

## PSALMS 145 AND 103 IN CONVERSATION ABOUT GOD

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Psalm 145 is one of nine Biblical Psalms that are constructed on the basis of the sequence of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Actually it omits one of them, the letter 'nun'. Nevertheless, this formal pattern alerts the reader to the possibility of other structural elements that the Psalm may contain.

To appreciate this we need to spend a few moments reminding ourselves about one component of Biblical poetry, the system known as parallelism. In its basic form, within a single verse, the first half expresses an idea, and the second half repeats the same thought but with different words. We can describe it as abc followed by a'b'c' where each letter represents a word. However having established this pattern, the second part of the verse can relate to the first part in a wide variety of ways. It can simply repeat it using similar words, it can expand on it or contrast it. Effectively, whoever hears or reads the verse, is forced to engage with the space between the two halves, seeking to grasp what unites and what separates them. The system pulls you in and makes the reader a commentator. But this basic format does not exhaust the possibilities of the system. For example, the second half can repeat the same order of words or reverse them, abc / c'b'a', giving a chiastic or crossover structure. More broadly, this pattern may exist not only within a single verse, but it can be expanded on a larger scale in poetic and even prose passages. The opening 'a' can be an entire sentence, as can 'b' and 'c'. In such a case the continuity between these sentences that follow one another may not be immediately obvious. But once you reach the second half of the passage, the same elements may repeat themselves in the reverse order, so that it closes as it began. In this way the entire poem has a chiastic or concentric form. On that basis there is also room between the two halves for an additional sentence in the middle, a 'd' verse in our pattern. It is this one that may provide a central climax to the ideas that the passage is exploring. There is still, of course, another 'climax' at the end of the poem or passage when we return to the idea of the opening sentence. But this time when we read it the original meaning has been changed or enhanced by what has happened in between. We can see how using this simple basic formula an enormous number of patterns and complex interactions can be constructed.

Enough of theory, let us see how it might apply to Psalm 145. However, in order to recognize and appreciate the pattern we have to rely on the Hebrew text of the Psalm, because the structure depends on the repetition of key words or phrases that hold it together. Sadly, these repetitions are often lost in translation because literary conventions of the new language may ignore them or even dislike the use of repetitions on aesthetic grounds. If we set aside the title of the Psalm, the first three verses contain a number of significant words and phrases:

- 1 I will glorify You God my Sovereign and *bless* Your name forever and ever.
- 2 Every day I will *bless* You and *praise* Your name forever and ever.
- 3 Great is the *Eternal* and *praised* aloud, Your greatness is beyond understanding.

In verse one three words or phrases stand out in the Hebrew: 'bless', 'Your name' and 'forever and ever'. All three reappear in verse two and in addition we have the verb 'praise'. 'Praise' is also present in verse three. Moreover, in verse three, for the first time we have the tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God which is translated here as 'Eternal'. These five key words and phrases become significant if we look at the closing verse of the Psalm where they all reappear.

21 My mouth shall speak the *praise* of the *Eternal*, and let all flesh *bless* God's holy *name forever and ever!*

The individual 'I' of the opening verse can now express the hope that all flesh will follow the same example of praising God. Presumably, something has taken place within the Psalm to lead to this universal hope. The Psalm closes as it began so that verses 1-3 and 21 form a kind of bracket, or 'inclusio', around the inner contents. So let us turn to what lies within.

The other significant word in the opening verse is the Hebrew word '*melech*', commonly translated as 'king', but if we try to encourage gender neutral language, we might prefer 'Sovereign'. Its appearance here at the beginning suggests that it is a major theme for the Psalm, and this is quickly confirmed if we look to the centre, verses 11-13. Each of them contains the noun '*malchut*' from the same root as '*melech*', which is conventionally translated as 'kingdom' or, more neutrally, 'rule'.

11 They shall speak of the glory of Your *rule* and talk about Your power.

12 To let all people know of Your mighty acts and the glorious splendour of Your *rule*.

13 Your *rule* is an everlasting *rule*, Your authority for every generation.

Located here in the centre of the Psalm, the 'd' position in our schema, the theme of the Psalm is defined as an exploration of the role of God as ruler over the world. But just to add another dimension, the writer has underscored the theme by choosing precisely these three verses for celebrating God's 'rule' within the alphabet structure. The three letters '*kaf*', '*lamed*' and '*mem*', that begin verses 11, 12 and 13, spell, in reverse order, the word '*melech*'. This anchors the divine rule within the very structure of the Hebrew alphabet. But perhaps it is also a sign that the psalmist takes some pride in his literary craftsmanship.

