

PSALMS - PART IX

PSALMS OF PRAISE, GLORY AND BLESSING

I. The psalms of praise (Hallel in Hebrew) reflect both the joy, the wonder, and even a reverent fear at the presence and the glory of God.

A. They tend to call upon all people, and in fact, all of creation to praise God with the psalmist. See psalm 145 (going from the praise of the psalmist, to the praise of all people to praise given by the works of God.) Part of the idea is that praise is complete only when all people join in it. Similarly other psalms of praise call upon the peoples to give God glory. See psalms 24.

B. On a related point, the psalms also frequently describe humanity blessing God (barak), in addition to God conferring His blessing on humanity. E.g., psalm 72:17-20, 103:1-2, 20-24. There is an overall (but no universal) tendency to use the word praise in the context of God's majesty and creative power in general, while the psalmist usually uses blesses God for specific things (e.g., deliverance from enemies or forgiveness of sins) done for Israel of himself. Some psalms of praise (e.g., psalms 8, 33) do not use either term or specifically call for praise, but rather describe a vision of the order and majesty of God that naturally lead to praise and blessing.

C. The idea is not that God needs human praise or blessing, but rather than human praise is a part of the order of God and fulfills His plans. E.g., Ps 50:12. Because this universe was made to serve humanity, the praise and blessing of God redounds to benefit of humanity. See Ps. 8. What is more, praise is the natural fulfillment of enjoyment (combined with reverence) in God's presence. See Eph. 1:3-4; Catechism 1078. The psalms of praise emphasize expressing this praise enthusiastically in song, acclamations, and the like.

D. The psalms of praise frequently focus on God's thunderous power coming into earth, often in a great theophany. See Ps. 29. The power can be constructive or destructive, or both at the same time. There is not an analysis of why God is acting, but rather simply a sense of being caught up in the glory of the moment and calling upon others to do the same. E.g., Psalm 104. There can also be a calmer sense of being drawn quietly closer to God. E.g., Psalm 103:1-5.

E. The psalms of praise generally begin with an invitation to praise, then describe what the psalmist is praising God for, and then a conclusion that again calls for people to praise God, or describes a blessing or a petition.

II. Psalm 29 describes in dramatic fashion the glory power of the voice God, calling upon all of creation to join in His praises.

A. The psalm is likely one of the oldest in the psalter and uses very vivid imagery from nature, possibly from a colossal storm and a shaking of the earth itself.

B. The psalm begins by calling upon the "heavenly beings" to praise God. In the psalmist's view, these heavenly beings were likely angels. See Job 1, Rev. 4. But the term would imply a connection to what the pagans worshiped as gods. The implication may be that the pagans had a sense of the angels (and possibly demons) and worshiped them as gods.

C. The psalmist then focuses on the voice of God, repeating this phrase seven times. He compares God's voice to thunder and lightning, possibly reflecting the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. See also Isaiah 30:30 (the voice of God as rendering punishment and redemption); Jer 25:30-32; Rev. 1:14 (describing the voice of Jesus as judge as like the rushing waters.)

D. Lebanon and Sirion (the Sidonese name for Mount Hermon in the north of Israel) are described as jumping for joy before the Lord. These terms indicate that the psalmist may be borrowing imagery from the surrounding peoples and has a favorable view of them.

E. The voice of God is in one sense destructive, but it is destructive of the "wilderness" and Kadesh, a palace in the desert to the south of the Promised Land that the Chosen People stayed in during their wanderings. It is associated with the grumbling of the people. See Numbers 20:1-11. Thus the inhospitable regions are uprooted in the presence of God to make way for His glory. See Matt. 3:9-10, 20:18-22.

F. The psalmist refers to "all in His temple cry[ing] 'Glory.'" It is not clear whether the psalmist means the Temple in Jerusalem (which had not yet been built at the time of David) or the heavenly Temple that was the basis for the Temple in Jerusalem. See Heb. 8:5-6; 9:11.

G. The psalmist then concludes by asking the God to whom he has been giving glory to bless His people with the peace that comes from living in accordance with this God of glory.

III. Psalm 97, which was probably a much later psalm is similar, but written more in response to paganism.

A. The Vulgate combines this psalm with psalm 96 which expressly declares the "gods of the peoples" to be idols, and calls upon all peoples and then all the earth to glorify God, rejoice in His presence and thus be prepared for His judgment.

B. Instead of calling upon the "heavenly beings" to glorify God, as Psalm 29 does, it begins by calling upon the earth and coastlands to glorify God. The psalmist would later refer to "the heavens" but not so much to heavenly beings. The psalm thus focuses more on the earth than on angels, possibly to avoid any confusion with the pagan gods.

C. The psalmist then describes the immense power of God going forth in fire, lightning and earthquakes

D. Verse 7 expressly condemns the pagan worship of gods, but also says that these gods (likely the forces of nature that the pagans worshiped) bow down before God.

E. The psalm then applies the lesson of God's power to human affairs, describing the joy of the faithful ones in sensing the protection and light of God. The psalm invokes the image of light dawning after a terrible night.

IV. Psalm 8 very much connects the glory of God with the dignity of the people He has created.

A. The psalmist begins by praising the very name of God as majestic above all the earth. The idea is that the name of God carried forth His power.

B. The psalm then presents the paradox of infants giving praise to God and thus defeating His enemies. The idea is that the true praise of God is so powerful that even infants can use it to defeat the enemies of God.

C. The psalmist is then drawn up in a contemplation of God's majesty as reflected in creation. The ancients knew as well as the moderns that the universe is physically much greater than humanity. The psalmist indirectly condemns the pagans who worshiped the moon and the stars, saying that they give glory to the true God. See Romans 1:20-21.

D. He then praises God for making man little less than "gods," or "angels" in the Septuagint translation. The psalmist describes mankind's power over nature, described mostly in terms of animals, as coming from God Himself. This view contrasts with the pagan view that the forces of nature were controlled by the gods, who may or may not want to help humanity. The idea is that

honor given to God redounds to an appreciation of the glory given to humans and increases our power over nature. There is a reflection of the primordial order described in Genesis 1-2.

V. Psalm 95 contrasts a celebration and wonder in the presence of God with the misery that comes from a loss of faith.

A. The psalm may have been used at the beginning of pilgrimages or the beginning of liturgies. It calls upon the hearer to join with the psalmist in joyfully worshiping God.

B. The psalmist then describes God as above all "gods," i.e. the depths and the heights, the land and the sea, which the pagans worshiped. It then describes more personally God as the shepherd of His people. The idea is that the true God is both above the pagan gods and closer to His people. Jesus would pick up on this theme, describing Himself as the personal shepherd to each of His faithful as well. See John 10.

C. In contrast to the joyful celebration and appreciation of God's presence, majesty, and love, the psalmist presents as a negative example the Chosen People's loss of faith at Meribah and Massah. Exodus 17 describes the people as grumbling because they could not find water in the desert and had no confidence in God despite the recent parting of the Red Sea and deliverance of manna in the desert. The place where this failure occurred was then called Maribah and Massah, which mean in Hebrew "the place of quarreling" and "the place of the test." That lack of faith is combined with the later lack of faith that resulted in the Chosen People's refusal to go directly into the Promised Land for fear of the inhabitants. In response to the latter event, God relented from His threats to destroy the people, but said that the people would wander in the desert for 40 years so that the unfaithful generation would die off. See Numbers 13-14.