**Prologue**

Establishing the genre, structure, purposes, and *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 107 poses no small challenge. Of the many questions worthy of discussion, the central one seems to be whether Psalm 107 is a nationalistic-historical psalm depicting the return to Zion or whether it is a universal psalm describing how God runs His world, with no special attention paid to Israel’s history.

However, before we delve into the challenges the psalm presents, let’s quickly summarize its contents and structure.

**Psalm 107’s Structure**

Psalm 107 is divided into four parts whose size and characteristics differ:

The Psalm’s prologue is comprised of three introductory verses.

The first half of the psalm includes the ‘individual thanksgivings’ of four groups.

The second half includes a ‘hymn’ describing *Elohim*’s absolute control over nature and human society.

And the end of the psalm features two concluding verses.

Let’s quickly review this psalm.

**The Psalm’s Introduction**

As befits a psalm of thanksgiving, the introduction begins with a summons to thank the Lord for his acts of loving-kindness. Therefore, the reader only discovers the identity of the psalm’s addressee in the second verse—a group denoted as ‘the redeemed of the Lord.’ The third verse describes the ingathering of this group redeemed by the Lord from the four corners of the earth: from the lands in the east, the west, the north, and the sea.

**Individual Thanksgivings**

The first half of the psalm comprises a sophisticated, stable structure that repeats four times.

First, a group experiencing adversity is mentioned: those who lost their way in the wilderness, the imprisoned, the sick, and those who go down to the sea in ships.

Then the first refrain describes how the group was rescued from its unique hardship.

Following this, the actual rescue—whose description stands in stark contrast to the aforementioned adversity—is detailed.

Then the second refrain—mentioning the obligation upon those saved to thank the Lord for his acts of loving-kindness—takes the stage.

The fifth and last part details the act for which thanksgiving is offered.

We should also note the undeniable connection between the first half of the psalm and the introductory verses. The two refrains resemble the descriptions of the people redeemed by God who express their gratitude at the beginning of the psalm. Perhaps, the four directions from which the multitude is ingathered parallels the four groups that are rescued. The parallel between those redeemed from “the sea” and “those who go down to the sea on ships” is particularly thought-provoking.

**The Psalm’s Second Half—A Hymn concerning the Lord’s Dominion over the Earth and Human Society**

The second half of the psalm describes the Lord’s might in two arenas: First, his dominion over the earth is revealed. the Lord punishes the wicked by turning rivers into a desert, and He also turns the desert into a pool of water in order to settle the hungry there. Second, the Lord’s dominion over human society is revealed: He brings the wicked low and raises up the poor.

**Concluding Verses—A Call to Take Note of the Lord’s Acts of Loving-Kindness**

The psalm concludes with an appeal to the wise “@@@”. This appeal creates an *inclusio* with the beginning of the psalm, which summons @@@.

**A Universal Psalm or a Nationalistic-Historical One?**

The central question that must be addressed in investigating our psalm is, What does Psalm 107 talk about? Is the psalm universal in nature, describing the salvation of human beings from a host of troubles, or is it a nationalistic-historical psalm narrating the story of Israel’s salvation?

This question was already on the minds of the rabbis in antiquity, as the following source makes clear:

**R. Akiva: The Psalm Addresses Universal Human Adversity**

How do we know that the sick must offer thanks? It teaches, saying (*talmud lomar*): “There were fools who suffered for their sinful way…. In their adversity, they cried to the Lord and He saved them from their troubles.”

How do we know that those who lost their way in the wilderness must offer thanks? It teaches, saying: “Those who lost their way in the wilderness…”.

How do we know that those imprisoned must offer thanks? It teaches, saying: “….those bound in cruel irons…”.

And how do we know that even those who go down to the sea must offer thanks? It teaches, saying: “Those who go down to the sea in ships…”.

**This Is the Teaching of R. Akiva.**

**R. Eliezer: The Psalm Addresses National Troubles**

In contrast to R. Akivaת who understands the psalm to be describing troubles that might beset any human being over the course of his or her life, R. Eliezer maintains that the psalm describes hardships that had befallen Israel on a national level.

**These words only refer to Israel’s exiles**, as it says, “Thus let the redeemed of the Lord say, those He redeemed from adversity, whom He gathered in from the lands,  
from east and west, from the north and from the sea.” (JPS, 1985)

**Those who lost their way in the desert** – This is the exile perpetrated by Elam and its allies;

**Fools who suffered for their sinful way –** These are the inhabitants of the Land of Israel who are like sick people;

**Those who lived in deepest darkness** – These are the city dwellers who are similar to prisoners.

**Those who go down to the sea in ships** – This is the exile perpetrated by Rome and its allies.

Even though our psalm is not very brief and does not use opaque or mysterious language, the fundamental question concerning whether the psalm is addressing universal or national-historical concerns has not yet been addressed in a way that the majority of scholars can agree upon.

