The Setting and Interpretation of Psalm 126*

The Psalter still presents major problems of interpretation. In fact the interpretation of many psalms is more difficult than other parts of the Old Testament. This is beeause we are dealing with Hebrew poetry, with all its attendant difficulties such as unusual vocabulary, poetic syntax and archaisms, and also because there is not the surrounding context to help with understanding the historical context. The individual psalms are isolated from their original setting and consequently interpretation is dependent on features such as content, form, and vocabulary.

Even within particular sections of the Psalter the difficulties are scarcely alleviated. To take the Songs of Ascents (Pss. 120-134), there is such variety within the section that any one psalm provides practically no assistance in the interpretation of any other. Their common title binds them together as a unit, but fails to elucidate their content. Hence any one of these psalms continues to confront us with major exegetical difficulties and scholarly viewpoints are as varied as they have been in the past. But the continued task of biblical students is to examine again the problems, as in this way exegetical progress is achieved and a fuller understanding of the biblical text is reached.

Psalm 126 is unique within the Songs of Ascents in that it has most commonly been taken to be post-exilic. However the interpretation of so much of the psalm has provided widely divergent views. Modern commentators have helped by focussing attention on the problems which can so easily be evaded. In addition to commentaries there is the stimulating study by Walter Beyerlin, *We are like Dreamers*,[1] which accurately points to these problems and which arrives at a conclusion different from previous studies.

The problems of the psalm are various, but include the following:

1. The opening clause, *shub 'eth sheḇith tsiyon*, can be interpreted in different ways. Is this a reference to the return from the captivity of exile, or does it refer more generally to the restored fortunes of Zion?
2. The expression "we were like dreamers" is unusual and has produced varied interpretations.
3. The time reference of several of the verbs is problematic, especially the Hebrew imperfects in vs. 2.
4. The contrast between vss. 1-3, with captivity a past condition of the people, and vss. 4-6 with an appeal for further restoration, has often been regarded as a major obstacle.
5. The literary form of the psalm is difficult to categorize.

It will be best to outline briefly Beyerlin's solutions to some of these problems. He begins by tackling the phrase "we were like dreamers", and argues that it can only refer to a dream whilst asleep. Those who experience such a dream are being told *beforehand* what God intends to do. This phrase is the hinge linking both sections of the psalm, because

---

what is foreseen in the dream is still to come and prompts the prayer of vs. 4, "Restore our fortunes". Beyerlin does not think the psalm has liturgical features, but was one recited in the communal cult. He takes the opening phrase to refer to restored fortunes, and suggests that the Gentiles still mock the unfortunate community. Hence he dates the psalm from the period of the exile, and gives its provenance as southern Israel.

Some aspects of Beyerlin's presentation have similarities with previous discussions. Other aspects are entirely new. All in all it prompts another look at some of the problems and especially an assessment of his proposed solutions.

1. THE CAPTIVITY OF ZION

The opening words of the psalm contain difficulties. The verb *shub,* "return", is normally intransitive in the Qal, but here and in another 16 places in the Old Testament it does have an object. Usually the expression is *shub 'eth shebuth*, "restore the captivity", as in vs. 4 of this very psalm.

But the object of the verb in vs. 1 is the word *shiba,* not *shebuth* or the variant *shebith*. Various explanations have been given of it.

1. As some manuscripts do have *shebuth* here it could be a textual corruption. The LXX rendering *aichmalosia* would lend some support for this.

2. Many editors and commentators read instead *shebuth*, in agreement with the Massoretic vocalisation of the consonantal text in vs. 4.

3. Dahood[2] draws attention to the Aramaic expression in the Sefire inscriptions "they restored the fortunes of my father's house". From this he proceeds to argue correctly that the word here is not a derivative from *shaba,* "go into captivity", but from *shub,* "return". Many older commentators also rightly saw that the noun was a derivative of the verb to return (e.g., Perowne, Alexander, Hengstenberg), though their explanation of the phrase did not follow a common pattern.

