

# The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures

ISSN 1203-1542

<http://www.jbsonline.org> and

<http://purl.org/jbs>



Articles in JHS are being indexed in the ATLA Religion Database, [RAMBI](#), and [BiBIL](#). Their abstracts appear in Religious and Theological Abstracts. The journal is archived by *Library and Archives Canada* and is accessible for consultation and research at the Electronic Collection site maintained by *Library and Archives Canada* (for a direct link, [click here](#)).

**VOLUME 8, ARTICLE 20**

**F. W. DOBBS-ALLSOPP, PSALM 133: A (CLOSE) READING**

## PSALM 133: A (CLOSE) READING

F. W. DOBBS-ALLSOPP

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The art of reading remains the paradigmatic practice of literary criticism, even (and perhaps especially) on this, the thither side of theory. The principal thrust, for example, of T. Eagleton's recent poetry primer is to call students of literature back to the practices and habits of close reading.<sup>1</sup> In Biblical Studies, too, there have been kindred voices raised urging scholars and students of biblical poetry to move from a preoccupation with matters of underlying structure and prosody (never irrelevant issues) to a pursuit of "the poetry per se," a pursuit, that is, of reading.<sup>2</sup> Readings (always in the

---

<sup>1</sup> *How to Read a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 1.

<sup>2</sup> E. L. Greenstein, "Aspects of Biblical Poetry," *Jewish Book Annual* 44 (1986–87), 42. The 1980s in particular witnessed a great amount of interest in scrutinizing key formal features (e.g., parallelism, meter, line structure) characteristic of biblical Hebrew verse, e.g., L. Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (SubBib 11; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1988); R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985); A. Cooper, "Biblical Poetics: A Linguistic Approach" (unpubl. diss., Yale University, 1976); S. Geller, *Parallelism in Early Biblical Poetry* (HSM, 20; Missoula: Scholars, 1979); E. Greenstein, "How Does Parallelism Mean?" in *A Sense of the Text* (JQRSup; 1982), 40–71; D. Grossberg, *Centripetal and Centrifugal Structures in Biblical Poetry* (SBLMS, 39; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989); J. Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New have: Yale University, 1981); M. O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1980); D. Pardee, *Ugaritic and Hebrew Parallelism* (VTSup 39; Leiden: Brill, 1988); W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (JSOTSup, 26; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984). So the desire for more

plural) are the stuff out of which all construals of prosody and poetics are necessarily made and at the same time are what complete said construals. They are the ultimate justification of poetry, the gift of poetry. Readings of biblical poems, and especially close, deep, lusciously savored, highly imaginative readings, are still too few in the field. Such a reading of Psalm 133 is what I aim to put on offer in the body of the essay that follows.

There is no one right way of reading, no tidy, pre-set template or calculus guaranteed to generate meaningful construals, sure and compelling readings. Reading is not an un-messy affair, not risk free. It is a practice, with many modes and an inestimable number of different and competing aims and outcomes. Proficiency (however measured) comes, much as it does in many other endeavors, through iteration and habituation, as does the peculiar and pleasurable satisfactions that it brings. My reading of the short Psalm 133 is here presented as but one example of what is possible, what is imaginable, what is readable. The reading itself is enacted in four main sections that fall out (mostly) according to the contours of the poem's structure as I understand it. Along the way I press two considerations more closely, both of which I believe have significance beyond a reading of Psalm 133. Neither, however, is very radical or new. The first is that poetry, at bottom, is a way of words; it is, as has often been said, a making out of words—poesy (cf. *ma'āsay*, Ps 45:2). And therefore any sort of maximally empathetic reading of a biblical poem—here a psalm—will include a close attending to the words that enact that poem, words that are themselves the very means of getting from a poem's beginning to its end—words as bearers of meaning (as they always are), rooted in a specific history and culture, and that have about them a certain “thingness,” a sound and shape, a physicality that can be repeated, played with, intensified, fractured. The main path (of reading) that I chart (and follow) through this particular piece of poetic discourse (especially in sections two, three, and five) finds its bearings literally word by word.

And yet if poems are all about words, they are often also more than the sum of their words, and this is the second (larger) consideration to be pressed (especially in the short section four). In the end, though a poem is a making of and through words, what is ultimately made—the poem—does not lie in the words alone but emerges, as well, because of them and in between them, literally, in the case of our ancient psalm, in the spaces of un-inscribed text that isolate and surround its words. Here, then, I also want to claim some significance for poetry's sometimes distinctive (though not necessarily unparalleled) way of embodying knowledge. The final upshot of how Psalm 133, for example, engages, interrupts, breaks into the world is something more than a mathematical summing of its component words. This accounts, I believe, for a good part of this psalm's appeal and satisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

---

attention to be paid to the biblical poems themselves and to the reading of these poems is understandable.

<sup>3</sup> The essay has benefited from the insight and input of many, for which I am

## 2. AN OPENING EXULTATION

The only claim made in the short Psalm 133 comes in the opening couplet (bicolon)<sup>4</sup> where the beauty of brothers dwelling together is extolled. What is most striking about this claim is its unmistakable hyperbole and its thoroughgoing aesthetic character. As J. Culler observes, lyric discourse generally exhibits a strong attraction to extravagance, exaggeration, sublimity: “the tiger is not just orange but ‘burning’” and “the wind is the very ‘breath of Autumn’s being.’”<sup>5</sup> In the first line of our poem the hyperbolic register is signaled by the twofold use of the exclamatory *mab*<sup>6</sup> (“How!”), headed by the presentative *hinnê* (“Wow!”).<sup>7</sup> If the semantics of such an additive strategy appears “strangely redundant,”<sup>8</sup> a more satisfying sum is achieved when the arithmetic is factored in terms of rhetorical force. One plus one plus one, in this (new) poetic math, yields a threefold underscoring of the attrac-

---

most grateful. Faculty and student colleagues at Princeton Theological Seminary have patiently and generously engaged it on more than one occasion. I presented versions of the essay on a number of occasions, including at the Lenox House Colloquium and as the 2008 presidential address at the MARSBL. Special thanks to Simi Chavel, Elaine James, Tod Linafelt, Leong Seow, and Ray van Leeuwen. All of these have made this a much more compelling piece.

<sup>4</sup> Lineation of biblical Hebrew poems always requires specification. Which is to say that it is not a given. Two important sources of evidence for line structure in the Psalms come in the accents and page layout preserved in the various Masoretic manuscripts. In both Aleppo and B 19 A, normally each columnar line contains two poetic lines (or parts thereof) separated by a varying span of uninscribed text (space permitting). This ideal, of course, is not always ideally realized. The blank space between the two lines of the first couplet is minimal (but noticeable) in both Aleppo and B 19 A as the scribes endeavor to get the complete couplet on one columnar line. Spacing between poetic lines is not typically shown in 11QPs<sup>a</sup>—it is written chiefly in a prose format. However, there is a significant amount of uninscribed space separating the first two poetic lines of this psalm—a significant juncture, too, in my reading of the poem.

<sup>5</sup> *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 72.

<sup>6</sup> Transliteration after the example of *mah-šēmô* in *SBL Handbook* (§5.1.1.4(5)).

<sup>7</sup> For a good orientation to the force and syntax of both exclamatory *māh/mā* and presentative *hinnê* in Biblical Hebrew, see *IBHS* §§18.3f, 40.2.1a–c.

<sup>8</sup> E. S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (FOTL 15; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 371.

tion of brothers dwelling together. Indeed, this piling up of exclamatory particles coupled with the withholding of the object of admiration means that the resulting surfeit of exultation seems to explode from the line as auditors move onto the second line in search of the unnamed topic so extravagantly hymned.

Perhaps the closest parallel to the line comes in Song 7:7 (cf. 4:10), *mah-yāpūt mah-nā'amtā* “How beautiful are you, how pleasant...!” The phrasing itself nicely throws into relief the added rhetorical force of *hinnē* in Ps 133:1,<sup>9</sup> but it is the obviousness of this line’s aesthetic interest that proves so crucial for our appreciation of Psalm 133 more generally. As the line in the Song is said of the Shulammite, we easily acquiesce to its defining aesthetic bent—after all she is repeatedly admired and found beautiful by her lover throughout the Song (e.g., 1:15; 4:1–7; 7:2). It is the aesthetic appeal of the less tangible “brothers dwelling together” that is front and center in the psalm. This is plainly indicated by the only two content words in the line, *ṭōb* and *nā'im*, both of which have pronounced aesthetic valences. The root *n'm* in Biblical Hebrew (BH) chiefly signifies high aesthetic value, as well evidenced by Song 7:7 (cf. Gen 49:15; 2 Sam 1:26; Ps 16:6, 11; 135:3; 147:1; Job 36:11; Prov 9:17; 24:4; Song 1:16). By contrast, the semantic range of *ṭōb* is considerably broader. The term often conveys a positive ethical evaluation (e.g., Gen 2:17; 3:5, 22; 1 Kgs 8:36; Isa 7:15)—and indeed it is hard not to hear at least the faintest echo of Micah’s more obviously ethically oriented *mah-ṭōb* (6:8). But *ṭōb*, of course, implicates high aesthetic esteem as well (e.g., Gen 1:4; 2:9; 31:24; 2 Sam 19:28; Song 1:2; Qoh 11:7) and this is the range of meaning on which *nā'im* (see esp. Gen 49:15; Ps 135:3) and the similes in 133:2–3 so clearly focus our readerly attention.<sup>10</sup>

The second line of the couplet, *šebet 'ahīm gam-yāhad*, provides the subject of this opening exultation, enacting the first instance of the poem’s defining rhythm of enjambment.<sup>11</sup> The words *nā'im* and *'ahīm* rhyme,<sup>12</sup> the

<sup>9</sup> Several of the versions are telling on this count as well. G underscores the hyperbole even further with its rendering of *hinnē* as *idou dē*—a double addition of sorts (i.e., compared to the Song passage). And the lack of an equivalent of *hinnē* in S points up the hyperbole of MT of Psalm 133 from a different angle.

<sup>10</sup> Akkadian *damqu* (lit. “to be good”) is used similarly to indicate high aesthetic esteem (see I. Winters, “Aesthetics in Ancient Mesopotamian Art” in *CANE* IV, esp. 2573).

<sup>11</sup> All of the couplets in the poem, as well as the closing triplet, are enjambed—that is, the syntax of the individual line continues on across line boundaries. For more details on enjambment in Hebrew poetry, see F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “The Enjambling Line in Lamentations: A Taxonomy (Part I),” *ZAW* 113/2 (2001), 219–39; “The Effects of Enjambment in Lamentations (Part 2),” *ZAW* 113/5 (2001), 370–85. For other examples in which an infinitive construct heads a phrase that functions as a subject, especially in verbless clauses, see *IBHS* §36.2.1b.

