

# A Study of Tehillim Chapter 29

*Tehillim* chapter 29 is familiar to most contemporary Jewish -readers from its recitation during *Kabbalat Shabbat* and when the Torah is returned to the ark on Shabbat morning.<sup>443</sup> In this essay, I hope to survey medieval and modern scholarship regarding its sophisticated literary structure and rich imagery, as well as its place in our liturgy.

## Structure

Scholars agree regarding the basic structure of chapter 29,<sup>444</sup> which divides into three sections:

The first two verses call for praising God.

The next seven verses contain the actual praise of God.

The final two verses present some sort of conclusion.

The chapter appears below, divided into its 3 sections:

A.

<sup>(1)</sup>A Psalm of David. Ascribe unto the Lord, O ye sons of might (*benei eilim*), ascribe unto the Lord glory and strength. <sup>(2)</sup>Ascribe unto the Lord the glory due unto His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

B.

<sup>(3)</sup>The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thundereth, even the Lord upon many waters. <sup>(4)</sup>The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of -majesty. <sup>(5)</sup>The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedars; yea, the Lord breaketh in pieces the cedars of Lebanon. <sup>(6)</sup>He maketh them also to skip like a calf; Lebanon and Sirion like a young -wild-ox. <sup>(7)</sup>The voice of the Lord heweth out flames of fire. <sup>(8)</sup>The voice of the Lord shaketh the wilderness; the Lord shaketh the wilderness of Kadesh. <sup>(9)</sup>The voice of the Lord maketh the hinds to calve, and strippeth the forests bare; and in His temple all say: 'Glory.'

C.

<sup>(10)</sup>The Lord sat enthroned at the flood; yea, the Lord sitteth as King for ever. <sup>(11)</sup>The Lord will give strength unto His people; the Lord will bless his people with peace.

Although they agree regarding this basic division, scholars differ regarding the significance of this division. One school of modern scholarship, known as Form Criticism, views all psalms as fitting into specific categories (e.g., thanksgiving psalms and laments) with each category having a specific form and a specific historical context in which it was recited in ancient times.<sup>445</sup> Psalm 29 would fall into the category of what they call "hymns" – psalms that open with a call to praise God,<sup>446</sup> offer thanks or sing, and then invoke God's name and address the men who would sing the psalm in liturgical settings.<sup>447</sup> Typically, a hymn's body praises God's attributes, such as His creative power (e.g., Psalm 104),

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<sup>443</sup>. Regarding the origins of the custom to recite this psalm when returning the Torah to the ark, see *Tur* (O.C. 284), R. Yisrael ben R. Yosef Al-Nakawa's *Menorat Ha-Ma'or* (vol. 2 pp. 187–88), and *Encyclopedia Talmudit* (vol. 8, pp. 482–483).

<sup>444</sup>. This essay addresses the structure of the verses, but it does not address their meter. We have chosen to ignore the issue of meter, because all serious attempts to identify the meter have entailed major emendations of the text. See Avishur (fn. 10 below) for a review and rejection of these approaches.

<sup>445</sup>. For a classic presentation of this fundamental approach, see Hermann Gunkel, *-Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (Macon, 1998).

<sup>446</sup>. Gunkel (ibid.) believes that this call originally served as the precentor's calls to his choir.

<sup>447</sup>. See, for example, *Tehillim* 66:1, 96:1, and 100:1.

concern for people, mythical victories (e.g., 89:11), and sheer force (e.g., images of earthquakes or volcanic eruptions). Hymns often close with blessings and wishes, although this element is not essential.<sup>448</sup>

In chapter 29, those elements of a hymn do seem to exist. -Section A above calls upon the *benei eilim*<sup>449</sup> to praise God. In section B, the -chapter proceeds to describe God's awe-inspiring power, employing mythical references and violent storm imagery.<sup>450</sup> The psalm concludes in section C with a wish for future peace for Israel.

While form critics associate the three aforementioned sections with the required elements of a hymn, others see the final two verses in a somewhat different light.<sup>451</sup> They argue that the concluding verses are not merely a perfunctory conclusion, designed to conform to a literary convention. Rather, these verses actively respond to the rest of the chapter. After the reader has developed a fear of God's destructive forces, the chapter stresses that, in truth, there is nothing to fear, because God blesses His people with peace.

