

(4) THE PSALMS OF DECLARATIVE PRAISE

These psalms of declarative praise correspond more or less to the psalms of thanksgiving that Gunkel first coined. It is important for us to capture the sense of the Hebrew verb *hdh* which in translations is often equated with thanksgiving. The Hebrew term *hdh* in its basic meaning refers to praising God for actions of salvation done to the people or an individual. The term then includes our notion of thanksgiving but the conception of praise goes further than thanking. In our notion of thanking there is an equal distinction between the self, a gift and a giver that is presumed. A basic element of this distinction can be noted in the very derivation of the word to thank from to think, or the German verb *danken* from *denken*. The important element in this process of thinking implied in thanking is for the one who has received a benefit to recognize the gift as originating from a particular giver. With this recognition comes a feeling of gratitude, of respecting the other for what has been received along with a recognition of the thoughtfulness and care of the giver.

The praise of God by the psalmist definitely includes this activity of thanking but without the corollary distinction being explicated between the giver and the gift. This distinction presumes a consciousness in society in which the individual is clearly distinguished as being autonomous yet in relation to others. In the Hebrew notion of praising God for salvation, the communal dimension is paramount. Praising God is a matter of the community. If the praise is to be done by an individual then it is done in the presence of the community. We give thanks and recognition to God before others. For the Hebrews then, the response to God's action in life, in words and in deeds is not simply to recognize to the giver the source of life, but to announce before others this salvation in order to magnify, to edify, to build up the name of God and all his goodness.

Like the psalms of lament, these declarative psalms of praise follow a structure which points to an inner dynamic of a particular form of prayer. They are logically connected to the psalms of lament. They in fact are a fulfillment of the vow to praise God for his marvelous intervention on behalf of the psalmist. Again Westermann presents a breakdown of their structure quite simply:

- 1) Exhortation, Proclamation
- 2) Introductory Summary
- 3) Looking back at a time of need (sapiential, theological reflection)
- 4) Report of Deliverance
- 5) Renewed vow of praise

1) **The opening address** in the psalms of declarative praise takes up the vow of praise that is the concluding part of the lament. In this way these psalms form continuity with laments. Praise and lament in Babylonian psalms are united. There the praise of God for a specific deed is bypassed in favour of descriptive praise. But in Israel the lament which was bound to a petition for God's intervention has its corresponding counterpart in the psalms of praise. God is magnified within the community for the saving acts done for the individual or the community. God's intervention is the source and basis of praise. The opening proclamation takes a variety of forms. Rarely however does it take an imperative call to praise God. Instead we note the use of indicative forms.

- 18:1 I love you, O LORD, my strength.
 30:1 I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up ...
 32:1 Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven ...
 34:1 I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
 65:1 Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed ...

67:1 May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us ...
 92:1 It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name O Most High ...
 124:1 If it had not been the LORD who was on our side – let Israel now say – ...
 138:1 I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;

On occasion the imperative is also used.

107:1 O give thanks to the LORD , who is good ... for God's steadfast love endures forever.

2) **The introductory summary:** The verb *hdh* הדה which often is translated to mean thanks in its root meaning means to confess, to proclaim. This is rendered clear in that *hdh* is used to confess, to declare one's sin. The praising of God in the context of declarative praise then is a proclamation, a confession of God's actions in the psalmist's life. Praise here is backed by the personal experience of the psalmist. This praise is expressed very simply as an introductory summary to the psalm.

116:1 I love the LORD because he has heard my voice ...
 138:3 On the day I called, you answered me ...

The declaration of God's intervention fulfills the trust the psalmist had voiced in the laments. A tension is released in the joyful declaration. Even though trust and confidence underlie the laments, there was always a tension of hopeful expectation. Declarative psalms of praise are spontaneous outbursts of fulfilled expectation. "I cried to the Lord, and the Lord heard my voice."

3) **Looking back at a time of need:** The dire straights of the psalmist are recalled in order to magnify the significance of God's intervention that is being declared. We know from the very beginning of the psalm that God has intervened, but the psalmist explains and recalls the context of the lament in order to highlight the praise of God. The dire straights are remembered and recalled in order to intensify the expression of joy and praise of God. Just as in the complaint of the laments the situation was critical yet vague and general, so too in the looking back any particular or unique features of the crisis are not dwelled upon.

The confession before others of what God has done is what is crucially important in order that God be magnified. What is at stake for the psalmist is God's exaltation. It is not essential that the psalmist give explicit recognition to the source of his joy. In our notion of thanking what is crucial is precisely the recognition of the source of a gift. Hebrew praise of thanking goes further in declaring the greatness of God. This declaration presumes a recognition of the giver, but it does not dwell on this recognition. Is it not true that even within our contemporary cultures, there is a spontaneous form of thanking which does not use the word thanking at all by bypassing the element of formal recognition heading immediately towards praising the giver? In response to receiving a surprised gift or benefit, the receiver addresses the giver with direct praise. Your fantastic", "How thoughtful of you".

