TO ENTER AND NOT TO ENTER

A Literary and Theological Study of Psalm 95

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Psalm 95 is certainly one of the widely used psalms in the Christian tradition. Since the time of St. Benedict[1] it is used as an invitatory psalm in the daily liturgy of the Latin rite. Traditional Christian exegesis, following the interpretation of the psalm in Heb 3,7-4,11, has interpreted it eschatologically. Because of their disobedience and obstinacy, the Jewish people were kept from entering the promised rest. Therefore, this same rest is now offered to the new people of God, the Church.[2]

Without denying the legitimacy of such an approach, here we would like to bring out the meaning of the psalm in itself and in its own context. The message of the psalm as envisaged by its author, as we shall see, is not bound to the Old Testament but applies also to us who celebrate it today in our liturgies.

Part One: Literary Analysis

All scholars agree that Psalm 95 is divided into two parts: vv.1-7a and vv.7b-11. In this section we shall first analyze these two stanzas separately to bring out the literary beauty and the structure of each. Then, putting together the results of our analysis, we shall consider the problem of the literary unity of the whole psalm.

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1 Cf. *Regula Monasteriorum*, IX.
2 Thus St. Augustine in his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*: "Iuravit ergo illis in ira sua, ne intrent in requiem ipsius; et tamen oportet aliquos intrare in requiem ipsius: non enim nulli dabitur requies ipsius; Illis ergo reprobatis, non intrabimus" (PL 37, 1226).

1. Stanza I: vv.1-7a

The first stanza is composed of two parallel strophes[3]: vv.1-5 and vv.6-7a, each of which consists of two parts, a call to worship and its motivation.[4]

The first call to worship (vv.1-2) is made up of four hemistiches of the same rythm (3). It opens with the imperative *lekû* (come) followed by four cohortatives depending on it. Of these, two are synonymous, $n^e ran^e n\hat{a}$ (let us celebrate with shouting) and *narî'â* (let us shout for joy in honour of), and the second one is repeated in the fourth hemistich. We may note *en passant* that the structure of v.1 is parallel and that of v.2 chiastic.

Davies has pointed out that, in the Old Testament, calls to worship have a triple pattern: 1) an imperative; 2) the conjunction *kî*; and 3) an affirmation which is not simply a statement of fact, but "also a statement of faith.... an embryonic creed". The simplest form of this pattern can be found in psalms 106,1 and 107,11.[5] We find this same triple pattern in psalm 95. The call to worship, in fact, is followed, in both strophes, by $f^e k\hat{u}$ and an affirmation of faith which is the motive for which God is to be worshipped.

The motivation for the first summons to worship is found in vv.3-5. The conjunction *kî* introduces two synonymous hemistiches which affirm Israel's monotheistic belief. God is then specified as the creator in two artistically constructed stitches both of which are introduced by the relative *'ašer* (who). In v.4, through the use of a merism ($mehq^e r\hat{e}$ *'ares*/the depths of the earth/ - *tô'apôt harîm*/the heights of the mountains/), the whole of creation is described as pertaining to God, as being his. The structure is chiastic.

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3   In distinguishing between stanza and strophe we follow Watson who defines a stanza as "a subunit within a poem" and a strophe as "a subunit within a stanza". Cf. W.G.E. WATSON, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*. A Guide to its Techniques (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament; Supplement Series 26; Sheffield 1984) 161.3.

4   Ravasi proposes a triple division of the two units: a call to worship (vv.1-2//v.6); a first motivation (v.3//v.7aa); and a second motivation (vv.4-5//v.7ab). [Cf. G.RAVASI, *Il libro dei Salmi*. Commento e attualizzazione, II (51-100) (Bologna 1983) 981]. Likewise, Girard writes that "Each stanza begins with a *call* to worship (1-2//6), continues (introduced by "for") with an overall motive for this worship (3//7a), and concludes with an *explanation* of this motive (4-5//7bcd)". [M. GIRARD, "The literary structure of Psalm 95", *TDig* 30 (1982) 57]. We do not agree with this division because whereas one may speak of a double motivation for worship in the first strophe (v.3: the LORD is the greatest of all gods and vv. 4-5: he is the creator of everything), this is not the case of v.7a where we have only one basic affirmation: the *berît* relationship between God and Israel.

Verse 5 complements v.4. First, it repeats *lô* and affirms that the sea also belongs to God, but then it makes a step forward to declare that not only does all creation belong to God, but also that he is the creator of everything. This is expressed through another merism (*hayām*/the sea/ - *yabešet*/ the dry ground/). The structure of the verse is perfectly parallel: *hāyam* (the sea) *w^{e}hû* (and he) *'asahû* (made it) *yabeset* (the dry ground) *yādâw* (his hands) *yāsārû* (fashioned).

If we take vv.4 and 5 together we notice that whereas the merism of v.4 takes into account the vertical dimension of creation (depths of the earth - heights of the mountains), that of v.5 contemplates the horizontal dimension (sea - dry ground). Through this literary device the poet is stressing the totality of creation. And this totality belongs completely to God whose hands enclose the two dimensions of creation: this is the meaning of the inclusion between *b^{e}yadô* (in his hands v.4a) and *yādâw* (his hands v.5b).

The second strophe (vv.6-7a) is parallel to the first. The second call to worship is introduced by *bo'û* (enter) which is synonymous to *l^{e}kû* (come v.1); to the first call to worship (vv.1-2) correspond three synonymous cohortatives in v.6: *ništahaweh* (let us prostrate), *nikra'â* (let us bow down, *nibr^{e}kâ* (let us kneel). Watson suggests that the function of this triplet or set of three synonyms is to portray a progression or the various stages in a sequence of actions.[6]

Verse 6 describes God as *'osenû* (the one who made us) resuming *'āsāhû* (he made us) from v.5a. After the first strophe we know that this God whom we are called to worship is the creator. But v.6 also introduces a new element: he is *our* creator, thus paving the way for v.7a which will speak of the relationship between God and his people.

