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The Bride and her Companions in Psalm 45: Making Sense out of an Allegory

Oblubienica i jej towarzyski w Psalmie 45: odkrywanie sensu alegorii

Abstract. The article explores various interpretations of the main individuals appearing in Ps 45, specifically the bride and her companions, in the light of the allegorical or non-allegorical reading of the king. Different configurations of who the protagonists represent are possible. However, a synchronic reading that is less historically orientated but that also takes neighbouring psalms into consideration offers a reading of the bride and her companions that is very rich theologically. Though allegorical and non-allegorical readings are both valid, the more pertinent interpretation is the one which offers greater hermeneutical links when taking the psalm's *Sitz im Psalter* into consideration.

Streszczenie. Artykuł analizuje różne interpretacje głównych postaci pojawiających się w Psalmie 45, szczególnie oblubienicy i jej towarzyszek, w świetle alegorycznego i nie-alegorycznego odczytania postaci króla. Istnieją różne możliwe konfiguracje dotyczące tego, kogo reprezentują bohaterowie. Jednak synchroniczna interpretacja, która jest mniej zorientowana historycznie, ale bierze pod uwagę sąsiednie psalmy, proponuje bogaty teologicznie sposób odczytania oblubienicy i jej towarzyszek. Chociaż zarówno alegoryczne i niealegoryczne odczytanie jest równie zasadne, jednak bardziej trafne wydaje się to, które dostarcza więcej hermeneutycznych powiązań, uwzględniając *Sitz im Psalter* psalmu.

Keywords: Psalm 45; allegory; king; bride and companions; the foreign nations.

Słowa kluczowe: Psalm 45; alegoria; król; oblubienica i towarzyski; obce narody.

Introduction

A close reading of Ps 45 should arouse the same wonder expressed in Cant 3:6 at the sight of the royal carriage: “Who is this...?” (מי זאת). Indeed, we might add, the question should be broadened to “Who are these?” A number of

intriguing personages appear in Ps 45, and the context of Canticles 3, wherein the king's mother crowns him on the day of his marriage, serves as a suitable backdrop for the spousal scene that unfolds in the psalm. The crux of the matter revolves around who the king refers to, but despite differing opinions, the various interpretations possible may not be entirely mutually exclusive. Certain readings may lend themselves to richer interpretations. The question at stake is what role each figure must be assigned, and the degree to which, if any, allegorical language is employed in order to convey the theology of Ps 45, both as an individual psalm and also as a member of the first Korahite collection.

1. Specific Interpretations of Ps 45

In view of the allegorical reading of Canticles which led to its acceptance as a canonical writing, early interpretations of Ps 45 along these lines are not surprising. In this light, the composition pointed to the amorous relation between God and Israel.¹ Particular attention was given to the bride, whom rabbinic interpreters saw as the community of Israel, and Christian readers envisaged as the Church.² However, it is specifically the figures of the king and the bride that mostly captured the writers' imagination. Interestingly, little attention has been given to the relation between the bride and her companions and the hermeneutical implications implied by it.

Diachronic exegesis was clearly more interested in identifying the precise origin of the psalm in terms of time and location. The psalm has been linked with king Solomon, or even with Ahab and Jezebel (circa 869 B.C.), but no certainty can be achieved in its dating.³ But by and large, scholars point out that the king is God's human agent who emulates the noblest of qualities and enjoys singular divine election. Childs avers: "The extravagant mythopoetic language of Pss. 45 and 72 continue to function in the Psalter because it is the rule of God which is being celebrated by means of reinterpreted imagery."⁴

As for the king's female counterpart, different interpreters have seen Israel embodied either in the queen in v.10 or the bride in v.11. Targum of Psalms substitutes the address to the bride in v.11 with one to the "Assembly of Israel"

¹ Cf. M. Alshekh, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 315.

² On v.11 see W. G. Braude, *Midrash Tehillim*, as well as Hieronymus, *Breviarium in Psalms*, p. 1016. The king was seen as Christ as early as the composition of Heb 1,8–9.

