

HEBREW EXEGESIS OF PSALM 29

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Introduction

Psalm 29 is a hymn of praise because of the awesomeness of God's strength and presence. Therein, the psalmist paints a poetic picture of a tremendous storm that thoroughly overwhelms and obliterates the area it strikes. The Lord's presence is introduced in the psalm as a glorious thunder. Thereafter, Yahweh's voice becomes the dominant metaphor for his powerful presence. Thunderstorm imagery pervades the psalm, and this has led some commentators to believe that it originated in the pagan mythology of the Canaanites. However, no conclusive evidence for this hypothesis is extant. This paper will demonstrate that this psalm is intended to evoke the praises of Yahweh because he alone is worthy. Today, Psalm 29 is a striking reminder of the fearsome and glorious presence of Yahweh as well as a plea to honor and glorify him above all else.

Historical, Social, and Literary Background

The opening line of Psalm 29 reads, "A psalm of David." This appears to be the title of the psalm. Many psalms begin with such titles. It is likely that David is the author, though it is not known for certain.

Psalm 29 is classified as a nature psalm, which may be thought of as a subsection of the larger group known as descriptive praise psalms (Estes 2005, 159). Descriptive praise psalms contain words of worship and praise to the God of Israel and admonish others to praise him because of his greatness and his grace toward humanity (Hays and Duvall 2011, 275). More specifically, nature psalms praise and extol God for his creative work, for his transcendence over

nature, for his sovereignty in the natural world, or for his power and control over or use of natural phenomena (Estes 2005, 159). Some features of Psalm 29, such as its lengthy opening lines meant to invoke praise to Yahweh, indicate that the psalm is also classified as a hymn of victory (Goldingay 2006, 414; Craigie 2004, 246).

In Psalm 29, “the voice of Yahweh” is a descriptive metaphor for a theophany (Estes 2005, 161). Yahweh is pictured as presiding over many waters (lit. great waters) by the presence of his voice in strength and majesty (vv. 3-4). The presence of his voice is so powerful that it destroys the forests and shakes the earth (vv. 5-6, 7-9). Yahweh is also pictured as the one who sends the lightnings (v. 7). The usage of such imagery to describe the moving of Yahweh’s voice has led many exegetes and commentators to believe that the psalmist is employing the imagery of a powerful storm to convey the absolute awesomeness of Yahweh’s presence, and, indeed, this appears to be the case (Kraus 1988, 345). Such an observation has led some scholars to believe that Psalm 29 may have originally been a pagan hymn which was adapted for and then adopted into the corpus of songs used in Israel’s worship of Yahweh (Estes 2005, 160).

Psalm 29 resembles Ugaritic literature more than any other psalm (Walton et al. 2000, 525). That there are close parallels between Psalm 29 and the worship and mythology of the Canaanite deity Baal is not widely disputed (Durham 1979, 143). Ancient Israel’s pagan neighbors worshipped Baal, the god of thunder and fertility, and his depictions in ancient literature often included violent storm imagery akin to what is seen in in this psalm (Estes 2005, 161). In 1935, Ginsberg suggested that Psalm 29 was originally a Phoenician hymn which had only been modified enough to allow its acceptance into the psalter (Craigie 2004, 243). One support he offers for this claim is that all of the places named in the psalm are in Syria (Walton et

al. 2000, 525). However, there are several reasons why Ginsberg's conclusion is unfounded, at best.

Ginsberg's theory suffers from several fatal problems. First, current knowledge of Phoenician mythological poetry as well as that in the Canaanite language of Ugaritic include no hymns or psalms (Craigie 2004, 244). Therefore, one cannot definitively equivocate Psalm 29 with a selection from a hypothetical hymnal which is not extant anywhere in the world of scholarship. All of the imagery with parallels in Ugaritic also appears in other literature which is undoubtedly Israelite (Walton et al. 2000, 525). Secondly, although the mythic Baal is depicted by the Canaanites as thundering mightily in the heavens, the mighty voice of the Lord in this psalm is exaggerated over that of a mere naturally occurring storm, however powerful (Craigie 2004, 246). Although powerful winds can possess sufficient force to uproot trees, the voice of Yahweh shatters the lofty cedars of Lebanon as if they were but glass (v. 5), and whereas thunder is generally incapable of causing earthquakes, Yahweh's voice causes entire country sides to "skip about like a calf" (v. 6). He causes entire wildernesses to quake (v. 8). Such is a depiction of the ultimate storm, Yahweh's awesome power, and it appears to intentionally play on the Canaanite imagery of the weather deity, Baal, in order to make him appear infinitely impotent when compared with the God of Israel (246).

