

**SING A NEW SONG:
A MEDITATION ON PSALM 96**

A lecture presented
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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.

שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ

1a *šrû lyhwh* (rd: *ʿadōnāy*) *šr ḥādāš*

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

The poet is so excited about his god, 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 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 YHWH, usually pronounced “yahweh,” which is the proper name of the deity of Israel. But, instead of pronouncing the four letters Y-H-W-H (in Greek *tetragrammaton*) as “yahweh,” it is a long-standing custom, among Jewish people, to substitute the Hebrew word *ʿadōnāy*, which means “mister, lord.” I think, that Christians should honor this custom. It would help us to be much more careful when we use the English word “God.” Out of respect Jewish people 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.

What does YHWH mean?

You know 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, “Who is like Yah.” Yah is another name for YHWH and it is not an abbreviation for YHWH/the LORD as many think.

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

I think that both meanings are present when the poet uses the name YHWH/the LORD.

The poet pairs the first line with the next:

שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה כָּל־הָאָרֶץ:

1b *šîrû lyhwh* (rd: *l'adōnāy*) *kol-hā ʿāreṣ*

1b Sing to YHWH/the LORD - all the earth

Who is invited to help the poet sing the praises to YHWH/the LORD? Answer: the whole earth.

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 he 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. 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. The psalmist, probably of the sixth century before Jesus, would be totally appalled by the puniness of any of our ecumenical movements of our own century.

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

שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה בְּרַכּוּ שְׁמוֹ

2a *šîrû lyhwh* (rd: *l'adōnāy*) *bārĕkû šēmô*

2a Sing to YHWH/the LORD - bless HIS NAME

How can I bless 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 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.

בְּשִׁירוֹ מִיּוֹם־לְיוֹם יְשׁוּעָתוֹ:

2b *baššîrû miyyôm-lÿyôm yĕšû ʾātô*

2b Announce from sea to sea (day to day) - 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.

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.

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, the creator, and there are no other deities, no other creators, neither divine nor human. And this one creator YHWH/the LORD.

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

ספרו בגוים כבודו

3a *sappĕrû baggôyim kĕbôdô*

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.

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 god 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

בְּכֹל־הָעַמִּים נִפְלְאוֹתָיו:

3b *bĕkol-hā‘ammîm niplĕ‘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.

Is this not a unifying thought? Would it not be possible for all peoples 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, go to the bathroom, see the sun, the stars, fly planes, drive cars, go to conferences, meet friends, share ideas.

It is totally stupid and insane to torture and kill one another for religious, economic or any other reason according to our psalmist. (accept, of course, self defense. Just read the Book of Judges if you do not believe me)

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

כִּי גָדוֹל יְהוָה וּמְהֵלָל מְאֹד

4a *kî gādôl yhw̄h* (rd *ʿadōnāy*) *ûmēhullāl mē ʿōd*

4a Because great is YHWH/the LORD and worthy of praise is the GRAND

This line is usually translated something like this:

“For great is the LORD and greatly to be praised. (NRSV)

The word “greatly,” is interpreted as a divine name, “the Great One, the Grand.”

The line 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.”

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-כָּל-אֱלֹהִים:

4b *nôrāʿ hûʿ ʿal-kol- ʿlōhîm*

4b [worthy] to be in awe of HIM - beyond all gods

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, the poet must have been familiar with all the creation stories from 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 ‘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,” *ʿal-kol-ʿlōhîm*, with “they are but nothing,” or “they are but rags” *ʿlîlîm*.

כִּי כָל-אֱלֹהֵי הָעַמִּים אֱלִילִים

5a *kî kol- ʿlōhê hā ʿammîm ʿlîlîm*

5a because all the gods of the peoples - are but nothing (rags)

Did you hear the assonance, that is, the play with similar sounds, but totally different meaning of the words? Listen again: *ʿlōhîm*, which means, “gods,” and *ʿlîlîm*, 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? 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.

