

# **Gabriel**

**Tell this Man the Meaning of his Vision** (Daniel, 8:16)

Studies in Archaeology, Epigraphy, Iconography  
and the Biblical World in Honor of Gabriel Barkay  
On the Occasion of his 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday (22 June 2024)

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# PSALM 49: A MEDITATION ON DEATH

David R. Blumenthal

## **Introduction**

The problem with reading psalms is that in most editions, in all languages, the verses are published in one continuous form. The psalm thus appears to the eye as one paragraph. Some editors publish psalms with each verse beginning on a new line, but that is just an elongated paragraph. Occasionally, an editor will realize that some psalms have groups of verses that belong together and so the editor will skip a line to signal the change. Even psalms written by a scribe in a megillah have no visual form connected to the meaning of the text. All these visual presentations of psalms do not tell us who is speaking, or to whom the speaker is talking. Further, these visual presentations do not tell us what the emotion that might have generated the verses is, or how we know when the psalmist's feeling changes. "Reciting psalms," especially in a liturgical context, is usually done by one person or even a whole community saying the verses out loud without any attention to the basic questions just raised. Reciting psalms by reading aloud on page so-and-so, or by reading responsively on page so-and-so, or just running through the text as part of a larger liturgy tells us nothing about the voices, the content, or the structure of the psalm.

The first task in understanding (and then praying) a psalm is to determine the various voices in the psalm. Sometimes, the psalmist is talking to God, but sometimes, he is talking to his audience, including ourselves; or, in an aside, to himself. Sometimes, the pronouns he uses give us a clue about which voice he is using; sometimes, he is ambiguous. Similarly, the psalmist is not the only voice in many of these texts. Sometimes, the psalmist speaks. At other times, God or the bystander or, perhaps, a chorus, is the speaker. Determining the person(s) being addressed and the voice(s) that are speaking in any psalm is, therefore, often the first task.

At other times, the first task is to determine the themes and structure of the psalm. In some psalms, the structure is clear as, for example, in Psalm 19 ("The heavens declare the glory of God") in which the first section deals with God in nature; the second with God in revelation; and the third with God in relationship to humans. Or, Psalm 145 ("I will raise You up, my God, the king"), which is an acrostic, the structure of which is the alphabet. But in most psalms, the structure is hard to discern because the voices and the themes overlap, and change often. Determining the themes and their relationship to one another (the structure) is, then, the second task.

The rapidly changing voices and themes mean that the first and second tasks are not always "first", and then "second." Rather, the determination of voice, theme, and structure must evolve together.

The next task in understanding (and then praying) a psalm is to determine the emotion that might have generated such a psalm. There are times when that emotion is gratitude, such as Psalm 100 ("A psalm of thanksgiving"), or Psalm 113 ("Hallelujah, sing praise, oh servants of the Lord").

There are others where the emotion is danger, such as Psalm 30 ("I will raise you up, my God, for You have saved me"), or Psalm 121 ("I lift up my eyes to the mountains from whence comes my help"). Psalms 38-39 ("Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger") provide examples of outright despair, and there are yet others when it is anger, sometimes even rage, such as Psalm 109 ("Oh God of my praise, do not be silent") for personal rage, and Psalm 44 ("Oh God, with our ears

we have heard”), for national rage.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, there are many psalms where there is more than one emotion involved, such as Psalm 147 (“Hallelujah, for it is good to sing unto our God”) where calls to praise God are mixed helter-skelter with the motifs of God of Zion; God as healer; God as creator; God as a just judge and protector of the weak; God as revealer; and God as the One Who chooses the Jewish people.

How does one depict on a printed page the voices, the themes, the structure, and the emotions that may have motivated a psalm? That is the question. Many years of studying, translating, commenting upon, and teaching psalms have led me to think that the following is the best method: give each verse a line; group the verses of each voice on a different margin; and group the verses of each structural unit (theme) in a paragraph by skipping a line. In addition, one should write footnotes with linguistic and stylistic comments and endnotes with reflections and advice on how to pray the psalm.<sup>2</sup>

With this in mind, I would like to dedicate my translation and commentary of Psalm 49 to Gabi Barkay. My wife and I have known Gabi for over 60 years, as a fellow academic, but mostly as a friend. We have been on tours all over Israel with him. We have sat in on his classes. We have worked on the sifting project. We have hosted him and his partner, Esther, in America. We have sat with him through conferences in which battles between the Jerusalem and the Tel Aviv schools took place. And we have spent endless hours just talking with him about politics, academic affairs, and personal matters.

