

THE FEELING FOR FORM IN PSALM 104

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WHAT I have to offer may seem to be nothing more than an idle fancy. I am by no means certain that it is anything more than that, myself. Yet possibly the time will not be misspent if it is devoted to a renewed contemplation of one of the most beautiful psalms in the Psalter, Ps. 104. Whatever may be thought of my conclusions, I trust what is said may do its part in stimulating anew a relish for the sheer beauty and the religious significance to be found in the study of that literature to which it is our glad privilege to devote our lives. Is this psalm susceptible of a strophical analysis that is at once simple and natural and at the same time reveals the beauty of the poem more fully than has hitherto been recognized? The key to the analysis is, of course, the first chapter of Genesis. The account of the creation in that chapter is followed through the first five days. This is not done in any mechanical fashion. The author of Ps. 104 is a real poet and not a pedant. He allows himself various liberties, as we shall see. Nevertheless, when Gunkel and Staerk, because of the poetic variations from the scientific¹ account of the creation, fail to relate their analysis definitely to the sequence of the creative days, they ignore the most outstanding factor in the structure of the psalm.

¹ When the first chapter of Genesis is spoken of as a scientific account of the creation, I, of course, mean that it is scientific from the point of view of ancient times. And by the way, the mistake is often made of supposing that the interest of Gen. 1 is primarily scientific. It is not. It is religious. What the author of Gen. 1 was trying to do was to express a great religious and theological idea in the terms of the best science of his day. From this point of view he takes his place with the

Ewald long ago saw that the prevailing rhythmical figure was the ten-line stanza, and this has been accepted by Cheyne and Duhm. But is this pattern regular? Should the attempt be made to reduce it to regularity? Ewald and Cheyne do not try to do this; Duhm does. Gunkel, Cobb and Staerk present increasingly irregular strophes. Briggs, on the other hand, by means of very determined sawing and planing, which leaves a great litter of shavings behind him in the shape of glosses, reduces all the stanzas to eight lines. The result is a very wooden poem, indeed. May there not be a golden mean between these extremes which does justice both to the apparent regularity and the apparent flexibility of the poem and relates the two characteristics to each other in such a way as to bring out a new beauty in the form of the psalm.

1) If we turn to vs. 19-23 we discover a stanza describing the work of the fourth day of creation. A couplet is devoted to the creation of the sun and moon (v. 19; the stars are left unmentioned), and a quatrain each to the night (vs. 20, 21) and to the day (vs. 22, 23), the whole rounded out in exactly ten lines. The finish of this stanza is perfect. It advances from sunset to sunset in accordance with the Hebrew method of reckoning the day and depicts the mystery and terror of the darkness and the serenity and security of the day in an inimitable way.

2) In vs. 5-9 we have the description of the first half of the third day's work, the creation of dry ground, and again the thought is rounded out in an admirable manner in ten lines. But the ten lines group themselves somewhat differently than in the case of vs. 19-23 into two couplets, vs. 5 and 6, a quatrain, vs. 7 and 8, and a couplet, v. 9. In other words within the main pattern of the ten-line stanza we have various subordinate figures. The beauty of this stanza is probably not surpassed in the Old Testament. Here the poet clearly shows his independence of his original. He sees the world with all its variety of mountain and valley reposing beneath the surface of the Deep, and then at the divine command the waters part and the

Alexandrine theologians and with all that company of earnest but often misunderstood souls who seek to relate their religious experience to the best thought and the fullest knowledge of their times.

beautiful world is seen to emerge, the mountains rising and the valleys falling, before the poet's kindling eyes.

The divisions in vs. 19-23 and vs. 5-9 are so obvious and the expression of the thoughts so perfect that there is general agreement upon them among commentators. Only Dr. Briggs is an exception. He cuts out vs. 8 and 20 in the interest of his eight-line division. But from an examination of these two stanzas we may draw one conclusion of great importance for our further investigation. *This poet is a master of form and of expression.* But if so, we have the right to expect the same fine craftsmanship in the remainder of the poem, unless in so short a lyric he nods incorrigibly.

