

SING A NEW SONG!

HOW SHALL WE SING A NEW SONG IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH TODAY?

By recognizing the need
for a serious study and meditation of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh/Old Testament)
on its own terms and not merely as the "Old" Testament

CHRISTIANS AND THE HEBREW BIBLE: A MEDITATION ON PSALM 96

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TOMORROW IS HERE!

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The following thoughts were first presented during the conference *Power in the Spirit. A New Song for a New Day*. July 13-15, 1995. Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia. Thursday, July 13, 1995. 4:15 p.m. Olin Theater. This presentation is, of course, presented in a revised form. I have also voiced these thoughts throughout my teaching career at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (1972-2001).

DEFINITIONS:

- . HEBREW BIBLE is a secular term for the Tanakh, Old Testament.
- . TANAKH is used by Jewish people. It is an acronym for תּוֹרָה *tôrāh*, Torah, = "Teaching;" נְבִיאִים *nəbî'im*, Nevi'im, = Prophets; כְּתוּבִים *kəṭūbîm*, Kethuvim, = "Writings." It stands on its own as the Word from G-d.
- . OLD TESTAMENT is a Christian term for the Hebrew Bible. It is understood as not standing on its own, but as leading to the New Testament.

Dear Colleagues:

What does the Bible have to say about mission and ministry?

The Bible - if taken seriously - always challenges the Jewish and Christian religious establishments with the life-giving warmth/blast of the Holy Spirit ... the covenants, intentions, hopes and the will of G-d for ALL humans, beginning with the People of G-d.

Every passage in the Bible is relevant for mission and ministry for Jews and Christians. So, which topics should I choose given the pressures of today? Every one of you has one or two favorite urgent texts and subjects. This is, of course, very good. Because we are all dedicated to the life and mission of the Church through our Lord, Jesus, there can be no surprise that our choices of topics will differ greatly.

In this first presentation I have chosen to emphasize the Christian relationship to the Hebrew Bible and I want to explore with you G-d's challenge to constant re-thinking of the intellectual and mythological framework and infrastructure of biblical people and the necessary re-formation of actions with a look at Psalm 96.

Tomorrow I will explore our Christian responsibility in the relationship to the Jewish people after the Holocaust.

The third presentation will deal with the biblical law-court pattern of prayer and the need for Christians to re-think the doctrine of original sin and the daily experience of so many people, including Christians, that they are victims of innocent suffering and that they are not always sinful and unclean.

Omit from presentation:

Words, words, words.

How do you feel about words? We all know that words can give life, can make us feel happy, affirmed, joyful and all tingly and excited.

But, we also know that words can kill, that words can make us feel terrible, insecure, sad, tormented, despised, unappreciated and absolutely miserable and downcast and ready to die. Words can be phony, stupid, authoritarian, arrogant and meaningless and they can start wars and bring about peace.

Words do mean something. Words do have power because they express the attitude and vision of the heart and mind of a person or of a group, families and nations.

We judge each other not only by our deeds, but also by our words. You will judge me by my words.

My task is to lead us in an understanding of Psalm 96.

I am qualified to do this because I have studied the Hebrew text of the Hebrew Bible (which Christians call the Old Testament) since 1953, and I have been a teacher in the Lutheran Church in Austria and in the USA since 1957, that's 38 years! I have served as a parish pastor, as a campus pastor and since 1972 also as a professor of Old Testament. My passion is to understand every letter, syllable, word and phrase in the Bible.

I will try to illustrate this passion (during these few minutes) with a brief exposition of Psalm 96. You will soon realize that it is possible to speak about this psalm for several days.

I just said that words mean something. So, I would like to begin by telling you what my name means.

My name is Walter Michel.

Walter is often spelled with an *h* and that is how it should be spelled, because the first part of *Walter* is the German verb *walten* and the second part is *Heer*. *Walten* in English means "to govern, rule, reign," and "Heer," in English, means "army," so, Walter = the ruler of an army.

Michel comes from the longer Greek form of *mega*, namely, *megalo*. You know the word "megalo-polis," which means "great city." You also know the name Michelangelo, "great angel."

And you know the name of the beer "Michelob," which consists of the word "michel" and the German word "Lob," which in English means "praise." The meaning, therefore, of Michelob is, "much praise." Note that the letter "l" is written only once, but that it does *double duty* for the end of the word "Michel" and for the beginning of the word "Lob." There is an old English proverb, namely, "many a little makes a mickel."

You have noticed that my name is not spelled with an *a*. The word *Michael* is a combination of three Hebrew words: *mi-cha-El*. The word *El* you know well from words like "Beth-El." *Beth* means "house" or "temple," so *Beth-El* means "Temple of El." *El* is the name of the chief god of the Canaanites and is then also used to denote any deity, any god. The word *mi* means "who," and the word *cha* means "like" ... so, *mi-cha-El* means "Who is like El?" The answer is? Nobody. Aha, this is the so-called incomparability formula. An excited, enthusiastic worshiper of El is saying "no other god can compare to my god." This is like the language of lovers. When you are deeply in love you say things like: "You are the only one, there is no one as beautiful, as important as you are, there is no one like you!"

And this is exactly what our poet, our psalmist, is saying about his deity with powerful words.

I will read the Hebrew text, line by line, provide a translation and a brief comment on some of the most important aspects of the message of the psalm and when the time is up I will just stop.

You may want to follow my meditation by turning to page 261 in the Lutheran Book of Worship. You will soon realize that the version which is given there takes liberties with the Hebrew text because the English words must fit the music.