³ Cf. J. M. Neale, R. F. Littledale, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, II, p. 223, and W. L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, p. 28 respectively.

⁴ B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, pp. 193–4.

and speaks of the accompanying virgins as “the rest of her companions who are scattered among the nations”. Conversely, Rashi read v.15 regarding the virgin companions of the bride in the light of Zech 8,23 (“Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you”) as referring to the gentiles who run after the Jews to be with them.⁵ Identifying the queen in v.10 with Israel, Kimchi saw v.11 as speaking of the dominion she would have over all nations (≡ the bride and her companions).⁶

The bridal procession was taken by Delitzsch to be “the church of Israel together with the churches of the Gentiles united by one common faith”.⁷ Zenger cited Isa 49,23 and 60,16 and took the bride’s entourage to refer to the peoples who act as “Dienern und Dienerinnen Zions/Jerusalem’s”.⁸ Though the texts from Isaiah help “identify” these virgins, we submit that the context is not so much one of servitude as one of communal joy (שמחה וגייל v. 16). Pss 47,2; 67,5; Isa 56,6–7; (Jer 33,9?) speak specifically of joy among the nations within contexts of Israel’s election. Affirming that the bride represents Israel, Vesco states: “Les compagnes de la reine représentent les nations païennes venant apporter leurs présents à Sion et participer à la joie des noces messianiques.”⁹ Barbiero too is in agreement with this allegorical reading that identifies the companions specifically with the foreign nations.¹⁰

For Maier, the primary interpretation of the princess’ identity is as a daughter of a king (cf. בנות מלכים v.10), hence a foreign princess.¹¹ Thus, her marriage to the Israelite king is reminiscent of the decision of Ruth the Moabitess to follow Naomi. Maier’s interpretation gives less importance to the figure of the companions, identifying them with the bride’s foreign nature, such that the relationship of Israel with the nations is not seen in the bride-companions link but rather in the king-bride relationship. Kraus had followed the same line of thought in seeing the bride as a daughter of Tyre (בת צר v.13), whose obeisance to the king signified that of the foreign nations.¹² No importance whatsoever was given to the female servants except for a subtle mention of their presence in the festive throng.

⁵ M. I. Gruber, *Rashi’s Commentary*, p. 215.

⁶ Cf. D. Kimchi, *Commento ai Salmi*, p. 357.

⁷ F. Delitzsch, *Psalms*, p. 334.

⁸ F.-L. Hossfeld, E. Zenger, *Psalms 1–50*, p. 283.

⁹ J.-L. Vesco, *Le psautier de David*, 420; cf. p. 419.

¹⁰ Cf. G. Barbiero, “Il secondo e il terzo libro”, p. 149.

¹¹ Cf. M. Maier, “Israel und die Völker”, p. 658.

¹² Cf. H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, p. 457. Given the fem. sing. suffix in v.13, Kraus’ conclusion that the daughter of Tyre (≡ the queen) brings gifts to the king cannot be correct.

It must be noted that Maier's interpretation has the merit of viewing the role of the pagan bride as contributing together with Israel (\equiv the king) for the foundation of the messianic kingdom: "Sie geht diesen Schritt freiwillig, durch Schönheit angezogen und selber anziehend, erhält so Anteil an der gottesgeschenkten Freude und wird durch die gemeinsamen Kinder zur Mitbegründerin des messianischen Reiches."¹³ This perception is unusual in the Bible, but the "presence" of Ruth in David's genealogy may point to it (cf. Ruth 4,21), given the fact that the Book of Ruth is held to have been penned as a polemic against Nehemiah's and Ezra's decision to exclude foreign women from among the post-exilic Jews. Hence, the identity (and provenance) of the progeny in v.17 would take on new overtones.

