

KING TRIUMPHANT: A RHETORICAL STUDY OF PSALMS 20 AND 21

by

J. KENNETH KUNTZ

The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, 52242

Initially, three assertions about Psalms 20 and 21 may be made with some confidence. First, as royal psalms they have not received the extent of scholarly attention that might reasonably be expected. At least they have been outdistanced by studies on Psalms 2, 18, and 110, just to mention three. Second, Psalms 20 and 21 manifest not a few affinities in content and form. Their placement in the Psalter is assuredly not accidental. Third, no scholarly consensus has been reached regarding their function. Nor is it expected that such consensus will be secured very soon.

Three questions will be addressed in this essay. First, what should be affirmed regarding the basic content and function of these two compositions? Second, what are the main configurations of their strophic structure? Third, as artful poems, how is their rhetorical achievement to be spelled out?

A working English translation follows:

20:1 To the choirmaster. A psalm of David.

I. *Petition of the people* (vv. 2-6)

- 2 May Yahweh answer you in the day of trouble!
 may the name of the God of Jacob protect you!
- 3 May he send you help from the sanctuary,
 and from Zion may he support you!
- 4 May he remember all your meal offerings,
 and your burnt sacrifices may he accept.
- 5 May he grant you your heart's desire,
 and your every plan may he fulfill.

Refrain 6 May we shout for joy in your victory,
 and in the name of our God lift the banner.
 May Yahweh fulfill all your desires.

II. *Oracular assurance of divine help and regal victory* (vv. 7-10)

- 7 Now I know that Yahweh will give victory to his anointed;
 He will answer him from his holy heaven
 with mighty victories of his right hand.
 8 Some [call] on chariots and some on horses,
 but we call on the name of Yahweh our God.
 9 They collapse and fall,
 but we stand erect and gather strength.

Refrain 10 O Yahweh, grant victory to the king,
 and answer us when we call.

21:1 To the choirmaster. A psalm of David.

I. *Thankful praise for Yahweh's favor toward the king* (vv. 2-8)

- 2 O Yahweh, in thy strength the king rejoices;
 and in thy victory how greatly he exults!
 3 The desire of his heart thou hast granted him,
 and the request of his lips thou hast not withheld.
 4 For thou didst meet him with goodly blessings,
 thou didst place on his head a crown of pure gold.
 5 Life he asked of thee; thou didst grant it to him,
 length of days for ever and ever.
 6 Great is his glory in thy victory;
 majesty and splendor thou didst confer upon him.
 7 For thou hast bestowed blessings on him forever;
 thou hast gladdened him with the joy of thy presence.

Refrain 8 For the king trusts in Yahweh;
 and through the favor of the Most High he will not be
 shaken.

II. *Anticipation of future regal victory* (vv. 9-14)

- 9 Your hand will reach all your enemies;
 your right hand will reach your foes.
 10 You will set them ablaze like a furnace at your coming.
 In his anger Yahweh will swallow them up,
 and his fire will consume them.
 11 Their offspring you will destroy from the earth,
 and their posterity from among men.
 12 For they intended evil against you,
 they have devised plots, they will not succeed.
 13 For you will put them to flight;
 with your bows you will aim at their faces.

Refrain 14 Be exalted, O Yahweh, in thy strength!
 We will sing and praise thy might.

*BASIC CONTENT AND FUNCTION**Psalm 20*

Our first composition opens with second-person speech addressed to the king which imparts the people's blessing wish in his behalf (vv. 2–6). Assuming that a day of trouble is imminent, the people voices its desire that Yahweh will respond to the king's cry and dispatch help from the sanctuary. It is hoped that the king's sacrifice, plans, and petitions will be acceptable to the deity in order that salvation might be realized for both himself and his people. The psalmist then refers to the king in the third person with words which convey a clear-cut confidence that the salvation so fervently sought will be actualized (vv. 7–9). Here it is affirmed that Yahweh has in fact granted salvation to his anointed. Indeed, through impressive victories that will ensue, the king will come to know that his cry for help has been divinely heard. Whereas those who trust in their own resources are doomed to fail, for having invoked the divine name and made this the object of their trust, the king and his people will taste triumph. In the final bicolon of this composition (v. 10), the psalmist expresses the prayer of his people anew—'O Yahweh, grant victory to the king, and answer us when we call.' The psalmist thereby shows himself to be motivated by the same concern that was his at the outset of his composition.

From the initial wording of v. 7 ('Now I know . . .'), we may infer that this psalm was linked with some kind of ritual ceremony. Presumably, after v. 6 a concrete indication of Yahweh's willingness to save was offered to the worshipers assembled. Perhaps the psalmist himself exercised a cultic ministerial function as an authoritative prophet-priest. In any event, a cultic choir, the worshiping congregation in its entirety, and an individual officiant seized by oracular inspiration all might have played a role in the ritualistic realization of this composition.

In the judgment of Gunkel (1933, p. 142), the *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 20 is easily discernible. It involved a day of prayerful preparation for battle. Requisite sacrifices have been presented by the priests on behalf of the Judean king in question, and appropriate prayers have been offered. Mowinckel (1962, I, p. 225) concurs with Gunkel's judgment, claiming that here is "a national psalm of intercession for the King before he goes to war." A host of scholars has approached Psalm 20 in like manner.¹ Indeed, as expressed by Johnson (1951, p. 179), Psalm 20

1. See *inter alios* Kirkpatrick (1902, p. 106); Briggs (1906, p. 176); Welch (1925, p. 408); Bittenwieser (1938, p. 92); Oesterley (1939, p. 171); Leslie (1949, p. 264); Johnson (1951,

“obviously reflects an attempt to secure Yahweh’s assurance of success prior to a king’s departure for the battlefield.”

