

'Turning' in the Psalms: With Special Reference to Psalm 90:13

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Greeting

I must express my thanks to Professor John Barton and Professor Susan Gillingham, as well as the Oxford Psalms Conference, for the opportunity to attend. Thanks to many good teachers, I have learned that when approaching the academic study of scripture, it is best not to begin by looking for answers first, but rather by seeking to ask good questions. I am asking better questions as a result of this conference, and I thank you all. I am surprised and grateful for the chance to speak with you briefly about my area of interest: the nature of the divine/human relationship in the Psalms, as reflected in terms usually translated as “turn.” These include: שׁוּב, נָטָה, סוּר, הִפָּךְ, פָּנָה, סוּג, and a related term, נָחַם. My research is in the early stages, and I look forward to feedback, which will be valuable for my future research.

Introduction

The Psalms capture more vividly than most biblical books the complex dialogue between the human and the divine. And one of the more perplexing questions to be encountered in the Psalms is; what happens when one partner lets the other down? What must be done to make things right again? Often in the Psalms the language used to describe this “making right” of things includes terms like those I just mentioned. While they are all interesting and will warrant further study on my part, I wanted to focus for this presentation on two specifically; שׁוּב and נָחַם.

שוב and נחם in the Psalms

שוב occurs sixty-nine times in the Psalms. Forty-two of these describe some aspect of the divine/human relationship, whether referring to God or to humans. As might be expected, the English renderings of these vary widely depending on the context of each occurrence.¹

נחם appears twelve times,² usually rendered as “comfort” with one notable exception: 110:4; “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind.” But I shall now propose to you another instance in which this term might be understood as a request for God to change God’s mind—Psalm 90:13.³

A Small Case Study: Psalm 90.13

In Psalm 90:13, two of the terms I have just mentioned, שוב and נחם, appear together—this is the only time in the Psalter that they do so. Psalm 90, the only psalm attributed by its editorial superscription to Moses, begins with a grand assertion of God’s omnipotence (v.1-4), then continues in a long meditation on the brevity and fragility of human life (v. 5-12). But then, in verse 13, the psalm turns into a formulaic lament and a prayer for restoration: “Turn, (שובה) O LORD! How long? Have compassion/change your mind (הנחם) on/concerning your servants!” There is a similar prayer in the story of Moses, found in Exodus 32:12; “Turn (שוב) from your

¹ In the NRSV, for example, renderings vary from the more literal “turn,” (6:5, 22:28, 85:9, 90:13, 119:59, 79) “return,” (51:15, 94:15) “turn away,” (106:23, 132:10) “turn back,” (89:44, 90:3, 132:11) and “turn again” (80:15) to the more figurative “restore,” (14:7, 23:3, 51:14, 53:7, 60:2-3, 80:4, 8, and 20, 85:2, 4 and 5, 126:1, 4) “revive” (71:20, 85:7), “repay,” (28:4, 54:7, 94:23) “recompense,” (18:20, 25) “bring back,” (68:23) “hold back,” (74:11) “restrain,” (78:38), “rescue” (35:17) “give” (94:2), “depart” (7:13) and in a couple of instances, “repent” (7:13, 78:34).

² Psalm 23:4, 69:21, 71:21, 77:3, 86:17, 90:13, 106:45, 110:4, 119:52, 76, and 82, 135:14.

³ Other passages which may warrant a second look in this regard: 106.45 (“For their sake he remembered his covenant, and showed compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love”), and 135.14 (“For the LORD will vindicate his people, and have compassion on his servants”).

fierce wrath; change your mind (הִנָּחֵם) and do not bring disaster on your people.”⁴ It is at this key point in the Exodus narrative that Moses convinces God to relent of the judgment about to be meted out on the Hebrews.

Both terms occur in the same form in both passages: שׁוּב in the *qal* imperative masculine singular (though the psalmist adds a paragogic *heh*) and הִנָּחֵם in the *niphal* imperative masculine singular. This specific form of נָחַם occurs in the Hebrew Bible only in these two verses.

These verbs also appear together in Jeremiah 18:7-10. In the next few minutes, I would like to discuss Psalm 90:13 in light of these passages: Exodus 32:12 and Jeremiah 18:7-10, in order to begin the discussion of the significance of this language in the Psalter, both within the canon and in continuing interpretation.

