Translation

12. Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he has chosen as an inheritance for himself.
13. From the skies the LORD has watched carefully. He has looked at all human beings.
14. From the place where he sits he watches all the inhabitants of the world,
15. the one who forms their heart together, the one who understands all their works.
16. There is not a king saved by the large size of an army, a warrior is not delivered by immensity of power.
17. The horse is a disappointment for salvation, and it does not save by its immense strength.
18. Look, the eye of the LORD is upon those who fear him to those who wait upon his faithfulness
19. to save their soul from death and keep them alive in famine [times].
20. For our soul has waited for the LORD, who is our help and our shield.
21. For in him our soul will be happy because we have trusted in his holy name.
22. May your faithfulness be upon us just as we have waited upon you.

Text

1. רָכַבְתִּי כִּפְרֵיָּהּ לָשׁוֹתֵים נָאָה תְּחֻלָּה:  
2. ה׳ִיוֹתִי לָשְׂתוֹ הַבְּכֶרְוֶ בִּנְבַל בְּשַׁוֵּר אָמְרֵי:  
3. נַעֲרֵי לָעֵר תְּרַצִי עֹלוֹת הַלָּשׁוֹנָה בֶּת חֲרָיָה:  
4. כִּי נָשָּׁה בְּרֵי הָהָה כָּל הֵשֵׁשַׁוֶּר עֹבְרֵיה:  
5. גְּאָה אָדָמְהָ הָמְשִׁיעֲשֵׁה הַשָּׁד בְּיְהוֹ הַמִּלָּה הָאָמֶר:  
6. בִּזְבַּר יְהוֹ הָשְׁמִים לִעְשֵׁי עֲבָרָה בִּן בִּשָּׁא:  
7. כִּנְסְבּ כָּל מִי חֵמָא עֹמְדִי בַּאֲרוֹר הָהוֹמָא:  
8. מִעְרַא מַעְרַא הָכָּל הָאֲרוֹר מְמַג מִגְּוָר כָּל לָשׁוֹנָה.
Overview

This second part of a hymn celebrates God’s power as superior to that of any ruler, even the rulers of the great nations surrounding tiny Judah. Judah’s defense against the wiles of its enemies is “fear of Yahweh,” i.e. doing the commandments which entitles the nation to hope in God’s deliverance from the nations round about. Trust in God’s “faithfulness” (xesed, vss. 18, 20, often mistranslated “loving kindness”) and in God’s public reputation (shem, “name,” vs. 21) bring salvation from enemies, both human and natural.

Gerstenberger (Psalms 1:145-146) believes that the psalm is a communal hymn from early Judaism rather than from the First Temple. He believes the communal liturgy involved here is one without sacrifice and one that is aware of its own precarious situation among the nations. Weiser, The Psalms, 289, on the other hand, sees this as a “festival hymn” appropriate to the New Year’s Festival. He correctly calls attention to the importance of the cultic music and musicians in the psalm (verses 2-3), an importance that suggests the sacrificial cultus, not Gerstenberger’s exilic assembly.

Notes on the Text

12. מַעְּרָר (BDB 80b-81a HAL 100a) The word מַעְּרָר is a noun that occurs only in the plural construct and, consequently, requires a nomen rectum. English speakers often (mis-)translate this as the adjective “blessed.” It is, however, part of an exclamation: “O the happiness of the nation.” Gunkel and Begrich (Introduction 222-231) class מַעְּרָר-sayings with the blessings in בְּרֵכָה and hold that their origin is in magic, the ability a person has to bless (or curse) another by means of verbal formulas. In the cultus the power of the blessing is scarcely
less because of its worship setting. One may note that the word יִשְׁרָאֵל outside the Psalter occurs most often in Proverbs. In the Psalter it most often occurs in the wisdom psalms.

Verbs of mental action often require ב instead of יִתְנָה as the marker of the object, whether emphatic or absolute. In the case of בחור “choose” (BDB 103b-104a) this is certainly the case so that the simple emphatic object יִתְנָה might surprise us especially since the “proper” formulation of the object as יִתְנָה would change neither poetic meter nor assonance. The verb, however, occurs often enough in the Bible without ב to make us comfortable with the usage here. See BDB 104a. The first ל following would be translated into English with “as,” and the second “for” or “on behalf of.”

12. Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people he has chosen as an inheritance for himself.

13. (BDB 613b) In addition to the simple notion of looking at something, the verb can also mean something like “inspect” or “pay attention to” or “consider.” Any of these would fit the context. The nuance is that of looking closely at something.

13. From the skies the LORD has watched carefully.
He has looked at all human beings.

14. (BDB 467b) Dahood, Psalms 1:202, considers יִתְנָה to mean the “dais of a throne” (Pss 89:15 and 97:2), but “place” or “fixed place” works just as well, if not better. The verb requires ל for its object (BDB 993a). The parallel with בחית is additive. God’s inspection of the world is empirical in a sense. God doesn’t deal with humans without observing and considering human ways. The word הנל here in context probably means the inhabited “world,” not just the Land. The Masoretes have separated the verb from its completion in ל. If we would not exactly call the device enjambment, it is not unlike it in creating this synthetic distich.

14. From the place where he sits he watches
all the inhabitants of the world,

15. On the assumption that the student recognizes this participle from יִתְנָה, the question is what it means to “fashion” or “mold” a heart. The heart, seat of will and intellect, must be soft, malleable, hence must be capable of being molded. A person of a “hard heart” is a person who cannot learn, who is rigid, hard-set, in the error of that person’s thinking. The word יִתְנָה can

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1. See on the anthropological term “heart” Hans Walter Wolff, Anthropology of the Old Testament, 40-58. The figure of the hardness of the heart is certainly phallic since it can be circumcised. Cf. Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4. R. Reichbart gives an interesting psychoanalytical discussion of the phallic figure in his “Heart
either mean “together” in the sense of “as one” or “all of them.” Although “heart” is singular here, the context favors plurality. The participles מתיים ילא and מבין ילא refer back to the previous verse to the God who considers human conduct.

15. the one who forms their heart together,
the one who understands all their works.

16. This verse and the next are the results of God’s empirical research, God’s observation of human beings from above. The student might want to review the nifal of the ד"ה verb.

16. There is not a king saved by the large size of an army,
a warrior is not delivered by immensity of power.

17. לות (BDB 1055ab) The translation “disappointment” here works well.

17. The horse is a disappointment for salvation, and it does not save by its immense strength.

18. ליימיל (BDB 404a) Piel participle.

18. Look, the eye of the LORD is upon those who fear him to those who wait upon his faithfulness

19. This continues the sentence in verse 18. Dahood, Psalms 1:203, reflects on the mythological setting of Death and Hunger, but this is not necessary to the interpretation of the passage.

19. to save their soul from death and keep them alive in famine [times].

20. חנה (BDB 314a) “wait for” or “hope for.” This has about the same range of meanings as the piel חל.

20. For our soul has waited for the LORD, who is our help and our shield.

21. For in him our soul will be happy because we have trusted in his holy name.


22. יְשַׁמֵּר This compound cannot be an accident here. It means something like “to the degree that” or, simply, “as.” One expects the measure of God’s faithfulness to descend upon Israel to the extent that Israel has been willing to hope for or wait for the LORD’s salvation.

22. May your faithfulness be upon us just as we have waited upon you.