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DID KING DAVID HAND IN FIRST DRAFTS AS FINAL PAPERS?

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I have always found it much easier to connect with David the character in Sefer Shmuel than with David the lyricist of Sefer Tehillim. One David is at least capable of brutal honesty when looking in the spiritual mirror, although he sometimes has to be dragged to the mirror. The other seems so often (but certainly not always) to be possessed of perfect confidence in his current righteousness, in his being deserving of Divine assistance. So it is an opportunity to be seized when those personae intersect, as they do in the haftarah of Parashat Haazinu, where the David of II Shmuel 22 recites a poem that also finds its place as Psalm 18.

Let us begin before the beginning. In both Shmuel and Tehillim, our poem is introduced as having been spoken by David to G-d "on the day that G-d saved him from the palm of all his enemies, and from the palm (Shmuel) or hand (Tehillim) of Saul". One problem is that David was not saved from "all his enemies" on a single day. A second problem, which the reader may or may not find important, is that the introductions are slightly different. Tehillim speaks of the "hand of Shaul," whereas Shmuel speaks of the "palm of Shaul." Thus Tehillim has a sharper distinction between Shaul and the enemies than Shmuel does. This is just the first of many differences. For example, after the introduction, Tehillim opens with a verse that is simply not present in Shmuel. A third question – not necessarily problem – is on what basis the author of Shmuel chooses which poems to include, as Tehillim includes several poems whose introductions link them to events in Shmuel, which the latter nonetheless does not include.

Abravanel seeks to resolve all these difficulties in one brilliant swoop. He begins by recording the dominant view in his day:

חשבו המפרשים

ששדוד המלך עליו השלום בסוף ימיו

אחרי שהצילו הקדוש ברוך הוא מכל אויביו
חבר השירה הזאת
להודות להשם הודאה כוללת על כל תשועותיו,
ולכן הושמה במקום הזה
באחרית המלחמות ותכליתם.

*The commentators thought
that King David – peace upon him! – at the end of his days
after The Holy Blessed One had saved him from all his enemies
composed this poem
to offer Hashem a comprehensive acknowledgement for all His
salvations.*

*Therefore the poem was placed here [in II Samuel]
in the aftermath of all the wars and at their conclusion.*

The commentators took this position in response to "all his enemies". Abravanel takes a different approach.

ודעתי נוטה
שהשירה הזאת דוד חברה בבחרותו
בהיותו בתוך צרותיו
ועשאה כוללת לכל הצרות,
כדי שבכל פעם ופעם שהיה הקדוש ברוך הוא מצילו מכל צרה
היה משורר השירה הזאת,
והיתה אם כן שגורה בפיו
כדי להודות להשם על כל תשועה שעשה עמו להפליא.

*But my mind inclines to the opinion
That David composed this song in his youth
when he was in the midst of his troubles
and made it comprehensive for all troubles
so that each and every time The Holy Blessed One saved him
from any trouble
he would recite this poem
so that it was fluent in his mouth
in order to acknowledge Hashem for each amazing salvation that
He did for him*

ספר תהלים

חברו דוד המלך עליו השלום בסוף ימיו
להנהגת המתבודד

ולסדר לפניו התפללות והתחנונים
אשר יאמר ויתפלל האדם בעת צרותיו

By contrast, Sefer Tehillim

*King David – peace upon him! composed it at the end of his life
as a guide for the meditator*

and to arrange for him the prayers and pleadings

that a person should say and pray in his time of troubles

Tehillim reflects the mature David's reworking of his personal works into a universally usable psalter. Abravanel then seeks to explain all 74(!) differences between the two versions on this basis. Some of these are substantive; some of them just reflect greater sensitivity to aesthetics. For example, the "palm" of Shaul is changed to his "hand" because that avoided using the same word twice in a row. Note that Abravanel in his introduction to Yirmiyah similarly explains the numerous *qeri/qetiv*'s in that book as the product of editing later in life, when Yirmiyah's knowledge of grammar had deepened.

Why are only some of David's relevant poems included in the narrative of Shmuel? Abravanel here in my humble opinion takes his theory a step too far:

כבר אמרתי בהקדמה הכוללת אשר הקדמתי לפירוש הספרים
האלה

בהתחלת ספר יהושע,

שהיתה הסבה בו להיות השירה הזאת כוללת לכל התשועות

ומפאת כללותה נזכרה בספר הזה,

ולא נזכרו שאר המזמורים להיותם פרטיים

שנאמרו על ענינים מיוחדים.

*I wrote previously in my general introduction to the interpretation
of these books,*

at the beginning of Sefer Yehoshua,

*that the reason was because this poem is comprehensive of all
salvations*

and on account of its comprehensives it was cited in this book

*whereas the other songs were not included because they were
personal,*

about specific matters.

This seems backward. Shouldn't a narrative about specific characters *davka* be interested in what makes those characters specific, rather than in what makes them generic? Perhaps this is imposing a modern consideration – pre -20th century literary theorists thought that Dickens had succeeded because he captured types so well, whereas moderns tend to argue

that his characters transcend the stereotypes they nonetheless effectively convey.

I generally argue that poems are included in Biblical narratives because they convey a subjective viewpoint that supplements the perspective of the omniscient narrator. The poem is included here because we want to know not only what happened, but how David felt about what happened.

If Abravanel is correct that this is David's generic poem acknowledging that G-d had saved him from enemies, then I think we can offer a different reason for the change in caption between Shmuel and Tehillim. Shmuel includes the poem to show that David at the time perceived Saul as just another enemy; "from the palm of all his enemies and from the palm of Saul." Tehillim, however, offers the mature later perspective that Saul was different, and so "from the hand of Saul".

But truth be told, I am not so convinced that this as a generic poem said as-is about episodes with many enemies before it was associated with Saul. My ground is the language of verses 3(4)-6(7):

מִהָלֵל אֶקְרָא יְקוֹק וּמִן־אֹיְבָיִי אֲנֹשֶׁעַ:
אֶפְפוּנֵי חֲבִיל־מָוֶת וְנִחַלִּי בְלִיעַל יְבַעֲתוּנִי:
חֲבִילִי שָׁאוּל סָבְבוּנִי קִדְמֵי מִנִּי מִקֹּשֵׁי מָוֶת:

Is it coincidence that the words for enemy and the consonants for Saul appear so early, so close together, and in this order? Or is this rather a literarily signal that this is not a generic poem, but rather one written specifically to convey David's feelings at the point when Shaul had – perhaps to his surprise and dismay – become a real enemy?

Where Abravanel's theory nonetheless helps me, perhaps ironically, is in suggesting a different approach to Tehillim. If we accept that Tehillim is intended as a series of setpieces to read in appropriate moods – a sort of early Rabbi's Guide – we do not need to see them as capturing the whole complexity of the great religious personality, except perhaps taken as a whole. All poetry loses a certain amount of complexity when it becomes liturgical, and there can be great liturgy that is stultifyingly unreadable as poetry in any other context. The capacity to write poetry that can function spectacularly as liturgy, but is nonetheless not limited to its liturgical meaning, is rare, and perhaps a key to developing a portrait that compellingly integrates the David of Shmuel with the David of Tehillim.