

From “The Lord-The Warrior” in the Book of Psalms to “The Army of the Lord” in the Prophetic Books and its echo in the New Testament.

Dr. John Lopez Agundez

ABSTRACT: This article brings knowledge about how to do the work of exegesis to find the wider meaning of biblical texts by taking into account that they are part of the canon of the Bible. Tracking down repetitions and themes in the book of Psalms and in the Prophetic books and showing how the New Testament echoes them in different ways helps to better understand a few difficult passages of the Old Testament, like the ones imbued by cosmic imagery and eschatological tones. In passing, this article brings theological knowledge about the identity of the protagonist of the book of Psalms. Finally, the author suggests a key of interpretation that might be useful to re-read the book of Psalms as a unity.

KEY WORDS: Book of Psalms; Prophetic Books; The Lord-The Warrior; The Army of The Lord; eschatology; canonical exegesis; interpretation.

INTRODUCTION. In this article we are going to track down the themes “*The Lord-The Warrior*” and “*The Army of The Lord*” in the Old Testament. As we move forward, we will have to answer a few questions: What’s the connection between those two themes? Who wrote first? Why? What are the original features of these themes? What’s a further development of these literary themes? Who do they refer to or what do they refer to? Is there a protagonist? Does the New Testament echo these themes?

How? What's a good methodology in our work of exegesis if we want to grasp the wider meaning of these texts?

THE THEME “THE LORD-THE WARRIOR” IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS.

When it comes to the presentation of the Lord in the book of Psalms, there is a pattern of repeated ideas that can be tracked down.

The Lord is presented both as a judge and a warrior or just as a judge. In Psalm 7, the Psalmist asks the Lord to come and save him from his enemies. The Lord (a righteous judge) will fight with sword and arrows if the wicked does not repent (Psalm 7:12-13). In Psalm 9, the Psalmist presents God as a righteous judge that defends his cause from his throne (Psalm 9:4). In Psalm 64, the Psalmist asks God to intervene against those who are wicked (Psalm 64:1-6) and God fights as a warrior throwing his arrows against them in order to save his chosen one (Psalm 64:7). Moreover, the Psalmist states that the Lord will condemn the wicked for the things they have said (Psalm 64:8). Psalm 110 describes the Lord as a judge in Zion (Psalm 110:2.5-6).

The Lord is presented just as a powerful warrior. In Psalm 18 the Lord shoots his arrows to scatter the enemy (Psalm 18,14). In Psalm 21, the king rejoices in God's strength and exults in his help (Psalm 21:1), and the Lord destroys the king's enemies by swallowing them up in his wrath; by sending fire to consume them and to sweep them out of the face of the earth; and by using his bow the Lord will put them to flight (Psalm 21:8-12). In Psalm 24, the Lord is presented as the King of Glory, strong and mighty in battle (Psalm 24,8). In Psalm 35, the Lord is asked to take hold of shield and buckler and to use his weapons (spear and javelin) against the enemies of the king (Psalm 35:1-3). In Psalm 46, the Psalmist presents the Lord as a powerful warrior that breaks chariots, bows, spears in order to bring peace to the world (Psalm 46:9); plus, when that

happens there's an impact in nature, and the Psalmist uses cosmic imagery to describe the consequences of the actions of the Lord in war (Psalm 46:6.8).

In Psalm 45, the Psalmists (the sons of Korah) praise God as a warrior and king. They say that he is the best of men (Psalm 45,2); he dresses like a warrior and like a king (Psalm 45:3); his cause is one of truth, humility and justice (Psalm 45:4); sword and arrows are his weapons (Psalm 45:2.5); his throne will last forever (Psalm 45:6); he is above his companions for his good heart (Psalm 45:7); the Queen stands with him (Psalm 45:10-11); the Queen's sons will rule over the land (Psalm 45:16); and nations will praise the King and the Queen forever (Psalm 45:17).

In Psalm 120, after invoking the Lord, the Psalmist takes for granted that the Lord will throw his arrows against the wicked for what they have said (Psalm 120:1-4). In Psalm 136, the Psalmist praises God for his love endures forever and brings up manifestations of that love, for instance, victory over Sihon (the king of the Amorites) and over Og, king of Bashan (Psalm 136:19-20).