The similarities between Psalm 29 and Ugaritic Baal worship literature demonstrate the strong cultural and linguistic connection between Israel and her Canaanite neighbors (Walton et al. 2000, 525). They are not adequate to suggest that the original version of this psalm was pagan. A much more likely possibility is that the psalmist purposely adapted Canaanite imagery in order to proclaim the superiority of the God of Israel over the pagan pantheon, including Baal, and to show that only Yahweh is truly worthy of worship (525).

Translation

Psalm 29

1. A Psalm of David¹.
Ascribe to Yahweh, O sons of God², ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength.
2. Ascribe to Yahweh the glory due his name. Worship Yahweh in [the] adornment³ of holiness⁴.
3. The voice of Yahweh is over the waters. The God of glory thunders. Yahweh is over many waters.
4. The voice of Yahweh is powerful. The voice of Yahweh is majestic.
5. The voice of Yahweh breaks cedars. Yahweh shatters the cedars of Lebanon.
6. He makes them skip about like a calf, Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild ox.
7. The voice of Yahweh carves [the] lightning⁵.
8. The voice of Yahweh shakes the desert. Yahweh shakes the Desert of Kadesh.
9. The voice of Yahweh causes the does⁶ to bring forth and strips the forest bare, and in his temple, everyone there says, “Glory!”
10. Yahweh sat [enthroned] at the flood, and Yahweh sits [as] king forever.
11. Yahweh will give strength to his people. He will bless his people with peace.

Outline

Main theme: The psalmist urges the angels to worship Yahweh because of his awesome power and sole worthiness.

- I. David exhorts the heavenly hosts to praise Yahweh (vv. 1-2).
 - A. Yahweh is glorious and strong (v. 1c).
 - B. Yahweh is worthy to receive glory (v. 2a).
 - C. Yahweh’s holiness is majestic (v. 2b).
- II. The voice of Yahweh is more powerful than any natural phenomena (vv. 3-9).
 - A. Yahweh’s voice mightily resounds over the raging seas which are under his dominion (v. 3).
 - B. Yahweh’s voice is powerful and majestic (v. 4).
 1. It smashing the cedars of Lebanon to pieces (v. 5).
 2. It makes the mountains Lebanon and Sirion skip (v. 6).

¹ LXX adds, “while exiting the tabernacle.”

² LXX adds *evne,gkate tw/| kuri,w/| ui`ou,j kriw/n*.

³ LXX and Syriac MSS read *הַצֵּר* (“in court of”).

⁴ Some MSS read *קִדְשׁוֹ* (“his holiness”).

⁵ Literally “flames of fire.”

⁶ Some manuscripts read *אֵילִים* (“rams”).

- C. Yahweh’s voice carves the sky with lightning (v. 7).
- D. Yahweh’s voice causes the desert of Kadesh to tremble (v. 8).
- E. Yahweh’s voice is terrifying and powerful (v. 9).
 - 1. It causes doe to give birth prematurely (v. 9a).
 - 2. It strips away every tree in the forest⁷ (v. 9b).
- F. Everyone in his temple shouts praises to him (v. 9c).
- III. Yahweh is the highest of all kings (v. 10).
 - A. He reigned during the judgment of the Flood (v. 10a).
 - B. He reigns eternally over all things (v. 10b).
- IV. Yahweh is the provider and protector of his own people (v. 11).
 - A. He provides them with strength (v. 11a).
 - B. He protects them with peace (v. 11b).

Commentary

1-2 The psalmist is probably David. The preposition ל can indicate that the psalm was written specifically to or for David, or that it was dedicated to him after it was written, or it can indicate authorship. Since many of the psalms are traditionally attributed to David, the latter is the most likely assumption.