Having defined the centre, we are now faced with explaining the two units on either side, verses 4-10 and 14-20. Once again, according to our scheme, we should expect them in some way correspond to each other. Till now the broad outline of the structure has been relatively easy to define. The next step requires a slightly different approach.

The overall theme of the first half is introduced in verse 4 and is addressed directly to God.

4 One generation shall extol Your deeds to the next and tell of Your mighty acts.

The theme is the passing on of the knowledge of God's greatness to new generations. If we now look to verses 5-7 the same general idea continues:

5 The glorious splendour of Your majesty and Your wonders shall be my theme.

6 People will speak of the power of Your awesome deeds and I will describe Your greatness.

7 They will spread the fame of Your great goodness and sing out loud Your righteousness.

This imagery reflects the promise in the opening verses to convey appropriate praise to God. It is rather like a herald standing before an assembled crowd in the court of a king of flesh and blood who recites a list of praises.

But the next verse interrupts the direction of the praise and also introduces a different kind of dimension.

8 Gracious and compassionate is the Eternal, slow to anger and great in faithful love.

Instead of addressing God directly as before this is a third person recital of the attributes of God. Moreover it is followed by a similar list.

9 The Eternal is good to all, with compassion over all God's works.

Verse 8 introduces an example of another feature of Biblical texts, the way in which later texts quote and reflect on earlier ones. In this case the source is from the Book of Exodus chapter 34, verses 6-7. Moses has challenged God to reveal to him God's qualities of compassion and graciousness to help Moses deal with the Israelites in their journey through the wilderness despite their frequent misbehaviour. Seemingly reluctantly at first, God finally reveals a list of divine attributes beginning with 'The Eternal is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and great in faithful love and truth.' It continues by listing how God forgives iniquity, rebelliousness and sin, but sets limits on the divine leniency. Variations on this passage appear in the Ten Commandments and are quoted selectively or with additions in the Book of Numbers (14:18), in a variety of Psalms and prophetic texts. Its appearance here is designed to be a comment on the original Exodus version, but also it stands out as a break in the pattern of what has gone before. It is not addressed to God but rather stands apart as a statement about the familiar tradition of the divine qualities of compassion and love.

Hebrew readers may notice that the opening is not an exact quotation of Exodus 34:6 which begins with the words 'compassionate and gracious' (*'rachum v'chanun'*)<sup>1</sup>. Instead, the word order in the Psalm is reversed: 'gracious and compassionate' (*'chanun v'rachum'*). The reason for this inversion is easy to explain. The original order in Exodus 34 begins with the word '*rachum*', 'compassionate' which starts with the Hebrew letter '*resh*', whereas the second word '*chanun*', 'gracious' begins with the letter '*chet*'. '*Chet*' is the eighth letter of the Hebrew alphabet which the Psalmist needs for this eighth verse of the alphabetical Psalm. The author has simply switched the word order around to fit the scheme, but without changing the meaning!

However if we now turn to verse 10 we find ourselves back in the same kind of direct address to God as previously.

10 All that You have made shall praise You, and those faithful to You will bless You.

What happens if we turn now to the second part of the Psalm, verses 14-20? It soon becomes apparent that the pattern of the relationship between the people and God is now reversed.

14 The Eternal supports the falling and raises all those bent low.

15 The eyes of all look to You and You give them their food when it is time.

16 You open Your hand and satisfy the needs of all living.

We can now see that the pattern of the relationship of praise of God in the first half is reciprocated by God's bounty to the people.

But again the pattern is interrupted. Verse 17 reverts to the third person recital of a set of divine attributes without a direct reference to people. This time the emphasis is not solely on divine compassion but on the divine righteousness which is nevertheless balanced by compassion.

17 The Eternal is just in all God's ways and loving in all God's deeds.

The word translated here as 'loving', '*chased*', is the more bounded, conditional love that exists within a covenant.