Moreover, some scholars correctly point out that it seems erroneous to treat section C like a routine closing formula when, in fact, the closing of chapter 29 (beginning at the end of verse 9) contains several parallels to section A.<sup>452</sup> These two sets of verses share the idea of heavenly beings praising God: "Ascribe unto the Lord the glory due unto His name"; "and in His temple all say: 'Glory'... The Lord will give strength unto His people," with Him also praying on behalf of His people in the latter verse. God begins the psalm as the *indirect* object (following the prefix "*la*"), with each half of the first two verses calling on us to do something "unto" Him ("*la-Shem*"). In each half-verse, God appears as the second word and as the sentence's object. When the chapter concludes, by contrast, each half-verse includes God's name as the *subject*, the sole actor. Verse 2, "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness," and verse 9, "and in His temple all say: 'Glory,'" both focus on the *location* of God's presence and how one must behave there.<sup>453</sup>

Yaakov Bazak (see fn. 36) argues that Psalm 29's division into three sections is actually part of a much more complex mathematical structure. The opening and closing components (vv. 1–2, 10–11) contain exactly sixteen words each (excluding the superscription "*Mizmor -le-David*"), including four appearances each of the Tetragrammaton (God's four-letter name). The core of this chapter (vv. 3–9) has precisely 57 words, which Bazak divides into two halves of 26 words each, plus five words which he considers to be the psalm's center. The first half has 159 letters, and the second one has 160, nearly perfect symmetry. The center of the middle section is the phrase, "He maketh them also to skip like a calf; Lebanon and Sirion."<sup>454</sup> This verse (6) also stands out in another way: it is the only verse in the entire chapter that lacks the Tetragrammaton.

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<sup>448</sup>. See the description of hymns in Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 1: With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (Grand Rapids, 1988).

<sup>449</sup>. This phrase is difficult to translate, and translating it correctly impacts the question of whether its verse indeed constitutes a call to praise. If one assumes that *benei eilim* refers to angelic creatures (Ramban to *Shemot* 15:11) or to celestial bodies (see Ibn Ezra, *Tehillim* ad loc. and Short Commentary to *Shemot* 15:11), then it is difficult to imagine that a call to *benei eilim* indicates a call to a human choir awaiting directions from its preceptor as form critics claim. This difficulty seemingly leads to one of three conclusions: 1) *Benei eilim* should be translated "sons of might" (JPS 1917; cf. NASV), and refers to God's faithful, or the Israelites collectively (Rashi and Me'iri ad loc.; Radak to 29:3), whom the preceptor is summoning to praise God. 2) Form critics correctly observed that chapter 29 opens with a call to praise God, but they erred in explaining this call in the historical context of a choir. In truth, the call to praise God is a literary device that could issue its call to angels or celestial -bodies. 3) Form critics were correct regarding the general historical context of calls to praise in a choir singing to God; chapter 29 seeks to create the specific image of a *choir* of heavenly creatures praising God, because it assumes that we expect it to open with a call to a human choir and will therefore picture the *benei eilim* as a heavenly choir.

<sup>450</sup>. Gunkel claims that the body of a hymn normally presents its praises of God through specific syntactical constructs, such as participle phrases ("Who forgiveth all thine iniquity; who healeth all thy diseases," 103:3) and rhetorical questions ("Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, among the mighty? who [*sic*] is like unto Thee, glorious in holiness?" *Shemot* 15:11). However, chapter 29 does not conform to these syntactical constructs.

<sup>451</sup>. Konrad Schaefer, *Berit Olam: Psalms* (Collegeville, 2001), p. 73.

<sup>452</sup>. See David Noel Freedman and C.F. Hyland, "Psalm 29; A Structural Analysis," *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973): 237–256; and Yitzchak Avishur, *Studies in Hebrew and Ugaritic Psalms* (Jerusalem, 1994).

