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## THE ARCHETYPE OF PSALMS 14 AND 53

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**T**HE Old Testament contains several instances of Hebrew hymns which have been preserved, in more or less widely differing form, in more than one place. The most familiar example is furnished by Psalms 14 and 53, versions of a hymn traditionally ascribed to David, but evidently a work of later date. The original poem, of which we have these two varying texts, was a vigorous and well planned composition. As I think will appear, it was carefully constructed, and is decidedly interesting from the point of view of Hebrew metrics. In each of the two versions the text is corrupt, and in one important passage there is also a remarkable divergence in both wording and sense. Nevertheless I believe that a very satisfactory result can be obtained from a comparison of the two Psalms.

The divergence is mainly due to accidents of scribal transmission, as will appear. We have also to take some account of oral tradition, variation in actual popular usage brought about by considerations of taste or by mere accident. The same thing has taken place here, in the case of a few less important words, which has happened over and over again in the hymn-books of modern congregations. It would be easy to give many examples of hymns, favorites in use in our churches, which in the process of transmission from generation to generation have undergone more or less verbal change. Some of the hymns of Isaac Watts, for instance, as they are printed and used at the present day, differ here and there from the form in which they were originally put forth. In one region of the English-speaking world a certain version of a

hymn is now commonly used; in another region, at the same time, a version is employed which shows a slight difference in words or phrases. It is often not easy to decide which is the 'better reading.' In such cases it is not especially important to know just what the author originally wrote, unless an antiquarian or a historian is studying the document. Hymns differ from other poems in that they become the property of the congregation, which may revise them at will.

The two psalms which are now before us illustrate especially the way in which a slight corruption of a written text, in the process of copying, may bring with it a change of meaning—or the loss of all meaning—and thus lead to a more or less thorough revision of the immediate context. The materials at hand are sufficient for reproducing the substance of every verse of the original poem, and the metrical form as well. The restored text is necessarily eclectic, and at two or three points the aid of conjecture is required, the basis for it being sufficiently strong.

Now the one psalm, now the other, presents a reading which is manifestly superior; on the whole, the text of Psalm 14 is nearer to the original. As a matter of course there has been contamination of the text in both directions, attested still further by occasional variant readings in the extant Hebrew manuscripts. The Greek tradition, it is needless to say, has suffered in the same manner.

The psalm is composed in the 'lyric' meter, the line consisting of a longer member of three metric beats or stresses followed by a shorter member of two beats, the whole conveniently represented as 3 | 2. There is the usual rhetorical variation of this scheme, and, apparently, one unusual variation.

*Verse 1* (using the numbering in Psalm 14). The 'ātilah of 14 is metrically decidedly preferable to the 'āwel of 53; it is also better suited in meaning to the two verbs. The conjunction uniting the verbs in 53 is better omitted, as in 14; the rhythm is then smoother.

*Verse 2.* We might prefer to omit the particle 'eth for the sake of improving (to our ears) the rhythm, but there is no sufficient ground for so doing.

*Verse 3.* There is nothing to choose between *hakkol sār* of 14 and *kullō sāgh* of 53; either might be the original. The variation arose in oral transmission, in the popular use.

The phrase "No one does right" would complete a 3 | 2 line; but there is added in both texts, and also in both Greek renderings, another phrase of two metric stresses: 'ēn gam 'eḥādh, "Not even one." The addition of a verse-member of three beats for rhetorical effect, in order to give to a paragraph a sententious ending, or to check momentarily the flow of thought, is very common in the Hebrew 3 | 2 verse; the extension of the verse by two beats, though a perfectly natural variation, is a decided rarity. If the example stood alone, we might well conclude that the text had suffered some change from its original form. But the case is not isolated; the concluding verse of the poem shows precisely the same thing, as will appear.

*Verse 4.* The simple verb *yādhēū*, without expressed object, is noticeably weak. It is used absolutely, beyond doubt, but the need of some reënforcement has been felt by most interpreters, perhaps by all. It is an easy conjecture that the infinitive absolute has been accidentally lost from the text. By simply reading  $\text{וְיָדְהוּ} \quad \text{וְיָדְהוּ} \quad \text{כֹּל}$  (the same order of words as in Jer. 3 1) the verb is given the absolute object which it needs, and the question gains the vigor which had been wanting. The metric pause adds to the effect, for the three words constitute a three-beat line; and the meter of the whole verse is now in order for the first time. The conjecture is also recommended by the fact that the accidental omission of the word is so easily accounted for; it is almost exactly the duplicate of the word which follows. It would appear that a manuscript ancestor of our two psalms was defective at this point through an error of transcription. On the other hand, the omission of *kol* in 53 is a later accident, not shared by 14.