<sup>12</sup> Rhyme is here understood phenomenologically and in its broadest sense as “any one of several kinds of sound echo in verse” (T. V. F. Brogan, “Rhyme” in *NPEPP*, 1053). English speakers will be most familiar with rhyme at line-end in metrical verse where it is commonly used to mark the end of a line and to (help) structure stanzas and even whole poems. But this is only one variety of rhyme (end

patterned cadences of their half-line phrasing (*ûmah-nā'îm/šebet 'aḥîm*) enhancing this sonic effect.<sup>13</sup> Even the additive particle *gam* is figured to good effect: the note of emphasis that *gam* contributes (frequently when “giving an exaggerated, aggravated or extreme case”<sup>14</sup>) both heightens still further the couplet’s already highly exclamatory rhetoric and focuses the accent most particularly on the “unity, togetherness” of the brothers’ dwelling (cf. Deut 25:5; Gen 13:6; 36:7),<sup>15</sup> while its climatic position<sup>16</sup> at line-end pleasantly balances the opening *hinnê*. The line itself is especially close to a clause in Deut 25:5, *kî-yēšēbû 'aḥîm yaḥdāw* “when brothers dwell together...,” which provides the phrase *šebet 'aḥîm ... yāḥad* with its most concrete sense, that of the patrimonial house—in BH, the *bêt 'āb*. In ancient Israel and Judah, as throughout the ancient Near East, the patrimonial house was society’s chief socioeconomic unit. Ideally, it spanned three generations, consisting of a senior conjugal couple with their unmarried children, together with their married sons and the latter’s wives and children, as well as other dependents (e.g., paternal kinsfolk, servants). Such a family would have lived in a large, single, multi-roomed house or in a compound of smaller houses built closely together with shared courtyards, external walls, etc.<sup>17</sup> It is just

---

rhyme), however prominent in some kinds of verse. Many others exist. In biblical Hebrew verse rhyme is never systematic and not often used structurally, but it does occur (and not uncommonly). Here rhyme’s prototypical shape of echoing syllables with the same medial vowels and final consonants is in evidence. This kind of irregular, internal rhyming (“Rhyme,” 1057; Brogan, “Internal Rhyme” in *NPEPP*, 613–14) is quite common in nonmetrical (free!) verse.

<sup>13</sup> Line internal troping of this kind is perhaps most recognizable in biblical verse in terms of parallelism (i.e., “half-line parallelism,” see W. G. E. Watson, *Traditional Techniques in Classical Hebrew Verse* [JSOTSup, 170; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994], esp. 144–62). The poet of Psalm 133 seems especially fond of partial-line phrasing that echos across lines, e.g., *hinnê mah-tôb//kaššemen haṭṭôb* (with word repetition), *zēqan-’ahārôn//kēṭal-hermôn* (with rhyme).

<sup>14</sup> T. Muraoka, *Emphatic Words and Structures in Biblical Hebrew* (Jerusalem/Leiden: Brill, 1985), 143.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. M. Dahood, *Psalms III* (AB 17A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 251.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Muraoka, *Emphatic Words*, 143.

<sup>17</sup> For details, see L. E. Stager, “The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel,” *BASOR* 260 (1985), 1–35; J. S. Holladay, “House, Israelite” in *ABD* 3, 308–18; “House: Syro-Palestinian Houses” in *OEANE* 3, 94–114; C. Meyers, “The Family in Early Israel” in *Families in Ancient Israel* (eds. L. Perdue et al.; Louisville: WJK, 1997); D. Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in*

such a joint family that is assumed in Deut 25:5. That passage is concerned specifically with the practice of Levirate marriage and the division of family property after the death of the paterfamilias. The phrase *kī-yēšēbū ʾahīm yahdāw* itself refers to the period of time after the father's death but before the division of property when the brothers would have continued to live together on the undivided family estate.<sup>18</sup> It is precisely the ideal of the multi-generation, joint family that most commentators privilege in their reading of the phrase as it appears in Psalm 133.<sup>19</sup> And yet in the absence of the delimiting issue of Levirate marriage, which is nowhere in view in Psalm 133, and in awareness of the tendency for kinship language in Israel and Judah to get extended into other spheres (e.g., politics, cf. Amos 1:9) and used figuratively in various ways (e.g., Song 4:10), the phrasing in Ps 133:1 is considerably more capacious than normally thought. It may focus on the prototypical joint family, but it can as easily take into its purview other patterns of co-residence (e.g., whole villages, neighborhoods in walled towns),<sup>20</sup> larger (potentially non-kinship-based) political alliances, and the like.<sup>21</sup> In the end, much will depend on the specific context in which the poem is heard.<sup>22</sup>

---

*Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2001); P. King and L. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (London/Louisville: WJK, 2001), esp. 36–40.

<sup>18</sup> R. Westbrook, "The Law of Biblical Levirate" in *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (JSOTSup, 113; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 78; cf. D. Daub, "Consortium in Roman and Hebrew Law," *The Juridical Review* 62 (1950), 71–91; Schloen, *House of the Father*, 149.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., A. Weiser, *The Psalms* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 783; H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen 60–150* (BK 15/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 1068.

<sup>20</sup> For the prevalence of these other kinds of co-residence patterns in ancient Israel and Judah, see Meyers, "Family in Ancient Israel," 11–13; Schloen, *House of the Father*, 15–65.

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, T construes the phrase most specifically as referring to two brothers dwelling together (Zion and Jerusalem!), which surely would have been the more common reality in antiquity (esp. Schloen, *House of the Father*, 150, n. 24). Of course, Aaron's mention a bit later in the poem makes one think of two other brothers, Moses and Aaron. And A. Berlin suggests that the image is to be understood as a call for the reunification of north and south ("On the Interpretation of Psalm 133" in E. Follis [ed.], *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry* [Sheffield: JSOT, 1987], 142). The politics of the poem may also fall out more allusively, more tropologically, as *šebet ʾahīm* plays on *\*šēbet ʾahīm* (cf. *šebet ʾābikā*, Num 18:2; *matte ʾābihā*, Num 36:8) and the image (*šebet/\*šēbet ʾahīm*) tumbles down the surface of the poem along with the *yōrēding* oil and dew, until it reaches Zion, Judah's political capital, and "pools" there in Yahweh's "blessing" (*bērākā* "blessing" playing on *bērēkā* "pool"; the puns were pointed out to me by R. van Lleeuwyn and the political implications of the imagery by C. L. Seow).

<sup>22</sup> The language of the psalm as transmitted in MT is late (A. Hurvitz, *The Transition Period in Biblical Hebrew: A Study of Post-Exilic Hebrew and its Implications for the Dating of Psalms* [in Hebrew] [Jerusalem: Bialik, 1972], esp. 156–60), suggesting a post-exilic date. To what ideological end the poem's valuation of family (in whatever manifestation) would have been put in this period is hard to determine with-

In sum, the opening couplet exclaims the aesthetic appeal of brothers (literal and metaphorical) dwelling spatially together. The initial point to be made here is that by itself the statement is rather abstract and provides no real warrant for our assent, aside from the inherent attraction of the proposition itself and the aesthetic appeal of the couplet having been so obviously and pleasingly figured.

### 3. A BODY OF SIMILES

The body of the poem comes in vv. 2–3 with its dominating images of flowing oil and dew. This section is comprised of three couplets,<sup>23</sup> and enjambment pervades the whole. In each couplet, the participle *yōrēd* stands on either side of a line juncture, effectively escorting auditors via its projection of the pure durative force of descending through the juncture. The participle’s nonfinite framing of bare action answers to the related focus of the infinitive construct in the opening couplet (*šebet*). And both contrast with the single finite verb, *šiwwâ*, that comes in the poem’s concluding lines. Beyond accentuating and reinforcing the effect of enjambment, the threefold repetition of *yōrēd* eases the transition from the image of fine oil to that of dew, as the one liquid melds into the other, and further gives the little poem its basic trajectory: moving most emphatically from the opening exclamation (down) through (and via) the overflowing oil and dew and spilling (as it were) onto Yahweh’s blessing at the end of v. 3. In addition to this patterned play of line type, cohesion is built into this section of the poem through word (*kē-*, *yōrēd*, *zāqān*) and phrase (*‘al* + prepositional object) repetition.<sup>24</sup>

---

out detailed socio-cultural information—it may well be, as Weiser contends (*Psalms*, 783), that the poem was intended to bolster the ancient family norm at a time of its decline—though here, too, Berlin’s reunification interpretation could make sense. Further, the language of this psalm (and of the psalms more generally) is open, and thus easily adaptable to the ever changing contexts of its auditors (see P. D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986], 50–51).

<sup>23</sup> The line structure represented here is basically that implied by the layout of B 19 A. The only difference is that in B 19 A there is no obvious extra space separating the fourth and fifth lines. But there is clearly a span of unscripted text after *mdvtyw* in Aleppo, which otherwise is not as consistent in its use of space in this psalm (the first several lines in this block of material in particular is run together).

<sup>24</sup> Berlin, “Psalm 133,” 141, 145; cf. O. Keel, “Kultische Brüderlichkeit—Ps 133,” *FZPT* 23 (1976), 69.

At the heart of this poem—and ultimately one of the chief ways that it means—are two similes, one picturing “the finest oil” and the other, “dew.” The initial image of oil cascading viscously but bountifully over head and beard (ultimately spilling, we are led to imagine, down onto the unnamed figure’s clothes) continues the hyperbolic accent struck in the poem’s opening couplet. It does so in two principal ways. First, by designating the oil—which in the ancient Levant meant olive oil<sup>25</sup>—as the finest and most expensive variety of olive oil (virgin oil), here *šemen tōb* (esp. 2 Kgs 20:13=Isa 39:2; cf. Song 1:3; 4:10; Qoh 7:1), but also called *rē šīt šēmānīm* (Amos 6:6) and *šemen kātīt* lit. “crushed oil” (Exod 27:20; 29:40; Lev 24:2; Num 28:5; 1 Kgs 5:25) in the Bible and *šmn rḥš* lit. “washed oil” in the Samaria Ostraca (16a.3; 16b.3; 17a.2; 18.2; 21.2; etc.). And thus the very designation of the olive oil cues the poem’s auditors that the high arc of the rhetoric continues. Indeed, the connection with the opening couplet is not left to chance, but is made plain to see and to hear through the verbatim repetition of the word *tōb* “good”—the first of Berlin’s “word chains” that help formally bind this poem together.<sup>26</sup> The “good” (*tōb*) of the extended family is literally—at the surface of the poem—of “like the good oil” (*kaššemen haṭṭōb*) that is poured over the head;<sup>27</sup> the two *tōbs* materially, physically linking the two sentiments, underscoring their shared fineness.

Olive oil ultimately becomes a source of economic prosperity in the region of Syria-Palestine.<sup>28</sup> Since the climate in other parts of the Mediterranean world (e.g., Egypt, Mesopotamia) was not suitable for growing olives (too consistently warm), olives and olive oil were among the Levant’s chief luxury items coveted by the social and political elites and thus exported, either for profit or trade, or through gift exchange (Hos 12:2; Ezek 27:12; cf. EA 161.56; *TAD* B3.8.20), and commonly counted among other valuables (gold, silver, and the like, see 2 Kgs 20:13; cf. *CTU* 4.438.4; EA 1.70; *TAD* B3.8.20). Thus, it is not surprising that olive oil carries mostly positive symbolic associations in the Hebrew Bible, signifying prosperity (Ezek 16:13, 20; Prov 21:17; ), high value and plenty (Deut 32:13; 33:24; 1 Kgs 17:12, 14, 16; 2 Kgs 2:4, 6, 7; Job 29:6), joy and well-being (Isa 61:3; Ps 92:11;

<sup>25</sup> The olive tree (*Olea Europaea*) is hardy and long-lived (capable of growing to an age of one thousand years or more). It thrives in the highlands and hill country of the Levant with its rocky and shallow soil (cf. Deut 32:13) and where there is just enough chill during the rainy season to cause the fruit to mature. See King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 95; M. Zohary, *Plants in the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982), 56–57; I. and W. Jacob, “Flora,” *ABD* 2, 807–8.