The motivation for the second call to worship is given in v.7a. The structure of the verse is parallel and correlative: the two hemistiches refer to the two parties of the *berît* relationship, something which is stressed through the explicit use of the pronouns *hû'* (he) in the first hemistich and *'anahnû* (we) in the second. The second part of the parallelism is bifurcated in two synonymous images: *'am mar'îtô* (the people of his pasture)/ *so'n yādô* (flock of his hand).

If we now consider the two strophes together we discover elements which enhance the literary unity of the whole stanza. There is, first of all, a kind of "boomerang" structure in the description of God. The psalmist begins by

5   G.H. DAVIES, "Psalm 95", *ZAW* (1973) 188.
6   Cf. WATSON, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 174.

inviting his audience to worship the LORD who is *sûr yis'enû* (the rock of our salvation). He presents a God who is very well known to his audience (the use of the Name) and who is in some kind of relationship with them (the rock of *our* salvation): he is the God of salvation history, the God of Israel. Then he widens his view and contemplates this same God enthroned in his heavenly court, beyond creation and history. Whatever exists belongs to him. The movement backwards starts with the presentation of the transcendent God as the creator who made the sea and fashioned the dry ground with his own hands. Then, at the end, we are back to our starting point: this great God, the creator, is our God. But this time the poet goes into detail in presenting the relation of this transcendent God with Israel: he is the shepherd of his people. And through the accumulation of personal pronouns (*hû*/he, *'anahnû*/we/) and pronominal suffixes (*'elohênû*/our God/, *mar'îtô*/his pasture/, *yādô*/his hand/) he brings out the intimacy of this relationship.

We may consider the way God is presented in the first stanza in another way. In the reason for worship given in the first strophe he appears as the sovereign lord and creator of everything. In the motivation of the second call to worship he is presented as the God of Israel, the God of history. The parallel structure of the stanza implies a bipolarity here: the two aspects, God of nature and God of history, are complementary and only when they are taken together do we have a complete picture of who the LORD is.

Another instance of bipolarity is found in the different styles of worship proposed in the two parallel invitations to worship. The words used in the first call to worship (vv.1-2), invite the worshippers to raise their voices in jubilation and enhance their worship with the use of musical instruments. The atmosphere created is that of excitement and celebration. The second call to worship (v.6) proposes a strikingly different mode of worship. No musical instruments, not even human voices, but rather gestures - prostration, bowing and kneeling - that express submission, humility and reverence.
We may conclude with Massouh that

> the first half of Ps 95 displays balance and symmetry. God is both the great king and the good shepherd. He is the transcendent creator and the immanent redeemer. He works in the vast world and among his people. He deserves to be worshipped in rejoicing and in reverence, with the jubilation and with submission. The two styles of and reasons for worship complement each other very well.[7]

S. MASSOUH, "Exegetical notes; Psalm 95", *Trin J* 4(1983) 86.

2. *Stanza II: vv.7b-11*

The atmosphere of the second style of worship - reverent, humble and silent - prepares the stage for the diving oracle that follows in the vv.7b-11.

Girard has suggested that the literary structure of this second stanza is concentric. The centre would be v.9c: *gam ra'û po'olî* (even though they have seen my work) which resumes God's "making" of the world (v.5a) and of Israel as his people (v.6b-7a). Around this centre (D) three antitheses are grouped. In the first series (vv.7b-9b: ABC) God exhorts his people to be faithful to him today. In the second series (vv.10-11: C'B'A') he explains how he turned away from their ancestors because they had been unfaithful". [8] Auffret retains v.9c as the centre, but he reduces the concentric structure to vv.8b-11 and considers vv.7b-8a as an introduction. [9]

We cannot deny that there are some corresponding elements in what Girard labels ABC//C'B'A', but I think they are not enough to speak of a concentric structure. It seems to me that the poet, who has given us two perfectly parallel strophes in stanza one, continues to play with parallelism and word pairs in the second stanza.

We have the first parallel structure in vv.7b-8a (up to *ľbabkem*/your hearts/). Here, *'îm b^eqolô tisma'û* (oh that you would give heed to his voice! v.7b) is parallel to *'al taqšû ľbabkem* (do not harden your heart v.8a) whilst the structure between the two is chiastic: *b^eqolô* (his voice)//*babkem* (your heart); *tišma'û* (give heed)//*l'al taqšû* (do not harden). The meaning is the same even though it is coined in a positive expression in the first hemistich and in a negative expression in the second. It is a call to obedience in the form of a *double* admonition.

The behaviour that is expected of the people today (*hayôm* v.7b) is then contrasted to that of their fathers on a specific day (*k^eyom*) in the past. And the pairs continue. This day is referred to as the day of Massah and Meribah (v.8) and the behaviour of the fathers is described with two synonymous verbs, *nissûni* (they temtped me) and *b^ehonûnî* (they put me to the test).

In V.10 God passes judgement on the fathers who are referred to with the pair *dôr* (generation) and *'am* (people). The judgement itself is phrased in two

8   Cf. GIRARD, "The literary structure of Psalm 95", 57-58.
9   P. AUFFRET, "Essai sur la structure littéraire du Psaume 95", *Bibl. Notizen* 22 (1983) 59-63

synonymous expressions styled in a positive and negative form as in the double admonition (vv.7b-8a): *to'ê lebabhem* (their hearts go astray)/*/lo' yad'û d°rākāy* (they do not know my ways). The two expressions are joined closely together with the unusual repetition of the pronoun (*hem w°hem*/they and they/).