Given the distinctions between God and king in Ps 45,3,7,8, Maier distances himself from the allegorical reading of Midrash, of Hossfeld and Zenger and others whereby the king is believed to represent God.¹⁴ As regards the identity of the king, Zenger poses the question: "die »neue« messianische Dynastie oder der Gott-König JHWH selbst?"¹⁵ Barbiero agrees with the psalm's royal-messianic orientation, though he claims that in its canonical position, it is the allegorical reading that ultimately wins the day.¹⁶ From an allegorical and synchronic perspective, Zenger states that the palace of the king in Ps 45 can be seen as referring to the Temple of the Lord if we move from a messianic reading of the psalm to one that reads Pss 46–48 in tandem.¹⁷

2. Further Synchronic and Exegetical Considerations

Among the details that have been highlighted to bolster the allegorical interpretation of the figure of the king, one finds the phrase "for he is your lord" (כִּי־הוּא אֲדֹנָיךְ v.12) which echoes the term אֲדֹנָי in 44,24, and the reference to God as the people's king in 44,5 which anticipates 45,2.¹⁸ Undoubtedly, apart from such significant verbal correspondences, the symbolic imagery created in Ps 45 is what is most striking. We now proceed to analyse some of these aspects.

¹³ M. Maier, "Israel und die Völker", p. 659.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 658; he suggests that כִּסֵּא־יְהוָה could be a verbal form meaning "Gott hat dich inthronisiert".

¹⁵ F.-L. Hossfeld, E. Zenger, *Psalm 1–50*, p. 279.

¹⁶ Cf. G. Barbiero, "Il secondo e il terzo libro", p. 148–49.

¹⁷ Cf. F.-L. Hossfeld, E. Zenger, *Psalm 1–50*, p. 283.

¹⁸ Cf. C. Süsserbach, *Der elohistische Psalter*, p. 366.

The king's victory is symbolically expressed in 45,4 where he is asked to gird his sword upon his thigh (also see v.6). Yet this psalm is flanked by two others which precisely express the futility of human arms. In 44,4 the psalmist acknowledges that it was not their sword that brought them victory, whilst in 46,10 God is the one who breaks the weapons of war. These, therefore, enhance the idea that Ps 45 should bring God's action to mind. Though in 45,7 the primary meaning of מִיֶּשֶׁר is definitely of an ethical nature, the alternative figurative meaning of a place of safety actually depicts the state of affairs God's action and his kingdom would make possible, particularly in terms of the restoration of the returned exiles.¹⁹

In some respects, the language of the surrounding Pss 44,46 and 48 presents God in the ambit of war and it is the marital aspect of Ps 45 that stands out as the novel section which is meant to represent the love-relationship between God and Israel. The personal address to the bride clearly functions as an address to Israel. The sapiential Ps 49 (which is a late text), with its "marital" connotations, confirms this hypothesis.²⁰ Moreover, one notes that the second part of Ps 45 serves to neutralize the negative representation of God's relationship with his people which emerges in the second part of Ps 44:

Ps 44	Ps 45
rejection (זָחַק v.10)	welcome (יָבֵל v.15)
plundered by adversaries (צָרָה v.11)	Tyre comes with a gift (בֹּתֵצֵיף v.13)
reproach to the neighbours (v.14)	beauty desired by king (v.12)
shame on the face (פָּנֵה v.16)	face appeased (פָּנָה v.13)
covered with deep darkness (v.20)	gown interwoven with gold; embroidered garments (vv. 14–15)
turning to a foreign god (v.21)	turning away from the father's house (v.11)
oppression and distress (v.25)	joy and gladness (v.16)
bowed down in distress (Qal שָׁיַח v.26)	bow down with respect (<i>Hish</i> חָוָה v.12)

¹⁹ Cf. W. Mayer et al., "יֶשֶׁר", *ThWAT* III, p. 1065: God will turn rough ground into a level place (מִיֶּשֶׁר Isa 40,4; cf. 42,16); he will level mountains (יֶשֶׁר Isa 45,2); God will lead his people along a straight way (יֶשֶׁר + בְּרֵךְ Jer 31,9); the levelling of the great mountain for Zerubbabel is announced (מִיֶּשֶׁר Zech 4,7). For E. S. Gerstenberger, "Theologies in the Book of Psalms", p. 606, Ps 45 has been "remodelled by the exilic / post-exilic community".

