

Complex Antiphony in Psalms 121, 126 and 128: the Steady Responsa Hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

Psalms 121, 126 and 128 are three songs of Ascents displaying the same structural characteristics: (i) they include two distinct parts, each one with its own theme; (ii) the two parts have the same number of verse lines; (iii) many grammatical and semantic similarities are found between the homolog verse lines from the two parts; (iv) a literary breakdown exists between the last verse of the first part and the first verse of the second part. These features remain unexplained as long as these poems are approached in a linear fashion. Here we test the hypothesis that these songs were performed antiphonally by two choirs, each one singing another part of the poem. This mode of complex antiphony is defined here as steady responsa. In the three songs analyzed here, the “composite text” issued from such a pairing of distant verses displays a high level of coherency, new literary properties, images and metaphors, echo patterns typical to antiphony and even “composite meanings” ignored by the linear reading. We conclude that these three psalms were originally conceived to be performed as steady responsa.

A INTRODUCTION

Antiphony is sometimes mentioned in the Bible. The first ceremony of alliance of the Israelites in Canaan is reported as an impressive antiphonal dialogue between two Israelite choirs: from mount Gerizim six tribes were to bless the people and from mount Eybal a responding choir of the other six tribes were to sing a hymn of curse (Deut 27:11-16). Antiphonal performances are evoked in the song of the Sea (Exod 15:1, 20-21) and also after the alliance on Mount Sinai, in the episode recounting the gold calf (Exod 32:18). Other antiphonal performances appear in the procession accompanying the transfer of the Ark of Alliance to Jerusalem¹ at the ceremony of inauguration of Solomon's temple (2 Chr 5:11-13); at the ceremony of the reconstruction of the Temple (Ezra 3:12-13); and at the ceremony for the completion of the city-wall of Jerusalem (Neh 12:27-42). Indirect evidence also suggests that many hymns were sung

¹ 1 Chronicles 15: 22-24. For analysis of the singing procession and its performance, see John W. Kleinig, *The Lord's Song* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 43-53.

antiphonally at the Jerusalem Temple.²

Despite these testimonies, this mode of performance has not received the attention it deserves. The main reason for this is that antiphony is considered as no more than a dialogue between two halves of a verse sung by two different choirs (*plain antiphony*). This mode of performance (generally identified by a parallelism between the two halves of a verse)³ does not in fact modify the structure and meaning of the poem. However, the content of the song may be deeply affected by the performance in the case of *complex antiphony*, when the choral dialogue occurs between non-adjacent fragments of text.

The most elementary mode of *complex antiphony* is a dialogue between two voices, each one singing its own “half-song.” This mode of performance, defined as *steady responsa*, is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible though it is attested in the ancient Near East, from Mesopotamia⁴ to Ancient Greece.⁵ However, Biblical psalms that combine two parts of similar length and structure but are distinct in their content, have been identified.⁶ In the past, this singularity has been frequently interpreted as evidence of a late gathering (during the editing of the book of Psalms) of two poems initially conceived of as independent entities. This “bricolage hypothesis,” however, is challenged by the literary affinities observed in some of the psalms, between homolog verses from the so-called independent poems.⁷

² See Israel W. Slotki, “Antiphony in Ancient Hebrew Poetry,” *JQR* 26 (1936): 199-219 and Alfred Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel* (London: Vision Press Limited, 1969), 37-55, 127, 154-168.

³ This pattern, defined as internal parallelism, suggests that each half-verse was sung by another choir. See Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Traditional Techniques in Classical Hebrew Verse* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 104-191.

⁴ In the hymn to Enlil in honor of Dungi (Bmes 96706, see Stephen Langdon, “Hymns from Eridu and Nippur,” *AJSLL* 39 [1923]:175-177), the indication *gisgigal* (antiphony) is found in the reverse of the tablet, followed by the same number of verse as in the obverse. A parallel in meaning is also observed in this case between corresponding verses from the two sides.

⁵ In Ancient Greece, songs from tragedies were frequently performed antiphonally (See Christopher Collard, *Euripides* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981], 24). In most of the Sophocles and Euripides tragedies, the song is divided in two halves of the same length. Here again, homolog verses from the two parts display similarities in rhythm and strong literary bonds, suggesting a *steady responsa* mode of performance.

⁶ As examples, see Lowell K. Handy, “Sounds, Words and Meanings in Psalm 82,” *JSOT* 47 (1990): 51-66; Ron Tappy, “Psalm 23: Symbolism and Structure,” *CBQ* 57 (1995): 255-280; Yair Mazor, “When Aesthetics is Harnessed to Psychological Considerations. Ars Poetica in Psalm 139,” *ZAW* 109 (1997): 260-271; George W. Savran, “The Contrasting Voices of Psalm 95,” *RB* 110 (2003): 17-32.

