seem to have anything corresponding to it. LXX and Vulgate have *I have exalted*, which presumably translates רָמַמתי (found in a few Hebrew manuscripts). This seems likely to be a misreading. de Boer thinks that this took place because עָלִי אָמַר was taken to mean (rightly, he supposes) *against* its mother⁽²¹⁾. The MT reading is doubtless correct: the Psalmist speaks of his passive self-abandonment to God.

Crow wonders whether the author has chosen the verb דָּמָה because of its similarity to דָּמָה, "to resemble", a synonym in one of its senses of the verb שָׁוָה. (Symmachus indeed renders it ὁμοίωσα). Crow suggests that the Psalmist is punning, using two verbs to express calming or quietening which coincidentally suggest the idea of comparison, by way of introducing the simile of the weaned child⁽²²⁾. This seems quite plausible. We may therefore perhaps translate: "I have made my נַפֶּשׁ like something calm, like something quiet."

נַפֶּשׁ. It is now widely accepted that נַפֶּשׁ (like the Ugaritic *npš* [as in *npš mt*, the maw/gorge of Death]) sometimes means neck, throat, gullet, appetite or breathing/speaking apparatus (the meaning of the root being to breathe). KB recognize a number of instances, including several in the Psalter: 44,26; 63,6; 107,9,18; 119,25; 143,6. Dahood identifies still other occurrences, including Pss 7,3; 27,12 and 41,3. No one, however, finds the idea in Ps 131,2, yet this is surely one of the cases where the word נַפֶּשׁ carries *some* of the connotation of "throat". The Psalmist, having previously been raucous, has now abated his complaining. Thus, as with לֵב and עֵינַי there is an element of *synecdoche* about the use of נַפֶּשׁ. I suggest further that something of the same sort is found in the preceding Psalm: when he says that his נַפֶּשׁ has waited for YHWH, that it <hopes> in his Master, Ps 130,5-6, the Psalmist is picking up the

(21) DE BOER, "Psalm CXXXI 2", 289-290.

(22) CROW, *Songs of Ascent*, 96.

appeal in v. 2 to the divine Master to hear his *voice* and the *sound* of his pleading. Similarly in Ps 62,2.6 [EVV 62,1.5], quoted above, $\text{נָפֵשׁ אֱלֹהִים דּוֹמֵה נָפֵשׁ}$ and $\text{נָפֵשׁ אֱלֹהִים דּוֹמֵה נָפֵשׁ}$ may carry connotations of making a silent cry to God.

If the נָפֵשׁ were identical with the "I", as is commonly supposed, how could a relationship between the two be envisaged, even an "imaginary" one, as predicated by Beyerlin⁽²³⁾? Beyerlin rightly draws a parallel between our Psalm and Ps 42-43 (a single Psalm originally), where the Psalmist addresses his נָפֵשׁ and calls upon it to wait in hope for YHWH (the same verb as we have in 131,3). He does not, however, acknowledge how appropriately connotations of "throat" can be predicated of the word נָפֵשׁ in that Psalm: it yearns and thirsts for God like a hart for waters (42,2-3).

The accentuation, with the word נָפֵשׁ carrying the accent *'ôlè w'ÿôred*, has a pause after 2a. Quell, in the light of this, argues for taking 2a with verse 1. He contends that the metre also favours this, vv. 1-2a consisting of three phrases in 2+2 metre (יְהוָה being excluded from the calculation, being in anacrusis), followed by 3+3 in 2b⁽²⁴⁾. Metrical calculations are, of course, somewhat speculative⁽²⁵⁾. Further, the ancient Rabbis also indicate a pause after שִׁירֵי in 2a α , witness the presence of the disjunctive accent *'azla l'garmeh* (similarly with the accent *shalsheleth magnum* after הַלְכָתִי in 1c), which Quell ignores since it would not help his case. The accentuation in fact of v. 2 is perfectly consistent with its being taken as a unit⁽²⁶⁾.

⁽²³⁾ BEYERLIN, *Wider die Hybris*, 32.

⁽²⁴⁾ QUELL, "Struktur und Sinn des Psalms 131", 177.

