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Cosmic Imagery in Psalm 72 עַד־בְּלִי יָרֵחַ [*ad bli yareaḥ*][1]

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Abstract. Psalm 72, usually identified as a "royal psalm", vividly portrays the profound connection between God and Creation. The psalm employs carefully crafted language to suggest a multi-faceted portrayal of the universe, encompassing both temporal and physical dimensions. The paper aims to analyse this language, with a peculiar focus on the Hebrew text. When necessary, parallels with translations in English will be employed. Special attention will be given to the semantic range of celestial or natural elements, which are used to evoke a sense of the seemingly endless or boundless extent of time or space. This is especially evident in v. 5 ("as long as the sun and as long as the moon"), v. 7 ("till the moon is no more"), v. 8 ("from the River to the ends of the earth"), and v. 17 ("as long as the sun") of the psalm.

Keywords: biblical commentary, translation challenges, psalms, Hebrew

Introduction

The history of Hebrew Bible translation represents an extensive topic within the sphere of translation studies and reflects a continuous engagement with theological, cultural, and linguistic dimensions. The first translations of the Masoretic Text, Septuagint (Greek translation; completed around the third and second centuries BCE) and Vulgate (Latin translation; completed by St Jerome around the fourth century CE), already gained a significant reputation as

1 Throughout this paper, I use a simplified transliteration system for Hebrew, which follows the conventions found in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (second edition), with the following exceptions: I do not mark the distinction in transliteration between ג/ג׳, ת/ת, ד/ד; I transliterate the labiodental fricative פ with *f*, the sibilants שׁ with *ṣ*, and ץ/צ with *ṭ*; I transliterate all vowels using their Latin counterparts *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u* without making any distinction between short or long vowels.

authoritative texts throughout centuries, particularly within the Orthodox and Catholic churches. Moreover, worth mentioning is the German translation of the New Testament rendered by Martin Luther in 1522, which had a great influence on subsequent Bible translations into vernacular languages. In his famous "An Open Letter on Translating", Luther articulated an important principle in translation, emphasizing the importance of making translations accessible and relatable to common people: "Rather we must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common person in the market about this [how we are to speak German]. We must be guided by their tongue, and the manner of their speech, and do our translating accordingly. Then they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them" (Luther 1909: n. p.; addition mine).

Luther's translation and his interest in translation techniques are particularly notable, especially because they paved the way for other similar endeavours. For example, William Tyndale, a fervent advocate of Protestant beliefs within the British sphere, being inspired by Luther's translation, decided to undertake a similar project. Therefore, in 1526, he completed an English translation of the New Testament, being driven by the same core of the Protestant Reform and critically directed towards ecclesiastic authorities who took advantage of the text for their benefit:

> But our malicious and wily hypocrites which are so stubborn and hard hearted in their wicked abominations […] say, some of them that it is impossible to translate the scripture into English, some that it is not lawful for the lay people to have it in their mother tongue, some that it would make them all heretics, as it would no doubt from many things which they of long time have falsely taught, and that it is the whole cause wherefore they forbid it, though they other cloaks pretend. (Bray 2004: 33)

Tyndale will become a reputed figure for Biblical translation studies and will profoundly influence the completion of other English translations, including the well-known King James Version of the Bible (first published in 1611).

However, delving into the history of Bible translation falls outside the scope of the current paper. Thus, I will only briefly acknowledge Robert Alter's most recent translation in English of the Bible, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (Alter 2018), which was preceded by the publication of the translation of the Book of Psalms. As we read in the introduction, Alter emphasizes the difficulties faced by the translators: "It is a constant challenge to turn ancient Hebrew poetry into English verse that is reasonably faithful to the original and yet readable as poetry. Perhaps the most pervasive problem is the intrinsic structural compactness of Biblical Hebrew, a feature that the poets constantly exploit musically and otherwise" (Alter 2007: xxviii–xxix).

The genesis of the current paper can be attributed to my involvement in a similar endeavour: translating the Book of Psalms from Hebrew into Romanian. The project *Biblia Hebraica: Cartea Psalmilor*, coordinated by Prof. Madeea Axinciuc, brings together a group of professors and scholars from the University of Bucharest, alongside alumni of the Jewish Studies and Religious Studies: Texts and Traditions programme of the University of Bucharest. It aims to offer the first academic, non-confessional translation of the Book of Psalms from the original Hebrew (Masoretic) Text into Romanian.[2] Although a plethora of authoritative Romanian translations exists, each with its legacy and significance, the project does not aim to reject or overlook the already existing editions but to complement them.