So, let us turn to Psalm 96:1-13

Verse 1

שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה שִׁיר הַדָּשׁ
šīrū lyhwh šīr ḥādāš
 rd l'adōnāy

1a Sing to YHWH/the LORD - a new song

The poet is so excited about his deity, that he invites everyone to help him in the singing and praising of his deity. And it does not do to use any old song, but a new one, a new composition, or using an old song in new ways or in a new situation.

How many times have we done this: used a well known poem or song in a new situation and then the song took on a new, totally new meaning, a meaning never noticed before. That's how lovers use old love poems.

And the poet has a name for his deity, a very specific name, namely Y-H-W-H, usually pronounced "yahweh," which is the proper name of the deity of Israel. But, instead of pronouncing the four letters Y-H-W-H (sometimes a Greek word is used, namely, *tetra-grammaton*) as "yahweh," it is a long-standing custom, among Jewish people, to substitute the Hebrew word *adōnāy*, which means "mister, lord."

I think, that Christians might want to honor this custom. It would help us to be much more careful when we use the English word "God." Out of respect for Jewish people we might even write the English word "God" as

“G-d” when referring to the deity in the Bible. It may not be a bad idea to accept this custom from our Jewish sisters and brothers. Then we, at least, know which deity, which “god” is meant.

What does Y-H-W-H mean?

You know that the name Micha, Mica, Mica, or Micha is the abbreviation of the name Mi-cha-El. Aha, the name of the deity can be dropped. Sometimes in stead of *El* the name *Yah* is substituted, so mi-cha-yah, meaning “Who is like Yah.” Yah is one of the, at least, 150 names and epithets of G-d in the Bible. It is not an abbreviation for YHWH/the LORD as many think.

YHWH is an abbreviation of the name “Yahweh-El.” *Yahweh* is a Hebrew verb meaning “to be, to be active, to be present.”

There are two possibilities:

(1) *Yahweh-El* can mean “El is present” (the verb explained as a Qal). This would then refer to the constant presence of God/G-d in every moment of our lives.

It could also mean

(2) “El causes to be” (the verb explained as a Hiphil). This would then refer to God/G-d as the creator, “El causes to be.”

I like to play with the possibility that both meanings are present when the poet uses the name YHWH/the LORD.

Now the poet pairs the first line with the next:

שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה כָּל־הָאָרֶץ: *šîrû lyhwh kol-hā āreṣ* 1b Sing to YHWH/the LORD - all the Earth
rd: *l’adōnāy*

Who is invited to help the poet sing the praises to YHWH/the LORD? Answer: the whole Earth, Mother Earth, one of the servants of the LORD.

It is not enough that only one single person sings the praises of YHWH/the LORD. It is not enough for the psalmist that only Israel sings the praises of YHWH/the LORD. If the poet would have his dreams come true then all Jews, Christians, Moslems, Methodists, Lutherans, Russians, Austrians, Latvians, and the multitude of religious communities and the multitude of ethnic and national communities would sing the praises of YHWH/the LORD ... including Israelis and Arabs. Even better: all the created world, the whole earth is invited to sing the praises of YHWH/the LORD, all of creation with all of her inhabitants.

Such a wish and invitation goes far, far beyond any ecumenical movement. Think about that! The psalmist (probably writing in the sixth century before Jesus) would be totally appalled by the puniness of any of our so-called ecumenical movements.

And now comes the third line and we all know from thousands of stories and jokes that the punch line is in the third line.

שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה בְּרַכּוּ שְׁמוֹ 2a *šîrû lyhwh bārĕkû šēmō* 2a Sing to YHWH/the LORD - bless HIS NAME
rd: *l’adōnāy*

How can I *ble*ss YHWH/the LORD? How can I bless God/G-d? Is it not supposed to be the other way around? Is not God/G-d supposed to bless me?

The Hebrew verb *barak* comes from the Hebrew word for “knee,” and means actually, “to bend the knee.” And before whom does one “bend the knee,” that is, before whom does one show respect? Answer: Before an authority, a power greater than I, greater than we -- of course only if this authority *deserves* our respect, and there is no doubt in the mind of the poet that YHWH/the LORD *deserves* respect as the creator of the creation.

But, instead of saying “Bless YHWH/the LORD,” the poet substitutes “Name.” Why? Because in Hebrew (and in some other languages) the whole character and importance of a person is expressed in the name. A name is something very powerful. If I know your name I have a certain kind of power over you. If I call you and say: “Hi Bob!” you will, probably, turn around ... you will pay attention. If I say: “Hey you!” you would not be very happy with me.

Our God/G-d has a powerful name, “*Yahweh El*,” which can mean, “God/G-d is a present, active god,” or it can mean, “God/G-d causes everything there is.” Either meaning is very powerful.

After inviting the whole earth to sing and praise God/G-d - three times - the poet now, finally, tells us the reason for the praise of God/G-d.

בְּשָׂרוֹ מִיּוֹם לְיוֹם יְשׁוּעָתוֹ: *baššērû miyyôm-lěyôm* 2b Announce from sea to sea (day to day)
 יֵשׁוּ אֲתוֹ *yěšû ātô* - HIS
 VICTORY/SALVATION/RESCUE

What is the content of this new song, this new praise of God/G-d? It is an announcement, a message, an exceedingly beautiful, happy, good message a good news. The Bible is full of good news.

The Hebrew phrase *miyyôm-lěyôm* has a double meaning in Hebrew. It can mean “from sea to sea” and also “from day to day.” “From sea to sea” obviously means from one end of the world to the other end, that is, everywhere. And “from day to day” obviously means every time, all the time.