Although there's no reference to the Lord as warrior in Psalm 145, we see here the same Lord warrior that has been portrayed as a warrior in other Psalms. This time around, the Lord lifts up those who are down (Psalm 145:14); answers to all those who call upon him (Psalm 145:18), and we are told that his kingdom lasts forever (Psalm 145:13).

The Lord-the warrior conquers cities. In Psalm 9, the Lord destroys the cities of the Psalmist's enemies and puts them to ruins (Psalm 9:6); and in Psalm 76, the Lord sets his place in Zion and breaks the weapons of war (Psalm 76:1-3). The Lord is presented in this Psalm as the one that brings peace to Zion, because he breaks the weapons (Psalm 76:3) and he is stronger than everybody else (Psalm 76:5-6).

The Lord delivers the Psalmist from the waters. After showing all his power as a warrior, the Lord delivers the Psalmist from deep waters which are the enemies that confronted him on the day of disaster (Psalm 18:16-18) and takes him into a broad place (Psalm 18:19). Moreover, the Psalmist states that the Lord saved him for he (the Psalmist) is righteous (Psalm 18:20). In Psalm 88 the Psalmist states that his enemies have surrounded him like water (Psalm 88:17), but the Lord is more powerful than waters (Psalm 93:3-4). Once again, the Psalmist states that the Lord has power over the waters as it happened in the episode of the Red Sea in the book of Exodus (Psalm 106:9-11) and that the Lord has power over the waters and saves people from the waters (Psalm 107:25-30). In Psalm 124 and 144 the metaphor of the waters is finally explained by the Psalmist when he says that the waters are people who attacked him and his people (Psalm 124:1-6). In Psalm 144 the Psalmist asks the Lord to save him from the waters which are foreigners who are liars (Psalm 144:7-8).

The Lord empowers the Psalmist to beat his enemies. After being saved by God in Psalm 18, the Psalmist feels strong to charge an army and to scale the city walls (Psalm 18:29). Most commentators have seen this verse as a turning point in the narrative of Psalm 18. From that verse on, the Psalmist is given strength to be victorious over his enemies.¹ Indeed, there's a description of the defeat of the enemies of the Psalmist on Ps 18:37-42. In Psalm 108, the Psalmist calls upon the Lord and asks him to show his glory upon the earth (Psalm 108:5) and God answers to the Psalmist's prayers and promises victory over a few nations (Psalm 108:7-9). It is with God's power that the Psalmist and his people can do a good job on the battlefield (Psalm 108:13). In Psalm 118, the nations surrounded the Psalmist, but he crushed them all in the Lord's name (Psalm 118:10-14). In Psalm 140, the Lord protects the Psalmist on the day of the battle (Psalm 140:7) and the Psalmist calls himself

¹ R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmayer, and R. E. Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991), 529.

the righteous and knows that he will live in the presence of the Lord (Psalm 140:13). Finally, in Psalm 143, the Psalmist in the battlefield sees that without God's help he will go down to the pit (Psalm 143:7) and asks God to be rescued from his enemies (Psalm 143:9) in order to get out of trouble (Psalm 143:11) and to destroy his enemies (Psalm 143:12), for the Psalmist is God's servant (Psalm 143:12). There are two ideas I want to point out now about Psalm 143; first, commentators have seen in the expression "*go down to the pit*" a reference to the netherworld, where the Psalmist dwells in darkness (Psalm 143:3), although he hopes for the light of the morning when he will experience God's unfailing love for him (Psalm 143:8) (Brown, 1991:550); and second, the Psalmist identifies himself with the servant of God and in this case he is a "*suffering servant*" (Psalm 143:12) because he has been crushed to the ground by his enemies (Psalm 143:3). We will come back to these ideas to explain how they echo in the New Testament.

At this point, a question arises: What's the connection between Psalm 143 and the poems of the servant that we find in Isaiah 40-55? According to commentator, Isaiah 40-55 was written probably during the kingdom of Cyrus (559-530 BC)² and Psalm 143 is assumed to have been written by King David³, so this Psalm must date from before 970 BC according to the data we know about the date of King David's death⁴. There is another version of Psalm 143 in 2 Sam, but 2 Sam was written after the year 971 BC (Murray 1990:132). Therefore, Psalm 143:12 is probably the first book in the Bible to bring up the theme of the "*suffering servant*". It is not a temerity to assume that Isaiah probably was familiar with this theme in the book of Psalms and developed it in the poems of the servant of YHWH he wrote.

