

Psalm 24: Reading from Right to Left and from Back to Front¹

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James Alfred Loader, in celebration of his 65th birthday.

ABSTRACT

The heading of the article “Reading from right to left and from back to front” is a play on the words of David A. Clines — “Reading from left to right.” The phrase “and from back to front” is added to emphasise the cultural difference existing between people living in the twenty first century and the writers and first readers of biblical texts. It is deliberately different from Clines’ reading. The writer of the article claims to have been influenced by scholars working within the historical-critical paradigm of biblical studies. His is thus a historical-critical reading of Ps 24 taking into account the ancient context in which the text originated, but with a slant—it was read in the South African context.

A INTRODUCTION

Daniel Marguerat and Ivan Bourquin make a very accurate observation in their book *How to Read Bible Stories: An Introduction to Narrative Criticism*: “There are no readers whose way through the text coincides exactly with that of their neighbours.”² My way through Ps 24 will inevitably be different from those of previous readers.³ Mine is an interpretation that tries to do justice to an ancient Israelite religious poem probably written to reflect a cultic procession.

¹ The title of the article is a play on the title of David J.A. Clines’ article “The Ten Commandments, Reading from Left to Right,” in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (ed. David J.A. Clines; JSOTSup 205; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 26–45. He also published an article concerning Psalm 24 in the same monograph: “A World Established on Water (Psalm 24): Reader-Response, Deconstruction and Bespoken Interpretation,” in *Interested Parties*, 172–186.

² Daniel Marquerat & Ivan Bourquin, *How to Read Bible Stories: An Introduction to Narrative Criticism* (London: SCM, 1999), 141. This was formulated with reference to narratives, but it can be applied to all types of literature.

³ Previous readers in the South African context (1980–2010) are: J. G. du Plessis, “Psalm 24,” in *Riglyne vir Prediking oor die Psalms* (vol. 4 of *Woord teen die Lig II*; ed. Coenie W. Burger, Bethel A. Müller & Dirkie J. Smith; Kaapstad: NG Kerk-uitgewers, 1988), 65–68; Jannie du Preez, “Mission Perspectives in an Old Testament Procession Song: Psalm 24,” *Missionalia* 18 (1990): 330–343; Cas, J. A. Vos, “Die Wagwoord by die Poort: Psalm 24,” in *Mens en Omgewing* (ed. Cas J. A. Vos &

Psalm 24 is poetical text written by an ancient Israelite living in a milieu that was totally different from people living in the twenty first century. The author cherished a completely different worldview.⁴ He believed that he lived in a three-decker universe and that Mount Zion was the *axis mundi*. The temple itself was seen as a replica of the heavenly sanctuary. It consisted of three sections, the *entrance portico* (*ülām*), the *main hall* (*hēkāl*), and the *holy of holies* (*dēbîr*). YHWH resided in the holy of holies, but his presence could be jeopardized by his people's acts. Moreover, his kingship had to be re-enacted and celebrated annually. This took place during a festival. Although the psalm may not have been written for exclusive use during the festival, it does reflect what may have occurred.

B MY WAY THROUGH THE TEXT

1 "Cards on the Table"

In the South African context, it is frequently required that before commencing with reading and explicating a biblical text, one should "put one's cards on the table," meaning: "state your view on Scripture."⁵ I regard myself as working within the biblical paradigm established at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.⁶ I thus concur with James Barr's statement: "If one wants to use the Word-of-God type of language, the proper term for the Bible would be Word of Israel, Word of some leading early Christians."⁷ I have abandoned the idea that God is a ventriloquist who is able to communicate with human beings through the Bible. I endorse William McKane's statement: "My contention is that God does not speak Hebrew, that the language of the OT is human language and that, with this in mind, it must

Julian C. Müller; God, Mens en Wêreld; Halfway House: Orion, 1991), 114–125; Phil Botha, "Psalm 24: Unity in Diversity," *OTE* 7 (1994): 360–369; Cas J. A. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms* (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2005), 140–153.

⁴ The author was most probably a priest. James Crenshaw's identification of the author as a "she" reflects his gender sensitivity, but it is historically and culturally nonsensical. Cf. James L. Crenshaw, "Knowing Whose You Are: Psalm 24," in *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 156, 159, 160.

⁵ Ferdinand E. Deist claimed that this is the most elementary question of hermeneutics in his book *Heuristics, Hermeneutics and Authority in the Study of Scripture* (Port Elizabeth: University of Port Elizabeth, 1978), 7–8: "The process of understanding, with which hermeneutics is concerned, cannot begin, and the question of understanding cannot be posed, before we know *what* must be understood. Thus the most elementary question in hermeneutics is: what *is* the Bible? and *not*: how should I understand the Bible."

⁶ Izak J. J. Spangenberg, "A Century of Wrestling with Qohelet: The Research History of the Book Illustrated with a Discussion of Qoh 4:17–5:6," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. Antoon Schoors; BETL 136; Louvain: Peeters, 1998), 61–67.

⁷ James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973), 120.

be studied like any other literature embedded in ancient documents."⁸ The Bible is a collection of religious literature from a remote culture. Those people's view of God is not more authoritative than any other ancient people's views, or the views people are currently developing.⁹ The Jewish and Christian traditions have assigned these texts more authority, but that is not objective. The OT/HB is one of many religious documents from the past and all of them deserve our respect and attention. We live in a global village in which we should refrain from denigrating other people's cultures, traditions and authoritative scriptures.

