

Our sages noticed several curiosities about this Psalm. Let's consider some of them.

Connection to Shabbat: The Psalm is introduced with **מְזֻמָּר שִׁיר לַיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת** - A song for the Sabbath day. Yet this is just a header; the rest of the psalm has no mention of Shabbat. So how did this psalm get its header and become connected to Shabbat? Rabbi Reuven Hammer [H, p. 23] offers the several possible explanations, including:

- The psalm offers many praises of God's creations, calling to mind the Creation, which Shabbat commemorates – as we say in the Shabbat Kiddush, **זָכַר לַמַּעֲשֵׂה בְרֵאשִׁית** – a memorial to Creation.
- Rashi interprets Psalm 92 as describing the messianic era, “a time that is ‘entirely Sabbath.’” One of the reasons for Rashi's interpretation: the verse

But me You have greatly exalted:

I am anointed with fragrant oil [translated in [A, p. 326] as “I am soaked in fresh oil.”]

Anointing with oil was the Biblical method of designating the kings of Israel, and the word *Messiah* (who is to be a descendant of King David) literally means the anointed one.

- As Adam and Eve were about to be destroyed for their sin, the Midrash [B, p. 112] tells us, “at that moment the Sabbath arrived and became Adam's advocate, saying to the Holy One, blessed be He: ‘During the six days of Creation no one suffered punishment. And wilt Thou begin it with me? Is this my holiness? Is this my rest?’ And thus Adam was saved by the Sabbath's plea When Adam saw the power of the Sabbath, he was about to sing a hymn in her honor. But the Sabbath said to Adam: ‘Dost thou sing a hymn to me? Let us, I and thou, sing a hymn to the Holy One, blessed be He.’ Hence it is said *It is good to acclaim Adonai.*”

Acclaim/confess: [H] cites Midrash Psalms 92:7 [B, p. 114], where the second verse of the Psalm is interpreted as “It is a good thing to *confess* unto the Lord.” The Midrash says: “Adam said this. He meant: Through me all the generations will learn that when a man confesses his sins and forsakes them, he will be saved from the punishment of Gehenna.”

What don't the foolish understand? Consider the verses

Your designs are beyond our grasp.

The thoughtless cannot comprehend;

the foolish cannot fathom this:

The wicked may flourish... but their doom is sealed....

[A, p. 326]: “This clause [Your designs are ...] lays the ground for the rest of the poem, and for the next two verses in particular. God's designs are deep. Superficial observation might lead to the conclusion that crime pays, but ... God prepares due punishment for the wicked. It is this unapparent system of justice that the brutish man is incapable of understanding.”

Notice the **contrast in the images of growth**:

The wicked [רשעים - *note the plural*] may flourish, springing up like grass,
But their doom is sealed, for You are supreme forever.

The righteous [צדיק - *note the singular*] shall flourish like the palm tree;
they shall grow tall like a cedar in Lebanon.
Planted in the house of Adonai,
They will thrive in the courts of our God.

Thus, even when the wicked flourish, they are grass as compared with the palm and cedar trees of the righteous. But these verses raise questions:

- Why are the wicked referred to in the plural, and the righteous in the singular? [H] cites Ibn Ezra who says it's because it's rare to find a righteous person.
- Why are the righteous compared to both palm and cedar? Wouldn't one species of tree suffice in comparison with grass? The Midrash [B, p. 120] explains it is so the righteous children of Israel will not be compared only to the palm, whose wood is inferior to cedar wood as a building material, and so the righteous children of Israel will not be compared only to the cedar, which, unlike the palm, does not produce edible fruit.
- Isn't growing "tall like a cedar in Lebanon" thriving? Why do we need "Planted in... they will thrive..."? The Midrash [B, p. 121] interprets the word rendered in *Sim Shalom* as "planted" alternately as "transplanted," and says that, unlike the palm and cedar which generally don't fare well after being transplanted, the children of Israel, when transplanted to the *House of Adonai* (possible interpretations offered by [H, p. 23]: the Temple in Jerusalem, or the presence of God - see the last verse of Psalm 23, where the latter interpretation of the same phrase seems appropriate), will thrive.

References

- [A] Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary*, W. W. Norton, New York, 2007
- [B] Rabbi William Braude, ed., *The Midrash on Psalms [Midrash Tehillim]*, 2nd of two volumes, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1959
- [H] Rabbi Reuven Hammer, ed., *Or Hadash: A Commentary on Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, The Rabbinical Assembly, New York, 2003