⁽²⁵⁾ The first two verses are analysed *inter alia* in the following ways:

v. 1 Gunkel: 3+3 (2); 3+2 (3); Schmidt 3+3; 3+2; Allen 3+3; 3+2; Dahood 3+3; 3+3; Kraus 3+3; 3+2. (All include the tetragrammaton). BEYERLIN, who omits the tetragrammaton from the calculation, has 3+3+5.

v. 2 Gunkel: 4; 3+3; Schmidt: 4+3; 3; Allen: 2+3; 3+3; Dahood: 3+3; 3+3; Kraus 4; 3+3; Beyerlin: 4; 3+3.

⁽²⁶⁾ First the verse is divided into two in accordance with the parallelism, the first colon ending in an *'ôlè w'ÿôred*, the second with a *silluq*. Each colon is then subdivided, in accordance with internal parallelism, the first half-colon ending in a disjunctive accent, the *'azla' l'garmeh* and the *'athnach* respectively. The verse seems to be perfectly regular judged by the rules identified by W. WICKES, שְׁעָרֵי אֱמִת , *A Treatise on the Accentuation of the three so-called Poetical Books of the Old Testament, Psalms, Proverbs and Job* (Oxford 1881).

V. 2bα. כָּנַמְל עַלִי אִמִּי. גַּמַּל means, among other things (e.g. to ripen), something like “to deal fully or adequately with” (BDB). When babies are in question (as in Hos 1,8 and Isa 11,8 and 28,9) the procedure indicated is commonly taken to be weaning. P. de Boer, however, thinks it improbable that עַלִי here means “on”: a local sense “occurs nearly always in connection with places, rivers and the like”. When גַּמַּל is followed by עַל, the sense is “to do something to another person, to deal with someone, to give him what is coming to him, *in malam et bonam partem*.” He therefore translates 2b “just as one does with his mother, thus I have made myself content.” He supposes that the Psalmist is referring to a proverb, and he notes a Sumerian saying: “Accept your lot, and make your mother happy; do it quickly and make your god happy”⁽²⁷⁾. I find this distinctly unconvincing: not only, as de Boer acknowledges, is one’s mother seldom in the OT a person to care for, but his translation would surely require emendation. Nevertheless, de Boer has, I suspect, put us on the track of the correct understanding of 2b (see below).

VanGemenen argues that “the word *gamul* can also mean contented...the essential picture is that of contentment regardless of the age”. Thus in Isa 28,9 גַּמְוִלִי מוֹחֵלֵב will mean “satisfied with milk”, whether of sucklings who have just been satisfied with their mothers’ milk or of children who have been weaned off it. In 1 Kgs 11,20 the meaning may be that Genubah’s mother brought him up or adopted, rather than weaned, him in the house of the pharaoh (cf LXX ἐξέθρεψε). In Isa 11,8 we read of the גַּמְוִלִי who puts his hand in the viper’s nest, after reference to the suckling who plays near the hole of the cobra. It is not clear, VanGemenen says, whether the two words are virtually synonyms indicating very young children, or whether the גַּמְוִלִי is distinguished from the suckling as a slightly older child who has been weaned. The meaning “satisfied” or “contented” fits well, he argues, for Hebrew proper names such as Gamul, Gamaliel and Gemalli (and Accadian names such as Gamalilim and Gamal-Shamash). He therefore translates v. 2 “Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul; like a contented/satisfied child (suckling or infant) upon (by) his mother”⁽²⁸⁾. VanGemenen may or may not be right to be suspicious of taking גַּמְוִלִי to mean “weaned”

⁽²⁷⁾ DE BOER, “Psalm CXXXI 2”, 290-293.

⁽²⁸⁾ W.A. VANGEMEREN, “Psalm 131:2 — *k’gamul*. The Problem of Meaning and Metaphor”, *Hebrew Studies* 23 (1982) 51-57, 52-56.

in some of the texts quoted, but, as we shall see, his approach does not help us much with the troublesome 2bβ, כּוּמַל עַלִי נִפְשִׁי.

