

Post-exilic conflict as “possible” historical background to Psalm 69:10ab

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Abstract

*As is the case with Psalm 8a, Psalm 69:10a, also commences with the emphatic particle *kî*. 10a and 10b are syndetically bound together by means of the conjunction “and”. What has already been stated in cola 8ab, is repeated and even expressed in clearer terms in these cola (10ab). The supplicant does not believe that he deserves his present distress. Actually, the distress and insult he is enduring come as a direct result of his devotion to God and God’s service. Even his fasting and mourning contribute to his suffering (11a-12b). What becomes increasingly evident is the fact this inner-group conflict is caused by the temple, or rather the debate about the significance of the temple. The question that does indeed arise, is whether it is possible to situate these statements historically. This article will pursue a possible dating for this conflict that can form a possible background against which the reader of this text could interpret the statements contained in these cola (Ps 69:10ab).*

1. INTRODUCTION

Psalm 69:10a, just like colon 8a before, commences with the emphatic particle *kî*. The emphatic particle does not introduce a justification, but it reinforces the continuous outcry of self-lamenting of the supplicant which started in 8a. 10a and 10b are syndetically bound together by means of the conjunction *w^e*. Ellipsis occurs in 10b as the emphatic particle *kî* is also supposed in this colon. This would result in 10b reading as follows: “and (indeed,) the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me”. This bond is furthermore strengthened by the fact that both cola are synonymously parallel to one another; this furthermore strengthens the bond existing between them. In addition to this, every colon individually also contains a stylistic element within itself. In 10a the supplicant says “indeed,

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the zeal for your house has consumed me". The metaphorical verb "consume" makes the "zeal" into a person or an animal. This is an example of personification: "zeal" is depicted as a person (cf Alonso-Schökel 1988:108-109; Holladay 1982:14). Wordplay (*viz* turn¹) occurs in 10b: the same stem is used both as a noun and as a verb (*w^hherpôt hôrpeykā* – "and the reproaches of those who reproach you").

What has already been stated in cola 8ab,² is repeated and even expressed in clearer terms in cola 10ab. The supplicant does not conceive of himself as deserving his present distress. Actually, the distress and insult he has to bear come as a direct result of his devotion to God and God's service. Even his fasting and mourning contribute to his suffering (cola 11a-12b).³ What becomes more and more evident is the fact that this inner-group conflict is caused by the temple, or actually the whole debate about the significance of the temple.⁴

2. POST-EXILIC CONFLICT AS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO 10ab

The question which arises is whether it is possible to situate these statements historically. From the history of Psalm scholarship it is apparent that quite divergent assumptions exist with regard to this matter. This debate is dominated by three main hypotheses, which could be outlined as follows: firstly, according to some scholars this conflict results from the opposition against the hellenization of the temple in the third and second century BCE.⁵ However, according to Hossfeld & Zenger (2000:273) this cannot be taken into consideration because of the fundamental problematics of such a late dating. Secondly, only the two post-exilic contexts thus remain to be considered as possible backgrounds for this text: the first is the early post-exilic conflict which derives from the whole issue whether the temple should

¹ Cf Watson (1995:239). Some people call this form of wordplay *figura etymologica*.

² Cola 8ab read as follows: "Indeed, for your sake I endure reproach, disgrace covers my face."

³ These cola read as follows: "And even when I weep in fasting, there is reproach for me; and even when I make sackcloth my clothing, I become a byword to them."

⁴ Cf also Podella (1989:236): "Die Ursache der Not sieht er nicht in eigenem Verschulden (V 5), sondern in seinem Eifer für Jahwes Haus (V.10). Die Traueritten begleiten damit kein Sündenbekenntnis, sondern sind auf die von Feinden bewirkte Todesgefahr des Beters zu beziehen."

⁵ Cf Baethgen (1904:213); Bertholet (1923:192); Duhm (1922:265); Kittel (1929:234); Oesterley (1939:327-328); Olshausen (1853:298); Staerk (1920:190); Treves (s a:60).

be rebuilt shortly after the exile or not, and the second appertains to the religious controversies and debates in the post-exilic community about the sacrificial cult at the temple as well as its institutionalization.