The images that are taken up in the looking back to a time in need have their origin in the laments themselves. Although, very rare is the accusation against God taken up as a sign of the dire straights of the past. But the tragedies of floods, surrounding enemies, false accusers are the order of the day. An interesting example is psalm 41 which quotes a lament. The time of crisis is recalled verbatim. This particular section of this psalm of praise could stand alone as a psalm of lament.

4) **Report of deliverance:** The actual acts of God that have transformed the lament into praise are here recounted. In terms of the lament, the report on deliverance is a spin-off from the actual petition of the laments, "I cried, he heard, he saved." Again the images used here are general ones derived from clusters of images of violence, images of nature, or the language of salvation history. The images are common ones that would be readily identifiable in the community.

Ps 40:2 He drew me out of the pit and put a new song in my mouth.

Ps 30:11 You have turned my mourning to dancing.

God's intervention has brought about a change, a transformation, a new life, and this joyful declaration testifies to God before others the exaltation of the name of the Lord. Just as in the double wish of a lament there was the double-edged call for salvation, so too in declarative praise this double-edged intervention is proclaimed.

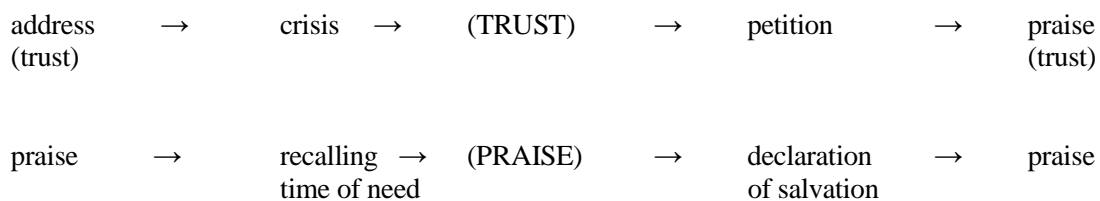
41:11 I know you are pleased with me in that my enemy has not triumphed over me.

92:10-11 My eyes have seen the downfall of my enemies
My ears have heard the doom of my evil assailants.

5) **Renewed Vow of Praise:** The renewal of a vow or promise of praise or thanks at the end of the prayer again points to the difference of our ordinary consideration of thanking, where recognition of the donor is the primary concern. The vow of continual praise means that the psalmist has been transformed, saved and has been given a new life by God. This new life cannot help but praise God continuously and give him glory in all that he does. We see here the fulfillment of a motive for God's intervention stated in the psalms of lament, "Can the dead give you praise?" The psalmist declares that since the Lord has brought him to life, so then by his life he will praise, exalt and magnify God. The very existence of the psalmist who confesses God's marvelous intervention is a testimony to God's power and goodness.

Some psalms of praise lack this renewed vow of praise but end the prayer instead with a declaration of trust, or with a description of the attributes of God which are a basis for this trust and confidence. This form of descriptive praise points to the movement towards another dynamic in prayer and that is the contemplation of God's power, goodness and beauty in creation. Very rare is there a petition to conclude a declarative psalm of praise.

At times the psalmist breaks in with expressions of praise while recounting the marvels of God's intervention. "Blessed be the Lord." "O Sing praises to the Lord". These declarations correspond to the expressions of confidence that permeate the laments. They also point to the dynamic of these psalms which incessantly leads to praising and magnifying God before the community. One who has been so near to death cannot help but declare God's goodness shown to him. We could give a general graphic expression to the dynamics of laments and declarative praise in the following way:



In the dynamic of the prayers of lament we noticed the inherent unity between the psalmist and God. It is this unity of covenant love between God and Israel that gives the psalmist confidence and trust in the midst of a crisis or tragic situation. This unity motivates the psalmist to cry out for help, to engage the love and fidelity of God to intervene in the crisis in order to live for God, for his name, for his praise. The declarative psalms of praise testify to God who upholds his fidelity. Beginning with praise the psalmist announces God's fidelity and backs this up with personal experience by recounting the crisis, his cry for help

and God's intervention. The new life that had been gained will continue to manifest the power and glory of God.

Notice that in both cases, in laments and in praise, intensity, polarity and crisis dominate. The laments cry out in pain for God's intervention. The praises cry out in joy for God's fidelity. But each form of prayer generates its own counterpart that corresponds to the inner dynamic of the prayer. The prayer of lament whose dynamic is based on trust generates a prayer that focuses and exemplifies the identity of Israel and the Lord. This new prayer becomes a form on its own - psalms of trust. Ps 46, "The Lord is my refuge and my strength, from whom shall I fear". Similarly the psalms of declarative praise whose dynamic is based on praising God has its counterpart in descriptive praise. In both cases laments and praise emerge from struggle, conflict intensity and polarity while psalms of trust and of descriptive praise arise from peace, unity, security and strength.

Examples of declarative praise are: 18, **30**, 32, **34**, 41, **66**, 116, 118, 124, 138.
Epiphanies: 18:7-15; 29; 33; 50:1-3; 68:7; 77:16-19; 97:2-5.