²⁰ Cf. M. Tait, "Till Death us do Join", pp. 177–98.

Pss 44 and 89 bear an interesting resemblance in their initial recounting of success based on God's faithfulness to his people, only then to be followed by a moving lament that verges on being an accusation of God for dealing with his people unfairly.

Ps 44,18 *All this happened to us, though we had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant.*

Ps 89,49 *O Lord, where is your former great love, which in your faithfulness you swore to David?*

The experience of shame (בשה 44,16; ברישה 89,46) is interpreted as a hiding (סתר 44,25; 89,47) of God or his face. In both cases, the searing questions put to God are resolved partly or totally through the presentation of God's ultimate kingship, namely in his action through his royal regent in Ps 45 and through the *Yahweh malak* Pss 93–100.

Whilst Ps 45,3–8 speak of the messianic king's election by God, vv. 11–16 highlight Israel's election by God. In both cases there is a clear distinction between the king or the bride and their companions (חבר v.8; רעה v.15). The bride's election can only be understood in terms of the king's own election by God, *by virtue of which the former becomes possible*. Hence, following the first part which centres around the *human* king vis-à-vis God, it is specifically the second part which is meant to be the allegorical representation of God and Israel.

In our view, Ps 45 proceeds in these steps: after the initial proclamation (v.2) follows an address to a human king (vv. 3–6) who is one of *the sons of men* (בני אדם v.3). The Elohist formulation in v.7, whether taken as addressed to God or, following Hoftijzer, as a noun phrase denoting the divine throne of the human king, emphasizes the dominion of God himself.²¹ This is confirmed by v.8 where reference is made to "God, your God" (אלהים אלהיך), hence excluding any absolute divine attribution to the king. Vv. 3 and 8 form an *inclusio*, beginning and ending with the king's qualities of grace and righteousness (which envelop the military descriptions) and, more importantly, refer to Elohim where in the term על-כף, in both cases, has God as subject of the actions mentioned. V.8 functions as a hinge due to the anointing and oil mentioned, ushering in the sumptuous motifs of the wedding ceremony. But given the resolve in v. 2 to address the king, the sudden address to the bride in v.11 is surprising. This

²¹ Cf. J. Hoftijzer, "Remarks on Psalm 45:7a", 82. J. C. McCann Jr., "The Book of Psalms", p. 862, suggests that the term *elohim* refers to the human king as is the case with Moses in Exod 4,16 and 7,1. G. Ravasi, *Il libro dei Salmi*, I, p. 811, cites several other instances where human beings are likened to the divine, e.g. Zech 12,8.

bears sapiential overtones in its call to listen, though this could be taken to refer equally to Israel as to the nations. However, the intimacy, exclusiveness and favour that characterize the king's disposition towards the bride would naturally gravitate towards an Israelite election.

Rashi interpreted the queen on the king's right (v.10) as the bride, not the queen mother.²² This is indeed possible as vv. 2–10 describe the king in an idealized form comprising war and love. When the king is told to “ride on in triumph” (v.5), this cannot be taken as representing an action that is unfolding before the psalmist's eyes but as depicting his military prowess. Likewise, the consort on his right hand is only an image used to represent his marital status, and is not meant to create a distinction between her and the bride of vv. 11–16. The bride's entry into the palace depicts a particular marriage scene of the same female figure (שָׁגֵל v.10). The feminine imperative employed immediately after the mention of this personage and the gold attire in both v.10 and v.14 indicate that it is the שָׁגֵל that is being addressed.²³ Conversely, Alonso Schökel opines that שָׁגֵל must refer to the queen mother given the huge importance she enjoyed in ancient cultures, no less the Israelite one: “Dire che tra tutte le mogli del re ce ne sia una principale che riceve il titolo di regina è proiezione dei nostri costumi, senza base biblica.”²⁴ However, though such a historical clarification is well-founded, the point the psalm makes is that the image of a singular woman is being exalted in order to stress her election, which would then serve to reflect God's favour granted to Israel. In such an allegorical reading, where the king points to God himself, a motherly figure somewhat jars.