⁷ See for example Anthony R. Ceresko, “The Function of Chiasmus in Hebrew Poetry,” *CBQ* 40 (1978): 1-10; Lloyd M. Barré, “Recovering the Literary Structure of

Parallelism between two halves of a poem can be expected once a poem, conceived as *steady responsa*, is edited without any performance indications. To evaluate this hypothesis, the psalm in question is firstly set as *steady responsa*. Then, the paired distant verses (or fragments of verses) are compared. If literary bonds are observed between *all* the pairs, then the psalm can be considered as fitting the *steady responsa* hypothesis. The multiplicity of psalms fitting the *steady responsa* hypothesis, together with an inability to relate their structural properties through the linear approach, is considered as a confirmation of the *steady responsa* hypothesis.

In this study, the case for *steady responsa* is tested on Pss 121, 126 and 128. These three songs of Ascents have been chosen because of their shortness, their simplicity, and indirect evidence of their antiphonal mode of performance in the ancient sources.⁸

B PSALM 121

Psalm 121 is a psalm of 8 verses that has been considered for a long time as a dialogic liturgy.⁹ However, internal verse parallelism does not appear constantly in this song, therefore it is not a within-verse choral dialogue (plain antiphony). The meaning-structure relationship reflects its mode of performance (the slash symbol marks the main pausal indication within each verse).

1. I lift up my eyes to the hills / Whence shall come my help?

Psalm 15,” *VT* 34 (1984): 207-211; Charles W. Miller, “The Book of Lamentations in Recent Research,” *CBR* 1 (2002): 9-29.

⁸ Alfred Sendrey (*Music in Ancient Israel*, 177) reports that Jewish sources attest to the antiphonal performance at the ceremonies of Sukkoth during which the songs of Ascents were supposed to be performed at the time of the post-exilic period. This testimony converges with the tradition of antiphonal performance of the psalms of ascents in early Christianity (see Oliver Strunk, “The Antiphons of the Oktoechos,” *JAMS* 13 [1960]: 50-67; Leon J. Liebreich “The Songs of Ascents and the Priestly Blessing,” *JBL* 74 [1955]: 33-36) has observed a parallel between the words repeatedly used in the psalms of Ascents and the priest blessing reported in Num 6:24-26.

⁹ Some scholars have suggested that the psalm was performed as a dialogue between a worshiper who leaves home on a pilgrimage and those who stay behind. See for example Paul Volz, “Zur Auslegung von Psalm 23 und 121,” *NKZ* 36 (1925): 576-585; Jean Calès, *Le livre des Psaumes* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1936), 450-452; and Marina Mannati, “Les psaumes graduels constituent-ils un genre littéraire distinct à l’intérieur du Psautier biblique?” *Sem* 29 (1979): 85-100. Others suggested a dialogue between a group of pilgrims and their spiritual leader, between two pilgrims upon arrival at Jerusalem, or even between the priest and the pilgrims, at the Temple ceremonial (reviewed by John T. Willis, “Psalm 121 as a Wisdom Poem,” *HAR* 11 (1987): 435-451 and “An Attempt to Decipher Psalm 121:1b,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 241-251.

2. My help [is] from YHWH / Maker of heaven and earth,
3. He will not give your foot to be moved / He will not slumber, your preserver
4. Lo, He shall not slumber / Nor sleep, the preserver of Israel.
5. YHWH is your preserver / YHWH is your shade on your right hand
6. By day the sun will not smite you / And the moon by night
7. YHWH shall preserve you from all evil / He shall preserve your soul
8. YHWH shall preserve your going out and your coming in / From henceforth and forevermore

The simplest form of dialogue proposed with regards to the structure of the song, is the question anxiously asked in verse 1, then answered in verses 2-8.¹⁰ However, this dialogic pattern cannot account for the locution עזרי (*my help*) in verse 2 which obviously indicates that the same voice is speaking in the first two verses. Alexander Kirkpatrick suggested the occurrence of an antiphonal dialogue between two voices, the first singing verses 1-2, and the second responding with verses 3-4. The last four verses are alternatively sung verse by verse (or by pairs of verses) by the two choirs.¹¹ This interpretation, however, is unsatisfying because the antiphonal exchange involving long sentences (vv. 1-2 versus vv. 3-4) is quite difficult to perform, and remains unattested in Antiquity. Marina Mannati suggested that verses 1-2 are general opening lines. Then, he assumed that two choirs performed the psalm antiphonally, verse by verse (voice 1: vv. 3, 5, 7; and voice 2: vv. 4, 6, 8).¹² As a variant, Richter suggested a liturgical exchange between the assembly (vv. 1-2, 4) and the priest (vv. 3 and 5-8).¹³ These two propositions eradicate the above-mentioned difficulties. However, the second part of the poem (vv. 5-8) does not appear as a dialogue, therefore the proposal of an antiphonal dialogue remains unjustified. The restriction of the antiphonal dialogue to the first part of the psalm (vv. 1, 3 versus vv. 2, 4) was suggested by Heinrich Herkenne. This solution resolves the above-mentioned problem by transforming the second part of the psalm into a rhetorical development.¹⁴ But here again, a problem arises when considering verses 1 and 2 as a dialogue between two choirs (see above).