3) In vs. 1-4 as they stand there are ten more lines, probably arranged in two couplets, vs. 1a, 1b and vs. 1c-2a, a quatrain, vs. 2b-3, and a couplet, v. 4, as in the case of vs. 5-9. Lines 3 and 4 are evidently parallel. Therefore line 2 must be taken with line 1. Unless the psalm were studied as a whole it might seem natural to take line 1 as an introductory line, possibly a liturgical addition, separate from what follows. But it cannot be separated from line 2, and there is no reason why the two lines together should not be the introductory couplet of the first stanza. In view of the certainty of the ten-line division in the two cases thus far examined this seems by far the most natural view to take. In this initial stanza the creative acts of the first two days, creation of light and of the firmament, are clearly present in the poet's mind. With the light and the sky are very beautifully associated the clouds and winds and lightnings. We certainly have not caught our poet napping *here*.

3) Thus far we have discovered three stanzas, describing the first two days of creation (Stanza I), the first half of the third day (Stanza II) and the fourth day (Stanza V). In the creation story there was the creation of plant life on the *second* half of the third day. We are not surprised, therefore, to find in vs. 10-11, i. e. between the account of the creation of the dry ground on the *first* half of the third day and of the heavenly bodies on the fourth day, reference to plant life, trees, grain, wine, oil. It thus becomes certain that the poet is intentionally following the order of the creative days. But instead of the

ten-line stanza which we have found hitherto, we now have a stanza in its present form of exactly twenty lines. This is at once reassuring and also disconcerting. It confirms the view that the number ten which has thus far been seen to dominate the structure of the stanzas is not a fancied fact but a real fact in the psalm. On the other hand the fact that the present stanza is twenty lines raises a query. Could there have been originally two stanzas here, later combined by accident into a single long stanza? In either case it is evident that the poet is especially attracted by the thought of the loveliness of growing things and enjoys lingering upon it. There is more independent elaboration here than anywhere else in the poem. If we examine these twenty lines more closely, several things at once strike the attention. a) In the first place there is the great emphasis upon *water*, vs. 10 and 14. How is the dry ground, the creation of which was described in the preceding stanza, to be prepared for the production of plant life? It must be irrigated. Water! That is the indispensable condition of luxuriant vegetation. This thought is a far more poignant thought to a dweller in Palestine than it is to us. We take water as a matter of course. Not so the Easterner. Where life is so close to the desert and rain confined to certain seasons of the year the wonder of water is appreciated far more than it is with us. Hence it is not astonishing that a stanza dealing with plant-life should be, as it were, saturated with the idea of water. b) Again, this water is carefully traced to its *two main sources*, the *springs* and the streams that flow from them, v. 10, and the *rains*, v. 13². c) In the third place the *rains* are immediately associated with the growth of what may be called the great staples of life, the herbage for the cattle, and grain and wine and oil for the nourishment and pleasure of man, vs. 13-15. According to the present text the trees also seem to depend upon the rain, though this is left rather to inference from the present position of the reference (vs. 16 and 17) than directly stated. At v. 16 we arrive at our first ambiguity. The trees of the Lord are satisfied. Satisfied with what? We must go back to v. 13 to find out. But the

² The contrast between the Wadys and the mountains which is sometimes drawn (cf. Duhm) is a subordinate contrast.

thought has been considerably diverted by the intervening verses, 14 and 15, and the reference to the satisfaction of the trees in the present connection is not as easy and natural as we would expect from this poet. d) On the other hand the fountains are associated *only* with quenching the thirst of the wild asses. This is curious, when one stops to think of it, in a stanza which seems to be devoted to *plant life* and to *water as the condition of plant life*. e) But there is another and much greater difficulty in the verses. What is the antecedent of "them" (עליהם) in v. 12, and how is this phrase to be translated? At this point the interpreters have a hard time of it. Are the birds *by* the springs or *over* the springs or upon the springs, or *over* the wild asses or *by* the wild asses? Even a Biblical exegete, who is capable of almost anything, would hardly say that they were *upon* the wild asses. f) What about the leafy branches in v. 12^a? Where are the trees? g) Finally, what of the rocks as the home for the conies in v. 18? This terrain is also difficult for the unwary footsteps of the exegete. Has the thought in v. 18 anything to do with the rest of this section? It is no doubt suggested by the reference to the home of the birds, v. 17; but it is certainly not in keeping with the theme of plant life. Some may find in v. 18 an example of the poet's naïveté. But I cannot feel that the *kind* of poet we have thus far found the author of Ps. 104 to be would thus lose the thread of a thought which he has enjoyed so much as to give a double stanza to its elaboration. Cheyne has done much to clear up the difficulties of this section. By his transposition of vs. 16, 17 between vs. 11 and 12 several things are accomplished which Cheyne himself failed fully to point out. a) A suitable antecedent is now provided for "them", and the phrase is to be translated "*upon* them" i. e. upon the trees (so Cheyne). b) The leafy branches of v. 12 now come appropriately after the mention of the trees v. 17. c) The trees are now clearly seen to be watered by the springs. d) But most important of all, there is now the possibility of logically dividing the twenty-line stanza into two ten-line stanzas. The first of them deals with the springs, which water the timid creatures of the desert, and also with the trees, while the thought of the trees suggests the beautiful description of the birds singing in them.

