Establish the Work of Our Hands:
An Egyptology-Informed Analysis of Psalm 90
with Creative Applications

Ruth Burn | Primary Advisor: Dr. Rahel Wells | Secondary Advisors: Dr. Beverly Matiko, Dr. Scottie Baker
Department of English and Department of Religion
Research Question

Psalm 90: “The prayer of Moses the man of God”

• What in Psalm 90 was relevant to the Ancient Egyptian context around Moses as he wrote it?
• What from that is relevant to us today?
Goals

Based on a **canonical** approach vs form critical or literary critical analysis

• Deeper understanding of the historical-cultural world and context of the author
• Deeper understanding of the theological significance of the psalm
• Reconstruct that world and create an imaginative narrative that highlights the historical-cultural context as well as the theological implications of the psalm for both an Ancient Egyptian character and the modern reader
Methods

• Personal Translation of the Psalm
• Word Studies
• Historical and Structural Research
  • Egyptological Connections
  • Chiastic Structure
• World-Building Research
• Creative Application

(1) The prayer of Moses, the man of Elohim: Lord (Adonai) you have been a dwelling for us from generation to generation, you are God (El).

(2) before the mountains were born, and you were forming the land and the world, from forever until forever—you are God (El).

(3) You will return man to dust, and say “return, sons of Adam.”

(4) For a thousand years in your eyes are like a former day, truly a passing of a watch in the night

(5) You flood them away; they are like a night’s rest, like grass that will be renewed in the morning.

(6) In the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it will fade and wither.

(7) For we are finished in your anger and in your wrath, we are terrified.

(8) You have set our iniquity before you, our hidden things in light before your face.

(9) For all our days wane away in your wrath; we finish our years like a sigh.

(10) The years of our life span seventy, or with strength, eighty, and their pride is toil and iniquity. But soon they are cut off and we fly away.
“dwelling place” מָאוֹן (v. 1)

- *Maon*, dwelling place, habitation.
- First reference: Deut. 26:15
  - “look down from your holy *habitation*, from heaven, and bless your people Israel…”
- Often describes the dwelling place of animals
- God as protective place
- Short Story: longing
“and you were *writhing*” יְהוֹלַל (v. 2)

- *Chil*, or *chul*, to whirl, dance, or to writhe
- *Chul*: labor of childbirth
- *yeladw יֶלַד ו*“[the mountains] were born” previously in the verse implies childbearing
- Short story: intimate creation story, gentleness, God with both female and male characteristics
“dust” נָחַף (v. 3)

- Dakka, crushed, contrite
- First references:
  - Job 4:19, “how much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed like the moth.”
  - Job 6:9, “that it would please God to crush me, that he would let loose his hand and cut me off!”

- Different to the word commonly translated as “dust,” aphar עפר (Gen 2:7 creation of Adam and curses of Gen 3).
- Short story: fragility of life
## Egyptian Connections in Psalm 90

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>verse</th>
<th>Biblical quotation</th>
<th>Egyptian connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“before the mountains were born”</td>
<td>Primordial mound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“you will return man to dust, and say ‘return to dust, sons of Adam’”</td>
<td>Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>“In the morning [the grass] flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it will fade and wither.”</td>
<td>“Osiris beds”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>“soon [the years] are cut off and we fly away”</td>
<td>The <em>Ba</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Egyptian Connections in Psalm 90

- “before the mountains were born” (v. 2)
- Primordial Mound
Egyptian Connections in Psalm 90

• “you will return man to dust, and say, ‘return to dust, sons of Adam’” (v. 3)
  • Ancient Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife

http://anubis4_2000.tripod.com/KV96/MummyProfile.jpg
Egyptian Connections in Psalm 90

- “In the morning [the grass] flourishes and is renewed, in the evening it will fade and wither” (v. 6)
- Ancient Egyptian “Osiris beds”
Egyptian Connections in Psalm 90

• “soon [the years] are cut off and we fly away” (v. 10)
  • The Ancient Egyptian concept of the *Ba*

*ibid. plate 3.*
### Chiastic Structure in the Names of God

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>verse</th>
<th>Name of God (in chiastic structure)</th>
<th>original Hebrew</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td><em>Elohim</em></td>
<td>אֱלֹהִים</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Adonai</em></td>
<td>אֲדֹנָי</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>El</em></td>
<td>אֵל</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><em>Yahweh</em></td>
<td>יְהוָה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td><em>Adonai</em></td>
<td>אֲדֹנָי</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td><em>El-oheinu</em></td>
<td>אֱלֹהֵינוּ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
World-Building Research

• Recreating Khol
• Topographical map of Avaris
• Visiting Egypt and Jordan in 2017
• Brandon Sanderson lectures

https://news.byu.edu/news/brandon-sanderson-launches-new-generation-byu-authors

https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/543960
Egypt-Jordan 2017
Creative Application

Statue of Jackal god Anubis

Modern Pharaoh hound

Ancient Egyptian dog breed “tesem”
Creative Application

Personal artistic visualization of Mai, based on his mummy and book of the dead

Roehrig, "The Tomb of Mauerpen in the Valley of the Kings," 72.
Creative Application

Personal artistic visualization of Mai, his dogs, and the leather dog-collars and quiver.
Personal photos from Karnak Temple and statue of Apis Bull from Cairo Museum
Analysis

• Attempt to convey the “gray area” complexity of the real world
• Fragility of life, confronting mortality
• Attractiveness of a gentle, creation God
• God as dwelling place
• God as the only true god
• It’s okay to ask God the hard questions
• God is a god who listens
• Injustice, yearning, and fulfillment
Conclusion

• Four-year long experience full of amazing opportunities
  • Immersive classes
  • Traveling abroad for firsthand research
  • Mentoring by Terri L. Fivash

• Deeper goal: foundation for future writing
  • Depth of knowledge in story-crafting and research
Weaknesses and Strengths

- Emphasis of the thesis on the Creative Application
  - Lack of potential depth in the Exegesis
- Limited amount of time for writing
  - Lack of review
- Focus on Creative Applications
  - Immersive reading experience
- Depth of theological insights
  - See the story from a new, meaningful perspective
Further Research

• Ambiguous ending of the psalm:

“And let the favor of my Lord our God be upon us;
and the work of our hands establish upon us,
and the work of our hands
establish him/it.

Ps 90:17.
Bibliography


Acknowledgements

• My Advisors!
  • Dr. Rahel Wells
  • Dr. Beverly Matiko
  • Dr. L. S. Baker
  • Terri L. Fivash

• Supportive Family and Friends
• The Honors Family
• The Religion Department Family
• Moshe
• My Abba