**A Diachronic Solution to the Tension between the Nationalistic and Universal Foundations of the Psalm**

Some scholars have noted that the tension between interpreting the psalm as universal or national-historical stems, in essence, from the gap between the psalm’s opening verses and the other verses in the psalm’s first half. In light of this realization, several scholars proposed that the psalm originally contained only verses 4–32 (and possibly verse one, which is devoid of any historical character).

According to this approach, this psalm functioned in an early period as a thanksgiving psalm recited by either an individual or a group of individuals on some thanksgiving holiday at the Temple.

After the return to Zion, the first three verses (one–three) were added in order to endow the psalm with new meaning. The psalm would no longer relate to the gratitude of each individual for his personal salvation but to national salvation. The people would jointly express their thanks for their national deliverance using this psalm.

In this way, the meaning of the first stanza was transformed from being the story of someone who lost his way in the wilderness to the story of the returnees to Zion who were forced to brave the wilderness on their return journey to Israel.

**Psalm 107 and the Psalm to Shamash**

The scholarly opinion that maintains that verses 432 are the psalm’s original kernel and that the psalm originally possessed a universal nature received unexpected support when the great Hymn to Shamash—the Mesopotamian sun god—was deciphered. This hymn was immensely popular during the Neo-Assyrian period and even in the later Babylonian period.

Lines 6582 in the Hymn to Shamash bear a remarkable resemblance to the first half of our psalm.

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Shamash also aids those who lose their way, those who go down to the sea, prisoners and invalids. The appearance of these four groups together is unique to Psalm 107 and to the Hymn to Shamash.

The groups’ order of appearance is also identical in both texts, except for one difference. The passage dealing with those who go down to the sea appears first in the Hymn to Shamash, instead of appearing separately at the end of the passage. Curiously, it is integrated interlinearly into the passage concerning those who have lost their way, as the author switches back and forth, line-by-line, between the two groups.

**The Riddle of the Inverted or Isolated *Nuns* in Psalm 107**

Despite this difference, the resemblance is quite impressive; however, there may be another clue indicating that Psalm 107, in its original form, resembled the Hymn of Shamash to an even greater degree.

Psalm 107’s passage concerning those who go down to the sea is marked by inverted *nun’s*. What is the significance of these *nuns*? The predominant explanation is that they function to mark a passage that does not appear in its proper or rightful place in the text.

However, the presence of these *nuns* in the passage concerning those who go down to the sea surprised Mesorah scholar Yisrael Yeivin who expressed his puzzlement (*Introduction to the Tiberian Masora*h):

These explanations sit well with the markings in Numbers; however, it is difficult to discover their relevance to the markings in Psalms, and **no satisfactory explanation for their use there has yet been offered.**

In contrast, Shlomo Dov Goitein hypothesized, indeed, basically took a guess (*Iyyunim Bamikra,* [Studies in the Bible]) in the following passage:

What is the nature of these markings? … “He made marks for it [this passage], before it and after it, as if to indicate that this is not its proper place [in Scripture]” This explanation also serves to explain the passage concerning those who go down to the sea. For there too, the passage about sea goers should rightfully follow the passage about the first group, the desert travelers.

Comparing the Hymn to Shamash to Psalm 107 offers unexpected corroboration of Goitein’s hypothesis, as in the hymn, the passage concerning those who go down to the sea was originally adjacent to the passage concerning those who lost their way.

**Parallels Between Psalm 107 and the Hymn to Shamash**

Aside from the astonishing fact that both texts contain the same set of supplicants, and we can reasonably assume that these supplicants appeared in the same order in the original version of both texts, the texts also contain additional similarities. Due to time constraints, I will only present two of them: one substantive and one linguistic.

From a substantive perspective, Psalm 107 describes two of those groups in need of salvation as sinners: the imprisoned and the invalids. @@@

Likewise, in the Hymn to Shamash, these very two groups are described as having angered their gods @@@

Linguistically, Psalm 107 describes the destination of those who go down to the sea with the hepaxlegomenon ‘*mehoz*.’ In the Hymn to Shamash, this very same word is utilized in the very same context.