Anyone who has walked with Gabi anywhere recognizes the question, “Do you see that building there?” and has then listened to an extended historical talk about it and its place in Jewish and Zionist history. And who can forget the tour of the tomboli (royal burial mounds) outside Jerusalem?! Or the tour of David’s City which culminated with standing in front of what are, almost surely, the graves of Kings David and Solomon, plundered by many and obliterated by the Romans?! Or, standing in the holy of holies at the altar to God (not an altar to a pagan god) in Arad?! Or being with him at Ketef Hinnom and hearing the story of the discovery of the amulet with the early version of the priestly blessing, the amulet that may have been the predecessor of the tefillin (phylacteries)?!

Gabi’s combination of great learning, on many levels, has dazzled us over and over again. My wife likes to tell Gabi that he should have his brain transferred to a computer to preserve all that he knows. Our lives, indeed our connection to Israel and Zionism, have been deeply influenced by Gabi. We are grateful to him for his friendship and his willingness to share what he knows with us. It is an honor to dedicate this essay to him.

## **Just the Text**

### **Psalm 49**

<sup>1</sup> A conundrum concerning death

<sup>2</sup> Hear this, all peoples.

שמעו-זאת כל-העמים:

Listen, all who dwell on earth –

האזינו כל-ישבי חלד:

<sup>3</sup> Ordinary people and those who are privileged,

גם-בני אדם גם-בני-איש

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<sup>1</sup> If you doubt this, pick the person you are angriest at, take verses 6-19 of Psalm 109, and recite them out loud with him in mind. If that person is female, change the pronouns. And, if you are still doubtful, put a vision of the holocaust in your mind and recite verses 19-27 of Psalm 44 out loud, being sure to raise your voice for verses 24-27.

<sup>2</sup> I hope, with the help of the Almighty, to publish a book of selected Psalms in this manner before my time in this world is over.

Rich and poor together. יחד עשיר ואביון:  
<sup>4</sup> My mouth will speak wisdom פי ידבר חכמות  
 And the meditations of my heart, understanding. והגות לבי תבונות:  
<sup>5</sup> I will tune my ear to metaphor, אטה למשל אזני  
 I will present my conundrum with music. בכנור-חידתי:

<sup>6</sup> *Why should I be fearful in times of peril,  
 When sin entangles my feet?* למה אירא בימי רע  
 עון עקבי יסובני:

<sup>7</sup> There are those who trust in their fortune,  
 Who boast of their great wealth. הבטחים על-חילם  
 וברב עשרם יתהללו  
<sup>8</sup> But, no man can save even his brother. אח לא-פדה יפדה איש  
 He cannot pay God for atonement for him. לא-יתן לאלהים כפרו  
<sup>9</sup> Even if the redemption price for him be steep,  
 He will cease to exist forever. ויקר פדיון נפשו  
 וחדל לעולם

<sup>10</sup> Can one live forever?! ויחי-עוד לנצח  
 And not see the grave?! לא יראה השחת  
<sup>11</sup> Indeed, any person will see that wise men die. כי יראה חכמים ימותו  
 Together, the fool and the ignorant, perish יחד כסיל ובער יאבדו  
 And leave their wealth to others. ועזבו לאחרים חילם:

<sup>12</sup> They think that their houses will last forever,  
 That their dwelling places will endure for generations,  
 That their names will be mentioned everywhere קרבם בתימו לעולם  
 משכנותם לדור ודור  
 קראו בשמותם עלי אדמות  
<sup>13</sup> But, humans cannot dwell in assets,  
 They are like animals that are silenced. ואדם ביקר בל-ילין  
 נמשל כבהמות נדמו:  
<sup>14</sup> The path of these people is folly for them,  
 Those who come after them explicitly wish denial. זה דרכם כסל למו  
 ואחריהם בפיהם ירצו סלה.  
<sup>15</sup> They have been herded to She'ol. כצאן לשאול שתו  
 מות ירעם  
 The righteous will drive them forth at dawn,  
 And their Rock will be the terrors of She'ol,  
 and not a temple, for them. וירדו במ ישרים לבקר  
 וצורם לבלות שאול  
 מזבל לו:  
<sup>16</sup> But God will redeem my soul from She'ol. אך-אלהים יפדה נפשי מיד שאול.  
 Indeed, He will take me. Selah. כי יקחני סלה