So, the major ingredients in the Good News, which Jesus was preaching is present here, i.e., the experience of G-d is available to anyone, at any time and everywhere. How dare religious establishments restrict God to only *some* particular people, *some* designated times and *some* proper places. What nonsense according to Jesus.

And what is it that the psalmist invites everything and everyone to announce? The content of the announcement is the faith of the psalmist that his deity, YHWH/the LORD, has been, is and will continue to be victorious over all chaos and disorder. For the psalmist it is clear beyond any doubt that his deity is in control, that his deity is the master of all forces in all of creation. There is only one master of creation, namely, YHWH/the LORD, and there are no other deities, no other creators, neither divine nor human.

In the next lines the poet almost stumbles and mumbles his faith

סַפְּרוּ בְּגוֹיִם כְּבוֹדוֹ *sappērû baggôyim kěbôdô* 3a Declare/tell/count among the nations
 - HIS GLORY

It is not enough just to announce God/G-d’s victory over the chaos forces, or in other words, that YHWH/the LORD is in control of all life-giving and death-giving forces in the world, the poet also invites us “to declare, to tell” of YHWH/the LORD’s victory among all the nations of this world. Again, that is exactly what Jesus had in mind when he asked/commanded his disciples to make disciples and invite everyone to share the message that God is a present reality for everyone, at any time and in any place ... that God is worshiped in Spirit and in Truth.

The Hebrew word for “to declare,” is *sapar*, which, actually means something like “to count.” God/G-d’s victory, God/G-d’s Glory is, of course, already there among all the nations of the world, so all that is necessary is simply *to count*, to point out, the evidence of God/G-d’s glory everywhere and among all the nations of this world.

The Hebrew word, which is translated “Glory,” is *kābôd*, which means something like “weight, reputation, heaviness, importance, distinction, honor,” and therefore also, “glory.”

Aha, the poet wants to declare his faith by saying that he believes that his deity is “a heavy,” a powerful, a most powerful deity and that his deity has proven this power, reputation and distinction by creating the creation.

The poet pairs the phrase with

בְּכָל־הָעַמִּים נִפְלְאוֹתָיו: *běkol-hā ammîm niplě ôtâw* 3b among all peoples
 - HIS MARVELS/WONDERS

Nations are almost everywhere made up of many different peoples. So, not only nations, but all the many and varied peoples among those nations are invited to look at the marvels, the wonders of God/G-d’s creation. *What more do we need for mission and ministry? We could stop right here. We need not say or think anything more but go and act.*

Is this not a unifying thought? Would it not be possible for all peoples, all religions, to share in the praise of creation? Would it not be possible for all of us simply to be happy that we are alive, that we can eat, drink, go to the bathroom, see the sun, the stars, make love, have orgasms, fly planes, drive cars, go to conferences, meet friends, share ideas ... wow!

It is totally stupid and insane to torture and kill one another for religious, economic or any other reason according to our psalmist.

The psalmist continues giving us reasons for the praise of YHWH/the LORD:

כִּי גָדוֹל יְהוָה וְמִהַר לִלְמֹד	kî gādôl yhwh (rd 'adōnāy) ûmēhullāl mē'ōd	4a Because great is YHWH/the LORD and worthy of praise is the GRAND
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This line is usually translated something like this: “For great is the LORD and *greatly* to be praised. (NRSV) The word, translated “*greatly*,” I interpreted as a divine name, “the Great One, the Grand,” as in many other passages in the Psalms and in Job.

This verse exhibits an excellent example of the break-up of a double divine name, “YHWH/the LORD” + “the Grand.” First the poet uses “YHWH/the LORD” and then “the Grand.” This poetic device is used at numerous times in Hebrew poetry.

The psalmist expects opposition from people who do not believe that YHWH/the LORD is such a great deity after all. So, he tries to continue to speak about why he believes that YHWH/the LORD is worthy of praise.

And now comes a potentially terribly dangerous line:

נִרְאָה הוּא עַל-כֹּל-אֱלֹהִים:	nôrā' hū' 'al-kol- 'ēlōhîm	4b [worthy] to be in awe of HIM - beyond all gods
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Not only is YHWH/the LORD worthy of praise, YHWH/the LORD is worthy of total awe and respect, even fear, because of YHWH/the LORD's work of creation. The poet believes that it is only YHWH/the LORD who is the creator and no other deity.

Of course, humans are creatures and not the Creator. The Creator does not need any co-creators and the thought that humans can even become YHWH/the LORD and that YHWH/the LORD would morph into a human being is absurd and totally absent from the Bible and was deemed a heresy by the Church in the third century.

Of course, the poet must have been familiar with all the creation stories from Canaan, Babylonia and Egypt, but he believes that only YHWH/the LORD is the creator and that the other deities of the Babylonians and Egyptians and Canaanites are something like officers in YHWH/the LORD's court. They represent very strong and powerful forces, like death, fertility, life, sickness, storm, rain, but they are not independent deities in their own right. They are important but they are like officers, servants in G-d's court or army with YHWH/the LORD being the Commander in Chief.

And now it becomes even more dangerous. The poet pairs the expression “beyond all gods,” 'al-kol- 'ēlōhîm, with “they are but nothing,” or, the same word can be read as, “they are but rags” 'ēlîlîm.