The word הַבּוּ, a masculine plural imperative meaning “ascribe!” is evoked three times to urge the בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים (sons of mighty ones, or sons of God) to direct their worship toward יְהוָה, (Yahweh) the God of Israel. The three-fold call to worship also appears in Psalm 96:7-9 and may have been a customary method of calling members a congregation to present themselves along with their sacrifices to the Lord (VanGemeren 2008, 293). The phrase “sons of God” in Canaanite mythology refers to the pantheon of lesser deities whose king is *El*, the chief Canaanite deity (Dahood 1966, 175). However, Old Testament usage of this phrase refers to the heavenly court of angels in perpetual service to Yahweh, the one God of Israel. Other occurrences include Psalm 89:7; 1 Kings 22:19; Isaiah 6:2; Job 1:6; 2:1 (Walton et al. 2000,

⁷ Some MSS read יַעֲלֹת and some יַעֲרִים.

526). The imperative (second person) **הִבְנוּ** indicates that **בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים** is in the vocative and, therefore, the psalm is addressed to the heavenly beings.

The psalmist gives two specific things that the sons of God are to ascribe to Yahweh, “glory” and “strength”. These speak of Yahweh’s worthiness, implying that all glory belongs to him and that he is the possessor of all strength. These two attributes conjure up the memory of Yahweh’s mighty acts from creation to salvation (VanGemeren 2000, 293). The word **עֹז** (strength) is found in both the first and last verses and so form an *inclusio* which is significant to the overall theme of this psalm. A similar pattern of this term occurs also in the “Song of the Sea” in Exodus 15:1-18, but the first occurrence of **עֹז** has the first person possessive pronoun attached, indicating a different nuance, “my strength” or “my refuge” (Craigie 1972, 145-6).

That the glory is “due his name” also refers to his worthiness. The phrase **כְּבוֹד חֲשֵׁמוֹ** is in the construct state (lit. “the glory of his name”), indicating that glory is rightfully ascribed to the name of Yahweh. His name is glorious in that he alone is worthy of praise (Kraus 1966, 348). The name **יְהוָה** was a source of source of deliverance and victory for the Israelites (Craigie 2004, 247). The mention of “the glory of his name,” which delivers and protects Israel, reinforces the psalmist’s expression of Yahweh’s worthiness to receive praise.

3-4 The psalmist employs the imagery of natural phenomena to highlight Yahweh’s power. Here, the psalm really begins to resemble literature about ancient Near Eastern storm gods (Walton et al. 2000, 526). The imagery is one of a powerful storm which roars over the sea and then rips across the countryside. Similar stories of Baal and Marduk depict the pagan deities’ thundering voices uprooting and sweeping away trees (526). **קוֹל יְהוָה**, “the voice of Yahweh,” which refers to the powerful presence of Yahweh himself, is reminiscent of thunder (Dahood

1979, 176). Seven times the psalm resounds with the praise of Yahweh's voice. Similar language is found in Ugaritic depictions of the weather god Baal (Craigie 2004, 247). The psalmist uses the Canaanite symbolism in a dual sense to both deny that Baal has any real power over the weather and to assert that Yahweh is the one who truly rules over the nature (247).

There is a complementary sort of synonymous parallelism in verse three, in which the second part of the parallel repeats but intensifies the first. That Yahweh is said to be "over the waters" and then "over many waters" is probably meant to illustrate his superiority over the Canaanite sea god Yam, who not only supposedly controlled the sea but was also said to rule over the chaos which the "mighty waters" represent in ancient Near Eastern literature (Craigie 2004, 247). Here the psalmist interrupts the two parallel sections and introduces the theophany in a mighty storm in which Yahweh's voice blasts like a violent thunder (Kraus 1988, 348). This is certainly consistent with the vivid storm imagery which follows. The phrase **מַיִם רַבִּים** could refer to "many waters" or to great swells of water as in a severe storm (Brown et al. 2007, 912d). It is significant that in the ancient Near East water imagery is often used to symbolize chaos (Goldingay 2006, 417). The storm imagery throughout this psalm seems to favor the picture of the "great waters" as stormy swells of water which Yahweh not only controls but rules over as well.