Exodus 32:12

Commentators have long noted the self-contained structure of Exodus 32-34.⁵ And it is clear from its final canonical form that, from a constructive perspective, this particular section of Exodus, with its focus on Israel’s unfaithfulness and God’s mercy (with a little convincing by Moses) found continuing resonance with the Jewish people. After all, it is this narrative that has

⁴ Other than this verse, the two terms are combined in Exodus only in 13:17; “When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, ‘If the people face war, they may change their minds (יִנָּחֵם) and return (שׁוּבוּ) to Egypt.’” (NRSV/BHT)

⁵ J. I. Durham, *Exodus* (vol. 3 of *Word Biblical Commentary*; ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, John D. W. Watts; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 417; R. W. L. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32-34* (JSOTSup 22; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 43. Moberly discusses the complex redactional web of Ex. 32-34 particularly in pp. 182-186, concluding that “the attempt to locate the final redactor of Ex. 32-34, must be regarded as tentative” (186).

given rise to the Talmudic concept of the thirteen attributes of God; a development of Exodus 34:6-7.⁶ So it is not altogether surprising that we find this clear semantic link in Psalm 90.⁷

What is interesting to note, however, is the setting and interpretation. In the narrative context of Exodus, the terms שׁוּב and נָחַם are used in a situation in which there is clear transgression—the Hebrews have made an idol, have worshipped it in place of YHWH, and thus have angered God to the point that God desires to destroy them (Ex. 32:1-6). Moses intercedes for them, immediately and boldly, with the result that God, immediately and completely, changes God’s mind. The people have been unfaithful, Moses has interceded, God has relented, and all, for the moment, is well; though the relationship between God’s relenting in 32:14 and God’s judgment in 32:35 has long puzzled interpreters.⁸

But how does changing historical circumstance affect the relationship between God and God’s people? What happens when the relationship is in danger of collapsing again due to the threat of new rebellion? Jeremiah addresses these questions.

Jeremiah 18:7-10

Jeremiah leads the prophetic books in its use of שׁוּב.⁹ Overwhelmingly in Jeremiah, it is used to describe human responsibility in the covenant relationship—humans, who have disobeyed God and continue to do so, must “turn,” or repent, so that God might be merciful to them and remove the impending threat of destruction. Like the Hebrews in the foothills of Mount Sinai, the Israelites have rebelled. But Jeremiah is more specific in delineating the terms of the relationship

⁶ Benno Jacob, translated by Walter Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (Hoboken: KTAV, 1992), 985-6.

⁷ I will discuss further Psalm 90’s likely post-exilic date of composition below.

⁸ William J. Urbrock has noted this pattern in the wilderness narratives. See “Psalm 90: Moses, Mortality, and... the Morning,” *CurTM* 25:1 (1998), 26-29. For the ambiguity of 32:35, see Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 56-57.

⁹ H. Fabry, “שׁוּב,” *TDOT* 14: 461-522.

between God and the Israelites. While Moses' plea invokes *God's* responsibility: God's oath to the patriarchs to make their offspring as numerous as the stars in heaven, and God's reputation among the nations (Ex. 32:11-14), Jeremiah's focus is on the *people's* responsibility to remain faithful.

The terms of this relationship are spelled out clearly in Jeremiah 18:7-10, as Walter Moberly has pointed out. Just following the well-known and evocative passage describing the potter at the wheel, who destroys a bit of clay that is not cooperating and remakes it "as seems good to him" (vv.1-6), God speaks via the prophet:

At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns (שב) from its evil, I will change my mind (נהמת) about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind (נהמת) about the good that I had intended to do to it. (v. 7-10, NRSV/BHS)¹⁰

For Jeremiah, the matter is simple, at least in this text—faithfulness brings blessing, unfaithfulness brings destruction, and repentance brings hope for mercy.¹¹ As Moberly discusses in his book *Prophecy and Discernment*, God's exercising of נהם is directly related to, perhaps even dependent upon, human response; what Moberly calls "a striking formulation of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility."¹² Later, Moberly says; "Prophetic speech is response-seeking speech—in the first instance the purpose of pronouncing impending disaster is that the sinful respond by turning to God, but there is also the further

¹⁰ Unlike in the Psalms (where the terms are combined only in 90:13), these terms occur together several times in Jeremiah; see also 4:28, 8:6, 26:3, 31:19, and 42:10.

¹¹ Though I am aware the situation is more complex when the whole of Jeremiah is in view, in this particular text, the relationship seems pretty straightforward.

¹² R.W.L. Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment* (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine 14; Cambridge: CUP, 2006), 51.

prospect that God *may then respond* by withholding the disaster.” (italics mine)¹³ For Jeremiah, at least in this particular text, there is still hope...all the people need to do is repent, and God may yet relent. But for the psalmist, writing Psalm 90 in exile, things are not so simple.

Psalm 90:13

The literary superscription of this psalm links it to Moses; and one implication of this is that Psalm 90 can be read as a poetic meditation on Moses’ Exodus prayer.¹⁴ While Exodus 32 is concerned with a specific event at the birth of the Hebrew nation, and Jeremiah is concerned with a fully formed nation about to be taken captive, Psalm 90 is written in a context in which all this is past history; Israel is no longer held by the Israelites, and the temple is in ruins. The covenant is under threat, and God, apparently, is silent.