<sup>453</sup>. Although the end of verse 9 is not technically a part of the conclusion, Freedman and Hyland believe that it nevertheless assists in the transition to the conclusion. Also see Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Waco, 1983), who suggests that the role of "and in His temple all say: 'Glory'" depends on how one interprets the "temple" in this verse. If the intended palace is God's *earthly* home, then it is introducing the conclusion of 10–11, but if it means His Divine, heavenly palace, then it is concluding the idea of the first verses.

<sup>454</sup>. Bazak claims to have identified ten examples of chapters in *Tehillim* that include units of 26 words. He attaches great significance to the number 26 because it represents the *gematria* (numerical value) of the Tetragrammaton. While the other numbers in his division of this psalm are objective facts (whether or not one considers them significant, one cannot deny the number of words or Divine names in the first and last pairs of verses), Bazak's decision to divide the middle 57 words in this particular manner 26→5→26 appears unconvincing. His turning point, "He maketh them also to skip like a calf; Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild-ox," ends in a sentence -fragment. If this verse constitutes a turning point, it would seem that the *entire* verse must be viewed in that light, even if it ruins the perfect symmetry.

## Parallels and Repetitive Language

Psalms 29 is characterized by repeating words. This phenomenon includes several verses in which the same word appears twice (*havu/havu/havu*; *al ha-mayim/al mayim rabbim*; *shover/va-yishaver*; *yachil/yachil/yecholel*; *yashav/va-yeishev*; *amo/amo*), often creating staircase parallelisms (in which the latter part of a verse repeats some of the first part verbatim; see Amos Chakham, *Da'at Mikra*, ad loc.). In addition, the -Tetragrammaton appears eighteen times, including seven uses of the phrase “*kol Hashem*.” The terms “*kavod*” and “*oz*” appear in verse 1 and repeat -themselves towards the chapter’s end, as does the concept of -giving, which is expressed through the synonyms “*hav*” (at the -beginning) and “*yitein*” (at the end).

Saadia Ga’on reportedly observed that some of these repetitions increase in specificity as the verse progresses.<sup>455</sup> For example, verse 5 -initially states that God breaks cedars, and then it specifies that He breaks the cedars of *Lebanon*. Saadia posits that the Bible will specify part of an aforementioned category when it is the most difficult part.<sup>456</sup> Hence, he interprets “The voice of the Lord shaketh the wilderness; the Lord shaketh the wilderness of Kadesh” as a general category followed by its hardest part: “wilderness” refers to all wildernesses, while “the wilderness of Kadesh” focuses on the specific wilderness that caused the Hebrews the most difficulty.<sup>457</sup> Similarly, Saadia’s translation of verse 5, “The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedars; yea, the Lord break-eth in pieces the cedars of Lebanon,” applies the same concept: the cedars of Lebanon are the hardest cedars to break, and yet God can smash even them.<sup>458</sup>

The repetitions of “*kavod*,” “*oz*,” and giving (“*hav*,” “*natan*”) are particularly instructive for interpreting this psalm. Because they appear at its beginning and end, we can determine its message by analyzing the relationship between their earlier and later appearances. One could suggest that the final “*oz*” (strength) which God gives to Israel, derives from the “*oz*” which God receives at the start of the chapter. The same power that can appear destructive (in nature) actually serves to benefit His people. Although this power can destroy, it can also be displayed with absolute serenity. Hence, the chapter’s middle verses inspire fear and awe, but the chapter’s ultimate purpose is not to present an -intimidating God, but rather to show that this same God also brings peace to His people.<sup>459</sup>

Other scholars also view “*oz*” in the closing verse as expressing peace, but suggest an alternative translation. Based on a newly discovered Ugaritic parallel, they posit that “*oz*” can mean “refuge.” Hence, “*kavod va-oz*” refers to God’s “might” or “strength” but “*Hashem oz le-amo -yitein*” refers to “refuge,” as it is a prerequisite of peace.<sup>460</sup> Whereas the first approach saw significance in God’s “might” turning serene, this latter view sees a similar progression within the chapter, but in a manner that no one English word can capture.