<sup>26</sup> “Psalm 133,” 141; cf. Grossberg, *Centripetal and Centrifugal Structures*, 28—the device is prominent in many of the Songs of Ascents.

<sup>27</sup> The way that *tōb* plays across the surface of MT is spot-lighted when comparing the translations of G (*kalon/myron*; cf. V) and S (*tb/mšh*<sup>3</sup>), which forego any attempt to offer a literal rendering (for different reasons) the “good oil” that might resonate with poem’s opening exclamation of “goodness”—contemporary English translations (e.g., *NRSV*, *NJV*) also obscure this play (but see R. Alter, *The Book of Psalms* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2007], 463: “how good .../ Like goodly oil...”).

<sup>28</sup> King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 96.

104:15). The gesture of anointing the head with oil (sacral and non-sacral alike), the image of which is specifically evoked in our verse, is a case in point. It is a high sign of richness, sufficiency, superabundance, and, above all, enjoyable pleasure (Ps 23:5; Qoh 9:8; cf. Ps 141:5). The latter quality is especially to the fore in the banqueting scenes in Psalm 23 and in Qoheleth's *carpe deum* speech in chapter 9, and even is echoed impressively in a description of Esarhaddon's banquet celebrating the dedication of a new palace: "I drenched their heads with finest oil and perfumes" (*Ī.SAG igulā muḥḥašunu ušašqi*, Borger Esarh. 63 vi 53, as cited in *CAD* R, 431b). Here in Psalm 133:2, then, not only does the oil's specific designation as the finest (*šemen ṭōb*) match and thus redouble the preceding couplet's rhetoric of extravagance, but so does the gesture of drenching the head with a superfluity of this fine oil, a literal image of over-the-topness, superabundance.

The image of oil running down over the head and onto the beard foregrounds movement, energy—especially given the threefold repetition of *yōrēd* in the poem and the eventual melding with another liquid figure, that of a plentiful, abounding dewfall, the combination of which Z. Zevit vividly—and apropos of the poem's deployment of these images—describes as chasing "a chain of similes into a verbal whirlpool."<sup>29</sup> This is not so very far from the hyperbole of Job's "streams of oil" (*palgē šāmen*, Job 29:6) or Ezekiel's likening of rivers to flowing oil (*wēnahārôtām kaššemen ṭōlik* lit. "like oil I cause their rivers to flow," Ezek 32:14).<sup>30</sup> Energy and force—the raw stuff of movement—are at the heart of "life" (*hayyim*), which is the ultimate blessing of the poem (v. 3) and, interestingly, a figure of choice in the Hebrew Bible for rendering "running, fresh water," i.e., "living water" (*mayim hayyim*, e.g., Gen 26:19; Lev 14:5; Jer 2:13).

Poetic imagery is not monolithic. If the oil's treacly movement is figuratively and literally critical to how this poem gets from beginning to end (as it literally *yōrēds* from line to line), other sensorial dimensions of the image are important to the poem as well and also would likely have been elicited in the minds of ancient auditors. Two stand out. Touch is one of the actual consequences of oil poured on the head. The experiencer feels the oil as it comes in contact with the hair follicles and oozes down over ears, forehead, and face (or as here, over the beard). Oil has a palpable tactility about it. Though it is vain to try to contain oil in the human hand (Prov 27:16), it is

<sup>29</sup> "Psalms at the Poetic Precipice," *HAR* 10 (1986), 356.

<sup>30</sup> Oil is even used as an extravagant figure for rain (*CTU* 1.6.III.6–7; cf. Gen 27:28; 1 Kgs 17:14).

soft and soothing to the hand's touch (Isa 1:6; Ps 55:22; Prov 5:3), a well-known healer's balm (Isa 1:6; cf. Ezek 16:8);<sup>31</sup> it moistens and soaks (*bw'*) into the body (Ps 104:15). Oil can be collected in jars (*nbl šmn*, throughout the Samaria Oastaca) and then handled and handed over (Arad 17.rev.1–2). And not only is there feel but there is smell, too. The finest oils are fine in part because of their sweet fragrance (Song 1:3; 4:10; cf. Qoh 10:1; cf. G's *myron*). The highly figured representation of the male lover's beard in Song 5:13 precisely accents the beard's pleasing erotic scent—presumably reflecting the fact that the beard would have been routinely oiled as with other parts of the body. These tactile and olfactory dimensions of the image flood in mostly through cognitive associations, the poem's auditors calling to mind (or projecting from) their own practical experiences with olive oil as the latter is evoked in the words of the poem.<sup>32</sup> And thus, the image of cascading oil not only lends an energetic substantiality to the psalm (however viscous), but it also sensualizes the poem's meaning, literally making it sensible, available to and through the senses—here to and through touch and smell as conjured in human mental activity.

The addition of a second couplet in v. 2 forms what may be described as a kind of run-on simile, a simile, that is, in which the original meaning or imagery is expanded in some way, or even moves off in an entirely new direction. In either case, the expansion takes its cue from some aspect or element of the simile proper.<sup>33</sup> In this instance the tag element is the term *zāqān* “beard,” which takes on a specific identity, as belonging to Aaron. The major interpretive issue raised in the secondary literature concerns the nature of this new, run-on part of the image. Does the image of overflowing oil continue, the oil now running down Aaron's beard (as the dew in v. 3 will flow from Hermon to Zion)?<sup>34</sup> Or, is an overflowing, and thus full, beard now in view, with the beard itself running down over Aaron's robes?<sup>35</sup> That is, is the antecedent of *šeyyōrēd* the phrase *šemen hattōb*, or is it *zēqan-ʾahārōn*? Linguistically, both are possible. The latter is more proximate, and it is often the case that dependent relative clauses follow closely

<sup>31</sup> See A. Ohry and A. Levy, “Anointing with Oil—An Hygienic Procedure in the Bible and in the Talmud” *Koroth* 9 (1985), 174.

<sup>32</sup> For a recent and provocative theoretical accounting of poetry's non-referential ways of meaning, see M. K. Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2007), esp. 3, 6–8, 10–13.

<sup>33</sup> Such similes are especially prominent in Classical Arabic poetry, see M. Sells, “Guises of the *Ghūl*: Dissembling Simile and Semantic Overflow in Classical Arabic *Nasīb*” in *Reorientations/ Arabic and Persian Poetry* (ed. S. Steikevych; Bloomington: Indiana University, 1994), 130–64.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., Dahood, *Psalms III*, 252; D. T. Tsumura, “Sorites in Psalm 133:2–3a,” *Bib* 61 (1980), 416–17.

<sup>35</sup> E.g. H. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (5th ed; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), 569; R. Kittel, *Die Psalmen* (Leipzig, 1922), 406; A. Weiser, *The Psalms* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 783; W. G. E. Watson, “The Hidden Simile in Psalm 133,” *Bib* 60 (1969), 108–9; Keel, “Ps 133,” esp. 74–75; L. C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (Word; Waco: Word, 1983), 212. The plene reading of *šyrd* in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> is construable toward this end; see Keel, “Ps 133,” 69.

on their antecedents in BH. On this reading a full beard that runs down over the collar is imagined. It was customary for mature Israelite and Judahite males, as elsewhere in the Levant and Mesopotamia, to wear a beard. Indeed, as J. Milgrom reminds us, in some ancient societies, including Israel and Judah, “the beard was the prized symbol of manhood.”<sup>36</sup> And not surprisingly, then, elite males, and especially royal males, are commonly depicted in the iconography of the ancient Near East with full beards.<sup>37</sup> Even in Egypt, where it was more customary to shave, the pharaohs are frequently depicted with fake, ceremonial beards.<sup>38</sup> And thus, as O. Keel contends,<sup>39</sup> there may well be an intentional evocation of a long, flowing beard here. That is, the evocation of Aaron in particular is meant to summon the (ideal) image of a hoary old Israelite cultural icon, with the beard itself symbolizing vigor and vitality, just as with the flowing oil earlier. Note to this end that the appositional structure (i.e., “...beard,/ beard of...”; especially as accented in MT)<sup>40</sup> extends by a whole again the physical length of the beard’s linguistic representation in the poem. That is, the length of the beard is effectively mimed in its very linguistic representation, as the Hebrew word for beard, *zāqān*, is repeated.

Still, as Berlin observes with regard to the phrase *kaššemen haṭṭōb*, “it is, of course, not necessary or even desirable to limit the sense of a poetic image.”<sup>41</sup> Multivalence, after all, is one hallmark of the poetic the world over and of biblical poetry in particular. That the image of overflowing oil is here evoked alongside that of a beard running down a man’s cheeks and chin remains an attractive possibility. There is no syntactic obstacle inhibiting *šeyyōrēd* from picking up on the less proximate antecedent *šemen haṭṭōb*. And several of the poem’s non-semantic features positively coerce such a reading. In particular, the repetition of *zāqān* and the phrase *yōrēd ‘al*

<sup>36</sup> *Leviticus 17–22* (AB 3A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1691; cf. 1801–2.

<sup>37</sup> Keel, “Ps 133,” 74–75.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. G. Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1997), ill. 107, 177, 233.

<sup>39</sup> “Psalm 133,” esp. 75; cf. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 212.

<sup>40</sup> The physical layout of the Aleppo Codex (distinct from B 19 A) enhances further the feel of continuation—there is no extra space between *zāqān* and *zēqan* and the two are the last words in the manuscript line. The Masoretic accentuation also encourages the two to be taken together (contrast the punctuation in S, for example, which, if correct, would appear to separate the two).