² Brian McCarthy et al., in *The Navarre Bible: Major Prophets* (New York: Scepter Publishers Inc., 2005), 34.

³ Daniel A. Murray et al., *Every Catholic's Guide to the Sacred Scriptures* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 161.

⁴ John Corbett, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913), IV, 642-643.

Indeed, Psalm 143:12 and Isaiah 50:10; 52:13; 53:11 use variants of the same Hebrew root טָוַן to refer to the servant.

The coming of the Lord to save the Psalmist makes an impact in nature. The book of Psalms contains a few theophanies and uses cosmic imagery to describe the impact of the coming of the Lord in nature. For instance, the Lord utters his voice; throws his arrows; and dark clouds, hailstones and lightning surround him as he is coming to save the Psalmist (Psalm 18:8-16) (Brown 1991:529). That cosmic imagery is present in other Psalms: the voice of the Lord is powerful over animals, waters, trees, deserts, everything (Psalm 29:3-10); the Lord turns deserts into pools of water and pools of water into deserts (Psalm 107:33-37); and the Lord is powerful over mountains, rivers, seas, and rocks (Psalm 114:3-8).

THE THEME “THE ARMY OF THE LORD” IN THE PROPHETIC BOOKS.

Most probably, the prophets picked up the theme “*The Lord-The Warrior*” from the book of Psalms and developed it into the theme “*The Army of The Lord*” which comes to conquer Zion to save his people and to change things in this world forever. The arrows, swords, theophanies, fights, victories and cosmic imagery present in the book of Psalms as a manifestation of God’s power will be amplified in the Prophetic books. The prophets picked up an old theme and added variations to it to the extent of creating a new literary theme. In the Prophetic books The Lord is not just a warrior: the Lord is an army.

Isaiah. Isaiah says that the lion roaring is an army and that the Lord is leading that army which is coming (Isaiah 5:26). By saying that, Isaiah is the first prophet who talks about the coming of YHWH as an army that punishes his people (Isaiah 5:25-30) by destroying its town. This army is preceded and followed by cosmic imagery (Isaiah 5:25.30); they move swiftly (Isaiah 5:26); and they come with arrows, bows, horses, and chariots (Isaiah 5:28). Again, the prophets probably got inspired

in the theophanies and the descriptions of the Lord as warrior in the book of Psalms and came up with a somewhat new literary theme: *“The army of The Lord”*. Indeed, according to commentators, the first Isaiah must date from before 733 BC (Brown 1991:236). Why does the Lord destroy the city? The answer is because of the sins of his people. Probably Isaiah takes up that idea from Amos (Am 6,8) who mentioned that first. Isaiah is developing the topic of the delivering of the city in a new way, but he’s —once again— extending Amos’ lines. Isaiah will talk again about the Lord’s army which destroys the city and he will point out this time one of the generals of the army (Isaiah 28:2). The army in motion is mentioned also in Is 22:7-10; 24:10-12; 25:2; 30:25-26; 66:15-16.

Nahum. Nahum describes with detail the army of the Lord, but first he talks about who is the Lord: the one who brings good news and prevents the chosen people from being destroyed by the wicked (Nahum 1:15). According to Isaiah there’s a messenger of peace (Isaiah 52:7), but for Nahum that messenger of peace is also a warrior who sets free his people, then he describes the army in Nahum 2:3-12; 3:1-7; 3:13,15-17. Nahum’s version of the theme *“The Army of The Lord”* includes details about the weapons and the chariots (Nahum 2:3-4).

Zephaniah. Zephaniah announces that the Lord will destroy a few cities and then his remnant will inherit the land (Zephaniah 2:1-15).

Habakkuk. Habakkuk describes the army of the Lord in motion destroying everything *“for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed”* (Habakkuk 3:13). Therefore, it’s not only a battle against nations or against a specific city; the battle takes place for the salvation of nations, and it is God who fights. Habakkuk’s version of the theme *“The Army of The Lord”* includes descriptions of the horses and the soldiers in motion.

