The Power of God in the Psalter

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The idea of the power of God remains a largely unexplored field in Old Testament research. Only a few observations regarding the characterization of the power of God in particular psalms can be found in the pertinent commentaries on the Psalter, in monographs and essays. There is currently no thorough investigation comprising all psalms. Why such an essential aspect of God's being, in such a central part of the Bible, has not evoked the interest of OT scholarship cannot be easily explained. However, the dearth of prior studies enables me to begin my investigation by analysing the sources rather than by engaging a vast field of scholarly literature.

My paper will provide a general introduction to my research project. I started to work on this project eight months ago. It is appropriate to start with the source material. The texts testifying to God's power are striking. My first approach aims to classify the different aspects of divine power in the Psalter. As a result of this first step I shall present my preliminary ideas concerning how the concept of God's power in the Psalter may be preserved. Finally, a brief prospect of my further research will be given.

I

The wide range of expressions for the power of God and the high frequency of these statements suggests that 'power' is both an important aspect of God's being and an essential topic in the Psalter. Therefore, it is no surprise to discover that only three psalms do not contain a direct or at least indirect reference to the power of God. According to my investigation there are altogether 1249 references in the Psalter expressing the power of God. This number does not include expressions of divine power which do not result in a characterization of God. Dealing with such an extensive topic requires that the investigation focus on a representative selection of references. Otherwise almost every statement in the Psalter could be associated with the power of God, and an appropriate characterization of divine power would then be hindered rather than promoted. My research project will not analyse every statement from which any sort of conclusion regarding the power of God could be drawn. Only those ideas will be

considered which have attained a fairly high degree of conceptualization, so that their connection with the notion of God's power is well-established. Numerous occurrences in the Psalter comply with this criterion. Nevertheless, I have come to the conclusion that they may all be assigned to four categories:

1) Manifestations

Manifestations designate God's powerful acting, which has to be understood as a consequence of his divine character. Manifestations capture linguistically how divine power can be perceived by humans. Therefore they do not represent direct, but indirect statements of divine power. For my investigation it does not make any difference whether the manifestations can be found in a statement or in a supplication of the psalmist. In either case insights are given into the power of God in the same way, because every supplication is expressed believing that God is in a position to fullfil all of it. The only criterion for a word to be regarded as a manifestation is that it be explicitly combined with a term for power in the psalms. The manifestations have not been identified by external criteria, but rather by evidence internal to the texts. The manifestations (926 references) comprise roughly one hundred Hebrew words which can be allotted to several different theological fields. Those fields are characterized by specific theological notions, for instance help and salvation (256 references), mercy and lovingkindness (166 references), shelter and refuge (99 references), destruction (87 references), law and dominion (73 references), wrath and punishment (73 references), signs and miracles (61 references).

To convey an idea of which characterizations and acts are regarded as manifestations, the semantic field of help and salvation may serve as an example: gʾl qal. (to redeem), yšʿ hiph. (to deliver), yĕšûʿâ (salvation), yešaʿ (rescue, salvation), nṣl hiph. (to deliver), ʿzr qal. (to help, succor), ʿezer (help), pdh qal. (to ransom), plṭ pi. (to bring into security), etc. Half of the references to God's acts of deliverance in the Psalter are combined with explicit mention of his power.

2) Metaphors

The most significant substantives used in the Psalter as metaphors designating God's power are zĕrôʿa (arm), yād (hand), yāmîn (right hand) and qeren (horn). With only 78 references, they make up the smallest of the four groups.

In the case of the manifestations, a reference to divine power had to be inferred from the respective word employed; however, metaphors for power embody power in the true sense of the word. Compared with the manifestations, which open up an indirect approach to the power of God, the metaphors for power represent more direct statements of divine power. For this reason metaphors embody a more concentrated emphasis on power than do manifestations.

3) Names of God

ʾābîr Yaʿăqōb, Yhwh Ṣĕbāʾôt, ʿelyôn, Šadday and šēm are divine names which include the element of God's power. 143 references attest this usage.

The importance of divine names for the perception of God's power represents a complex field of investigation. This is above all the case with the proper name Yhwh and its representation by šēm. I can not say anything about it in detail yet, so I will only offer an obvious case as an example. The aspect of power is particularly evident in God's extended proper name Yhwh Ṣĕbāʾôt. Bearing the Hebrew text in mind, the most common translation of Yhwh Ṣĕbāʾôt in English editions of the Bible, Lord of Hosts, is not unproblematic, since in Biblical Hebrew a proper name cannot serve as the *nomen regens* of a genitive construction. Nevertheless, Ṣĕbāʾôt contains the substantive ṣābā which has been added as an epithet to the proper name Yhwh. In the course of time the metaphor ṣābā has became more and more part of God's proper name. Eventually, the extended proper name Yhwh Ṣĕbāʾôt has arisen. This case reveals beyond doubt how a notion of military power has been incorporated into a proper name. The extended proper name stresses Yhwh's royal dominion over the heavenly powers. The military aspect has been transformed into a characteristic feature of divine kingship. Though the metaphor of kingship derives from the political domain, it has to be kept in mind that divine kingship is a notion in its own right. Even the Septuagint provides evidence for this specific understanding of Yhwh Ṣĕbāʾôt. Though the Greek translation renders Yhwh Ṣĕbāʾôt sometimes by κύριος in the Book of Jeremiah, it prefers translations as κύριος τῶν δυνάμεων in the Psalter, (κύριος/θεὸς) παντοκράτωρ in the Dodeca-propheton or simply transliterates his proper name, Yhwh σαβαωθ, in the Book of Isaiah.

