

Psalm 24: The Entrance of the Creator King

1. Of David. A Psalm.

The earth is YHWH's and all its plenitude,
the world and all its inhabitants,

2. for [God] is the one who founded it upon the seas,
and established it upon the rivers.

3. Who may ascend YHWH's mountain?

Who may stand in [God's] holy place?

4. (Only) those with clean hands and a pure heart,¹
who have not entrusted their lives² to falsity,
or sworn deceitfully.

5. They will bear a blessing from YHWH,
and righteousness from the God of their salvation.

6. Such is the generation of those who seek [God],
of those who seek [God's] face, O Jacob.

Selâ

7. Lift up your heads, O gates!

Be lifted up, O ancient doors!

So that the king of glory may enter!

8. Who is this king of glory?

YHWH—strong and mighty!

YHWH—mighty in battle!

9. Lift up your heads, O gates!

Be lifted up,³ O ancient doors!

So that the king of glory may enter!

10. Who indeed⁴ is this king of glory?

YHWH of hosts.

[God] is the king of glory!

Selâ

Overview

Like Psalm 15, Psalm 24 is an entrance liturgy that stipulates the qualifications for access to YHWH's "mountain" or "holy place," the temple mount. Distinctive, however, is both its opening verses, which identify YHWH as the sovereign creator, and its conclusion, which liturgizes YHWH's entrance to the temple as the glorious king. Psalm 24, thus, serves a double duty: it provides an entrance liturgy for both worshippers and the worshipped One, highlighting the "holy place" as the destination point for both.

Structure

¹ The Hebrew reflects a singular, masculine subject. The translation is pluralized for inclusive purposes.

² Literally, "not lifted up (\sqrt{ns}) his life to falsity." Read *napšô* for MT *napšî* ("my life").

³ MT features "lift up." Read *hinnâšē'û* (Niphal), as in v. 7, in accord with the versions.

⁴ Indicated by the independent pronoun *hû'*, absent in v. 8.

The psalm divides itself into three discrete strophes. The first two verses, excluding the superscription, provide a creational framework for the psalm as a whole, stressing YHWH's sovereign claim over all creation. That YHWH is creator and universal sovereign adds cosmic "heft" to YHWH's royal "glory," with which the psalm concludes (vv. 7-10). The overall movement of the psalm is dramatic: the creator of all gains entrance into the temple, the microcosm of creation. Within this movement, the middle section details criteria for entrance for worshippers, comparable to what one finds in Ps 15:2-5 but cast in more generalized language. Together, Psalm 24 details a double entrance, human and divine, the former with moral qualifications, the latter with liturgical celebration.

Like its counterpart, Psalm 15, Psalm 24 seems to reflect entrance liturgy. The last section, at least, would fit well with a processional ritual for the Ark of the Covenant from war or during an imagined annual festival, akin to the Babylonian procession of the gods. The psalm may reflect a complex compositional character, given the discreteness of the three sections. Nevertheless, they are linked in various ways: the verb *nś'* ("lift," "bear"), for example, joins the second and third strophes, while the first and third strophes share the common theme of *Chaoskampf* in two different domains: creation and the battlefield.

Commentary

[1a] The Davidic "stamp" placed on this psalm through its superscription conjures the image of David declaring his faith in YHWH as creator, divine warrior, and glorious king. Without any degree of irony, the speaking David in Psalm 24 affirms his allegiance to the divine king while implying his own unworthiness to enter YHWH's palace. That is, one cannot say that David always had "clean hands and a pure heart" (v. 4; see 2 Sam 11). Perhaps the superscriptionist imagined David in the role of YHWH's gatekeeper, a role typically assumed by a Levite.

[1b-2] Because YHWH established the earth, fundamental warrant is given to YHWH's cosmic sovereignty, as the causal connection (*kī* ["for"]) between the two verses makes clear. YHWH's sovereignty, in other words, is cast in terms of ownership: YHWH owns what YHWH creates, and so all creation belongs to YHWH. The "earth"/"world" (*hā'āreš/tēbēl*) is anchored, as it were, "upon the seas" and "rivers," the latter referring to subterranean streams. Such a cosmology coheres well with Genesis 1, in which the "earth" emerges from the parted waters, separating the waters into discrete bodies on the third day (Gen 1:9-10). The imagery also hints at a cosmogonic conflict myth, or *Chaoskampf*, in which land-based creation is established upon the slain or contained waters of chaos (cf. Pss 65:7-8[6-7]; 104:6-9; Job 38:4-7, 10-11), as in the *Enuma Elish*, in which Ea builds his residence upon the slain Apsu (I.67-77), or when Marduk fashions creation from Tiamat's corpse (IV.135-146). But in Psalm 24 the seas remain intact and rivers flow freely: the waters are given a constructive role, and the mythos of divine conquest is mitigated, if not ruled out.