From a diachronic perspective, if vv. 11–16 are a later addition, שָׁגֵל would indeed be taken to refer to the queen mother since the added verses point to a different context altogether. However, after the admonition to the bride in vv. 11–13, a synchronic reading may well render vv. 14–16 a snapshot describing an event that actually led to the glorious depiction in v.10.²⁵ Here, the daughters

²² “Your wife shall stand...”; M. I. Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary*, p. 214. Also see F. Delitzsch, *Psalms*, p. 326.

²³ Those who support the idea that שָׁגֵל is the queen mother (see F.-L. Hossfeld, E. Zenger, *Psalms 1–50*, p. 283, who cite 1 Kgs 2,19) may point out that the term for gold is different in both verses: כֶּהָם; זָהָב. But the speaker who addresses the bride in vv. 11–13 need not be taken to be the queen mother but may be the poet himself who earlier addressed the king.

²⁴ Cf. L. Alonso Schökel, *Trenta Salmi*, p. 184 (cf. pp. 183–185).

²⁵ C. A. Briggs, E. G. Briggs, *Psalms*, Vol. I, p. 390, see the subject of v.14 as the same queen on the king's right in v.10, but they take the subject of v.15 to be the companions *alone* since the bride is already by the king's side. Such an interpretation is not necessary, given the tendency, at times, not to follow a chronological sequence (e.g. Josh 2,3–4; similarly, see

of kings (בנות מלכים) would represent both the rich ones of the nations (עשירי עם v.13) and the virgin companions of the bride (רעותיה v.15). Tyborowski speaks not only of the special honour daughters of kings of the Old Babylonian Kingdom seemed to have enjoyed in their dealings with others but also the lucrative, entrepreneurial activity in which they were sometimes involved.²⁶ The title “*marat šarrim* (dumu.mí lugal)”, that is “daughter of the king”, may have been a fixed title that retained overtones of wealth. In Ps 45, therefore, their presence among the bride reflects the wealth brought to Israel.²⁷

In v.13 פניך יהלוי refers to the face of the bride who has become queen. The rich who come to appease her face create continuity with Pss 42–43 where the psalmist seeks God’s face. But that here we are now dealing with the future queen’s face, that is the one of Israel in an eschatological dimension, can be deduced from the use of יפי (Zion’s beauty) and יפע (God’s brilliance) in Ps 50,2, where their phonetic relation implies that the former notion depends on the latter.²⁸

At the end of the psalm, v.17 refers to what will happen in the future (Impf. שיית + היה). In light of the juxtaposition of the military and spousal sections, one infers that this verse elucidates Israel’s role in the expansion of the influence of God’s reign. Essentially, the king’s sovereignty will not be so much guaranteed by his ability to destroy his enemies as by Israel’s willingness to submit herself to him. This distinction can also be surmised from the contrasting images of peoples falling *under* the king’s feet (נפל תחת v.6) and Israel’s falling *at* his feet in genuine reverence (חיה v.12) that leads to progeny.²⁹ Given the fact that Ps 45 must be read in continuity with the exilic tragedy of Pss 42–44, the connections with Isa 61,9–62,5 are enlightening since this text portrays Israel as a bride of Yahweh, the bridegroom, in a context of a marriage the fruit of which is acknowledged by the nations.³⁰ The very classification of the bride’s companions as “daughters of kings” (v.10) lends itself to viewing this retinue from an international perspective.

W. A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, p. 348). L. Alonso Schökel, *Trenta Salmi*, p. 182, does not agree that Ps 45 exhibits a non-chronological order.

²⁶ Cf. W. Tyborowski, “The Daughters”, 64–67.