Nevertheless, to some critics the matter was far from obvious. Thus a counter position emerged which regarded the psalm as part of a festal liturgy that enjoyed periodic celebration within the Judean community. In Duhm’s analysis (1922, p. 86), Psalm 20 was associated with the king’s enthronement, and in Schmidt’s thinking (1927, p. 39), it was seated in an annual festival of Yahweh’s own kingship. As one who basically concurs with Schmidt’s assessment, Weiser (1962, p. 206) argues that the poem is “couched in too general terms and is also too colorless, its sentiments are developed on lines which are too composed and too measured, to make the situation of a mobilization plausible.” Weiser avers that the more likely setting was not frantic warfare, but a new year festival, whereby the celebration of Yahweh’s kingship and the enthronement of a new king were brought into meaningful juxtaposition. Noting that passion and urgency are not a part of Psalm 20, Eaton (1986, p. 117) casts his vote with Schmidt and Weiser. Somewhat tentatively, Eaton remarks that this psalm “seems to add to the evidence that there were rites of inauguration or renewal of kingship with a highly dramatic character, in particular as portraying warfare.” This more ritualistic approach is likewise favored by Crim (1962, p. 85) who dismisses the interpretation presupposing regal prayer before actual warfare as “the older view.”

Several Psalms commentators have remained open on the issue. For its similarity of content with Psalm 2, Kraus (1961, p. 163) is attracted to Duhm’s assessment of Psalm 20; yet given a certain parallel of circumstance between Psalms 18 and 20, Kraus also approves the interpretation of Gunkel. Deissler (1963, p. 81) is equally willing to associate Psalm 20 with either a *Thronbesteigungsfeier* or a *Bittgottesdienst*. Rogerson and McKay (1977, pp. 90–91) posit two liturgical settings for Psalm 20 with comparable enthusiasm, one reflecting the approach of Duhm, and the other that of Gunkel. Moreover, Craigie (1983, p. 185) proposes “a special service prior to the departure of the king and his army for a battle or military campaign” as the more probable liturgical appropriation of this poem, yet he admits that in the course of time, Psalm 20 might have “passed into general liturgical usage and lost its particular associations with the royal ritual preceding a military campaign.”

p. 168); Kissane (1953, p. 88); Taylor (1955, p. 108); Dahood (1965, I, p. 127); Rowley (1967, p. 164); Anderson (1972, p. 174); Craigie (1983, p. 185.)

The basis for this judgment is the notation in the title verse that this psalm was part of the music director's collection.

Our own inclination is to view this composition as a royal psalm accompanying the sacrifice of the king before actual combat. We concur with Kraus' judgment (1961, p. 163) that an impressive *Sachzusammenhang* exists between Psalm 20 and Psalm 18, a thanksgiving composition in which the king expresses gratitude to the deity for help he has given him on the battlefield and for the victory that has been secured. Moreover, the portrayal in 2 Chronicles 20 of the people with their Judean king, Jehoshaphat, gathered in the Jerusalem Temple in wartime to implore Yahweh's help, may serve as useful background for understanding Psalm 20. To be sure, this does not automatically establish a ninth century B.C.E. date for the poem. It is enough to say that it is pre-exilic. On rhetorical-critical grounds, we shall argue that the impending battlefield context makes good sense. Even so, dogmatism is unwarranted, as Eaton himself recognizes (1986, p. 131) when he writes, "The distinction of the historical from the ritual psalms is . . . somewhat tentative, and it is all the harder to establish since the psalms evoked by a crisis still present the matter largely in ritual stereotypes and quite easily passed into regular usage."

Psalm 21

Our second composition opens with the psalmist's second-person address to Yahweh whereby the favors that the deity has conferred on the king are freely acknowledged (vv. 2-7). Yahweh's active goodness is elaborately portrayed, presumably for the purpose of interpreting some event which has taken place prior to the psalm's recitation. By virtue of divine salvation, the king now finds himself in a truly salutary position. Yahweh has answered his prayers. He has visited the king with 'goodly blessings,' placed a golden crown on his head, and granted his petition for long life. This portion of the psalm is completed by the emphatic v. 8, where God is named in the third person as both 'Yahweh' and 'the Most High.' Then in second-person bicola, the psalmist turns to the king (vv. 9-13). Though Weiser (1962, p. 215), Johnson (1951, p. 179), and Fensham (1965, p. 198) claim that it is God who is addressed in these verses, we favor the interpretation of Gunkel (1926, p. 86), Mowinckel (1962, II, p. 63), and Kraus (1961, p. 169) that it is the Judean king as Yahweh's anointed who is the object of the poet's concern. Manifesting nuances of prophetic benediction, vv. 9-13 ponder the ways whereby the king will conquer his enemies. The psalm comes to rest in v. 14, which invokes Yahweh, whose sovereignty alone makes such glorious triumph

a reality. The identity of the speakers in Psalm 21 is not easily determined, though the first-person plural utterance in v. 14 militates against our imagining a soloist. A chiasmic situation is at least appealing, namely, that chorus precedes soloist in Psalm 20 and that soloist precedes chorus in Psalm 21. Yet this is at best conjecture.

