PSALM CX: “RULE IN THE MIDST OF YOUR FOES!”

by

TH. BOOIJ

Amsterdam

Psalm cx is an assurance of everlasting dominion, made to a ruler on Zion. The poem consists of a few mutually coherent “words”, partly oracles, expressing the nature and realization of the sovereign rule in different images.¹

In this article attention will be given to the content of the separate units and to their mutual relationship. Then the historical setting of the poem will be considered.

I

The oracle of v. 1 presents the assurance in a radical form: the sovereign may sit in the place of honour with YHWH,² who himself subjects the enemies and makes them serve the ruler’s well-being.³

In the conception of this verse, sovereignty is an honour and a gift. It is only YHWH who acts.⁴

¹ Cf. J. P. M. van der Ploeg, Psalmen II (Roermond, 1974), pp. 247-8: “almost kaleidoscopic”.
² Cf. 1 Kgs ii 19; also e.g. Ps. xlv 10, lxxx 18. In the Ugaritic Baal cycle it is recorded that Kothar wa-Hasis is seated on a chair at the right hand of the god (CTA 4 V:109-10: wyythb. lynn. ‘u’d’yyn b’l’); see A. Caquot, M. Sznycer and A. Herdner, Textes Ougaritiques I (Paris, 1974), p. 210. See also e.g. O. Keel, Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament (Zürich, etc., 1972), pp. 246-7 and fig. 353 (Pharaoh Horemheb seated at the right hand of Horus).
³ Cf. 1 Kgs v 17; Ps. viii 7, xviii 39, xlvi 4. The pharaoh’s Syrian-Palestinian vassals call themselves “the footstool of his feet”; see J. A. Knudtzon, Die El-Amarna-Tafeln II (VAB II/2; Leipzig, 1915), 84:4, 106:6, 141:40, 241:7. In Egyptian iconography, too, the enemies are a footstool of the royal seat; see Keel (n. 2), pp. 230-1 and figs 341, 342.
⁴ Cf. e.g. Exod. xiv 13; also Archives Royales de Mari X, 50:23-6: “Zimri-Lim, ne pars pas en expédition. Reste à Mari, et ainsi, moi-même, je réponds continuellement de toi.” K. van der Toorn, “L’oracle de victoire comme expression prophétique au Proche-Orient ancien”, RB 94 (1987), pp. 80 ff., distinguishes three forms. The deity may assure that he/she (a) will give the enemies into the ruler’s hand; or (b) will effectively help him in war; or (c) will subdue the enemies himself/herself.
In the solemn pronouncement of v. 2 the sovereign is given a more active part. YHWH stretches forth the ruler’s staff from Zion and speaks to him:5 “Rule in the midst of your foes!” The statement of v. 2a implies that v. 2b is a promise and a guarantee—but not in the same way as v. 1. The staff, being stretched forth by YHWH, is nevertheless in the hand of the ruler,6 who is surrounded by enemies and has to maintain his dominion forcibly.7

In both v. 1 and v. 2 there is an apparent symbolism in the graphic elements: the ruler sitting at YHWH’s right hand (representing honour); the enemies laid down as a footstool (submission); the staff, or “sceptre”, stretched out from Zion (dominion). In these images the proportions are significant: the enemies are small in v. 1, the staff is large in v. 2.

V. 3 deals with the sovereign’s dignity and the lofty origin of his power.

Obviously, the transmitted text is problematic. Those accepting it generally assume that ‘ammēkā and yaldūtekā refer to the sovereign’s youthful warriors.8 The word ‘ammēkā, indeed, may have that meaning.9 yaldūt, however, denotes early age in general (cf. yeled, “child, boy”, yaldâ, “girl”) and is hardly a proper designation of “young men” (abstractum pro concreto). Orthographically, the form yaldūtekā (yldtyk, with Yod), found in a considerable number of manuscripts,10 is remarkable, the Yod being uncommon before the 2nd person singular masculine suffix.11 The Old Greek (ἐξεγερνόσα σέ) also reads the Yod and interprets yldtyk as a verbal form, “I have begotten you” (yelidtîkā; cf. Ps. ii 7).

5 So rightly e.g. Franz Delitzsch, Die Psalmen (Leipzig, 1883), p. 725; A. Weiser, Die Psalmen II (Göttingen, 1963), p. 477. Similar cases are Ps. xlv 10-1 (cf. v. 7); Isa. xxxiii 14.
6 matteh-uzzek̄ may be understood as “your staff-of-power”; cf. Jer. xlvi 14; Ezek. xix 14; GK § 135n. Similarly Ugaritic ht mtšk, “your staff of dominion” (CTA 6 VI:29; ANET2, p. 141b).
7 A. Caquot, “Remarques sur le Psaume CX”, Semitica 6 (1956), p. 38, points out that rash “denote une domination par la violence”. Likewise, matteh is “sceptre” and “staff” or “rod” at the same time; see Isa. xiv 5; Jer. xlviii 17 (cf. šēbet in e.g. Num. xxiv 17; Ps. ii 9, xlv 7).
8 Apart from Ps. cx 3, yaldūt occurs in Qoh. xi 9, 10, where the young man (ḥāhûr) is addressed.
9 See the use of ‘am in e.g. Exod. xiv 6; 1 Sam. xi 11.
10 100 Masoretic manuscripts; also Ec 17.
11 There are, however, some more instances; see Ezek. xxxv 11; Ps. ix 15; Qoh. xi 9 (1).