<sup>41</sup> “Psalm 133,” 144.

strongly compels auditors to assume the continuation (repetition!) of the same subject matter, flowing oil. That the oil now spills down the beard and over the robe's collar seems only natural. The continuation of the oil image is consistent, as well, with the prominence of liquified imagery in this poem more generally and follows, straightforwardly, as a consequence of the poem's informing enjambment—that is, the oil and dew follow in the wake, as it were, of the syntax's pronounced pull forward from one line to the next. Finally, besides the fact that nowhere in the Bible are there explicit references focusing on length as a notable characteristic of beards, the one other time that *yrd* is used in connection with a beard, it describes the spittle that runs down David's beard in 1 Sam 21:14 (as he pretends to be mad): *wayyored rîrô 'el-zēqānô* “and let his spittle run down his beard” (NRSV). Such usage makes it extremely difficult to ignore the strong attraction of the oil image in this context. Thus, imagery, line play, word repetition, and diction all conspire to keep the image of flowing oil before the auditor's consciousness.<sup>42</sup>

If the question of *šeyyōrēd* and its antecedent(s) has preoccupied scholars' philological interests, it is surely the identification of the beard as belonging to Aaron that is the most striking aspect of the couplet. To this point the imagery has been non-specific—unnamed brothers living together somewhere, oil, even the finest olive oil, poured over the head and beard of an unidentified man. Against such a background the sudden mention of a specific and even legendary figure commands our readerly attention. But to what effect? Aside from his ability to speak (*kî dabbēr yēdabbēr hū'*, Exod 4:14),<sup>43</sup> Aaron is not known for any outstanding physical attribute, such as the beauty of David's ruddy skin (1 Sam 17:42) or the disfigurement of Mephibosheth's crippled feet (2 Sam 4:4). In fact, the biblical tradition pays no attention whatsoever to Aaron's physicality, suggesting that the reference here to Aaron's beard in one respect is conventional and iconic, following the representational trajectory better witnessed to in the two and three dimensioned representational art from the wider ancient Near East. This is not to downplay the beard's symbolic significance—a specific emblem of (manly) vitality and weal, as suggested by Milgrom and others. To the contrary, the identification of the beard as belonging to Aaron, a cultural hero remembered as one of Israel's founding patriarchs (alongside Moses; Num 33:1; Josh 24:5; 1 Sam 12:6, 8; Mic 6:4; Ps 77:21; 105:26) and first chief priest (Num 18:1; Josh 21:13; Ps 99:6; Ezra 7:5; Neh 10:39; 1 Chron 6:34; 24:19; 2 Chron 31:19), only heightens this symbolism. This is not just any beard but the beard of Aaron. And thus the poem's high hyperbole continues still, the mention of Aaron upping the rhetorical ante just as in the

<sup>42</sup> Thus I see things the other way around from Allen (*Psalms 101–150*, 212), namely, that far from “the line” under this construal being “hardly viable poetically,” it is precisely the poetics (viz. syntax, word repetition, and the like) that makes this reading viable.

<sup>43</sup> Such an idea could resonate, though most obliquely, with the “pleasing words” of the poem itself (as in Ps 45:2, *dābār ṭōb*; cf. 1 Kgs 12:7; 18:24; 2 Kgs 20:19; Zech 1:13; Ps 141:6; Prov 12:25; 15:23),

opening couplet's surfeit of exaltation, the specification of an overabundance of fine virgin olive oil, and the mimetic figuration (through repetition) of a doubly long beard. Even the passing fixation on the anointing of Aaron as high priest (Exod 29:7; Lev 8:12),<sup>44</sup> which his naming here elicits allusively and retrospectively, follows this same trajectory, the already buoyant and beatific image of anointing becoming itself bathed in the extra specialness of a treasured sacral moment.

Such specificity appears to flood the second half of this little poem—Aaron, Hermon, Zion, though always from the background; that is, the poetic focus stays trained specifically on the *beard* of Aaron, the *dew* of Hermon, and the (literal) *mountains* of Zion. Still, a turn away from the hitherto abiding anonymity is unmistakable and the poem's second (explicit) simile, that of dew, as a consequence, takes shape against a more immediately recognizable backdrop. Its chief effect is to draw in the reader, quicken her attention, through the force of familiar names and places. The image itself—dew—maintains the poem's liquid texture, with the repetition of the comparative *kē-* unleashing, as it were, a new surge of watery energy. The less viscous nature of dew itself, along with the final repetition of *yōrēd*, gives the strong impression of increased velocity and force—necessary, perhaps, to propel the dew (and reader, too) down its imaginary course from Hermon to Zion. Dew, “the deposit of water droplets on objects the surface of which is sufficiently cool, generally by nocturnal radiation, to bring about the direct condensation of water vapour from the surrounding air,”<sup>45</sup> provides a critical water source in the subtropical and semi-arid cli-

---

<sup>44</sup> Most commentators do not fail to mention Aaron's consecration as high priest in connection with the oil running over head and beard in Psalm 133 (almost uniquely, Weiser [*Psalms*, 784] foregoes any such observation, keeping the focus of his comment on “the deliciously scented” oil's principal aesthetic significance). But if in fact this is what the psalmist “wishes to recall” (Dahood, *Psalms III*, 251), it is accomplished only through allusion, and at that not in any heavy-handed way. The language of oil *yrđ*-ing over head and beard may well be compatible with that more specifically sacral anointing (though see Ezek 32:14), but it is not that language (see S. Paul, *Amos* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 208) nor is it even close to the wording in the actual biblical accounts of Aaron's anointing (Exod 29:7; Lev 8:12).

<sup>45</sup> D. Prinz, “The Role of Water Harvesting in Alleviating Water Scarcity in Arid Areas.” Keynote Lecture, *Proceedings, International Conference on Water Resources Management in Arid Regions. 23–27 March, 2002* (Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research, Kuwait), vol. III, 107–122; cf. “Water Harvesting—History, Techniques

mate regimes that typify most of the Levant.<sup>46</sup> And though specific dewfall amounts and incidences vary across the region, the steady, moist prevailing west winds from the Mediterranean ensure a relatively stable number of dew events in general and in some places (e.g., Jerusalem) the disposition amounts are relatively high.<sup>47</sup> The ancients were well aware of this critical importance. Job uses the image of nightly dew on branches to figure his prior vigor and vitality (29:19; cf. Hos 14:6; Zech 8:12; Prov 19:12). The regularity and plenitude of dewfall was one of the characteristics of the land that made it so attractive for human habitation and therefore worthy of celebration:

So Israel lives in safety,  
untroubled is Jacob's abode  
in a land of grain and wine,  
where the heavens drop down dew  
(Deut 33:28; cf. Zech 8:12)

Indeed, dew, as a gift from the heavens (*tal haššamayim* “dew of heaven,” Gen 27:28, 39; Deut 33:13; Hag 1:10; cf. Dan 4:12; Ug. *tl šmm*, CTU 1.3.II.39) with no dependence on human agency (Mic 5:6; cf. Exod 16:13–14; Num 11:9), was thought of as a blessing of the gods, and often factored itself as a blessing (Gen 27:28; Deut 33:13), a wishing well (cf. Isa 26:19; Hos 14:5) and its lack as a curse (2 Sam 1:21; 1 Kgs 17:1). The mention of Yahweh's commanded blessing in the immediately following lines will focus more precisely (if retrospectively) on this aspect of dew's symbolism. But initially it is as an emblem of weal and well-being that the image of cascading dew registers in this psalm, especially coming so close on the beautiful evocation of a superfluity of the finest virgin olive oil in v. 2.

The poem's rhetoric continues its hyperbolic reach. The dew, like the oil and beard before it, though of ordinary stuff cannot be truly ordinary but in the end also must be exceptional in some way. The exceptionality in this case is achieved through association with Mount Hermon, the high (ca. 2814 m), southernmost part of the Anti-Lebanon range whose snowcapped peaks are visible to many parts of Palestine. Dewfall in the Hermon is renowned for its copiousness, especially below the snowline.<sup>48</sup> So the “dew of Hermon” is a literal cipher for heavy dew disposition. But beyond actual dewfall amounts, this dew gains a certain specialness from Hermon's stunning iconicity. It is surely the iconic image of this mountain, with its imposing height and the hoary beauty of its high peaks covered almost year round with snow (so it is called in Arabic, *Jabal al-Thalj* “snowy mountain”; cf.

---

and Trends,” *Zeitschrift für Bewässerungswirtschaft* 31/1 (1996), 64–105.

<sup>46</sup> See “Palestine, Climate of” in *ABD* 5, 119–26.

<sup>47</sup> See M. Mileta et al., “Comparison of Dew Yields in Four Mediterranean Sites:

Similarities and Differences” in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Fog, Fog Collection and Dew* (2004); S. M. Berkowicz et al., “Urban Dew Collection Under Semi-Arid Conditions: Jerusalem” in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Fog, Fog Collection and Dew* (2004).

<sup>48</sup> G. A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (London, 1931), 65; cf. Weiser, *Psalms*, 784; Anderson, *Psalms*, 886.

Aram *ṭwr tlgħ*, Tg. Onq. Deut 3:9; Tg Cant 4:8), always present, whether up close or off on the horizon, perpetually a part of the area's landscape, perpetually providing sensory input (conscious and otherwise) to the viewer's visual system, that impresses itself most tenaciously and pervasively on the imaginations of any who have visited or lived in the region. And the views from Hermon are equally magnificent.

The last repetition of *yōrēd*, finely balanced at the line's end, can be heard in two ways. Since the ancients understood dew to be a meteorological phenomenon related to rain (esp. 1 Kgs 17:1; Mic 5:6; Prov 3:20; *CTU* 1.19.I.44; Sanh. 96b(52); FPT Deut 23:28[04]), they conceptualized it, like rain, as water which falls down (with *yrd* in Num 11:9; cf. Deut 32:2; 33:28; 2 Sam 17:12; Job 38:28; Prov 3:20; Dan 4:12) from the heavens (esp. Zech 8:12). This lexical association between the verb *yrd* and the noun *ṭal* is troubled initially by phrasing and syntax. The phrase “dew of Hermon” is itself a little surprising and even puzzling when heard instead of the commonplace “dew of heaven” (Gen 27:28, 39; Deut 33:13; Hag 1:10; cf. Dan 4:12; Ug. *ṭl šmm*, *CTU* 1.3.II.39) and the role that the phrase plays—goal, as would be more natural, or source—is not clarified until the prepositional object is given in the second line of the couplet. When the prepositional phrase does come (“upon the mountains of Zion”), it becomes apparent that Hermon is the source of the dew which descends upon Zion. Here the more natural *yrd*-ing of dew (i.e., falling out of the sky like rain) gives way to an image of the dew collected (cf. Judg 6:37–40) in the Hermon streaming (somehow) down onto Zion. We now feel the force of the earlier image of oil running down over head and beard, as well as the general association of the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains as a source of flowing water (e.g., Song 4:15)—the runoff from the Hermon actually feeds the headwaters of the Jordan.

Having the dew spill down onto Zion some hundreds of kilometers to the south is a fabulous image.<sup>49</sup> It accentuates the already high hyperbole and at the same time concretizes the image of superfluity, measures it, makes it graspable, imaginable to the mind's eye. And as a felicitous consequence, the several ridges on which the ancient city of Jerusalem is situated

---

<sup>49</sup> The insistence by so many (most recently, Alter, *Psalms*, 463) on a strictly mimetic or realistic sense here is unwarranted. Biblical poets often show off a capacity for imaging the world other than through realism (e.g., the deer-lover in the Song of Songs; the speaking-but-not-literally-through-speech-cosmos in Psalm 19; conceptualization of the deity).