The linear approach of the poem has not provided any satisfying solution concerning its antiphonal performance, thus, two conclusions may be suggested: (i) despite its dialogic content, this psalm was not performed

¹⁰ See Arnold A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* (London: Oliphants, 1972), 851. See also Willis, "An Attempt to Decipher Psalm 121:1b," 246-247.

¹¹ Alexander F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: The Cambridge Bible, 1902), 736-737.

¹² Mannati, "Les psaumes graduels."

¹³ Hans-Friedemann Von Richter, "Von den Bergen kommt keine Hilfe. Zu Psalm 121," *ZAW* 116 (2004): 406-408.

¹⁴ Heinrich Herkenne, *Das Buch der Psalmen. Die Heilige Schrift des Alten Testaments* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1936), 401.

antiphonally, but read as a liturgy or simply sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem; (ii) the poem was originally conceived as a complex antiphonal work. This latter hypothesis is tested here.

Many scholars have stressed that Ps 121 includes two distinct parts of 4 verses each.¹⁵ From this observation, Sigmund Mowinckel proposed that it may be considered as a dialogic exchange between a worshiper (vv. 1-4) and a priest (vv. 5-8),¹⁶ while the two parts are sung by distinct choirs.¹⁷ This mode of performance, however, remains no more than a succession of two monologs of 4 verses each. A strong parallel between verses 1-2 and 5-6 has been noticed,¹⁸ and the repeated use of the root שמר in the couples of verses 3-4 and 7-8 is regarded as evidence towards their literary link.¹⁹ They reveal a parallel existing in Ps 121 between the homolog-ranked verses of the first and second part of the poem. These findings fit the *steady responsa* mode of performance, in which verses 1-4 and 5-8 are sung antiphonally by two distinct choirs.

The setting of Ps 121 as *steady responsa* requires in the first place the identification of the verse fragments (antiphonal units) to be paired. To determine these, each verse has been divided in two antiphonal units according to the main pausal indication (*atnach*).²⁰ This yields the following *steady responsa* setting of Ps 121:

- 1a. I lift up my eyes to the hills // 5a. *YHWH is your preserver,*
 1b. Whence shall come my help? // 5b. *YHWH is your shade on your right hand*
 2a. My help [is] from YHWH, // 6a. *By day the sun will not smite you,*
 2b. Maker of heaven and earth. // 6b. *And the moon by night.*
 3a. He will not give your foot to be moved // 7a. *YHWH shall preserve you from all evil*
 3b. He will not slumber, your preserver // 7b. *He shall preserve your soul.*

¹⁵ See Jan P. Fokkelmann, *Reading Biblical Poetry – An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 217; see also Amos Hakham, *Sefer Tehilim* (vol. 2, 6th ed., Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990), 447.

¹⁶ Sigmund Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien* 2 (Amsterdam: P. Schippers, 1961), 170-171.

¹⁷ Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien* 5, 48-50.

¹⁸ Ceresko, "Chiasmus in Hebrew poetry."

¹⁹ Nils W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in Formgeschichte* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 109.

²⁰ This division of each verse in two antiphonal units is suggested by the similarity in length of the verses of Ps 121 with the verses of Ps 132. In the latter, all the verses display internal parallelism, suggesting that the two halves of each verse are sung in dialogue by two choirs (plain antiphony). About the use of pausal indications in setting the verses in antiphonal units, see Ernest J. Revell, "Pausal Form and the Structure of Biblical Poetry," *VT* 31 (1981): 186-199; Nissim Amzallag & Mikhal Avriel, "Complex Antiphony in David's Lament and its Literary Significance," *VT* 60 (2010): 1-14.

- 4a. Lo, He shall not slumber // 8a. *YHWH shall preserve your going out and your coming in,*
 4b. Nor sleep, the preserver of Israel // 8b. *From henceforth and forevermore.*

1 אשא עיני אל ההרים / / 5 יהוה שמרך
 מאין יבא עזרי / / יהוה צלך על יד ימינך
 2 עזרי מעם יהוה / / 6 יומם השמש לא-יכבה
 עשה שמים וארץ / / וירח בלילה
 3 אל-יתן למוט רגלך / / 7 יהוה ישמרך מכל-רע
 אל-ינזם שמרך / / ישמר את נפשך
 4 הנה לא ינזם / / 8 יהוה ישמר צאתך ובואך
 ולא יישן שומר ישראל / / מעתה ועד עולם.