The world, both land and sea, is full of life (v. 1b α), resonant with God's command in Gen 1:22, 28 ("Be fruitful and multiply and fill waters/earth.") In the divine rebuke featured in Psalm 50, God claims all animal life as God's own:

I shall accept no bulls from your house,
or goats from your folds.
For every wild animal of the forest is mine,
[and] domestic animals on hills of a thousand.
I know every bird of the mountains;
even the bugs of the fields are mine.
If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and its plenitude. vv. 9-12

This final verse carries the same expression in 24:2 except in reverse order (*tēbēl ūmēlō'āh*; cf. Jer 8:16; 47:2). The earth's "plenitude" or fullness (*mēlō'*) in Psalm 24 denotes its biodiversity as well as its bio-volume. But "plenitude" need not be limited strictly to the biological in the scientific sense but can include various forms of matter, such as mountains, valleys, and rivers, as well as various forms of precipitation, resulting in a variegated and dynamic, living landscape—all for God, all created by God. Creation's fullness, in short, includes life in all its diversity and the earth's ecosystems in all their variety including their domains. This creational preface frames the entrance liturgy that follows by identifying the temple as the place of the creator in residence in creation, YHWH's home in creation. The temple is meant to be fit for the creator's entrance. So also the people, as the next strophe enjoins.

[3-6] The middle section stipulates criteria for admittance into YHWH's "holy place" or "mountain," the temple mount. Distinct from Ps 15:2-5, the qualifications given in Psalm 24 are generalized, embracing both the moral and the cultic. "Clean hands" refer to innocence and right action (cf. Pss 10:8; 15:5; 94:21; 106:38). Most frequently the adjective (*nāqī*) qualifies "blood," conveying innocence (Deut 19:10; 21:8; 2 Kgs 21:16). The "pure heart" paired with "clean hands" encompasses both moral and cultic integrity, inwardly and outwardly. A "pure heart" depicts a person who is guiltless, outwardly and inwardly, consequentially and intentionally. The following criterion develops the latter quality ("pure heart"), drawing from the negative example of oath-taking (cf. Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11; Ps 139:20), but whose scope is broader: literally "the one who has not lifted (*nāšā'*) his life (*nepes*) to falsity" (*laššāw'*). Doing so reflects a devotion of deceit, of devoting one's life to lies. The converse is found in Ps 25:1: "To you, YHWH, I entrust (i.e., 'lift up') my life." This language of "lifting," while conventional, is deliberate in this psalm, given that the same verb (*ns'*) is deployed twice in the final section (vv. 7, 9; cf. v. 5). In any case, the verse claims deceit as the underlying factor of false oath-taking; it is a matter of intent and will, a matter of the "heart."

The reward for innocence is bearing YHWH's "blessing," whose form or nature is not specified except that it is poetically paired with "righteousness" (*šēdāqā*; v. 5b). In this context, "blessing" and "righteousness" are salvific in nature, suggesting vindication or deliverance. "Righteousness" comes from the God who saves; it is not strictly a matter

of moral integrity cultivated in the human will, as one finds in the Wisdom literature (e.g., Prov 1:3; 21:21). In the Psalms, “righteousness” is endowed by God; it is a gift. The speaker generalizes to say that all who “seek” God will be blessed by God’s salvific righteousness, a “generation” no less, indeed a *new* generation of “seekers” (cf. Num 32:13; Deut 1:35; 2:14). The promise is thus turned into a call for the community, hence the speaker’s concluding direct address (“O Jacob”) to end this section. Admittance into the temple is widened, applicable to *all* who “seek” God. In light of the psalm’s creational introduction, seeking God and receiving righteousness and blessing begins with acknowledging that all creation belongs to YHWH. Clean hands and pure hearts do not attempt to counter God’s claim over all creation but live in honoring creation as God’s own, not ours. Such acknowledgement grounds the Year of Jubilee observance, for example, according to Leviticus: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but immigrants and tenants” (Lev 25:23). In other words, “land acknowledgement,” a long overdue and necessary practice for Americans of European descent, begins with acknowledging the creator as the rightful owner of the land, according to Psalm 24.

[7-10] This final, repeated section, shifts the attention from the human being who is suited for admittance into YHWH’s “holy place” to YHWH’s rightful and dramatic entrance into the temple. In other words, the issue of rightful entrance has shifted from “Jacob” to YHWH, “the king of glory.” Psalm 118 supplies a comparable command, but is voiced by the king:

Open for me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them (and) give thanks to YH.
This is the gate of YHWH;
(only) the righteous will enter through it. vv. 19-20

YHWH’s palace or abode is the king’s temple, and only the “righteous” are fit to enter it, including, as the psalm implies, the king. But Psalm 24, it is the “king of glory” who demands entrance.

This strophe is structured as a call and response, specifically as a command, question, and answer, all delivered with enthusiastic exclamation. A communal command is issued to the “gates” whose “heads” are to be “lifted up.” The power of psalmic poetry blurs the line between the physical gates of the temple and the community that awaits to receive YHWH’s entrance. The fact that ancient temple gates had no moving parts might suggest that the language is metaphorical. Or perhaps the psalmist had in mind the temple itself physically expanding vertically, levitating, to accommodate the grandeur of YHWH’s presence.

More likely, however, is the case that the lifted “gates” and open “doors” serve as models for the community’s reception of YHWH’s approaching presence: the call is for the people to lift up their heads and hearts to YHWH. Instead of “lifting” oneself to “what is false” (v. 4a), the gates “lift” up their “heads” to welcome YHWH’s entrance. “YHWH of hosts” here, as elsewhere, is a military title, alternatively translated as

“YHWH of the heavenly forces/armies.” YHWH’s “forces” (*šēbā’ôt*) include everything from stellar entities to meteorological phenomena to natural elements—anything that YHWH chooses to enlist to achieve victory. Such victory, in whatever form, cosmogonic or otherwise, is confirmed by the return of the divine warrior. Such victory is celebrated by the people’s reception of YHWH with raised heads, cleansed hands, and pure hearts in worship . . . and in creation.