The whole is a lovely oasis scene. The second deals with the rain and associates with it the provision for man and beast. It seems to me that this suggestion of Cheyne is a real inspiration. It clears up all the difficulties of this section but one, and the result is strikingly beautiful. The one difficulty is what to do with the wild goats and the conies? Cheyne leaves them where they are in their craggy uplands in v. 18, which now follow vs. 13-15. This is impossible, in spite of the superficial coincidence that the stanza, on this arrangement, begins and closes with a reference to mountains. V. 18 cannot be separated from v. 17. The conies can maintain themselves in the text only by clinging desperately to the company of the stork. Duhm feels this, and in order to keep vs. 17 and 18 as close together as possible, arranges the stanzas as follows, vs. 10-12, 16, 17 and vs. 18, 13-15. Most of the advantages of Cheyne's transposition are lost in this arrangement, and the conies and the wild-goats are advanced to a position of dignity at the beginning of the second stanza which they do not at all deserve. There is no help for it, so far as I can see, but to chase these unfortunate little beasts out of the text altogether, if Cheyne's transposition is adopted. The advantages gained by this transposition far outweigh the loss of these creatures. My idea is that two lines were lost from the fourth stanza at the time the original text was accidentally jumbled into its present arrangement, and later v. 18 was added under the influence of v. 17 by some one who did not apprehend the real purpose of the original poem at this point.

The subordinate figures within the main pattern of these two reconstructed stanzas are as follow: a) a couplet v. 10, and probably two quatrains, v. 11 with 16, and v. 17 with 12; b) a couplet v. 13 and two tristichs v. 14 and v. 15. The last couplet is lost.

4) Thus far five stanzas have been recovered, each of ten lines, in which the order of the creative days is carefully followed through the first four days. On the fifth day marine life and birds were created. But the poet has already dealt with the birds. Hence his next stanza deals only with the life of the sea. Strictly speaking only vs. 25 and 26 expressly refer to the subject. V. 24 is introductory. Yet it is a most appropriate introduction.

The poet has been thinking of all the varied life of the land, the birds, the cattle, the beasts of the forest, men themselves; but now when he turns to think of all that teeming life that moves below the sparkling surface of the sea, he cannot repress an exclamation of wonder at the abundance and variety of it all. How versatile, how inexhaustible is this creative wisdom of the Lord! But this stanza appears at last definitely to break with the established ten-line pattern of the preceding part of the poem. Does not v. 27 properly belong to what follows? This is the unanimous view of commentators. It is at this point that I will probably be accused of allowing my fancy to run riot. I cannot accept Duhm's attempt to construct two additional lines out of vs. 24-27. To my mind it is artificial and improbable. I would challenge the view that v. 27 must *necessarily* be taken with what follows. If this verse be taken with what precedes the two lines necessary to complete the usual pattern are gained. But is this a legitimate arrangement? Does not v. 27 introduce the thought that is developed in vs. 28-30? Should it not, therefore, be associated with them? I would urge three considerations in support of my contrary arrangement. a) The construction of v. 27 differs from that of vs. 28-30. Every line but line 5 in these verses begins with a verb in the second person. This argument in itself does not carry much weight, yet taken with what follows it is not to be ignored. b) Of more importance is the fact that in the preceding stanza (v. 21) the thought of the dependence of the beasts upon the Lord for their food is expressly mentioned. It would therefore seem quite natural for it to be introduced again in connection with sea life, especially if it were the purpose of the poet to give a further stanza to the amplification of this thought. c) But most interesting of all is the beautiful arrangement which results from taking v. 27 with what precedes. Not only does it provide the desired number of lines for the sixth stanza, but it results in a seventh stanza in which there are just seven lines and this is a stanza devoted to the thought of God's Providence. Is this only a conceit of mine or is this arrangement intentional? When it is remembered how almost Greek our poet is in his feeling for form, how beautifully he sculpts out his thoughts in his ten-line stanzas, is there