²⁷ For F. Delitzsch, *Psalms*, p. 333, the daughters of kings refer not to pagan kingdoms but to representatives of their nations.

²⁸ Cf. G. Barbiero, *Salmi scelti*, p. 7. Also see יפה with reference to Zion in 48,3.

²⁹ On the related link between these two concepts in the story of David and Abigail, see N. R. BROWN, “A Fairy Tale Wedding?”, 58.

³⁰ Cf. S. M. Attard, *The Implications of Davidic Repentance*, pp. 57–59.

Then we move on from the human domain (v.17) to the elusive v.18 which is significant given the fact that the king's name remains unmentioned at the end of the composition, coupled with the possibly misleading name שִׁיר יְדִידָת.³¹ The absence of the king's name may, indeed, allude to God more than to an earthly monarch.³²

3. Historically Sensitive versus Purely Synchronic Readings?

Nathan's parable in 2 Sam 12 has drawn attention for the difficulty it poses with regards to who the different characters stand for. Though in vv. 7–11 Nathan identifies the rich man with David and the ewe lamb with Bathsheba, it has been suggested that the parable could be understood differently, with Joab being the rich man, David the traveller, Uriah the lamb (that gets murdered) and Bathsheba the poor man. The parable thus lends itself to different views depending on who the main characters are made to represent. Here, one may apply the image of the clerical cassock with a long row of buttons: if the first one is done up wrongly, the rest will follow suit. Could the same be said of such a constellation of figures in Ps 45? A particular identification of the king would invariably lead to a particular identification of all the other protagonists of the psalm, namely the queen, the bride, her people and her father's house, the daughter of Tyre, and the bride's companions.³³ But is it necessary to lock each figure or metaphor into a particular role, or would it suffice to appreciate

³¹ However, F. Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 391, translate this as "a song of love." A basin housed in the Pergamon Museum of Berlin has an Arabic inscription concerning a king who remains nameless. Can one surmise that the basin could have been passed on from generation to generation, thanks to the absence of a particular name? But given the ideological and propagandistic agenda behind the penning of royal psalms, as was the case in the ANE, S. R. A. Starbuck, *Court Oracles*, p. 68, marvels at the absence of the king's name despite the pledge to propagate it in 45,18.

³² Ps 45,18 links the name to praise, not unlike 72,19 which speaks of God's name as being blessed. Conversely, 72,17 speaks of the *perpetuity* of the human monarch's name. In his list of *concatenatio* elements between adjacent psalms, F. Delitzsch, *Symbolae*, p. 54, links 44,9 (שִׁמְךָ לְעוֹלָם נוֹדָה) with 45,18 (שִׁמְךָ ... יְהוֹדֵךְ לְעוֹלָם). In Ps 44 the subject is the people of God, whilst in Ps 45 it is the peoples at large.

³³ Analysis of syntax may also throw light on this exegetical work. For instance, Beaucamp, "Agencement strophique du Psaume 45", p. 173, reads בַּת-צִיּוֹן (v.13) as a vocative, like בַּת in v.11, hence qualifying the bride.

the general tone of the psalm which is enhanced by the representation of its protagonists?³⁴

Summarizing the different views given by interpreters, the positions held are as follows: (i) the king represents God, the bride Israel, her companions are either of her own race that were scattered (hence stripping them of any possible pagan quality) or the foreign nations; (ii) the king is an Israelite king, the bride a foreign princess, her companions are foreign princesses too, and the children are offspring of Israel and the nations. Here, the queen (שגיל) has little importance, unless she is identified with the bride. Her role is important only if she represents Israel who has dominion over the nations (the daughters of kings, including the bride).