Verses 18-20 return to the theme of God's generous dealing with people, but the language suggests there is a special concern for those who are particularly close or loyal to God.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word '*rachum*' means an intensive love or compassion. The Hebrew word '*chanun*' means to act with 'grace', giving without expecting anything in return. The combination of the two means an unbounded, limitless divine love. In the Exodus passage, the pair are linked to a second set '*chesed ve'emet*'. '*Chesed*' means the love and loyalty that exists between partners in a covenant. The word '*emet*', 'truth', is derived from '*amen*' which means firm, reliable. So the combination of these two means a love and loyalty to each other that is nevertheless governed by mutual responsibility – with penalties if one of the partners were to break faith with the other. The Exodus pairing of both terms addresses the paradox that an almighty God can somehow enter into a formal relationship with limited human beings, allowing the boundless divine love to be constrained within the relationship.

- 18 The Eternal is near to all who call, to all who call to God in truth,  
 19 fulfilling the needs of those in awe of God, hearing their cry and saving them.  
 20 The Eternal protects those who love God, but all the wicked God destroys.

Just as in the previous unit in the first half of the Psalm, verses 4-10, the two-way relationship present in the outer verses is interrupted by a central statement of God's 'attributes', compassion in verses 8-9 and justice in verse 17. We should also note that the two units, although they are effectively mirror images of each other, are not exactly symmetrical, which suggests that a degree of flexibility is allowed within these poetic structures.

The pattern that emerges of the Psalm as a whole can be shown in a simplified form

1-3	a I praise God, the Sovereign	
4-7	b People 'give' to God	
8-9	c Attributes of God – compassion	
10	b People 'give' to God	
11-13		d God the King
14-16	b' God gives to people	
17	c' Attributes of God – righteousness	
18-20	b' God gives to people	
21	a' All praise God	

What are we to make of this structure? It describes a transactional relationship with God, the powerful sovereign who is generous to people but expects in return their obedience and praise, thus cementing God's ultimate authority over them. It might even be that behind this definition of the ideal relationship with God the Psalmist is hinting at what the people might expect of their relationship with their own flesh and blood king.

But this is not the only kind of imagery in the Book of Psalms that describes the relationship between God and Israel. Psalm 103 also offers a commentary on the passage from Exodus 34:6-7. The same verse is quoted in the same place, verse 8 of the Psalm, but interpreted in a radically different way.

The author of Psalm 103 begins with what seems to be a private internal monologue:

- 1 David's. Bless the Eternal, O my soul, and all that is in me bless God's holy name.  
 2 Bless the Eternal, my soul, and do not forget all God's generous deeds.

The author of Psalm 145, from the very beginning, is consciously addressing the world. However, the author of Psalm 103 is inviting others to eavesdrop on the Psalmist's own private musing about the role of God in the life of the individual. Like Psalm 145, it is contained within an *inclusion*. The opening is a personal appeal to 'bless God'; at the close of the Psalm the same appeal to bless God is addressed to all of God's creation, before ending exactly as it began with the Psalmist's own self.

- 22 Bless the Eternal, all His creations, in all the places of God's rule. Bless the Eternal my soul.

Psalm 103 is not as formally constructed as Psalm 145. It is more fluid, with ideas flowing into one another. One way to approach it is again to recognize certain key words that have become familiar to us from Exodus that repeat themselves throughout the Psalm. Just to list them: '*rachum*', signifying God's boundless love and compassion is in verses four, eight and twice in verse thirteen; '*chesed*', the faithful love and loyalty between partners within a covenant is also in verses four and eight, and additionally in verses eleven and seventeen.

We noted above that the passage from Exodus 34:6-7 continues with the idea that God forgives Israel's 'wrongdoing'. The three terms that are specifically mentioned there play a prominent role in Psalm 103. They are '*avon*', (vv 3, 10) usually translated as 'iniquity', which seems to indicate habitual wrongdoing. The second, '*peshah*', (v 12) means 'rebellion', something that one does deliberately, knowing full well that it is forbidden. The third term, '*chata'a*' (v 10) is conventionally translated as 'sin', but it is the weakest of the three terms. The root meaning is to miss the target one is aiming at, failing to live up to an expected standard of behavior.

In addressing the 'self', the Psalmist acknowledges all the ways in which God supports life.