The ancient versions are at one in taking the first גּוּמַל to mean a weaned child, and I think we should follow them. 2bα will surely mean “like a weaned child on its mother”. That toddlers were carried on a parent’s shoulders is attested by b. Hag 5b-6a (cf ANEP 49). It is true that עַל with a person seldom means “on”; it tends to carry a connotation of the burdensome or the oppressive⁽²⁹⁾. But we have a close parallel to the situation envisaged in our text at Isa 49,22, “they will bring your sons in their bosom, and your daughters will be carried on (עַל) their shoulders”. But why does the Psalmist specify a weaned child rather than a baby? Children were weaned late (as late as three years, in 2 Macc 7,27); the idea may therefore be, as Anderson supposes, that before weaning they got increasingly restless as their mothers found it more and more difficult to satisfy their appetites. A newly weaned child is, therefore, likely to have recently ceased to be raucous, and thus provides the writer with an apt image for his own attainment of quiet contentment⁽³⁰⁾. The image of the weaned child thus follows well upon the claim that the Psalmist has calmed and silenced his נִפְשִׁי.

Is there any suggestion here of a maternal side to the deity? Does the Psalmist imagine himself as snuggling up to God? The mention here of the mother rather than the father of the child may have been suggested simply by the idea of weaning. On the other hand, maternal affection (or, to speak more accurately, an affection that is more than maternal) is certainly ascribed to God on occasion in the Old Testament⁽³¹⁾, so it may well be implied here too.

V. 2bβ. כּוּמַל עַלִי נִפְשִׁי. These words have been the despair of translators and commentators. Most of them fail to translate the article, but this is defensible if it is taken as referring back to the first גּוּמַל⁽³²⁾. The Peshitta renders them, “and like a weaned child, so

⁽²⁹⁾ e.g. at Gen 33,13; Num 11,13; Isa 1,14; Job 7,20.

⁽³⁰⁾ In 1 Sam 1,22, Hannah says that she will take the child Samuel up to the shrine at Shiloh after he has been weaned. Is it possible that this story has influenced our Psalmist?

⁽³¹⁾ As at Isa 49,15; perhaps also Ps 22,10,11 and Jer 31,22; cf too Ps 27,10, where the Psalmist professes himself surer of a good reception by God than by his parents.

⁽³²⁾ As in Hab 3,8 (הַבְּנֵהִים...בְּנֵהִים): F. DELITZSCH, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. III, tr. D. Eaton (London 1889) 303. Delitzsch suggests

was my soul to me”, which would surely require כן. “To me” is a possible rendering of עלי, though על in this sense (= in my eyes: Rashi) is a post-exilic usage (BDB, על 8)⁽³³⁾. RV has *my soul is with me like a weaned child*; NEB and REB *as a weaned child clinging to me* (they delete the words, though); RSV *like a child that is quieted is my soul*, which omits עלי and mistranslates גמל⁽³⁴⁾. NRSV *my soul is like the weaned child that is with me* would make sense only if (as suggested by Quell and Seybold) spoken by a worshipper carrying a child⁽³⁵⁾. I find it hard to believe that a poem would have found its way into the Psalter if it could have been sung only by a minority of the congregation. JB and NJB, as is their wont, translate creatively, unconstrained by the actual Hebrew text: *as content as a child that has been weaned and like a little child, so I keep myself*. The New Latin Psalter has *Sicut parvulus, ita in me est anima mea*, which mistranslates גמל and has a dubious rendering of עלי. The translation of על as “within” was already rejected by BDB as “incorrect”. Some take עלי as “within me” at Pss 42,5; 142,4 and 143,4, but very questionably⁽³⁶⁾.

VanGemenen, taking גמל, as we have seen, to mean contented rather than weaned, comes up with the translation “So is my soul contented/satisfied within me”⁽³⁷⁾. This seems to me unsatisfactory on several counts: he is taking כ as if it were כן; he is ignoring the gender of נפש, which would require גמולה; he is taking no account of the article with גמל; and he is taking על in a doubtful sense.

Loretz, as we have seen, takes v. 2 to mean *Like a weaned child on its mother; like a weaned child is my soul to me*. He finds here

another reason: the absence of a “collateral definition”, as in Deut 32,2 and Isa 41,2 (? the idiom noted at GKC 126q).

