

Dr. Stuart W. Halpern

The Battle Was Over Before It Began: An Examination of Tehillim Chapter 93 (Hashem Malakh Gei'ut Laveish) and Its Place in the Shabbat Liturgy

The Lord reigns. He is robed in glory.
The Lord is robed, girded with strength.
The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved.
Your throne stands firm as of old; You are eternal.
Rivers lift up, Lord, rivers lift up their voice, rivers lift up their -crashing waves.
Mightier than the noise of many waters, than the mighty waves of the sea is the Lord on high.
Your testimonies are very sure; holiness adorns Your house, Lord, for evermore.⁷⁰

Tehillim Chapter 93: Structure and Context

Tehillim chapter 93 appears three times in the liturgy: once as the “Song of the Day” for the sixth day of the week, once in *Kabbalat Shabbat*, and once in *Pesukei De-Zimrah* on Shabbat morning. Though the psalm contains a mere five sentences, it is laden with latent meaning. The psalm shares literary associations with other biblical passages and with extra-biblical creation-stories from the ancient Near East as well. Indeed, in its invocation of creation-related themes and motifs, *Tehillim* chapter 93 likely represents a polemic against, an antithesis to, the Ancient Near Eastern creation stories of Israel’s neighbors.

The psalm, conventionally referred to by its opening clause, “*Hashem malakh gei’ut laveish*,” begins and ends with a “hymnic affirmation.”⁷¹ The first verse praises God, and the final verse speaks of His statutes and His kingship over the earth,⁷² both of which are described as eternal.⁷³ In fact, some modern scholars, led by Sigmund Mowinckel, have theorized that chapter 93 and other psalms that refer to God’s kingship⁷⁴ were part of an annual enthronement ceremony commemorated by the ancient Israelites, in which God’s role as King and Creator was celebrated.⁷⁵ This theory remains tenuous, however, since there is no actual evidence of such an Israelite ceremony.⁷⁶

A more convincing theory contends that Psalm 93 responds to, and to some degree intends to negate, other Ancient Near Eastern creation stories. Those stories contain battles between supreme gods (Baal in Ugarit, Marduk

⁷⁰. Translation taken from Jonathan Sacks, *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth* (London, 2009), 153, with slight modification.

⁷¹. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids, 2001), 173.

⁷². Avi Baumol, *The Poetry of Prayer: Tehillim in Tefillah* (Jerusalem, 2009), 187.

⁷³. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, 2007), 328.

⁷⁴. Among these psalms may be included chapters 24, 97, 99, and 96.

⁷⁵. Stephen A. Geller, “Myth and Syntax in Psalm 93,” in *Mishneh Todah: Studies in Deuteronomy and Its Cultural Environment in Honor of Jeffrey Tigay*, eds. Nili S. Fox, David A. Glatt-Gilad, and Michael J. Williams (Winona Lake, 2009), 323; Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 328; Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 173; for an extensive discussion of this theory, and possible Babylonian parallels, see N. M. Sarna, *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel* (New York, 1993), 182–185.

⁷⁶. Sarna, *On the Book of Psalms*, 184.

in Babylonia) and a chaotic water god (referred to as “Sea,” “Mighty Waters,” “Leviathan,” among other names).⁷⁷ -According to these myths, these battles ultimately led to the creation of the earth. Such an allusion to foreign mythic traditions is not unprecedented, as these stories are alluded to in several other passages in *Tanakh*, as well.⁷⁸