anything improbable in the view that in this seventh stanza, after he had finished his account of the creative works, he varied his pattern purposely for the sake of the beautiful effect? When such an effect can be so simply attained why not accept it? Every one admits that the next major pause falls at the end of v. 30 and in vs. 28–30 there are just seven lines. If v. 27 is taken with what follows this leaves eight lines for the fifth creative day and nine lines for God's providence. We have seen how Duhm invented two extra lines in vs. 24–27, and now he must invent another extra line for vs. 27–30, in order to carry through his ten-line arrangement. But his conjectures are quite unconvincing. On the other hand to accept eight-line and nine-line stanzas at this point is a needless departure from the symmetry of the poem. In the suggested arrangement the figures woven into the main patterns are: a) in vs. 24–27, two tristichs, v. 24, v. 25, and two couplets, v. 26, v. 27; b) in vs. 28–30, a couplet, v. 28, a tristich, v. 29, and a couplet, v. 30. In passing, the special beauty of this stanza on God's providence should be noted. Our poet loves sunny landscapes, but at v. 29 a shadow falls across them. Yet he provides in vs. 28 and 30 a silver lining to the cloud. He cannot bring his stanza to a close with the solemn thought of v. 29. He must repeat in the closing couplet the thought of love and bounty in the first couplet though with a variation in which he sees the beautiful carpet of tender green unrolling over the arid landscape after rain as I have seen the sear hills east of Jerusalem soften into a myriad delicate tints of new created life after the same sort of blessing from on high.

With this seventh stanza the hymn proper is concluded. The work of the sixth day, creation of animals and man, is not described. They have already been introduced in various ways in the preceding stanzas; what follows, vs. 31–35, is an epilogue. This section fares rather badly at the hands of the critics. Duhm sees in it another ten-line stanza if the last clause of v. 35 is omitted, but treats it with something of contempt, and it is usually regarded as a more or less scrappy agglomeration of ideas. I cannot share this view. This section was originally formed of two quatrains which are quite distinct in thought and yet related to each other in a very beautiful way. Observe how the

second line of v. 34 with its emphatic *I* takes up the thought in the second line of v. 31. The poem comes to its fitting conclusion at v. 34 where the poet offers his 'effusion' as a gift to his God (cf. Ps. 19 15 [14]). V. 35 is a liturgical addition which most unfortunately intensifies the shadow which our poet allows to fall across his bright visions at vs. 29 and 32. Vs. 29 and 32 express the awe of a deeply religious and sensitive soul who lives in that fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom. V. 35 voices in unfeeling terms the threats of a dogmatic theologian, who deals in fixed, unyielding formulas, unmindful of the vast complexity and infinite pathos of human life.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION. It is not my purpose to enter into the more subtle questions of the text of this Psalm. But a few points in the translation should be explained or justified. Square brackets imply emendations. Parentheses are paraphrastic or stylistic developments.

I.

The First and Second Creative Days: Light and Sky.

Gen. 1 1-5, 6-8.

- v. 1. 1. Bless the Lord, Oh my soul,
 2. Oh,³ my God, Thou art very great:
 3. With majesty and splendor Thou art robed,
 v. 2. 4. Veiling Thyself with light as with a mantle;
 5. (Who)⁴ Stretcheth out the heavens as a tent-curtain.
 v. 3. 6. Who buildeth in the (heavenly) waters his reservoirs (for the rain),
 7. Who maketh the clouds his chariot,
 8. Who marcheth on the wings of the wind;
 v. 4. 9. Making the winds his messengers,
 10. His ministrants (the lightning's) fire and flame.⁵

³ Delete the second הוה .

