

DISCUSSION OF THE PSALMS - PART VIII HISTORICAL PSALMS

I. The historical psalms (i.e. psalms 78, 105, 106, 114, 136, and part of psalm 135) present the history of Israel and the surrounding nations from the standpoint of God's fidelity to His people and His people's response.

A. To Jews, the central event was the Exodus, which showed forth above all God's saving action in their lives. The Exodus was not considered simply a past event, but one renewed every year in their central feast Passover, which celebrated God's deliverance of the Jews from Egypt. The two other high feasts, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) and the Feast of Booths, were also developed during their time in the desert. See, e.g., Lev. 23.

- The historical psalms, and the Jewish outlook generally, combined the past and the present into one vision.

B. The historical psalms connect history through themes, especially the theme of God's power overcoming the enemies of Israel, guiding His people, but also punishing their infidelity to bring them back to repentance.

- The psalms draw lessons of confidence, praise and thanksgiving from this history.

C. The psalms very much contrast with pagan histories, which tended to see history as a circle, with the current era somewhere on the downside of it. To the ancient Jews, history represents real progress and the manifestation of the glory of God.

II. Psalm 78, the second longest in the psalter, presents God's plan overcoming all obstacles, including the Chosen People's lack of faith.

A. The psalm describes the events from the Exodus about 1290 to the establishment of the Davidic line and placement of the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem at about 980. The progress, however, is not chronological.

B. The first eight verses give the theme that one should draw a lesson from Israel's history that faith in God is alone what leads to life and prosperity.

- In verse 2, the psalmist describes this history as a "parable," i.e. a story that one should draw a clear lesson from. See Ezek 17:2; Matt. 13:35.

- The psalmist does not pretend to be saying anything new, but rather fulfilling God's command to teach each generation about the wondrous deeds of the Lord. The implication is that this command was not being carried out and that Israel's infidelity was largely a result of this failure. See Duet. 6:20-25.

C. The main part of the psalm then begins by criticizing the Ephraimites for refusing to fight for God and failing to remember God's providence. Ephraim was one of the children of Joseph (Manassah being the other.) It is not clear in which battle this failure took place. It could have been the general failure to rid the land of paganism. One great irony was that Joshua was from Ephraim. He, along with Caleb from the tribe of Judah, alone tried to persuade the Israelites to enter the Promised Land immediately, as the Lord has commanded, despite the dangers. See Num. 13-14. The psalmist may have used Ephraim to represent the northern tribes generally.

D. The psalm then alternates between describing God's power and the lack of faith that the people showed.

1. Thus, for example, the people lost confidence in God when their did not seem to be enough food, and then when there did not seem to be enough water. Even when God provided for these needs, there were complaints that there was no bread except the manna. See, e.g., Ex. 16-17, Num. 11. God provided for their needs, but also punished the infidelity.

2. The reference to the "bread of angels" may simply mean bread from heaven. But on a deeper level, it reflects the connection between heaven and earth that the bread represented. We now take from this reference an analogy to the Eucharist.

E. Verses 34-39 describe the continual history of the Chosen People as being guided by God, forgetting His commandments, being punished, repenting, receiving salvation from God, but then falling into infidelity.

1. The psalmist then specifically refers to the Exodus and the plagues sent on Egypt (represented by the plains of Zoan, which were just to the side of the Nile delta.) The psalm describes seven of the ten plagues, leaving out the boils, the pestilence and the darkness, possibly because he is focusing on moving things.

2. The psalm then describes the entrance into the Promised Land, skipping over the time in the desert that was covered earlier, The psalm focuses on the infidelity during the last years of the high priest Eli, whose sons Hophni and Phineas were

corrupt. That reign ended with the deaths of Eli and his sons and the capture of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines. See 1 Sam. 2-4.

3. After that time, the Ark was restored and the prophet Samuel reigned among the Chosen People. They asked for a king, against God's warnings. And, after a good start, the first king Saul proved unfaithful, eventually dying in battle. It was then that King David took over. The psalm skips the interim period and simply describes the ideal of the Davidic reign, as well as the transfer of the Ark to Jerusalem, which would become the capital of the Chosen People.

F. Overall, the psalm justifies the presence of the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem and subtly calls upon the northern tribes, who would eventually break off from the Davidic king, to return to worshipping there. The implication is that complaining and infidelity to God's wishes will only lead to more punishment.

III. Psalm 105 reflects upon the history of Israel from the call of Abraham to the entrance into the Promised Land. Like psalm 78, it also draws lessons from God's guidance of His people, but this time reflects more on joyfulness at God's presence. There is not as much a criticism of the people's lack of faith. It seems to have been written during a glorious time in Israeli history, or at least to recall such a time.

