

Psalms 24 — Clean Hands and a Pure Heart — Who May Climb the Hill of the LORD, and the King of Glory at the Gate

Psalm 24: an entrance liturgy for the temple mount — likely sung as the ark of the covenant was carried up to Zion. The psalm opens by declaring that all the earth belongs to its Maker, poses the worthiness question at the sanctuary gate (who may ascend and stand in the holy place), answers it, and climaxes in an antiphonal gate-liturgy welcoming the King of glory in. Ascribed to David; a processional psalm of the First-Temple worship of Israel.

Psalm 24 is not a poem you read so much as a poem you *walk into*. It is a liturgy — a script for a procession — and to hear it rightly you have to picture the scene it was written to accompany. A crowd is climbing the temple mount. Ahead of them, borne on the shoulders of Levites, is the ark of the covenant, the gold-lidded box that marked the throne-seat of Israel's God. The road goes up; Zion is a hill, and the house of the LORD sits at the top of it. Somewhere on that ascent a question gets asked and answered, and at the summit, before the gates of the sanctuary, two choirs sing a call-and-response that ends with a name for the God coming home to his house: *the King of glory*.

Hebrew Word Studies

erets (H776) / tevel (H8398) (אֶרֶץ / תֵּבֵל) — **earth, land, ground / world, the inhabited/productive world v. 1.** Verse 1 uses two different words the KJV renders "earth" and "world," and the pair is doing real work. *Erets* is the broad word — earth, land, ground, the whole physical planet and everything in it ("the earth... and the fulness thereof"). *Tevel* is narrower and warmer: the *inhabited*, fruitful, productive world, the earth precisely as a place where people live ("the world, and they that dwell therein"). Hebrew poetry loves this kind of paired repetition — say it once wide, say it again with a human focus. So the claim is not only that God owns the rock and water of the planet; it is that he owns the *lived-in* world, the fields and cities and households, and the people in them. *Tevel* shows up in the courtroom promise that "he shall judge the *world* [tevel] with righteousness" (Ps. 96:13) — the same inhabited earth he owns in Psalm 24 is the one he will set right. You cannot fence God out of any acre of it: "the earth [erets] is the LORD's."

yasad (H3245) / kun (H3559) (יָסַד / כּוֹנֵן) — **to found, lay a foundation / to establish, make firm, set in place v. 2.** Two building verbs anchor verse 2. *Yasad* is "to found" — to lay the foundation-stone of a structure, the deliberate first act of construction. *Kun* is "to establish, make firm, fix in place" — to set something so it will not be moved. God "founded" the world upon the seas (*yasad*) and "established" it upon the floods (*kun*): he laid it down and then made it stand. The pairing insists that creation was not an accident of the chaos-waters but a deliberate, load-bearing act — a foundation set and then secured. It is the same *kun* used when God promises David that his throne "shall be *established* for ever" (2 Sam. 7:16) and when the Psalmist says "the world also is *stablished*, that it cannot be moved" (Ps. 93:1). A world firmly founded is the fitting home of a firmly founded throne — which is exactly the throne the King of glory takes at the end of this psalm.

alah (H5927) (אָלַה) — **to go up, ascend, climb; to offer up (a sacrifice) v. 3.** "Who shall *ascend* into the hill of the LORD?" *Alah* is the plain Hebrew verb for going up — up a hill, up a road, up to a higher place — and it became the standard word for going to the sanctuary, because you always went *up* to God's house. Jerusalem sits on a height; the songs the pilgrims sang on the road are literally the "Songs of Ascents" (Ps. 120–134), the *alah* songs. The same verb names the burnt offering, the *olah* — the sacrifice that "goes up" whole in smoke. So *alah* fuses two ideas that belong together: to approach God is to *rise*, and to rise toward God is to offer something up. You do not stroll into the holy place on the level; you climb, and the climb costs. When Isaiah dreams of the last days, it is this verb: "let us *go up* to the mountain of the LORD... and he will teach us of his ways" (Isa. 2:3). Psalm 24 asks the entrance question of that whole tradition — of everyone on the upward road: who, of all these climbers, may actually arrive?