2 Structure and Translation of Psalm 24

1	לְדוֹד מִזְמֹר
תְּבִלָּוִישְׁבֵי בָּהּ:	לִיהְוָה הָאָרֶץ וְמַלְאָה
וְעַל־נֶהֱרֹות יָכֹנֵנָה:	בַּיְהָוָא עַל־יִמְמִים יִסְדֹּה
וּמִי־קְוָם בָּمָקוֹם קְדוּשָׁו:	מִידִיעָלָה בְּהַרְיָהָוָה
אֲשֶׁר־לֹא־נִשְׁאָלָשָׁא לְשֹׁוֹא נִפְשֵׁי וְלֹא נִשְׁבַּע לְמַרְמָה:	גְּנִיקִי בְּפִים וּבְרַלְבָּב
יְהָוָה וְצִדְקָה מְאֹלָהָי יִשְׁעֵנוּ:	יִשְׁאָבָרְכָה מִאָתָה
מְבָקְשִׁי פְּנֵיךְ יִעַלְבֵּסָלָה:	זֹה דָּוָר דְּרָשֵׁיו
וְהַנְּשָׁאָפְתַּחְיִ עַולְםָוָא מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבָוד:	שָׁאוֹשָׁעָרִים רְאִשְׁיכָם
יְהָוָה גָּבוֹר מֶלֶךְ הַמְּחֻמָּה:	מֵי זָהָמֶלֶךְ הַכְּבָוד
וְבָא מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבָוד:	שָׁאוֹשָׁעָרִים רְאִשְׁיכָם
הַוָּא מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבָוד סָלָה:	מֵי הָזָה מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבָוד
יְהָוָה אָבָאָות	

Verseline

1. For David. A Psalm.

To YHWH belongs the earth and that which fills her;
the world and everything existing on it.

2. For he has founded it on the seas

Strophe Stanza

i

A

⁸ William McKane, *A Late Harvest: Reflections on the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), x.

⁹ Philip Kennedy, *A Modern Introduction to Theology: New Questions for Old Beliefs* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 252–260; Nigel Leaves, *The God Problem: Alternatives to Fundamentalism* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2006), 69–81; Gijs Dingemans, *Sporen van de Verborgen God: Een Theologie van de Geest* (Kampen: Kok, 2010), 191–226.

and established it on the rivers.

3. Who may ascend the mountain of YHWH?
Who may stand in his holy place?
4. He who has clean hands and a pure heart;
who does not treat me as an idol
nor swear an oath calling on misleading ones.

ii

B

5. He will receive a blessing from YHWH
and be conferred integrity by his rescuer God.
6. Such is the company of those who seek him;
of those who seek your presence, [God of] Jacob. [Selah]

iii

7. Lift up your heads, gates!
Open up, last doors,
that the glorious king may enter!
8. Who is this glorious king?
YHWH strong and mighty!
YHWH mighty in war!

iv

C

9. Lift up your heads, gates!
Open up, last doors,
that the glorious king may enter!
10. Who then is this glorious king?
YHWH seba'oth!
He is the glorious king! [Selah]

v

3 Arguments, Warrants and Motivations

Before proceeding to interpret the psalm, arguments, justifications and motivations for the previous delineations and translation are called for. This will be done in the following order: first the line-level, then the strophe-level and finally the stanza-level.¹⁰

¹⁰ My analysis agrees with that of Pieter van der Lugt's who says: "Psalm 24 has five strophes, ten verselines and 25 cola." Cf. Pieter van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry: With Special Reference to the First Book of the Psalter* (OtSt 53; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 259. I prefer the term "stanza" and not his term "canto" when referring to the larger sections of a psalm. Contrary to his working method I start with the verselines and work towards the stanza while he starts with the cantos and works towards the verselines. Cf. Pieter van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes*, 72–73.

The first line of the psalm (vv. 1b, c) is evidently a synonymous parallel line consisting of two *cola* which express the same idea. The second colon (v. 1c) commences with an ellipsis, common in parallel lines. The reader is supposed to read *לַיהוָה תָּבִל* which corresponds with the first line's *וּמְלֹאת הָאָרֶץ*. The second colon's *וַיֵּשֶׁב בָּהּ* corresponds with the first *cola*'s *ah*, which is repeated in the second line (v. 2) of the psalm. This line starts with an "evidential,"¹¹ since it presents the evidence for the statement in the first line: the earth is YHWH's *for* he has founded it. The second colon (v. 2b) of the second line also commences with an ellipsis. However, this time the colon commences with a *waw*, which fills the space of the ellipsis. The two *cola* of the second line (vv. 2a, 2b) are evidently synonymous parallel *cola*, since the words *וּעַל־נָהָרוֹת* of the second colon run parallel to *עַל־יְמִים* of the first colon. Both *cola* end with a verb expressing the idea that YHWH established the earth on the subterranean waters, or the chaotic waters. These two lines (vv. 1b–2) form the first strophe (*strophe i*) as well as the first stanza of the psalm (*stanza A*).¹²

The third line of the psalm (v. 3) consists of two questions which run parallel. They represent two *cola* and both start with *מַי*. Although the two *cola* can be classified as synonymous parallel, there is a conspicuous difference. The verb of the first colon (v. 3a) reflects movement (*עָלָה* = "ascend"), while the second colon's verb (v. 3b) reflects a static position (*קָוָם* = "stand"). One first has to ascend the temple mount before being able to stand in the sanctuary.¹³ The fourth line (v. 4) of the psalm has the antiphonal reply to the questions asked in the third line (v. 3). In this case, we have a tricolon consisting of three clauses.