כִּי כָל-אֱלֹהֵי הָעַמִּים אֲלִילִים	kî kol- 'ēlōhê hā'ammîm 'ēlîlîm	5a because all the gods of the peoples - are but nothing (rags)
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Did you hear the assonance, that is, the play with similar sounds, but totally different meaning of the words? Listen again: 'ēlōhîm, which means, “gods,” and 'ēlîlîm, which means either “nothing” or “rags.”

In either case this is not very flattering of the ideological, the religious views of the other peoples. Is the poet a bigot, a supremacist, a supersessionist? It surely sounds like it.

But, I suggest that the poet is far from being a supremacist. On the contrary, he is trying to unite all the peoples of the earth by inviting all of them to consider that there is only one creator deity.

Studies have shown that the idea of one deity was not a foreign concept in the ancient Near East. I dealt with this theme in a course which I taught at LSTC, a few years ago, with the title “God - As Portrayed In The Hebrew Bible.”

I add the Profile from the God course as an appendix to this presentation.

From the recent literature I would like to highlight the article by Simon Parpola, “Monotheism in Ancient Assyria,” in *One God Or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World*, edited by Barbara Nevling Porter (Transactions of the Casco Bay Assyriological Institute I. 1997) 165-209

Let’s read the next line:

וַיְהִי כִּשְׁמַיִם עֲשָׂה:	<i>wyhwš šāmayim ʿāsāh</i>	5b Yes, YHWH/the LORD - the Sky/Heavens
	<i>rd wʿadōnāy</i>	- HE made

The poet has been building up to this statement of faith. He has been building on the beliefs of creator deities among all of the peoples of the ancient Near East. Here, now, he adds that such ideas of creation are not wrong, but that they could be improved by his belief that it is YHWH/the LORD who is this one and only creator. Correct, this is potentially very dangerous and exclusive of other faiths. But, it is the honest, sincere attempt of an Israelite or Judean poet to find a *common* basis for a religious expression which all peoples could accept.

Much later the Rabbis totally overcame supremacist or supersessionist ideas by the teaching of the so-called Noachide Laws, where all peoples of the world have access to the deity of Sinai by observing some very minimal obligations, like having a legal system, i.e., having a concern for justice. Christianity and Islam continue be supersessionist to the detriment of these religious systems while also causing horrendous suffering throughout the world because of such thinking.

For an article on the “Noachide Laws,” see, e.g., Schwarzchild, Steven and Saul Berman, “Noachide Laws,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* Volume 12 Min-O (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972) 1189-1191: “The seven Noachide laws as traditionally enumerated are: the prohibition of idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual sins, theft, and eating from a living animal, as well as the injunction to establish a legal system (Tosef., Av. Zar. *:4; Sanh, 56a).”

The Hebrew word *šāmayim* is usually translated as “heavens,” or “Heaven.” Such a translation is misleading and wrong, because the word does not refer to what people usually mean by “Heaven,” but it refers to “sky,” actually to the sky-dome, which separates (in this mythology) the created world from the divine realm. Of course all of this is poetic language which tries to say something which really can not be said in words.

In YHWH/the LORD’s court YHWH/the LORD keeps the chaotic forces and the beneficial forces in check and can summon them at any time to do YHWH/the LORD’s bidding. God/G-d can make use of the forces of life and the forces of death, sickness and health, wealth and poverty, rain and drought any time YHWH/the LORD has need of them.

Two, or four of these officers of YHWH/the LORD are mentioned in verse 6:

הוֹד־וְהַדָּר לְפָנָיו	<i>hōd-wēhādār lēpānāw</i>	6a Splendor and Majesty are before HIM
עֹז וְתִפְאֵרֶת בְּמִקְדָּשׁוֹ:	<i>ʿōz wētīpʿeret bēmiqdāšō</i>	6b Strength and Beauty at HIS side (in HIS SANCTUARY)

The Hebrew word *bēmiqdāšō* is usually translated “in His sanctuary,” but this does not make much sense in this context. The basic meaning of the Hebrew word *qadaš* is “separation, setting apart” and so, paired with *lēpānāw*, “to his face,” or “in his presence,” or “before his face, before Him,” *bēmiqdāšō*, therefore, most likely, here means “at His side.”

On the other hand, the poet may have used the word here very deliberately to allude to *ḥašrôtāw*, in verse 8b, and *ḥašrôtāw* means “His Courts,” that is, the courts of the temple.

Hōd-wēhādār, “Splendor and Majesty” is either the name of one officer, which is the most likely interpretation, or *hōd-wēhādār* refers to two officers.

And this is also true of *ʿōz wētīpʿeret*, “Strength and Beauty.”

So, these officers, *hōd-wēhādār*, “Splendor and Majesty” and *ōz wētīp’eret*, “Strength and Beauty” stand at attention in YHWH/the LORD’s presence.

I find it terribly fascinating that “Strength and Beauty” are paired here. We all know the power of beauty, but, I am not so sure that strength is always beautiful. What do you think?

Verses 7-9 form the second part of the first stanza and the poet is becoming more specific and more courageous. He pairs the “sing” // “sing” // “sing” of verses 1a-2b with “give” // “give” // “give” in verses 7a-8b.

Aha, singing alone is absolutely not enough. It is an excellent beginning, but it must be followed by concrete evidence that the singing is not just phony or hypocritical ... and we all know that there is much of that going on in some religious services, i.e., beautiful worship services with lots of wonderful music, soothing sermons ... but with little or no concrete evidence of ethical, moral, right, just actions. What blaspheme!

Remember what Amos reports that God/G-d had said to him to tell the people about phony worship services, about beautiful worship services which are not accompanied by daily practice of justice and righteousness?