One can question whether Dahood's approach is satisfactory here in Ps. 126.1, and whether the expression has to be rendered "restored the fortunes of Zion" on the basis of the comparison with the Aramaic. Even the phrase *shub shebuth* can have this general meaning within the Old Testament. The only other occurence of *shiba* in biblical Hebrew is in 2 Samuel 19:33. Speaking of Barzillai providing for David, the text says that he did it *beshibatho bemahanayim*. Most editors emend the text here to read *beshibto*, "while he stayed". But David had already been at Mahanaim (cf. 2 Sam. 17:24, 27), and it makes perfectly good sense to regard *shiba* as a derivative of *shub* and thus to render, "when he returned to Mahanaim".

Taking the expression as a cognate accusative in Psalm 126:1 it is quite feasible to translate, "When the Lord returned (or restored) Zion". That this restoration was something more than mere general restoration of fortunes seems implied by the psalm as a whole. The joy is excessive for anything other than a major happening (see vss. 2, 3, 5, 6), while the use of *higdil,* "to do wonderful things", is important. It points to a major event which demonstrated God's power. The opening phrase of vs. 3, *higdil yhwh lacasoth,* only occurs here and in Joel 2:20, 21 in the Old Testament. This is important, as there are significant connections in

thought and language between Psalm 126 and the book of Joel. These include references to the return (Ps. 126:1, 4// Joel 3:1), Zion (Ps. 126:1// Joel 2:23), the great things the LORD has done for his people (Ps. 126:2, 3// Joel 2:20, 21), rejoicing (Ps. 126:3// Joel 2:21, 23), the watercourses (Ps. 126:4// Joel 3:18) and to harvest (Ps. 126:5, 6//Joel 3:13).

The date of Joel cannot be determined with precision, but Myers' arguments for a date around the period of Haggai and Zechariah (520 B.C.) seem best to fit the evidence.[3] Whatever the exact relationship between Joel and Psalm 126, the similarities in thought and general time of composition are striking. The specific phrase which occurs only in Joel and the psalm is used by the prophet to describe a very dramatic intervention of God on behalf of his people. Its use in the psalm also suggests an event as dramatic as the return from exile. In Isaiah 28:29 the Hiphil forms of the roots *gdl* and *pl'* occur in parallelism. If the connotations of God's marvellous acts such as the Exodus, as expressed frequently by the root *pl'*, carried over to the Hiphil form of the root *gdl*, then the phrase may well have suggested an event as magnificent as a second exodus.

A word should be added regarding the use of the term "Zion". The syntax precludes "Zion" being the indirect object of the verb ("to Zion"). What is remarkable is that it is the return *of Zion* which is described. Clearly the closest parallels occur in Isaiah 49-52, where the exiles in Babylon are referred to as "Zion" (Isa. 49:14; 51:3), or as "the captive daughter of Zion" (Isa. 52:1, 2, 12). In the Apocrypha the term is likewise used of the captive people of Judah (cf. 2 Esdras 2:40; 3:2, 31). The term was extended from the literal mount Zion to embrace the concept of devoted worshippers of the LORD, whether they were doing so on that very site or even far off in exile.

2. THE DREAMERS

The last clause in vs. 1 also has its problems, as the versions testify. The LXX has "as those who are comforted", and the Syriac "as those who rejoice". The Targum has "like sick people who are cured", which has received support from the scribe at Qumran responsible for the manuscript 11QPs^a.[4] That manuscript has the reading *khlwmym*, "like those who have been healed". The NEB seems to follow the Qumran scribe in rendering "like men who had found new health". Dahood desires to find a different solution because he claims the words have "never been successfully fitted into the content of the verse".[5] He proceeds to suggest either reading the consonants as *khl mym*, "like the sands of the waters", or as *khlm ym*, "like the sands of the sea" (with enclitic mem in a construct chain).[6] While the latter expression is a common biblical one it never occurs elsewhere with an enclitic mem, and also the idea is alien to the present context.