(cf. Ps 125:2), rising no higher than 800 m, are made more noble, more majestic as they are bathed in the superabundance of Hermon's copious dew-fall. The magnificence imparted through this association is not unlike that when Zion elsewhere (Ps 48:3) is imagined to rival in height the loftiest peaks of the towering Mount Zaphon—present-day Mount Cassius (Ab. *Jebel el-'Aqra'*) on the north Syrian coast, which rises some 1950 m above sea level.<sup>50</sup> And all three mountains are divine mountains, homes to local deities,<sup>51</sup> and thus it is no surprise that this spilling over of dew onto Zion literally attracts Yahweh's blessing in the psalm's closing triplet—according to the old Zion tradition, one of the more felicitous consequences of Yahweh's residence on Zion is the beneficence and weal—the blessing (cf. Ps 128:5; 134:3; 135:21; Jer 31:23)—that devolves to Zion's inhabitants.<sup>52</sup>

#### 4. BEYOND WORDS

Beyond a shared interest in aspects of everyday life, there is little of substance in the content of the two similes in Ps 133:2–3—one involving fine oil, the other dew—that necessarily connects them with the exaltation in 133:1.<sup>53</sup> Rather, the connection lies in syntax and the force of juxtaposition,

<sup>50</sup> For this motif and the Zion tradition more generally, see J. J. M. Roberts, "The Davidic Origin of the Zion Tradition" and "Zion in the Theology of the Davidic-Solomonic Empire" in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Collected Essays* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 313–30 and 331–47; J. Levenson, "Zion Traditions" in *ABD* 6, 1098–1102.

<sup>51</sup> See generally R. J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (HSM, 4: Cambridge: Harvard University, 1972).

<sup>52</sup> Some have stressed a connection with the Zion songs (e.g., Keel, "Ps 133," 77–78; Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 214). However, such a connection (and its presumed cultic implications) is much more obvious in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> and S (and MT<sup>mss</sup>) where *hr sywn* is read. Which is to say that the plural of MT troubles (at the very least) the cuing of the Zion tradition here. One implication of the plural, on my reading, is that the surrounding hills of Zion are placed most immediately in focus (cf. Ps 121:1; 125:2), with the Zion tradition itself being alluded to only secondarily and at a distance (cf. Ps 87:1). Put still differently, the reading of the singular phrase, which is otherwise standard in the Zion songs, reads that tradition into this context far more explicitly than does the plural phrasing.

<sup>53</sup> Berlin, "Psalm 133," 144. Berlin even suggests that "making a connection" between these verses "is unnecessary, if not harmful, to a correct understanding of the poem." In fact, one of the central aims of Berlin's interpretation of Psalm 133 is to maintain that "the two comparative particles (*k*) do not introduce two similes which relate back to 'dwelling in unity'" ("Psalm 133," 144). Rather, she believes the two similes relate to each other, are equated, viz. "like the good oil on the head ... so is the dew of Hermon..." But the construction she cites in support of this construal (*k*- ... *k*-, J-M §174i), whether in poetry or prose, inevitably involves the sequence of particles in rather close proximity (esp. Isa 24:2; Ps 139:12), the close juxtaposition itself effecting the sense of equation (e.g., "like father, like son"), and often involves other linguistic cues in support of the construal (e.g., *'āz*, *'āttā* in Josh 14:11; *kī* ... *yahdāw yahālōkū* in 1 Sam 30:24). Neither is obviously true of the similes in Psalm 133. Indeed, I think the scale (i.e., the comparisons in question

word repetition (*tób*) and plays (the echoing of *šebet* in *kaššemen*), and perhaps even a common rhetoric of extravagance. To what end?

Surely, Weiser is correct in thinking that auditors are won over to the poem's opening exclamation (in part) precisely "by means of" the "colourful images" of fine oil and dew.<sup>54</sup> But the latter do not only illustrate the "harmonious beauty and charm" exclaimed in v. 1, though they do that, they concretize it, making it sensual (through figures of taste, feel, smell, and sight) and thus sensible, imaginable. The key is then, the combination of exclamation and similes.

A great deal of what this poem achieves comes about expressly through the joining of elements, emerges in the literal space between the poem's words<sup>55</sup> and in the time that elapses during the poem's performance.<sup>56</sup> R. P. Blackmur observes in a comment on a similar figure in Wallace Stevens's poem "The Death of a Soldier" that what is achieved is "not exactly in the words" themselves, but "because of them."<sup>57</sup> The force of the similes in our little poem is not so much "for example" but "just like" or "as" (in Hebrew literally *kě-*) and because of them the abstract exclamation in v. 1 ("how good...!") is fitted out with qualities and feelings that it otherwise does not have. That is, the goodness of brothers dwelling together is beyond the sense of the specific words used to express it. What is good and praiseworthy is made known and knowable, finds its purchase in the variable sensibilities (as traced above) conjured by a superfluity of fine virgin

---

being separated by several couplets) in this instance works against Berlin's suggestion. But in any case the syntactic profile of the whole is sufficiently indistinct as to warrant consideration of other possible construals.

<sup>54</sup> *Psalms*, 784.

<sup>55</sup> Spacing was used to divide words already in Aramaic from the seventh century BCE on (e.g., *KAI* 233; *TAD* A1.1) and becomes the normative scribal practice in most (biblical) manuscripts written in the so-called "Jewish script" recovered from the Dead Sea and its environs, see E. Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Jean Desert* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 131.

<sup>56</sup> The experience of temporality, "a sense of real-time unfolding," is a critical distinguishing characteristic of the poetic in general and nonnarrative, lyric poetry in particular—the elapse of time makes no difference in reading narrative prose (cf. B. Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968], 4; D. Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* [London: Routledge, 2004], 71).

<sup>57</sup> "Examples of Wallace Stevens" in *Close Reading: The Reader* (eds. F. Lentricchia and A. Dubois; Durham: Duke, 2003), 116.

olive oil and the fecundity of overflowing dew. This extraordinary goodness—trebly hyped—is the goodness of “good oil,” its feel and smell, its rich associations of richness, daily sufficiency, a life well and long lived with family and among the gods, against the majestic backdrop of snowcapped Hermon and amid the surety of life promised in the dewy runoff so abundant that it finds a catch-point even amid the hills of Zion. This begins to approach—but only approach!—the goodness and pleasantness of “brothers dwelling together” hymned in this psalm. What is here put in words, then, as Blackmur observes, is at the same time put “beyond words and beyond the sense of words,”<sup>58</sup> and herein lies another way of this poem and of poetry more broadly. That is, I want to claim for poetry—and here specifically biblical Hebrew poetry—the critical importance of its way of saying and what emerges as a product of that saying, a saying that necessarily says things one way and not another, chooses in this case to think goodness and pleasantness of family—an image which itself is already given very particularly, viz. “brothers living together”—through selected images of fine virgin olive oil, a long flowing beard, and heavy Mediterranean dewfall, and as a result gives rise to an idea, a sensibility, a knowing above and beyond (but always in light of, too) what is literally said (viz. the goodness, etc.) that is new, that does not exist apart from this (particular) way of saying it. To ventriloquize Blackmur one last time, “we cannot say abstractly, in words, any better what we know” about this goodness and pleasantness, “yet the knowledge has become positive and the conviction behind it indestructible, because it has been put into words,” into these specific words in this most particular way.<sup>59</sup>

## 5. A SENTENTIOUS CLOSING

But this is not yet the end of the poem (or my reading of it), though the change in feel and form of the final three lines<sup>60</sup> signals an impending ending. Compact to this point, orchestrated around the patterned play of couplets, the psalm now uncoils just a bit, as the closing declaration (“there Yahweh commands the blessing, life always”) spreads out over three lines instead of two, the extended reach enabled by the added bulk of the so-called prose particles (e.g., *ha-*, *’et-*).<sup>61</sup> And the syntax here, still enjambed

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> “Examples of Wallace Stevens,” 116.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Gunkel, *Psalmen*, 569. The lineation here again follows the spacing discernible in B 19 A. In Aleppo there is not a significant amount of space separating *šiwwâ* and *yhwh*. This line division has sometimes been questioned. However, the fact of lineation itself is shown visually in the bi-columnar page layout with interspersed spacing of MT (the combination of spacing and column boundary is especially telling in Aleppo; in 11QPs<sup>a, b</sup> the psalm is written in prose format) and the resulting lengths of line are balanced (Dahood, *Psalms III*, 252) and comparable with those in the rest of the poem. Even the staging, i.e., in which subject and object comprise a single line of their own, has good parallels (esp. Lam 2:1a).

<sup>61</sup> Further, it should be recalled that the lack of the so-called prose particles in Hebrew poetry is largely a consequence of the compressed nature of the latter kind

but now unfettered by the earlier lines' rhetoric of repetition, straightens out noticeably, becoming more obviously sententious, plainer even—standard prose word order (VSO) prevails. With these subtle changes as signal guides—terminal modification is a quintessential mechanism of closure<sup>62</sup>—the poem glides to its seemingly inevitable (*ad-hā'ōlām* “always”) close.<sup>63</sup>

The force of *kī* here may be taken asseveratively (esp. Gen 22:17; Deut 2:7; 1 Sam 26:16; Isa 1:27, 29–30; 7:15–16; Jer 22:5, 24; 31:18–19; Amos 4:2; Ps 49:16; 77:12; Lam 3:22)<sup>64</sup>—in which case we have yet one further (obvi-

---

of discourse. There is no (metaphysical) reason why they should not appear in verse—and, in fact, they do quite commonly!—nor should their appearance be construed (invariably) as a sign of prose or a prosaizing style or insertion. Besides the Masoretes are not normally given to lineating prose and prosaic glosses are not common in the Psalms (outside of the superscriptions).

<sup>62</sup> On the notion of “terminal modification” as an especially commonplace means for signaling closure in poems, see Smith, *Poetic Closure*, esp. 28, 43–44.

<sup>63</sup> Smith notices that poems often allude at the end to experiences (literary or nonliterary) that have associations with “termination, finality, repose or stability” (*Poetic Closure*, 175–76). The language of perpetuity (*ad-ōlām*, etc.) in the Hebrew Bible carries just these kinds of associations (esp. finality and permanence), and even a cursory reading of how psalms typically end reveals a conspicuous preference for this language in closing lines (e.g., Ps 5:12; 12:8; 15:5; 18:51; 28:9; 30:13; 41:14; 45:18; 48:15; 52:10–11; 61:9; 72:19; 79:13; 89:53; 100:5; 106:48; 111:10; 115:18; 117:2; 118:29; 121:8; 136:26; 138:8; 139:24; 145:21; 146:10).

<sup>64</sup> So Keel, “Ps 133,” 76 and n. 37; Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 213. The question of asseverative *kī* has been thoroughly discussed of late. For bibliography, see Muraoka, *Emphatic Words*, 158–64; JM §§164, 165a, e; *IBHS* §39.3.4e. Muraoka's discussion is most judicious and his summary statement may be offered as a working premise for the consideration of individual cases of asseverative *kī* (164):

The etymologically deducible original demonstrative force of the particle *kī* was still alive alongside its later specializations, and this demonstrative function is the source of its occasional asseverative-emphatic use. It is used particularly when it appears in oath formulas, and closely related to that in the apodosis of conditional sentences. Beyond these uses, it may be used for the emphasizing purpose when directly fixed to the predicate, and that almost exclusively in poetic context.