שנאתי מאסתי חגיגתם	<i>šānē’ī mā ‘asī’i ḥaggēkem</i>	21 I hate, I despise your feasts.
ולא אריח בעצרתים:	<i>wəlō’ āriḥ bē ‘asrōtēkem</i>	and I take no delight=do not want to smell your solemn assemblies
כי אם תעלו לי עלות ומנחתים לא ארצה	<i>kī ‘im- ta ‘ālū-lī ‘ōlōt ūminḥōtēkem lō’ ‘erṣeh</i>	22 Even though you offer Me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings (gifts) I will not delight (in them)
ושלם מריאיכם לא אביט:	<i>wəššelem mērī‘ēkem lō’ abbīṭ</i>	and the whole/peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon
הסר מעלי המון שיריך וזמרת נבלים - לא אשמע: ויגל כמים משפט וצדקה כנחל איתן:	<i>hāser mē ‘alay ḥāmōn širēkā wəzimrat nēbālēkā - lō’ ‘əšmā‘ wəyiggāl kammayim mišpāt uṣṣēdāqāh kēnaḥal ‘ētān</i>	23 Take away from me the noise of your songs (even your new songs) to the melody of your harps (organs,pianos) I will not listen but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream (RSV with slight changes by WLM)

The next few verses offer no surprises. The poet plays on the variations of the themes touched on before and the three-fold “sing” // “sing” // “sing,” in verses 1-2a, is now paired with “give” // “give” // “give.”

הנהיל ובה מימע תוחפשים	<i>hābū lyhwh mišpēḥōt ‘ammîm</i>	7a Give YHWH/the LORD - you clans/families of the peoples
הבו ליהנה כבוד ועז:	<i>rd: l’adōnāy hābū lyhwh kābōd wā ‘ōz</i>	7b Give YHWH/the LORD - glory and strength
הבו ליהנה כבוד שמו	<i>rd: l’adōnāy hābū lyhwh kēbōd šēmō</i>	8a Give YHWH/the LORD - the glory - due to HIS NAME
	<i>rd: l’adōnāy</i>	

The poet becomes even more specific. Not only nations (*gōyim*), and peoples (*‘ammîm*), but individual families (*mišpēḥōt*), are invited to praise YHWH/the LORD.

Families (*mišpēḥōt*), in biblical times, were actually something like whole clans, large extended families, with the “fathers,” the so-called patriarchs, of these clans being responsible for the wellbeing of persons and property. He does not quite mention the individual, but he is close. (The gross, and often purposeful, misunderstanding of the function of “the patriarchs,” in recent biblical studies, does us a great disservice in understanding the “patriarchal” texts.)

Again, how can a human being give glory and strength to YHWH/the LORD? The meaning is the same as to bless YHWH/the LORD, that is to acknowledge YHWH/the LORD' glory and strength.

And what is the reason for this acknowledgement? Answer: it is due to YHWH/the LORD, to His Name, His character, His role as the creator of the creation.

The “give” // “give” // “give” is specified, in the next linem, as bringing a present, a gift to YHWH/the LORD.

שְׂאֵר־מִנְחָה וּבְאוֹר לְחַצְרוֹתָיו:	<i>šě ū-minhāh ūbō ū lēḥašrôtāw</i>	8b Bring a present/offering/gift and enter HIS COURT
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The poet, of course, wants us to remember verses 2b and 3a:

2b Announce from sea to sea (day to day) - HIS VICTORY/SALVATION/RESCUE

3a Declare/tell/count among the nations - HIS GLORY

So, how does one announce and declare God/G-d's victory and glory? How does one sing a new song? Answer: by actually bringing a gift to God/G-d.

Aha, this assumes that the temple was standing and that it was possible to bring sacrifices to YHWH/the LORD in the temple. So, this refers either to a time before 586 BCE (when the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians) or to a time after 515 BCE (when the temple was rebuilt by those who returned from the Babylonian exile).

Our forebears in the faith, the Judeans, the people of YHWH/the LORD, had learned many important things in Exile. Among other things, they had learned to substitute the whole sacrificial system with prayer. Yes, can you imagine that? This would be something like for Christians to be forced to substitute the Lord's Supper with something totally different. This is not a joke. It may, actually, happen one day.

But even prayer is not enough, if it is not sincere and followed with acts of righteousness and justice. The gift I can bring to God/G-d is my whole life. I have received life from God/G-d and as a biblical believer therefore I can not but live my life in daily service according to the vision God/G-d has of human life, namely, in total adjustment to God/G-d's will.

Ha, another association with the life of Jesus. That is exactly what Jesus did and asked his followers do imitate. Jesus did not ask his fellow Jews to join the Constantinian Christian Church and confess the Nicene Creed.

The next line makes this even clearer:

הִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לַיהוָה בְּהִרְרֵת-קִדְשׁ	<i>hištaḥǎwû lyhwh bēḥadrat-qōdeš rd: l'adōnāy</i>	9a bow down to YHWH/the LORD - when the HOLY ONE appears (in holy array)
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The Hebrew word *hištaḥǎwû*, “bow down, prostrate yourselves,” is similar to the word *barak*, “bend the knee,” but now the awe, reverence, amazement, dread, in the presence of YHWH/the LORD is so overwhelming that the poet invites everyone not only “to bend the knee,” but to stretch out flat on the ground before YHWH/the LORD.