Let’s read the next line:

וַיְהִי שָׁמַיִם עֲשָׂה:

5b *wyhwh* (rd *wʿadōnāy*) *šāmayim ʿāšāh*

5b Yes, YHWH/the LORD - the sky/heavens/space - 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.

The Hebrew word *šamayim* is usually translated as “heavens,” or “Heaven.” Such a translation is very misleading, because the word does not refer to “heaven,” in our sense, but to the “sky,” actually the shydome, which separates the created world from the divine realm. The translation “space” is, therefore, I think, very appropriate for our time. Today, the Hebrew poet would say that beyond space, which is a part of creation, lies the divine domain, the abode, the imperial court of YHWH/the LORD. Of course this is all 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 (or gods) and the beneficial forces (or gods) 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 death, sickness and health, wealth and poverty, rain and drought and 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

6a *hōd-wēhādār ləpānāw*

6a Splendor/Honor and Majesty are before HIM

עֹז וְתִפְאֵרֶת בְּמִקְדָּשׁוֹ:

6b *ōz wētīp’eret bēmiqdāšō*

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 *ləpānāw*, “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 *ōz wētīp’eret*, “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, that is, beautiful worship services with lots of wonderful music, but with little or no concrete evidence of ethical, moral, right, just, daily behavior.

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?

5:21	<i>śānē ʾî mā ʾastî ḥaggêkem</i>	שָׂנְאֵתִי מֵאַסְתִּי חַגֵּיכֶם
	<i>wēlōʾ ʾārīaḥ bē ʾuṣrōtêkem</i>	וְלֹא אֲרִיחַ בְּעֲצָרֹתֵיכֶם:
5:22	<i>kî ʾim- ta ʾālû-lî ʿlôt ūminḥōtêkem</i>	כִּי אִם-תַּעֲלוּ-לִי עֹלוֹת וּמִנְחֹתֵיכֶם
	<i>lōʾ ʾerṣeh</i>	לֹא אֲרַצֶּה
	<i>wěšelem mēri ʾêkem</i>	וְשָׁלֵם מְרִיאֵיכֶם
	<i>lōʾ ʾabbîṭ</i>	לֹא אֲבִיט:
5:23	<i>hāser mē ʾalay ḥāmôn širêkā</i>	הֲסֵר מִעָלַי הַמִּזֵּן שִׁירְךָ
	<i>wēzimrat nēbālêkā - lōʾ ʾešmāʿ</i>	וְזִמְרַת נְבָלֶיךָ - לֹא אֲשָׁמַע:
5:24	<i>wēyiggal kammayim mišpāt</i>	וַיַּגַּל כַּמַּיִם מִשְׁפָּט
	<i>ûšēdāqāh kēnaḥal ʾētān</i>	וַיַּצְדֵּקָה כְּנַחַל אֵיתָן:

- 5:21 “I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in (I do not want to smell) your solemn assemblies.
- 5:22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings (gifts)
I will not accept them,
and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts
I will not look upon.
- 5:23 Take away from me the noise of your songs (even your new songs);
to the melody of your harps (and organs and pianos) - I will not listen.
- 5:24 But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
(RSV, with a few additions from 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.”

הָבוּ לַיהוָה מִשְׁפָּחוֹת עַמִּים

- 7a *hābû lyhwh (rd: lʾadōnāy) mišpəḥôt ʾammîm*
- 7a Give YHWH/the LORD - you clans/families of the peoples

הָבוּ לַיהוָה כְּבוֹד וְעֹז:

7b *hābû lyhwh* (rd: *l'adōnāy*) *kābôd wā ʕz*

7b Give YHWH/the LORD - glory and strength

הָבוּ לַיהוָה כְּבוֹד שְׁמוֹ

8a *hābû lyhwh* (rd: *l'adōnāy*) *kēbôd šēmô*

8a Give YHWH/the LORD - the glory - due to HIS NAME

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

Families (*mišpēḥôt*), in biblical times, were actually 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.

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.