⁽³³⁾ “By writers of the silver age, it is sometimes used with the force of a dative.” [e.g. 1 Chr 13,2] Beyerlin so understands it in both cola, noting that this interpretation fits well with the common opinion that the Psalm is “very late”: BEYERLIN, *Wider die Hybris*, 27 n.33.

⁽³⁴⁾ Unless Vangemenen is right about the semantic range of גמל.

⁽³⁵⁾ They think in terms of a mother, but it is not clear why. The Mishnah (Hag 1.1) and the Talmud (Hag 6a) speak of a child being carried on the shoulders of his father. If v. 2 referred to a child being carried, would it not be more natural to take it thus: “Like a weaned child carried by its mother, nay like the child that I, its father, am now carrying”?

⁽³⁶⁾ See BEYERLIN, *Wider die Hybris*, 25 and n.17.

⁽³⁷⁾ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5: Psalms – Song of Songs (ed. W.A. VANGEMEREN) (Grand Rapids 1976) 56.

the *parallelismus membrorum* that he detects throughout vv. 1-2. He further⁽³⁸⁾ finds a formal parallel to Ugaritic usage, as in the tricolon *As is the heart of the cow to its calf/ As is the heart of the ewe to its lamb/ So [literally, As] is the heart of Anat after Baal* (KTU 1.6 II 28-30). Loretz takes the Psalmist to be using repetition for emphasis, in conformity to long established linguistic usage. He may be right, but if so the Masoretes were presumably in error in pointing the second *גמל* in the way that they did. Moreover, Loretz' interpretation entails taking *על* in a different sense in the two cola.

Dahood re-points *עָלִי עָלִי* which, he says, "parses as the Phoenician third-person suffix" (in Isa 52,14, he similarly amends the text, from *עַלֶיךָ* to *כִּי עָלִי*) and translates "Like an infant with him is my soul". This seems somewhat contrived.

Some of the ancient versions take the verb *גמל* in 2b β to mean, as it often does, "to recompense": LXX $\acute{\omega}\varsigma \acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\alpha\pi\acute{o}\delta\omicron\sigma\iota\varsigma$ [*al. \acute{\epsilon}\omega\varsigma \acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\alpha\pi\acute{o}\delta\omicron\omega\sigma\epsilon\iota\varsigma*] ἐπὶ τὴν ψυχὴν μου; Symmachus οὕτως ἀνταποδοθεῖη τῇ ψυχῇ μου; Vulgate *ita retributio in anima mea*; Syrohexaplar "so you did recompense me". Unfortunately, they do not manage to get a satisfactory sense out of the Hebrew text, partly because they take *אם-לא* to mean "if not." Thus LXX and Vulgate take the Psalmist to say, "If I have not been humble but have exalted [רממתי] my soul, then, just as a weaned child is to its mother [i.e. a nuisance?], so let retribution come upon my soul"⁽³⁹⁾. This is unconvincing, not least because it depends on the reading *רממתי*, which would have been less likely to suffer corruption than the better attested *דממתי*, and it would require emendation to *כן גמל*. It does, though, point us in the right direction, namely to taking *על* closely with *גמל*. I suggest that we need to make a minimal textual emendation and read *כי תגמל עלי נפשי* (which may well be what the Syrohexaplar is translating) in the sense "surely you have dealt kindly with me"⁽⁴⁰⁾. The Psalmist is deliberately using the verb *גמל*

⁽³⁸⁾ Following BEYERLIN, *Wider die Hybris*, 50, n.11.

⁽³⁹⁾ LXX and Vulgate could be reading the noun *גמל*: cf C.A. BRIGGS, *The Book of Psalms*. Vol. II (ICC; Edinburgh 1907) 467: "so is bountiful dealing unto my soul"; he oddly, however, says that LXX, Vulgate and Symmachus seem to presuppose the infinitive construct form *גמל*. Symmachus makes quite good sense: "If I have not assimilated and likened my soul to a child that has been weaned to its mother, thus let retribution be given to my soul". It would require, however, emendation of the consonantal text as well as of the pointing.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Alternatively we can follow Mowinckel, Schmidt and Kraus in reading a niph'al form, *תגמל*. (An excellent suggestion, says H. GUNKEL, *Die Psalmen*.

and the noun נפש in two different senses: “Surely I have calmed and quieted my voice/breathing apparatus like a weaned child on its mother’s shoulder. Surely you have dealt kindly with me”⁽⁴¹⁾. The pun cannot readily be rendered in English, though we could perhaps translate גמל as “toddler” and תגמל (rather less felicitously) as “coddled”.