In the light of the above, Psalm 72, an exemplar of themes encompassing justice, righteousness, and divine sovereignty, serves as the focal point of the current paper. Through a systematic analysis, I aim to examine the nuances of the Hebrew text, with a particular emphasis on the language used to denote the ideas of infinity in time and space. The paper is divided into three sections as follows: firstly, I introduce the structure of Psalm 72 within the large corpus of the Book of Psalms. My investigation primarily targets staying close to the Masoretic Text and offering additional insights into the peculiarities of the Hebrew language which cannot be always rendered in translation. Then, I narrow the focal point of my analysis to the exploration of certain verses (vv. 5, 7–8, 17) that employ suggestive language to express celestial or natural elements to convey notions of infinite time and space. Lastly, particular attention will be given to the thought-provoking implications inferred by the translation of the Hebrew phrase part of my title, *ad bli yareaḥ* [*ad bli yareaḥ*] (commonly translated as 'till the moon is no more').

1. Central themes and the structure of Psalm 72

Psalm 72 falls within the category known as the royal psalms, being considered a "coronation hymn" (Tanner 2014: 573). The heading of the text לִשְׁלֹמֹה [li-şelomoh] sparks curiosity regarding the author of the psalm, taking into consideration that the Hebrew phrase could mean either 'of Solomon' or 'for/to Solomon' (Human 2002: 667, Alter 2007: 252–253).

In terms of structure, the psalm comprises twenty verses. The author (whether David or Solomon remains uncertain) prays for God's gift of justice to descend on the king: "God, grant Your judgments to the king/ and Your righteousness to the king's son" (v. 1). It is hoped that if the king applies divine justice in his rule, the kingdom will have peace and abundance. However, the key point is that the king has to administer God's justice and righteousness, not his own. Note the

2 One volume, containing the translation of the first 50 Psalms, has already been published at Polirom Publishing House (Iaşi) in 2020.

repetition of the two roots ש.פ.ט [ş.f.t] and צ.ד.ק [ţ.d.k] (for their precise meaning, see BDB 8199 and BDB 6664 respectively), especially throughout the first four verses of the psalm: מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ [mişpateikha] 'your judgments', וְצִדְקָתְךָ [ve-ţidatekha] 'your righteousness', בְצֶדֶק [ve-ţedek] 'righteously', וּבְמִשְׁפָּט [ve-mişpat] 'in justice', בִּצְדָקָה [bi-ţdaka] 'righteousness', יִשְׁפֹּט [yişpot] ('may he bring justice'). Concerning this matter, Robert Murray observes that "[t]his psalm reflects the ideal world-order of the cosmic covenant. Hebrew lacked one regular word for cosmic order […]; but this order is included in the semantic range of the words *mišpaṭ* and *ṣedeq/ṣědaqah* which dominate the psalm" (Murray 2007: 42).

As the psalm goes on, it transitions into the king's rule, with particular emphasis on the poor and the ones oppressed within society: "May he judge Your people righteously/ and Your lowly ones in justice" (v. 2), "May he bring justice to the lowly of the people,/ may he rescue the sons of the needy/ and crush the oppressor" (v. 4), "For he saves the needy man pleading,/ and the lowly who has none to help him./ He pities the poor and the needy,/ and the lives of the needy he rescues" (vv. 12–13). Furthermore, the psalm beautifully describes the entire creation rejoicing in the rule of the king; observe, especially in vv. 3, 5–6, 8, and 16, the presence of natural elements depicting the mountains, the hills, the grass, the earth (terrestrial), the sea and the river (aquatic), the Sun and the Moon (celestial). Moreover, words part of the lexical field of "abundance" can be noticed in v. 6 ("May he come down like rain on new-mown grass,/ like showers that moisten the earth") and in v. 7 ("May the just man *flourish* in his days –/ and *abundant* peace till the moon is no more") (emphasis mine). The Hebrew noun גֵּז [gez], translated here as 'new-mown grass', speaks of "shearing, mowing" and is usually used in the Hebrew Bible in reference to fleece or wool; this marks the only instance where the word is employed in reference to "land to be mown". The Hebrew term for "showers" from v. 6, רְבִיבִים [revivim], is highly suggestive and conveys the idea of "copious showers causing fertility". Towards the end of the psalm, the same image is reiterated, cyclical, in v. 16: "May there be abundance of grain in the land,/ on the mountaintops./ May his fruit rustle like Lebanon,/ and may they sprout from the town like grass of the land."