The second clause of v. 4 (v. 4b) poses a problem for some commentators because the last word has a first person singular suffix, *נַפְשִׁי* ("my soul"). They turn this suffix into a third person singular suffix and then translate "his soul/ his mind." Compare the following translation of v. 4:¹⁴

One who has clean hands and a pure heart
who has not set his mind on what is false

¹¹ Bill T. Arnold & John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 149–150.

¹² Pieter van der Lugt agrees that strophes and stanzas (cantos) may sometimes overlap, cf. van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes*, 72.

¹³ Francis Landy classifies this line as a "combination of synonymous and sequential parallelism," cf. Francis Landy, "From David to David: Psalm 24 and David Clines," in *Reading from Right to Left: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of David J.A. Clines* (ed. J. Cheryl Exum & Hugh G. M. Williamson; JSOTSup 373; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 282.

¹⁴ *The Revised English Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

or sworn deceitfully.

Jan Holman argues convincingly that the last two clauses refer to idols, basing his arguments on the interpretation that **נפשִי** ("my soul"), refers to YHWH.¹⁵ The evidence for this interpretation and translation is to be found in Amos 6:8: "**נִשְׁבַּע אֶלְيָהוָה בְּנִפְשׁוֹ**" "The Lord God has sworn by himself," where **נפשָ** with the third person suffix refers to YHWH.¹⁶ The two Hebrew words in the psalm that refer to idols are **שׁוֹוא** and **מְרַמָּה**.

The second clause (v. 4b) conveys the message that one should not treat YHWH as if he were on a par with idols. This corresponds with the third commandment: "You shall not misuse the name of Yahweh your God, for Yahweh will not leave unpunished anyone who uses his name for what is false" (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11). The third clause (v. 4c) continues the idea expressed in the second clause. This time it refers to swearing an oath by calling on an idol. The word **מְרַמָּה** which is often translated as "lie," is a pejorative word for an idol.¹⁷ This accounts for my translation of v. 4:

He who has clean hands and a pure heart;
who does not treat me as an idol
nor swear an oath calling on misleading ones.

Verses 3–4 represent the second strophe of the psalm (*strophe ii*), as the antiphonal reply (v. 4) is directly linked to the questions in v. 3.

The fifth line of the psalm (v. 5) has two *cola* which run parallel. The second colon (v. 5b) commences with an ellipsis and, like the second colon of line two (v. 2b), it commences with a *waw*. The reader should, in this case, read the verb **יָשַׁעַ** (**נִשְׁאַל**). The one who has "clean hands and a pure heart" (v. 4) will be blessed (**ברָכָה**, v. 5a) and will become a person of integrity (**אָשֶׁר צְדָקָה**, v. 5b). Although the two words (**ברָכָה** and **צְדָקָה**) are used synonymously, there is a difference that should not be ignored. Something "more" is communicated in the word **צְדָקָה** and this "more" is expressed in line six (v. 6). The person who is "conferred" with integrity automatically becomes part of the "community of his seekers" (**דָוֶר דָרְשָׁיו**, v. 6a).¹⁸ The second colon

¹⁵ Jan Holman, "Are Idols Hiding in Psalm 139:20?" in *Psalms and Prayers: Papers Read at the Joint Meeting of the Society of Old Testament Study and Het Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap in Nederland en België, Appeldoorn August 2006* (ed. Bob Becking & Erich Peels; OtSt 55; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 119–128.

¹⁶ Holman, "Are idols hiding?" 127.

¹⁷ Holman, "Are idols hiding?" 125.

¹⁸ The Hebrew word **צְדָקָה** is extremely difficult to translate. However, Hans Heinrich Schmid, in his study *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung* (BHT; Tübingen: Mohr, 1968), has convincingly argued that it has to do with orderliness and the good functioning of a community. Someone who is conferred with **צְדָקָה** is one who lives in harmony with his community.

מבקשי of line six (v. 6b) elaborates on this community and describes them as פניז (= “seekers of your presence”).

Alastair G. Hunter argues a case that verseline 6 is a synonymous parallelism of the form a / b / c // B / C / A and illustrates this in the following way:¹⁹

Such is the company of those who seek him
of those who seek your face
Jacob

My understanding however, differs slightly from his. There is an ellipsis in the second colon (v. 6b) and the parallelism may be presented as follows: a / b/ c // [A] / B / C.

Such is the company of those who seek him;
[Such is the company] of those who seek your presence, Jacob.

Lines five and six (vv. 5–6) represent the third strophe of the psalm (*strophe iii*) since line six elaborates on the ideas expressed in line five.²⁰ The ones who are blessed and conferred with integrity join the company of YHWH's seekers.

The second (vv. 3–4) and third strophes (vv. 5–6) form the second stanza of the psalm (*stanza B*). The link between them may be presented as follows: The stanza commences with two *questions* (v. 3) followed by an *antiphonal reply* (v. 4). The antiphonal reply is *completed* in vv. 5–6, where the *outcome* of having “clean hands and a pure heart” is described: such a person will be blessed, be conferred with integrity and join the company of those who seek him.

Stanza B can also be seen as featuring a *rite de passage*. Entering the temple is similar to Jacob's *rite de passage* at the Jabbok river. The name יעקב and the word ברכה are a reminder of the episode narrated in Gen 32:23-33. Before Jacob could reenter the promised land, he had to demonstrate his integrity and be blessed. Although *BHS* does not have (=) אלהי יעקב “God of

¹⁹ Alastair G. Hunter, *Psalms: Old Testament Readings* (London: Routledge, 1999), 137.