In the second line of the verse,  $\text{וְיָדְהוּ}$ , the reading of both texts, is impossible. The consonant text is correct, however, and it is not certain that the ancient versions, excepting the Targum, read the word with the massoretic vocalization. We must point  $\text{וְיָדְהוּ}$ , *βρωσις ἄρου*, *escam panis*, recognizing

here the expanded construct form occasionally used especially in poetry; see Gesenius-Buhl, § 90, *n*, the Gezer calendar inscription, and *JAOS*, Vol. 45 (1925), p. 277. This cognate accusative not only gives the sense which is needed, but also improves the rhythm. It is further obvious that the construct ending in *ō* is here more euphonious than any form (infinitive or other substantive) ending in the consonant *lamedh*. The Greek, Latin, and Syriac versions may not actually have read the word in this way, but their rendering gives reason to suppose that they did. The whole verse is the utterance of Yahweh, who is frequently made to speak of himself in the third person, in various parts of the Old Testament.

*Verse 5.* The first half of this verse, in 14, has lost a clause which is preserved in 53 (verse 5). There is some reason for doubt as to the meaning of *lō hāyāh*; whether it intends to say that the "fright" came suddenly to those who had been without apprehension, or that it was so intense as to deserve another name. Either interpretation is possible—since this is poetry, not prose—and the metric 3 | 2 line has the ring of genuineness. The clause fell out in 14 because of the two occurrences, so near together, of the same word.

*Verses 5, 6.* This is the place of serious trouble in the poem. The two Hebrew texts diverge here so remarkably, and in such extent, that at first sight it seems almost hopeless to look for a common source accounting for both readings. Certainly no satisfactory explanation of the divergence has been found hitherto. I think it can be shown that the whole trouble had its origin in a copyist's easily explained omission of two words. The poem was saved from oblivion by the rescue of a single defective manuscript; corrupt in only the slightest extent, and yet in such a manner that the resulting text was utterly incoherent. It was nevertheless copied as it stood, and no doubt there were several different attempts to make some kind of sense, by conjecture, out of the mutilated verse. We have in fact before us the result of two such attempts.

I believe that the text of the solitary surviving manuscript read as follows, in this passage: **כִּי יִהְיֶה פִּיר עֵצַת עֵינַי תִּבְשֹׁן כִּי יִהְיֶה מַחְסוֹ**. According to the context, this gives the reason

for the discomfiture of the oppressors! Obviously, the psalm could not be made usable without the aid of conjectural improvement here. Why were these foes of Israel discomfited? One interpreter said (making the least possible change): *Because the Lord is with the righteous.* He accordingly wrote **בְּדוֹר צַדִּיק**, and read the next clause as a question: "Can ye put to shame the counsel of the lowly?" The other interpreter very naturally felt the need of something more drastic. He conjectured **פֶּן עֲצַמֹת** (cf. Ps. 141 7 and Ezek. 6 5), and then of necessity made the following word into **תִּהְיֶה**, the suffix derived from the second person of the following verb. The two other slight changes which he made were also inevitable, as any one can see. But this is no place for 'scattering bones.' The *'āsmōth* merely supports the *'āšath* of the other text, which unquestionably comes nearer to the original reading.