An overview of this “composite song” reveals its surprisingly high level of readability. In the “composite opening” of the song, the first voice is asking a question which is immediately followed by an answer formulated by the responding voice (vv. 1, 5). The unit 1a evokes the hills (ההרים) without any precision. However, once paired with the 5a unit, the hills become Zion, the mount from where YHWH blesses his people. Similarly, in the linear reading it is impossible to understand who is asked for help in the 1b unit. The global context of the psalm points to YHWH, but this is still unclear to the listener at the beginning of the performance. However, in the *steady responsa* setting, the source of help is explicitly mentioned in the paired 5b unit: “*YHWH is your shade on your right hand.*”

The pairing of the antiphonal units from the second couple of verses (2/6) generates two continuous sentences introducing a new “composite” meaning. In the linear reading, YHWH is asked in unit 6b to protect against hazards from the moon. However, the *steady responsa* pairing with unit 2b engenders a new meaning, by reminding that YHWH is the creator of the moon. The combination of these two meanings may not be incidental. In the case that this song is truly from early post-exilic composition, as generally assumed for most of the songs of Ascents,²¹ the linear reading may express a request to

²¹ Because the themes of exile, return and (re)building of the temple are constantly evoked in the psalms of Ascents, they are generally considered as a corpus of post-exilic songs. The Aramaisms identified in the language of these songs (except Ps 132) confirm they were composed in the context of the return to Zion from the exile. See Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return. Book V, Psalms 107-150* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 27-30 and references therein. The exact circumstance of the performance of these songs remains debated. See Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 848-849; David G. Barker, “Voices for the Pilgrimage: a Study in the Psalms of Ascents,” *ExpTim* 116 (2005): 109-116; Daniel E. Fleming, “Psalm 127: Sleep for the Fearful, and Security in Sons,” *ZAW* 107 (1995): 435-444; Cuthbert C.

reject the worship of Sin, the dangerous Babylonian moon-god. Both times, the antiphonal setting reminds that YHWH is the creator of the earth and the moon. This conjunction stresses the inefficiency of the turn to other gods for protection. Evidently, the linear and composite dimensions of meaning appear to be complementary.

Each one of the three following couples of antiphonal units (3/7a, b and 4/8a) display an echoing pattern, a feature typical of antiphonal performances. The last antiphonal units (4/8b), once paired, become together a whole sentence of praise fitting very well at the end of the performance. This final position of verse 4 in the *steady responsa* setting resolves the problem of transition in the linear reading between this verse expressing a confident general promise, and verse 5 restricting this universal value by its particular dimension. For all these reasons, the literary content of Ps 126 fits the *steady responsa* better than the linear hypothesis.

C PSALM 126

Psalm 126 is a short psalm evoking the return from exile. Nevertheless, despite the use of simple words and expressions, its content is not yet entirely clarified. Prinsloo even stressed that, “When an exegete consults studies on Psalm 126, he is left with the unsettling feeling that he does not really know what the little poem means!”²² Psalm 126 includes four simple verses (vv. 1, 3-5) and two verses (vv. 2, 6) of double length. In order to analyze the eventual occurrence of complex antiphony, these two verses have been divided each one in two verse lines. Without affecting the serial order of antiphonal units, this change yields a series of 8 verse lines of equal length:

- 1'. When turned YHWH the captivity of Zion / We were like dreamers.
- 2'. Then filled with laughter was our mouth / And our tongue with singing,
- 3'. Then do they say among nations / Great things YHWH did with those.
- 4'. Great things YHWH did with us / We have been joyful.
- 5'. Turn again, YHWH, our captivity / As streams in the Negev.
- 6'. Those sowing in tears / With singing shall reap,
- 7'. Who goes on and weeps / Bearing seed for sowing,
- 8'. Shall doubtless come with rejoicing / He bears his sheaves!

This psalm has been considered by many scholars to contain two parts of 4 verse lines each.²³ This conclusion is not only issued from the literary content, but also from grammatical considerations. The past tense is used in the first part (vv. 1'-4') when the poet evokes the rescuing intervention of YHWH in

Keet, *A Study of the Psalm of Ascents: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary Upon Psalms 120 to 134* (London: Mitre Press, 1969).

²² Prinsloo, Gert T. M. “Analysing Old Testament Poetry: An Experiment in Methodology with Reference to Psalm 126,” *OTE* 5 (1992): 225.