The intentionality and function of Psalm 21 are likewise grasped in pluralistic fashion. Gunkel (1926, p. 85) found the *Sitz im Leben* of this composition in a regal birthday celebration or in the anniversary of the king's enthronement. Though Mowinckel (1962, I, p. 224) initially read this psalm as a prayer prefacing actual combat, he later asserted that Psalm 21 belongs to "festivities at the annual celebration of the day of anointing and enthronement." Weiser (1962, p. 212) and Craigie (1983, p. 190) regard Psalm 21 as a component within the annual coronation liturgy, and Eaton (1986, p. 117) insists that the poem is "obviously connected with enthronement or related rites." Once more, what is obvious to one scholar is not obvious to another. Kirkpatrick (1902, pp. 109-110) and Briggs (1906, pp. 183-184) held that Psalm 21 was sung after a historical battle as both a thanksgiving to Yahweh for victory experienced and an invocation for future divine blessing on the king. More recently, Dahood (1965, p. 131) has argued that in its entirety, Psalm 21 is a response to the crown's recently secured military triumph. Oesterley (1939, p. 173) perceived the psalm as a fervent prayer offered before battle with an unshakable certitude that it is being answered. Kraus (1961, p. 169) exhibits confidence in delineating three different psalmic elements (*Danklied*, vv. 2-8; *Orakel*, vv. 9-13; and *Bittlied*, v. 14), but some puzzlement in fathoming the precise cultic situation, though a royal Zion festival as it is presupposed in Psalm 132 appeals to him. Identifying v. 8 as the axis of the entire psalm, Fensham (1965, p. 202) argues for its distinctive covenantal character. For him vv. 2-7 contain a thanksgiving prayer consisting of general covenant benedictions; v. 8 affirms the covenant relationship between Yahweh and the king, and vv. 9-13 "tell of the protection given by Yahweh to the king against his enemies according to certain covenantal conceptions."

Psalm 21 has often been categorized in terms of its presumed key verse. Though Fensham (1965, p. 195) favors v. 8, other scholars opt for either v. 3 or v. 4. Accordingly, Psalm 21 is thought to be a coronation hymn by those who are mainly fascinated by the mention of 'goodly blessings' and a 'crown of pure gold' in v. 4. Other scholars, with whom we feel some affinity, are especially taken by the declaration in v. 3, 'The desire of his heart thou hast granted him, and the request of his lips thou

hast not withheld.' A comparison between this verse and Ps 20:5-6 suggests that Psalm 21 was framed as a *Te Deum*, a thanksgiving for victory, to balance the prayer of Psalm 20 anticipating impending battle. A rhetorical-critical inspection of Psalm 21 will highlight this understanding, though the language of this poem is not sufficiently precise to consign it confidently to a single, well-defined context. We do not share Craigie's eagerness (1983, p. 190) to perceive here a commemoration of the king's coronation, yet we concur fully with his honest remark that "though the classification of the psalm as a *royal liturgy* is fairly certain, the precise social setting within which the liturgy should be interpreted remains uncertain." Insofar as this psalm forecasts the king's complete triumph over his foes, its link with the ritual of the king's coronation or with the annual celebration of his accession present themselves as attractive options.

Interpretations of Psalm 21 remain necessarily speculative. On the one hand, this composition appears to reflect an entire range of divine favors ensuring the Davidic continuity of the Jerusalem throne. On the other, the canonical placement of Psalm 21 strikes us as deliberate. If in a general sense it joins Psalm 20 in celebrating Yahweh's covenant with David, in a more specific sense it may join Psalm 20 in reflecting on an actual battle or series of battles, the details of which are forever lost.

Translation Bias

One other consideration must be given its due before we proceed further: the way one elects to translate certain Hebrew words in Psalms 20 and 21 significantly colors any final assessment of these poems. Some nouns may be rendered in military language, such as 'victory' and 'triumph' in order to lend credence to the proposition that Psalm 20 anticipates, and Psalm 21 responds to, a particular battle scene. By opting for such English equivalents as 'salvation' and 'deliverance,' a less specific language may be used to support the thesis that these psalms belong to a regular annual service which seeks for royal welfare, yet without reference to any specific historical situation. For example, Weiser (1962, p. 205) translates *yěšû'ā* in 20:6 as 'blessings,' a rendering that accords nicely with his view that the psalm enjoyed liturgical use at the new year festival. Kissane (1953, p. 88) renders the same Hebrew noun 'success,' a translation supporting his understanding that Psalm 20 functioned to ensure the well-being of the monarch's entire reign. And Dahood (1965, p. 127) translates the Hebrew noun 'victory,' in the light of his assessment of Psalm 20 as the intercession of the congregation for

its king prior to his entrance into battle. Thus what is previously determined to be the function of Psalm 20 influences the manner whereby the Hebrew is translated. Since several Hebrew words are sufficiently ambiguous to allow for several interpretations, the situation could scarcely be otherwise. Even so, in our rhetorical-critical pursuit, we must keep this reality firmly in mind.

