

The Use of the OT in the OT – “The LORD is my Strength & My Song”

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The Biblical Texts Themselves:

Exodus 15:2 (MT & Eng)

עָזִי וְזִמְרַת יְהוָה לִי לְיִשׁוּעָה זֶה אֱלֹהֵי וְאֲנִי אֶבְיָר וְאֲרַמְּנֶהוּ:

(“Yahweh is my strength & song. And he has become my salvation. He is my God and I will praise Him; the God of my Fathers & I will exalt Him.”)

Isaiah 12:2 (MT & Eng)

הִנֵּה אֵל יִשׁוּעָתִי אֲבָטַח וְלֹא אֶפְחָד כִּי־עָזִי וְזִמְרַת יְהוָה יְהוָה וְיִהְיֶה לִי לְיִשׁוּעָה:

(“Behold God is my salvation. I will trust and not be afraid for Yahweh, the LORD, is my strength and song. And he has become my salvation.”)

Psalms 118:14 (MT & Eng)

עָזִי וְזִמְרַת יְהוָה לִי לְיִשׁוּעָה:

(“Yahweh is my strength and song. And He has become my salvation.”)

Examination of Specific Texts:

The earliest occurrence of the phrase “my strength and song and He has become my salvation” (עָזִי וְזִמְרַת יְהוָה לִי לְיִשׁוּעָה) occurs in Ex 15:2. It is interesting how the Old Testament (OT) uses the OT. The context of the first occurrence in Exodus 15 celebrates the victory that Yahweh accomplished for Israel in passing them through the midst of the sea & destroying Pharaoh and his entire army. God brought His people through the sea as they walked on dry land. Indeed, the people then chant that Yah (shortened form for Yahweh) is the strength and song. He is the one who has given the ability (=strength) and he is the one who is worthy of praise and worship (=song). It is only through God and through His mighty strength that Israel was spared from the Egyptians at the shore of the Red Sea.

No wonder then that OT writers would take such a God-centered phrase and incorporate it elsewhere in their writings.

For instance, in the surrounding context of Isaiah 12, the prophet speaks of the coming deliverer. He speaks of a child who will be born, a son will be given, the government will rest on his shoulders. And his name will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace (9:6). So amazing will this man be that there will be no end to the increase of his government or of peace. He will sit on the throne of David & establish and uphold justice and righteousness forever (9:7). But indeed, Assyria, the enemy of Israel’s and thus God’s enemy will be judged (ch. 10) and then there will arise a “shoot” from the stem of Jesse (11:1). The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him and he will delight in the fear of the Lord (11:2). He will judge the poor in righteousness (11:3) and the wolf will dwell with the lamb (11:6). At this time the entire earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord (11:9). Then on that day, the people of God will say “I will give thanks to You, O LORD, for although you were

angry your anger has been turned away and you comfort me” (12:1). In this song of the redeemed, the worshippers of Yahweh will then sing: “Behold God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; for the LORD God is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation (12:2). The context of this will happen when the inhabitants of Zion dwell with God, the Holy One of Israel, in their midst (12:6). What a day of gladness, rejoicing, and deliverance that will be! One can see, then, how Isaiah could incorporate not only the language of Ex 15:2 but also the context of the larger discourse to enhance the meaning of the text in Isaiah 12:2.

The other occurrence of this language can be found in Psalm 118. As one of the “Egyptian Hallel Psalms” (Pss 113–118), this psalm acclaims the goodness of the Lord and the deliverance that the Lord provides for His people. Jewish tradition holds that Psalm 118 was sung during the Passover festivities. The psalm commands God’s people to “give thanks to the Lord for He is good” (118:1). All Israel is to say the covenant-keeping (steadfast) love of Yahweh is everlasting (118:2–4). It is the Lord who is for His people and so it is far better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man (118:7–9). Even if all the nations were to surround God’s people, in the name of the Lord, they will be defeated (118:10–12). The Lord is the help for His people (118:13). Because of this, the psalmist can shout: “the LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation” (118:14).

One cannot overlook the larger significance and context of Psalm 118. The Jews all understood Psalm 118 to be significantly Messianic. The Messiah is the One who will come in the name of the Lord (118:26). He is the “stone which the builders rejected and has become the chief cornerstone” (118:22). And in the day of the Lord’s saving, all can chant: “this is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (118:24). This is when the people of God can chant in Hebrew: “Hosannah!” (Do save, we beseech You; 118:25). What a great God who is worthy of blessing, exaltation and thanks (118:26–29). How appropriate for the psalmist to remember that it is the LORD who is the strength & song. Indeed, He — and he alone — has become salvation for His people (in the Messiah).

This phrase in Hebrew remembering the praise and worship due to Yahweh because of the salvation/deliverance that He has accomplished (עָזַי וְזַמְרָתֶיךָ יְיָ-יְהוָה לִי לְיִשׁוּעָה) occurs first in Yahweh’s deliverance in the Exodus narrative. It then speaks of Messiah’s first coming in Psalm 118. It also occurs in Isaiah 12 speaking of Messiah’s kingdom on earth when His people will remember the deliverance God has provided them.

And finally, this phrase in this specific form occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible (Ex 15:2; Isa 12:2; and Ps 118:14). One should not overlook that these three references encompass the three main divisions of the Hebrew Bible — the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. In the Torah, God delivers His people at the Red Sea from the Egyptians (Ex 15:2). In the Prophets, God is the strength and song of His people when he delivers them in the coming of the Messiah (Ps 118:14). And, lastly, in the Writings, Isaiah speaks of God as Israel’s strength and song when He has finally delivered them and ushered His people into the Messianic Kingdom (Isa 12:2).

What a glorious phrase with tremendous theological significance that occurs in the OT. And one should see how the OT writers used this phrase in different contexts while still respecting the primary OT context (Ex 15:2) that further enhances and substantiates the saving power of God in later OT contexts.