A strict interpretation of the bride in terms of her being a “daughter of a king”, and hence pagan, leans towards an exegesis that gives significant weight to the psalm’s provenance and can therefore be said to be more historically influenced. A purely synchronic approach usually suspends historical considerations of the psalm’s origin and development in order to focus squarely on its hermeneutical implications within its new context. For instance, the reference to the bride as a daughter of the king (בַּת־מֶלֶךְ 45,14) would not be understood in the literal sense but would be taken as investing Israel with royal dignity. It thus becomes evident that diverse readings can be reached depending on how moored or otherwise is an exegetical study to the original *Sitz im Leben* of individual psalms. This by no means devalues the richness of the text’s interpretation. On the contrary, it may even embellish and deepen it. But such difficulties arise from a seeming disagreement among scholars over to what extent one may, if at all, make historical-critical considerations when analyzing a text synchronically. The fact that the transition from a historically biased synchronic approach to a purely synchronic approach showcases a different understanding of a metaphor or allegory should not be interpreted as resulting from a possible erroneous reading of the text. In speaking of inherent ambiguity and the polyvalence of texts, Gorman states: “A text... inherently has a sort of open-ended character that permits a variety of readings. The process of exegesis brings together a text, a set of contexts in which the text was created and is now situated, and a reader located in yet another context. The results of this process are bound to vary.”³⁵

³⁴ J. Schipper, “Did David Overinterpret Nathan’s Parable?”, p. 388 avers: “Since the speaker may intend to draw a single point of comparison, the hearer should not search for parallels for each element of a parable.”

³⁵ M. J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, p. 132.

The interpretation of Barbiero and others is more canonically sensitive with respect to Maier's non-allegorical interpretation. One can therefore see how the method or approach used can bear upon the way one interprets the psalm, even rendering diverse readings. The canonical approach is such that neighbouring psalms become essential to draw out certain features of a particular psalm which would otherwise remain concealed. In our view, the *Sitz im Psalter* of Ps 45, specifically the Korah group, gives enough indications for reading it allegorically. It is also valid to uphold a non-allegorical reading in order to appreciate some other nuance which cannot otherwise be perceived (e.g. the progeny resulting from Israel and the nations). Holt speaks of a "tacit metaphor" and then points out that a metaphor may be flexible in its meaning. In other words, if read in its original form it may refer to a particular reality, but it is legitimate "from a literary and theological point of view" (but not a historical-critical one) to allow the metaphor to take on added meaning.³⁶ In our opinion, if the king is taken to be only an Israelite king, one may deplete Ps 45 of its potential to represent God's special election of Israel, which election is of utmost importance at this juncture in this Korah group. Other aspects, such as the king's admiration of the bride's beauty, would have nothing more than a human tone with no real theological implications. It is therefore necessary to weigh in the balance which are the more pressing and relevant theological messages from a synchronic perspective before deciding which side to lean on.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of Ps 45 may not necessarily be to give a clear jigsaw puzzle-like picture where each personage depicted refers directly to a character/entity in real life. Rather, the intention could be to enhance more generic notions, in this case the ones of military victory and spousal love, with all the splurge and panoply that they are meant to portray. Trying to interpret every detail of the text could be somewhat risky, not merely because its relation to the author's intention could become seriously tenable, but also because such categorisations can impose limitations on the text.

The metaphors or allegorical representations change depending on the stage of composition or redaction of the psalm. First it referred simply to a king, a bride and her companions. Then, its inclusion in the Korah group may have been instigated by its propensity to reflect the sovereignty of the divine King,

³⁶ Cf. E. K. Holt, "Ad fontes Aquarum", pp. 80, 84–85. Here, he also mentions "theological potentials in the text", a concept that is most fitting in a canonical close reading.

albeit through human agency. At this stage, it may well be the case that the marriage metaphor per se was the central focus, with the bride (and her companions) not so much representing specific entities as contributing to the image of male dominance that would therefore enhance the impact of the royal ideology of the poem. In the final stage, when Zion theology psalms were juxtaposed to Ps 45, the poem became imbued with more specific and universal overtones, also in line with the universal dimension of Pss 46–48 and the eschatological tone of Ps 49. For this reason, the allegorical reading or otherwise must always take into consideration not only historical and exegetical aspects of a psalm but also its impact on the rhetorical discourse that gradually unfolds in the Psalter.

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