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Subj: Psalm 42-43 and Sukkot

In the tradition of the Sephardic Jews these Psalms are recited throughout the holiday of Sukkot.[1] The connection to Sukkot, specifically, is somewhat tenuous, yet the psalm clearly shows the yearning of the psalmist to join the throngs of people on their way to the Bet Hamiqdash on the festival. The choice of these psalms as part of the liturgy reflects the yearning of those who recite it to once again be amongst the masses of people who are celebrating on their way to the Temple.

Two Psalms or One

These two psalms should be considered as one, even though the division into two psalms is quite ancient, and found in most of the manuscripts (the Septuagint even begins psalm 43 with the words Mizmor Ledavid). The unity of these two psalms can be seen most clearly from the refrain that is repeated twice in Psalm 42 and at the end of Psalm 43. There are other phrases that occur in both psalms. As far as the content is concerned when thinking about the experience of the psalmist, Psalm 42 lacks a resolution, which Psalm 43 provides. Psalm 43 lacks a beginning that gives some idea of the circumstances for the psalm's composition. Although it is not clear why the psalm was divided into two, Psalm 43 does represent a significant turn in the psalmist's attitude. Perhaps it was this change of attitude that prompted the division into two psalms. In our comments we will treat the two psalms as one.

Overview and Structure

The psalmist begins by bemoaning his situation of being far away from the Temple ("bet Elohim" - "the house of God"). He recalls with extreme sadness the times when he would lead the throngs who would go to "appear before God." The taunts of his enemies about the absence of his God do not help his situation. The psalmist, after complaining to God for forgetting and ignoring him, assures himself that he will once again be brought to the Temple with to thank God with rejoicing and song.

The psalms divide into three sections each of which ends with the refrain, "Why so downcast my soul, why disquieted within me.." These sections show a progression in the psalmist's emotional state, from a doleful recollection to a hopeful future. The change in the emotional state despite the presumed unchanged situation is the message of the psalm.

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[1] In the liturgical tradition that is associated with the GR"A (R. Eliyahu of Vilna) these psalms are recited on the second day of Sukkot (in the diaspora only).

Analysis

Section I (Psalm 42:1-6)

For the Leader. A maskil of the Korahites.
Like a hind crying for water, my soul cries for You, O God;
My soul thirsts for God, the living God;
O when will I come to appear before God!

My tears have been my food day and night;
I am ever taunted with, "where is your God?"
When I think of this, I pour out my soul:
how I walked with the crowd, moved with them,
the festive throng, to the House of God
with joyous shouts of praise.

Why so downcast, my soul,
Why disquieted within me?
Have hope in God;
I will yet praise Him
For His saving presence. (NJPS)

This psalm begins the second book of Psalms and the first of seven psalms that begin with an attribution to the sons of Qorah[2]. The sons of Qorah were a levitical clan that served in the Temple.

> For the singing in the House of the Lord, to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps, and lyres, for the service of the House of god by order of the king (1 Chronicles 25:6 NJPS).

The first verse of the psalm (after the title verse) has the psalmist speaking directly to God describing his yearning for Him. This yearning is compared to that of an animal thirsting for water. By the second verse the psalmist's distance from God becomes apparent. He cannot "appear before God" and by this verse does not even address Him directly. The first section does not contain another direct address to God.

The psalmist's need for water expressed in the first two verses is met with a kind of water-tears. The psalmist's tears were his response to the repeated taunt "where is your God?" His God is distant--in place, time and experience.

At this point in the psalm, his God is in his memory. He recalls the joy of leading the throngs to the festive pilgrimage to the Temple. God was apparent to him there and then.

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[2] There are 11 psalms that begin with an attribution to Qorah. They come in two groups. The first group is Psalms 42-49 (except psalm 43, which does not have an attribution at its beginning) and the second is Psalms 84-88 (except psalm 86, which begins with "A prayer by David").

Not now. This memory causes him to "pour out his soul." This is another image of water. His soul has become like water, but this water is of no use because it is poured out.

Verse 6 is the refrain in which the psalmist addresses his "self." The psalmist encourages his self to not mire in depression, but to have hope in God. The psalmist's hope is that the he will once again be able to thank Him for His salvation.

Recalling the past did not help the psalmist feel close to God. It just led to his feeling more depressed. Deciding to hope for the future and goading his soul not to be downcast is the psalmist's way out of his depression.

Section II (42:7-12)

O my God, my soul is downcast;
Therefore I think of You
In this land of Jordan and Hermon,
In Mount Mizar,
Where deep calls to deep
In the roar of your cataracts; All Your breakers and
billows have swept over me.
By day may the Lord vouchsafe His faithful care, so that at
night a song to Him may be with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock,
"Why have You forgotten me,
why must I walk in gloom,
oppressed by my enemy?"