The verb *hištaḥǎwû* parses as an impv. mp. št (causative reflective) from the root *hwh*. Prior to the discovery of the Ugaritic tablets (1929) the forms of this verb were parsed as Htd forms from a root *šḥh* (i.e., with metathesis), but this was totally unsatisfactory. See, e.g., Seow, C. L., *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987.

As some of you know I know a little bit about Biblical Hebrew and Biblical Poetry with an emphasis on Northwest Semitic Studies which includes Ugaritic.

I might just as well include here the conviction that theological students, pastors, bishops ... and anyone who has the responsibility to interpret the Hebrew Bible ... MUST know Hebrew well. There is no debate about this. Without such knowledge one forfeits any right to say anything about the Bible. Period.

Martin Luther called the fact of clergy being uninformed about Hebrew a sin. I am not making this up. See my article, “How Should the Old Testament Be Read?” *Dialog* 31 (Summer 1992) 190-195. See also, “Why Study Hebrew,” *Dialog* (A Journal of Theology) 18 (1979) 61-62.

The fact is that I have come to understand and experience G-d, deeply, ONLY since I know Hebrew well. I have no comprehension why clergy pompously insist on being uninformed about Hebrew. Possible interpretations are laziness and a purposeful Christian anti-Jewish attitude fostered by the Church.

That theological institutions participate in this sham, i.e., sin, is mind boggling, especially after 1945. Does the Church, actually, prefer uninformed functionaries in stead of serious students and preachers of the Word from G-D.

It has been my experience (since 1957!) as a teacher of religion, parish and campus pastor and professor of Old Testament that people hunger for intelligent, knowledgeable, competent pastors.

It is not true that Hebrew is hard to learn. My career counselor in Vienna told me - after looking over my documents - "Herr Michel, do not aspire to a profession in which you have to know languages ... you are too dumb." Well, I speak several languages and have learned many more. Anyone can learn Hebrew.

The Hebrew phrase *bēhadrat-qōdeš* can be translated, as I just did: "when the HOLY ONE appears," taking the word "holy" as a name of God/G-d. Scholars had great difficulty with this expression and some translate it "bow down to YHWH/the LORD in holy array." this would mean, that we are asked not only to bring gifts to YHWH/the LORD, but to bring them in our finest, festive garments.

I prefer the translation "bow down to YHWH/the LORD - when the HOLY ONE appears," because it fits the context. When do I prostrate myself? Of course, when the one I worship "appears."

The poet now goes even a step further: not only the people of this earth are invited to prostrate themselves before YHWH/the LORD, but the whole earth:

חילוּ מִפְּנֵי קֹדֶשׁ ה' *hîlû mippānāw kol-hā'āreš* 9b tremble/shudder before HIM
- all the Earth

"All the Earth." Why should the Earth shudder, pulsate with awe? Because the Earth is the creation of YHWH/the LORD and total awe before YHWH/the LORD is quite appropriate for all creatures.

The poet expresses a wonderful vision for all of humanity and all of creation. Not only humans but the whole creation is invited to pulsate with the awe and glory of YHWH/the LORD.

THE POET COULD NOT STATE THE WHOLE PROGRAM OF THE BIBLE BETTER. Just imagine what would happen if only a few of us would actually follow the invitation of the poet and sing such a new song: well, it would literally shake up everyone and everything. Our lives would change, our economies would change, peace and justice would break out. No more muggings, rapes, murders, wars. Fantastic!

Next: verses 10-13 form the second stanza of this poem and verse 10 contains the central message of the psalm.

אָמְרוּ בַּגּוֹיִם יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ *imrû baggōyîm yhw̄h mālāk* 10a Say among the nations
rd: *ʾadōnāy* - "YHWH/the LORD reigns/is King

What is the content of the singing, blessing, announcing, declaring, giving, bringing, prostrating?

It is to say to everyone in this world: It is YHWH/the LORD who is in charge, it is YHWH/the LORD who rules, it is YHWH/the LORD who is the creator and that is the reason why the world will not totter and stumble and fall into utter chaos.

Who is in charge? Not democracy, not communism, not Hitler, not Stalin, not the American enterprise, not the Babylonians, the Lutherans, the Canaanites, the Catholics, the Israelis, the Arabs, not ... (fill in the blanks).

Because YHWH/the LORD governs the world, therefore, the poet continues:

אֲרֵ-תִּכּוֹן תִּבְּל בַּל-תִּמּוֹט *ap-tikkôn tebel bal-timmôt* 10b surely established is the world
- no more to totter

The world is *tikkôn* (Niphal imperfect 3 f s), which means something like, "established." The root of the word is *kân*, which means, "to be firm, prepared, ready, fixed, (in a moral sinse) be directed aright," etc.

I am an avid reader of a number of newspapers, journals and magazines. Among them *Tikkun: A Bimonthly Jewish Critique of Politics, Culture & Society*. Editor: Michael Lerner. (te.kun) To mend, repair and transform the world). You may want to consider reading in this magazine also.

The world is ready and prepared for great and wonderful events, because YHWH/the LORD created it and then YHWH/the LORD gave this world to humans to administer this world, to cultivate this world, in God/G-d's stead and always responsible to the owner of the world for every single deed. YHWH/the LORD created a stable, firm and orderly world.

But, creation alone is not enough. To bring a human baby into this world is not enough and can even be a sin. The real work starts after the baby is born. The potential human needs constant care and guidance from concerned parents and the larger family and the whole human community.

So also God/G-d does not just create. God/G-d brings to the world a moral purpose, a moral program:

יְדִין עַמִּים בְּמִישָׁרִים: *yādîn 'ammîm bĕmêšārîm* 10c HE judges the peoples
- with equity/fairness/uprightness."