The depiction of flourishing and abundance is completed, on the terrestrial level, by the victory against the enemies granted to the king and by the favourable political relations regarding the other nations, as we read in vv. 9–11:

> Before him may the desert-folk kneel,
> and his enemies lick the dust.
> May kings of Tarshish and the islands
> bring tribute,
> may kings of Sheba and Siba
> offer vassal-gifts.

And may all kings bow to him,
all nations serve him.

In v. 11, note the presence of the verbal form וְיִשְׁתַּחֲווּ [ve-yiştaḥavu] 'and [they] will bow down', which comes from an uncertain Hebrew root – either ש.ח.ה [ş.ḥ.h] or ח.ו.ה [ḥ.v.h] –, employed predominantly in the Hebrew Bible with the meaning of 'to bow down, to prostrate oneself' (see also Bujor 2020: 77–79).

The psalm ends in a traditional liturgical manner, praising the name of the king throughout eternity.[3] This idea is expressed by the use of phrases such as לְעוֹלָם [le-olam] 'forever' (in vv. 17 and 19) and לִפְנֵי־שֶׁמֶשׁ [lifnei şemeş] 'in front of the sun' (in v. 17), as we have already observed from the subtle use of adverbs skilfully integrated throughout the text: דּוֹר דּוֹרִים [dor dorim] (v. 5), עַד־בְּלִי יָרֵחַ [ad bli yareaḥ] (v. 7), תָּמִיד [tamid], and כָּל־הַיּוֹם [kol ha-yom] (v. 15).

2. Navigating time and space in Hebrew

Within this section of the paper, I narrow the focus of the discussion to vv. 5, 7–8, and 17 of Psalm 72, as they contain some Hebrew phrases that pose a translation challenge, expressing ideas of "forever" in time and "infinity" in space. Beforehand, I will provide some preliminary explanations regarding the structural aspects of this section. First, I cite the Hebrew verse as it appears in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (which offers the standard scholarly edition of the Masoretic Text), parallel to its transliteration in Latin script. Then, I supply one English translation (Alter 2007). In addition, some clarifications regarding the use of capitalization are required before proceeding. Note that in Hebrew there is no distinction between uppercase and lowercase letters. Therefore, the pronoun "he" (and its derivative grammatical forms) can refer either to the (mundane) king or to God, which can influence the reading and might add a layer of depth to the interpretation: "The *he* in the preserved words of the poem is no doubt the king, but now the *he* is anyone who chooses to live as part of God's kingdom" (Tanner 2014: 574).[4]

In the light of the above, in v. 5 of Psalm 72, we read:

May they fear you as long as the sun	יִירָאוּךָ עִם־שֶׁמֶשׁ וְלִפְנֵי יָרֵחַ דּוֹר דּוֹרִים׃
and as long as the moon, generations	*yiraukha im şameş*
untold.	*velifnei yareaḥ dor dorim*

The Hebrew phrases that are of interest for the current discussion are עִם־שֶׁמֶשׁ [im şameş] and וְלִפְנֵי יָרֵחַ [ve-lifnei yareaḥ]. The first one combines the preposition

3 Tanner considers the later stanza of the Psalm (vv. 18–20) to be a later editorial addition (Tanner 2014: 574).

4 Note that Robert Alter rejects the messianic reading of the Psalm (Alter 2007: 252).

עִם [im] ‘(together) with’ and the noun שֶׁמֶשׁ [şemeş; here, in pausal form] ‘sun’; the second one results from pairing the coordinating conjunction וְ [ve] ‘and’, the preposition לִפְנֵי [lifnei] ‘in front of’, and the noun יָרֵחַ [yareaḥ] ‘moon’. Therefore, a technical translation of the verse would be ‘they will fear you/ may they fear you (together) with the Sun and in front of the Moon, generation after generation(s)’. As charming as the image rendered in the Hebrew text may be, it is equally difficult to translate it into modern languages. The general idea suggested by the psalmist is that the (foreign) nations should fear the king forever and ever. As seen from the translation above, the translator has resorted to rephrasing or compensation to convey the intended meaning more effectively.[5] Both of these phrases are very lyrical in Hebrew, employing two timekeeping devices – the Sun and the Moon – to suggest the idea of eternity.