²⁰ Cas J. Labuschagne, Duane L. Christensen and Pieter van der Lugt regard v. 6b as the pivotal colon of the psalm. Cf. Duane L. Christensen, “Psalm 24:1–10,” n.p. [cited 10 March 2011]. Online: http://www.bibal.net/04/proso/psalms-ii/pdf/dlc_ps024-001-g.pdf. Cas J. Labuschagne, “Psalm 24 — Logotechnical Analysis,” n.p. [cited 15 August 2010]. Online: <http://irs.ub.rug.nl/dbi/48c52de3dc0c5>. Van der Lugt, *Cantos and Strophes*, 259. A logotechnical/logoprosodic/arithmetrical analysis thus assigns the climax of the psalm to a different colon than a rhetorical and cultic analysis of the psalm. In the latter case the climax is assigned to the last colon of the psalm (v. 10c).

Jacob") the Septuagint and Syriac translations support this reading and translation.

Line seven (v. 7) is a tricolon consisting of two commands (שָׁאוֹן and הנשְׁאוֹן) that run parallel. The verbs are formed from the same root נְשָׁאַן but two different imperative conjugations are used. The first is a *qal* imperative (v. 7a) and the second a *nip'al* imperative (v. 7b). The imperatives are followed by a telic clause expressing purpose: וַיּוּבְאֵן מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד (v. 7c): The gates should open *so that* the glorious king can enter.²¹ Line eight (v. 8) is a tricolon consisting of an antiphonal question (מי זה מלך הַכְּבוֹד) followed by two parallel replies (vv. 8b, 8c) describing the glorious king. The relationship between lines seven and eight can be described as: *command and purpose*, followed by *question and reply*. There are *two commands* in line seven (vv. 7a, 7b) and *two replies* in line eight (vv. 8b, 8c). Lines seven and eight are intended to be read together, and represent strophe four of the psalm (*strophe iv*).

Line nine (v. 9) is a tricolon almost identical to line seven (v. 7). There is only one small variation: both verbs from the root נְשָׁאַן are now *qal* imperatives (שָׁאוֹן). The commands (vv. 9a, 9b) are again followed by the telic clause expressing purpose: "so that the glorious king may enter" (וַיּוּבְאֵן מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד, v. 9c), as was the case in line seven (v. 7). Line ten (v. 10) is almost identical to line eight (v. 8). It is a tricolon consisting of an antiphonal question (v. 10a) followed by a reply (v. 10b) and a declaration (v. 10c). In this instance, there are not two replies but only *one reply* and a *declaration*. The declaration יהוָה מלך הַכְּבוֹד (v. 10c) is similar to the antiphonal question at the beginning of the tricolon מי הוא זה מלך הַכְּבוֹד (v. 10a). The reply in the middle (צבאות, v. 10b) is a climactic declaration. Lines 9 and 10 represent strophe five of the psalm (*strophe v*) and it should without doubt be linked to the previous strophe (*strophe iv*) to form the third stanza of the psalm (*stanza C*). There is an intricate relationship between the four tricola of this stanza (vv. 7–10), which can be presented as follows:

7a	Lift up your heads, gates!	9a
7b	Open up, last doors,	9b
7c	that <i>the glorious king</i> may enter!	9c
8a	Who is <i>this glorious king</i> ?	10a
8b	YHWH strong and mighty!	
8c	YHWH mighty in war!	
10b	YHWH seba'oth!	
10c	He is <i>the glorious king</i> !	

Verses 7–8a and vv. 9–10a run parallel, while vv. 8b, 8c and 10b give the essence of who YHWH is. He is strong and mighty, mighty in war because

²¹ Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 86.

he is YHWH seba'oth! Verse 10c is the final liturgical declaration and the climax of the psalm.

There has been considerable discussion about the words **שעריהם** and **פתחיהם**. Do they refer to the city gates/doors or to the temple gates/doors? As I understand it, they can only refer to the temple doors. Moreover, I am of the opinion that the words **פתחי עולם** (vv. 7b, 9b) refer to the *last doors*: the doors sealing off the holy of holies from the main hall.²² The words **פתחי עולם** should thus not be translated as "everlasting doors" or "ancient doors," but as "last doors" or "final doors." Qohelet 12:5c may serve as proof for this understanding of **עולם**. The verse reads: **כיהלך האדם אל-ביה עולם** ("but man sets out for his final abode"). The grave is the final abode or last dwelling place for human beings.

A number of words are repeated throughout the psalm, showing it to be a close-knit unit. The name YHWH is mentioned *once* in stanza A, *twice* in stanza B, and *thrice* in stanza C, reflecting a build-up towards the climax of the psalm, which is reached in the third and final stanza:

- יְהוָה x 1 in the first stanza (vv. 1b–2).
- יְהוָה x 2 in the second stanza (vv. 3–6).
- יְהוָה x 3 in the third stanza (vv. 7–10).

Apart from this, the root **נשא** is used *twice* in stanza B and *four* times in stanza C:

- נשא x 2 in the second stanza (vv. 3–6).
- נשא x 4 in the third stanza (vv. 7–10).

Finally, the phrase "the glorious king" (**מלך הכבוד**) is used *twice* in the fourth strophe (*strophe iv*), and *thrice* in the fifth strophe (*strophe v*). This also indicates that these strophes belong together.