Beyerlin has argued strongly that the expression must refer to those who dream *while asleep*, and that the message so received concerns the future.[7] Thus this opening verse is not descriptive of past experience, but of future experience. He claims that we must set aside modern English or German expressions which suggest that the returning exiles were left amazed as if they were dreaming.

It is strange, though, that Beyerlin *begins* by appeal to modern English and German dictionaries. He claims from discussion of the usage in these languages that "only attempts at interpretation can be seriously considered, which interpret the comparison with dreamers, as dreamers in sleep", but then immediately points out that this evidence needs counterproof from within the Old Testament![8] One could easily argue that English and German have the expression "like dreamers" and use it of those *awake* because of a biblical idiom and idea which has penetrated these languages.

There can be no doubt that Beyerlin is correct when he asserts that in biblical Hebrew dreaming is usually used of those who dream during sleep or slumber.[9] But the major difficulty with his view is simply that the text here says not they "were dreamers" but "like dreamers". There is no textual evidence to support the deletion of the preposition. Rather the Hebrew manuscript evidence and also all the ancient versions indicate its presence. This is the only occurrence of the participle of this verb in the Old Testament with the preposition ke, and it is hard to evade the force of it. The indication is that when the LORD restored Zion, they were as if dreaming. It expresses a state of mind comparable to dreaming in sleep, but not of actual sleep with an accompanying dream. It is different from "we were rejoicing" in vs. 3, which describes reality.

This still leaves an ambiguity. The exiles could be viewed as dreaming while in exile of what God was going to do for them. This would mean that when the restoration commenced there were some at least who were conjuring up visions of a return to their own land. They had earlier prophecies to stimulate them, as well as those of their fellow exile Ezekiel.

Alternately, the expression could relate to the amazement with which the returning exiles regarded their restoration. This explanation is probably preferable. They had regarded themselves as dead (Ezek. 37:1-13) but the restoration left them with a sense of wonder at God's action. The comparison with dreamers is not at all inconsistent with the hilarity with which they greeted the restoration (vss. 2, 3, 6). There may also be present the idea, as Kimchi suggested, that the distress of the exile passed away as a dream because of this abounding joy.

3.THE TIME REFERENCE OF THE VERBS IN VSS. 1-3

Another important consideration is the time reference of the verbs in the first half of the psalm. This is especially so because Beyerlin argues that the opening clause is future in reference ("When the LORD restores Zion"), followed by a parenthesis ("we were like dreamers"). Of this latter phrase he says that it "interrupts the future context and therefore is logically parenthetical".[10] That parentheses do occur is not in dispute, but it seems very forced to suggest that this is an example of one. Rather his assertion that the verb *hayinu* refers to the present in this context has to be challenged, and more particularly his assertion that the verbs in vs. 2 are future in orientation.

The main question in vs. 2 is whether the two verbs which are imperfect in form refer to the future. Both of these verbs are preceded by the particle *'az*, "then". Beyerlin adopts the position that the double use of this particle followed by the imperfects refers to future time ("when the LORD restores the fortunes of Zion . . . then our mouth is filled . . . and then they say").

This position is not nearly as certain as he suggests. Firstly, the Hebrew verbal system is not primarily concerned with time but rather with *aspect*. Hence it may well be that on occasions the imperfect may require to be translated by an English past tense, especially past continuous. Secondly, there is clear evidence that Hebrew has a combination of *yqtl* forms, one denoting the imperfect while the other,\ corresponding to the Accadian preterite *iqtul* is virtually the equivalent of the *qtl* forms. The waw consecutive forms in Hebrew are to be explained as constructions connected with the Accadian pattern, but the occurrence of *yqtl* forms denoting the past is also wide-spread especially in poetical passages.[11] A convenient listing of suggested passages in the Psalter where a seeming imperfect form refers to past time is given in "The Grammar of the Psalter" by Dahood and Penar.[12] This is not a new discovery, but older grammarians and commentators were conscious of the need to translate imperfect forms as referring to past time.[13] In fact, it is notable how perceptive older writers were, and modern linguistic knowledge has confirmed and explained their observations. The phenomenon occurs less rarely in biblical prose[14], but even in a causal clause the imperfect can occur in reference to past time.[15] In poetic passages there are many examples of a *yqtl* form which must be translated by an English past tense.