As noted above, de Boer has drawn attention to a text in 2 Chronicles (32,25) where we find not only the idiom גמל על used in this sense, but also the verb גבה used of לב: Hezekiah, being a proud man (גבה לבו) was not grateful for the good done to him (גמל עליו). The closeness of the two texts makes it likely, I would suggest, that the Chronicler was aware of, and was deliberately recalling, Ps 131. His familiarity with the preceding and the following Psalm is evident from 2 Chr 6,40-42, where Solomon is made to echo them. My suspicion that גמל על is being used in our text in the sense claimed is confirmed by the striking parallel with Ps 116,7 שרבי נפשי למנוחכי כיריחה גמל עליכי, “Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.” (NRSV)

It is time to return to the question of whether 2b goes with 2a, or whether it marks a new statement. On the whole, I think it goes with both what precedes and what follows. The Psalmist notes that he has quieted his complaints, and proceeds in v. 3 to encourage his fellow-Israelites similarly to trust in YHWH. 2b does, though, build on what has gone before: although 2a has not directly used maternal imagery, it has spoken of calming the נפש, using verbs which suggest assimilation with something shortly to be identified.

V. 3. Skehan among others has noted connections with the previous Psalm. In Ps 130,7 [EVV 130,6] the phrase found at 131,3 occurs: יחל ישראל אל-יחודה; both Psalms also speak of נפשי (130,5,6; 131,2 [bis]). Further, in both Psalms the writer adopts a lowly pose; and both Psalms are, as Dahood notes, bipartite: beginning with an

4. Auflage (HAT, II.2; Göttingen 1925) 564.) Kissene proposes כן גמל, “so is my soul weaned in me,” ignoring the gender of נפש: E.J. KISSENE, *The Book of Psalms*. Vol. II (Dublin 1954) 269.

⁽⁴¹⁾ LXX clearly realized that the word גמל is used in two different senses. Crow, although he identifies a pun in the words שרה and דמם, oddly declines to find one in גמל, on the ground that the two occurrences come so close to each other.

address to YHWH and ending with a call to the congregation. Presumably the redactors have deliberately placed our present Psalm after one which speaks of hope and waiting⁽⁴²⁾.

Some commentators, as we have said before, treat v. 3 as a redactional addition. If the Psalm was originally a purely personal poem, this is possible. If, however, it was designed to be sung by the King, an invitation to the congregation to follow the singer's example of trust would have been very appropriate.

A free translation of the text as slightly emended may now be offered:

- 1b *O LORD, my heart is not haughty,
my eyes are not lifted up.*
*I have not occupied myself with great matters,
with things too wondrous for me.*
- 2a *No, I have made like something calm
and like something quiet my heaving breast:*
- 2b *like a toddler on its mother,
surely you have coddled my heaving breast.*
- 3 *Await in hope, O Israel, for the LORD,
from now and for evermore.*

II. Literary Form and *Sitz im Leben*

Was the Psalm written as a unity? Was it cobbled together from fragments of devotional poetry deposited in the Temple and subsequently worked up into a song for congregational use? Was it (or part of it) designed for use at the Temple gates by a female worshipper with a child on her shoulder? Was it sung by the King? It is hard to say, particularly since some of these life-situations are somewhat hypothetical: we do not know whether things were deposited in the Temple (like petitions on a present-day prayer-board at the back of a church?) We do not know whether things were ever written to be used specifically by women worshippers. We do not even know for certain whether some Psalms were proclaimed by the King, though this at least is very likely.

