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PSALMS OF DESCRIPTIVE PRAISE

Lament and Praise consisted of a cry of anguish in trust and a shout of thanks in praise. Both forms of prayer were very much rooted in the urgencies and resolutions of crises in ordinary human experiences. The intensity of the joy in declarative praise matches the intensity of the cry and the trust of the lament. If we describe the unfolding of human existence with the images of Martin Buber as a fluctuation between epochs of homelessness and epochs of habitation, then clearly both the psalms of lament and declarative psalms of praise belong to the situation or experience of homelessness. This epoch is characterized by a quest, a searching for God and meaning, precipitated by natural disasters or by internal upheavals in new decisions and commitments. Urgency, intensity, immediacy and integrity characterize the prayers of those in homelessness.

By the same token, the revelation of God through actions in history generates a consolidation of these prayers into reflection on their significance. The psalms of lament whose dynamic is founded on trust generate the psalms of confidence. In these psalms God is honoured and praised for the sureness of salvation -- the images of a child in the arms of a mother, a soldier in a fortress, a bird under the wing of its mother all express the quality of habitation, of rest in which the psalmist has the time and the peace to contemplate that particular quality of God in relation to the people -- God is one who is there, who can be counted on.

Similarly in the psalms of declarative praise, God is praised with intensity for the direct intervention that has changed the course of events. The psalmists or the community is alive and well. Their very existence is testimony to the goodness and power of God. These psalms of declarative praise whose dynamic is the confession of praise generate a consolidation of reflective praise. God is praised for majesty and power, in all goodness and steadfast love. This praise of God in glory and goodness stems from an atmosphere of habitation and rest. There is no sense of urgency. Rather this prayer flows from a sense of well-being and peace whose source is recognized as being rooted in God. People are called to praise, honour and to love their God who is great and good. *God is Great* in extraordinary deeds of power. *God is Good* in all signs of compassion and mercy.

The psalms of trust or confidence do not have a particular structure. They are poems that develop images of security, peace and well-being. They begin with a particular image that is then developed throughout the poem. Some examples might help to illustrate this phenomenon:

- 16:1 Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge
 16:5 The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup.
 23:1 The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want
 27:1 The Lord is my light and salvation
 46:1 God is our refuge and strength, from him comes my salvation
 62:1 For God alone my soul waits in silence
 He is my rock and my salvation, my fortress
 91:1 He who dwells in the shelter of the most high
 who abides in the shadow of the almighty
 will say my refuge, my fortress.
 121:1 I look to the hills from there comes my help
 122:1 I was glad when I heard them say let us go to God's house.

However, the psalms of descriptive praise have a basic structure that is followed quite consistently in the many diverse forms that emerge. What is developed in these psalms is a contemplative and reflective consideration of God in relation to Israel and to Creation. God is the one who looks down from on high and saves the people. This is an expansion of the part in the lament, which says turn to me and save me. Or it

could similarly be considered an expansion from the summary statement of psalms of declarative praise, which declares that the Lord is high in the heavens, he regards the lowly.

The use of the verb *hll* (ללח hallal, as in halleluia) in distinction from *hdh* (הדה – hada, as in *todah modern Hebrew for thanks*) also shows a different mode of praising God. In declarative praise, *hdh* was used to highlight the confession of God's intervention in the life of the psalmist. In descriptive psalms of praise we notice the characteristic verb *hll* whose root meaning is to shine, to cause to shine. No longer are we in a form of prayer that seeks to declare personal acts of kindness or goodness. Rather we are in a contemplative and reflective mode that considers God's general aspects of greatness and goodness towards all of Israel and indeed towards all of creation.

Westermann breaks down the structure of descriptive praise in the following way:

- 1) The call to praise
- 2) Reason for praise
- 3) Description of God's majesty
 - a) in creation
 - b) in history
- 4) Description of God's goodness
 - a) God saves
 - b) God preserves life
- 5) Concluding call to praise

1) The call to praise: These psalms ordinarily begin with an imperative call to praise God. It is a call for others to participate in the praising of God. The psalmist's praise of God cannot help but lead others to share in this life. On occasion we do find direct praise which ordinarily is associated with declarative praise. Ps 8, O Lord, our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth. Or the praise of God can be introduced in the third person, where all of creation is seen as praising God. Ps 19, The heavens are telling of the glory of God.