STROPHIC ANALYSIS

Psalm 20

If the strophic structure of Psalms 20 and 21 is scarcely cryptic, it is nevertheless a matter of rhetorical-critical import. In particular, the turning points, breaks, and shifts disclose the sequence and movement within these two compositions. Both psalms enjoy a remarkable similarity of proportion and balance. Psalm 20 consists of two strophes. Strophe I, the petition of the people (vv. 2-6), contains four jussive bicola rich with crucial third-person singular verbs, plus an emphatic jussive tricolon. It offers the prayer for triumph presumably on the monarch's behalf. The royal salvation expected consists of Yahweh's answering the king, protecting him, sending help, supporting him, giving him the desires of his heart, and fulfilling his plans. The concluding tricolon (v. 6), employing two first-person verbs and one in the third person, constitutes an effective refrain whereby the congregation reinforces its desire that the king enjoy victory. In the king's triumph, the people themselves will triumph.

Strophe II, the oracular assurance of divine help and regal victory (vv. 7-10), opens with a tricolon of third-person discourse, proceeds with two bicola mainly employing third-person verbs, and terminates with a bicolon refrain framed in second-person speech. As Kraft (1938, p. 65) has rightly insisted, the structural unity of Psalm 20 is obvious from the fact that Strophe II clarifies the meaning of its predecessor: "it is Yahweh's anointed king for whom the congregation is praying and at whose victory great rejoicing is promised." As the only tricola in Psalm 20, vv. 6 and 7 are assigned a back to back position at the center of the poem. As such, they directly contribute to the structural alignment of the poem into two well balanced halves. The latter tricolon (v. 7) promises that victory will ensue, and the two bicola which follow (vv. 8-9) declare that it will be divinely wrought. The song artfully terminates with the final refrain in v. 10 which offers a climactic entreaty for Yahweh's saving intervention and his continued readiness to heed the supplications of his people. Significant ring composition (*inclusio*) is recognizable since v. 10b, 'answer us when we call,' returns us to the

psalm's opening statement in v. 2a, 'May Yahweh answer you in the day of trouble!'

Psalms 21

Though Psalm 21 is somewhat longer, it likewise bifurcates in the center to form two strophes. Strophe I, thankful praise for Yahweh's favor toward the king (vv. 2–8), consists of three couplets followed by a bicolon refrain. The first couplet (vv. 2–3) treats divine goodness to the king in a manifestly general manner. Divine blessing is then spelled out in more detail in the second and third couplets. Tangible blessings of a golden crown and prolonged life are mentioned in the second couplet (vv. 4–5), whereas intangible blessings of majesty, splendor, and gladness are enumerated in the third couplet (vv. 6–7). The refrain follows in v. 8 and has at its head the deictic *kî* particle. Unlike all three of the preceding couplets, it does not address the deity. Rather, as a third-person bicolon, it objectively offers a word of instruction about *why* the king has thus been blessed—Yahweh is the object of his trust.

The structure of Strophe II, anticipation of future regal victory (vv. 9–14), is less evident. The obscurity of v. 10 is particularly problematic, though it apparently alludes to Yahweh's destruction of the king's foes by fire. Therefore, vv. 9 and 11 possibly form a couplet on the king's triumph over his foes, and v. 10, which spans roughly the length of a couplet, includes mention of the miraculous assistance which Yahweh offers the king. Accordingly, vv. 9 and 11 may be regarded as a split couplet enveloping v. 10.² The psalm's final couplet (vv. 12–13) announces that the plans of the enemies come to naught, although the meaning of the second bicolon of that couplet is not altogether apparent. The concluding refrain, consisting of one bicolon (v. 14), forms a noteworthy contrast with all that has previously transpired in the strophe, perhaps after the manner of the refrain which brings Strophe I to rest. Providing the appropriate conclusion to the poem, v. 14 is a liturgical refrain celebrating the deity. Again *inclusio* is evident since the divine

2. Earlier advanced by Kraft (1938, p. 66), this approach presents itself as viable. As an alternative, one might read Ps 21:9–10a as a tricolon addressing Yahweh in the second person, and the remainder of v. 10 as a bicolon referring to Yahweh in the third person. Though this analysis claims the advantage of not demanding a possibly awkward shift of person within an individual poetic unit, this is secured at the expense of having to assign the furnace-fire imagery of v. 10 into two different units. Moreover, a shift of persons does not necessarily denote disharmony. At least it does not appear that way in the refrain preserved in Ps 20:6.

strength and the glad response it evokes in humanity there attested reaffirm the psalm's opening articulation in v. 2. To summarize: In Psalm 21 we confront a well balanced hymn of praise which divides into two strophes, each of which hosts three couplets and a refrain. The subject matter, structure, and movement all suggest that the position of this hymn following Psalm 20 is in fact intentional. Thus it may be submitted that from the perspective of strophic analysis, Psalms 20 and 21 do convey the impression of being complementary compositions.

RHETORICAL ACHIEVEMENT

Psalm 20: Strophe I (vv. 2-6)

As we raise the issue of the rhetorical achievement of Psalms 20 and 21, it is evident that these are carefully executed compositions which manifest balanced structure, studied phraseology, deliberate contrasts, vivid imagery, and a deft use of repetition. Clearly, the prayer of the people for its king finds intense expression in the first strophe of Psalm 20. In words directly addressed to its ruler, the people readily manifests earnestness. The repeated use of the jussive is scarcely fortuitous. Moreover, the bicola appear to be as much faith assertions about Yahweh's power as they are petitions for divine assistance in time of national need.