This second post-exilic conflict derives from the debates in the post-exilic community about the “whether” and the “how” of the institutionalization of the temple as well as the sacrificial cult. It thus reflects an internal dispute about the role the cult should play in the late post-exilic Jewish society.⁶ This conflict could – in a nutshell – be ascribed to the different views held by two opposing groups, that is on the one hand those who advocate the prophetic cult criticism and on the other hand those who advocate an institutionalized temple as well as sacrificial cult (cf Albertz 1994:506). These two rival groups could – roughly speaking – be designated as, on the one hand, the hierocratic group (also called “theocratists”) and, on the other hand, the prophetic group (also called “eschatologists”). Hossfeld & Zenger (2000:274) postulates that the hierocratic party could be indicated as those propagating the “salvific presence” of God and the prophetic group as those propagating an “eschatological” realisation of God’s presence. The hierocratic party had a very strict anti-eschatological viewpoint; they totally rejected any idea of God’s final judgement that would still come in the future and, corresponding with it, any idea that only then the truly pious – that is to say, Yahweh’s true Israel – would be revealed.

The references to God’s house (10a), fasting (11a) as well as to acts of repentance (12a) rather witness in favour of the first possibility, viz the early post-exilic conflict which derives from the whole issue whether the temple should be rebuilt or not.⁷

Right now it is essential to briefly outline the general historical situation in the Ancient Near East, as well as in the land of Judah, in the latter half of the sixth century as this forms the background to this conflict prevalent in the

⁶ The following exegetes, for example, situate this psalm during this internal conflict: Briggs & Briggs (1951:118); Deissler (1964:101); Hossfeld & Zenger (2000:274); Marti (1992:142); Tillmann (1993:225); Weiser (1979:494).

⁷ In an article on *qn’* Reuter (1993:57) infers as follows: “Für das Haus Gottes ereifert sich auch der verfolgte Beter von Ps 69. Die Rede vom Haus Gottes läßt vermuten, daß der Beter zu den Kreisen, die auf den Bau des zweiten Tempels drängten, zu zählen ist (vgl Sach 7, 3; Hag 1,8ff). Sein Tun hat nicht die angestrebte Reaktion bewirkt, sondern nur Hohn hervorgerufen (vv 10-13). Der leidenschaftliche Eifer ‘für’ (v 10a) wird ebenso wie der ‘gegen’ als eine verzehrende (*’kl*) Kraft beschrieben.”

With regard to this dating compare also Anderson (1972:499); Bratcher & Reyburn (1991:597); Braulik (1975:128); Coetzee (1986:172); Coetzee (1988:7); Firth (1996:201); Hirsch (1898:298); Keel (1969:136); Kraus (1989:643); Lindström (1994:325); Van der Ploeg (1973:409).

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post-exilic Judaeon society.⁸ The downfall of the neo-Babylonian empire in 539 BCE made an end to the Babylonian rule over Judah. From then on Judah was under the authority of the Persian empire. This did not mean a return of its own independence, but it did bring about some important changes. In comparison to the period of Babylonian domination, that of Persia lasted for quite a long period. The Persian rule extended from the fall of the city of Babylon in 539 BCE to the battle of Issus in 333 BCE, in which Alexander the Great finally defeated the Persians and thus put an end to the Persian rule. Cyrus – the Persian emperor – left the administrative organisation of the Babylonian empire intact. He furthermore had a policy of treating the people he conquered as if he was their native ruler. Part of this policy was the very tolerant attitude both he and his successors adopted towards these people in many aspects, for example in the spheres of culture, worship and religion.⁹

Part of the Persian policy was the fact that they also allowed those who were deported to return to their former country or place of origin. However, in spite of this policy the returning of the Judaeans living in Babylon only took place at a very slow pace over the years to follow. One of the main reasons for this was definitely the fact that the bigger part of the older generation, who were deported to Babylon before and up to 582 BCE¹⁰ when the last deportation took place, were with all probability not alive anymore. It can be well imagined that the new generation, who had no personal concept of Judah and in the meantime seem to have established good positions in Babylon,