If I had to take up a position on these matters, I should opt for taking Ps 131 as a Royal Psalm. As Crow has noted, it is plausible

⁽⁴²⁾ Beaucamp, indeed, sees 131 as "perhaps an appendix" to Ps 130: E. BEAUCAMP, *Le Psautier* [tom. 2:] *Ps 73-150* (SB 7; Paris 1979) 255.

to take the denial of *hybris* as a rejection of the arrogance attributed to foreign kings in Isaiah and Ezekiel⁽⁴³⁾. Even if it was not originally a Royal Psalm, it can be argued that Ps 131 became one when לָדָר was added (if it was) to the superscription. The Psalm in its final form serves as a warning that kings should not be proud but should place all their trust in their divine Master and call upon their subjects to do likewise⁽⁴⁴⁾.

But is our Psalm early enough to be a Royal Psalm? Many commentators admittedly suppose it to be post-exilic, but this is little more than surmise⁽⁴⁵⁾. Some of the Psalms of Ascent (but not this one) have unusual lexical features, such as the use of ׀, which may be late; on the other hand, they may be archaisms or survivals. (׀ is found in one of the very earliest passages of the Hebrew Bible, the Song of Deborah: Judg 5,7 [*bis*]⁽⁴⁶⁾). Beyerlin and Crow both treat the Psalm as post-exilic. Beyerlin⁽⁴⁷⁾ posits a connection with the Wisdom movement, seeing a significant parallel with Job 42,2-6, where Job says that he has learnt his lesson and will henceforth forswear speaking of נַפְלְאוֹתָיו. Not only is the thinking comparable,

⁽⁴³⁾ CROW, *Songs of Ascent*, 97. See Isa 14-19; 23; Ezek 26-28.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Kimhi, following Numbers Rabbah (IV. 20), finds allusions to David's own life: his heart was not proud when Samuel anointed him; his eyes were not haughty when he killed Goliath; he did not walk in matters too great for him when he was reinstated; and he eschewed matters too marvellous for him when he brought up the Ark to Jerusalem. KIMHI, *Psalms CXX-CL*, 42-43.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ So, for example, without evidence, BRIGGS, *Psalms*, II, 466: "the Ps is doubtless one of the late Greek period"; and ANDERSON, *Psalms*, II, 878: "The date of the Psalm may well be post-Exilic". If לִי means (as Peshitta and Rashi, among others, including BEYERLIN, suppose) "to me", it will point to a post-exilic date; but such an interpretation is improbable.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ On the Judges text, Moore wrote many years ago: "The rel. ׀ is frequent in late BH, and in MH supplants ׀ altogether; but it is unsafe to infer that it was of late origin...We have equally little ground for pronouncing ׀ a peculiarity of a northern dialect. The relatives ׀ and ׀ are probably of different origin, and may have existed side by side in all periods of the language": G.F. MOORE, *Judges* (ICC; Edinburgh 1895) 144-145. More recently Dahood has also protested at the view that ׀ "as a relative pronoun [is] limited to late Hebrew and passages with North Palestinian colouring...The Ugaritic personal name šbʿl...can well be interpreted 'the One of Baal', in which šu is the relative pronoun": M. DAHOOD, *Psalms III (101-150)* (AB 17A; New York 1970) III, 251-252. Soggin at one time suggested the possibility of taking ׀ in Judg 5,7 as 'an ancient causative in š- (the šafel form)': J.A. SOGGIN, *Judges* (OTL; London 1981) 86.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ BEYERLIN, *Wider die Hybris*, 76-80.

he says, but the Job passage is form-critically similar to a divine oracle or to a Certainty of a Hearing section in a Psalm of Individual Lament or Confidence, such as our present Psalm is. I am not persuaded by the argument. A similarity between Job 42,2-6 (and other parts of that book) and the Psalms of Individual Lament is evident enough, but what does it prove? Surely not that any individual Psalm of Lament (or, for that matter, any Jeremican Confession) comes from the same period as the Book of Job. If a direct influence needs to be posited in respect of Ps 131 and Job 42, the Psalm could surely have influenced the author of Job rather than the reverse. But why need such a connection be made? Talk of God's נפלאות is not confined to Wisdom texts: it is found in both prophetic⁽⁴⁸⁾ and historical⁽⁴⁹⁾ texts.