Specific reference to the *šēm* ('name') of the deity is conspicuous in 2b, as it is in 6b and 8b. As the embodiment of God's cultic presence, the *šēm* is that protecting power whereby Yahweh answers the needs of king and people. The naming of the deity played a crucial role in Israelite worship (Ps 50:7). To know God's name was to be able to address him. By purposefully referring to the God of Jacob (*ʔēlōhē yaʿāqōb*), the poet employs part of the formula used for designating the God of the patriarchs. Often in biblical texts, 'Jacob' corresponds to 'Israel' and is firmly linked with it in poetic parallelism. However, this is not the case here. As Barnes (1937, p. 406) points out, from the physical meaning of the root *ʿqb*, 'to follow closely,' two derivative meanings emerge: (1) 'to pursue as a victor,' and (2) 'to follow as an avenger.' As predicated to Yahweh in v. 2, the notion of 'God the Victor' or 'God the Avenger' presents itself. Psalm 81 manifests a cultic usage of *ʔēlōhē yaʿāqōb* in vv. 2, 5, within a composition that historically reviews God's mighty deeds for Israel's welfare. In Ps 114:7 the earth is said to tremble in the presence of the God of Jacob (*millipnē ʔēlōhē yaʿāqōb*). In sum, the motifs of warfare, cult, and cosmic upheaval are resident in such psalmic references. This is what might be expected of the great God who is

Israel's fighter. When he goes to war for Israel, it is holy war, and the battle by definition has a cosmic scope. His mere appearance causes the earth to tremble. Thus his fighting is as his theophany, a powerful and disturbing entrance into history for Israel's own sake. Moreover, the verb *šiggēb* (Piel) here employed with *šēm* is well chosen, for it denotes the act of making someone high or inaccessible, and may well call to mind its noun *mišgāb* meaning 'sure height' or 'bulwark.'

A chiasitic structure is evident in v. 3 with the verbs 'may he send' (*šlh*) and 'may he support' (*s'd*) standing at the extremities of the bicolon. The Zion sanctuary was an undeniably significant point of contact between Yahweh and his people. Indeed, this earthly abode was a counterpart of Yahweh's own heavenly abode. A rich expression is achieved in *yīšlah* *ʿezrēkā* ('May he send your help') with its dative use of the pronominal suffix. A similar noun-verb chiasmus is operative in 4ab, 5ab, and 6ab, for the verbs again reside at the extremities of their respective bicola. In v. 4 *minhā* is mentioned alongside *ʿōlā*. The former is to be understood as a meal or vegetable offering and the latter as a burnt sacrifice. Perhaps in his original composition, the psalmist referred to *minhā* and *ʿōlā* in the singular, but in subsequent liturgical usage the plural was substituted. The verb *dšn*, meaning 'to regard as fat,' is doubtlessly a technical term of the cult used to denote Yahweh's acceptance of what is offered. In v. 4 concern that the deity will receive what is offered him is scarcely subtle.

Following its petition that the king's plans be fulfilled (5b), the congregation considers its own participation through the refrain (6ab), 'May we shout for joy in your victory, and in the name of our God lift the banner.' It seeks opportunity to express, even in an inarticulate manner (*rnn*), its gladness in the king's victory. Craigie's observation (1983, p. 186) is fitting: "The people prayed not only for the king, but also for themselves, for he was their representative." Here we meet the Hebrew noun *yēšūʿā* ('victory') in the first of three appearances in these two psalms (see 21:2, 6). If the Hebrew text is accurate, the raising of the banner (*dgl*) would involve a cultic act in which some symbol of the divine presence would be conspicuous. Though the Septuagint presupposes *nagdīl*, 'we will be magnified,' thus suggesting a consonantal metathesis, the Hebrew recommends itself by virtue of its variety. It requires no emending. Nor should 6c, 'May Yahweh fulfill all your desires,' with its return to second-person discourse, be deleted as superfluous. It may indeed serve as the climax of Strophe I, not unlike 10b, 'answer us when we call,' the concluding component and climax of Strophe II.

Psalm 20: Strophe II (vv. 7-10)

This strophe is sharply marked off from the preceding by distinct caesura. Previously the king was spoken of in the second person; now he is referred to in the third. The earnest petitions in Strophe I give way to confident affirmations in Strophe II. The presence of the emphatic particle *‘attā* (‘now’) at the head of the verse effectively signals the change, undoubtedly a turning point in the cult proceedings. Presumably an oracle has been spoken during a ritual pause after v. 6. Though the wording of that oracle is not given here, the result is clearly favorable. The cultic ministrant commences his declaration, ‘Now I know that (*kî*) Yahweh will give victory to his anointed’ (7a). The certitude conveyed resembles that of Jethro’s disclosure in Exod 18:11, ‘Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all gods’ (*‘attā yāda‘tî kî*), and that of Jonah in Jonah 4:2, ‘That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that (*kî yāda‘tî kî*) thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil.’ In examining the stylistic usage of *kî* in relation to individual clauses, Muilenburg (1961, p. 144) finds it useful to refer to the presence of *kî* in Ps 20:7. He observes that *kî* often “introduces the object clause, notably . . . after verbs of seeing, hearing, believing, remembering, forgetting, but especially after *knowing*, where the rhetorical context is noteworthy, as in the cultic asseverations of the priest or cultic prophet or the king in the liturgies of the Psalter.” Such knowledge in the form of conventional cultic speech is operative here. Moreover, reference to the king as Yahweh’s anointed is surely self-conscious. If *māšīaḥ* is a crucial terminology in Ps 18:51; 84:10; 89:39, 52; and 132:10, it is no less the case here. As de Vaux (1961, p. 104) reminds us, “The king, a consecrated person, thus shares in the holiness of God; he is inviolable.”