<sup>17</sup> Do not be afraid if you see a man become rich,  
 Who multiplies the capital of his estate. אל תירא כי-יעשר איש  
 כי-ירבה כבוד ביתו  
<sup>18</sup> For, in his death, he cannot take everything with him,  
 His fortune does not go down after him. כי לא במותו יקח הכל  
 לא-ירד אחריו כבודו  
<sup>19</sup> For one is praised only during one's life –  
 You are praised only when things go well for you. כי-נפשו בחייו יברך  
 ויודך כי תיטיב לך:  
<sup>20</sup> One reaches the generation of the ancestors  
 Who will never again see light. תבוא עד-דור אבותיו  
 עד-נצח לא יראו-אור:  
<sup>21</sup> A man of assets – he does not understand (that). אדם ביקר ולא בין

He is like animals that are silenced.

נמשל כבהמות נדמו:

### The Text with Commentary

#### Psalm 49

<sup>1</sup> A conundrum concerning death<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Hear this, all peoples.

Listen, all who dwell on earth --

<sup>3</sup> Ordinary people and those who are privileged,  
Rich and poor together.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> My mouth will speak wisdom  
And the meditations of my heart, understanding.

<sup>5</sup> I will tune my ear to metaphor,  
I will present my conundrum with music.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Why should I be fearful in times of peril,  
When sin entangles my feet?*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>7</sup> There are those who trust in their fortune,  
Who boast of their great wealth.

<sup>8</sup> But, no man can save even his brother.  
He cannot pay God for atonement for him.

<sup>9</sup> Even if the redemption price for him be steep,  
He will cease to exist forever.

<sup>10</sup> Can one live forever?!  
And not see the grave?!

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, any person will see that wise men die.  
Together, the fool and the ignorant, perish  
And leave their wealth to others.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This psalm is a meditation on death. It is written in the style of wisdom literature; that is, as a conundrum or puzzle. It clearly has four parts: the introduction (2-5); the conundrum itself (6); the condemnation of those who think they can achieve immortality through wealth with a closing verse of affirmation (7-16); and an address to a third person with the same theme (17-21). The verses on the outer margin are addressed to the general reader. The verses on the first indented margin are an aside. And the verses on the second indented margin are addressed to a specific person; or perhaps to the psalmist's inner self. Note the revised ascription, the traditional ascriptions being notoriously incomprehensible.

<sup>4</sup> The invocation of heaven and earth as witnesses is widespread in Scripture, as is the invocation of all levels of society. Note, too, the a-b-b-a structure in verse 3 (poor, rich, rich, poor).

<sup>5</sup> Conundrum (Heb., *hida*). The invocation of metaphor (Heb., *mashal*) and music (Heb., *kinnor*, lit., a lyre) is also common in wisdom literature.

<sup>6</sup> This is his conundrum: Why should he be afraid of death? His answer begins in the next verse with a denunciation of those who trust in their wealth to give them immortality. This is in vain because everyone dies and has no benefit from his former wealth. The italics are used to highlight this verse because it is the lynchpin of the psalm. "My feet" (Heb., *akeivai*), literally "my ankles." Alternate reading: "When the sin of those who deceive me encompasses me." In this alternate reading, the following verses describe those who deceive him.

<sup>7</sup> An aside on the inevitability of death: One cannot avoid death and, one cannot avoid leaving one's wealth to others.



<sup>12</sup> They<sup>8</sup> think that their houses will last forever,  
That their dwelling places will endure for generations,  
That their names will be mentioned everywhere.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>13</sup> But, humans cannot dwell in assets,  
They are like animals that are silenced.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The path of these people is folly for them,  
Those who come after them explicitly wish denial.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>15</sup> They have been herded to She'ol.

Death is their shepherd.

The righteous<sup>12</sup> will drive them forth at dawn,  
And their Rock<sup>13</sup> will be the terrors of She'ol, and not a temple, for them.

<sup>16</sup> But God will redeem my soul from She'ol.

Indeed, He will take me. Selah.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Do not be afraid if you see a man become rich,  
Who multiplies the capital of his estate.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For, in his death, he cannot take everything with him,  
His fortune does not go down after him.