²³ See Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, 866-867; Mitchell S. J. Dahood, *Psalms* (New York: Doubleday, 1965); and Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 218.

the past (the coming back of the exiles from Babylon). The present/future is encountered in the second part (5'-8'), where the god is requested to intervene again. The meaning of this new request is diversely interpreted. Traditional Jewish exegesis links it to prayer for the blessing of abundant rain in the New Year.²⁴ This interpretation is supported in the second part of the psalm by the extensive use of words belonging to the agricultural semantic field, and by the claim that the psalms of Ascents were sung during the Sukkoth festival.²⁵ As an alternative, the second part has been regarded by many of the modern scholars as the expression of an eschatological hope for future deliverance.²⁶ However, both interpretations are unable to explain the singular dynamics observed in this psalm: the first part starts by a verse (1'b) expressing melancholy (*we were like dreamers* - היינו כחלמים) and “achieves” by a verse (4'b) expressing joy (*We have been joyful* - היינו שמחים). The same feature is observed in the second part of the psalm, starting with an anxious request (5'a: *Turn again, YHWH, our captivity*) and ending with exaltation (8b: *He bears his sheaves!*). This parallel literary development is accompanied by a parallel in content.²⁷

The double occurrence of a dynamics starting with complaint and ending with deliverance, generates here again an abrupt turn at the middle of the psalm, between the end of the first part (4'b: the joy of deliverance) and the beginning of the second part (5'a: new complaint). This unexplainable feature, in a linear approach, suggests that Ps 126 was conceived to be performed in *steady responsa* fashion. To test this hypothesis, the verse lines of Ps 126 were divided in two antiphonal units each, according to the main pausal indication (*atnach*), exactly as it was performed in Ps 121.²⁸ Then, Ps 126 becomes the following “composite song:”

- 1'a. When turned YHWH the captivity of Zion / / 5'a. Turn again, YHWH,
our captivity
1'b. We were like dreamers / / 5'b. As streams in the Negev.
2'a. Then filled with laughter was our mouth / / 6'a. Those sowing in tears
2'b. And our tongue with singing / / 6'b. With singing shall reap.

²⁴ Hakham, *Sefer Tehilim* 2, 466.

²⁵ According to the Jewish tradition, the 15 psalms of Ascents remind of the 15 steps where the Levites sung at the Temple (see David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter. An Eschatological Program in the Book of Psalms* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press], 111-114). According to Mishna Suk., 5.4, a ritual procession on the fifteen steps of the Temple court with 15 steps occurred at Sukkoth, where the priests played trumpets (See also Hakham, *Sefer Tehilim* 2, 437-438). Michael D. Goulder (“The Songs of Ascent and Nehemiah,” *JSOT* 75 [1997]: 43-58) has even suggested that these 15 psalms accompanied a post-exilic Sukkoth Temple ritual during which the book of Nehemiah was read.

²⁶ See Prinsloo, “Reference to Psalm 126,” 226. This opinion was adopted by almost all the modern scholars.

²⁷ Prinsloo, “Reference to Psalm 126,” 236-237.

²⁸ See note 20.

- 3'a. Then do they say among nations / / 7'a. *Who goes on and weeps*
 3'b. Great things YHWH did with those / / 7'b. *Bearing seed for sowing.*
 4'a. Great things YHWH did with us / / 8'a. *Shall doubtless come with rejoicing*
 4'b. We have been joyful / / 8'b. *He bears his sheaves!*

1' בשוב יהוה את שיבת ציון / / 5' שובה יהוה את שבותנו
 היינו כחלמים / / כאפיקים בנגב
 2' אז ימלא שחוק פיננו / / 6' הזרעים בדמעה
 ולשונו רנה / / ברנה יקצרו
 3' אז יאמרו בגוים / / 7' הלודך ילך ובכה
 הגדיל יהוה לעשות עם אלה / / נשא משך הזרע
 4' הגדיל יהוה לעשות עמנו / / 8' בא יבא ברנה
 היינו שמחים / / נשא אלמתיו

Here again, the *steady responsa* setting does not generate any literary dissonance, as may be expected from the pairing of distant fragments of verses of a poem crafted in linear fashion. Rather, even literary bonds are identified between all the paired antiphonal units:

Verses 1'/5'. The first pair (1'a/5'a) displays an echo structure, stressed by the double use of the Semitic root שׁוּב in each antiphonal unit: בשוב and שיבה (1'a) versus שובה and שבותנו (5'a). Through this parallel, the first composite unit brings to mind the classical antiphonal pattern of echoing claims. The meaning of verse 5' remains quite obscure in a linear reading: “*Turn again, YHWH, our captivity as streams in the Negev,*” and the relationship between captivity in Babylon and the Negev’s streams is also quite difficult to understand. But this becomes clarified in the *steady responsa* setting. The 1'/5'b pair generates an echo structure between חולמים and אפיקים בנגב promoting a composite metaphor: for the exiles in Babylon, the reality of the pre-exilic life became a subject of doubt, exactly as the watering of streams in the Negev desert may be a subject of doubt, except for very few days in the year.

Verses 2'/6'. The pairing of the antiphonal units 2'a and 6'a stimulates a contrast between the words שחוק (laughter) and דמעה (tear). This opposition may also be considered as a specific expression of parallelism between the two antiphonic voices. Once paired, the two next antiphonal units (2'b/6'b) generate an echo through the common use of the word רינה (singing).