- מלך הכבוד x 2 in the fourth strophe (vv. 7–8).
- מלך הכבוד x 3 in the fifth strophe (vv. 9–10).

4 Psalm 24 as a Historical Artifact

The advice George Nickelsburg gave scholars studying ancient religious texts is not only sound but is also a good summary of what historical-critical studies entail. He wrote:

Ancient religious texts are historical artifacts, created in time and place. Their conceptions and ideologies responded to specific historical circumstances and functioned in particular social

²² Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "YHWH's Exalted House — Aspects of the Design and Symbolism of Solomon's Temple," in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel* (ed. John Day; London: T & T Clark, 2005), 75, 88–90.

locations. If our interpretation is to do these texts justice, we must try to identify their time, circumstances, and locations to the extent that this is possible.²³

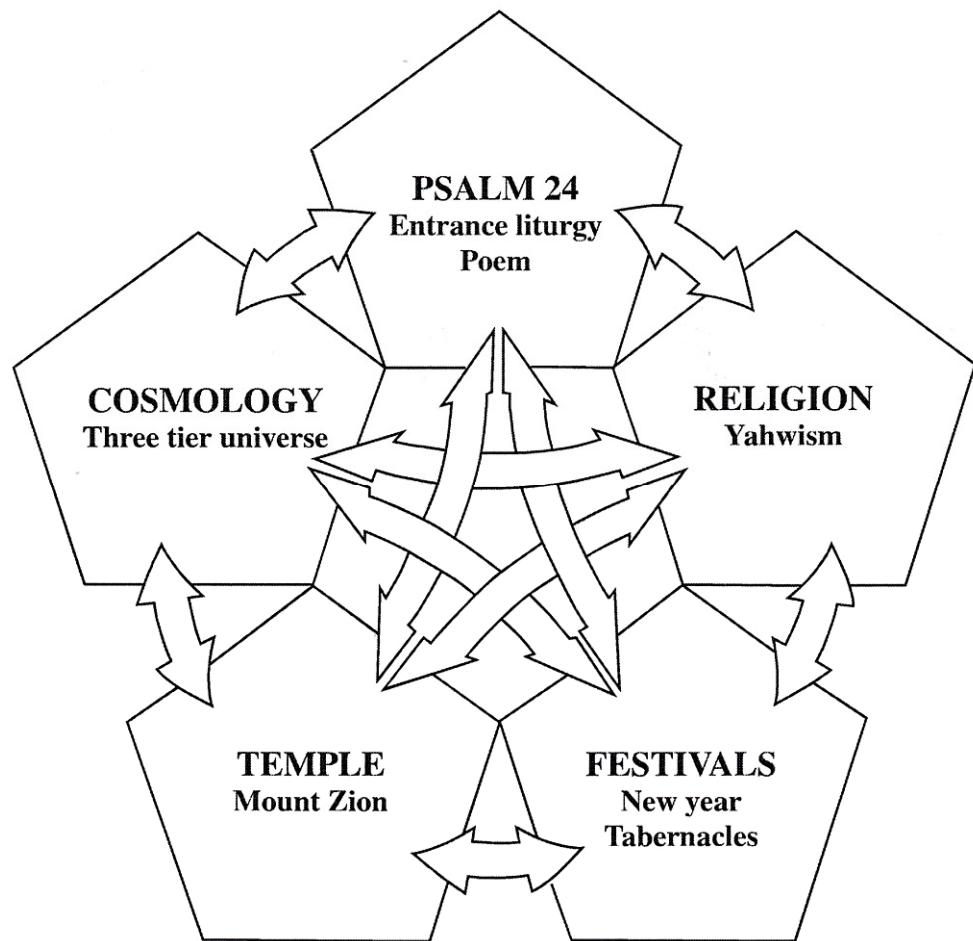
Psalm 24 originated in a specific historical context and at a specific place in the world. A cursory reading of the psalm reveals that it had been used at the Jerusalem temple, probably during a festival.²⁴ To understand its context the reader has to become acquainted with not only the location and structure of the temple but also the ideology associated with it. What did Israel believe about the cosmos and about YHWH and his temple? What was the relationship between their worldview and the temple? During which festivals did the pilgrims come to Jerusalem? What were they supposed to do during these festivals, and why? What role did the priests play?

A purely synchronic reading of the psalm cannot supply answers to these questions. One has to read books and articles dealing with such matters if one is to form an idea of how the psalm probably functioned and what it tried to do and communicate. In some way, one should try to get into the world of ancient Israel and into the mindset of the priests and pilgrims who went to Mount Zion and the temple.

My reading of the psalm prompted me to look at five topics that are important for a proper understanding of the psalm: (1) Hebrew poetry and psalm genres. (2) Israel's idea of the cosmos and its worldview. (3) The relationship between the cosmos and the temple. (4) The Israelite religion and the relationship between YHWH and the temple. (5) The annual festivals, which gave the Israelites a sense of belonging to a group whose existence was intertwined with a deity who was seen as creator and king. The diagram on the next page represents these issues and indicates how interconnected they are. They form a "web of information" for readers to understand the psalm in its context. An anti-clockwise exposition of the diagram may serve to illustrate the interconnectedness of the aspects referred to in the diagram.

²³ George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 191.

²⁴ Cf. Hunter *Psalms*, 132–133. The psalm may not have been recited exactly as it was written down but the tripartite division leaves the impression of a liturgical procession. Whoever wrote the poem gave readers a glimpse of what happened during such a procession.