2) reason for praise: At times what follows the opening call to praise is a summarizing sentence that really condenses the central theological backdrop of these descriptive psalms of praise. This theological condensation could be summarized in the statement, 'God is great, God is good'. Moreover God's greatness and goodness are experienced by Israel as being inexorably connected. Israel cannot experience God in any other way. There is obvious tension in this theological perspective: God's majestic distance, and God's compassionate immediacy.

examples:

117:2 For great is his steadfast love, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.

33:4 For the word of the Lord is upright and all his work is done in faithfulness.

47:2 For the Lord, the most High, is terrible, a great king over all the earth.

3) Description of God's majesty: The main body of these descriptive psalms of praise are an expansion or development of the reasons for praising God. Whereas in the psalms of confidence the development of the images does not follow a set pattern, in this reflective praise there is a development of God's majesty and God's kindness. God is the one who is on high in all splendour, majesty and power: and at the same time this glorious God is the one who intervenes, saves and upholds the people and all creation through compassionate love.

a) God's greatness as creator: God's majesty and greatness are described and extolled by creation itself which has been brought into being through God. God is great and majestic in that all of creation manifests the power and the glory of the Lord.

examples:

- 33:6 By the word of the Lord the heavens were made and all their host by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle, he put the deeps in storehouses.
- 113:3 From the rising of the sun to its setting the Lord is to be praised.
- 135:5 For I know the Lord is great and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the Lord pleases he does in heaven and on earth in the seas and in all deeps. He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain.
- 136:3 Praise to the LORD... who by understanding made the heavens for his steadfast love endures forever
- 147:4 He determines the number of the stars he gives to all of them their names.
- 148:3 Praise him sun and moon, praise him all you shining stars. Praise him you highest heavens and you waters above the heavens.

The proclamation "Look down and hear the voice of my cry" presumes that God is in the heights. Precisely God's power in creation, as the creator, gives testimony to the glory and majesty of God. Secondly, creation itself then gives glory to God as signs of the Lord's beauty and power. Within the context of the world and all of creation the psalmist praises God. This description of God's glory is never reduced to "God in onesself". The majestic God is always one who looks upon creation to sustain in and to direct it.

b) God's majesty in history: In the hymns, particularly the early ones, the presentation of God's glory in creation swiftly and effortlessly passes into the glory and power of God in history.

examples:

- 33:10 The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to naught, he frustrates the plans of peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever the thoughts of his heart to all generations.
- 135:8 He it was who smote the first born of Egypt

Obviously the main source of imagery is located in the exodus narrative and in this context some of the favourite passages and images of the exodus account are borrowed for the purpose of eliciting from the psalmist a shout of joy and praise in God's lordship of history. The unity between God and the people is presumed. The covenant declaration "You shall be my people and I shall be your God" is presumed throughout these psalms. At times creation and history are combined in the declaration that the Lord has created Israel.

examples:

- 100:3 Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his. We are his people and the sheep of his pasture.
- 149:2 Let Israel be glad in his maker
- 147:2 The Lord builds up Jerusalem he gathers the outcasts of Israel

What is praised in these statements is God's lordship in history over all nations. Nothing is outside of the purview or the power of God. God is truly great. He has created all things and God governs all things.

4) Description of God's goodness: God is good. The famous Hebrew word *hsd* is that covenant word which characterizes God's goodness. *Hsd* consists of the loving movement in God which looks down and enters human history to intervene with healing and salvation. God's beauty and power in creation and in history have been known precisely because God's kindness and steadfast love have caused and brought salvation and new life. What was prayed in the laments, "Look", "Turn your eyes towards me and save me"; what was joyfully uttered in the psalms of praise, "The Lord answered me and set me free", is now prayed in all its fullness as the characteristic attitude of God towards Israel.

examples:

33:13 The Lord looks down from heaven, he sees all the sons of men.

113:5 Who is like the Lord our God who is seated on high who looks far down upon the heavens and the earth.

136:23 It is he who remembered us in our low estate.

— a) **God is praised for the love shown in saving Israel.** Instead of having an introduction of God in power and might who looks down upon the earth, these psalms of praise often state simply the fact of the goodness and steadfast love of the Lord.

145:8 The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all and his compassion is over all he has made.

— God in all exaltedness raises the lowly who cry to the Lord, but the wicked are cast from their heights.

147:6 The Lord lifts the downtrodden, he casts the wicked to the ground.