3 [God is] the one who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your sickness,  
4 who redeems your life from the pit [of death], who crowns you with faithful love and compassion,  
5 who fills your old age with goodness, renewing your life like an eagle.

God begins by forgiving all the Psalmist's 'iniquities', thus already fulfilling the promise in the Exodus passage. Verse 4 concludes with two key words from the Exodus passage but also from Psalm 145. God crowns you with '*chesed v'rachamim*', the 'faithful love and loyalty of the covenant' ('*chesed*') and the 'boundless love' of the divine attributes ('*rachamim*'). Though the two terms are separated in Exodus 34:6, here they are elided into a single concept of divine compassion.

6 The Eternal does what is right and provides justice to all the oppressed,  
7 making God's ways known to Moses and God's deeds to the Children of Israel.

Verse 6 introduces a further set of divine attributes beginning with God's righteousness. God supports all who are oppressed. We are clearly building up to the quotation from Exodus, so verse 7 introduces it by recalling how God informed Moses and through him the people about God's ways.

8 *rachum v'channun Adonai erech appayim v'rav-chased*

Compassionate and gracious is the Eternal, longsuffering and great in faithful love.

What follows, however, appears to be a remarkable challenge to the original formulation in Exodus with its warning about sanctions and potential punishment for breaking the conditions of the covenant. Four emphatic repetitions of the word '*lo*', '*no / not*', pound home the message.

9 *lo lanetzach yariv*  
*v'lo lolam yittor.*

10 *lo chachata'einu asah lanu*  
*v'lo cha'avonoteinu gamal aleinu*

9 *Not* for all time does God accuse,  
*not* forever remain angry,  
10 *not* according to our failings has God dealt with us,  
*not* according to our iniquities requited us.

Having taken this negative route, the rhetoric soars with a metaphor that places God's '*chesed*', God's faithful love and loyalty, rising up to the very heavens. Then adds that God's willingness to forgive even the most serious of sins is as wide and broad as the greatest imaginable distance on earth.

11 For as high as the heavens over the earth, so great is God's '*chesed*', faithful love, to those in awe of God;  
12 as far as the east from the west, so far has God taken away from us our rebellious acts.

The Psalmist has proclaimed, on God's behalf, a comprehensive amnesty, far beyond what God had told Moses.

No wonder the next verse introduces a totally different image of God to that which we have seen in Psalm 145.

13 *k'rachem av al-banim richam Adonai al-y'r'ei'av*

As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Eternal shows compassion to those in awe of God.

In this verse the verb for showing compassion is '*racham*', that overwhelming love and compassion that a father feels for his children. Israel might have transgressed the strict requirements of '*chesed*', the faithful love and loyalty expected by the terms of the covenant with God. But it is still possible to appeal to God's '*rachum*', the boundless love of God that is always there to be found. What might be unforgiveable under the strict letter of the law, could nevertheless always be forgiven by a loving father.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The image of God as a father to Israel can be found in Deuteronomy 32:6; Isaiah 1:3; 63:16; 64:8; Jeremiah 3:20; 31:9; Malachi 1:6; Proverbs 3:12. The earliest version is already to be found in the Book of Exodus in God's instruction to Moses to say to Pharaoh: Thus says the Lord, My son, my firstborn is Israel (Exodus 4:22-23). The same 'fa-

The Psalmist follows up what is implicit in the Exodus passage. God who made *known* the divine qualities to Moses, also *knows* the nature of human beings, our transience, and our ultimate fate:

- 14 For God knows our formation, remembers that we are dust.
- 15 Frail mortals, their days are like the grass, they blossom like a flower in the field;
- 16 but a breeze passes over it and it is gone and its place knows it no more.

This evocation of human frailty and the brevity of our individual lives, becomes the opportunity for the Psalmist to contrast this with the faithful love of God that is so essential for our continued existence. In Exodus 34:7 God's '*chesed*' is present and available for a thousand generations. Moreover, the Psalmist challenges indirectly the idea that God visits the wrongdoing of the patriarch on his family 'down to the third and fourth generation'. God will treat these generations with righteousness. This specific reference to God's righteousness links us to its previous appearance in verse 6 as a general principle governing God's action.