When one reads the first stanza of the psalm (vv. 1–2; *top pentagonal block*) one is immediate confronted with the ancient Israelite cosmology and worldview (*first pentagonal block to the left*). Following this, the reader is introduced to the temple and a *rite de passage* in the second stanza (vv. 3–6). To understand what is communicated, the reader needs to be informed about the temple and the ideology which is associated with it (*second pentagonal block to the left*). Verses 7–10 give evidence to YHWH becoming king during one of the festivals (*second pentagonal block to the right*) and this immediately feeds into the Israelite religion — Yahwism (*first pentagonal block to the right*). However, each of the five pentagonal blocks is related to all the others in such an intricate way that one may call it a "web of meaning." A mere synchronic reading of Ps 24 cannot assist a modern reader in getting into the world of the ancient Israelites. One has to become acquainted with all the aspects touched on by the author of the poem. As it is not possible to dwell on each of the aspects, a short introduction should suffice for the purpose of reading and understanding Ps 24 in its context. The five sub-sections below are related to the five pentagonal blocks mentioned above and can be seen as part and parcel of a historical-critical reading of the psalm.

4a An Ancient Israelite Poem

Ferdinand Deist's words concerning the the most elementary question of hermeneutics are applicable in this case as well.²⁵ Before one tries to understand a piece of literature one has to extablish what it is that one is reading and trying to understand. One needs to establish the genre of the piece of literature. A historical narrative should be approached in a different way than a historical poem; a parable should not be read as if it is a historical narrative, etcetera.

There are a number of features in the text which reveal that Ps 24 should be read as a poem.²⁶ The following may serve as examples:

- *Parallel Line-Forms*

To YHWH belongs the earth and that which fills her;
the world and everything existing on it. (v. 1)

Who may ascend the mountain of YHWH?
Who may stand in his holy place? (v. 3)

- *The Use of Ellipsis*

For he has founded it on the seas
and established it on the rivers. (v. 2)

He will receive a blessing from YHWH
and be conferred integrity by his rescuer God. (v. 5)

- *Repetition of Word and Phrases*

Lift up your heads, gates!
Open up, last doors, that the glorious king may enter! (v. 7)

Lift up your heads, gates!
Open up, last doors, that the glorious king may enter! (v. 9)

- *The Use of Tricola.*

Lift up your heads, gates!
Open up, last doors,
that the glorious king may enter! (v. 9)

Who then is this glorious king?
YHWH seba'oth!

²⁵ Deist, *Heuristics, Hermeneutics and Authority*, 7–8.

²⁶ Sue E. Gillingham identifies at least sixteen characteristics of Hebrew poetry, cf. Sue E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 21–28.

He is the glorious king! (v. 10)

The psalm is a poem which can be classified as an "entrance liturgy" or a "gate liturgy" similar to Ps 15. It is difficult to establish whether the poem was composed to be used during a specific festival procession and whether it merely reflects some elements of such a procession.

4b The Three-Tiered Cosmos

The psalm without doubt reflects Israel's understanding of the cosmos. There is a heaven above, which is the home of the gods. Below heaven is the earth, on which exist human beings, animals and plants. Although the actual surface of earth is flat, it has a few important mountains. It also has pillars (probably attached to the mountains) implanted in the netherworld. Below the earth is the netherworld ocean or the chaos waters, home to Leviathan.²⁷ Philip Kennedy quite correctly says: "There is not a single comment about God and human beings in the entire Bible that does not presuppose that the universe is static, hierarchically ordered and centred on the earth."²⁸ We should keep this in mind whenever we read the Bible so as not to confuse biblical statements with modern scientific statements. Furthermore, we should not equate ancient understanding with our own and then argue that the Jewish or Christian God is the sole creator of the universe. Modern-day creation stories do not work with the idea of a creator God fashioning everything in the universe.

Another aspect of the Israelites' understanding of the cosmos is that whatever happens on earth has already been decided in heaven. This brings us to the Israelite religion and the relationship between YHWH and his people.

4c Yahwism — the Religion of Israel

Scholars studying the Israelite religion are almost unanimous in the claim that their religion developed from polytheism.²⁹ The Israelites initially believed that more than one god existed in heaven. Psalms 82:1 and 89:6–7 may serve as

²⁷ Sakkie Cornelius, "The Visual Representation of the World in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible," *JNSL* 20 (1994): 193–218; Bernd Janowski, "Das biblische Weltbild: Eine methodische Skizze," in *Das biblische Weltbild in seine altorientalischen Kontexte* (hrsg. Bernd Janowski & Beate Ego; FAT 32; Tübingen: Mohr, 2001), 3–26.

²⁸ Kennedy, *A Modern Introduction to Theology*, 224.