Verse four is the second acclamation of Yahweh's voice and is a mere exclamation that his voice is **בַּכֹּחַ** ("in the power") and **בַּהֲדָר** ("in majesty"). The **ב** here is a *beth essentiae*, which indicates that the object of the preposition is a substantival predicate, equivocated with the subject (Williams 2010, 199). Therefore, the object is translated as an adjective. So the psalmist is proclaiming that Yahweh's voice is "powerful" and "majestic." The following verses elaborate on these two characteristics of Yahweh's voice, especially its strength.

5-6 The next two verses elaborate on the power and majesty of Yahweh's voice mentioned in verse four and form the middle of the psalm. Therein is a violent display of the awesome, terrifying presence of Yahweh's voice. In each of these verses, the pattern of parallelism introduced in verse three is continued, only without the interruption to introduce Yahweh's thunderous voice. In the first half of verse five which states, "The voice of Yahweh breaks cedars," the *Qal* participle form of שָׁבַר is used. The second half of the verse intensifies both "cedars" and "break." What are mere cedars in 5a are the famed, lofty "cedars of Lebanon" in 5b, and the *Qal* participle in 5a likewise gives way to the imperfect *Piel* with a *waw* consecutive. שָׁבַר in the *Piel* stem is intensified and means to "smash" or "shatter" (Brown et al. 2007, 990). So in 5b, "Yahweh shatters the cedars of Lebanon" as if they were but glass. Such a description moves beyond the capabilities of a natural storm and indicates that Yahweh's power is much more intense than any natural phenomena.

In verse six, the strength of Yahweh's voice is so intense that it causes Lebanon and Sirion to skip like wild oxen. These refer to two great mountains in Syria, Mt. Lebanon and Mt. Hermon, which was called Sirion by the ancient Phoenicians (Craigie 2004, 247; Kraus 1988, 349). This could be a repetition of the fleeing of the trees at Yahweh's presence, a possible interpretation because this image is alluded to in verse nine in which Yahweh "strips the forest bear." However, it is more likely that the plainer sense of the text was the author's intention (VanGemeren 2008, 294; Goldingay 2006, 419). That Yahweh's voice removes great mountains from their places is consistent with the theme of the exaggerated storm of Yahweh's presence, which is infinitely more powerful than any naturally occurring storm. Such a display of might would undoubtedly evoke praises to Yahweh, which is the purpose of this psalm. If this

inference is correct, then verse six is both the center and climax of the Psalm 29, which has only increased in intensity until now and begins to gradually decrease hereafter.

These two verses are intended to demonstrate Yahweh's overwhelming power above and beyond the force of the most fearsome storm. Thus, they contribute to the psalmist's opening command to "ascribe to the Yahweh glory and strength" (v. 1). His strength is so awesome that the only appropriate response is worship and praise.

7-9b The storm imagery continues with a seemingly parenthetical reference to Yahweh "carving the lightning" as **לְהַבֹּת אֵשׁ** (flames of fire) in the sky. This abrupt pause from the picture of the violent, rushing wind of Yahweh's voice creates the feel of suddenness with which lightning strikes. The participle **הִצַּב** means "cleaving" or "hewing" and can refer to a stone carving (Brown et al. 2007, 345). Yahweh is not limited to carving into stone; he writes upon the sky with the sheer power of his voice.

In verse eight the synonymous parallelism continues. Yahweh's voice is so powerful that it causes the earth to shake. This exalts Yahweh's voice over natural thunder which does not cause earthquakes. There is a parallel here with Canaanite mythology. Baal is also said to have a thunderous voice which shakes the earth (Craigie 1972, 149). However, as in the other parallels in Psalm 29, the author's intention is not to compare Yahweh with pagan gods, but to illustrate Yahweh's power over them and over natural phenomena. Whereas Baal's voice was said to shake a local area of land, Yahweh's voice causes the entire desert **מִדְבָּר** (wilderness or desert) to tremble. The intensification in 8b illustrates this point. Yahweh causes the wilderness of Kadesh to shake. Although the exact referent is uncertain, Kadesh likely refers to Kadesh Barnea through which the Israelites crossed on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land and could

even be understood to refer to the entire region of the Sinai desert (Walton et al. 2000, 526; VanGemeren 2008, 295; Craigie 2004, 248). Not only does Yahweh's voice shake desserts, it shakes entire dessert regions.