Bazak derives a similar transition from storm to serenity from the repetition of “*kavod*.” God receives “*kavod*” at the chapter’s outset, which the following verses seemingly attribute to His might. Ultimately, though, the message of the chapter is that God’s true glory is revealed in a different manner: “*u-ve-heikhalo kulo omer kavod*.” Most traditional exegetes would translate this verse, “And in His temple/palace, all say: ‘Glory.’”<sup>461</sup> However, Bazak interprets it differently: “And in His temple, its totality says: ‘Glory.’” According to Bazak, no human or angel proclaims anything in this verse; rather, the silence and serenity of His palace “proclaims” His glory.<sup>462</sup> Interestingly, this theme,

<sup>455</sup>. See the passage cited by R. Yosef Kafih, *Peirushei Rabbenu Saadia Ga’on Al Ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 5723), p. 175.

<sup>456</sup>. Saadia Ga’on believes that this style exists in prose, too. He writes that Yehoshua commands his spies, “Go view the land, and Jericho,” because Jericho was the hardest part of Canaan to conquer.

<sup>457</sup>. Saadia explains that they spent eighteen years in that one specific wilderness of Kadesh.

<sup>458</sup>. See R. Yosef Kafih’s notes to Saadia’s translation to 29:5 and his related note to Saadia’s translation to *Tehillim* 18:48.

<sup>459</sup>. See Schaefer, cited above, fn. 9. Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (-Philadelphia, 1962), ad loc., presents a similar idea, but in theological terms. He remarks that -biblical theology depends on the belief that man can benefit from God’s hand. Hence, peace can only be brought about by the God of the awesome powers that our chapter delineates.

<sup>460</sup>. Peter C. Craigie, “Psalms 29 in the Hebrew poetic tradition,” *Poetry in the Hebrew Bible; Selected Studies from “Vetus Testamentum,”* compiled by David E. Orton (Leiden, 2000). Craigie claims that this use of “*oz*” with two meanings in the same chapter also occurs in *Shemot* chapter 15. He interprets “*ozi ve-zimrat Kah*” (v. 2) as, “God is my refuge and protection,” while he reads “*neihalta ve-ozekha el nevei kodshekha*” (v. 13) as a reference to God’s “strength.”

<sup>461</sup>. Ibn Ezra cites a dispute regarding whether the “*heikhal*” in this verse is God’s heavenly abode, where heavenly beings proclaim, “Glory!” or the “*heikhal*” is the Temple in Jerusalem, where priests and Levites proclaim God’s glory. Me’iri adopts the latter interpretation of *heikhal* but argues that *all* nations will proclaim His glory there.

<sup>462</sup>. Bazak compares this idea to God’s words to Elijah – “And He said: ‘Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord.’ And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not

progressing from God's power and might to His ability to bring serenity and peace, is foreshadowed earlier in the psalm. Verse 4 proclaims, "The voice of the Lord is *powerful*; the voice of the Lord is full of *majesty*," with power leading to majesty.

## Imagery

While the underlying message of chapter 29 may be that God's glory ultimately lies in serenity and peace, the middle verses (section B above) focus on the exact opposite, the sheer power and awe of a thunderstorm wrought by God. This section is filled with rich imagery, although the vague (and sometimes difficult) language of some verses has led to disputes regarding the interpretation of several images.

Throughout these verses, the chapter repeatedly refers to the Divine voice ("*kol Hashem*") – seven times in total. Does this term, or its repetition, portray any particular image? It has been suggested that the seven appearance of "*kol Hashem*" at irregular intervals correspond to lightning (also called "*kol*" in Hebrew), which strikes at irregular intervals.<sup>463</sup> Other scholars, however, consider the seven appearances to be well organized, so they would likely reject the notion that the -repetition of "*kol Hashem*" alludes to randomly-striking lightning bolts.<sup>464</sup>