שִׂאוּ מִנְחָה וּבֹאוּ לְחַצְרוֹתָיו:

8b *šē ʾû-minḥāh ūbō ʾû lḥašrôtāw*

8b Bring a present/offering/gift and enter HIS COURT

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 us Christians substituting the Lord’s Supper with something totally different.

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.

The next line makes this even clearer:

הִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לַיהוָה בְּהַדְרַת־קֹדֶשׁ

9a *hištaḥăwû lyhwh* (rd: *l'adōnāy*) *bēhadrat-qōdeš*

9a bow down to YHWH/the LORD - when the HOLY ONE appears (in holy array)

The Hebrew word *hištaḥăwû*, “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 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:

הֵילוּ מִפְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:

9b *ḥîlû mippānāw kol-hā'āreṣ*

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 בְּגוֹיִם יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ

10a *imrû baggôyîm yhwh* (rd: *adōnāy*) *mālāk*

10a Say among the nations - “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:

אֲרֵךְ-תְּכוֹן תִּבֶּל בַּל-תִּמּוֹט

10b *ʾap-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, “established.” The root of the word is *kân*, which means, “to be firm, prepared, ready.”

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. 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:

דִּין עַמִּים בְּמִישָׁרִים:

10c *yādîn ʾammîm 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” with 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 just, even partially, 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 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. Is this right?

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 or 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. 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 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.

יְשׁוּחֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְתִגַּל הָאָרֶץ

11a *yîšmêḥû haššāmayîm wētāgēl hā'āreš*

11a Let the sky/heavens/space rejoice and earth be glad

יַרְעֵם הַיָּם וּמַלְאֵוֹ:

11b *yir'ām hayyām ûmēlō'ô*

11b the sea/ocean and what fills it roar

יַעֲלוּ שְׂדֵי וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ

12a *ya'ālōz šāday wěkol-āšer-bô*

12a the field/highland and everything on it exult

אֵז וְרִנְנוּ כָּל-עֲצֵי-יַעַר:

12b *āz yērannēnû kol-āšê-yā'ar*

12b Then all the trees of the woods/woodland trees will shout for joy

לִפְנֵי יְהוָה כִּי בָא

13a *lipnê yhwh* (rd: *l'adōnāy*) *kī bā'*

13a before YHWH/the LORD - because HE comes

כִּי לִשְׁפֹט כִּי
הָאָרֶץ

13b *kī bā'lišpōt hā'āreš*

13b because HE comes - 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 *mēšārîm*, "equity," (in verse 10c is now followed by two, very concrete and specific words: *šedeq*, "rightness/righteousness," which is paired with *'emûnāh*, "certainty, faithfulness."

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

Lines 13c and 13d:

יִשְׁפֹּט־תֵּבֵל בְּשֶׁדֶק

13c *yīšpōt-tebel bēšedeq*

13c HE governs the world - with HIS rightness/righteousness/morality

וְעַמִּים בְּאֱמוּנָתוֹ:

13d *wě'ammîm bē'emûnātô*

13d and the peoples - 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: *mēšārîm*, which means something like "equity, straightness" (v. 10c).

The poet illustrates what he means by *mēšārîm*, "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 with my wife I would lose my position.

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 more than fifty years of occupation by the Soviets. This Summer she will be gone for three months. Have I committed adultery. Of course not.

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 *šāddīq*, “righteous,” I am also *qādōš*, “holy.”

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

קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ, *qēdōšīm tihyû*, “holy you can be,”

כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי, *kī qādōš ānī*, “because holy am I,”

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, *yhwh (rd, ʾdōnāy) ʾēlōhēkem*, YHWH/the LORD, your Deity.”

Jesus picks up this theme, practically quoting Leviticus 19:3. But, instead of “holy,” or “righteous,” he uses the word “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 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.

The word *ʾemūnāh*, can be translated “certainty, faithfulness, trust.” It comes from a root very familiar to you, namely, *āman*, *āmen*, 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 *ʾemūnāh*, “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.

I hope that you agree.

Thank you for you attention.

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