The term חוּל (shake or writhe) occurs three times in this section, twice in verse eight and once in nine. In verse eight, it is a *Hiphil* imperfect and is causative, as we have seen. In the third occurrence, חוּל is in the *Po'el* stem, but is still said to be causative by Brown, Driver, and Briggs (Brown et al. 2007, 297). In each occasion this verb is in the imperfect third person masculine singular, which indicates that Yahweh (or his voice) is the subject of the verb. The word אֵילֹת which follows חוּל in verse nine means “does” or “hind,” the feminine plural of “deer” (19). Translations and commentaries differ on the proper understanding of this phrase.

Verse nine seems to abandon the synonymous, intensifying parallelism, stating that Yahweh's voice causes the does to give birth prematurely. Some manuscripts read אֵילִים, which is the same word with a masculine plural suffix. Some translations choose to translate this word using as “oaks” (Estes 2005, 162). This reading would preserve the parallelism as found in the preceding verses. Yahweh “twists oaks and strips forests bare.” However, this phrase resembles Job 39:1 which also refers to female deer (Dahood 1966, 179). Thus, the dreadfulness of Yahweh's voice which causes animals to prematurely give birth is probably in view here (Kraus 1988, 349).

The second part of verse nine refers back to verse five. Yahweh's voice does not merely uproot a few trees as would a fierce storm, but it utterly desolates the entire forest, leaving it completely treeless. An indirect secondary implication is probably that nothing can escape from Yahweh's great power and fearsome wrath.

9c-11 The last one-third of verse nine echoes the admonition to worship God found in the first two verses of the psalm. This time the psalmist offers an example, stating that everyone in Yahweh’s temple shouts praises to him. The wondrous and powerful voice of Yahweh is answered by the unanimous voices of everyone in his temple shouting, “Glory!” וְבַהֲיִכְלוֹ (“and in his temple”) could refer to either Yahweh’s earthly or his heavenly temple (Craigie 2004, 248). Considering the opening setting of the psalm in which David addresses the “sons of God” (heavenly beings), it is likely that he is referring to the heavenly temple (Goldingay 2006, 419). However, either temple could be in view here.

Verse 9c reintroduces the theme of praise to Yahweh and bridges into the psalm’s two concluding verses. The synonymous, intensive parallelism returns in verse ten which declares that Yahweh not only ruled over the chaotic judgment of the Great Flood in Genesis 6, he rules and reigns as the eternal king over all things. It has been mentioned that water can be representative of chaos in ancient Near Eastern literature. The biblical Flood was definitely a chaotic event, as most judgments are. מַבּוּל is the term for flood used in verse ten and generally refers to the Great Flood judgment of Genesis 6. A different Hebrew word for flood is normally used when referring to symbolize chaos in Israelite literature (Walton et al. 2000, 526). So the cosmic chaos which threatens God’s natural order is probably not in view here.

The final verse of Psalm 29 offers an assurance of empowerment and peace to the people that belong to Yahweh. The statement’s primary purpose is probably to contribute to the evidence of Yahweh’s worthiness following the psalmist’s command to “ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength” (v. 1). Here, not only is Yahweh the possessor of all strength, he is also the source of strength. If someone is strong, it is because the God of Israel has issued a measure of

strength to him. This takes the imperfect of the verbs נתן (give) and ברכ (bless) as indicative, meaning that Yahweh will do this. Goldingay takes them as jussive, “May Yahweh give... may Yahweh bless,” in which case verse eleven would merely be a benediction. However, the Septuagint (LXX) prefers the indicative (Goldingay 2006, 421), which is probably to be preferred because the peace that Yahweh gives is rooted in his strength. That is likely what the psalmist has in view here. Because Yahweh is all-powerful, the peace that he provides cannot be interrupted. The peace that Yahweh gives is contingent on his strength, both inherent in his nature and bestowed on his people, which gives victory over Israel’s enemies (Craigie 2004, 249).