In their entirety, vv. 7-9 manifest a tone similar to the Certainty of a Hearing which often transpires in Israel’s Laments. And *hōšīa‘* in 7a may be identified as a perfect of certainty since the divine saving action it denotes is confidently expected. Completed action is thereby implied. Yahweh’s ‘right hand,’ an apt symbol of his strength, ensures that ‘mighty victories’ (*gēbūrôt yēša‘*) will ensue. To be sure, *yāmīn* stands for Yahweh himself as *pars pro toto*, and functions aptly as an accusative of means. The verbal picture of God fighting for the king is most expressive. Positive divine response is portrayed as an answering, and here in 7b the verb *‘nh*, so central in the initial and concluding cola of the psalm (2a, 10b), is met anew.

Only in vv. 8-9 does this composition employ antithetic parallelism. Accordingly, the antithesis between reliance on human resources and

reliance on the deity is effectively dramatized. Moreover, reference to chariots and horses lends support to the thesis that Psalm 20 should be viewed against the background of war. The bicolon in v. 8 is the only one in the psalm to be cast in 4:4 meter. This poetic line appears to have been intentionally broadened in order to highlight the contrast between Israel's behavior and that of other nations. Indeed, one may surmise a dimension of defiance in this boast. Weiser (1962, p. 209) aptly remarks, "Two different worlds are here deliberately confronted with each other." The psalmist takes his stand against the sheer naked force of military capacity, for he is confident that when Yahweh approaches, the hero's strength is soon dissipated. Accordingly, the anointed of Yahweh finds that the strength that equips him for both the present and the future resides in the deity himself, not in a horse. Since 2b attests 'the name of the God of Jacob,' and 6b 'the name of our God,' the Tetragrammaton in 8b is presumably a secondary element which disrupts the meter. And it is lacking in the Septuagint. The bicolon in v. 8 is at once blunt and well drawn. The poetic contrast that is here created is assuredly striking. Similarly, *hēm̄mā* ('they') in 9a is set against *ʾānah̄nū* ('we') in 9b, and two negative verbs denoting the enemies' ruin (*kr̄* and *npl*) are set against two positive verbs denoting Israel's well being (*qwm* and *ʿwd*). It is also noteworthy that as the psalmist moves from human deliberation in v. 8 to human action in v. 9, the poetic pace quickens. The bicolon in v. 9 is replete with well chosen verbs. Indeed, vv. 8-9 deftly declare that the enemies' efforts will be incapable of defeating a nation among whom dwells Yahweh's wonderworking name.

Finally, in v. 10 we meet the concluding refrain which echoes the psalm's opening theme. An aesthetically pleasing envelope figure is created by means of the repeated root *ʿnh* ('to answer') in 10b, a root first employed in 2a. Distinct from the rest of Strophe II, v. 10 hosts imperatives that are addressed to Yahweh, not to the Israelite monarch (with the Septuagint we read *waʿānēnū* for MT *yaʿānēnū*, a modest emendation). The earlier segment of the liturgy (vv. 2-6) is concisely restated. The rhetorical force of this refrain was well perceived by Kirkpatrick (1902, p. 109) who insisted, "The prayer of the earthly king is addressed to the heavenly King, whose representative he is." With this *inclusio*, Psalm 20 effectively terminates on a sturdy note.

Psalm 21: Strophe I (vv. 2-8)

This composition, commencing with the vocative, 'O Yahweh,' is reminiscent of a Thanksgiving Psalm. The several blessings which the deity has bestowed upon the king, and indirectly, on the whole people,

are enumerated in straightforward manner. Though the language of this strophe, when taken in its entirety, affirms Yahweh's fundamental goodness toward the monarch, the emphasis falls on Yahweh's capacity to ensure that the king is victorious in battle. The climax of the strophe is reached in v. 8 with its affirmation that the king's confidence rests in the unchanging favor (*hesed*) of the Most High. Indeed, it is through this refrain that Strophes I and II are firmly linked.³

Two key nouns in v. 2, *ōz* ('strength') and *yěšûā* ('victory'), both prefixed by prepositional *bě*, indicate the basis of the king's gladness. Such war terminology affirms that it is Yahweh's strength and victory that have brought into being this cultic moment of thankful praise. Yahweh's *ōz* and *yěšûā* are respectively reaffirmed in vv. 14 and 6. Moreover, the king's exclamation of wonder is deftly introduced by the originally interrogative *mā*.⁴ Presumably, as the psalmist constructed this composition, he resolved to shape v. 2 in such manner that it would present the basic idea which underlies the thought of the entire psalm: Yahweh is the strength of the king. He rejoices in this strength (v. 2), for it has been the ground of his recent victory (vv. 3-5), and it upholds his rule (vv. 6-7). This keynote is struck anew in v. 8 as the strophe achieves its climax.