⁴ The question of the insertion or omission of the articles with the various participles in the Psalm is one to which different tastes will supply different answers. Duhm's suggestion that it should be supplied with הוה is attractive, as the quatrain in lines 5-8 would thus become regular in grammatical structure.

⁵ Read בְּהֵימָן with Bickell, Cheyne, Duhm, Gunkel, because of the preceding plural.

II.

The Third Creative Day, First Half: Dry Ground.

Gen. 1 9, 10.

- v. 5. 1. He hath established the earth upon its bases,
2. That it cannot be moved for ever;
- v. 6. 3. The Deep as a garment did cover it,⁶
4. Above the mountains the waters stand;⁷
- v. 7. 5. At thy rebuke they flee,
6. At the sound of thy thunder they haste away
- v. 8. 7. — (While) mountains rise (and) valleys fall⁸ —
8. To the place which Thou hast established for them;
- v. 9. 9. A bound has Thou set that they may not cross,
10. That they may not return to cover the earth.

III.

The Third Creative Day, Second Half: Plant Life.

Gen. 1 11–13.

- v. 10. 1. Who freeth⁹ the fountains in the Wadys,
2. Among the hills they course along;
- v. 11. 3. They give drink to all the beasts that roam in
freedom,¹⁰
4. The wild asses slake their thirst,

⁶ Possibly read כַּסְתָּהּ, Duhm, Gunkel, Staerk.

⁷ The verbs in lines 4–7 should be translated by presents. The emergence of the dry land from within the Deep, where it had been, as it were, waiting for the Lord's command to come forth, is described as transpiring before the poet's eyes.

⁸ כִּרְרִי. Duhm would strike this out. The three-toned rhythm would thus be conserved, but a most picturesque and beautiful description would be marred. The deletion of line 7 by Briggs and Cobb is most unfortunate. The line is parenthetical (R. V.) and not to be joined with line 8. (A. V., Gunkel, Staerk.)

⁹ Compare Job 12 15 where the Pi'el off שָׁלַח is antithetic to עָצַר.

¹⁰ Literally, "all the beasts of the field". The contrast is with the domesticated animals of v. 14.

- v. 16. 5. The trees of the Lord are satisfied,
6. The cedars of Lebanon which He hath planted;
v. 17. 7. Where the little birds build their nests,
8. The pious stork homes in the cypress trees,
v. 12. 9. Upon them the birds of heaven perch,¹¹
10. (And) forth from the leafy foliage sound their song.

IV.

The Third Creative Day, Second Half: Plant Life Continued.

- v. 13. 1. (Who)¹² watereth the mountains from his (heavenly) reservoirs,
2. With Thy mists (?)¹³ the earth is satisfied;
v. 14. 3. Making grass to grow for the cattle
4. And herbage for the dumb servitors¹⁴ of man,
5. That they may bring grain forth from the earth;
v. 15. 6. (Making) wine (to grow) that gladdenth the heart of man,
7. And oil to make his face to shine,
8. And grain to strengthen the heart of man.¹⁵
v. 18. (9. The high mountains are for the wild goats.)
(10. The crags a refuge for the conies.)

¹¹ For מַשְׁבֵּן in this sense see Ezek. 31 13, cf. 17 23.

¹² Supply article (?); cf. v. 10.

¹³ The text very doubtful. The translation accepts מְשִׁיבֵי cf. Ps. 135 7, a conjecture offered by Kittel and Staerk, as one among a number of guesses, none of which is convincing.

¹⁴ Read מְבִרָה, i. e. service-cattle, parallel to מְבִרָה, cf. Gen. 26 14; Job 1 13; Kittel, Ehrlich.

¹⁵ The construction of lines 5—8 is doubtful. The translation follows the solution proposed by Ehrlich, though the difficulties of it are admitted. On the basis of this view lines 3—8 make up two tristichs, the first of them, lines 3—5, referring to the provision for the cattle to enable them to do their work, the second, lines 6—8, referring to the provisions made for man. Ehrlich cites Dt. 11 15; Gen. 24 32f.; Jd. 19 21 as examples of the care for the domestic animals which characterized Israel.