The image of "*chotzeiv lahavot eish*" (v. 7) is difficult to translate, because the root *ch-tz-v* refers to hewing (from stone), but "*lahavot eish*" (flames) are not normally cut from stone. Ibn Ezra suggests that the phrase is a metaphor for lightning bolts that function as God's arrows.<sup>465</sup> However, his interpretation doesn't fully explain why the verse employs the root *ch-tz-v* if lightning bolts are not hewn from stone. Instead, some have suggested reading the verse with an implied direct object, "The voice of the Lord heweth [stones, creating] flames of fire." Thus, the image of "*chotzeiv lahavot eish*" refers to God striking rocks. The large majority of appearances of *ch-tz-v* in the Bible relate to rocks or stony soil, so this image was understood even with "stones" -omitted. Indeed, the Bible might assume the same implied direct object in *Mishlei* 9:1, "She hath hewn out [of stone] her seven pillars." The striking of rocks, God's voice, and light also combine to form one powerful image in *Hoshea* 6:5, "Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets, I have slain them by the words of My mouth; and thy judgment goeth forth as the light," and in *Yirmiyahu* 23:29, "'Is not My word like as fire?' saith the Lord; 'and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?'" The fire created by hewing hard stones or by striking them together was a well-known phenomenon. Hence, the verse in *Hoshea*, like our verse, assumes that any reader would picture this image even if its text excluded the word "stone."<sup>466</sup>

The reference to "the wilderness of Kadesh" has challenged commentators, because several biblical locations are called "Kadesh," and it is not clear which Kadesh should be referred to as a wilderness. If one assumes – as *Chazal* did – that chapter 29 alludes to the giving of the Torah, then "the wilderness of Kadesh" presumably refers to the -location with that name in the Sinai region.<sup>467</sup>

Bazak adds another way in which this psalm's imagery parallels the Sinai revelation. He interprets the two halves of the verse "The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty" (v. 4) as referring to God's *physical* might and *visual* splendor, respectively. Based on this reading, Bazak interprets the second "*kol*" as a *vision* rather than a *sound*, and he therefore sees a parallel to the Sinai narrative, which states that the nation *saw* sounds: "And all the people *saw*"<sup>468</sup> the thundering (*kolot*), and the lightnings, and the voice of the horn, and the mountain smoking" (*Shemot* 20:14).

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in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice" (*Melakhim Aleph* 19:11–12).

<sup>463</sup>. See Schaefer (fn. 9 above).

<sup>464</sup>. Freedman and Hyland (fn. 10 above) divide verses 3–9 into strophes, such that every strophe opens with "*kol Hashem*." They believe that the phrase "*kol Hashem*" appears in an organized manner. Also see Avishur (fn. 10 above), who writes that the seven appearances of "*kol Hashem*" distribute evenly according to a straightforward division, with three appearances each in verses 3–4 and verses 7–9, and one in the middle (v. 5).

<sup>465</sup>. Ibn Ezra bases his interpretation on a similar image in *Tehillim* 18:14–15, "And the Most High gave forth *His voice*; hailstones and coals of fire. And He sent out *His arrows*, and scattered them; and He shot forth *lightnings*, and discomfited them."

<sup>466</sup>. Already R. Moshe ibn Chiquitilia (cited by Ibn Ezra ad loc.) argued that the image of "*chotzeiv lahavot eish*" is a flame or spark created by metal striking stone. Yair Hoffman, "Psalm 29:7," *Textus* 19 (1998): 81–85, presents a more thorough argument for this approach, including the proofs that are presented here.

<sup>467</sup>. This is the view of Rashi (ad loc.) and the Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 89a).

<sup>468</sup>. The JPS translation to this verse replaces "saw" with "perceived" because the verb applies to sounds.

Verse 9 has troubled many scholars, because it presents a seemingly bizarre parallelism: “The voice of the Lord maketh the hinds (-*ayalot*) to calve, and strippeth the forests bare.” Most of the parallelisms in chapter 29 are synonymous, so scholars wondered why the psalmist paired an animal with a forest. The image of stripping a forest at least fits smoothly with the chapter’s depiction of God’s voice in natural storms, but the image of a doe giving birth seems especially out of place. Scholars thus offer a range of reasons for the image of a doe giving birth:

Hinds are mentioned in order to provide an image from the -animal kingdom. This phrase is conveying the idea that this -kingdom, too, fears God.<sup>469</sup>