It is interesting to note how the various images are connected and interwoven. In vv.7b-8a the people of the present generation are called to have a heart that is attentive to God's voice. In v.10 we are told that the fathers did not know the ways of God. These two images are interwoven in v.10a where God judges the fathers as a people whose heart goes astray.

There is also a sharp contrast between the wilderness (*midbār* v.8b) and the resting place (*m°nûhāti* v.11b), that is, the inhabited and fertile land of Canaan. While they were in the desert (which in the Old Testament is considered as a land without ways, without direction[10]), on their way to the land of the promised rest, the Israelites went astray (*to'ê*, v.10b) because they did not know the ways of God (v.10c). Therefore they could not enter the promised land of rest (v.11).

3. The Literary Unity of the whole Psalm

Until recently, scholars advocated a complex origin of Psalm 95. The first part (vv.1-7a) would be a hymn of praise and the second part (vv.7b-11) an oracle typical of prophetic and priestly literature (cf.Is 8,11-15; Jer 7,21; Ex 12,46; Lev 11, 4.8.11) later added to the original hymn[11]. In fact this is the first impression that one has on reading the psalm.

If one analyzes the semantic fields of the two stanzas, one realizes that there is a great difference between them. The first stanza, for example, is full of liturgical terminology (*n°ran°nâ*/let us celebrate with shouting/, *nāri'â*/let us shout for joy in honour of/ (2x), *n°qadmâ pānâw*/go into his presence/, *tôdâ*/thanksgiving/, *zimrôt*/songs/, *ništahaweh*/let us prostrate/, *nikrā'â*/let us bow/, *nibr°kâ*/let us kneel/). This vocabulary is not present in the second stanza which is dominated by two other semantic fields: that of broken relations (*Meribah* [*rîb*/to quarrel/] *Massah* [*nāsah*/to tempt/], *nissûnî*/they tempted me/, *behonûnî*/they put me to the test/, *'aqût*/I loathed/, *'apî*/my anger/) and that of obedience/disobedience (*b°qolô tišma'û*/give heed to his voice/, *'al taqsû l°bab-kem*/do not harden your heart/, *to'ê lebāb*/hearts that go astray/, *lo' yā'dû*

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10   Cf. Ps. 107, 40; Job 6, 18; 12, 24; Deut 32, 10.

11   Cf. for example, H. GUNKEL *Die Psalmen* (HKAT) (Göttingen 1929) 417-420. S. MOWINCKEL, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Oxford 1962) I, 32.76; II, 156-157.

dᵉrākāy/they do not know my ways/). But when one reads the text carefully, one discovers many literary elements that show a deep structural and thematic unity.

A first link between the two stanzas is probably the fact that God is described as *sûr yiš'enû* (the rock of our salvation) in the first stanza (v.1) while the second stanza refers to the testing of God at Meribah - Massah (v.8). Here, according to Ex 17,1-7, the Israelites found fault with Moses and God because they had no water to drink and God ordered Moses to strike the *rock* at Horeb and water came out of it. The poet is probably alluding to this incident when he calls God *sûr yiš'enû*.

Mar'îtô (his pasture) in v.7a and *mᵉnûhatî* (my rest) in v.11 are also related for they both refer to the promised land.[12] In Ps 23,2 the LORD-Shepherd leads the psalmist *'al mê menûhôt* (to refreshing/lit. of rest/ waters). But in our psalm the Israelites who are defined as the people of God's pasture and the sheep of his hand in v.7a are kept from entering the LORD's place of rest. The contrast between the two stanzas is evident.

Another case of contrast is found in the fact that whereas in the first stanza the Israelites are defined as the *people* whom the LORD-Shepherd leads (*'am mar'îtô wᵉsôn yādô*, v.7a), in the second stanza God himself attests that they are a people who have lost their way (*'am to'ê lebāb hem wᵉhem lo' yād'û dᵉrākāy*, v.10). This people, in the first stanza, is called to worship God because of his works: the "making" of the universe (*'asahû* v.5) and the "making" of Israel as his people (*'osenû* v.6). In the second stanza, they are admonished not to follow their fathers who tested God even though they had seen his work (*po'olî* v.9).

But what really keeps the two stanzas together is the semantic field of movement. In the first stanza we have *lᵉkû* (come) in v.1, *nᵉqadmâ* (let us enter) in v.2, and *bo'û* in v.6. All three are invitations to enter the temple and worship God. In the second stanza we are told that the Exodus generation was a people whose heart goes astray (v.10 *to'ê lebāb* from the verb *tā'â*, to wander, to go astray) because they did not know the way (v.10). This wandering in the desert is clearly opposed to the procession to the temple in the first stanza. And the final verse, which comes as a logical result of the people's behaviour described in v.10, is in very sharp contrast with the insistent invitation of the first stanza to enter. For at the very end of the psalm God swears: *'im yᵉbo'ûn 'el mᵉnûhātî* (they shall not enter my rest v.11).

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12   Cf. Is 49,8-9; Jer 26,36-38; and Ezek 34,14 for *mar ê*, and Deut 12,9; Num 10,33; 1 Kgs 8,56; and also Ex 33,14; Josh 1,15; 21,42; and 22,4 for *m nûhâ*.

There is in fact, a general inclusion between *lᵉkû* in v.1 and *'im yᵉbo'ûn* in v.11. It is an inclusion that unifies the whole psalm both structurally and thematically. The meaning of the psalm is to be sought in the ambivalence of "entering the temple" — "not entering God's place of rest".

The relation between the two stanzas, then, is one of contrast and it gives the following structure to the whole psalm[13]:

(Stanza one)   *Come*

The people is invited to enter the temple to worship the LORD who made the universe and Israel.