Given the presence of a similar expression in v. 17, I will address it here:

May his name be forever. As long as the sun may his name bear seed. And may all nations be blessed through him, call him happy.	יְהִי שְׁמוֹ ו לְעוֹלָם לִפְנֵי־שֶׁמֶשׁ יִנּוֹן שְׁמוֹ וְיִתְבָּרְכוּ בוֹ כָּל־גּוֹיִם יְאַשְּׁרוּהוּ׃ *yehi şemo le-olam lifnei şemeş yinin şemo ve-yitbarekhu vo kol goim yeaşeruhu*

We find in this verse the phrase לִפְנֵי־שֶׁמֶשׁ [lifnei şemeş], comprised of the words we have already seen in v. 5, לִפְנֵי [lifnei] ‘in front of’ and שֶׁמֶשׁ [şemeş; here having its usual vocalization] ‘sun’. In a parallel manner, this metaphorical language, translated literally as ‘in front of the Sun’, conveys the same idea of eternity mentioned earlier in v. 5 (‘in front of the Moon’); at the same time, it echoes the idea expressed by the phrase לְעוֹלָם [le-olam] ‘for eternity, forever’ within v. 17. The verse appears to be both a blessing and an invocation of the name of the king, which should endure throughout eternity and be praised through future generations, this idea being put forward by the continuous cycle of life and growth symbolized by the Sun.[6]

Probably one of the most intriguing phrases that expresses the idea of eternity can be found in v. 7, where the fate of the king’s dominion is described:

5 Other English translations render: “They shall fear thee as long as the sun and moon endure, throughout all generations” (King James Version); “In the sight of the sun and the moon he will endure, age after age” (New Jerusalem Bible); “People will fear you as long as the sun and moon remain in the sky, for generation after generation” (New English Translation).

6 The Hebrew text allows the reading with uppercase letters. In this case, the name of the King could refer directly to God. Compare the meaning in other English translations of this verse: “His name shall endure for ever: his name shall be continued as long as the sun: and men shall be blessed in him: all nations shall call him blessed” (King James Version); “May his name be blessed for ever, and endure in the sight of the sun. In him shall be blessed every race in the world, and all nations call him blessed” (New Jerusalem Bible); “May his fame endure! May his dynasty last as long as the sun remains in the sky! May they use his name when they formulate their blessings! May all nations consider him to be favored by God!” (New English Translation).

יִפְרַח־בְּיָמָיו צַדִּיק וְרֹב שָׁלוֹם עַד־בְּלִי יָרֵחַ:
yifraḥ be-yamav ṣadik
ve-rov ṣalom ad bli yareaḥ

May the just man flourish in his days
and abundant peace till the moon is
no more.

The psalmist foresees the rise of the just man and predicts abundant peace that will last, as the Hebrew puts it, "until without the Moon". Literally, the phrase combines the preposition עַד [ad] 'until', the particle of negation בְּלִי [bli] 'without, lack of, wearing out', together with the noun יָרֵחַ [yareaḥ] 'moon'.[7] Noteworthy is that, generally, in Hebrew, we find an abundance of adverbs denoting the eternal duration of time, which are frequently employed in the psalms. I briefly mention here only a few examples: לְעוֹלָם [le-olam], לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד [le-olam va-ed], לָנֶצַח [la-neṭaḥ], לְדוֹר וָדוֹר [le-dor va-dor], תָּמִיד [tamid]. This precise language used in v. 7 to convey 'forever' diverges from the conventional Hebrew. More than this interesting choice of words is the fact that this specific phrase, in identical form, cannot be found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.