⁸ This outline is based on the following works: Ackroyd (1968:138-217); Albertz (1994:382-387, 451-454); Albertz (2001:102-112); Bedford (2001:183-299); Bright (1976:363-373); Carroll (1986:206-212); Carroll (1994:41-42); Clines (1994:60-87); Galling (1964:127-148); Gunneweg (1979:135-140); Jagersma (1994:193-200); Lange (1999:19-35); Noth (1959:271-86); Petersen (1991:135-137); Schaper (2000:162-194); Schramm (1995:53-69); Seidl (1995:141-179); Willi-Plein (1999:57-73); Zenger (1984:123-135); Zwickel (1999:181-182).

⁹ Cf Briant (2002:79): "To this end, Cyrus and Cambyses followed an ideological strategy meant to create conditions for cooperation with the local elites, a most urgent need. This is why, rather than appearing to be outsiders bent on overturning the existing kingdoms and societies, the Great Kings endeavoured to appropriate local traditions to their advantage over the long run and to present themselves as protectors of the sanctuaries. At the same time, this strategy required allowing the elites of the conquered countries to participate in the functioning of the new imperial power."

¹⁰ According to Jr 52:30 there was a final deportation of 745 Judaeans in the twenty-third year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, that is to say in 582 BCE. The Hebrew Bible thus records three separate deportations: the first took place in 597, the second in 587/6, and the third in 582. Galling (1964:51-2) estimates that the total number of people exiled could have been as high as 20,000 people. According to Bright (1976:345) these people would have constituted Judah's upper class. The nucleus of what constituted the nation of Judah its political, ecclesiastical and intellectual leadership – was thus exiled to Babylonia, while those remaining in Judah were viewed as leaderless and helpless.

would not have been particularly enthusiastic to return to Judah.¹¹ It is most probable that after 538 BCE only small groups would have returned to Jerusalem and Judah.

It is almost certain that the temple was not rebuilt at once. About twenty years were to pass before the Judaeans would start with the rebuilding. The Old Testament does not give us any information about the reason for this situation. According to Haggai 1:2 a majority of Judaeans did not consider it the right time to rebuild the temple.¹² It is left unclear precisely what Haggai means by this, but presumably the assumption is that the economic conditions were bad. Both Haggai (2:16-20) and Zechariah (8:10-12) referred to a succession of poor seasons and consequent crop failures. The reintegration of those who had just returned caused considerable problems: property claims made against those who had remained behind had to be fought in court and created a lot of social tension in the community. Houses had to be planned and built for those who had returned, which meant that the wider population was fully occupied with securing their own livelihoods. The newcomers were clearly faced with years of hardship, privation and insecurity. They had to make a fresh start in a strange land – which obviously was a task of staggering difficulty. It is thus hardly surprising that there was no work done to restore the temple at all.

In addition, there were also theological objections to building the temple. All the signs in this bleak time failed to fulfil the view that the favourable time bestowed by Yahweh for such an enterprise had already come (Hag 1:2). And had not Jeremiah, in the view of his Deuteronomistic interpreters (JerD), warned against putting false trust in the temple instead of first bringing about just social conditions in society (Jr 7:1-15)?¹³ It is thus understandable that those groups of people who were influenced by the JerD theologians in particular would have accorded priority to a just solution to social problems existing in Judaeans society over the (re-) building of the temple. In their point of view the temple was, by all means, no assurance of

¹¹ Cf Albertz (2001:105): “Es ist zu erwarten, daß ... höchstens einige wenige Mitglieder der Gola bereit waren, in die noch immer teilweise kriegsverwüstete Heimat zurückzukehren.”

¹² This text reads as follows: “Thus says Yahweh Zebaoth: This people says the time has not yet come to rebuild Yahweh’s house” (Hag 1:2).