(Stanza two)   *Today*

The people are given a double admonition to have a listening heart not like their fathers, who

On that day

even though they had seen God's work, did not recognize his ways and kept erring in their heart (and in the desert) so that God kept them from entering his place of rest.

They shall not enter

Thus, vv.7b-8a seem to be at the centre of the psalm. What precedes is addressed to the people today (*hayôm*) and what follows is an example from the past (*kᵉyôm*) which the present generation should not follow if they want to enter God's rest as they are entering the temple. The gist of the psalm is the double admonition in these two hemistiches: "Hearken to his voice and do not harden your heart".

Part Two: Theological Analysis

The literary analysis of Psalm 95 has already given us a good insight into its meaning. The aim of this section then, is to deepen our understanding of it by analyzing the psalm line by line in the light of the parallel texts. The results of our literary analysis have to be kept constantly in mind.

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13   The structure which we propose here is inspired by that of AUFFRET in his article "Essai sur la structure litteraire du Psaume 95", 64.

1. Stanza I: The Call to Worship (vv.1-7a)

The psalm opens with an enthusiastic and insistent invitation to worship (vv.1-2). The introductory $l^e k\hat{u}$ sets in motion the procession towards the temple and gives a tonality of movement to the whole psalm. It is followed by a cluster of liturgical terms.

The first verb, $n^e ran^e n\hat{a}$ means "to cry out for joy" and is a classical term for expressing the joy and exultation that bursts out in hymns and festive acclamations (cf. Is 12,6; 24,14; 49,13; 54, 1; Jer 31,7; Zeph 3,14; Ps 35,27; etc.). *Nārî'a* is used of a military or liturgical cry in honour of a victorious king (cf. Pss 47,2; 60,10; 65,14; 66,1; 81, 2; 98,4.6; 100,1; Josh 6,5; 10,20; Judg 7,21; 1 Sam 4,5; 2 Sam 6,5). In Ps 68,26 *qidmû* (enter) is used for the procession towards the temple and in Mic 6,6 the same verb is used twice for presenting oneself in the temple to worship God. This is the meaning of $n^e qadm\hat{a}\ p\bar{a}n\hat{a}w$ (let us enter into his presence) in v.2. The temple, in fact, is the place, where, through his participation in worship, the Israelite sees God's face (cf. Deut 12,5; 1 Sam 1,22; Pss 24,6; 27,8; 42,3; Is 38,11). *Tôdâ* is the technical term for sacrifices of thanksgiving or praise (cf. Lev 7,12-15; 22,29; Pss 50,14.23; 56,13; 107,22; 116,17; Am 4,5). But it can also refer to hymns of praise which is probably the meaning here since the context is vocal. Ravasi has suggested that taking into account the second stanza, *tôdâ* here might have a connotation of confession of sins: a hymn acknowledging God's faithfulness and the people's unfaithfulness, like the penitential hymns in Dan 3,26-45; Neh 9,6-37; and Bar 1,15-3,8[14]. *Zimrôt* is one of the traditional terms for songs or melodies in honour of God.

The LORD, the object of this exuberant worship, is described as *sûr yiš'enû*. We have already noted that we probably have an allusion to Ex 17,1-7 here. This divine epithet occurs many times in the psalms (18,2.31.46; 19,14; 27,5; 28,1; 31,2; 61,2; 62,3.7.8.; 71,2; 73,26; 78,35; 95,1; 92,15; 94,22; 144,1) and elsewhere (Deut 32,18; Is 26,4; 44,8; 51.1; Hab 1,12). It is an image that depicts the reliability and stability of God, on whom Israel can lean with a sense of security. Considering the texts where this epithet occurs, Davies has concluded that it contains a reference to Jerusalem, and in particular to the rock on which the sanctuary was built [15]. In Ps 61,3-4 *sûr* surely refers to the temple and God himself is called *migdāl* (tower) and *'oz* (stronghold).

The first set of motivations for worship follows in vv.3-5. Perhaps one may speak of a certain "chronological" order in these motivations for God is

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14   Cf. RAVASI, *Il Libro dei Salmi II*, 985-6
15   Cf. DAVIES, "Psalm 95", 180-90.

contemplated first in himself (v.3), then as creator of the universe (vv.4-5), and finally as the creator and shepherd of Israel (v.7a). We have already noted that these motivations are confessions of faith[16]. In fact, the three motivations are the three basic axioms of the Old Testament creed: God is one; he is the creator; he is our saviour.

In v.3 the psalmist employs the image of the heavenly court to proclaim the monotheistic faith of Israel. The LORD is pictured as an emporor (*'el gādol//melek gādol*)[17] surrounded by minor deities whom he has subjected. This image is quite common in the Old Testament (cf. Ex 15,11; Pss 29,1; 47,3; 77,14; 96,4; 97,9; 136,2) and we do not think that it necessarily presupposes a polytheistic background[18]. It could simply be a poetic way of affirming monotheism. Mythical and polytheistic imagery are not missing in biblical poetry. God, then, is to be worshipped first of all for what he is in himself: the one and only God.

The domain of this "great king" knows no limit. It includes the whole universe as the two merisms of vv.4-5 indicate. The only God does not share his sovereignty. The peaks of the mountains, considered to be the dwelling of the gods, belong to him. So also the underworld (probable meaning of "the depths of the earth"), which was considered to be the realm of Death. The same idea is beautifully expressed in Ps 139,7-10 and Amos 9,2-3.