Verses 3'/7': The first pair of antiphonal units complement each other strikingly: “*Then do they say among nations*” (3'a) evokes the Gentiles who tell about the sons of Israel suffering in exile (7'a). The next pair of antiphonal units (3'b/7'b) further generates a whole sentence with the words עם אלה becoming the locution that links the two antiphonal units grammatically. These last words of unit 3'b display, therefore, a hinging status. This property is not restricted to the pairs of antiphonal units that together generate a whole

sentence. Even in cases of true antiphonal dialogue, the last words sung by the first voice may escape their initial context to become the first words of the second voice's claim. Such a *composite tiling* occurs spontaneously as soon as the claim of the first voice becomes significant in absence of the "labile" locution. This phenomenon seems to occur between the pair 3'a/7'a as antiphonal units. In this case, the expression בגוים (at the end of unit 3'a) may become the beginning of the 7'a sentence. This leads to the following composite tiling: "*Then do they say → among nations who goes and weeps.*" The meaning is deeply modified by this tiling. Now, the people returning from exile, once delivered and blessed, remember their suffering in exile.²⁹

Verses 4'/8'. Simple causal relationships are observed among the 4'a/8'a pair of antiphonal units: the great things done by YHWH (4'a) are rejoiced by those coming back from exile (8'a). In the linear reading, the sentence *he bears his sheaves* (8'b) obviously refers to the man who sowed his field in tears (vv. 6' and 7'). But in the *steady responsa* setting, the pairing with the sentence *we have been joyful* (4'b) generates a new duality between Israel (4'b) and her god (8'b). In such a context, *he bears his sheaves* becomes a metaphor of YHWH reassembling the scattered sons of Israel in a new sheave. This composite meaning fits the conclusion of a psalm devoted to the return from exile, as explicitly mentioned in the first composite verse (1'a/5'a). In this context, the agricultural image characterizing the second part of the psalm as a whole should serve as the metaphor of dispersion of the people after the exile and its reunification.

A subtle composite tiling is promoted by the poet in this couple of verses. The antiphonal unit 4'a repeats the expression הגדיל יה לעשות sung immediately before (3'b) by the same voice. This repetition is perceived during the performance. It induces the spontaneous restriction of the antiphonal unit 4'a to the expression הגדיל יה לעשות, transforming the last 4'a word (עמנו) into a labile fragment. This stimulates the composite tiling transforming it into the first word of the 8'a unit. "*Great things YHWH did → with us shall doubtless come with rejoicing.*" This feature deeply modifies its meaning: now, this pair of antiphonal units becomes an invitation to the people remaining in exile to join those coming back to Jerusalem. The success is ensured because YHWH has already brought about great things for his people. This interpretation is confirmed by the parallel between the tiled unit 8'a and the subsequent claim: the claim of the antiphonal unit 4'b "*we have been joyful,*" stimulates the emergence of a transverse echo pattern with the tiled antiphonal unit immediately preceding it.

These considerations reveal the high level of literary complement found,

²⁹ This may be a cryptic way for the poet to condemn those staying in exile, as mentioned in Ezra 2: 1.

once again, among all the couples of antiphonal units paired in *steady responsa* fashion. They support the hypothesis that Ps 126 was not conceived originally as a linear, but as a *steady responsa* piece of work.

D PSALM 128

Psalm 128 is approached as a classical “poem of wisdom” relating the blessing of the man who fears YHWH.³⁰ This poem comprises six verses of quite similar length:

1. Happy is every one who fears YHWH / Who is walking in his ways.
2. The labor of your hands surely you shall eat / You are happy and it is well with you.
3. Your wife is as a fruitful vine in the flanks of your house / Your sons are as olive plants around your table.
4. Behold, thus shall be blessed the man / Who fears YHWH.
5. YHWH will bless you from Zion / And you will see the good of Jerusalem, All the days of your life
6. And see the sons of your sons! / Peace be upon Israel!

Here again, two distinct parts of equal length (three verses each) may be identified. The first part is a praise of the man who fears YHWH (vv. 1-3) while the second part evokes the blessing of the man who fears YHWH.³¹ These two parts display parallel, complementary and related features:

- The first part evokes the house of the man fearing YHWH (vv. 1-3), while the second part focuses on the house of YHWH as the source of the blessing (v. 5).
- The two parts follow the same grammatical pattern: verse 1 and verse 4 turn to the third singular person (the man who fears YHWH), while the subsequent doublet of verses, in both the first and the second part, turn directly to the man (second singular person).
- The two parts display the same rhetorical pattern: both start with a general consideration about the blessing, which is later developed in the two following verses.³²
- Similar words are encountered in paired verses: fear (יִרָא) in verses 1, 4,

³⁰ This opinion is adopted by most of the modern exegetes. See the review by Martin J. H. van Niekerk, “Psalms 127 and 128: Examples of Divergent Wisdom Views on Life,” *OTE* 8 (1995): 414-424. Anderson (*The Book of Psalms*, 869) mentions others opinion suggesting that this psalm was a marriage song or a pilgrim song.