The true text of the passage, as composed by its author, would seem to have been the following: **כִּי יִהְיֶה הַפִּיר עֲצָתָם** וּבִמְהָ עֲצַת עֲנִי תִבְשׁוּ כִּי יִהְיֶה מַחְסוֹ. The accidental omission of the two words was occasioned by the twice occurring *'āšath*—a typical example of the most common of all the causes of textual corruption. The foes were discomfited "because the Lord disconcerted their counsel. But how will ye put to shame the counsel of the lowly? since the Lord is his refuge." The contrast makes an effective introduction to the close of the poem. The initial consonant of *hēphīr* fell out by haplography, presumably after the other corruption had taken place. For examples of this verb (a variation of the *hiph'il* of **פִּיר**) see especially Ps. 33 10, where it is used with *'āšath* in precisely the manner of our passage; also Ezek. 17 19 and Zech. 11 10, in both cases used with *bērīth*. Another example which ought not to be questioned is Ps. 89 34. (In the last-named passage, and also in 85 5, some scholars have proposed to read the *hiph'il* of *sūr*, supported by some Hebrew mss. and by parallel passages; but according to sound principles of criticism the text-reading in either case should be left as it is.) Among the several possible ways of expressing "how?" in the above restoration, the one adopted seems to have some slight advantages.

*Verse 7.* The two verbs at the end of the verse give a better sense as future (so the Greek in 53, and Jerome in both psalms) than as jussive. Regarding the meter here, see the note on verse 3. It is not to be doubted that the last four words of the poem *could* be read as a single three-beat line, or that the whole of verse 7 could be read in bits of two stresses each — which would have a very displeasing effect. Verse 7 begins, however, with a good 3 | 2 line introducing a new subject. If this was intended, that is, if the general metric scheme of the composition is preserved here also, then at least one other 3 | 2 line must follow, according to all the usage of this Hebrew metric form. The most important consideration, however, is the meter of verse 3, where the first main division of the poem seems to be marked off by a 3 | 2 | 2 line. Here, also, this is the natural metric scheme. There is no ground for suspecting the text, in either case, and the coincidence is hardly accidental. As was remarked above, this extension of the metric line for a rhetorical reason is not only very natural, but also has its close analogies in Hebrew prosody. There is apparent no sufficient reason for denying the device to the author of this hymn.

Appended is the text of the whole as emended, followed by a translation. I am unable to recognize the regular 'strophes' which some scholars have found here as elsewhere. Hebrew poetry in general is not strophic, and even the Psalter contains comparatively few poems made up of stanzas of equal length.

*The Restored Text:*

- 1 אָמַר נָבֵל בְּלִבּוֹ | אֵין אֱלֹהִים |  
 הַשְּׁחִיתוּ הַתְּעִיבוּ עֲלֵיָהּ | אֵין עֲשֵׂה טוֹב |  
 2 יְהוֹה מַשְׁמִים הַשְּׁקִיף | עַל בְּנֵי אָדָם |  
 לִרְאוֹת הַיָּשׁ מִשְׁכָּל | דַּרְשׁ אֵת אֱלֹהִים |  
 3 הַכֹּל סוֹר יַחְדוֹ נִאֲלָתוֹ | אֵין עֲשֵׂה טוֹב | אֵין נָם אַחַד |  
 4 הֲלֹא יִדְעוּ יָדְעוּ | כָּל פְּעֵלֵי אֵין |  
 אֲכָלֵי עֹמֵי אֲכָלוּ לָחֶם | יְהוֹה לֹא קִרְאוּ |

5 שם פתחו פתח | לא היה פתח |  
כי יהוה הפיר עֲצָתָם

6 וּבִקְשָׁה עֲצַת עֲנֵי חֲבִישׁוֹ | כי יהוה מחסוֹ |

7 מי יתן מִצִּיּוֹן | ישׁוּעַת יִשְׂרָאֵל |

בשׁוּב יְהוָה שְׁבוֹת עִמּוֹ | יִגִּל יַעֲקֹב | יִשְׂמַח יִשְׂרָאֵל |

*The Translation:*

1. The foolish man says in his heart, | There  
is no God. |  
They are corrupt, deal abominably, | no one  
does right. |
2. The Lord looked down from heaven | on the  
children of men, |  
To see whether any had insight, | seeking  
after God. |
3. All have turned away, they are vile; | no  
one does right, | no, not one. |
4. Have they no knowledge whatever, | the work-  
ers of evil, |  
Who devour my people like bread, | and call  
not on the Lord? |
5. Then they were in consternation, | where no  
fear had been, |  
For the Lord brought their counsel to nought.
6. How will ye shame the counsel of the lowly? |  
since the Lord is his refuge. |
7. Oh that from Zion might come forth | the  
rescue of Israel! |  
When the Lord turns the fortune of his  
people, | Jacob will exult, | Israel will  
rejoice. |