— Recognition is given also to the fact that God has tested and purified the people through difficult experiences, yet in the end they were always saved.

66:10 For you O God have tested us, you have tried us as silver is tried, you brought us into a net yet you have brought us to a spacious place.

— God in *hesed* love knows the fragility of human existence.

103:14 For he knows our frame he remembers that we are dust.

135:14 For the Lord vindicates his people and has compassion on all his servants.

146:9 He upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

— b) **Finally God in compassion and steadfast love is the one who preserves and sustains** the life that the Lord has created and saved.

136:25 He who gives food to all flesh

- 145:15 The eyes of all look to thee and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living creature.
- 146:7 who executes justice for the oppressed who gives food to the hungry
- 33:19 Behold the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine.

5) Call to praise: The ending of the descriptive psalms of praise or hymns as they are generally called varies in different ways. Often the psalms form inclusions in which the opening call to praise is repeated at the end of the psalm. Generally there is a synthesized declaration that the Lord is worthy of great praise. Ps 8:9 How majestic is your name in all the earth. Ps 146:10 The Lord will reign forever, praise the name of the Lord.

Again as with the laments and declarative praise, specific elements of the hymns may be highlighted into unique psalms. For instance in the descriptive psalms of praise there are a few psalms that highlight the praise of creation to the point where they can be termed creation psalms. Psalm 104 is a psalm that praises God as creator and sustainer. Psalm 148 is predominantly a call to praise using the images of creation. Other psalms praise God primarily as the Lord of history in which God is praised for the exodus account, a symbolic summary of all of Israel's history.

But even when one aspect of the hymn is highlighted the unity between majesty and compassion is usually present because of the nature of hymnic praise. History itself contains the elements of God's lordship and compassion. The lordship of God itself has generated a series of psalms that are hymnic in nature called the enthronement psalms, where God is declared as the one who reigns. Yet precisely because in these psalms where a particular feature of the hymn is highlighted there is a constant reminder of the unity between God's majesty and goodness, we know that Israel's praise was firmly rooted in concrete experience that stretched towards the transcendent being who is all powerful and all compassionate.

In Hebrew descriptive praise we have a development of God's majesty and God's kindness as exhortations to praise. God is great and God is good. Both of these features are intrinsically linked. We come to know God's majesty and power through God's concern and action in history. Notice how the reality of the incarnation of God entering human history as a human being is consistent with the dynamic and suppositions of hymnic praise. Christ, the creator and Lord of history, enters history in the form of a human being in order to give life, to exalt the lowly, to bring judgement and to sustain life. (Phil 2:5)

This form of praise which is reflective and contemplative is firmly rooted in the experience and history of the Israelite people. Had it not been for this historical dimension to the hymns, they would be indistinguishable from Egyptian and Babylonian hymns with which they already do have much in common. No doubt Israel borrowed features from these surrounding cultures, particularly in the contemplation of creation, but for Israel these descriptive songs of praise continuously vied back and forth between praising God in majesty and power, as Lord of all history who governs all nations, and praising God in kindness, as the one who stoops down and empties the self to draw all people to himself and sustain them in God's very own life.

Examples **8, 33, 48** (Zion), **66:1-12**, 13-20, 67, 76, **103**, 104, **117, 135, 136, 145-150**.

Creation Psalms: 8, 29, 89, 104, 148. Covenant Psalms: 50 (Mosaic), 78, 81 (Mosaic), 89, 132 (Davidic).

Diagram of Psalm Types:

Crisis – Homelessness – Disorientation		
<p>Laments</p> <p><i>(The value that sustains the psalmist in crisis and enables both complaint and petition is Trust)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">↕</p>	<p>↔</p> <p>Language of intensity (dialogue)</p> <p>Complaint Relieved Joy</p>	<p>Declarative Praise (Thanksgiving)</p> <p><i>(This dynamic of praise is to profess to others God's deliverance of the psalmist or the community - Praise)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">↕</p>
<p>Psalms of Trust</p> <p><i>Presentation of images which elicit trust in God before the imagination in prayer</i></p>	<p>↔</p> <p>Language of contemplation (images)</p> <p>Images of Trust Images of God's Greatness and Goodness</p>	<p>Descriptive Praise</p> <p><i>God is Great!</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Creator – Lord of History –</i></p> <p><i>God is Good!</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Deliverer – Sustainer –</i></p>
Peace – Habitation – Orientation/Reorientation		