In *Shemot* 15:15, “*eilei Moav*” refers to Moab’s *kings* (as it parallels to “*alufei Edom*,” “chiefs of Edom”).<sup>470</sup> Although “*ayalot*” of 29:9 literally refers to hinds, perhaps it has a dual meaning: beyond its literal meaning, it also alludes to kings. Thus, this verse would be indicating that all spheres of existence – forests, animals, and human kings – fear God’s mighty voice.<sup>471</sup>

The image of a hind giving birth is not actually the first allusion to the animal kingdom in chapter 29. Although earlier images of Divine voices did not include the intimidation of wildlife, verse 6 did compare the dancing mountains to wild animals. Thus verse 9 builds on earlier images from both plant and animal kingdoms.<sup>472</sup>

One final problematic image appears at the start of the final section (v. 10). The word “*la-mabul*” is normally translated as “at the flood” (JPS 1917, NJPS), presumably referring to the flood in Noah’s time. Indeed, this verse is the only time in the Bible that the word “*mabul*” appears, outside of that flood narrative (*Bereishit* chs. 6–8). It would thus appear that chapter 29 seeks to remind us of the primordial flood. As Ibn Ezra to 29:10 observes, the flood entailed supreme destruction and -unleashing of forces, yet it also exhibited God’s eternal kingship and mercy (by saving Noah and his family and by making a covenant to never bring another flood of that magnitude).<sup>473</sup> Hence, it would seem that this image, at the start of the chapter’s conclusion, fits the theme that we have -developed earlier. The same Divine forces that can destroy the world can also express themselves in a more compassionate form.

Some modern scholars challenge the standard translation of “*la-mabul*.” They note that “*le-olam*,” “forever,” comes at the verse’s end, -paralleling “*la-mabul*,” so “*la-mabul*” must similarly imply that God reigns forever. They therefore suggest that “*la-mabul*” means “since the flood,” which would turn the primary meaning of this image into an expression of His eternity, rather than His destructive or constructive power.<sup>474</sup> -Nevertheless, this interpretation need not exclude the expression of God’s power; the psalmist may well have chosen to express God’s eternity with the unique word “*la-mabul*” rather than using the more -common phrase “*le-dor va-dor*” (“from generation to generation”) to parallel “*le-olam*,” in order to also allude to the primordial flood.

## Liturgical Role

Until now, we have focused on *Tehillim* chapter 29’s content. Let us now turn our attention to its functions in Jewish liturgy.

Some evidence exists that Psalm 29 was recited in the Second Temple as the song for one of the major holidays. A superscription at the start of this psalm in the Greek Septuagint links this psalm to the *Sukkot* holiday,<sup>475</sup> and the Babylonian Talmud similarly recounts that it was recited as the Levites’ “Song of the Day” on the first -intermediate

<sup>469</sup>. See Weiser (fn. 17 above).

<sup>470</sup>. This translation of “*eilei Moav*” is debatable. JPS renders it “mighty men of Moab,” which presumably is based on Onkelos’ “*takifei Moav*.” Interestingly, though, Ibn Ezra (Long Commentary) interprets *Shemot* 15:15 as having the same dual meaning that Bazak sees in *Tehillim* chapter 29. Ibn Ezra believes that “*eilei Moav*” literally means “sheep of Moab,” but it is figurative language for “officers of Moab,” as it -alludes to the sheep who march at the head of the flock.

<sup>471</sup>. Yaakov Bazak (cited in fn. 36 below).

<sup>472</sup>. Dennis Pardee, “On Psalm 29; structure and meaning,” *The Book of Psalms: -Composition and Reception*, Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller, Jr., eds. (Boston, 2005), 153–183.

<sup>473</sup>. This understanding of the flood imagery in our chapter is further developed by J.W. Rogerson and J.W. McKay’s commentary to Psalms (New York, 1977).

<sup>474</sup>. Hyland and Freedman (fn. 10 above). Also see Craigie (fn. 18 above), who reads the “*l*” of “*la-mabul*” as a proclitic “*l*” from Ugaritic, rendering the word “above the Flood.”