This sovereignty of God is particularly evident in his act of creation. The sea, the classical opponent of the creator in many creation narratives, cannot be more passive here. It is simply God's work and belongs to him (v.5a). The image of God fashioning (*yāsar*) his creatures is dear to the biblical tradition (cf. Gen 2,7; Is 29,16; 45,9.11.18; 64,7; Jer 18,6; Pss 33,15;119,73;Job 10,8-9; Sir 33,13: Wis 7,1; 2 Macc 7,23). Usually it is applied to the creation of the human person and its consequent dependence on him. In v.5 this same image is extended to the whole platform of the earth (*yabešet*). The distant emperor of the heavenly court (v.3) has suddenly become a cosmic potter!

It is interesting to note how rich and varied the images that the psalmist uses for God are. He is depicted as the rock of salvation (v.1), the heavenly emperor (v.3), the sovereign lord of all (v.4), the cosmic potter (v.5), the shepherd of Israel (v.7a), the saviour (cf. v.9: *po'olî*/my work/), the judge

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16   Cf. our presentation of Davies' exposition on Old Testament calls to worship on p.2
17   Cf. 2Kgs 18, 19. 28// Isa 36,4.13 where *Melek gadol* means not simply the "king", but the "emperor", that is to whom other kings are subjected.
18   For a different view cf.A.A. ANDERSON, *The Book of Psalms II*: Psalms 73-150 (Michigan and London 1972)678

(vv.10-11). He is at the same time distant and near, worthy of jubilant celebration and of reverent worship, of love and of fear.

The second call to worship opens with the technical verb for entrance into the temple: *bo'û* (enter; cf. Pss 96,8; 100,4; 132,7; and also 5,8;24,7.9; 118,19), which is followed by three synonymous verbs of worship. The use of a set of three verbs of worship is found also in Ugaritic texts [19]. Although synonymous, each of the three verbs has a nuance of its own.

Ništāhaweh refers to the act of prostration or profound bow before a person of a higher status to express utmost reverence (cf. Gen 33,7; 1 Sam 25,23.41; 2 Sam 14,4.33; 24,20; 1 Kgs 1,16.23; 2 Kgs 2,15; etc.). When the word is used for worship before God (cf. Deut 32,6.15.18; Is 44,2; 51,13; 54,5; Pss 66,4; 99,5.9; 100,4; 132,7; etc.) it indicates the religious attitude of the worshipper and can be simply translated as "to adore"[20] *Nikrā'â* is explained by Ravasi as "una prostrazione più profonda, gettandosi quasi a terra"[21] And *nibrᵉkâ* refers to the act of kneeling down, a rather uncommon practice in the Old Testament[22] All three postures fit very well the description of God as heavenly emperor, sovereign lord and creator. They are like a response to the presentation of God just made in the first strophe. But now, in the second strophe, God is presented in another way. We pass from creation theology to election theology with *'osenû* (our maker) serving as a link.

One is inclined to take *'osenû* as a reference to the creation of humanity about which nothing is said in the first strophe. But considering the affirmations that follow it as a motivation for the second call to worship, I agree with Anderson[23] that the stress here is upon the making of Israel into God's people. In many other Old Testament texts the formation of the people of Israel is considered as God's "making", as his creation (cf. Deut 32,15; Is 43,15; 44,2; 51,13; Hos 8,14; Pss 100,3; 149,2). In the narrative of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds (Ex 14,21-22 we find the same creation vocabulary of Gen 1 - a hint that the author conceives this event as the "creation" of Israel[24] Perhaps we might

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19   Cf. *UT* 76: II: 17-18; 51: VIII: 26-29.
20   Cf. H.P. STÄHLI, "MIM *hwh* hist. PROSTRARSI", *Dizionario Teologico dell'Antico Testamento* (ed E. Jenni and C. Westermann; Ital. ed. G.L. Prato) Vol. I (Torino 1978) 461.
21   RAVASI, *Il Libro dei Salmi II*, 987.

22   The only instances in the Old Testament where someone kneels to pray are 1 \kgs 8,54; 18,42; Ezra 9,4; and Dan 6,11.
23   ANDERSON, *The Book of Psalms II*, 697
24   Cf. J.L. SKA, *Le Passage de la Mer*. Etudes de la construction, du style et de la symbolique d'Ex 14,1-31 (Rome 1986) 93-96.

say that some "schools" in the biblical tradition considered Israel's formation as God's people as the completion and climax of creation. In this way, there is no dichotomy between creation and election, between the God of nature and the God of history.

The motivation for the second call to worship (v.7a) is the special relationship that exists between the LORD and Israel as a result of his "making" Israel. This relationship is expressed in a phrase which echoes the classical "covenant formula" or "formula belonging": *hû' 'elohênû wᵉanahnû 'am marîtô* (He is our God and we are the people of his pasture: cf. Ex 6,7; Lev 26,12; Deut 26,17-19; 29,12; 2 Sam 7,24; Jer 7,23; 11,4; 24,7; 30,22; 31,1; 32,38; 37,23.27; Ezek 11,20; 14,11; Zech 8,8). The origin of this formula and its relation to the Sinai *berît* has been the subject of long studies and discussions among scholars.[25] What seems important to us in our context is that the formula marks the exclusive relationship that exists between the LORD and Israel as a result of the *berît* and that there is a connection between this relationship established by the LORD and Israel's observance of the law.[26] Then, the admonition that follows in vv.7b-8 is not an abrupt change of mood but the natural consequence of the main assertion in the motive for the second call to worship.

The "covenant formula" is here developed and enriched with pastoral imagery. The LORD himself is not identified as the shepherd of Israel but this is implied by its counterpart: the Israelites are *'am marîtô wᵉso'n yadô* (the people of his pasture and the flock of his hand). In fact, only four times in the whole Old Testament is the title "shepherd" applied to God (Gen 48,15; 49,24; Pss 23,1; 80,2), but the theme is common. The relationship between the LORD-Shepherd and Israel-flock is very similar to that set up by means of the Sinai *berît* and expressed in the "covenant formula".