**Differences Between Psalm 107 and the Hymn to Shamash**

Of course, there are also important differences between the Hymn to Shamash and Psalm 107, both in terms of their artistic design and, perhaps, even more importantly, in terms of their theological perspectives.

1. We will begin with the obvious. The Hymn to Shamash expresses a polytheistic perspective while Psalm 107 expresses a monotheistic one. This difference, which is foundational to the psalm’s theology, affects other elements in the text.
2. Even in a hymn exclusively dedicated to praising Shamash, his power is limited to his spheres of responsibility
3. Shamash does not have dominion over the sea – He does not cause storms and he does not end them. In Psalm 107, the Lord’s dominion over storms is heavily emphasized both in terms of his causing them and in terms of his terminating them.
4. Shamash does not cause the prisoner to become imprisoned, and he does not release him from captivity. His role is merely to appease the wrathful god. In Psalm 107, the Lord Himself shatters the prison gates.
5. Shamash does not cause people to get sick, and he does not heal them. His role in this psalm is merely to appease the outraged goddesses, so that *ipso facto* the sick get well again. In Psalm 107, the act of sinning against the Lord causes the sickness, and the Lord Himself heals the sick.
6. The different conceptualizations of divine recompense: In both hymns, the invalid and the prisoner suffer injury at their gods’ hands; however, in the Hymn to Shamash the anger of the gods is not described as a reaction to sin, while in Psalm 107 it is made quite clear that the individual suffers this evil fate because of his sin.

We have apparently solved the mystery. By reading Psalm 107 in the context of the Hymn to Shamash we have confirmed Goitein’s hypothesis that our psalm was originally a universal psalm concerning the aid the Lord offers to the sufferers who need His help. The addition of verses 1–3 transformed the psalm into a nationalistic-historical one.

**Parallels Between Psalm 107 and the Book of Isaiah**

However, this conclusion, which seems so irrefutable, may be cast into doubt by investigating the profound textual link between Psalm 107 and the book of Isaiah, especially to those parts attributed to Second Isaiah.

Almost every single phrase in our psalm has a parallel in the book of Isaiah, and, in some cases these phrases are unique to these two texts.

Here are several examples comparing Psalm 107 to the book of Isaiah:

The phrase “the redeemed of the Lord” only appears in Psalm 107 and in Isaiah.

The notion of an ingathering of exiles which appears in our psalm appears several times in the book of Isaiah. In this context, the combination of “from the north and from the sea” which appears solely in our psalm and Isaiah is most instructive.

The combination of “lost” *(ta‘u*) and “wilderness” (*midbar*) is almost exclusive to our psalm and Isaiah, as is the combination of “wilderness” and “wasteland” (*yeshimon*). The combination of “the thirsty” (*nefesh shokekah*) is unique to our psalm and Isaiah.

The depiction of the imprisoned as “lived in darkness” (JPS, 1985) or “dwelt in the dark” (*yoshvei hoshekh*) is unique to our psalm and Isaiah.

There is a fascinating parallel between the verse in our psalm, “**because** they defied the word of God, **spurned** the counsel of the Most High,” **כִּי** *הִמְרוּ* *אִמְרֵי אֵל* *וַעֲצַת עֶלְיוֹן* **נָאָצוּ**,which has a universal character, and its far more nationalistic parallel in Isaiah 5:24: “**For** they have rejected the instruction of God of Hosts, **Spurned** the word of the Holy One of Israel”:**כִּי** *מָאֲסוּ* אֵת *תּוֹרַת ה' צְבָאוֹת* ו*ְ*אֵת *אִמְרַת קְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל* **נִאֵצוּ**

The verse “@@@” is an almost identical replica of the verse “@@@”.

The combination of “fool” (*evil*) and “way” (*derekh*) is almost exclusive to our psalm and Isaiah.

The phrase “who go down to the sea” is unique to our psalm and Isaiah.

The combination of “staggered like a drunken man” (*yanu’u ke-shikor*) appears nowhere else except for our psalm and Isaiah.

The description of the Lord as an entity that transforms rivers into a desert is unique to our psalm and Isaiah.

So is the description of the inverse act, in which the Lord turns a desert into a pool of water.

These are just a few of the many parallels between Psalm 107 and the book of Isaiah; however, I believe they are sufficient to make my point: Psalm 107’s composer was extremely familiar with the book of Isaiah and he had it in mind when he composed each verse.

**The Significance of the Comparison between Psalm 107 and the Book of Isaiah**

What can we learn from the strong connection between our psalm and the book of Isaiah about the psalm’s meaning?