<sup>475</sup>. The Greek superscription reads “At the exode of the Tabernacle” according to Thomson’s translation of the LXX or “on the occasion of the solemn assembly of the Tabernacle” in Brenton’s translation. In addition to not appearing in our traditional (Masoretic) text, this superscription does not appear in the *Psalms* fragments in the Dead Sea Scrolls (*The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible* [San Francisco, 1999], ad loc.).

day of *Sukkot*. Rashi (ad loc.) explains that the water libation took place on that day – a glorious ceremony in God’s honor – so they read a chapter of *Tehillim* which mentions God’s grandeur and emphasizes His dominion over water. One might add that the agricultural significance of the festivals held greater prominence at a time when many Jews still lived in *Eretz Yisrael* and engaged in agriculture. Consequently, a psalm filled with images of thunderstorms might have naturally fit with the holiday during which the *Mishnah* (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 1:2) teaches that we are judged for water.<sup>476</sup>

While the aforementioned sources point to a connection between chapter 29 and *Sukkot*, the minor tractate *Masekhet Sofrim* identifies chapter 29 as the “Song of the Day” of *Shavuot*. This latter position would fit with midrashic interpretation of several verses in this chapter as allusions to the revelation at Mount Sinai. For example, they interpret the giving of “*oz*” (“strength”) in verse 11 as an allusion to the -giving of the Torah.<sup>477</sup>

While some modern scholars prefer to highlight chapter 29’s -connection to the *Shavuot* service,<sup>478</sup> it seems that the connection to *Sukkot* has older roots. Since the Greek Septuagint (which dates to the -Second Temple period) and the Talmud (citing a tannaitic source) explicitly link chapter 29 to the holiday of *Sukkot*, it is difficult to -understand why someone would view *Masekhet Sofrim* (a work whose composition date and historicity are unclear<sup>479</sup>) as a more authoritative source for when the Levites sang chapter 29 in the Temple. Although the midrashic connection between chapter 29 and the revelation at Sinai prompted later generations to associate chapter 29 with *Shavuot*, it seems unlikely that any expression of this association existed in pre-tannaitic times, before the development of those midrashic interpretations. The biblical text itself does not contain enough allusions to Sinai to merit inclusion in the *Shavuot* service. Moreover, Amos Chakham (*Da’at Mikra* ad loc.) points out that biblical poetry often employs imagery from the Exodus and/or Sinai as symbols of God’s might and awe (e.g., *Shoftim* 5:4–5, *Tehillim* 68:7–9), but the use of these images does not mean that a particular chapter was written in order to commemorate the Exodus or Sinai. Hence, even if one interprets certain parts of chapter 29 as allusions to the revelation at Sinai, it still lacks the explicit references that would be necessary for it to be considered as being about the revelation. Without these explicit references, it seems unlikely that this psalm would have played a prominent role in the *Shavuot* liturgy until the acceptance of the midrashic interpretation of verse 11 as referring to giving the Torah. It therefore seems that the chapter first served a liturgical role on *Sukkot* and later earned a secondary connection to *Shavuot* based on its allusions to Sinai. Later, these same allusions to the giving of the Torah earned Psalm 29 yet another role in our liturgy – our custom to recite it when returning the Torah to the ark on Shabbat (see fn. 1 above).

## Conclusion

*Tehillim* chapter 29 has rightfully found its way into our liturgy in multiple places. Its images portray God’s might as the awesome and terrifying force behind storms, yet it ultimately leaves us with a message of peace and tranquility. The storm imagery made this chapter a natural fit for recitation on *Sukkot*, while possible allusions to the revelation at Sinai eventually earned this chapter additional liturgical roles, perhaps on *Shavuot* and certainly when we return the Torah to the ark on Shabbat.

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<sup>476</sup>. This interpretation does not contradict Rashi’s, because the water libation itself was performed on *Sukkot* due to the holiday’s proximity to the rainy season.

<sup>477</sup>. See, for example, *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Bemidbar* 3) and *Berakhot* 6a.

<sup>478</sup>. Yaakov Bazak, *Numeric Structures in the Psalms* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1999).

<sup>479</sup>. For an overview of the minor tractates, see Aaron Rothkoff, “Minor Tractates,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik eds., 2nd ed. vol. 14 (Detroit, 2007), 292–293. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, Web. 16 October, 2012.