²⁹ Meindert Dijkstra, "El, the God of Israel — Israel, the People of YHWH: On the Origins of Ancient Israelite Yahwism," in *Only One God? Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah* (ed. Bob Becking, Meindert Dijkstra, Marjo C. A. Korpel and Karel J. H. Vriezen; The Biblical Seminar 77; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 81–126. Mark S. Smith, *The Memoirs of God: History, Memory and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 105–119.

examples of this conviction. Like all other ancient Near Eastern peoples, the Israelites were convinced that there was a supreme god who had a wife and many children. This family could also be presented as a king with his queen, children and a host of servants. The children were in reality gods of a lower rank who had to attend to the needs of the supreme god. The servants were gods of still lower rank than the children. Together they formed the "court of heaven," or the "council of the gods." The Israelite pantheon consisted of four tiers (at least during the monarchical period).³⁰ The top tier was inhabited by the supreme god and his wife. Below them were lesser gods who had to perform specific tasks in the court. Below this group of lesser gods was another group of even lesser gods. On the lowest tier were the messengers and dispatchers. In Hebrew they are referred to as **מלאכים**. This word is usually translated as "angels." The angels are thus only the messengers and dispatchers who keep the human beings informed about the plans and desires of the supreme god. The four-tiered pantheon "imploded" prior to and during the exile. Monotheism became the norm in the Israelite religion and only a two-tiered pantheon was believed to exist.³¹ All that remained were the supreme male god and his servants. It was during this period that the angels received names.³²

4d The Temple in Jerusalem

Understanding the temple in Jerusalem requires knowledge of temples and their role in the ancient Near Eastern cosmology and ideology. Temples were usually erected on mountains or hills, and the belief that such locations were sacred meant that the gods on hills or mountains could be more easily contacted. Furthermore, the supreme god's throne in the temple replicated his throne in heaven. It was thought that there were springs underneath the earthly throne feeding rivers with "living" water. The throne in the temple and the springs gave life to everything outside the temple. Temples, life, fertility and blessings thus went hand in hand.³³

The presence of the deity in the temple could not be taken for granted. He could abandon his earthly home if the relationship between himself and his worshippers were to break down. One way of making sure that the supreme god felt at home in the temple was to bring regular sacrifices, other offerings and libations, and to live a moral life.

³⁰ Lowell K. Handy, "The Appearance of Pantheon in Judah," in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (ed. Diana V. Edelman; CBET 13; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995), 27–43.

³¹ Handy, "The Appearance of Pantheon," 42–43.

³² Izak J. J. Spangenberg, "Yahwism, Judaism and Christianity: Religions do Evolve!" in *The Evolutionary Roots of Religion: Cultivate, Mutate or Eliminate?* (ed. Cornel W. du Toit; SASRF Series 13; Pretoria: Unisa, 2009), 131.

³³ C. Meyers, "Temple, Jerusalem," *ABD* 6:358–360.

The Jerusalem temple was located on Mount Zion and had a tripartite structure: (1) an entrance portico, (2) a main hall and (3) an innermost holy place where YHWH resided on the cherubim throne.³⁴ A distinctive theology developed around the Jerusalem temple, the throne and YHWH's presence. This has been described as the "Zion-Zebaoth theology."³⁵ Zion was regarded as the centre of the world and the most important mountain on earth. The temple erected there was regarded not only as YHWH's earthly abode but also as "the point of intersection between heaven and earth."³⁶ His presence in the temple conveyed the message that he was king and ruled the world.

Another feature of the "Zion-Zebaoth theology" was the belief that if YHWH was present in the temple nothing could go wrong on earth. Israel would experience regular seasons, rain would fall, the sun would shine and the moon and stars would play their roles, ensuring that crops grew and flourished, cattle, flocks and humans were fertile and Israel would not suffer defeat in the face of enemy attack.

4e The Annual Enthronement Festival

John Day and J. J. M. Roberts deserve acknowledgement for revisiting Sigmund Mowinckel's suggestion of an enthronement festival.³⁷ They argued convincingly that such a festival was celebrated at the end of the old year and the beginning of the new one and that it was probably part of the feast of Tabernacles. During this festival, a procession of priests and pilgrims would have stationed themselves outside the sanctuary with the ark in order to carry it into the sanctuary once more and into the inner sanctum. The priests eventually placed the ark underneath the cherubim throne where it remained until the next enthronement festival. Day summarizes the ideology behind the festival and the procession in the following words: "In re-enacting Yahweh's primeval enthronement over chaos, the Israelites experienced it sacramentally anew, and

³⁴ Othmar Keel, *Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik* (4th ed.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984), 99–111, 133–124; Graeme Auld & Margreet Steiner, *Jerusalem I: From the Bronze Age to the Maccabees* (Cities of the Biblical World; Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1996), 55; Zony Zevit, "Preamble to a Temple Tour," in *Sacred Time, Sacred Place: Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (ed. Barry M. Gittlin; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 79; Hurowitz, "YHWH's Exalted House," 65–72; Eckart Otto, *Das antike Jerusalem: Archäologie und Geschichte* (München: Beck, 2008), 48–50.

³⁵ T.N.D. Mettinger, "Yahweh Zebaoth," *DDD* 920–924.

³⁶ Mettinger, "Yahweh Zebaoth," 922.

³⁷ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms and Israel's Worship* (vol. 1; Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 106–192; John Day, *Psalms* (OTG; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 67–87; J. J. M. Roberts, "Mowinckel's Enthronement Festival: A Review," in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception* (ed. Peter W. Flint & Patrick D. Miller; VTSup 99; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 97–115.

looked to Yahweh to control the forces of chaos in the present so as to ensure both the fertility of the land and their political welfare."³⁸ Roberts concludes his article with the statement: "I think the festival included a ritual re-enactment of Yahweh's accession to the throne symbolized by a procession of the ark into the sanctuary, and the placing of the ark under Yahweh's cherub throne in the inner sanctum of the temple."³⁹

Although Ps 24 may not have been written to be recited exclusively during this festival, it does reflect the three stations of the procession. The first station was *outside the sanctuary*. The second station was *at the entrance portico*. The third station was *in the main hall*, where the priests finally prepared to enter the holy of holies.

