

¹ Bless, O my being, the L^{ORD}!

L^{ORD}, my God, You are very great.

Grandeur and glory You don.

² Wrapped in light like a cloak,

stretching out heavens like a tent-cloth.

Setting beams for His lofts in the waters,³

making His chariot the clouds,

He goes on the wings of the wind.

He makes His messengers the winds,⁴

His ministers, glowing fire.

He founded earth on its solid base,⁵

not to be shaken forevermore.

With the deep You covered it like a garment—⁶

over mountains the waters stood.

From Your blast they fled,⁷

from the sound of Your thunder they scattered.

They went up the mountains, went down the valleys,⁸

to the place that You founded for them.

A border You fixed so they could not cross,⁹

so they could not come back to cover the earth.

¹⁰ You let loose the springs in freshets,

among the mountains they go.

¹¹ They water all beasts of the field,

the wild asses slake their thirst.

¹² Above them the fowl of the heavens dwell,

from among the foliage they send forth their voice.

¹³ He waters mountains from His lofts,

from the fruit of Your works the earth is sated.

¹⁴ He makes the hay sprout for cattle,

grass for the labor of humankind

to bring forth bread from the earth,

and wine that gladdens the heart of man ¹⁵

to make faces shine brighter than oil,

and bread that sustains the heart of man.

The trees of the L^{ORD} drink their fill, ¹⁶

the Lebanon cedars He planted,

where the birds make their nest, ¹⁷

the stork whose home is the cypresses,

the high mountains for the gazelles,¹⁸

the crags a shelter for badgers.

He made the moon for the fixed seasons;¹⁹

the sun—He appointed its setting.

You bring down darkness and it turns to night²⁰

in which all beasts of the forest stir.

²¹ The lions roar for prey,

seeking from God their food.

²² When the sun comes up, they head home,

and in their dens they lie down.

²³ Man goes out to his work

and to his labor until evening.

²⁴ How many Your deeds, O L ORD,

all of them You do in wisdom.

All the earth is filled with Your riches.

This sea great and wide,²⁵

where creatures beyond number stir,

the little beasts and the large.

There the ships go,²⁶

this Leviathan You fashioned to play with.

All of them look to You ²⁷

to give them their food in its season.

When You give them, they gather it in, ²⁸

when You open Your hand, they are sated with good.

When You hide Your face, they panic, ²⁹

You withdraw their breath and they perish,

and to the dust they return.

When You send forth Your breath, they are created, ³⁰

and You renew the face of the earth.

May the L_{ORD}'s glory be forever, ³¹

may the L_{ORD} rejoice in His works,

³² Who but looks down to earth, and it trembles,

but touches the mountains—they smoke.

³³ Let me sing to the L_{ORD} while I live,

let me hymn to my God while I breathe.

³⁴ Let my speech be sweet unto Him.

As for me, I rejoice in the L_{ORD}.

³⁵ Let offenders vanish from earth

and the wicked be no more.

Bless, O my being, the *Lord*,

Hallelujah!

1. *Bless, O my being, the *Lord*!* This psalm shares the formula of self-exhortation used at the beginning of Psalm 103, but that formula seems even more appropriate for this poem, which is not a meditation on God's providential justice but rather an ecstatic celebration of God's dominion over the vast panorama of creation.

Grandeur and glory You don. The first two nouns in the translation emulate the strong alliteration of the Hebrew *hod wehadar*. These terms refer to the trappings of majesty, but it will immediately become clear in the next line that God's royal robes and chariot are not the stuff of earthly majesty but the elements of the natural world.

2. *Wrapped in light.* The Hebrew actually uses an active participle ("wrapping"), and this inaugurates an unusual formal pattern in which God is represented in a whole chain of present participles without pronouns. The poet imagines the presence of divinity in the world as a dynamic series of actions—wrapping, stretching out, setting, making, walking, and so forth. This translation seeks to reproduce some of that participial activity, though the necessities of readable English have led to the introduction of at least a few pronouns and actual verbs (for example, in verse 3C, "He goes on the wings of the wind" instead of the literal "going on the wings of the wind").

3. *Setting beams for His lofts in the waters.* The modern reader may be puzzled as to why the divine builder should set beams in water, but the cosmological image would have been transparent to the ancient audience. Above the vault (*raqi'a*) of the heavens are the upper waters (see Genesis 1), where God builds His "lofts" or "upper chambers."

making His chariot the clouds. One of God's epithets is "rider on the clouds." The image is borrowed from Canaanite mythology.