With murder in my bones (crushing my bones-NJPS)
My foes revile me,
Taunting me always with, "where is your God?"

Why so downcast, my soul,
Why disquieted within me?
Have hope in God;
I will yet praise Him
My ever-present help, my God. (NJPS)

The psalmist is closer to God in this section. The psalmist's direct call to God that opens the section is continued to throughout the section. In every verse except one (the central verse of this section and of these psalms) the psalmist addresses God with direct speech. Even though the content of the address is accusations and complaints, the fact that the psalmist is addressing God is an improvement over the first section, in which God is so distant that he cannot be addressed
in a sustained way.

The psalmist's complaint against God is that "All Your breakers and billows have swept over me." The psalmist interprets all his troubles as ultimately emanating from God. His feeling is one of being forgotten by God.

The conversation with God allows him to react differently to the taunts of his enemies. Now he has "murder in his bones." His anger at the enemy is felt but not expressed. Contrast this reaction with the psalmist's reaction in the first section. The psalmist cries at the taunts in the first section, accepting them and pitying himself. The response of inner anger at the enemy is a more self-affirming one.

This section also gives us some information about the psalmist's situation. He is in the north of Israel, where the sources of the Jordan River are. He hears the sounds of the rushing water and possibly waterfalls and associates his relationship to God with those sounds. An oppressive enemy is also driving the psalmist.

Section III (Psalm 43:1-5)

> Vindicate me, O God,
> Champion my cause
> Against faithless people;
> Rescue me from the treacherous, dishonest man.
>
> For you are my God, my stronghold;
> Why have you rejected me?
> Why must I walk in gloom, oppressed by the enemy?
>
> Send forth Your light and Your truth;
> They will lead me;
> They will bring me to Your holy mountain,
> To Your dwelling place,
> That I may come to the altar of God,
> God, my delight, my joy;
> That I may praise you with the lyre,
> O God, my God.
>
> Why so downcast, my soul,
> Why disquieted within me?
> Have hope in God;
> I will yet praise Him
> My ever-present help, my God. (NJPS)

The connection to God in this section is even greater. The psalmist's anger of the second section is turned into a call for help and justice from the hands of the unjust nation.

Even in the psalmist's complaint to God repeated complaint to God, God is referred to in an amplified way. He is now the psalmist's "stronghold," whereas in section he was the psalmist's rock.

It is this realization that allows the psalmist to imagine a brighter future-one in which he is restored to his service of singing in the Temple. In this section the gloom of walking to and fro in the oppression of the enemy is responded to by God's light of truth. It is that truth that will eventually bring the psalmist to his hoped for future.

This last section allows the psalmist to develop the idea "I will yet praise Him." that is found in the refrain. Even though the refrain is the same as in the second section, it is the element of praising God for his help that comes into sharper focus in this section. His hope has been fleshed out by his imagination. He sees himself coming to the altar with his instruments. He is no longer focusing on the past in grief, eating his tears as his meal, but is now hearing the music of the Temple service that he is sure he will participate in once again.

The Progression

The three section of this work progress from a state of despair and grief, where the psalmist feels very far from God (sections I), to a state of complaint and anger (section II), and ultimately to a state of hope and joy as the psalmist imagines his future salvation. The three sections also have the psalmist focusing on different time frames, the focus on past glory causes him to grieve. The focus on his present situation angers him. The focus on his future vindication and return to the Temple fills him with joy and closeness to God. The psalmist's fulfilled his initial desperate yearning for God at the outset by changing his focus. True he is not able to be in the Temple, but God is with him. The verse before the last refrain poignantly illustrates the closeness that he feels.

> God, my delight, my joy; That I may praise you with the
> lyre, O God, my God.

Psalm 42-43 and Sukkot

Sukkot was the most joyous of the pilgrimage festivals. In the Second Temple times the joy was such that the Mishnah says that any one who has not seen the joy of the water drawing on Sukkot has never seen rejoicing in his life. The psalmist at the end, although he is far from the Temple, imagines himself serving there in joy. Using this psalm liturgically allows for a similar imagination and hope.

[Other connections to Sukkot and to simhat bet hashoeba (the joy of the water drawing) are made by the Midrash Pesiqta rabbati. That Midrash connects the phrase "I come to appear before God" to the simhat bet hashoeba (the phrase definitely echoes the command of pilgrimage found in the Torah). Also the word "throng" (besach) in 42:5, is explained by the Midrash as having to do with the "sechach" the thatch covering of the booth, the sukkah.]