V.

The Fourth Creative Day: The Celestial Bodies.

Gen. 1 14-19.

- v. 19. 1. He made the moon (to rule) the festal seasons,
 2. He made the sun¹⁶ to know its setting;
- v. 20. 3. Thou makest darkness and so night cometh,
 4. Wherein all jungle-beasts creep forth,
- v. 21. 5. The young lions roaring for their prey,
 6. And seeking from God their food;
- v. 22. 7. The sun cometh forth, they slink away,
 8. And in their dens they crouch,
- v. 23. 9. (Then) Men go forth to their work,
 10. And to their labour until the even-tide.

VI.

The Fifth Creative Day: Marine Life.

Gen. 1 20-23.

- v. 24. 1. How manifold are Thy works, Oh Lord,
 2. All of them in wisdom hast Thou made,
 3. The earth is full of Thy creatures;
- v. 25. 4. Yonder Sea vast and broad-expanding —
 5. There are gliding things,¹⁷ yea, without number,
 6. Living things¹⁷ both small and great;
- v. 26. 7. There terrific (monsters)¹⁸ (?) move about¹⁹
 8. Leviathan whom Thou hast formed to sport with;
- v. 27. 9. All of them put their hope in Thee,
 10. To grant their food in its (due) season.

¹⁶ Read Pi'el with Aquila and Theod.; cf. Job 38 12. So Duhm, Gunkel, Staerk.

¹⁷ רמס and חית are here used of sea-life with clear allusion to Gen. 1 21. Vs. 24-26 have to do with marine life of the fifth day of creation.

¹⁸ Read אצמת with Gunkel, Kittel and Staerk, and cf. Job 41 6 39 20, as a possible solution of the difficult אגית. While the supposition that the poet is here thinking of ships as living creatures no doubt furnishes,

VII.

God's Providence.

Gen. 1 29-31.

- v. 28. 1. Thou givest them, they gather up,
 2. Thou openest Thy hand, they have their fill of good;
 v. 29. 3. Thou hidest Thy face, they are confounded,
 4. Thou withdrawest their breath, they expire,
 5. And to their dust return;
 v. 30. 6. Thou sendest forth Thy breath, they are created,
 7. And Thou renewest Nature's face.

EPILOGUE

A

Let the Lord rejoice in His works.

Cf. Gen. 1 31.

- v. 31. 1. Let the glory of the Lord be forever.
 2. Let the Lord rejoice in His works;
 v. 32. 3. Who needeth but look upon the earth and it
 trembleth.
 4. Who needeth but touch the mountains and they
 smoke.

in itself, a very beautiful and poetic thought, it seems hazardous to make it in the present connection. It is true that Khuenaten's Hymn to the Solar Disk (see Breasted's Translation in Petrie's *History of Egypt in the XVIIth and XVIIIth Dynasties*, p. 215 ff.) with which our Psalm has so much in common, also introduces the ships; but there the introduction of them is perfectly natural. The question of the literary dependance of Ps. 104 upon the Egyptian hymn opens up perplexing but most interesting possibilities.

¹⁹ The Pref. of this verb seems to be used especially in poetry, and I have therefore ventured to translate it in various ways suitable to the connection at v. 3, 19 and 20.

B

The Poet will rejoice in the Lord.

- v. 33. 1. I will sing to the Lord while I live,
 2. I will make melody to my God while I still breathe;²⁰
 v. 34. 3. Let (this) meditation²¹ of mine be sweet unto Him,
 4. I, yea I, will rejoice in the Lord.

Liturgical additions.

- v. 35. 1. Let the sinners be utterly consumed out of the earth,
 2. And wicked men be no more.
 1. Bless the Lord, Oh my soul.

²⁰ Literally, while I still am.

²¹ מִשְׁמַחַת alludes to the preceding poem just as הִגִּיין does at Ps. 19 15 (14).

Postscript. A colleague of mine has suggested to me the possibility that the seventh stanza may include a delicate allusion to the creation of man. Compare line 6 with the *idea* in Gen. 2 7; also line 5 with Gen. 3 19. This would relieve, somewhat, the difficulty caused by the omission of the last creative act. But it would imply a use of the second creation story of which there is no indication in the rest of the Psalm.