Thus, the plea of v. 13 is all the more poignant: “Turn, O LORD! How long?! Change your mind concerning your people!” The psalmist places the onus squarely on God, for an entirely different reason than in the earlier texts—God is silent. God has not rescued. God is not changing God’s mind.

Unlike Ex. 32:12, which is a request for an immediate act of mercy after a recent act of unfaithfulness, and Jer. 18:7-10, which is a statement of what could happen should the people turn to God after prolonged unfaithfulness, Psalm 90:13 is a request for God to show mercy after

¹³ Ibid., 52. Moberly cites examples in which God changes God’s mind for the benefit of the Israelites (Jon. 3.9-10, 26.19) and when God, angered by their faithlessness, changes God’s mind to their detriment (1 Sam. 2.30; 15.11, 35).

¹⁴ M. E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (vol. 20 of *Word Biblical Commentary*; ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, John D. W. Watts; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 438-9. Tate engages in a helpful summary of recent views by scholars such as Von Rad, Wellhausen, Mowinckel, and Vawter in his support of a post-exilic date. More recently, John Goldingay has also supported this view; see John Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150* (vol. 3 of *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms*; ed. Tremper Longman III; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 24.

a prolonged period of suffering, interpreted by the psalmist as God's wrath (v. 11). Thus, as Richard J. Clifford has suggested, vv. 12-13 may be read as a request to know the specific end of God's extended period of apparent silence, so that God's people "might submit in faith to the divine chastisement while preserving a lively hope in God."¹⁵

But why the connection to Moses in the first place? How did this psalm come to receive the superscription it has been given; "a prayer of Moses, the man of God" (90:1)? Clearly, a plausible answer to this question may lie in the two key verbs we have been discussing: שׁוּב and נָחַם.

In 1971, Brevard Childs noted the importance of the Davidic psalm titles in providing continuing interpretive significance to the worshipping community of Israel, which transcended any particular historical context.¹⁶ I would like to suggest that the appearance of שׁוּב and נָחַם in Psalm 90:13 may have provided the "trigger" for an editor/compiler to refer back to Exodus 32:12—to provide an interpretive context for the psalm in its continuing usage, functioning in much the same way that the Davidic psalm titles do. Thus, as has been said of the Davidic psalm titles, the ascription of this psalm to Moses was midrashic. Though interpreted differently, the Exodus narrative, and particularly the Mt. Sinai episode of idolatry, intercession, and forgiveness, found continuing relevance in a very different literary and historical setting.

Christopher Seitz has suggested that Book IV of the Psalter, with its shift in emphasis to Moses, shifts also the perspective of the remaining Psalter to God's kingship, not David's. Seitz also argues regarding Psalm 90 that "the wrath Israel experiences has to do with their iniquities and

¹⁵ Richard J. Clifford, "What Does the Psalmist Ask for in Psalms 39:5 and 90:12?" *JBL* 119:1 (2000), 59-66.

¹⁶ Brevard S. Childs, "Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis," *JSS* 16:2 (1971), 137-150.

secret sins, and not primarily with the impotence of God or a failure to honor a covenant made with David (Ps. 90:8).”¹⁷ However, in my view, such a description of the point of this prayer does not fully engage with the pathos of psalms 88 and 89:38-f., nor with the plea of v. 15: “Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.” There is more going on here than a simple confession of sin and request for forgiveness. The psalmist is requesting, perhaps demanding, that *God* relent. In the end, it is not the psalmist’s sin which is the focus of this lament—it is God’s silence.

In Psalm 90:13, the psalmist is concerned with these questions: what happens if God does not respond according to the promise? If human beings are expected to “turn,” then what is God’s responsibility in this relationship?¹⁸ If the Exodus and Jeremiah texts are mainly concerned with God’s action (to relent, either because of God’s own nature, or because of the people’s repentance), is Psalm 90:13 concerned with God’s inaction? Is the psalmist making what Walter Jens has called “an appeal in darkness;”¹⁹ an appeal, nevertheless, which “refuses to believe that God would not live up to his name as the refuge of his people,” as Richard J. Clifford has said?²⁰ In his commentary on the Psalms, Augustine wrote that in verse 13 the psalmist is expressing “prayerful righteousness, not indignant impatience.”²¹ Is it not possible that the psalmist could be expressing not just one or the other, but both?

¹⁷ Christopher Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 162.

¹⁸ For other engagements with these questions, see for example Psalm 10, 13, 22, 44, 60, 74, 77, 79, 80, 82, 85, 88, and 89.

¹⁹ Walter Jens, 1995, “Psalm 90: On Transience,” *LQ* 9:2 (1995):177-189.

²⁰ Richard J. Clifford, “Psalm 90: Wisdom Meditation or Communal Lament?” p. 190-205 in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, Edited by Peter Flint and Patrick D. Miller, Jr, vol 99 of *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 205.

²¹ John E. Rotelle, OSA, editor, Maria Boulding, OSB, translator, *Expositions of the Psalms*, vol. III/18 of *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2002), 311.