Today most scholars agree that the Sinai *berît* was a type of vassal treaty by which the LORD imposed his law on the Israelites assuring them of his protection. As the book of Deuteronomy insists, the people have to obey, to give heed to the voice of their God, and he, in turn, will guard them against any harm and make them prosper (cf. for example Deut 11, 13-15.22-25; 28,1-14). Likewise, the relationship shepherd-flock evokes the idea of guidance and concern on one side and docility on the other. From the time of the exodus from Egypt, when "he made his own people to go out like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock, and led them on safely so that they feared not" (Ps

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25   Cf. R. SMEND, "Die Bundesformel", *ThSt* 68 (Zürich 1963); N. LOHFINK, "Dt 26,17-19 und die 'Bundesformel'", *ZkTH* 91 (1969) 517-553.

26   Cf. for example Deut 26,17-19.

78,52-53), God showed continual solicitude for Israel, "as the shepherd who feeds his flocks, gathers the lambs in his arms, puts them on his breast, and leads to repose those that are with young" (Is 40,11). And Israel could feel secure even amidst dangers because "thy rod and thy staff comfort me" (Ps 23,4). However, her response was not always that of a docile flock: "for Israel is stubborn like a stubborn heifer; now shall the LORD feed them as a lamb in a broad pasture?" (Hos 4,16). This theme leads us on to the second stanza of our psalm.

2. Stanza II: The Oracle (vv. 7b-11)

The divine oracle is preceded by an introduction typical of the prophetic style (cf.. Is 1,2; Jer 2,4; Hos 5,1; Amos 3,1; 4,1; 5,1). The opening *hayôm* changes the mood of the psalm from one of worship into one of reflection. It is useless to try to imagine a particular day to which the psalmist would be referring here, as some scholars have done. In the style of the book of Deuteronomy (cf. Deut 4,4.10.40; 5,3; 6,6; 7,11; 10,13; etc.), the poet is referring to any day on which the psalm might be celebrated, the everlasting "today" typical of Jewish and Christian liturgy which renders actual God's salvific acts of the past and postulates a response to them here and now.[27]

This response is what the psalmist solicits from his audience with his exhortation: *'im b^{e}qolô tišama'û* (oh that you would give heed to his voice! v.7b). For the expression is not simply an invitation to hear the forthcoming oracle, but a call to obedience. To listen to God is to do what he commands (cf. Judg 2,2; 1 Kgs 20,35; Jer 7,23.28; Hos 9,17; Zeph 3,2; Hag 1,12; Zech 1,4).

The oracle itself opens with an admonition that is likewise an invitation to obedience: *'al taqšû f^{e}babkem* (v.8a). Usually in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is the neck (*'orep*) that is said to be made stiff or hardened (cf. Ex 32,9; 33,3.5; 34,9; Deut 9,7.13; 10,16; 31,27; 2 Kgs 17,14; Jer 7,26; 17,23; 19,15; etc.). The image is taken from the ox which was used as a beast of burden and which was believed to hold its energy in its neck. When the ox stiffens its neck it is impossible to make it move. Hence, whoever is rebellious to the yoke of obedience is said to be stiffnecked (cf. Jer 5,5; Hos 4,16).[28] In Ex 7,3, Prov 28,14, Ezek 3,7 and our

27   The same opinion has been expressed by DAVIES, "Psalm 95", 193; L. JACQUET, *Les Psaumes et le coeur de l'Homme II*, 793; E. BEAUCAMP, *Le Psautier II*; Ps 73-150 (Paris 1979) 119; G. RAVASI, *Il Libro dei Salmi II*, 990.

28   Cf. A.S. VAN DER WOUDE, "*qsh* ESSERE DURO", *Dizionario Teologico dell'Antico Testamento II*, 622.

text, it is the heart that is hardened. In the first of these passages it is God who hardens the heart of man, but in the other three texts it is man himself who hardens his own heart and the meaning is the same as that of hardening the neck, that is, disobedience. With much the same meaning, Jeremiah speaks of the stubborness of the heart (*š^erirût leb*; cf. Jer 3,17; 7,24; 9,13; 11,8; etc.), Zechariah of hearts rendered as adamant stone (*libbam śāmû āamîr*) "lest they should hear the Torah" (Zech 7,12) and Ezekiel of a stiff heart (*hizgê leb*, Ezek 2,4) and a heart of stone (*leb ha 'eben*, Ezek 36,26). Only when God removes this heart of stone from the flesh of Israelites and gives them a new heart, a heart of flesh, will they learn to be obedient (cf. Ezek 36,26-27).

The worshippers celebrating our psalm are admonished not to harden their heart as their fathers of the exodus generation had done. In Exodus and Deuterenomy this generation is constantly rebuked for being stiffnecked (cf. Ex 32,9; 33,3.5; 34,9; Deut 9,6.13; 10,16; 31,27). From all the incidents in which they had proved themselves disobedient and ribellious, the psalmist chooses only one, that of Massah-Meribah, which, in fact, seems to have become emblematic of the stubbornness of the exodus generation (cf. Deut 6,16; 33,8; Ps 81,8).