Was the Psalm written as it now stands, as a unity? It is hard to be certain, but the arguments urged against this supposition do not convince me. The main problem is that whereas verse 1 is addressed to YHWH, verse 3 is addressed to Israel. Should we regard either the Tetragrammaton in v. 1 or the whole of v. 3 as redactional? Let us examine the arguments. I take the case of v.1 first. It is possible to argue that the ancient Rabbis found the word יודה here problematic on the basis of the "Note-line" that follows it. This line is usually taken as the sign *l'garmeh*, part of the accent *m'huppak l'garmeh*, which has a disjunctive force. This, though, tends to show, at most, that the Rabbis took the divine name to constitute an anacrusis. Kennedy, however, believes that there is no distinction between *paseq* and *l'garmeh*. He thinks, *pace* Wickes, that the "Note-line" antedates the accentual system. The Masoretes, "viewing 'Paseq' as if it were really a mark occasionally inserted to separate words in a sentence, adopted their accentual arrangements in accordance with this erroneous idea, as they deemed best in every passage where it occurred"⁽⁵⁰⁾. There are fifteen different reasons for the insertion of the *paseq*, and both the occurrences in Ps 131,1 are instances of the fifteenth, namely to question the originality of the word that precedes it⁽⁵¹⁾. If Kennedy is right, the ancient copyists will have regarded יודה and הלכתי as incorrect readings. It is difficult,

⁽⁴⁸⁾ see Mic 7,15.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ see Exod 3,20; Josh 3,5; 1 Chr 16,12,24.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ J. KENNEDY, *The Note-line in the Hebrew Scriptures commonly called Paseq, or Pesiq* (Edinburgh 1903) 11.

⁽⁵¹⁾ KENNEDY, *Note-line*, 78,90.

I think, to see why they should have thought this of יְהוָה, unless of course they anticipated some modern scholars in supposing that a Psalm that ended by addressing the people could not have begun by addressing the deity. Even if this view should have such early backing, however, I remain unconvinced that the reading יְהוָה is wrong.

Nor am I persuaded by form-critical arguments that something has fallen out after יְהוָה. Crow, as noted earlier, maintains that there must be a petition missing:

With the vocative, "O YHWH" at the beginning, one naturally expects that a petition will follow. This is reinforced by the "negative confession" of v. 1, the purpose of which is normally to provide the grounds for divine action on the supplicant's behalf⁽³²⁾.

As for the initial address, it is true that it is hard to find an example of a Psalm where it is not followed by a request⁽³³⁾ or an expression of thanks⁽³⁴⁾. But it seems hard to rule that an ancient Jewish writer who wanted to express his confidence in God had always to refer to him in the third person. It seems unlikely that there were hard and fast rules about such things. Similarly with what Crow calls the negative confession: although the common context of protesting one's innocence was to plead for help⁽³⁵⁾, it is readily conceivable that an author should have wanted on occasion to tell God that after a struggle with self-will he had achieved a calm and humble confidence in him. Indeed, I think that Ps 130 (which with Volz and Weiser I take as a Psalm of Thanksgiving⁽³⁶⁾) we have a good parallel: in v. 1 he reminds YHWH that he has in the past thrown himself upon his mercy, using the plea spelt out in vv. 2b-6. He implies that his appeal had been successful, and proceeds in vv. 7-8 to urge others to follow suit. If this is right, the temptation to excise verse 3 of our Psalm should also be resisted. It forms the natural culmination to the Psalm: the Psalmist's gratitude to God for the peace of mind he has achieved leads him naturally to call on

⁽³²⁾ Crow, *Songs of Ascent*, 97.

⁽³³⁾ as in Ps 22.

⁽³⁴⁾ as in Ps 18.

⁽³⁵⁾ e.g. Ps 26,1 "Give me justice, O LORD, for I have lived my life without reproach, and put my unfailing trust in the LORD"; cf 17,1; 44:18 [EVV 44,17].