6. *With the deep You covered it like a garment.* This evocation of the waters of the primordial abyss (*tehom*) covering all of the dry land refers in all likelihood not to the Flood story (though that remains a possibility or perhaps rather a superimposed image) but to creation itself. One can see that in this particular psalm the idea drawn from Canaanite mythology of a cosmogonic conquest of the sea god or sea monster has been domesticated in monotheistic terms. A primordial engulfing of the land by the sea is envisaged, but without personification or mythic imagery. God is the agent controlling the waters, and His “blast” (or “rebuke”) drives the waters back into their appointed bed. Indeed, Leviathan, the sea monster, appears in this poem as nothing more than a tame aquatic pet (verse 26) among the other manifold creatures of the sea.

10. *You let loose the springs in freshets.* Against the potentially destructive waters of the sea, now driven back to their appointed place beyond the shore, God releases on land powerful streams of fresh water to sustain the life of all creatures.

11. *the wild asses slake their thirst.* As in the Voice from the Whirlwind in Job, the wild ass, resistant to all domestication, is an image of unfettered freedom. God’s sustenance of His creatures extends to the wild and the tame, to beast and man (again, as in Job).

12. *Above them the fowl of the heavens dwell.* That is, up above all the beasts of the field. The fowl are said to “dwell” because their realm is the sky, though perhaps one might infer that the force of the verb in context could be something like “glide.”

their voice. The Masoretic text has merely “voice” (*qol*), but one manuscript and some ancient versions read “their voice” (*qolam*).

13. *He waters mountains from His lofts.* The reference of course is to rain, coming down from the celestial chambers above the vault of the heavens. The rain is the complement to the freshets bubbling up from the earth.

from the fruit of Your works. This is odd as a designation for rain, but the various

proposed emendations are contorted, without warrant in the manuscripts or ancient versions.

15. *to make faces shine brighter than oil.* Most translators understand the letter *mem* that is prefixed to *shemen*, “oil,” as a causative, somehow inferring that oil makes the face brighten. It may be more plausible to construe the *mem* as a *mem* of comparison (“than”) —the faces shine brighter than olive oil seen in sunlight.

17–18. *stork...gazelles...badgers.* The sprawling zoological panorama, all of it under God’s providential care, again has analogies in the Voice from the Whirlwind in Job.

19. *the sun—He appointed its setting.* The Masoretic text seems to say, “The sun knew its setting,” a less forceful formulation that requires a new subject for the verb in this second verse. By simply revocalizing *yada*, “knew,” as *yida*, “appointed,” a reading warranted by one version of the Septuagint, the line makes better sense theologically and poetically.

20. *You bring down darkness and it turns to night.* Darkness here is not a mythological realm of terrors but part of the diurnal cycle controlled by God.

21. *The lions roar for prey.* The idea that God provides for even the fiercest of predatory beasts is again one that is prominent in the Voice from the Whirlwind. But, as scholarship has abundantly documented, this line, like several others in the psalm, sounds quite close to a line from the fourteenth-century BCE hymn to the sun associated with the Pharaoh Akhenaton that was found at Amarna. Because poetry in all eras works through allusion, it is hardly necessary to understand this poem as an “adaptation” of Akhenaton’s hymn. The Hebrew poet may well have borrowed phrases from it, or from a Canaanite intermediary, but in the psalm there is no sun god. On the contrary, the sun and the moon and the stars and the winds of the heavens are all God’s instruments.

23. *Man goes out.* This is a beautifully imagined diurnal cycle of seeking sustenance. The hunting lion returns to its lair at daybreak, and man then goes out to labor till evening.

24. *How many Your deeds.* With these words, the poet launches on a grand summation of the great hymn to God as master of all creation that he has produced.

riches. This translation follows the King James Version. The Hebrew *qinyanim* might mean “creations” because the verb that is cognate to it occasionally means “to create.” That sense sounds awkward here, and the word also means “acquisitions”—hence “riches.”

25. *This sea great and wide.* As above, this is a post-mythological sea, very much part of the map of creation.

where creatures beyond number stir. Literally, “where there are stirring creatures beyond number.” The term *remes* is part of the vocabulary of the Priestly creation story. This poem reads distinctly like a poetic free improvisation on themes from the creation story at the beginning of Genesis, rendered from the perspective of a human observer rather than through the magisterial omniscience of the narrator in Genesis.

26. *There the ships go.* The sea teems with creatures but also with the works of human civilization. Thus Leviathan can be reduced to a plaything.

29. *their breath.* The Hebrew term equally means “spirit,” but the background of Genesis argues for the sense of “breath” because it is God’s breath there that brings life into being. The Septuagint reads “Your breath.” Either reading makes sense.

31. *May the L ORD's glory be forever.* The psalm now concludes with a kind of doxology. This is the explicit meaning of “blessing” the L ORD.

33. *while I breathe.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is “as long as I [am].”

35. *Let offenders vanish.* This reference to evildoers introduces an issue of transgression and justice nowhere in evidence in the body of the poem. It may be, as is the case with the concluding lines of quite a few psalms, an editorially added gesture of piety.