4) Terms for power

The most significant terms for expressing the power of God in the Psalter are ʿōz, gĕbûrâ, kōăḥ and ḥayil. Altogether 102 references can be found in the psalms. Condensing all the different aspects of God's power which are expressed in the categories mentioned above, the terms for power represent the most explicit verbalisations of divine power. The terms for power are marked by bundling together linguistically characteristics and actions that are at a powerful person's disposal. Using a term for power always implies a personal idea. Only a person can have power. If power is linked to something else (e.g. 'power of rhetoric'), it represents a metaphorical use of a term for power.

I have ordered these categories by considering the extent to which each one gives concentrated literary expression to the idea of God's power. Thus, the most literarily diffuse expressions of divine power are where the divine being and action are described. The most concentrated expressions of divine power are found in the fourth category, where a single word characterizes and focuses the expression of divine power. This last category, which will be the focus of my research, encompasses 102 references distributed among fifty psalms.

The four categories mentioned above are linked with one another, and the transitions from one category to the next are fluid. At times a single word can be assigned to two different categories, depending on how the word is used. ʿōz, for example, is by definition a term for power. But if the psalmist sings the praises to God using the words Yhwh ʿuzzî, 'The Lord is my strength', we have a metaphorical use of a term for power. Hence, both ways of using the term are interrelated. Furthermore, the four different ways of expressing divine power seem to explicate one another. The manifestations, for example, give a hint as to how the terms for power are to be understood. This is clearly the case, because in every text in which a term for power is used, at least one manifestation of divine power can be found. The coexistence and interweaving of the expressions for the power of God suggest that a great many of them were always used side by side. Accordingly, it is not possible to say that the manifestations represent the older expressions for divine power while the terms for power have been added later. However, this does not mean that one cannot observe a succession of terminology employed within the categories preferred at a certain time. For example, ʿōz is a term

already well established in pre-exilic times, whereas the term gĕbûrâ is preferred in post-exilic times.

The terms for power are not the focus of my investigation due to the remarkable number of them in the Psalter. Rather, it is their theological significance which is of the greatest interest to me. Those terms bundle up the different aspects of divine power, each of them concentrating on certain characteristic features. They are absolutely central to reflection on God's power in the Psalter, as they are either exclusively – as in the case of ʿōz – or predominantly used to designate divine power.

II

Preliminary investigations have revealed that the frequency and semantics of the terms designating God's power in the Psalter differ remarkably; yet in spite of all the differences, there is no doubt that they all belong to the semantic field of 'power', covering a wide range of notions. There is, moreover, a general pattern to the manner in which the power of God has been conceptualized in the psalms. There are three different ways in which God's power is recognized and expressed. The first, and most frequently employed, describes how God makes a human participate in his power or expresses a human request for participation in the divine power. This aspect can be found, for instance, in Psalm 29:11: Yhwh ʿōz lĕʿammô yittēn Yhwh yĕbārēk ʾet-ʿammô bašālôm, 'May the Lord give strength to his people. May the Lord bless his people with peace.' Along with this direct description of human participation in divine power, a more indirect form of participation is attested in the Psalter. This is the case when a human takes part in divine power by being under God's shelter. Psalm 27,1: Yhwh ʾôrî wĕyišʿî mimmî ʾîrāʾ Yhwh māʿôz-ḥaiay mimmî ʾepḥād, 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?' The second way in which God's power is expressed occurs less frequently: power is mentioned as a characteristic of God, implying a certain impact on the world and on humans. In this case, Psalm 63:3 can serve as an example: kēn baqōdeš ḥăzîtîkā lirʾôt ʿuzĕkā ûkĕbôdekā, 'So I look upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.' Third, with almost equal frequency we find the idea expressed that divine power appears in God's acting on the world and in relation to humankind. This aspect arises, for instance, in Psalm 145:6: weʿĕzûz nôrĕʾōtêkā

yʾōmērû ûgĕdûlātĕkā ʾăsappĕrennâ, ‘They proclaim the might of your awesome deeds and I will declare your greatness.’

It is remarkable that each of the 102 references can be fitted into this taxonomy. Moreover, none of these references speaks about the power of God in an abstract way. Even if power is mentioned as a characteristic of God, divine power is related to humans.

III

Assuming that all references to God’s power in the Psalter have a relational character, my research project will try to work out how these three modes of conceptualizing and expressing divine power are interrelated. Furthermore, I will seek to investigate whether any other ideas have exerted influence on the development of these modes. I aim at reconstructing how the notion of God’s power has evolved throughout the history of theology in the Psalter. Eventually, a cursory glance will be cast on the Septuagint. The Greek translation of the terms for power offers at times a significant interpretation of the Hebrew text which has been influenced by the (new) cultural contexts of the Jewish community in the late Persian and Hellenistic periods. I will investigate whether the origins of those implications can be traced. If sufficient time is left, I will also go into the prayers of the Qumran community to identify its perspective on the idea of divine power.

<u>Discussion:</u>

- methodologicial approach
- relation of term and notion