At Massah-Meribah (cf. Ex 17,1-7[29]) the Israelites contented (*yareb* v.2) with Moses because there was no water for them to drink. The text makes it clear that the contention was in fact directed against God (cf. vv.2.7). On the theological level, the verb *rîb* (to contend, to dispute) is usually used with God as its subject. God contends with the enemies of his people (cf. Is 49,25; Jer 25,31; 50,34; Ps 74,22; etc.) or of the pray-er (cf. Pss 31,21; 35,1.23; 43,1; 119,154; etc.) or with his own people (cf. Is 3,13; 27,8; 57,16; Jer 2,9; Hos 4,1; 12,3; Mic 6,2; cf. also Ps 50). But in Ex 17 God is the object of the contention as if he had committed some injustice against his people! They are dissatisfied with him and his ways. Psalm 95 does not use the verb *rîb* directly, but there is a hint to the contention in the name Meribah which comes from the same root. But it does use the other verb, *nās'â*, which forms a pair with *rîb* in Ex 17.

Nās'â means "to examine", "to put to the test", "to tempt" in order to see whether someone is capable of a certain achievement. God puts men to the test, he tempts them, so that he may know their mind (cf. Gen 22,1; Deut 8,2.16; 13,4; 33,8; Judg 2,22; 3,1.4; Ps 26,2; 2 Chron 32,31). But also men can tempt God (cf. Ex 17,2.7; Num 14,22; Deut 6,16; Is 7,12; Pss 78,18.41.56; 95,9; 106,14). The

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29   It seems that originally there existed two different and seperate traditions, one concerning Massah and the other Meribah. The Massah incident had to do with putting to the test God's presence among his people and it is mentioned alone in Deut 6,16. The Meribah incident was a rebellion against God because of lack of water and it is found alone in Num 20,1-13

connotation seems to be that of expecting God to solve a problem by performing a miracle. In Ex 17 the meaning of such a test is explicitly stated in v.7: the Israelites tempted God saying, Is the LORD among us or not? The miracle of providing water for them in the desert was to be the proof of God's saving presence among them.

In parallelism with *nās'â*, we find in Ps 95,9 the verb *bāhan* which does not occur in Ex 17. *Bāhan* means "to scrutinize", "to probe", "to examine", in order "to determine the degree of value and strength inherent in another"[30] It is God's right, as creator and lawgiver, to scrutinize men, or their words (cf. Gen 42,16; Job 12,11; 34,3), or their heart (cf. Gen 12,3; Ps 17,3; 1 Chron 29,17), or their reins and heart (cf. Jer 11,20; 20,12; Ps 7,10). However three times in the Old Testament we find men scrutinizing or testing God (Mal 3,10.15 and our psalm). The use of *b^{e}honûnî* in the context of the incident at Massah-Meribah implies that by asking for a miracle, the Israelites were doubting God's capability of providing for their needs and ultimately of leading them into the land which he had promised to them. They doubted the strength and stability of the "Rock of their salvation" (v.1).

And all this happened in the very wilderness (v.8) where they were continually experiencing God's saving power, where they were seeing his work (v.9). The word *po'al* (work) occurs fourteen times in the Hebrew scriptures in reference to God's action.[31] Most of these occurrences to God's action in history, past, present, or future (cf. Is 5,12; Hab 1,5; 3,2; Pss 44,2; 77,13; 90,16). In Ps 95,9 *po'alî* refers to God's saving action in the exodus from Egypt and all through their wandering in the wilderness. All through this long period the Israelites saw without understanding (cf. Is 6,9-10), and being never really convinced of the undertaking (cf. Ex 14,11-12; Num 11,4-6; 14,2-4; 16,13-14; 20,4-5; 21,5), they never ceased requiring new proofs from God that he was really able to lead them to the promised land.

In our psalm God judges this generation of Israelites as a people with a wandering heart who do not know his ways (v.10). The verb *ta'â* means "to wander", "to roam", (cf. Gen 20,13; 21,14; 37,15; Ex 23,4; Ps 107,4). But it is also used in a figuritive sense. In Ps 119,176, the psalmist asks God to seek him out because "I have gone astray (*ta'îtî*) like a lost sheep". Like a sheep that goes

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and Ps 81,7. The two traditions were joined together in Ex 17,1-7 and are found together also in Deut 33,8 and in our text. Cf. DAVIES, "Psalm 95", 193-4.

30   S.R. HIRSCH, *The Psalms II*, 176.

31   In reference to God's action, *po al* occurs only in the singular and therefore there is no reason to change it into the plural to follow the LXX reading *ta erga*.

astray from the way in which the shepherd is leading it, the sinner goes astray from the way of God's commandments (cf. also Is 53,6). In a figurative sense, then, *ta'â*, takes on the meaning of sin and of its consequences[32].

In our psalm it is the heart that goes astray (*to'ê lebāb*). *Leb* has a wide range of meaning in the biblical language. As the seat of decision-making and responsibility (cf. for example Gen 20,5; a Sam 24,6) it can be translated as "conscience". Those who have a pure conscience, who act in accordance with God's law, are referred to as *yisrê leb*, "upright of heart" (cf. Pss 7,11; 11,2; 32,11; 36,11; 64,11; etc.). To the contrary, those who act independently of God's law, who do not walk in his ways, are said to be *to'ê lebāb*.

The image is completed by saying that they do not know God's ways (*w*ᵉ*hem lo' yad'û d*ᵉ*rākāy*). God's ways are his plans for men and more specifically his commandments (cf. Deut 5,30; 8,6; 10,12; 11,22.28; Josh 22,5; 1 Kgs 2,3; 3,14; 8,58; Is 2,3; 42,24; 58,2; 63,17; Zech 3,7; Pss 25.4.9; 27,11; 37,34; 51,15; etc.). Man is to walk in God's way (cf. for example Ex 32,8), that is, he is to direct his conduct in obedience to God, to live in accordance with God's commandments which show man the way (cf. for example Deut 5,33). To abandon God's way or ways is to wander away from God's commandments (cf. for example Num 22,32; Deut 11,28)[33]. The exodus generation did not know God's ways. Among the various shades of meaning of the verb *yad'a* (to know) there is that "recognizing" in the sense of understanding or comprehending. It is one of the main functions of the heart to recognize or understand (cf. Deut 8,5; 29,3; Josh 23,14; 1 Kgs 2,44; Isa 32,4; Jer 24,7; etc.). But when the heart is one that goes astray, it cannot accomplish its function. In plain language, stubbornness renders a person incapable of "knowing", that is, of understanding (cf. Deut 29,4; Is 29,9-12; 42,18-25, 48,8; Jer 5,3-5; 10,14; etc.).