A. The first verses give the theme of remembering with gratitude and joy the wondrous works of God. The reference to God being mindful of His covenant may reflect Moses' promise that God would punish sin, but be faithful to the thousandth generation. See Ex. 34:5-9.

B. Verses 9-15 go right back to the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham came with a small band to the Promised Land, wandering for time before settling down.

C. The psalm then describes God's providence for Joseph in particular and through him for all of the descendants of Jacob.

D. The psalm continues, describing God as planning all of the subsequent events, including "turning the hearts" of the Egyptians to hatred of the Chosen People.

- Earlier Israelite history tended not to distinguish between what God allows and what He permits. Compare 2 Sam. 24:1 with 1 Chron. 21:1.

- The psalmist then describes the plagues as Psalm 78 did, but this time beginning with the darkness.

E. The psalm then describes the journey through the desert and God's providence for His people, but without any reference to the sins of the people.

- The reference to enjoying the fruit of other people's labor is puzzling, for it seems unjust. It may be that God was punishing the natives for their injustice by turning their land over to others who would give glory to God. See also Joshua 24:13.

F. The psalm ends with the Chosen People's entry into the Promised Land. The purpose of all of this providence was that the people should keep God's commandments. See Duet. 6:24

IV. Psalm 106, by contrast, is written from the standpoint of one at a time of distress, likely during the exile (see verses 46-47). It reflects back upon numerous times during which the Chosen People were unfaithful to God, which led to their punishment, but then restoration because of God's fidelity to His own glory..

A. The first 5 verses call upon the people to reflect on God's saving actions, and calls upon God once again to restore them.

B. The psalm then describes numerous time in which the people lost confidence in God, at the Red Sea, at Mount Sinai, in the desert wanderings, and again after entering the Promised Land, when they adopted the most abominable of pagan practices.

C. The psalmist does not describe so much the repentance of the people, but rather either individual's interceding for the people, or to the cries of the people in general. (See verses 23, 30-31, 44.) Above all, God saves His people because He will not give up on His covenant. (See verses 8, 45, 47). This fact gives the psalmist comfort that God will save His people again.

V. Psalm 114 combines the crossing of the Red Sea and the crossing of the Jordan in calling upon all creation to praise God for His might

A. The psalm is structured in terms of doublets, or as in the case of verses 3-6 a twin doublet.

B. The psalm seems almost more addressed to nature than to people. Part of the idea, however, is that humanity gives a purpose to nature, and therefore, can make even nature praise God.

C. The first two verses describe both the Exodus and the establishment of the Chosen Land as God's sacred place. There may even be subtle reference to the Temple as "the sanctuary." The reference to Israel and Judah may reflect a desire for unity between them, either after they had broken up, or possibly when a breakup seemed imminent.

D. The sea and river are described in terms of warriors barring the passage of the Chosen People, who flee at the sight of God. The hills and mountains are described in more positive terms as animals rejoicing at God's presence. This contrast reflects the generally favorable view the Israelites had of the stable land and unfavorable view of the unstable waters. Compare Ps. 125:1-2 with Ps. 87:4; 89:10. Even the Jordan seemed hostile because, for the most part, it was not irrigable.

VI. Psalm 136 describes creation, the Exodus, and the continuing providence of God for all people who trust Him, referring continually back to His "steadfast love" that endures forever.

A. This psalm is also a psalm of praise; Jewish liturgy refers to it as the "Great Hallel," i.e. the great psalm of praise. Psalms 113-118 and 146-150 are also called the Hallel Psalms.

B. The psalm begins with the theme, i.e. calling upon all peoples to give praise to "the God of gods, and the Lord of lords." Here the term "Gods" is more positive than the idea of pagan gods. The term "gods" in this case seems simply to refer to powers.

C. The psalm then describes creation as based upon "understanding," to be contrasted with the chaos of the pagan world. The psalmist describes God as commanding nature through things that the pagans worshiped as gods, the sun, the moon and the stars. See Wisdom 13:1-10.

D. The psalmist then turns to God's conquest of the human powers of the world, of Egypt, and then two kings whose land lay just before the promised land. See Duet. 2:30-3:11. These conquests are quintessential examples of God's control of human history and protection of His people when they are on the path He intends.

E. The conquest of the powers is contrasted with God's providence to His people when they are lowly. There is perhaps a warning that prosperity can tempt a people to fail in their faith. See Duet. 8:6-20. The psalm then describes God's providence for all people ("He gives food to all living things) and concludes by repeating the theme of thanksgiving.