Jeremiah. According to Jeremiah, the army of the Lord, the army from the North, and the lion refer to YHWH, and all of them are the protagonists of the day of YHWH, but he focuses on the army from the North. That army—which is God’s army—will fight against Jerusalem, but after the battle there will be some relief (Jeremiah 1:14-19). Jeremiah describes how the army and the invasion from the North proceeds by describing the blowing of the trumpet (Jeremiah 4:5), the destroying of Zion with the consent of the Lord (Jeremiah 4:6) and the presence of a lion destroying around (Jeremiah 4:7). Furthermore, according to Jeremiah, the destruction which the army brings goes against human power in general: princes, priests, and the king (Jeremiah 4:9-11). Lastly, according to Jeremiah, the army of the North destroys Jerusalem (Jeremiah 4:11-13) because of their sins (Jeremiah 4:16-31). Jeremiah also says at what time the army of the Lord—the army from the North—is going to attack: at noon (Jeremiah 6:1-4). Jeremiah also describes the army from the North: they will roar like the sea, and they will come riding horses (Jeremiah 6:22-26). Jeremiah 25:9 is explicit in stating that the Lord is who has the power over the army from the North.

Ezekiel. Ezekiel states that the Lord will beat the army of the North, which is Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 39:1-10).

Zechariah. Zechariah states that the army is the king of Zion-Jerusalem riding on a donkey and beating Jerusalem and Ephraim’s armies (Zechariah 9:9-10). Zechariah states as well that the army is the Lord who fights in Mount Olive (Zechariah 14:1-5).

Joel. Joel develops the theme of the army of the North and says that the army of the North is the army of the Lord, because the Lord leads that army (Joel 2:11). Joel’s version of the army of the Lord includes cosmic imagery (Joel 2:2.10); theophany (Joel 2:3); chariots in line (Joel 2:5); soldiers scale the city walls (Joel 2:7); soldiers enter the houses (Joel 2:9); and the Lord thunders at the head of his army (Joel 2:11). That army assaults the holy

city —Jerusalem— and specifically Zion (Joel 2,1-11). Joel says also that the Lord will drive away the army of the North (Joel 2:20) which is the plague he sent (Joel 2,25). Therefore, the locusts of chapter 1 and the army of chapter 2 are involved in the same process, but the description of the army of the Lord in 2:1-11 is not necessarily a continuation of the locust plague described in chapter 1 as many commentators suggest (Brown 1991:299). Both the plague of locusts and the army of the Lord are very different literary themes, but at the same time they are connected, because they are part of the same process. It is possible that Joel presents in chapter 1 the consequences of the destruction of the passing of the army of YHWH (devastation of the land) and then he explains in the first segment of chapter 2 the cause of that devastation (the army of the Lord destroying the city). As we know, the book of Psalms and the Prophetic books often describe a land that is laid waste after the battle of the army of the Lord. Joel could be doing the same by using cosmic imagery (radical devastation of nature) to mean that the passing of this world is happening (a plague of locusts destroys everything), because the coming of the new world is here (the army of the Lord conquers Zion). Collins was right when he wrote: *“the prophets often used cosmic imagery –i.e., they spoke of particular historical crises as if they involved the destruction or renewal of the world.”*⁵ Indeed, if the army of the Lord hits Zion, there will be consequences worldwide.

THE ECHO OF THE THEME “THE LORD-THE WARRIOR” ACCORDING TO THE BOOK OF PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

As we already know, in Psalm 45 God is portrayed as warrior and king and the throne of this God-Warrior-King lasts forever (Psalm 45:6). The literal meaning of Psalm 45 refers to the entrance of the Near Eastern concept of divine kingship into the royal court (Brown 1991:523), but, as Brown explains, there

⁵ John J. Collins, “Old Testament Apocalypticism and Eschatology”, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991), 299.