Thus, both expressions ("they are a people whose heart goes astray" and "they do not know my ways") refer to disobedience to God's law just as the two admonitions of vv.7b-8a ("Oh that you would hearken to his voice!" and "Do not harden your hearts") are calls to obedience. What characterized the exodus generation - disobedience - is what the present generation should not imitate.

In fact, in biblical tradition, the exodus generation became the symbol of Israel who, though loved by God, is always ribellious (cf. Deut 1,2; 2,7; 8,2; 29,4;

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32   Cf. J.F.A. SAWYER, "*t'h* VAGARE", *Dizionario Teologico dell'Antico Testamento II*, 953-4..

33   Cf. G. SAUER "derek VIA, *Dizionario Teologico dell'Antico Testamento I*, 397-8

Num 14,33; Am 2,10). The LORD was disgusted with this generation (*'aqût b^edôr*, v.10a) and, since they did not recognize his ways and their hearts went astray, he made them wander in the wilderness for forty years (v.10a; cf. Num 14,33.34; Deut 2,7; Josh 5,6; Am 2,10). The generation who had witnessed his work but continued to doubt that he was really able to lead them to the promised land and even despised the project itself, attempting once and again to return to Egypt, was not worthy to enter the promised rest (v.11).

The very last word of the psalm, *m^enûhatî*, is pregnant with meaning. Literally, the word means "a place of rest", or even "tranquillity", "calm". In many Old Testament passages it refers to the promised land and all the goods connected with it (Num 10,33; Deut 12,9; 1 Kgs 8,56; cf. also Ex 33,14; Deut 3,20; Josh 1,15; 21,24; 22,4). In others it refers to Jerusalem and more specifically, to the temple (cf. Is 66,1-2; Ps 131,8.13-14; 1 Chron 28,2). In the first case, the rest is provdided by God for his people: he gives Israel the land which he had promised and which belongs to him. In the second case, it is the people who provides a resting-place for God. However, the two aspects are closely connected.

In Deut 12,9-11 the land which the LORD is giving to his people as inheritance is called (*ham^enûhâ*/the resting-place/). There the LORD will give Israel rest (*henîah*) from all her enemies that she may dwell in safety. An important part of this idyllic image of rest and safety shall be "the place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there". Later, when Israel was dwelling safely in the resting place promised to her, David had in mind "to build a house of rest (*bêt m^enûha*) for the ark of the covenant of the LORD", but God did not permit it. It was Solomon who built this house for the LORD in Jerusalem and during the rite of its consecration, he stood up and said: "Blessed is the LORD who has given rest (*'ašer nātan m^enûhâ*) to his people Israel, according to all that he promised: there has not failed one word of all his good promise, which he promised through his servant Moses" (1 Kgs 8,56). This passage seems to say that only with the building of a house of rest for the LORD, when the glory of the LORD dwelt amidst his people, was the promise of giving Israel *m^enûhâ* completely fulfilled. Thus, the temple seems to be both the LORD's resting-place and the resting-place of Israel perhaps as the symbol and the culmination of all the goods included in the gift of the promised land.

The fact that *m^enûhâ* refers to both the promised land and to the temple is very significant for the understanding of psalm 95. Verse 11 refers God's reaction to the disobedience of the exodus generation: he swore that they will not obtain what he had promised them, the land where they were to enjoy rest

and security. But the verse forms part of the example from the past (vv.8-11) given to the present generation that they might act in a different way from their fathers. This being the case, v.11 is not simply a report of God's punishment to the exodus generation, but it is also intended as a threat to the present generation who is worshipping in the temple, God's resting-place and their own resting-place. If they harden their hearts as their fathers had done, if they are not obedient and do not conform their lives to God's law, then it is useless to go to the temple because God will not let them enjoy the rest of which the temple is the culmination and symbol and he will not let them experience his presence in his resting-place.

Thus, the theme of entering ($l^e k\hat{u}$, v.1; $bo'\hat{u}$, v.6) and not entering ('$\hat{i}m$ $y^e bo'\hat{u}n$, v.11) God's $m^e n\hat{u}h\hat{a}$ which is both the temple (stanza one) and the promised land (stanza two) is the main issue of the psalm. The condition for entering both is obedience (vv.7b-8a) placed at the centre of the psalm to unite the two generations, the two aspects of $m^e n\hat{u}h\hat{a}$ and the two stanzas.

Conclusion

Ps 95 is an entrance liturgy. The oracle, that is the second stanza, has the function of preparing the people to have the right disposition for worship, and corresponds to the series of requirements for access to the temple which we find in other entrance liturgies (cf. Pss 15;24).

The psalm, then, is a warning to the people who are entering the temple. If they are disobedient as their forefathers were, it is useless to enter the temple physically because they will experience neither the $m^e n\hat{u}h\hat{a}$ of which the temple is the symbol and culmination nor God's presence in his place of his rest.

The message of the psalm basically is that the nature of true worship is not ritualism but obedience, a message that was sounded again and again by prophets (cf. for example 1 Sam 15,22; Jer 7,2-26; Hos 6,6; Amos 5,21-24).

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