

## An INTRODUCTION to the Book of Psalms (part V)

### THEOLOGICAL CONTENT OF PSALMS

#### A. A Repository of Israel's Faith

1. DIVERSITY -- The great diversity on the Psalter is authorship. Kings, priests, prophets and commoners alike are given the same opportunity to speak to God and Israel.<sup>1</sup> The Psalter represents the voice of "every man". They give us a cross-section of Israel's society. This would suggest a diversity of moods, life situations and viewpoints. NOTE: we are not referring to an ancient social pluralism but rather of a "representative approach to life and faith, with the controlling element being the covenant between God and Israel." (Bullock, 127)
2. UNITY -- It is a unity enriched by the diversity. It is held in bounds by the covenantal element of Israel's faith. Two component parts which demonstrate this unity are: the Psalter reveals a unity of faith in Israel's covenant Lord; and a unity of faith in covenant responsibility. There is no room in the Psalter for non-faith.

PSA 14:1, "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good."

PSA 53:1, "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. Corrupt are they, and have done abominable iniquity: there is none that doeth good."

Yet there is ample accommodation for a faith that can question and inquire about God's enigmatic ways.

PSA 22:1, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? <sup>2</sup>O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent."

The first Psalm sets forth the covenantal responsibility.

PSA 1:1, "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. <sup>2</sup>But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night."

#### B. The Praise of God

1. The Psalter offers a rich praise vocabulary. "All though the Psalms are full of the special words of praise (e.g. "Praise the Lord"), they are also

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<sup>1</sup> "In general no apparent attempt has been made to legitimize anonymous psalms by assigning them to a famous person (except in the LXX). (Bullock, 127)

replete with descriptions of who the Lord is and what He has done. The vocabulary of praise and the descriptive content are complementary." (Bullock, 128)

2. For example, David did not stop with the language of praise in Psalm 103 but complemented it with a description of what the Lord continued to do:

PSA 103:1-4, "Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. <sup>2</sup>Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: <sup>3</sup>Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; <sup>4</sup>Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies;"

The language of praise dominates the opening (cf. vv. 1-2) and the closing (vv. 20-22) of Psalm 103. The main body of the hymn describes the Lord in terms of what He has done and who He is. "At some point, the person who praises must endow the vocabulary of praise with content. We can praise God without using the special language of praise, but we cannot long maintain the genuineness of that language without relating His being and works. In fact, the form is validated by the content. It is the relationship between liturgy and gospel. The gospel validates liturgy, not vice versa." (Bullock, 128)

3. Yet the Psalter is not all praise. The emotional disposition of the Psalter alternates between praise and lament. However, the nature of the Psalter is such is that the power of gravitation is in the direction of praise. Is it not true that the worshiper finds coherence and meaning for his life in praise, not in lament? But when we find ourselves closer to lament there is no cause for disdain for the Christian, because as the penitential psalms inform us (cf. Psalm 51), a turning to the omnipotent God can propel us toward Him who can turn our reasons for lament into occasions for joy. Thus, the lament frequently breaks forth into praise or intersperses praise with lament.<sup>2</sup>

### C. The Portrait of God

1. God is portrayed as transcendent and yet also immanent. The boldness of the description sometimes could give the impression of a "low" view of God or an inadequate human comprehension e.g. Psa 78:65-66, "Then the Lord awaked as one out of sleep, and like a mighty man that shouteth by reason of wine. <sup>66</sup>And he smote his enemies in the hinder parts: he put them to a perpetual reproach."

"Yet the anthropomorphic tendencies in the Psalms counterbalance and keep us reminded that God is close to man." (Bullock, 131)

2. "The features of the God-portrait present us with a Deity who ultimately

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<sup>2</sup> Note Psalms 6, 13, 22, 28, 30, 31, 41, 54-56, 61, 63, 64, 69, 71, 86, 94, 102, and 130. These are psalms which do not fall neatly into the classification of praise or lament but rather they enfold both.

cannot be comprehended by man, except to the extent that He unveils Himself. This is one of modern man's problems in relating to God -- that He eludes man's scientific analysis." (Bullock, 131)

The Psalter also translates His immanence into comprehensible terms by relating God's interpersonal designs and activities as He helps individuals who appeal to Him.

PSA 27:10, "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take me up."

PSA 23:1, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."

PSA 80:1, "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth."

PSA 42:1-2, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. <sup>2</sup>My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?"

PSA 63:1-2, "O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; <sup>2</sup>To see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary."

The God of the Psalter is always there, even when He seems far away.

#### **D. The Description of Man**

1. The Psalter is just as descriptive of man. Man is described in the light of God's marvelous creation, and followed by the brevity of man's life as seen in:

PSA 8:4, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?"

PSA 144:3, "LORD, what is man, that thou takest knowledge of him! or the son of man, that thou makest account of him!"

NOTE -- Man's transitory nature is placed in sharp contrast to divine constancy, which is likened to the "Rock".

PSA 144:1-2, "Blessed be the LORD my strength, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight: My goodness, and my fortress; my high tower, and my deliverer; my shield, and he in whom I trust; who subdueth my people under me."

2. The man is not an accident in the world but the central feature of God's universal design. Man is corrupted by sin. The portrait of man in the Psalter

is a realistic one. Though there is little or no effort to explain the origin of the sin in man, that man is sinful is a forgone conclusion, a basic preposition of the Psalter.

The only remedy for man's sinful condition is reorientation toward God. Divine forgiveness is readily available for those who turn to their Creator and Redeemer. The psalmists reach out pleading hands to God and beside Him there is no one to whom they would turn to for help and find completion.

PSA 73:25, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee."

## E. Creation and Redemption

1. The two polarities are between a transcendent and yet immanent God on the one hand and sinful helpless man on the other. This polarity is resolved by God's own saving deeds i.e. by the intersection of the doctrine of creation and redemption.

What a great revelation that the Creator of the world should have intertwined His creative and redemptive designs like warp and woof, as the inspired New Testament writers transparently affirm.<sup>3</sup> "Creation is more than the presupposition of redemption. It is God's commitment to redemption. Even though we may not have this position so lucidly set forth in the Psalms, the two doctrines are interdependent." (Bullock, 134)

2. Although the literal order of the two concepts may not be creation-redemption, we will find that it is the theological order.

PSA 74:12-17, "For God is my King of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. <sup>13</sup>Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength: thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. <sup>14</sup>Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness. <sup>15</sup>Thou didst cleave the fountain and the flood: thou driedst up mighty rivers. <sup>16</sup>The day is thine, the night also is thine: thou hast prepared the light and the sun. <sup>17</sup>Thou hast set all the borders of the earth: thou hast made summer and winter."

NOTE -- Verses 12-15 constitute the main point of God's redemption, the next two verses, vv. 16-17, is the creation theme. The basis for the psalmist's faith in God is His past saving acts (vv. 12-15). And the basis for the psalmist's plea for future acts of God's redemption (cf. vv. 18-23) is God's creative power and work. The inability of the other gods is in the fact that they did not create anything at all. PSA 96:4-5, "For the LORD is great, and greatly to be praised: he is to be feared above all gods. <sup>5</sup>For all the

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<sup>3</sup>John 1:1-18; Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6; 2 Cor. 4:6; Heb. 1:1-3; 1 Pet. 1:19-20; Rev. 13:8. This motif is also seen in Isaiah 40:12-31; 42:5-9; 43:1-7; 44:1-8, 21-27; 45:12-17.

gods of the nations are idols: but the LORD made the heavens.”