- 17 But the Eternal's faithful love, '*chesed*', endures forever and ever, for those who fear God, and God's righteousness for their children's children,
- 18 to those who keep God's covenant, and to those who remember God's laws to perform them.

It remains for the Psalmist to list the manifold layers of God's servants, from the heavenly to the earthbound, down to the actual Psalmist, all of whom offer their Blessings to God. Perhaps it is not surprising that here too, however briefly, there is reference to God's throne and God's sovereignty, '*malchut*'. But the theme what was so prominent in Psalm 145, is here merely noted.

- 19 The Eternal's throne is established in heaven and God's rule reigns over all.
- 20 Bless the Eternal, divine messengers, the mighty in strength who perform God's word, obedient to God's command.
- 21 Bless the Eternal all God's hosts, servants who do God's will.
- 22 Bless the Eternal, all God's creations, in all the places of God's rule. Bless the Eternal, my soul.

It is possible to apply the concentric pattern to Psalm 103, though with some reservations.

- a 1-2 Blessing
  - b 3-5 God's engagement with the individual
    - c 6 God's righteousness
      - d 7-10 God's compassion
        - e 11-14 The compassion of a father
          - d' 15-16 Human weakness
            - c' 17-18 God's righteousness
              - b' 19 God's engagement with all
- a' 20-22 Blessing

1-2 and 20-22 clearly work as an *inclusio* based on the use of the verb '*barach*', to bless. 3-5 and 19 express God's engagement with individuals, on a highly personal level in b, and as a general principle in b'. 6 and 17-18 introduce the idea of God's 'righteousness', '*tsedek*', seeking justice for all oppressed, and across the generations. 7-10 and 15-16 do not seem to fit together so we will examine them separately.

As I indicated earlier, one should be cautious about attempting to force the various verses or units of an extended Biblical passage into a predetermined structure of corresponding parts. In the above pattern the sections marked d and d' do not seem to belong together either through the repetition of key words or directly equivalent themes. What is happening in verses 7-10 is a remarkable challenge to the original Exodus passage. It begins by asserting that God's anger does not last forever. The next breathtaking leap comes in verses 11 and 12, moving from the dimension of time to that of space, vertical and horizontal, and the almost unimaginable power of God's

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mial relationship' is echoed in Exodus 6:6 when God promises to 'redeem' Israel from slavery, God assumes the responsibility of a member of the family to release an Israelite who has been sold to slavery for indebtedness, an idea echoed in Isaiah 63:16 'For You are our father ... You O Lord are our father, our redeemer.' The emotional commitment by God to His 'child' (the Northern Kingdom) is expressed in Jeremiah 31:20.

'chesed' to forgive. From that perspective, when God views human beings, it is their transience and weakness that God sees, viewing them with the compassion of a parent. So, it is possible to see verses 7-10 as starting with a recognition of human wrongdoing that needs to be addressed by God's forgiveness, then returning to it in verses 15-16 as if locating the source of their wrongdoing in the transience of their lives. Nevertheless, the hierarchy of power is maintained as we move to the ending with the myriad servants in heaven and below that serve God, and, like the Psalmist, offer their blessings.

11-14 is the center of the Psalm. The composer of Psalm 145 located God at the center of a formally constructed universe as the ideal king. Instead, Psalm 103 uses spatial imagery, as high as heaven, as distant as the horizon, to describe the vastness of God's compassion. The composer of this Psalm locates God in this central position, not as the ideal king, but instead as the ideal, compassionate father.

## Conclusion

These two Psalms offer radically different interpretations of the passage in the Book of Exodus about God's self-revelation. Psalm 145 focuses on God as sovereign, supporting people as part of a formal transactional system: care is given to all that are in need, and gratitude and praise are given by them in return. For the author of Psalm 103, instead, God is the father, who, because of the feelings of love for his children, respects their independence but knows only too well their frailty. Such a father will always forgive them however far they stray from the path that God wishes them to follow. If Psalm 145's universe is transactional, Psalm 103's universe is existential.

It is evidence of the spiritual imagination of the composers of the Psalms that two such contradictory images of God can be derived from the same textual source. But it is also proof of the wisdom of the editors of the Psalms that two such diverse understandings of God can exist side by side. Both may be needed in different times and circumstances. Together they offer different possible responses to the everchanging needs, challenges and self-understandings of a living community on its journey through history.

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