C CONCLUSION

The first stanza of the psalm (vv. 1b–2) gives evidence that the priests recited a credo *outside the sanctuary*, thus preparing for the procession to enter the temple.⁴⁰ YHWH is celebrated as creator and owner of the three-tiered cosmos:

To YHWH belongs the earth and that which fills her;
 the world and everything existing on it.
 For he has founded it on the seas
 and established it on the rivers.

After uttering the credo, the procession proceeded to the *entrance portico*. The second stanza (vv. 3–6) gives evidence that the priests and pilgrims dialogued with each other before entering the *main hall*. Psalm 15 and Isa 33:14–16 reflect a similar dialogue, warranting the claim that there was such a practice when pilgrims frequented the temple. They had to request entry and proclaim that they lived a moral life, whereupon they would receive a blessing from the priests. The declaration of innocence and the immediate priestly blessing are inexorably coupled. It is like lightning and thunder: you cannot have one without the other.

Who may ascend the mountain of YHWH?
 Who may stand in his holy place?
 He who has clean hands and a pure heart;
 who does not treat me as an idol
 nor swear an oath calling on misleading ones.
 He will receive a blessing from YHWH
 and be conferred integrity by his rescuer God.

³⁸ Day, *Psalms*, 69.

³⁹ Roberts, "Mowinckel's Enthronement Festival," 114.

⁴⁰ I differ from scholars like John Goldingay who view this psalm as being comprised of "three self-contained brief sections that are unusually unrelated to each other." Cf. John Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41* (vol. 1 of *Psalms*; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 356. The three sections are closely related as argued above.

This generation is his seekers;
seekers of your presence, God of Jacob.

After entering the main hall, the pilgrims would remain silent while the priests concluded the last ceremony. They would then enter into an antiphonal "chant" proclaiming YHWH's kingship (vv. 7–10):

Lift up your heads, gates!
Open up, last doors,
that the *glorious king* may enter!
Who is this *glorious king*?
YHWH strong and mighty!
YHWH mighty in war!
Lift up your heads, gates!
Open up, last doors,
that the *glorious king* may enter!
Who then is *this glorious king*?
YHWH seba'oth!
He is the *glorious king*!

After the antiphonal "chant," the Ark was once more repositioned in front of the two large cherubim in the holy of holies.⁴¹

D CONTEXTUALISATION

I have always understood historical-critical studies to be concerned not only with the layers, growth and redaction of ancient texts but also with context, culture and worldview. In my reading of Ps 24, I have attempted to penetrate the world of the ancient Israelites and to understand the text as a communication from a remote culture. I do not live in that world, but I can appreciate something of what the authors were trying to communicate to the people in their society. Psalm 24 is as pleasing to me as the Native American prayer I once read:

O Great Spirit,
Whose voice we hear in the winds,
and whose breath gives life to the world,
hear us! We are small and weak,
we need your strength and wisdom.

May we walk in beauty.
May our eyes
ever behold the red and purple sunset.

⁴¹ Alastair G. Hunter discusses the role which the Ark played in this procession and then concludes: "There is, I believe, a strong circumstantial case for seeing Psalm 24 in the context of a procession involving a symbolic object (the Ark?) which embodies the presence of Yahweh the great warrior God and King of Jerusalem." Cf. Hunter, *Psalms*, 138.

May our hands respect the things you have made
and our ears be sharp to hear your voice.

Make us wise so that we may understand the things
you have taught our people.

Help us learn the lessons you have hidden
in every leaf and rock.

Make us always ready to come to you
with clean hands and straight eyes.

So when life fades, as the fading sunset,
our spirits may come to you without shame.⁴²

Philosophers, poets, writers, singers and preachers have the task of reflecting on the moral values of a society. Moreover, they must all try to encourage people to live morally and with integrity; with "clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps 24:4) or "clean hands and straight eyes" (Native American prayer). A society without such people would not be able to sustain itself and would eventually collapse. Both poems are aesthetically pleasing to me and, although I do not believe in the gods to whom they refer, they challenge me to live morally and with integrity in a society that is utterly different from theirs, one that is riddled with crime and corruption.⁴³

⁴² Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon, *Earth Prayers from around the World — 365 Prayers, Poems and Invocations for Honouring the Earth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 188.

⁴³ The Department of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at the University of South Africa organises at least three research seminars annually. One of these is held when Professor James Alfred Loader visits the department during July/August each year. The year 2010 was an important one in his life, as he turned sixty five shortly before his visit. The organisers set "Psalms" as the theme and 19 August as the date for the 2010 seminar. The theme of "Psalms" was chosen because Loader's lectures were concerned with the Korahite psalms. There was an interesting coincidence this year. The organisers had not realised that the seminar would fall on the birthday of the late Professor Willem Prinsloo, a South African OT scholar who specialised in the psalms. He would have turned sixty six on 19 August. When I realised that, I immediately offered to read a paper. But a further coincidence increased my eagerness to do so. Loader celebrates his birthday on 12 July, and it was on that day in 1997 that the late Ferdinand Deist died in Heidelberg (Germany) while on study leave. He was a mere fifty three years old. Deist, Loader and Prinsloo, all born in South Africa in the mid-40s of the twentieth century, had a tremendous influence on the younger generation of biblical scholars in South Africa. As one of these, I am fortunate to have known the earlier scholars and to have benefitted from their enthusiasm, scholarship and rigorous discussions. I dedicate the article to Professor Loader in appreciation of his scholarship and his willingness to continue his

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