However, these two particles, עַד־בְּלִי [ad bli] 'until not, until without', are joined together to express the idea of "until [there is] no [more of]" in other two instances. In the book of Job, we find the following verse: "but a man lies down and will not arise, *till the sky is no more* he will not awake and will not rouse from his sleep" (Job 14:12; emphasis mine). The Hebrew text renders עַד־בִּלְתִּי שָׁמַיִם [ad bilti ṣamayim] for 'till the sky is no more'. The word בִּלְתִּי [bilti] is an adverb of negation, comparable in usage and meaning to בְּלִי [bli], and it encompasses the idea of "not, except, without". Both of these words are used chiefly poetic for the common ways of expressing negation in Hebrew: לֹא [lo] 'no' and אֵין [ein] 'there is not'. Moreover, in the book of Malachi, the prophet says, "I will surely open for you the casements of the heavens and shower upon you blessings *without end*" (Malachi 3:10; emphasis mine). The last part of this verse is of interest for the current paper since it uses the following language: עַד־בְּלִי דָי [ad bli dai], where the word דָי [dai] is a noun meaning 'sufficiency, enough'. Hence, the Hebrew phrase conveys the idea that abundance will continue until there is no more of it left (until there is not sufficiency/ until there is not enough/ until my abundance will be exhausted).[8]

Even though it does not explicitly convey the notion of eternity, I include v. 8 of Psalm 72 in my analysis because it poetically expresses the concept of infinity in space through a suggestive parallelism.

7 Please compare: "In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth" (King James Version); "In his days uprightness shall flourish, and peace in plenty till the moon is no more" (New Jerusalem Bible); "During his days the godly will flourish; peace will prevail as long as the moon remains in the sky" (New English Translation).

8 Although not used to express the idea of "forever" or "eternity", a more common expression (that employs a similar word-structure) in the Hebrew Bible is the following: עַד־בִּלְתִּי הַשְׁאִיר־לוֹ שָׂרִיד [ad bilti ha-ṣeir-lo sarid] 'until there is no one/no remnant left'. See Numbers 21:35, Deuteronomy 3:3, Joshua 8:22, Joshua 10:33, Joshua 11:8, 2 Kings 10:11.

וְיֵרְדְּ מִיָּם עַד־יָם וּמִנָּהָר עַד־אַפְסֵי־אָרֶץ׃
ve-iered mi-yam ad yam
u-minahar ad afsei areṣ

And may he hold sway from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth.

The phrase "to the ends of the earth" is depicted in Hebrew as follows: the preposition עַד [*ad*] 'until', the nouns אֶפֶס [*efes*; here, in plural construct form] 'end, extremity, non-existence, cessation', and אֶרֶץ [*ereṣ*; here, in pausal form] 'earth, land'. In an attempt to clarify this expression, Abraham Ibn Ezra, in his commentary on the Book of Psalms, states:

> If the psalm speaks of Solomon then the meaning of *from sea to sea* is, from the Sea of Reeds to the Sea of the Philistines. *The river* refers to the Euphrates and *the ends of the earth* to the wilderness. Scripture mentions the width and breadth of the Land of Israel. If the psalm speaks of the Messiah then the "sea" refers to the Southern Sea that is known as the Red Sea. [*From sea to sea* means from the Red Sea] to the North Sea, that is, the ocean. *And from the river* refers to the river that comes out of Eden. This river is located where east begins. *The ends of the world* are located at the end of the west. (Ibn Ezra 2009: 192)

Note that Ibn Ezra highlights the double reading of the psalm: one reading that refers to a mundane king and kingdom (of Solomon) and another one that might refer to a divine king (here, Messiah). Both readings are allowed by the Hebrew text, and they convey a complex layer of interpretation.

3. Final remarks and further research

As illustrated in this paper, a closer analysis of the peculiar choice of words in Hebrew and the difficulty of rendering it in translation opens the door to several paths for future exploration. From here, I believe some research questions can be formulated such as: can these particular phrases (which express the idea of everlastingness) offer insights into the psalm's authorship or the historical context in which the psalm was written? Can similar expressions be found in later developments of the Hebrew languages (such as Mishnaic Hebrew or other sources in poetry)? Do other Semitic languages (Aramaic, Ugaritic, Akkadian) have similar ways to express the idea of eternity? By extending the scope of this investigation in future research, I aim to contribute additional insights to the scholarly discourse surrounding this topic.

In the interim, as regards the poetic Hebrew phrases that are challenging to render in other languages, in the absence of finding a perfect equivalent, one

should accept the loss when trying to translate the *untranslatable*, as Ricoeur puts it, "[i]n translation too, work is advanced with some salvaging and some acceptance of loss" (Ricoeur 2006: 3). I believe the same attitude applies when translating the psalms: the translator is compelled, eventually, to experience *mourning* (Ricoeur 2006) and to give up to the ideal of the perfect translation, which might be, actually, the source of happiness in the process of translation.

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