must be a wider meaning of this text gained from the placement of this text in the book of Psalms which is part of the canon of the Bible.⁶ Therefore, it is a relevant part of our work of exegesis to find the connection of this text with other texts of the book of Psalms and with other books of the Bible. As mentioned before, there is an idea that runs throughout the book of Psalms, that is, The Lord-The Warrior (now portrayed as well as a king) is God who comes down from heaven showing his power to save his chosen one who is calling upon him, and Psalmists use theophanies to present him. Theophanies occurred first in Exodus 15:8-10; Exodus 19:16-19; and Judges 5:4-5, and they present YHWH with all his power. The fact that theophanies are used in the book of Psalms (Psalm 18:6-19; 29; 77:16-20) means that the Psalms are dealing with the same theme those passages of Exodus and Judges were dealing with: God, YHWH, shows all his power when he comes to save his chosen one, and the fact that God, YHWH, comes with all his might and power to rescue his chosen one means that the chosen one is very important, to the point that the Psalm states that his throne will last forever (Psalm 45:6), like the throne of YHWH who comes to save him. Therefore, God, the warrior and the king are the same. If God, the warrior, and the king are the same, it is relevant for our work of exegesis to find in the Bible a warrior that is a king and that is a God whose throne can only last forever. The only throne which lasts forever, and we know of in the New Testament is Jesus' throne; Jesus, the heir of David (Luke 1:33), the one who is going to save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). Indeed, it is in the NT that we find the wide extent of the meaning of Psalm 45:6. Augustine of Hippo was right when he wrote: *"This Psalm is sung of the sacred Marriage-*

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 41.

feast; of the Bridegroom and the Bride; of the King and His people; of the Savior and those who are to be saved.”⁷

We can proceed the same way in order to discover the wider meaning of Psalm 143. In this Psalm, the servant of God (Psalm 143:12) experiences a defeat that brings him down to the pit (Psalm 143:3), but that is not the end of it, because there’s hope for the servant (Psalm 143:8). The foundation of this hope can be found in Psalm 16, where the servant states that he will not see corruption because God will save him (Psalm 16:9-11). The NT echoes these passages in the passion of the Lord in the cross, where he is fighting against the power of sin (Luke 23:34). Although it seems that the Lord is defeated in the death of the cross, he will not see corruption, on the contrary, God will raise him with a glorious body (Acts 2:24-32).

The New Testament echoes in the book of Revelation a different version of the same idea of God saving his chosen one and giving him power to win (Psalm 18:16-19). In the book of Revelation is the woman that is saved from the power of the waters and the evil one (Revelation 12:14-16).

THE ECHO OF THE THEME “THE ARMY OF THE LORD” ACCORDING TO THE PROPHETIC BOOKS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

The New Testament echoes “*The Army of The Lord*” in a few passages. For instance, the Lord’s entry in Jerusalem before his passion (Luke 19:37-42) echoes Zechariah 9:9-10 and Matthew 26:36 echoes Zechariah 14:1-4.

Habakkuk’s statement about a YHWH’s fight for the salvation of the nations and for the salvation of your anointed (Habakkuk 3:13) is connected with the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord. Jeremiah’s image of the lion destroying around in Zion in the middle of YHWH’s fight is connected to the passion of the

⁷ Augustine of Hippo, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 145.

Lord in the cross (which happened in Zion) and to the lion of the tribe of Juda who is the one with power (Revelation 5:5). John 19:30 echoes the Lord uttering his voice before his army (Joel 2:11), and we see the army of the Lord as well following the risen Lord after his resurrection in (Matthew 27,51-53). Finally, according to the book of Revelation, the Lord will destroy God and Magog in a big battle in Zion (Jerusalem) (Revelation 20:8-10) which is again the passion, death, and resurrection of the Lord.

CONCLUSION. A few conclusions can be drawn after having tracked down different variations of the themes “*The Lord -The Warrior*” and “*The Army of The Lord*” in the Old Testament.

- The theme “*The Lord -The Warrior*” in the book of Psalms became the theme “*The Army of The Lord*” in the Prophetic books. The date of a few Psalms and the date of a few fragments of the prophetic books, plus the repetition of a few ideas both in the Psalms and in the prophetic books support this statement.
- The book of Psalms might have been first in bringing up the theme “*YHWH's servant*” which was later developed by the prophet Isaiah.
- The protagonist of the book of Psalms is presented as *The Lord, the King, the Warrior*. The repetition of this theme makes us think that a significant number of Psalms could be read in the perspective of the following idea: the help that the protagonist of the Psalms receives from on high to keep fighting and beat his enemies forever. It would be worthwhile to propose a reading of the book of Psalms using that key of interpretation.
- The NT echoes the ideas Psalmists and prophets wrote about. The canonical approach to the work of exegesis cannot be underestimated if we want to grasp the wider meaning of difficult to interpret texts of the OT. In that

sense, finding connections between texts in the OT and the NT has proven itself useful to interpret the texts we have studied in this article.

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