In the synonymous parallelism of v. 3, the language of Ps 20:5a is deliberately recalled. The king's requests have been granted by Yahweh. Introduced by the deictic *kî* particle, the bicolon in v. 4 comprehensively refers to tangible 'goodly blessings' (*birkôt tôb*), that is, to the enrichment and intensification of life in the fullest sense, or to borrow from Kraus (1961, p. 170), to a *Lebenssteigerung*. Moreover, it is likely that the plural use of *bērākā* here and in 7a denotes intensive, even superlative, expression (in agreement with Gesenius, 1910, par. 124e, pp. 397-398). This noun merits mention as a key terminology within the strophe.

The language used in vv. 4-7 to describe the king's situation is hyperbolic, as well it should be, since he is closely bound with the deity. The noun *hayyîm* ('life') finds its strategic collocation at the head of v. 5, a bicolon which affirms prolonged life for the king, and for his dynasty

3. Clearly, v. 8 is a vital structural component in Psalm 21. Though Ridderbos (1972, p. 183), Quintens (1978, pp. 534-540), Auffret (1980, pp. 91-93), and Kselman (1981, p. 7) may be correct in designating it as transitional, this detracts from its emphatic capacity. We prefer to consider v. 8 as a refrain that directs the reader in both a reverse and a forward direction.

4. On the nature and significance of the interrogative *mā*, see Gesenius (1910, par. 148a, p. 471).

continuity and permanence. Rather than discerning with Dahood (1965, p. 132) intimations of immortality, we would do better to recognize the presence of an honorific court language which has been called into service by the poet. According to v. 6, the divinely given *hōd* ('majesty') and *hādār* ('splendor') are truly manifested in the *kābōd* ('glory') which the king enjoys. In effect, such imagery proclaims the king's status as Yahweh's vice-gerent. A withdrawal of these gifts would render the king powerless. Divine attributes are therefore reflected in the king by virtue of his office. These nouns are employed by the poet as a way of acknowledging the crucial covenantal connection between God and king. They are not a celebration of royal achievement for its own sake. Finally, through reference to the king's gladness (*śimhā*) in 7b, the poet demonstrates his skill at ring composition by returning to the motif which was announced at the outset of the strophe (2b).

Then with its dual reference to the deity as Yahweh and Most High (*elyōn*), the refrain in v. 8 affirms the king's trust in the covenant relation that binds him to his overlord. Whether there is a change of speaker at this juncture is hard to say. In any event, it is clear that the poet seeks at this mid-point in his composition to highlight the king's present relation with the covenant deity. Earlier verses in this strophe attest to the king's *past* reliance on Yahweh. In the solemn disclosure of the refrain, the king's *present* trust is emphasized (8a) and his *future* trust is confidently anticipated (8b). Here the poet summons into his discourse two crucial covenantal terms, *bṭḥ* ('to trust') and *hesed* ('favor'). Compellingly they point to the fundamental nature of that continuing relation that binds heavenly and earthly king. Moreover, the latter has been carefully perceived by Sakenfeld (1978, p. 226) as indication of the deity's *willingness* to deliver. The temporal dimension, therefore, is no incidental matter in our poet's rhetoric.

Psalms 21: Strophe II (vv. 9-14)

Though the poet continues to reflect on the high dignity of the king, he now shifts into an eschatological mode. Since the Judean king will certainly encounter future challenges from his enemies, his forthcoming triumphs and those of his dynasty are anticipated. In the opening bicolon (v. 9), the dual use of *mš*² in the sense of 'to reach' or 'to overtake' provides a confident introductory affirmation about contemplated regal victory. The verbal repetition in this synonymous bicolon is surely deliberate, and requires no emendation as is sometimes suggested (see, for example, Oesterley, 1939, pp. 175-176). Indeed, in each colon the subject and object of *mš*² are strikingly similar. Effective rhetoric,

not faulty transmission, explains the repetition of this verb in close sequence. Moreover, as Watson points out (1984, pp. 203–204), the psalmist fashions a partial chiasmus whereby the /c/ component ('your enemies' / 'your foes') stands outside the chiastic pattern that is to be labeled ab-c//b'a'-c'.

The battle imagery continues in textually corrupt v. 10 which at best invites tentative interpretations. Even so, the chiasitic order of its last two cola, the double-duty suffix on ³appô ('his anger') which carries over to ²ēš ('his fire'),⁵ the figurative use of bl^c ('to swallow') to denote the enemies' downfall, and the vivid metaphor of the blazing oven (*tanûr* ²ēš) as the agency of divine judgment all disclose the psalmist's rhetorical gifts. The incomplete parallelism in the bicolon of v. 11, which lacks a verb in its second member, nevertheless constitutes an effective hyperbole celebrating the efficacy of the divinely empowered monarch: 'Their offspring you will destroy from the earth, and their posterity from among men.' So thorough is the victory anticipated, that the defeated foes would leave behind no progeny whatever. Then the succinct asyndetic phrases in 12ab denote the inability of those who oppose Yahweh and his anointed to succeed in their acts of rebellion. Against this, 13a speaks of the king's dominance in general terms—'you will put them to flight.' This articulation is particularized by means of an archaic illustration in 13b which offers a circumstantial verbal clause—'with your bows you will aim at their faces.'

