

Debra Band
Psalm 91 The Illuminated Text

LEADER'S GUIDE
Psalm 91: Through the Artist's Eyes

Leader: *This psalm is unusually graphic, with a threatening range of phenomena that the Psalmist is presenting to the listener. It is also an unusual presentation of a conversation. Listen in.*

Psalm 91

¹ O you who dwell in the shelter of the Most High
and abide in the protection of Shaddai—
² I say of the LORD, my refuge and stronghold,
my God in whom I trust,
³ that He will save you from the fowler's trap,
from the destructive plague.
⁴ He will cover you with His pinions;
you will find refuge under His wings;
His fidelity is an encircling shield.
⁵ You need not fear the terror by night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
⁶ the plague that stalks in the darkness,
or the scourge that ravages at noon.
⁷ A thousand may fall at your left side,
ten thousand at your right,
but it shall not reach you.
⁸ You will see it with your eyes,
you will witness the punishment of the wicked.
⁹ Because you took the LORD—my refuge,
the Most High—as your haven,
¹⁰ no harm will befall you, no disease touch your tent.
¹¹ For He will order His angels
to guard you wherever you go.
¹² They will carry you in their hands
lest you hurt your foot on a stone.
¹³ You will tread on cubs and vipers;
you will trample lions and asps.
¹⁴ "Because he is devoted to Me I will deliver him;
I will keep him safe, for he knows My name.
¹⁵ When he calls on Me, I will answer him;
I will be with him in distress;
I will rescue him and make him honored;
¹⁶ I will let him live to a ripe old age,
and show him My salvation."

Leader: *How does this psalm reflect a "conversation" with the Divine?*

- God's offer of refuge from danger is directly addressed by a religious person (priest?) to a third (unnamed) party (vs. 1-13)

- the conversation conveys the third party's descriptions of his/her troubles
- God appears to be speaking to the religious person/priest about the third party (vs 14-16)
- The religious person/priest figures here as an intermediary or translator, between the interlocutor and God
- Angels are also depicted, protecting the interlocutor on God's behalf

What is the emotional tone, and message, of Psalm 91?

- a palpable fear of eminent and lurking danger
- *passionate* reassurance of Divine protection of the individual, meant to allay anxiety and produce calm

How does the language of the psalm evoke God's protection?

Answers might include:

- shelter, protection (v.1)
- refuge, stronghold (v. 2)
- an encircling shield (v.2)
- "save you from.." (v. 3)
- "cover you with.." (v. 4)

How does the language reflect danger?

Answers might include:

- fowler's trap, destructive plague (v. 3)
- terror by night, arrow that flies (v. 5)
- plague stalks in the darkness, scourge that ravishes (v.6)
- punishment
- cubs and vipers

How do these opposite images create the mood of the psalm?

- dangers are terror-inspiring, which makes God's able protection even more comforting

What is the role of the angels in the psalm?

- Angels represent the promise of divine protection.

[Note: Recent study of materials in the Dead Sea Scrolls has revealed that during the early Second Temple period, before the advent of the Hellenized Hasmonean priesthood, the Zadokite priests considered themselves descended directly from Aaron and perceived themselves as the earthly counterparts of the angels. Dead Sea Scrolls scholar Rachel Elior theorizes that this Qumran community believed that their habits of measuring time and organizing their community replicated the angels' habits in heaven.]

Leader: *This psalm figures prominently in our liturgy. Do you know where/when it is recited?*

- Shacharit, the morning service for Sabbaths and holidays
- addition to the standard Tefilat haderekh (prayer before a journey)
- at the cemetery, the psalm is recited on the way to the grave prior to burial
- after the Maariv Amidah at the conclusion of Shabbat (last verse of 90 and all of 91)
- in traditional siddurim the psalm is recited with the *Shema* recited upon going to sleep

Discussion Question: *Why do you think this psalm is so frequently invoked?*

Illuminations 5-6 of Psalm 91

Introduction to Illuminations

Artist Debra Band seeks to express the serenity that the psalm's promise of Divine protection offers the individual. She is particularly fascinated by the possible hints here of the kinship felt by the early Israelite priesthood toward the angels.

Leader: *What images – including color usage – do you see in Band's illumination of Psalm 91?*

- Shades of sky-blue and gold provoke an emotional image of the heavens; in particular, the sky-blue is associated with the *t'chaillet* color commanded for the hangings of the mishkan and temple, as well as *tsitsit*.
- Angels playing music and offering protection in the celestial firmament above the clouds and in the deepening blue sky below;
- Seven levels of blue symbolize the heavens above and below the clouds;
- The changing blues (also) correspond to early Zadokite priestly traditions of the first century CE and before, inferred from priestly documents found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. These traditions tell of seven heavens, in the uppermost of which rises God's *heikhal*, or sanctuary.
- Atop the heavens on each page hovers a white stork tending its chicks. The Hebrew name for the stork, *hasidah*, contains the word for "kindness," hence, the protective divine presence is symbolized here by the wide-winged bird.
- angels portrayed here are arrayed in garb resembling that described for Israelite priests (see above note on angels in the Dead Sea Scrolls);
- (English page): the angels support a globe representing the earth, upon which we see a tree representing the righteous man, in an image drawn from Psalms 92 and 128.
- (Hebrew page): the angels support a rocky cavern from which a dove prepares to alight, in reference to The Song of Songs 2:14:

Text # 2

O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks, hidden by the cliff,
Let me see your face, let me hear your voice;
For your voice is sweet and your face is comely.

The rabbinic allegorical understanding of The Song of Songs treats the poetry as the love-song of God and the Jewish people; in that reading, this verse as a divine plea for Israel's trust. Here, the dove's willingness to emerge from its rocky hiding place symbolizes Israel's trust in its divine lover's care, which Psalm 91 assures will always hover near.

Final Questions: *Now having studied this psalm anew, how do you relate to it?*

Does it provide comfort, reassurance?

Do you feel yourself participating in a "conversation"?