1. The psalm’s addressees are referred to as “the redeemed of the Lord.” This phrase appears solely in our psalm and in Second Isaiah. If the “redeemed of the Lord” mentioned in Isaiah are the returnees to Zion then it seems likely that the poet who wrote Psalm 107 used the phrase with a similar denotation.
2. Our psalm describes the redeemed as having been ingathered by the Lord from the four corners of the earth (literally, the four directions of the wind in the heavens). The ingathering of the returnees to Zion from the ends of the earth is an exceedingly common trope in the book of Isaiah. We can therefore reasonably assume that those ingathered from the four directions from which the winds blow are the returnees to Zion.
3. The redeemed in Psalm 107 lost their way in the desert on their way to “a settled place” (literally, city) and suffered hunger and thirst before God saved them. In Isaiah, the image of the redeemed journeying through the desert, as God guides them on the way and ensures they do not suffer hunger or thirst, is very common. Thus, it seems likely that our psalm is describing the very same returnees to Zion.
4. Our psalm describes those who were imprisoned because of their sins, and it reports that they had no one to help them, save the Lord. Isaiah also compares the return to Zion with leaving prison. It seems likely that the psalm refers to the very same redeemed people.
5. Our psalm details how God turned the desert into rivers and pools of water and the rivers and pools of water into desert. The book of Isaiah constantly describes similar divine acts that will occur in the course of Israel’s redemption. Presumably, our psalm was referring to the same events.
6. Our psalm describes God as settling his redeemed people in a wasteland that is transformed into a fruitful land. Likewise, the book of Isaiah describes how in the future God will bring the returnees back to Zion and give them the wasteland as an inheritance. Presumably, the two texts are referring to the same process.

Reading our psalm in the context of its deep connection to the book of Isaiah, and especially to the prophecies of Second Isaiah, corroborates the hypothesis that our psalm is a nationalistic-historical psalm concerning Israel’s redemption.

After undertaking this long intellectual journey, it is quite frustrating to have made no progress. Even after examining the Hymn to Shamash and the book of Isaiah in depth, the same question remains: Is Psalm 107 a universal or a national-historical psalm?

**Paganism, Nationalism, Universalism, and Redemption in Second Isaiah’s Prophecies**

Given the profound connection between our psalm and Second Isaiah’s prophecies, it seems probable that the solution to our mystery may be discovered by deepening our understanding of the tension between nationalism and universalism in Second Isaiah’s redemption prophecies.

**Second Isaiah’s Polemic with Paganism**

First of all, scholars studying Second Isaiah’s prophecies are very familiar with the phenomenon evident in Psalm 107 of well-known Babylonian texts being reworked to fit a monotheistic agenda. Indeed, as Yisrael Apfel, among others, writes (concerning Second Isaiah’s linguistic and cultural background),

The prophet was familiar with the genre of Babylonian dedicatory inscriptions. He borrowed an entire passage and embedded it in his prophecies in the form of a fairly exacting paraphrase. However, his use of this passage is instructive: While the passage originally belonged to the genre of religious devotion and hymns to the Babylonian gods, the Jewish prophet borrowed and used it to prove the inconsequence of those gods by embedding it in the well-known genre parodying the making of the idols and the very belief in them.

Thus, Psalm 107’s very connection to the Hymn to Shamash does not contradict its connection to Second Isaiah’s prophecies but rather strengthens it.

**A Psalm that Mixes Nationalistic and Universal Motifs**

Furthermore, like Psalm 107, Second Isaiah’s prophecies are also comprised of a similar mixture of universal descriptions and nationalistic language.

Thus, for instance, Yair Hoffman writes that he attempted to interpret the hymn found in Isaiah 42—a hymn heavily associated with our psalm:

The passage before us is a hymn of glorification and praise to a deity, like those found in Psalms…. Apparently, it is related to “the things once predicted” and “the new ones [the prophet now foretells]” in the previous verse [= the motif of national redemption]; however, the connection is weak: a song of praise to a deity begins with universal motifs, not necessarily with nationalistic ones which better suit the notion of those ‘once predicted’ and those ‘now foretold’.

Later in the hymn (vv. 14–15), the motifs become cosmic and again possess no nationalistic sensibility, and from this point, the prophet continues with the following utterance: “I will lead the blind by a road they did not know” (v. 16), which also has nothing to do with nationalism.