³¹ See Hakham, *Sefer Tehilim* 2, 471-473.

³² Amos Hakham noticed (*Sefer Tehilim* 2, 473, our translation): “*The psalms from the two parts are parallel one another. The first psalm from each part is an aperture that reminds the fear of YHWH in a hidden language, the second verse deals with the work of the hands and his fruitfulness, and the third verse about the sons.*”

good (טוב) in 2, 5 and your sons (בניך) in 3, 6.

All these properties are difficult to justify in a linear context of reading. Furthermore, the sudden use of the third person singular in verse 4, surrounded by two verses with the second singular person, remains totally unexplained. Both the parallels observed between the two parts of equal length and the problems inherent to a linear approach invite one to examine whether Ps 128 was also conceived to be performed as *steady responsa*. Consequently each verse of Ps 128 was divided in two antiphonal units each according to the main pausal indication (*atnach*). The following *steady responsa* setting of Ps 128 then appears:

- 1a. Happy is every one who fears YHWH / / 4a. Behold, thus shall be blessed the man
 1b. Who is walking in his ways / / 4b. Who fears.
 2a. The labor of your hands surely you shall eat / / 5a. YHWH will bless you from Zion,
 2b. You are happy and it is well with you / / 5b. And you will see the good of Jerusalem, All the days of your life.
 3a. Your wife is as a fruitful vine in the flanks of your house / / 6a. And see the sons of your sons!
 3b. Your sons are as olive plants around your table / / 6b. Peace be upon Israel!

1 אשרי כל ירא יהוה / / 4 הנה כי כן יברך גבר
 הלך בדרכיו / / ירא יהוה
 2 יגיע כפיך כי תאכל / / 5 יברכך יהוה מציון
 אשריך וטוב לך / / וראה בטוב ירושלם כל ימי חיך
 3 אשתך כגפן פריה בירכתי ביתך / / 6 וראה בנים לבניך
 בניך כשתלי זיתים סביב לשלחנך / / שלום על ישראל.

In this instance we see again that no literary dissonance emerges from the reading of the composite text, as should be expected if the psalm were conceived in a linear fashion. Rather, many literary bonds are observed among the paired antiphonal units. In the first couple, a parallel arises between the man who fears YHWH (1a) and the blessed man (4a). The second couple draws a similar parallel between the man following the divine commandments (1b) and the man fearing YHWH (4b). By expressing the central theme of the psalm, these two pairs of antiphonal units may be considered as a “composite heading.”

The third couple generates a parallel between the blessing of YHWH from Jerusalem (5a) and fruitfulness in work (2a). This parallel is even extended in the subsequent couple of antiphonal units (2b/5b). The next pair of antiphonal units introduces a metaphoric parallel between the grape (3a) and the sons of the blessed man (6a). In the last couple, a relationship is formulated between the collective and personal blessing: peace upon Israel (6b) is

interrelated with the association of the sons of the blessed man to olive plants (3b).³³ The universal claims of this last pair are echoed in the composite heading and therefore fit the composite ending of the whole psalm very well.

Another point should be stressed besides the literary bonds which have been identified among all the antiphonal pairs. Parallelism is the literary pattern constantly observed between the pairs of antiphonal units. However, the parallel which the poet established between the sincere worship of YHWH and the blessing in return is far from being trivial in ancient Israel. Rather, the theme of non-intervention of YHWH towards his sincere worshipper remains a Biblical leitmotiv. Many of the psalms explicitly complain about this “deficiency,”³⁴ and the book of Job is entirely devoted to this problem. In Eccl 4, the author invites us to leave any attempt to establish a causal link between divine and terrestrial justice.

The use of complex antiphony in Ps 128 is especially interesting in such a context, because *steady responsa* becomes the means to induce a spontaneous parallel between concepts which are not related. It becomes, therefore, the artistic means of promoting a specific theological approach. The efficiency of this artistic device depends on the ability of the listener to link those concepts which are not trivially related. This process occurs spontaneously in antiphonal performance. But in the present case, the poet further stimulates this process by crafting transverse literary interactions. A “transverse literary bond” is observed between the antiphonal units 4a and 1b, generating together the following composite sentence: “Behold, thus shall be blessed the man who is walking in his ways.” This bond is even stressed by the double use of **אָרַח** around the transversal, then transforming the fear of YHWH (1a and 4b) into a poetic frame surrounding the blessing (4a and 1b). A transverse bond also exists between antiphonal units 5a and 2b (“YHWH will bless you from Zion: you are happy and it is well with you”). This linkage is further strengthened in the next transverse bond (5b and 3a). The end of verse 5b (All the days of your life) may truly refer to the blessing from Jerusalem (the beginning of this antiphonal unit). However, a transverse tiling may occur by associating this expression to the next antiphonal unit (3a): “All the days of your life, your wife is as a fruitful vine in the flanks of your house.” In this case, the blessing becomes related to familial harmony. The occurrence of a transverse literary bond is expressly stressed by the poet in the last instance (6a-3b), where the word **בְּיָדְךָ** is used both as the last word of 6a and the first word of 3b (exactly as it occurs in the case of transverse tiling): “And see the sons of your sons – your