One of the most helpful recent discussions on the translation of the tenses in Hebrew poetry is that by P. C. Craigie. After discussion of the problem he pertinently concludes:

> From the kind of evidence summarized above, it is evident that there can be no simple rule of thumb with respect to the appropriate English tense which may be indicated by the forms of the Hebrew verb. In practice, the context is the principle guide to determining the most appropriate translation, but difficulties arise precisely because context, in non-historical poetic texts (which is the case with respect to the majority of the psalms), may leave room for considerable ambiguity and uncertainty.[16]

In this psalter passage we have two imperfects in vs. 2 both following the particle "then". Beyerlin compares the usage here to the grammar of Proverbs 1:27f. and Job 33:15f., though both of these passages present difficulties which render their evidence less than cogent. He argues that following the future reference in the opening clause of vs. 1 in Psalm 126 the sequence is not completed until "then" is followed by imperfects referring to the future. The evidence is not just as strong as Beyerlin may suppose, as imperfects following "then" quite often refer to *past* time.[17] As he himself recognises,[18] time references depend largely on the context. This view is emphatically underscored by Craigie, who says that aspect and context have to be our principal guides in translating verbs in Hebrew poetry.[19] The most obvious way to undertake the opening clause of vs. 1 is to the past, while the repeated *hayinu* (vss. 1 and 3) are also best taken as past. If present time was intended the pronoun plus the participle would have been more appropriate. Also, in the syntax of the opening verses the repeated *higdil* in vss. 2 and 3 best refers to what was reported of God's action in restoring the people, so that the same testimony was declared both among the surrounding Gentile nations (vs. 2) and within Israel (vs. 3).

On balance it seems best to disallow Beyerlin's thesis and to accept that the opening verses of the psalm are describing a past action in which God restored his people. Then, as a consequence, their mouths were filled with laughter, and proclamation of the fact was made among the Gentiles. If this view is maintained then we are left with the contrast between the two halves of the psalm which Beyerlin's argument denies.

4. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN VS. 1 AND VS. 4

Within the psalm itself there is no precise identification of the events to which it refers. "Events" seems demanded, for the contrast between the opening and vs. 4 appears to require at least a partial restoration with an appeal for further restoration. The contrast is between "When the LORD restored Zion" (vs. 1) and the prayer of vs. 4 "Restore, O LORD, our captivity".

There are many similarities between this psalm and Psalm 85. Various ideas are in common (e.g. restoration, rejoicing, the earth producing its crops), but also the contrast between previous blessing and restoration and the subsequent appeal for further restoration (vss. 1 and 4) is striking. Here in Psalm 126 the appeal is for another return to take place. Dahood's attempt to relate vs. 4 to the past by appeal to Phoenician grammar ("he returned") carries little weight, as one would need to show several cases of the form he proposed in order to argue convincingly for its existence in the Old Testament.

To which events then does the psalm point? The opening verse could refer to the initial return from exile following Cyrus' decree of 537 B.C. When the foundation of the Temple was laid, some who had seen the former Temple wept, but others shouted for joy. The intermingling of weeping and joy could be heard far away (Ezra 3:12f.). That joy was in marked contrast to the desolate grief of the exilic condition (Ps. 137). Opposition soon arose and the building work was suspended. The latter part of the psalm could refer to this discouraging period between the cessation of the building programme and the resumption through the efforts of Haggai and Zechariah in 520 B.C.