Chapter 93 serves to counter the creation stories of Israel’s neighboring cultures, and the belief system underlying this psalm stands in stark contrast to the belief systems represented by the other foundational stories. Chapter 93 is an undoing of the motif of a battle between the gods and the primordial water god – this is evident because, in our psalm, there simply is no battle at all.⁷⁹ Given the plots of the Ugaritic and Babylonian myths, one would expect our psalm to describe God challenged by a water god, prepare for battle, fight, defeat the Sea, create the world, and then have a palace built in His honor. However, the order of events in our psalm is as follows: God’s enthronement, preparation for battle (“girded with strength”), Creation (“the world is firmly established), another mention of God’s enthronement, the challenge of the roaring waters, God’s victory (“mightier than the noise of many waters...is the Lord on high”), and then the mention of God’s house/palace. There is no recounting of any battle, and Creation is completed immediately, without any delay. In Prof. Stephen A. Geller’s words, “the battle theme seems to have been almost eliminated, hinted at only by the single term ‘*hitazzar*,’ ‘girds himself,’ which stands strangely isolated, almost as a vestige of the combat myth.”⁸⁰ While the waters seemingly pose a threat to God’s sovereignty (v. 3, “rivers lift up, Lord, rivers lift up their voice, rivers lift up their crashing waves”), that threat is quickly eliminated (v. 4, “mightier than the noise of many waters, than the mighty waves of the sea is the Lord on high”). The victory of the Lord is instantaneous. As modern biblical scholar Erhard -Gerstenberger explains, “The primeval battle for an orderly and life-giving world is insinuated by this hymn. The chaos waters cannot resist the forces of the God of life.”⁸¹

Just as God’s sovereignty is depicted as stable and everlasting (“Your throne stands firm as of old”), and free of any countervailing force, so too God’s house and *eidut* are similarly described by the poet as timeless (“Your testimonies [*eidotekha*] are very sure; holiness adorns Your house, Lord, for evermore”). *Eidut*, in this context, seems to refer to the laws of the Torah,⁸² which are practiced in the Temple (“*le-veitkha na’avah kodesh*”), and which are as timeless and eternal as God’s kingship. As Geller puts it, “the divine king-creator reigns forever, but specifically in terms of the regulations he has made for the temple.”⁸³ Thus, service of God in the Temple and obedience to the Torah are the capstones of the Creation process.

Not surprisingly, given the prominence of water imagery in the psalm, scholars have noted numerous parallels between this psalm and the Song of the Sea (*Shemot* ch. 15) pertaining both to water and to God’s kingship:⁸⁴

Psalm 93	Song of the Sea
“The Lord reigns...for evermore”	“The Lord will reign forever and ever”
“ <i>Hashem malakh...le-orekh yamim</i> ”	“ <i>Hashem yimlokh le-olam va-ed</i> ”
“He is robed in glory”	“for He has triumphed gloriously”
“ <i>gei’ut laveish</i> ”	

⁷⁷. Ibid., 183, 186; Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 173–175; Alter, *The Book of Psalms* 329; M. Z. Brettler, “Bible,” in *My People’s Prayer Book: Kabbalat Shabbat*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock, 2005), 150.

⁷⁸. Amos Chakham, *The Bible with the Jerusalem Commentary: Psalms* (Jerusalem, 2003), 379ff.

⁷⁹. Geller, “Myth and Syntax,” 323ff.

⁸⁰. Ibid., 326.

⁸¹. Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 175.

⁸². Chakham, *The Bible with the Jerusalem Commentary*, 381; Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 330.

⁸³. Geller, “Myth and Syntax,” 329.

⁸⁴. Sarna, “On the Book of Psalms,” 179; Chakham, *The Bible with the Jerusalem -Commentary*, 381.

	<i>"ga'o ga'ah"</i>
"Your throne is established" <i>"nakhon kisakha"</i>	"in the place...in which Your hands have established" <i>"Mikdash Hashem konenu yadekha"</i>
"great, mighty waters" <i>"adirim mishberei yam"</i>	"in the mighty waters" <i>"mayim adirim"</i>
"Your holy habitation" <i>"na'avah kodesh"</i>	"Your holy habitation" <i>"nevei kodshekha"</i>

The psalmist clearly played off of the imagery of the Song of the Sea when he composed chapter 93, and drew a thematic parallel between God's victory over the Egyptians at the sea and God's creation of the world through victory over the primeval waters.