¹³ After the Josianic reformation had taken place, the temple gave the people an absolute feeling of security. It is possible that originally Jeremiah could have warned against this false feeling of safety. There is, however, consensus in the recent Jeremianic research that “im Jeremiabuch spiegeln sich die Erfahrungen und Hoffnungen der exilischen und nachexilischen Gemeinde wieder und zwar in Palästina ... Nicht der historische Prophet und seine Verkündigung werde im Jeremiabuch greifbar, sondern eine auf redaktioneller Ebene im Exil und Nachexil erschaffene Prophetengestalt erschließe sich dem kritischen Jeremia-Forscher und Ausleger” (Seidl 1995:146). “Jeremiah” is thus only a metaphor for the redactional and community activity which produced it (cf also Albertz 2001:105, 108, 110).

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protection against the recurrence of a catastrophe like the one which struck Jerusalem in 587/86 BCE. According to them the people's security was not to be found in the possession of a divine house. Everything in which the nation puts its trust (temple, city, cultic officials, etc) might become the source of false consciousness if it was divorced from an amendment of lifestyle. The fall of Jerusalem exposed the falseness of all such beliefs, and not even possession of Yahweh's temple could protect an evil people – which they were, according to the theology of the JerD theologians. Under amendment of life they understood the practice of justice, non-oppression of alien, orphan or widow, the refusal to shed innocent blood and the avoidance of following other gods (Jr 7:5-6). This deuteronomistic redactor(s)/author(s) of the temple sermon therefore tried not only to explain the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 587/86 BCE, but most probably also reacted to the more contemporary problems. Thus, they aimed at efforts towards a rebuilding of the Jerusalemite temple in the early Persian times and the high hopes connected with it. The Deuteronomistic interpreters of Jeremiah were indeed dissociating themselves from these hopes of salvation of which there was clear evidence in the early post-exilic period (Hag 1:3-11; 2:15-19).

Failure to get on with the temple was, however, no trivial thing for the Judaeans leaders. This surely included the high priest Joshua as well as the members of the priesthood, as for them the rebuilding of the temple was the necessary presupposition of employment and livelihood. However, the pragmatic politicians around the governor Zerubbabel were also interested, wanting to make the most of the opportunity offered to them by the tolerant Persian imperial policy in the spheres of culture, worship and religion. According to these leaders the community desperately needed a focal point about which its faith could rally. The community could not be indifferent to the temple if it was to continue as a community. No "new age" would come about if the temple was not rebuilt. To Zerubbabel and Joshua it would have been an important accomplishment since a rebuilt temple surely would give divine legitimation to their position as leaders of the renewed and reunited Judaeans community.

These leaders would have had their support groups – prophets, administrators and priests (Clines 1994:82). On the other side there were the "people" – the man on the street, everyone else; farmers and householders. The root of this conflict is found in the fact that the people of power think that the people without power should stop farming and rebuilding their houses; they rather should spend their days in unpaid labour building the temple. However, the people without power did not regard this as a good idea.

One can actually pose the question: in whose interest was the temple rebuilding? Certainly not the people's (Clines 1994:82). Even though they were not economists, they could see that this project was not contributing to gross national product. And even if they were not atheists, they could see that the worship of the deity was not being impeded in any way by the incompleteness of the temple. Sacrifices were still offered, prayers were said, priests and Levites were being fed by the tithes. The temple, it seems, was rather a prestige project promoted by the elite – its construction served their sense of fitness, their vanity. The people at large were, understandably, not so enthusiastic, as they had little to gain and plenty to lose by the project.

Obviously the Judaeans' set of interests were not as such enough to accord absolute priority to the (re-)building of the temple. A change in public opinion only came about when the pragmatic political interests in building the temple were combined with the prophecy of salvation as anticipated by Haggai and Zechariah (Zch 1-8). They offered related, but also distinct, ideologies of temple rebuilding. Both were drawn from the monarchical period Zion/Yahweh *mālāk*-ideology which had legitimated the building of the original temple and justified the existence of the kingdom of Israel, which later became Judah. Thus, for both Haggai and Zechariah temple rebuilding was an expression of the kingship of Yahweh. Yahweh would return to Zion/Jerusalem to rule over his people and the nations, Yahweh would bring the period of divine ire to an end and prove himself to be sovereign in the affairs of his people. A temple from where the divine king would rule was therefore needed; it was the necessary pre-condition for Yahweh to come and dwell among his people again. The construction of the temple was the initial step towards the expression of Yahweh's kingship; the completion of the temple thus was a matter of urgency.