The second occurrence of עז (strength) closes the inclusio which envelopes the psalm. עז is found in both the first and last verses of the psalm, although both words are from different roots (Estes 2005, 162). The psalmist’s employment of this homonym at the beginning and end of the psalm is probably meant to connect the two words together. It is Yahweh’s strength, rightfully ascribed to him by his heavenly worshippers, that provides protection for his people. Just as Yahweh is the master and conqueror of all chaos and storms, his people can share in his victory if they give all honor to him (Dahood 1966, 180; VanGemeren 2008, 296).

Application

Today, destructive natural phenomena are sometimes referred to as “acts of God.” Indeed the imagery of Psalm 29 is a tremendously destructive force attributed to Yahweh. However, the purpose of the psalm is not to blame God for the ferocity of nature, but it is intended to inspire the praises of his people. The intended message of Psalm 29 must be noticed if a person is to

truly understand and benefit from it. From the beginning of the psalm, David calls for the praises of Yahweh. All people, Christians as well as non-Christians, would do well to heed this call.

With everything from the latest movie effects to the most dominant athletes competing for the attention of people today, Psalm 29 serves as a valuable reminder that there is nothing as awesome as the one true God. No matter what might enthrall and captivate the hearts of men and women, there is nothing more meaningful than recognizing that Yahweh is infinitely greater than anything we can imagine much less view on the television or witness in the world. In this way, Psalm 29 is a much needed reminder of God's rightful place of preeminence in the lives of Christians. Our God is infinitely more powerful than the fiercest storm and infinitely more worthy of respect, worship, and love than the most popular would-be idols of our day.

Yahweh provides protection and peace to his people, but those who refuse to honor him have reason to fear because his judgment will be inescapable. Like the trees in the forest which are all utterly destroyed at the sound of Yahweh's voice, there is no person or thing that can escape God's power and judgment. When Yahweh works out his sovereign plan in the lives of his prayerful people who continually petition him for their various needs and desires, God will bend, move, and break whatever he needs to in order to accomplish what he intends to accomplish, either for the sake of his own will or on behalf of his people. For those that belong to Yahweh, there is a quiet comfort in the midst of any storm. Psalm 29 promises us protection, peace, and tranquility, but we must honor God in order to benefit from the peaceful result of his power (VanGemeren 2008, 296). On the other hand, it is a terrifying thing to be on the negative receiving end of or in opposition to God's fearsome power.

The God who rules over all things and is infinitely more powerful than any storm is the same God who empowers and protects his people. God is not only the possessor of all power and

strength, he is also the source. That is why Jesus distinguishes between his peace and the world's abstract concept of peace. "My peace I give to you," he says, "Not as the world gives do I give you" (John 14:27), and this is why those who belong to him can possess true, lasting peace. Since our God is so powerful, nothing can ever separate us from his love (Rom. 8:38-9), and, therefore, from the peace that he lovingly provides. Also, no one will ever be able to pluck us out of his mighty hand (John 10:29). The hand that drives the storm of Psalm 29 is the same hand that holds us gently in its grasp and repels anything that would seek to take us from him, and so we are safe and secure as long as we are his.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Psalm 29 is an ancient Israelite victory hymn which celebrates Yahweh's awesome glory and power by urging all of the angels of heaven to worship him and acknowledge his worthiness. Yahweh alone is worthy of praise because, unlike the pagan deities, Yahweh truly does control the fiercest of storms, and the mere power of his voice is infinitely more powerful than any naturally occurring phenomena. Although Psalm 29 has been attributed to ancient Canaanite mythology and the worship of pagan gods, the lack of adequate support for this hypothesis implies the contrary. Psalm 29 is an ancient Israelite psalm which portrays the God of Israel by employing the vivid imagery of violent storm over which Yahweh is commander. Yahweh is more fierce and mighty than any storm, and therefore is worthy of the praise of both his people and his holy angels. Everyone who knows how powerful and glorious Yahweh is can do nothing but worship and praise him. Those who recognize Yahweh, worship him, and belong to him are the perpetual partakers of Yahweh's infinite strength which brings peace. Just as Yahweh is Lord of the storm, he is also Lord of everything else, and because we know this, we can by faith worship him alone and honor him above all else.

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