Of course, it should be noted that some have voiced skepticism about the (supposed) role of Creation in Psalm 93. There is another -possible interpretation of the role of water in the psalm: that the *"kolot"* (voices) of the sea are not roaring against God, but rather in *praise* of God.⁸⁵ According to this view, the psalm does not act as a response to the -creation myths described here; rather, the psalm is a straightforward praise of God's kingship, to which the waters of the ocean testify. Most scholars, however, conclude that chapter 93 does represent an Israelite response and corrective to the theologically unacceptable depictions of creation espoused by Israel's neighbors.

As a final structural note, in terms of its artistry, the psalm is an intricately designed literary work utilizing many stylistic techniques. These include common root words used throughout (*"tikkon"/"nakhon"*); synonymous parallelism, in which different phrases are used to convey the same or a similar idea (*"nakhon kisakha mei-az"/"mei-olam atah"*); staircase parallelism⁸⁶ (*"nasu neharot Hashem"/"nasu neharot kolam"*); and even a hapax legomenon (*"dokhyam"*).⁸⁷ Verse 4 builds to a suspenseful crescendo by waiting to reveal the identity of the Being that is greater than the mighty waters until the last word (*"Hashem"*). As mentioned above, verse 5 serves as an *inclusio*, bookending the psalm with mentions of God's everlasting rule.

Place in the Liturgy

Our analysis of the meaning of chapter 93, and especially its incorporation of the theme of Creation, illuminates the reason that this psalm was sung by the Levites every Friday in Temple times, and included as a component of both the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service and the *Pesukei De-Zimrah* of Shabbat. In fact, the connection between these times of prayer and chapter 93 are so apparent that the Septuagint version of the psalm contains the superscription, "for the day before the Sabbath, when the earth was [first] inhabited..."⁸⁸

With regard to the establishment of chapter 93 as the *Shir Shel Yom* ("Song of the Day") for Friday, many scholars⁸⁹ posit that the psalm was chosen due to its apparent description of the completion of Creation, which, as we know from *Bereishit* chapter 1, took place on the sixth day. In fact, the Talmud in *Masekhet Rosh Ha-Shanah* 31a is explicit in this regard, stating that our psalm, which describes *Hashem's* kingship, is appropriate for the day that God finished creating and began ruling over His creations.⁹⁰

⁸⁵. Ibid., 330; Baumol, *The Poetry of Prayer*, 185.

⁸⁶. Staircase parallelism is structured as an ABAC format meant to be read as if it were written ABC.

⁸⁷. A hapax legomenon is a word that occurs only once in the Bible.

⁸⁸. Sarna, *On the Book of Psalms*, 178.

⁸⁹. See, for example, Sacks, *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, 152.

⁹⁰. Alyssa Gray, "Our Talmudic Heritage," in *My People's Prayer Book: Kabbalat Shabbat*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock, 2005), 150; Baumol, *The Poetry of Prayer*, 186–188; Sarna, *On the Book of Psalms*, 178.

There are many Creation images present in the psalm, including the water imagery described above (according to the Creation narrative in Genesis, God separated the waters, and, as mentioned above, many Ancient Near Eastern creation myths, as well as various passages in *Tanakh*, contain the motif of God/gods reigning in the water that threatens to destroy the earth).⁹¹ Other images and phrases relating to Creation, including “*teivei*” and “*bal timot*,” are similarly used in other psalms (such as chs. 24, 46, and 104) in the context of Creation, as is the word “*mei-az*,” which is used in a similar fashion in Proverbs 8:22.⁹² The bookend references in our chapter to God’s eternal reign also are reflective of God’s establishment of His sovereignty over both nature and history through His creation of the world.⁹³