In his larger discussion, Muraoka also notes the use of asseverative *kī* in “a climatic construction” (e.g., Ps 77:12; Isa 32:13; *Emphatic Words*, 163). In all cases, of course, the discernment of emphasis is a consequence of contextual considerations. In Psalm 133 *kī šām*, which elsewhere is sometimes written with a *maqṣab* (i.e., *kī-šām*, e.g., Gen 11:9; 43:25; Num 11:34; 1 Sam 7:17; 22:22) emphasizing the words

ous) inflection of the poem's rhetoric of extravagance—or logically and causally (esp. Gen 11:9; 21:31; Num 11:34; 2 Sam 1:21; Joel 4:12)<sup>65</sup>—wherein the simile-laden goodness so far hymned is provided with a kind of explanation, one loaded (the citation of divine blessing) such that it will brook no argument.<sup>66</sup> And I see no reason why both senses are not to be heard here. But in either case (or even in both cases) the extended *kî* clause itself motivates what precedes it. Its target may be construed locally, as modifying the immediately preceding image (esp. 2 Sam 1:21; Joel 4:12). The poet has already used a run-on simile with regard to the elaboration of the beard as belonging to Aaron, so to see another here is unproblematic. The “there” (*šām*), then, on this reading would point back explicitly to the “mountains of Zion.”<sup>67</sup> Most often the antecedent of this deictic particle (*šām*) in BH is local and proximate. And, of course, it is precisely from Zion (most especially in the so-called Zion tradition),<sup>68</sup> the mountain home of Yahweh, that the deity's commands and teachings are issued (Isa 2:1–4) and a bounteous life promised for Zion's inhabitants (Ps 48:12–14; 132:13–18; 147:12–20; Isa 33:17–24). In fact, *šām* echoes through several of the psalms in the small collection of Songs of Ascents (Ps 122:4, 5; 132:17), each time referencing Zion/Jerusalem, and thus *šām* is given a most specific semantic gloss as it is read across the surface of this particular sequence of poems.<sup>69</sup> In Psalm 133 the content of the blessing Yahweh commands is spelled out most proximately in the immediately following line that concludes the poem: “Life always” (*hayyîm 'ad-hā' ôlām*). The phrase is stacked paratactically in apposition next to *'et-habbērākâ*, literally as if it were a gloss. This is the psalm's second significant use of apposition, the first coming back in v. 2 and there also straddling a line boundary, viz. *hazzāqān/ zēqan-'ahārōn*. This is not the “eternal life” of later tradition (only in Dan 12:2),<sup>70</sup> but the

---

close bond as a phrasal unit, directly precedes the predicate (*šiwwâ*) and, if not locally climatic (in Muraoka's sense), the closing triplet in Psalm 133 is certainly rhetorically prominent, even climatic. *kî miššām* in Jer 22:24 as a part of Yahweh's oath is emphatic (“even there...,” NRSV) and *kî šām* in Hos 9:15, Ps 122:5, and Ps 137:3 may be taken asseveratively—or at least the force of the particle is not so obviously or necessarily logical in these passages (cf. 2 Chron 20:26). *hinnē-šām* (e.g., Ezek 8:4), *'ak-šām* (Isa 34:14, 15), and *gam-šām* (Ps 139:10) exemplify related types of asseverative markers.

<sup>65</sup> Weiser, *Psalms*, 785; Dahood, *Psalms III*, 252; Berlin, “Psalm 133,” 146; cf. *IBHS* §§38.4, 7–8, 39.3.4e. S construes specifically in this way: *mīl dtmn* “because there....”

<sup>66</sup> The plainer, sententiousness of the lines suits the causal or logical construal especially well, as the appeal of the explanation is enhanced by the apparent simplicity or straightforwardness with which it is made.

<sup>67</sup> Dahood, *Psalms III*, 262; Keel, “Ps 133,” 78–80; Weiser, *Psalms*, 785; Berlin, “Psalm 133,” 146.

<sup>68</sup> See Roberts, “Zion in the Theology of the Davidic-Solomonic Empire,” 331–347.

<sup>69</sup> Others, too, have noticed this tendency for *šām* to reference Zion/Jerusalem in a group of psalms (e.g., Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 214).

<sup>70</sup> Esp. J. J. Collins, *Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 392, n.

finite existence (i.e., life and not death, cf. Deut 30:15–20) that Yahweh, “maker of heaven and earth” (Ps 134:3), established and blessed for human beings. Ps 21:5 more explicitly glosses this notion of “life” with the standard royal leitmotif of “length of days” (e.g., *KAI* 4.5–6; 5.2; 6.2–3; cf. Deut 30:20; *TAD* A4.7.3), days, it is often implied, which are also full, abundant, satisfying.<sup>71</sup> The expression “forever and ever” in that psalm is well explained by P. Craigie as implying “that such life would extend into the future as far as conceivable.”<sup>72</sup> This is the basic sense of ‘*ōlām* more generally and it holds for our expression in Psalm 133: life, good and whole and abundant, for as long into the future as possible, unto such a time that is not presently conceivable.

*šām* has a less proximate antecedent as well. This one cued by the ears, through the voiced quality of the word itself. The /-ām/ sound of *šām*’s single syllable, redoubled and thus sonically underscored in the /-ām/ of the triplet’s (and poem’s) final syllable, ‘*ōlām*, echos the /-am/ of *gam* in the poem’s opening couplet. An alertness to the possibility of sound play is provoked, however briefly, in the rhyming /-ōn/ endings that connect the three named figures in the body of the poem—‘*ahārōn*, ‘*hermōn*, ‘*šiyōn*. But for the most part, at least to this point, the poem’s play with sound happens covertly, piggy-backing, as it were, on the poem’s more overt play of word (and phrase) iteration, viz. *ṭōb/ṭōb*, *yōrēd/yōrēd/yōrēd*, *še-/še-*, *zāqān/zēqan*, *kē-/ka-*, ‘*al/‘al/‘al/‘al*. And yet once the ear hearkens back to that initial couplet it will hear the rhyme and chime of other sounds, too, chains of sound (to match of the word chains already noticed) that appear to reach

---

212; P. C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Word; Waco: Word, 1983), 191. Contra Dahood, *Psalms III*, 253. D. N. Freedman (as cited in Dahood, *Psalms III*, 253) raises the possibility that *hyym* may have been omitted intentionally in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> to avoid just this connotation of eternal life.

<sup>71</sup> The Karatepe inscription of Azatiwada (*KAI* 26) elaborates well the kind of flourishing life (esp. ll. A i 1–21, ii 1–19) that the phrase “length of days” (l. A iii 5; C iii 20) implies and that results from divine blessing (ll. Ai 1, iii 2; C iii 16). The last rendition, written on the statue of Baal, fleshes out the general sense behind the language of Psalm 133:3 (though the latter, of course, does not have the king in view): “Now may Baal KRNTRYŠ bless (*nbrk*) Azatiwadawith with life (*blhym*) and health and mighty strength over every king; may Baal KRNTRYŠ and all the gods of the city give Azatiwada length of days (‘*rk ymm*) and multitude of years and good (*n‘mt*) prosperity” (COS 2.31).

<sup>72</sup> *Psalms 1–50*, 191.

back over the body of similes to link the opening couplet to the closing triplet: the final /-ā/ in *šiwwâ* and *habbērākâ* echoing the doubled *mah* in v. 1 and the /-īm/ of the plural morpheme in *ḥayyîm* resounding in the /-īm/ of *nā'îm* and *'ahîm*.<sup>73</sup> Repetition here, too, is the means by which these sounds re-sound across the surface of the poem, our hearing of them helped by the absence of word final /-am/, /-ā/, and /-īm/ in the body of the poem. Thus, in addition to the sheer pleasantness of this burble of sound, we are seduced by its thrum into hearing the closing *kî* clause as if in answer to the psalm's initial exclamation:

Wow! How exquisite and how pleasant is  
The dwelling of brothers all together!

....

There Yahweh  
Commands the blessing—  
Life always!

The “there” of the divine blessing so heard resides, it now seems clear, also in the brothers' residing (together).<sup>74</sup> That is, family, literally and in its many possible metaphorical and metonymic extensions, is one place where Yahweh's blessing of life is made manifest (e.g., Gen 12:2; 2 Sam 7:29; Zech 8:13; Ps 37:26).

Here, then, several other ways by which poetry means come into view. The way of sound, as it infects and affects thought and sense, Culler observes, is precisely one of the scandals of lyric verse.<sup>75</sup> In this case, the “chaos of paronomasia, sound-links, ambiguous sense-links, and memory-links” (to borrow N. Frye's words) refocus the site of blessing in the psalm (euphonicly relocating its *šām* in the opening couplet's *gam*) and at the same time discloses an alternative formal structure operative in the poem. With *šām*'s most proximate antecedent uppermost in mind (i.e., the “mountains of Zion”), the poem may be read as consisting of an opening exclamation followed by two run-on similes.<sup>76</sup> Yet when the links of sound are noticed, the initial couplet and closing triplet resolve into a frame, enveloping the similes of oil, beard, and dew.<sup>77</sup> And if *šām* routinely takes a local and proximate antecedent in standard biblical Hebrew usage, it may also point more remotely and even generically. The triply repeated *šām* in Job 3:17 and 19 is a parade example. For the “there” in question is surely the underworld figured throughout this section of the poem (vv. 11–19) though nowhere precisely named. That is, *šām* in that poem has no single linguistic item to

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Freedman as cited in Dahood, *Psalms III*, 253. In 11QPs<sup>a</sup>, the lack of *ḥyym* explodes the /-īm/ chain of MT. While the linking succession of /-ām/ sounds can still be heard in the wording of this manuscript, it is the thrice repeated /-ā/ in *šmh*, *šwh*, and *hbrkh* that answers most emphatically the doubled *mh* of v. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Gunkel, *Psalmen*, 572; Weiser, *Psalms*, 785.

<sup>75</sup> *Literary Theory*, 75.

<sup>76</sup> E.g., Berlin, “Psalm 133,” 145.

<sup>77</sup> The frame is itself fastened to the poem's body (ever so subtly) by the associating play of sibilants and labials in *šebet* and *šemen* and sibilants and approximants in *šiyyôn* and *šiwwâ* (cf. Allen, *Psalms*, 101–150, 215).

which it literally points, and so the antecedent does not lie in any of the actual words of the poem but in what those words imagine, create, conjure.