It may well be, however, that verses 2 and 3 demand an event somewhat more distant in time, and hence it could be that the psalm dates from just prior to the period of Ezra and Nehemiah in the following century. The memory would have been there of God's restoration of the first wave of the exiles, and the prayer is offered in vs. 4 that an even fuller restoration would take place. If the words "the LORD has done great things" (vss. 2, 3) are derived from the book of Joel, then some additional weight may be given to the later date.

The second part of vs. 4 compares the return to a well-known phenomenon — streams in the Negev. The comparison seems to be used for two reasons:

1. The suddenness of the appearance of these gushing streams is used as an illustration of the suddenness with which the further return will take place.

2. The result of the rain and the overflowing streams is that previously barren places will bring forth a harvest. The psalmist's prayer is that a like phenomenon will occur when God brings about even fuller restoration of Israel.

Lest it be thought that the miraculous intervention of God on behalf of his people would solve all their problems, vss. 5 and 6 point to another aspect. Sudden restoration would be followed by the slow and tedious work of re-settlement in the land. Laborious work had to precede joyful harvesting.

CONCLUSION

While studies such as Beyerlin's stimulate re-assessment of earlier discussions, yet they have their own weaknesses. Other questions which he raises have not been taken up in this present discussion, such as the reference to the proclamation among the Gentiles and the overall form of the psalm. Within such a short psalm there are a cluster of problems, but clarification of these will only come with persistent study and discussion. Some of the surest progress in biblical studies comes from detailed examination of small portions of the text. For the present we are left with this short psalm rejoicing in the wonder of God's mighty act in fulfilling his promise to bring his people home, with the prayer for even fuller manifestation of his restoring grace.

ALLAN M. HARMAN.

1. W. Beyerlin, *We are Like Dreamers* (T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1982). Beyerlin's book in its English format is marred by numerous typographical errors. Also, the system of transliteration employed is still the Continental one.

2. M. Dahood, *Psalms III* (Anchor Bible), p. 218. For the Sefire text see J. C. L. Gibson, *Syrian Semitic Inscriptions* 11 (Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 50.

3. *ZAW* 74 (1962), pp. 177-195.

4. See. J. A. Sanders, *The Psalm Scroll of Qumran Cave II*, p. 25; J. Strugnell, "A Note on Ps. CXXVI", *JTS* N. S. 7 (1956), pp. 239-243; A. A. Anderson, *The Psalms* (The New Century Bible Commentary) 11, p. 864.

5. Dahood, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 219 Beyerlin's criticism (p. 14) is scarcely an adequate discussion of Dahood's suggestion. The whole question of enclitic mem, plus exegesis of the context within the psalm, is necessary to disallow this rendering.

7. Beyerlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-23.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 16f.

9. Of the biblical occurrences of the Hebrew verb "to dream", Genesis 37:5-10 and Judges 7:13 do not mention night or sleep, but one would have to agree that it would be consistent to regard them as dreams during sleep.

10. Beyerlin, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

11. For convenient short summaries of this survival in Hebrew of two different forms both denoting the completed action see G. R. Driver's note in the Appendix to J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar of Classical Hebrew* 2nd Ed., p. 253; A. B. Davidson/J. Mauchline, *An Introductory Hebrew Grammar*, pp. 95 and 195.

12. Dahood, *op.cit.*, pp. 417-419.

13. *GKC* # 107b; S. R. Driver, *Hebrew Tenses*, p. 37f.

14. Cf. Exod. 15:1, "then Moses sang" and Num. 21:17, "then Israel sang", both using the same imperfect form.

15. 1 Kings 21:6, "because I said". Cf. the Mesha inscription, line 5, "for Chemosh was angry", Gibson, *op. cit.*, I, p. 74.

16. P. C. Craigie, "Excursus II: The Translation of Tenses in Hebrew Poetry", *Psalms 1-50* (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 19), p. 111.

17. *GKC* # 107c; *BDB* sub *'az* 1. a.

18. Beyerlin, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

19. Craigie, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

ATLA**S**erials

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may priut, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the eopyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.