Interestingly, there is also a midrashic connection between some of the images of chapter 93 and Creation, in that God’s throne (-mentioned in v. 2), God’s house (the “*bayit*” alluded to in v. 5), and the Torah (possibly the referent of the “*eidut*” also mentioned in v. 5), along with the Messiah and the concept of repentance, existed before the creation of the world (*Midrash Tehillim* 93:3).⁹⁴

Furthermore, the image of God “robed in grandeur” (*gei’ut laveish*) is a common ancient description of godly figures⁹⁵ that brings to mind another component of the Sabbath liturgy, the poetically anthropomorphic *Anim Zemirot* (“Your head with gray, with black hair hung”; “His curls are filled with due drops of light”).⁹⁶ The repeated descriptions of God as a warrior in *Anim Zemirot* (“a young warrior with mighty hands they saw”; “triumph like a helmet He wore on His head/His right hand and holy arm to victory have led”) might be based on the “God-as-warrior” imagery present in many psalms, including Psalm 93 (“the Lord is robed, girded in strength”; “mightier than the noise of many waters...is the Lord on high”). This same warrior imagery is present in the Song of the Sea, as mentioned above. Further connections between our psalm, which discusses God’s kingship and throne, and R. Yehuda He-Chasid’s *Anim Zemirot*, include the latter’s kingship-related imagery (“His people have adorned Him with a crown”; “Like a crown in His hand may His treasured people be”; “may my praise be a crown for Your head”; “He sits enthroned upon their praise”), as well as the mention of sacrifices, and incense, and the “*nevei ha-tzedek*,” all of which are allusions to the Temple, which is mentioned in the concluding verse of Psalm 93 (“*-le-veitkha na’avah kodesh*”).⁹⁷

As to the psalm’s placement in *Kabbalat Shabbat*,⁹⁸ *Kabbalat -Shabbat* includes six Psalms (29, 99, 98, 97, 96, and 95), *Lekha Dodi*, and Psalms 92 and 93. As such, a perfectly appropriate structure for the lead-in to Sabbath *Ma’ariv* is created, in which the aforementioned six psalms are recited, followed by the “bridge” of *Lekha Dodi*, in which the -Sabbath Queen is met (note the royal imagery), followed by Psalms 92 and 93, now repositioned as the seventh, and final, component of the service, prior to *Ba-Meh Madlikin*.⁹⁹ Certainly, the structure of seven units is an intentional one, paralleling the seven days of Creation.

⁹¹. Chakham, *The Bible with the Jerusalem Commentary*, 381; Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 174; Sarna, *On the Book of Psalms*, 186–187; Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 329.

⁹². Chakham, *The Bible with the Jerusalem Commentary*, 379–380.

⁹³. Baumol, *The Poetry of Prayer*, 187; Sarna, *On the Book of Psalms*, 187.

⁹⁴. Gray, “Our Talmudic Heritage,” 150–153; Chakham, *The Bible with the Jerusalem Commentary*, 380.

⁹⁵. Akkadian texts describe various gods as “clothed in awesomeness,” “clothed with terrifying splendor and light,” and “clothed in loveliness.” See Sarna, *On the Book of Psalms*, 185.

⁹⁶. Translations taken from Sacks, *Authorised Daily Prayer Book*.

⁹⁷. It is of note that the image of a crown also appears in another place in the Shabbat services: the *Amidah* of *Shacharit*. However, this mention of the crown is not in reference to God’s crown, but rather, to Moshe’s crown. The middle blessing of the *Amidah* begins “Moses rejoiced at the gift of his portion, when You called him ‘faithful servant.’ A crown of glory You placed on his head...”

⁹⁸. The structure of Shabbat morning *Pesukei De-Zimrah*, and the place of Psalm 93 therein, is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁹⁹. See Reuven Kimelman, “Kabbalah,” in *My People’s Prayer Book: Kabbalat Shabbat*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock, 2005), 146–153. I would like to thank Judah Kraut, Ahuva Warburg, and Jina Davidovich for reviewing this essay, and for their editorial assistance.