The creator, the owner of the world and of people has the right and the duty to govern, to judge. And how does YHWH/the LORD govern, judge? Answer: with equity, with fairness, with uprightness.

The root of *mêšārîm*, translated "equity," is *yāšar*, which means, "to be straight, smooth, right, upright."

Equity, fairness, straightforwardness, uprightness ... this is the moral purpose for the world and this is the model which all humans are invited to follow.

If YHWH/the LORD is accepted as the creator, as the ruler of this world and if YHWH/the LORD rules with equity then YHWH/the LORD's ambassadors and cultivators of this world, that is, all humans, must do likewise, namely, govern with equity, with fairness, with uprightness. They simply must be "straight" in their dealings with one another.

What a novel idea, what a new song? Or is it so novel, is it so new?

Just imagine if we would begin singing this new song.

Let's say everyone in the world would stop ... well, what is your favorite sin? ... Oh, let's take, for example ... stealing. Let's just imagine that from this very moment on all humans (including all Jews and Christians) would refrain from taking what does not belong to them.

What would happen? Much of human insecurity and pain would disappear. All muggings, robberies, rapes, and wars would come to an end. Does anyone have any idea how many billions and billions and billions of dollars would be saved, or ... would all economies of the world simply collapse.

Surely, YHWH/the LORD has established the world not to totter into chaos.

What have we humans done, including some very religious people? We live with constant insecurity, fear and chaos. And some of this fear and injustice is imposed on you and on me by fellow Christians. Have you ever had this experience?

What does YHWH/the LORD do?. YHWH/the LORD rules, governs, judges all the peoples (religious and non-religious) of this world with equity. There are no favors, no exceptions.

It really does not matter to God/G-d if you are religious are not religious. What matters to God/G-d is that we all adopt God/G-d's policy of *mêšārîm*, "equity, fairness, straightforwardness, uprightness," in our dealings with one another. That's the new song. Why not try it!

There is only one moral authority in this world and not many. This is what the poet proclaims.

And this is what it means to believe that there is one God/G-d and that this one God/G-d is YHWH/the LORD. If you want to believe and live according to many different moral authorities, gods, fine, go ahead, and see where this will lead you. Will the earth be established, will the earth be a secure, happy place? There are standard traffic laws. Just imagine the chaos if every single person would drive the way he or she wants to?

The poet is extremely excited about this new song, this renewed song in his own life and history. He is overjoyed that it is YHWH/the LORD who governs the world and all of her peoples.

I find it fascinating that the biblical poet did not use the the specific Israelite covenant word "Torah," which means, "teaching, guidance, revelation." I think that the poet did this on purpose, because he wanted to achieve a universal appeal.

Just imagine what would happen if we would stop using our Lutheran specific terminology and speak in terms the whole world would understand. What a new idea, what a new song?

Next. The rule of YHWH/the LORD has world-wide repercussions. It effects space, the earth, the sea (and every creature that fills it), the fields (and everything that grows on it) and every single tree (with its beauty and its fruits) in every forest and grove.

יְשׁמְחוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְתִגַּל הָאָרֶץ	<i>yišmēḥû haššāmayîm wētāgēl</i>	11a Let the Sky/Heavens rejoice and Earth be glad
יָרֵעַם הַיָּם וּמַלְאוֹ:	<i>hā'āreṣ yir'am hayyām ûmēlō'ô</i>	11b the Sea/Ocean and what fills it roar
יִדְּשׁוּ זֵלְעִי וּבְרִשְׁאֵל־לֶכֶן	<i>ya'ālōz sādāy wēkol- āšer-bô</i>	12a the Field/Highland and everything on it exult 12b Then all the Trees of the Woods/trees will shout for joy
אֲזַיְרָנֶנּוּ כְּלִי־עֲצֵי־יָעָר:	<i>āz yěrannēnû kol- āšê-yā'ar</i>	13a before YHWH/the LORD - because HE comes
לִפְנֵי יְהוָה כִּי בָא	<i>lipnê yhw h kī bā' rd: l'adōnāy</i>	13b because HE comes
כִּי בָא לִישְׁפֹּט הָאָרֶץ	<i>kī bā' lišpōt hā'āreṣ</i>	- to judge/govern the Earth

Fantastic! All of creation rejoices because YHWH/the LORD governs the world, not humans, not the Church, not the communists, the capitalists, the environmentalists.

These lines deserve a long and detailed study and meditation, but, let's concentrate on the last two lines.

In lines 13c and 13d, the poet becomes even more specific and tells us what he means by his sentence in verse 10c, "HE, (that is YHWH/the LORD) judges the peoples - with equity/fairness/uprightness."

The general word *mêšārîm*, "equity," (in verse 10c is now followed by two, very concrete and specific words: *šedeq*, "rightness/righteousness," which is paired with *emûnāh*, "certainty, faithfulness."

I you would like to inform yourself about the meaning of the Hebrew word *šedeq* you might want to read the article "Righteousness in the OT," *IDB IV* (1962), 80-85. "... righteousness is in the OT the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship ..." (p. 80). Jeuss lived with this meaning of "righteousness." Paul, Augustine and Luther did not.

Again, I admire the poet for not using culture specific, religion specific terminology. These terms do not stamp him as an Israelite or Judean. Marvelous. We can learn something from this genius.