<sup>19</sup> For one is praised only during one's life –  
You are praised only when things go well for you.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>20</sup> One reaches the generation of the ancestors  
Who will never again see light.

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<sup>8</sup> The wealthy.

<sup>9</sup> Alternate translation: "Their graves will be their houses forever, their dwelling places for generations, though their names have been talked about everywhere." This is based on a reversal of two letters in the first Hebrew word (Heb., *kirbam / kivram*) which is attested in the sources.

<sup>10</sup> The usual metaphor for death. See Isaiah 6:5 and elsewhere.

<sup>11</sup> The word "Selah" usually denotes a pause or break in the text. There is no pause here as the condemnation of those who think they can achieve immortality through wealth continues in the next verse. Rather, the pause comes naturally at the end of verse 16 with the second "Selah." The Hebrew letters *s-l-h* occur as a verb in Psalm 119:118: "You have rejected all those who err from Your ways; indeed, their deceitfulness is false" and again in Lamentations 1:15: "He has rejected all my heroes." There is also a related Arabic root *s-l-w* meaning "to forget" or "to induce forgetfulness." Here, the heirs wish to forget, deny, and reject the futility of what those who came before have done, and they do this explicitly (Heb., *be-fihem*, lit., "with their mouths"). Requiring no consonantal change, one should read *salah* or *sillah*. (The passive forms of this verb in Job 28:16,19 and Lamentations 4:2 do not seem to be connected to this root.)

<sup>12</sup> "Righteous" is a euphemism for the attendants in She'ol.

<sup>13</sup> Heb., *ve-tsuram*, with the traditional reading. Their Rock, God, will be the terrors of Sheol. Heb. *Levallot* is a contraction of *le-vehalot*, terrors (Job 18:11,14 and elsewhere; see Amos Hacham's commentary to Psalms in the Rav Kook edition of the Tanakh).

<sup>14</sup> The psalmist ends this section by contrasting himself to those who rely on their wealth. With this, he begins the answer to his conundrum. Selah, here, signals the break in the text.

<sup>15</sup> This section is addressed to a third person, though the psalmist may be talking to his inner self. Hence, the new margin.

<sup>16</sup> Note the shift in pronoun to the impersonal "you." The verb in the next verse, *tavo'*, can be in the second person. This would be consistent with the second person in this verse but it would contradict the third-person suffix of "ancestors," *'avotav*, in the next verse. Or, the verb in the next verse can be in the third person and refer back to *nafsho*, "his soul." This yields, "The soul reaches the generation of its ancestors"; here rendered in the impersonal form: "One reaches the generation of one's ancestors."

<sup>21</sup> A man of assets does not understand that.  
He is like animals that are silenced.<sup>17</sup>

### **Endnote**

As one ages and confronts death at closer range, one takes note of those things that one has done wrong - of the missed opportunities to perform an act of kindness; of the moments of anger; of serious professional and personal mistakes of judgement; of the people one has hurt, some of them deeply. One also takes stock of what one has accomplished, of one's legacy. Like all older people, I have been to many cemeteries. They are filled with the tombstones of people who are no longer remembered, of people who have descended into silence, as the psalmist puts it. Who remembers them? Who remembers their accomplishments? In traditional Jewish ritual, this psalm is recited twice daily in a house of mourning. Perhaps it is a warning to the living; or perhaps it is a comfort to those who are soon to die to know that death brings a silence that is absolute.

This is a particularly good psalm to dedicate to Gabi, a man who believes very strongly in the inherent truth of the biblical text and who is a religiously-observant Jew and a fervent Zionist.

Yet, Gabi does not always accept the rabbinic reinterpretation of biblical texts. In this psalm, the psalmist, also a deeply religious person, does not provide for a reward in the afterlife (which led to some aggressive re-interpretation in rabbinic tradition). For Gabi, as for the psalmist, there is the simple truth that the dead cannot take their wealth or their accomplishments with them. Instead, there is the deep silence of time.

To pray this psalm, put yourself in the Presence of God; listen to the call to attention, repeat the conundrum; ponder the truth of the response; and harken to the advice.

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<sup>17</sup> The refrain here is a repeat of verse 13, with a slight change. For a similar usage of a refrain, see Psalm 42:6,12. The conundrum is: Why should I be afraid as death nears and I realize the depth of my sinfulness? The answer is: Do not think that worldly success can save you from death; death is being silenced forever.