They (Haggai and Zechariah) – themselves convinced that the time was now at hand – played upon the messianic hopes of the people in order to spur the people to resume work on the temple. Both succeeded in motivating not only the political and priestly leaders, but also the wider population to start working on the rebuilding of the temple and to carry it through despite all the external difficulties. Particularly Haggai scorned the lassitude and the indifference that allowed people to build their own houses while Yahweh's house lay in ruins. According to him the hard times the community had experienced was the divine judgement for their indifference. It was thus the drought which prompted the Judaeans to accept Haggai's call to undertake the rebuilding of the temple. Droughts were normally acknowledged to be signs of divine judgement; it was interpreted by Haggai to be a sign of divine displeasure at the community's inattention to the task of temple rebuilding. Haggai thus clearly focused on those living in Judah - which did not necessarily imply the exclusion of those still in exile.

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Zechariah, however, focused much more on the return of the exiles and he had such an inclusive – albeit nationalistic – view of the polity that Yahweh was establishing that he also included foreigners within it. Zechariah thus reflected the influence of another prophetic tradition, namely that of the nations coming to Zion to do homage to Yahweh – thus acknowledging Yahweh as their king. The gathering of the exiles to Zion is the necessary prelude to this. This was thus a polity which would be created by Yahweh himself in order to manifest his sovereignty. It was done by means of chastising the nations, returning the exiles to their homeland, and blessing all who resided in Jerusalem and Judah. What was thus important for both these prophets was the fact that Jerusalem would again be the home of Yahweh, the great king, under whom would serve his earthly monarch of the house of David. Those living in Judah thus had a fundamental role to play by rebuilding the temple.

3. CONCLUSION

In order to end this discussion some concluding remarks will now be made. According to the text of Psalm 69 the supplicant's love for and obedience to his God is not only intensifying his suffering, but is actually portrayed as the real cause of the hostilities he has to endure. The supplicant most probably belonged to those groups in the Judaeen society who zealously campaigned for the rebuilding of the temple.¹⁴ This conflict even caused families and clans to be torn apart (69:9ab). The supplicant's efforts are without any compromise; it has thus caused him to be an enemy of those who declare that the time has not yet come to rebuild Yahweh's house (Hag 1:2). The supplicant – in contrast to these people – confesses the precedence of God's presence above the people's interests (just like Hag 1:1-11).¹⁵ By means of fasting and acts of repentance the supplicant wants to demonstrate that God's judgement, as well as absence, will continue as long as the temple – the locus of his visible presence – has not been rebuilt. Kraus (1989:644) therefore infers: "Vielleicht ist er einer von den »starr Konservativen«, die noch immer »um des Hauses Jahwes willen« sich kasteien (Sach 7, 3), während die Menge des Volkes von einer bequemen Zukunft träumt (Hag 1, 4ff) ." According to this supplicant the honour and the credibility of his God is clearly at stake. The reproach he has to endure is likewise reproach for God. Or one could formulate it in another way: because these people reproach God

¹⁴ Cf Braulik (1975:128); Keel (1969:136); Kraus (1989:643). Ferris (1992:132) postulates as follows: "Though it is difficult to date this Psalm, its expressions are appropriate to the period around 535-515 BC. This was a period of tension."

¹⁵ It is interesting to take note that whereas the supplicant of Ps 69 is reproached for his zeal for God's house, the supplicant of Ps 119 is reproached for his zeal for the Torah (119:51.61). He zealously campaigns for the Torah (119:136.139).

through their words and deeds, they also reproach the supplicant who is consumed by his zeal for God and his house (10ab).

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