Lines 13c and 13d:

יְשְׁפֹט־תִּבְל	<i>yišpōt-tebel bēšedeq</i>	13c HE governs the World - with HIS
בְּצִדְקָה	<i>wē'ammîm bē'emûnātô</i>	rightness/righteousness/morality 13d and the peoples
וְעִמֵּים בְּאֱמוּנָתוֹ:		- with HIS Truth/Faithfulness/Certainty

These three words are of utmost importance. And, of course, using three different terms to express one basic idea, is a poetic device which indicates emphasis.

The poet is very smart. He begins with a general term first: *mêšārîm*, which means something like "equity, straightness" (v. 10c).

The poet illustrates what he means by *mêšārîm*, "equity, straightness" by using two extremely important biblical terms: *šedeq*, "rightness, righteousness," which is paired with *emûnāh*, "certainty, faithfulness."

So, our task is, to understand these terms.

The word and concept of *šedeq*, “righteousness,” is not really hard to understand. We live it and do it all the time.

In the Hebrew mind *šedeq*, “righteousness,” means: to fulfill the demands and expectations of a relationship. It’s that simple.

We all live in many relationships and most of the time we do know quite clearly what is expected in a certain relationship. Sometimes we even write up a contract and we can even look up what the expectations are.

Is it possible to fulfill the demands of particular relationships? Of course. You do it all the time. Therefore, according to the Bible, you are *šāddîq*, “righteous” when you fulfill the demands of a relationship.

There is no such thing as absolute “righteousness.” What’s right in one relationship is a sin in another relationship. If I were to commit certain acts with you as I do in my relationship, e.g., with my wife, I would lose my reputation.

By the way, my wife is Latvian. Since Latvia regained her independence in the Fall of 1991 my wife spends as much time as possible in Latvia to help with the rebuilding of the country, after the horrors of the invasion by the Nazis and the more than fifty years of occupation by the Soviets. Can we both continue to be *šāddîq* in our relationship? Of course.

The Bible goes even a step further, it equates “righteousness” with “holiness.” So when I do the right thing in a relationship I am not only *šāddîq*, “righteous,” I am also *qādôš*, “holy.”

You may remember that YHWH/the LORD, according to Leviticus 19:3, demands of his people:

קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ,	<i>qēdôšîm tihyû</i> , “holy you can be,”
כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי,	<i>kî qādôš ʾanî</i> , “because holy am I,”
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.	<i>yhw̄h (rd, ʾadōnāy) ʾēlōhēkem</i> , YHWH/the LORD, your Deity.”

Jesus picks up this theme, practically quoting Leviticus 19:3. But, instead of “holy,” or “righteous,” he is quoted of using the Greek word for “perfect:”

“Be perfect, therefore,
as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Is this possible? Of course it is. If it would not be possible then it would be stupid of Jesus to tell us, command us, to be perfect, holy, righteous.

Will I fail, will I fall short in some relationships? Of course, but then I repent, get back on the course, pay my fine, and I listen to Jesus, who said to the woman caught in adultery: “go and sin no more.” We can do the same according to Jesus.

The word *ʿemûnāh*, can be translated “certainty, faithfulness, trust.” It comes from a root very familiar to you, namely, *ʾmn*, *ʾāman*, *ʾāmen*, which means something like “to prove oneself steady, trustworthy, faithful, to be firmly established.” You have said the word “Amen,” a thousand times. It means “surely, certainly.” Is it possible to trust a person? Of course. Have some people proven to you that they can not be trusted? Of course.

I will probably never learn that I can not even trust a fellow Christian. I have been so seriously disappointed, especially with Christians who have power over me, that my very life was in danger.

All of the human experiences of rightness, righteousness, of trust and faithfulness are wonderful. Why? Because they are glimpses of God/G-d’s *šedeq*, “righteousness,” God/G-d’s *ʿemûnāh*, “faithfulness.”

God/G-d does not govern this world and all of her peoples according to our notions of rightness and faithfulness.

The poet closes his poem with the strong affirmation: YHWH/the LORD governs the world - with HIS rightness / righteousness / morality and the peoples - with HIS truth / faithfulness / certainty.

The beautiful thing is that all humans - in all of their ethnic, national, linguistic, cultural, geographic variety - can participate in God/G-d’s rightness, God/G-d’s faithfulness, simply by *doing* what is right in any given culture, simply by being trustworthy in any relationship.

Is this message worthy of singing a new song? Just imagine what would happen if all peoples would adopt this message as their theme song?

I have adopted it as my theme song in my life and every day the song changes rhythms and instruments, but the conductor remains the same: YHWH/the LORD, my deity, the creator of the world and of all peoples - which, therefore makes space, earth, oceans, trees and all of you my brothers and sisters.

And just like the poet of Psalm 96 tried to do so I also would like to invite you:

Sing to YHWH/the LORD!

Announce His marvelous wonders every day and everywhere!

Give to YHWH/the LORD the glory due to God/G-d through prayer and deeds!

Say to everyone, in words and deeds,

YHWH/the LORD governs this world and all of her peoples,

YHWH/the LORD governs with rightness and with faithfulness.

Once more, with feeling: Who is invited to sing a new, a re-newed song? Jews? Christians? All humans? The psalmist encourages all humans, including Jews and Christians, to be ever more imaginative in their different ways to praise God/G-d, the one God/G-d, through equity, righteousness, justice and faithfulness and truth, and to live out our human lives always transparent of God/G-d's vision for all humans and for the whole world because God/G-d is the creator of us all and we are all siblings.

Question: Can we do this?

Answer: Yes. But are we? Will we? These are not just words, words words.

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