However, we have already seen that the prophet often uses the motif of blindness to describe God’s aid to the exiles who are returning from Babylonia via the desert and are likened to people with deformities [= a nationalistic motif]…

Thus, the motifs continue to unfold until the universal hymn to a deity is transformed into one possessing the sensibilities of a national thanksgiving psalm that juxtaposes well with verse eighteen whose subject is a comparison of the nation of Israel to the deaf and the blind.

Hoffman’s description of the disgruntled scholar attempting to decide whether the hymn is a universal or nationalistic one bears a remarkable resemblance to the confusion we felt as we attempted to explain Psalm 107.

**The Ingathering of the Exiled Gentiles in Second Isaiah’s Prophecies**

An even more amazing mix of descriptions concerning Israel’s redemption and those addressed to all humanity can be found in the wondrous prophecy about the ingathering of the exiles:

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The description of the redemption does not end with the ingathering of the Israelites who were scattered to the four corners of the earth. For on its heels, another ingathering will transpire—this time that of the Gentiles. *Ipso facto*, we must ask the following question: Which ingathering was the author of Psalm 107 referring to?

**Israel’s Role in the Redemption of the World in Second Isaiah**

It is clear that Second Isaiah’s prophecies not only resemble Psalm 107 linguistically but also in several of its other characteristics:

1. Familiarity with pagan texts and their utilization to support a monotheistic agenda.
2. An admixture of language alluding to Israel’s redemption with that alluding to the world’s redemption.
3. The description of redemption includes an ingathering of the exiles, but not necessarily the Israelite ones.

But how do all these characteristics come together as a unified whole?

Moshe Weinfeld noted that Second Isaiah offers us a new and astonishing explanation for the choice of the nation of Israel **(“The Universalist Trend and the Isolationist Trend During the Period of the Return to Zion**”):

The fully-formulated ideology of chosenness appears twice in the Bible: once in the book of Deuteronomy and once in Second Isaiah’s chapters…

In the book of Deuteronomy, which understands idolatry to be the natural inclination of the Gentiles, chosenness functions to remove Israel from the orb of the nations and distance it from them. Or, in other words, the purpose of chosenness is nationalistic.

In Second Isaiah’s prophecies, chosenness is designed to bring the Gentiles closer to Israel and its faith, that is to say, chosenness facilitates a universal goal. Here, God’s choice of Israel is not intended to improve Israel itself, as in the book of Deuteronomy, but is the means to improve the spiritual condition of the Gentiles and is made on their behalf…

Thus, national redemption in Second Isaiah is the means to redeeming the entire world—the true salvation.

This new understanding of redemption seems to have inspired Second Isaiah in his extraordinary prophecies. He seems to be attempting to convince the Gentiles as well, and, therefore, he uses pagan texts and since he addresses the Gentiles as well as Israel, he mixes nationalistic and universal language.

**Between Psalm 107 and Second Isaiah’s Thought**

The resemblance Psalm 107 has to Second Isaiah’s prophecies tempts us to ascribe the composition of Psalm 107 to the Prophet of Consolation (as Buttenwieser claimed). However, Psalm 107’s connection to the entire book of Isaiah indicates that the psalm’s composer lived after Second Isaiah’s time (especially if one posits the existence of a “Third Isaiah”) since he is familiar with the entire book in its final form.

We may also be able to point out certain differences between Second Isaiah’s thought and particular ways in which our psalm perceives reality.

1. Like Second Isaiah, Psalm 107 has a strong connection to a pagan text. However, while Second Isaiah tends to polemical parody, our text adopts the pagan hymn (with the necessary accommodations). Thus, if the reason that Second Isaiah reworked the pagan texts was to mock them and to distance the Gentiles from their pagan beliefs, the new and respectful way our psalm uses the pagan text is designed to bring the Gentiles closer to a belief in the Lord.
2. Like Second Isaiah, our psalm mixes nationalistic and universal motifs. However, while the redemption in Second Isaiah is first and foremost the redemption of Israel, in our psalm Israel goes entirely unmentioned.

Thus, it is clear that our poet walks in the footsteps of Second Isaiah; however, he audaciously goes even further, both in merging the two texts in a deeper sense and in the central place that “human beings” occupy in his song of redemption.

**And in any case, [it is] a continuation of Second Isaiah’s Thought**

However, even if our composer does not walk in the exact footsteps of the Prophet of Consolation, the wonderful prayer he composed is clearly a response to Second Isaiah’s call to the people of the world:

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Isaiah calls upon those who go down to the sea to sing a new song to the Lord, and Psalm 107’s composer writes that very song. A song that will be sung by all of humanity when they realize that the Lord is the one who will redeem them from their troubles—if they just call to Him.