³³ The olive plant is used in the Bible both as an image of blessing of the individual (Ps 62:10), of the land of Israel (Deut 8:8; 28:40) and even of the people of Israel as a whole (Hos 14:7). This combination of meanings is precisely reflected in Ps 128.

³⁴ For clear examples, see Pss 6, 7, 10, 22, 35, 38, 40, 42-44, 70, 74, 79, 83, 88 and 89.

sons are as olive plants around your table.” These “transverse literary bonds” contribute to strengthen coherency of the whole composite pattern without operating directly on the parallel promoted by the poet.³⁵

E CONCLUSION

The three psalms considered here (121, 126 and 128) display common characteristics. They include two distinct parts of equal number of verses parallel in their content. This is reflected by the presence of words belonging to the same semantic field, of homolog grammatical forms and of parallel rhetorical developments. This latter property introduces a sharp breakdown at the transition between the two parts of the psalm disturbing its readability. All these singularities are difficult to explain in a linear context, but they become clarified once the psalm is set in a *steady responsa* fashion. In each one of the three psalms considered here, this arrangement reveals a high level of literary bonds between all the pairs of antiphonal units, including parallels, contrasts and complementary claims. Their conjunction (together with the inability to account for these singularities in a linear approach), strongly suggests that these psalms were originally conceived to be performed antiphonally in a *steady responsa* fashion.

Plain antiphony is mainly based upon redundant claims. In this case, the responding voice introduces no more than a nuance, clarification or personalization of the claim sung by the first voice. In contrast to plain antiphony, complex antiphony involves the intertwinement of two coherent poems, each one with its own theme and development. It promotes metaphors, equivalences and causal links between claims which are not trivially linked. This is difficult to perform in a linear fashion. Furthermore, in complex antiphony, multiple meanings are superimposed without introducing any hierarchy or causality between them. These properties open an extensive field of poetical creativity impossible to fully explore otherwise.

The dual structure related here is not restricted to Pss 121, 126 and 128. Other songs of Ascents are also divided in two parts of similar length,³⁶ and

³⁵ Transverse bonds are also observed in a linear setting, but they are less frequent (the main one being the 2b-3a transverse bond) and provide less fluidity in verse transition than in the *steady responsa* pattern.

³⁶ Terence L. Fretheim, “Psalm 132: a Form-Critical Study,” *JBL* 86 (1967): 289-300; Fleming, “Psalm 127”; Adri J. O. van der Wal, “The Structure of Psalm 129,” *VT* 38 (1988): 364-367; Daniel J. Estes, “Like Arrows in the Hand of a Warrior (Psalm 127),” *VT* 41 (1991): 304-311; Gert T. M. Prinsloo, “Psalm 130: Poetic Pattern and Social Significance,” *OTE* 15 (2002): 453-469 and “Historical Reality and Mythological Metaphor in Psalm 124,” in *Psalms and Mythology* (ed. D. J. Human, New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 181-203; Thijs Boij, “Psalm 132: Zion’s Well-Being,” *Bib* 90 (2009): 75-83.

this singularity also characterizes many other biblical Psalms.³⁷ Among them, strong affinities have sometimes been observed between verses in parallel position.³⁸ This reality suggests that the three psalms considered here are not singular exceptions. It is likely that many other biblical songs have also been conceived to be performed as *steady responsa*. This is why the question of the occurrence of complex antiphony should not be ignored in Biblical poetry.

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³⁷ For example, see Lowell K. Handy, "Sounds, Words and Meanings in Psalm 82," *JSOT* 47 (1990): 51-66; Tappy, "Psalm 23"; Mazor, "Psalm 139"; Savran, "Psalm 95."

³⁸ See Pierre Auffret, "Essai sur la structure littéraire du psaume 11," *ZAW* 93 (1981): 401-418; and "Essai sur la structure littéraire du psaume 32," *VT* 3 (1988): 257-285; and "De l'oeuvre de ses mains au murmure de mon coeur. Étude structurelle du Psaume 19," *ZAW* 112 (2000): 24-42. See also Jacob Bazak, "Structural Geometric Patterns in Biblical Poetry," *Poetics Today* 6 (1985): 475-502; David J. Zucker, "The Riddle of Psalm 49," *JBQ* 33 (2005): 143-156 and "Restructuring Psalm 47," *JBQ* 35 (2007): 166-172.

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