Once cued to the more expansive purview of Yahweh's blessing in the poem, it may also occur to some readers—especially those steeped in the stories and poems of ancient Israel and Judah, in their songs, psalmody, proverbial lore, and even royal annals—that fine olive oil (Deut 8:6–10; 33:24; cf. 28:1–15) and copious dew (Gen 27:28, 39; Duet 33:13; Zech 8:12–13; cf. Deut 28:1–15; Judg 6:37–38; Hos 14:6; Prov 19:12) are themselves often thought of as a blessing or the marks thereof. Indeed, Hermon and Zion as divine mountains are inherently blessed (cf. Gen 49:26; Jer 31:23), or more properly, become sites of blessing as a felicitous consequence of their divine resident(s), and also sites from which blessings are effected (Ps 128:5; 134:3; 135:2; cf. Deut 27:2; Josh 8:33).<sup>78</sup> Aaron, too, is a (verbal) source of blessing (Lev 9:22) and his posterity, the “house of Aaron,” even attracts blessing (Ps 115:12; 135:19), and blessings may themselves be characterized as “good” (Ps 21:4; Prov 24:25).<sup>79</sup> And thus here again a glimpse may be had of how biblical Hebrew poems through their words can achieve something more than what those words literally say. It is as if once commanded by Yahweh the blessing is released and ricochets,<sup>80</sup> retrospectively in this case,<sup>81</sup> back through the psalm, pin-ball fashion, hitting and catching hold on words (momentarily) wherever it might, first through the attraction of sound and then through a rich if spasmodic and

---

<sup>78</sup> For a broad survey of the divine mountain in ancient Near Eastern thought, see Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*. Roberts comments more explicitly on Zion as a site of blessing and well-being as a consequence of Yahweh's dwelling there in “Davidic Origin of the Zion Tradition” and “Zion in the Theology of the Davidic-Solomonic Empire.”

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Weiser, *Psalms*, 785.

<sup>80</sup> There is a substantiality—a thingness—to blessings and cursings in antiquity as they were the tangible products (viz. blessedness=deliverance from enemies, e.g., Qom 3.2) of speech acts (viz. “I hereby bless you,” KAjr 18.1–2; Arad 16.2–3; cf. S. Sanders, “Performative Utterances and Divine Language in Ugaritic,” *JNES* 63 [2004], 161–81, esp. 174). So in Lev 25:21 Yahweh's blessing, once commanded, takes on an agency such that it can be conceptualized as the subject of a transitive verb: “... so that it (=blessing) will yield (lit. “do,” *wē'āsāt*) a crop (*'et-hattēbū'ā*) for three years.”

<sup>81</sup> For the idea of “retrospective patterning” in poetry, see esp. Smith, *Poetic Closure*, 10–14.

nonlinear array of association and implication.<sup>82</sup> There is a substance and density that lyric verse takes on “by virtue of the quickenings or subtle gradations of sense established by the choice of words and the patterns they enter into—as overt syntax and as elements thickening the texture of the attitudes projected by such gradations.”<sup>83</sup> As a consequence, any fully empathetic, close reading of single items in a poem, words in particular, but also images, sounds, rhythms, and the like, will always require attending to their potential resonances, both prospective and retrospective; a detailed following out, that is, of the multiple, often discontinuous, and complex meanderings of sense and sensibility that are enacted in the event of the poem.<sup>84</sup> This, too, is a prototypical way of poetry, and of lyric poetry most especially.

## 6. CONCLUSION

I have lingered long over this psalm, in part, as I indicated at the outset, to savor the gift of reading that it sponsors. Along the way I hope to have illustrated as well some of the possibilities that accompany a reading attentive both to the words that make the poem, words in their manifold dimensions of meaning, form, and sound, and to what happens in the spaces between those words, what happens, for example, because of them, as a result of their being fitted together in one way and not another. And like all readings, my reading, however intentionally patient and mindful of larger horizons of interpretation, in the end is but a reading, singular, limited in how it sees, what it celebrates and luxuriates in. Other readers, bringing different eyes and ears, different sensibilities to bear on this small poem, have read and will read it differently. But even so not all poems, and surely not all biblical poems, will repay so handsomely such close attention, such close reading. If close reading is a practice I want to (re)claim for the study of biblical poetry, what is read closely also has much to do with what is ultimately readable. Psalm 133 is one of the Bible’s more stunning poetic gems, a poem whose lusciousness and depth belies its extreme brevity. This reading, many times longer than the poem itself, stands, finally, as testimony to my own sense of this psalm’s aesthetic achievement and to the kind of readerly engagement that it invites and even requires.

---

<sup>82</sup> Gerstenberger (*Psalms, Part 2*, 372) recognizes something of this retrospective resonance of “blessing” in Psalm 133, even if I think it ultimately comes off quite differently than Gerstenberger supposes: “The inner logic of the psalm, therefore, runs counter to the sequence of the text [viz. exclamation followed by similes and the concluding *kî* clause]. First, there is the blessing of Yahweh from Zion, then this blessing runs down to all who meet at the sanctuary, therefore they may be called ‘happy’ (although the standard expression of BEATITUDE, *’ašrê*, is missing; cf. [Ps] 1:1).” Weiser (*Psalms*, 785) is also alert to the prospective and retrospective play of this poem, the need to always “look both ways.”

<sup>83</sup> C. Altieri, “Tractatus Logico-Poeticus,” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007), 537.

<sup>84</sup> See the thoughts of M. Nussbaum on the medium of lyric verse and what it requires of readers in *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986), 67–70. Cf. Altieri, “Tractatus Logico-Poeticus,” 538.

## 7. APPENDIX: TEXT, TRANSLATION, AND NOTES

<i>hinnē</i> <sup>85</sup> <i>mah-ṭōb ūmah-nā</i> <i>im</i>	Wow! How good and how pleasant is
<i>šebet</i> <i>ʾaḥim gam-yāḥad</i>	The dwelling of brothers, all together—
<i>kaššemen haṭṭōb</i> <sup>86</sup> <i>ʿal-hārōʾš</i>	Like fine oil on the head
<i>yōrēd</i> <sup>87</sup> <i>ʿal-hazzāqān</i>	Running down over the beard,
<i>zēqan-ʾahārōn šeyyōrēd</i> <sup>88</sup>	The beard of Aaron which is running down

<sup>85</sup> The reading in MT is presupposed by 11QPs<sup>a</sup> (*hnh*), T (*hʾ*), and V (*ecce*) as well. G reads *idou dē*, though often referring to added emphasis explicitly present in MT (e.g., *hinnē-nā*<sup>3</sup>, Judg 13:3, 1 Sam 9:6, 16:5, 2 Sam 14:21, 2 Kgs 4:9, Job 10:16; *hinnē* *ʾattā*, 1 Sam 28:9, cf. Job 27:12; *rēʾēh nā*<sup>3</sup>, 2 Sam 7:2; *kī hinnē*, Isa 3:1), other times the emphasis implied represents G’s interpretation, i.e., there is no extra linguistic element in the immediate context in MT (e.g., 1 Sam 20:5; 28:21; 2 Kgs 5:11; Isa 22:17; 33:7; Ps 134:1), which seems to be the case here (and also in Ps 134:1). That is, there is no reason to think G was actually reading a *Vorlage* with *hinnē-nā*<sup>3</sup> or the like. S leaves out a corresponding literal gloss for *hinnē* altogether (also in Ps 134:1), as usual its chief aim is to give the semantic sense of the Hebrew as clearly as possible.

<sup>86</sup> G’s gloss as *myron* “sweet oil” does not quite capture the grade distinction denoted by the Hebrew, but it does nonetheless appear to get the extraordinary nature of the oil (the same rendering of *šemen ṭōb* is given in 2 Kgs 20:13=Isa 39:2). In Qoh 7:1 G translates (perhaps) more literally, *elaion agathon*. Any in case, G should be construed here (in all likelihood) as supporting MT (along with 11QPs<sup>a</sup>, T, and V). The rendering in S, *mšh*<sup>2</sup>, again represents this translation’s habit of leveling through all topological density in favor of a (more) straightforward semantic rendering (cf. T’s *kmšh.tb*). Therefore, it too is unlikely to be witnessing to a *Vorlage* that varies from MT.

<sup>87</sup> There is no need to emend by adding a *še-* in imitation of the two other occurrences of *šeyyōrēd* (so Gunkel, *Psalmen*, 572; Kraus, *Psalmen*, 1067) or to follow the minority of Masoretic manuscripts that add a definite article (see *BHS*), conforming to the clustering of definite articles in the couplet. Both strategies level MT in light of the broader context. G (*to katabainon*), V (*quod descendit*), and S (*dnht*) all similarly assimilate toward the other renderings of *šeyyōrēd* in the psalm. The reading in MT is reflected in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> (*ywrd*) and T (*nhyt*). Further, while it is common in BH for the participle to be accompanied by a definite article when forming a relative clause, it is by no means syntactically necessary, “because the participle, as a verbal adjective, by itself can serve as a relative clause” (*IBHS* §19.7b).

<sup>88</sup> 11QPs<sup>a</sup> reads *šyrd* in contradistinction to *ywrd* earlier and *šywrd* later. Of

‘*al-pî middôtāyw*<sup>89</sup>

Over the collar of his robes;

course, this could simply reflect a defective spelling of the participle (as in MT). However, the spelling in this scroll (and in the DSS more generally) is customarily full, opening up the possibility that the scribe intends the perfective form of the verb here. On this reading, Keel (“Ps 133,” 69) suggests that 11QPs<sup>a</sup> means to signal that it is taking the immediately preceding *zqn ḥrwn* as the subject and not the *šemen haṭṭōb*, which, like *ṭal*, governs a participle. However construed, the underlying Hebrew *Vorlage* is the same.

<sup>89</sup> The Masoretes apparently vocalize as if from *middâ* “measure, measurement,” for which the feminine plural is well attested (Num 13:32; 1 Kgs 7:9, 11; Jer 22:14; Ezek 40:24, 28, 29, 32, 33, 35; 41:17; 42:15; 43:13; 48:16). The reading would be something like: “...the beard of Aaron which falls down according to (‘*al-pî*; see Lev 27:8, 18; Num 26:56; Prov 22:6; Sir 13:24) its measures (i.e., length, size, Num 13:32; 2 Sam 21:10; Isa 45:14; Jer 22:14; 2 Chron 3:3; more commonly in BH with *kē-*, e.g., 1 Kgs 7:9, 11; cf. Keel, “Ps 133,” 71–73). N.B.: Jastrow has no entry for a lexeme from *mdd* meaning “clothes” or the like (only JBA *madda*)—though he does translate a passage in Yeb. 76<sup>b</sup> with reference to 1 Sam 17:38 *maddāyw kmiddātō* “his (Saul’s) garments such as fitted his stature” (I, 732; cf. *ʾyš špyr mddh* “a man whose stature is beautiful,” *TAD* C1.1.95). In contrast, all the versions (G *ōan tou endumatos autou*, T *ʾymrʾ dlbwšwy*, S *br šwrʾ dkwtynh*, V *oram vestimentorum eius*), and also 11QPs<sup>a</sup> and 11QPs<sup>b</sup> (both read *mḏyn*) construe as if from BH *mad* “garment” (Lev 6:3; Judg 3:16; 1 Sam 4:12; 17:38, 39; 18:4; 20:8; Ps 109:18) or *mādū/madweh* “garment” (2 Sam 10:4=1 Chron 19:4). The problem is that the lexeme in Hebrew is normally masculine, except for a single occurrence at Qumran (*mdt hdr* “robe of honor,” 1QS 4.8). Ugaritic may also attest one instance of a feminine plural, *mdth* (*CTU* 4.182.55). MT is to be preferred (over the DSS readings) as the more difficult reading, though following the versions in construing the reference to be to a garment of some kind. This interpretation is supported by a number of considerations. One, there are the two other attested feminine forms at Qumran and in Ugaritic, the latter a plural. Two, if the Masoretes did not know a word for garment from the root *mdd*, then their construal as if a measure of some sort, as well as taking Aaron’s beard as the antecedent, is sensible but no longer overly compelling (the Masoretic accentuation, contra Dahood, *Psalms III*, 252, does not disambiguate the antecedent presumed to govern the relative clause). Besides I know of only one late reference to a long beard in the ancient sources: R. Payne-Smith cites Syr *ʾarrīq daqnā* “long bearded” as a translation of an Arabic original (Ibn S. Thes. §3; s.v. *ʾarrīq*), and none of the uses of *middâ* pointed out by Keel and others offer very precise parallels, mostly indicating a large person or structure. An allusion via a play on *middâ* to the stature of the individual, especially in light of the explicit naming of Aaron, and even possibly, given the iconographic evidence, to the fullness of the beard imagined (so Keel’s “seiner ganzen Größe”), is entirely possible (so Ray Van Leeuwen, personal communication). Third, if the reference is to a garment, then there are good parallels to *pî* as indicating the collar or the neck opening of a garment (cf. all the versions): *kēpî kuttonî* “by the collar of my tunic” (Job 30:18), *kēpî taḥrā* “by the collar of a coat of mail” (Exod 28:32; 39:23), *ūpî hammē il* “the opening of the robe” (Exod 39:23). Fourth, though perhaps incidentally, Aaron is himself fitted out with a “linen robe” (*middō bar*) in Lev 6:3. And the clincher is a passage in 1 Samuel 21 in which David, feigning madness, causes spittle to run down his beard: *wayyôred rîrô ʾel-zēqānô* “and he