⁽³⁶⁾ קִרְיָתִיךָ in v. 1 in that case is a genuine past tense, as in LXX and Vulgate.

others to place their trust in him too. In Ps 62, we find the same situation in reverse: in vv. 1-11, the Psalmist tells the people that he has committed his silent trust to the LORD, and he calls on them to do likewise; then in v. 12 he addresses the LORD.

What is clear above all is that the language of this, as of most other Psalms, is sufficiently general for all to be able to identify with its sentiments and make it their own. That is the beauty of the Psalms: although they for the most part clearly spring from deep personal experience, the language in which they are clothed is so chosen as to make them suitable for use by all sorts and conditions of men and women.

As is widely known, there is no scholarly consensus on the significance of the word *מעלות* (steps, ascents, extolments?) in the designation of Psalms 120-134 as *שירי המעלות*; nor are scholars agreed on the reason for these Psalms being described in this way. The majority view is that the term characterizes these Psalms as in some sense pilgrimage songs. It is widely accepted, however, to be unlikely that they were all originally composed as such. This particular Psalm was probably not in the first instance created to be sung by pilgrims. As for the phrase *עלי אמו*, "it seems...likely that the metaphor is used as a metaphor, with no factual connection to the speaker"⁽³⁷⁾. Nevertheless, the Psalm works quite well as a member of a collection of pilgrimage songs. Fyall has written: "The Psalter expresses the emotions and feelings of the pilgrim people of God and, though rooted in particular times and places, speaks to pilgrims in circumstances far removed from those who originally wrote and sang these songs"⁽³⁸⁾. What this particular poem expresses is the conviction that the true pilgrim must travel in humility, hoping and trusting in God, and is inviting others to do the same: in v. 3, "the confidence in the LORD of one pilgrim is offered to the company of pilgrims"⁽³⁹⁾.

What has this Psalm to say in particular to those who read it as part of the Christian Bible? From the start Christians have drawn inspiration from the study and recitation of the Psalms. Athanasius, in *To Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms*, waxed lyrical on the subject:

⁽³⁷⁾ CROW, *Songs of Ascent*, 98.

⁽³⁸⁾ R.S. FYALL, *Travelling Hopefully: A Spiritual Pilgrimage* (London 1996) 50.

⁽³⁹⁾ J.L. MAYS, *Psalms* (Louisville 1994) 408.

All of our scripture, old and new, is divinely inspired...But the Book of Psalms has a special claim on our attention...since it is like a paradise garden containing all the fruits of Scripture and expressing them in song, making them its own...It seems to me that those who sing the Psalms are furnished with a mirror in which to contemplate themselves and their own feelings and to give expression to these feelings⁽⁶⁰⁾.

As for Psalm 131 in particular, the Fathers aptly illustrate its teaching (which is summarized by Hilary as that “humility is the greatest work of our faith”⁽⁶¹⁾) from the New Testament. Thus Athanasius and John Chrysostom link it with the Gospel call in Matt 18,3 to become like little children⁽⁶²⁾. Cassiodorus gives examples from the New Testament of haughty eyes (the rich man who destroys his barns), of walking in great matters (Pilate), and of walking in matters too wondrous (Simon Magus). He also notes that Paul’s advice in Rom 11,20 not to be proud but to stand in awe chimes in with the teaching of the Psalmist⁽⁶³⁾. For the Christian, the model for such humility must, of course, be the one who is represented as having said, “Learn of me, for I am gentle and humble of heart” (Matt 11,29).

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SUMMARY

Psalm 131 displays a subtle play on words. The psalmist has silenced and calmed down his soul/breast (he has put an end to its loud complaints). The two verbs used express or suggest the idea of assimilation (‘I have transformed it into something silent and something calm’), which leads up to the material image which follows. In 2b *gamul* means a child that has been weaned or is happy (and has stopped crying loudly); instead of *kaggamul* one should read *tiggmol*, ‘you have been nice to me’. Although the psalm has an unusual form, it has the same structure as Psalm 130. It probably constitutes a literary unit. It may be royal psalm.

⁽⁶⁰⁾ PG 27:12,24.

⁽⁶¹⁾ PL 9:725.

⁽⁶²⁾ PG 27:520; 55:378.

⁽⁶³⁾ PG 70:943-4.



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