naqi (H5355) / bar (H1249) (נָקִי / בָּר) — **clean, free, innocent, unstained (of hands) / pure, clean, clear (of heart) v. 4.** The two words behind "clean hands, and a pure heart." *Naqi* means clean in the sense of *cleared* — free of guilt, unstained, innocent, acquitted; it is the word for hands with no blood on them and no bribe in them. *Bar* means pure, bright, clear — the word for grain winnowed clean of chaff, or a sky washed clear; here, a heart with nothing muddy or double in it. The pairing is the whole ethic of the verse: *naqi* hands (a clean record of deeds) and a *bar* heart (an unclouded interior). Neither alone will do. Psalm 51, David's great confession, asks God to "create in me a clean [*bar* is cognate to the idea] heart" — the pure heart is finally something God has to *make*, not something we scrub up ourselves. And Job, protesting his integrity, appeals to exactly these: "the righteous also shall hold on his way, and he that hath *clean* [naqi] hands shall be stronger and stronger" (Job 17:9). Clean hands and a pure heart are the two halves of a life that can bear to stand in the light.

shav (H7723) (שׁוֹ, רָ, אֵ) — emptiness, vanity, worthlessness, falsehood, a lie v. 4. "Who hath not lifted up his soul unto *vanity*, nor sworn deceitfully." *Shav* is a heavy little word: emptiness, worthlessness, *falseness* — a thing that looks like something and is nothing. It is the word in the commandment against taking God's name "in *vain*" (Ex. 20:7), and the word for a *false* witness in Deuteronomy's version of that law. So "lifted up his soul unto *shav*" means more than idle daydreaming; it means to set your whole self, your appetite, your worship, on what is empty and false — on idols, on lies, on nothing dressed up as something. The parallel line makes it concrete: "nor sworn deceitfully." The person who may ascend is the person who has not given his soul to falsehood and does not use his oaths to deceive. Truth in the innermost part, and truth on the lips — that is the *shav*-free life. Psalm 24 says the empty-hearted and the false-tongued do not get to stand in the holy place, however far up the hill their feet may carry them.

kavod (H3519) (כָּ, בֹ, דָ) — glory, weight, honor, abundance, splendor vv. 7, 8, 9, 10. The word that rings five times through the gate-liturgies: the *King of glory*, *kavod*. Its root means *weight*, *heaviness* — glory in Hebrew is not first about brightness but about *massiveness*, the sheer heft and gravity of a great presence. A glorious king is a *weighty* king, one whose importance you feel like a mass in the room. That is why the doors must lift their heads: the arriving King is too *heavy* with glory for a low gate. The *kavod* of the LORD is the visible weight of his presence — the cloud that filled the tabernacle so that Moses could not stand (Ex. 40:34–35), the glory that filled Solomon's temple at its dedication. Psalm 24 is staging that same filling: the King of *kavod* coming into his house. And the New Testament gives the title a face — "the Lord of *glory*" whom the rulers crucified (1 Cor. 2:8), the one in whose face we behold "the glory of God" (2 Cor. 4:6). The whole psalm has been climbing toward a weight: the seekers who ascend the hill are seeking the face of the King of glory, and at the gate that glory comes in to meet them.

melek (H4428) / tsava (H6635) (מֶ, לֶ, כָּ / צָ, בָ, אֵ) — king, sovereign / host, army, company (of soldiers or of heaven) vv. 7–10. The climax fuses two words. *Melek* is the ordinary word for king — and the psalm's refrain, "the *King* of glory," insists that Israel's true monarch is not the man on the throne in Jerusalem but the LORD whose ark is coming up the hill. Then the final answer names him "the LORD of *hosts*" — *YHWH tseva'ot*, Yahweh of the *tsava*, the armies. *Tsava* means a host, a mustered army, a marshalled company; "the LORD of hosts" is the God who commands the armies both of Israel and of heaven — the sun, moon, and stars are called the "host" of heaven, and so are the angels. So the two challenges climb: first the King is "mighty in battle" (a warrior), then he is "the LORD of *hosts*" (the commander of all the armies of creation). This is the covenant name the prophets thunder — "the LORD of *hosts* is his name" (Isa. 47:4) — and the name the ark carried into war. The gates open for a *melek*; the King who walks through them turns out to command every *tsava* there is.

From the Chapter's Architecture

Two "Selah" marks (v. 6, v. 10) close the second and third movements — a held musical pause at each summit, first after the seekers are named, then after the King of glory is named. There is a quiet symmetry worth noticing, though I would not force it into a formal chiasm: the psalm opens with the LORD as maker and owner of all and closes with the LORD as King and warrior over all, and in between stands the one hill where owner and King meet the clean of hand who have climbed to see his face. The seekers go up; the King comes in; and the meeting is the whole point.