Thereupon the strophe terminates with a firm liturgical refrain in v. 14. Yahweh is addressed in anticipation that his ⁶ōz ('strength') and *gēbûrā* ('might') will overcome all resistance. As if this has already taken place, the psalm ends emphatically on a glad note of celebration not unlike that which resounded in its opening utterance. We witness the song of the congregation exulting in the blessings that have been secured. Perceiving *rûmā* ('be exalted') to be synonymous with *yīšmah* ('he rejoices') in 2a, Dahood (1965, pp. 134–135) rightly emphasizes the *inclusio* that is achieved: "In vs. 2 the king is said to rejoice in Yahweh's victory, while here Yahweh himself is invited to celebrate his triumph." The *inclusio* is further strengthened by dual mention of the divine vocative, 'O Yahweh,' as well as the phrase that adjoins it, *bē^cozzekā* / *bē^cuzzekā* ('in thy strength'). Past and future temporal dimensions are at work here. Just as past victories have induced in the faithful a singing of divine praise, the securing of future victories will do no less.

5. Here we follow Dahood (1965, p. 133).

Conclusion

Our investigation invites the conclusion that in its capacity to advance knowledge, rhetorical criticism resembles other avenues of biblical interpretation. The resources at hand, while helpful, are in fact limited. As it subjects the text to an intrinsic reading, rhetorical criticism is to be commended for its sustained engagement in questions of particularity. Yet as it is applied to Psalms 20 and 21, the fundamentally synchronic discipline of rhetorical criticism is unprepared to posit any absolute statement regarding the intentionality of the text. If it accepts as useful the findings of form criticism which emphasize the capacity of these two compositions to function as royal liturgies, it does not insist that Psalms 20 and 21 were anchored in one, and only one, Judean festival. Notwithstanding the pitfall of what we have defined as translation bias, our rhetorical-critical investigation has emphasized the military dimensions of these two poems. Though the historical context of battlefield appears to be more pertinent to Psalm 20 than it is to Psalm 21, it surely cannot be ruled out for the latter. The argument can still be made that Psalm 20 looks forward to the triumph of the king and his army as they engage in warfare against real historical enemies, and that Psalm 21 thankfully reflects on the victory that has been secured with Yahweh's intervention. Even so, our rhetorical reading of Psalm 21 has rightly called attention to its considerable temporal sweep. We dare not circumscribe it with easy limits. Perhaps Craigie's recognition of the situation of Psalm 20 applies equally well to that of Psalm 21, namely, that a composition initially devoted to honoring military concerns in due course was taken up into more general liturgical employment and thereby was divested of some of its former associations.

Rhetorical criticism sharpens our perception of the resourcefulness of the ancient Israelite poets, as they gave expression to the ongoing traditions and faith of their people. Since the specific vocabulary common to both Psalms 20 and 21 is quite limited, we cannot insist that they are the product of one poet—that an editor placed them side by side is, of course, another matter. Nevertheless, each poem attests to the artistic capacities of its creator.

Both compositions yield impressive strophic balance. The two strophes in Psalm 20 are of virtually equivalent length and each is buttressed by a climactic refrain. The interplay between the poem proper and refrain is likewise evident in Psalm 21, but now the bicola are more numerous. Thus Psalm 21 is best perceived as a poem of two balanced strophes, each of which consists of three couplets and a refrain.

The studied structure of these compositions is matched by a conscious repetition of significant terms which serve both to integrate the diverse expressions of the poetic cola and to establish emphasis. Thus in Psalm 20 there is threefold reference to the *šēm* ('name') of the deity (vv. 2, 6, 8). Several roots are intentionally repeated—*zkr* ('to remember') in vv. 4, 8; *mlʾ* ('to fulfill') in vv. 5, 6; *qōdeš* ('sanctuary') in vv. 3, 7; and *yšc* ('to save, deliver') in vv. 6, 7, 10. Also in Psalm 21 the repetition of key nouns and verbs is likewise deliberate—*yěšûcā* ('victory') in vv. 2, 6; *cōz* ('strength') in vv. 2, 14; *pānīm* ('face, presence') in vv. 7, 10, 13; *ntn* ('to give') in vv. 3, 5; and *šyt* ('to place, put') in vv. 4, 6, 10, 13. Such repetition achieves its greatest effectiveness when an *inclusio* is established as is the case when the last colon of Psalm 20 in its own way restates the concern of the opening colon (2a, 10b). We also noted a similar *inclusio* involving the initial and concluding cola of Psalm 21.

The poet's artistry is no less evident in his recourse to vivid imagery which is especially noteworthy in Ps 20:7 with its reference to Yahweh's right hand (*yamīn*) and in Ps 21:10 with its mention of the blazing oven (*tanūr cēš*). Use of the superlative plural in *bērakôt* ('goodly blessings,' 21:7), the emphatic particle *cattā* ('now,' 20:7) to signal a shift in the movement in the poetry, and the heavy concentration of noun-verb chiasmus in the first strophe of Psalm 20 (3ab, 4ab, 5ab, 6ab) also testify to poetic accomplishment. Nor should we ignore the strategic collocation of the noun *hayyīm* ('life') at the head of Ps 21:5 and the deft use of contrast, both in the antithetic parallelism in Ps 20:8-9 (involving the contrasting sources of Israel's strength and that of the enemy) and in the juxtaposition of tangible and intangible blessings which the king enjoys in Ps 21:4-7 (the tangible being a golden crown and prolonged life, and the intangible being majesty, splendor, and gladness).

The configurations of the poet's craft are admittedly varied. Collectively, the poetic excellence of Psalms 20 and 21 presents itself as a focused expression of Israelite faith that, as the covenant deity, Yahweh truly affirms the king. The human king is indeed king triumphant, and through his triumph—be it past, present, or future, the people Israel likewise triumphs.

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