*kēṭal-hermôn šeyyōrēd*<sup>90</sup>  
 ʿal-harēre<sup>91</sup> šīyyōn<sup>92</sup>

Like the dew of Hermon running down  
 Over the mountains of Zion—

causes spittle to run down his beard” (1 Sam 21:14; some Mss read ʿl for ʾl). That is, nowhere else do beards *yrd*. But to the contrary substances like “spittle,” and thus presumably, potentially “oil,” too, do *yrd* down upon and over the beard.

<sup>90</sup> This is a late syntagma. Hurvitz (*Transition Period*, 156–58) points out that only here (2x) and in Haggai (Hag 2:1) and in Qoheleth (9:12; 10:15) does the syntagma *še* + participle appear in BH; otherwise it has the definite article (i.e., *h* + participle, cf. *IBHS* §19.6; for the SBH construction with *yrd*, see Deut 9:21; Josh 3:13; 2 Kgs 12:21; cf. Qoh 3:21; Neh 3:15). The *še* + participle construction is otherwise known in Rabbinic Hebrew (e.g., *t. Hag.* 2a; *Mek.* (226); *Sanh.* 7, 50b) and is also reflected in Targumic Aramaic (e.g., Tg. Onq. 2 Chron 18:7; see Hurvitz, *Transition Period*, 156–57). *še-* is itself a typically late affix, substituting for and even replacing the relative particle ʾāšer that dominates the early phases of the language (for discussion with earlier literature, see F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Late Linguistic Features in the Song of Songs” in *Perspectives on the Song of Songs—Perspektiven der Hobeliedauslegung* (A. C. Hagedorn, ed.; BZAW; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2005), 46, 59–60).

<sup>91</sup> The plural in MT is supported by G (*orē*), T (*twry*), and V (montana). 11QPs<sup>a</sup> (*br*) and apparently S (*twr*<sup>3</sup>, without *seyame*), in contrast, read the singular. The latter reading is surely an assimilation to the standard phrase *har šīyyōn* “Mount Zion,” elsewhere always in the singular (e.g., 2 Kgs 19:31; Isa 4:5; 8:18; 10:12; 24:23; 29:8; 31:4; Joel 3:5; Obad 17; Mic 4:7; Ps 48:3, 12; 74:2; 78:68<sup>1</sup> 125:1; Lam 5:18). The plural “mountains” is the more unique and difficult reading, and hard to imagine a scribe coming to it from a putative *Vorlage* with a singular. But the rendering in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> and S does point up a certain oddness to the phrasing of MT. Perhaps, indicating that something more or other than “Mount Zion” is intended here. The genitive construction involving “mountains” (in the plural) plus a Geographical Name is rather commonplace, e.g., “mountains of Ararat” (Gen 8:4), “mountains of Abarim” (Num 33:47), “mountains of Samaria” (Jer 31:5; Amos 3:9), “mountains of Israel” (Ezek 6:2, etc.), “mountains of Judah” (2 Chron 21:11). Hence, the reference may be taken rather straightforwardly (initially at any rate) as a reference to the “mountains of Zion,” namely, the several hills in and around Jerusalem (cf. Ps 87:1; 121:1; 125:2).

The reanalyzed form of the plural with the typical infix *-a* plural of *qvīl* nouns (the standard plural of the *qvīl* pattern with geminate roots in BH is *qvīllim* in the absolute and *qvīllē* in the construct, cf. J. Fox, *Semitic Noun Patterns* [HSS 52; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003], 136, 147, 153), though not indisputably diagnostic of LBH, becomes (more) prominent in LBH and later dialects of Hebrew. A general trend towards more prominence is to be observed diachronically in the

<i>kī šām</i> <sup>93</sup> <i>šiwwā yhw</i>	There <sup>94</sup> Yahweh
<i>’et-habbērākā</i>	Commands the blessing—
<i>ḥayyīm</i> <sup>95</sup> <i>’ad-hā’ōlām</i> <sup>96</sup>	Life always!

Aramaic dialects as well. For details, see Dobbs-Allsopp, “Late Linguistic Features,” 34–36.

<sup>92</sup> All witnesses follow MT in reading “Zion.” Yet a number of emendations are routinely pressed (*’iyyōn* “Ijon,” *šiyyâ* “parched,” *šiyyōn* [presumably for *šī’ōn*] “Sion”), since the notion of dew running down from Hermon to Zion is literally untenable. Alter (*Psalms*, 463) is exemplary, pointing out that the reading “mountains of Zion” does not “make much sense because Mount Hermon is geographically removed from the Judean mountains around Jerusalem, and dew certainly does not travel in this fashion.” But the realist assumptions of this logic do not necessarily hold. There is every reason to suspect that the poet means the image figuratively, similar to how Zion in other passages is imagined as high and in the far north (Ps 48:3)—it neither has high peaks or is located in the north, or in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle the heavens can rain “oil” (*šmn*) and the wadis run with “honey” (*nbtm*) (CTU 1.6.III.6–7). On this view, all of the suggested emendations are assimilatory and have little appeal beside the only material reading attested.

<sup>93</sup> 11QPs<sup>a</sup> reads the long form, *šmh*.

<sup>94</sup> The rendering of *kī šām* as simply “there” follows the lead of *NJV*. This leaves ambiguous the question of whether to understand the force of *kī* here as-severatively or logically. As indicated above, I think both senses are to be heard. But any literal rendering of *kī* into English must favor one (“indeed, truly, verily”) or the other (“because, for”) construal.

<sup>95</sup> *ḥayyīm* is lacking in 11QPs<sup>a</sup>. G, T, and S add a conjunction. V and 11QPs<sup>b</sup> (as far as it is extant) follow MT. Of the two readings, the shorter and more syntactically challenging MT (and V) is likely the more original reading. The addition of the conjunction eases, and thereby clarifies and interprets explicitly, the appositional construction of MT (the addition of the conjunction earlier in v. 2 in S, viz. *w’l dqn’*, is also of this nature). According to G, T, and S, Yahweh here commands two things: blessing and life. It is difficult to imagine the latter being simplified to an appositional construction, except through parablepsis (the *waw* being overlooked between the final *he* on *hbrkh* and the initial *het* from *ḥyym* (which are similar especially at Qumran, cf. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *Textual Criticism* [GBS; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986], 46):

M, V	<i>’t-hbrkh ḥyym</i>	<i>’d-h’wlm</i>
G, T, S	<i>’t-hbrkh whyym</i>	<i>’d-(h)’wlm</i>
11QPs <sup>a</sup>	<i>’t-hbrkh</i>	<i>’d-’wlm</i>
11QPs <sup>b</sup>	<i>’t-hbrkh ḥyym</i>	[ <i>’lm</i> ]

The absence of *ḥayyīm* in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> is more puzzling. There is no obvious mechanical explanation of the minus here. Though not precisely paralleled, the sentiment of blessing or being blessed forever is not uncommon in the Psalms in particular (e.g., 41:14; 45:3; 72:19; 89:53; 106:48; 113:5; 115:18; 145:1, 2, 21). The reading in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> could be explained as a simplification of MT or simply a scribal error, or even as D. N. Freedman (cited in Dahood, *Psalms III*, 253) suggests, an intentional omission that was theologically motivated, viz. to get rid of any notion of an eternal life. But, in any case, of the two readings (MT and 11QPs<sup>a</sup>), it is hard to imagine the rationale for inserting *ḥayyīm* into a text like 11QPs<sup>a</sup>. Moreover, considerations of line length and of the sound patterns traced in the body of this essay support the suspicion that the reading in MT is more likely to have given rise to a

reading like that in 11QPs<sup>a</sup>.

<sup>96</sup> 11QPs<sup>a</sup> and MT<sup>mss</sup> (Ken) read the common *‘d ‘wlm*. The idiom with the definite article, as in MT, G (*ēōs tou aiōnos*), and T (*‘d ‘lm*’; cf. S *‘dm’ l’lm*), is the more difficult reading and is a feature of LBH (see Hurvitz, *Transition Period*, 158–59): outside of the four instances in the Psalms (28:9; 41:14; 106:48; 133:3), *‘d- h’wlm* occurs only in the books of Chronicles, Nehemiah, and Daniel; it is in contrast to the SBH idiom *‘d-‘wlm*; and the targums consistently translate the latter as *‘d ‘lm*’ (= Heb *‘d- h’wlm*). Hurvitz gives the following example which nicely points up the contrast:

2 Sam 7:16:	<i>wn’ mn bytk wmlktk</i>	<i>‘d ‘wlm</i>
1 Chron 17:14:	<i>wh’ mdyhw bbyty wbmlkwty</i>	<i>‘d h’wlm</i>
Targum (to Samuel):	<i>wqym bytk wmlkwtk</i>	<i>‘d ‘lm</i> ’

11QPs<sup>a</sup> (cf. 11QPs<sup>b</sup>: *šlwm ‘l yśr’l*) adds a line to the end of the poem not attested in MT or any of the other witnesses: *šlwm ‘l yśr’l* lit. “Peace upon Israel.” This addition, combined with other variations in 11QPs<sup>a</sup>, significantly alters how this poem ends. The main upshot is to provide the blessing (*šlwm ‘l yśr’l*) which Yahweh in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> is understood to have commanded. The plus itself occurs elsewhere in Ps 125:5 and 128:6, where it also closes the respective poems, and thus looks suspiciously secondary in Psalm 133. Again it is difficult to imagine varying a text like 11QPs<sup>a</sup> such that it would result in the verse attested in MT (this is supported by the need to reconstruct *hyym* in 11QPs<sup>a</sup>, which suggests the priority of MT).