

God, Community, and Power in the Psalms
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I propose to focus on the Psalms as a broad group of texts that deal with “community and power . . . in light of who God is and what God is doing in the world as these are perceived from differing social locations” (charge to the Biblical Studies Working Group). I select the Psalms, partly because they deal with the substantive issues of community and power and God, but also because most of the psalms are not in the first instance literature for private reading or devotion but liturgies for use in particular kinds of social locations and situations. The paper will deal successively with the three main liturgical genres of psalms: hymns, complaints, and thanksgivings, and conclude with a look at one peculiar and peculiarly relevant psalm. I will address several of the “representative areas” mentioned in our charge: God as creator and the community of creation (1); human power in relation to divine power (2 and 3); and solidarity and self-critique (8).

A. Hymns (te*hillîm)

Hymns usually take the form of a call to worship God and a list of the reasons why (the simplest example is Ps 117). But there are also hymns that address God directly (e.g. Ps 8). The former may have been used at the opening of religious services, like the modern “call to worship,” while the latter perhaps occupied a more central role as part of the encounter of the congregation with God. Both types give reasons why God is to be praised, including his qualities and things he has done. Prominent among the latter are God’s activities in creating and sustaining the earth:

who covers the heavens with clouds,
who provides rain for the earth,
makes hills sprout grass;
gives to the beast its food,
to the ravens what they cry for.

Who gives snow like wool,
scatters frost like ashes,
hurls hail like crumbs--
the waters stand fast at his cold;
who gives the command and they melt,
makes the wind blow, and they flow.

(Ps 147:8-9, 16-18)

Animals and people alike depend on God’s provision and are at the mercy of his power. Because of God’s creative and sustaining activity, the summons to praise may include all natural phenomena and “all sorts and conditions of men”:

Praise Yahweh, from the earth,
sea monsters and deeps,
fire and hail, snow and mist,
storm wind doing his bidding,
mountains and hills,
fruit trees and cedars,

wild life and tame,
 creeping things and birds on the wing,
 kings of the earth and peoples,
 officers and rulers of the earth,
 boys and girls,
 elders and children.

(Ps 148:7-12)

God is the creator of all things, on whom all things depend and to whom they owe joyful praise. In this respect, humanity is not different from the rest of nature, nor are people with power and authority different from the rest of humanity. The differences in power within creation are negligible compared with the difference in power between every creature on the one hand and God the creator on the other. Even Ps. 104, which rejoices in God's bountiful and appropriate provision for all creatures, does not distinguish humanity in this respect from lions, birds, or Leviathan.

The mood of many hymns is: "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world." But that cannot be taken for granted:

Who looks down toward earth--it trembles,
 touches the mountains--they smoke.

(Ps 104:32)

God's bounty may be replaced by the unleashing of God's other powers. This is because our dependence on God has moral implications. Hence, v. 35 of this psalm reads:

May sinners cease from the earth,
 and the wicked be no more.

Our enjoyment of God's good disposition toward the earth is threatened by the wickedness of people who abuse God's creation. Ideally we may form one community of creation, but those who work against it break that solidarity. For the sake of creation, the psalmist wishes an end to such people, lest the consequences be felt by all. For God's power can break out destructively as well as sustainingly.

The moral implications are perhaps most clearly stated in Ps 8. Here within the framework of community confession of its faith ("O Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name throughout the earth" vv. 2, 10), the psalm gives voice to individual wonder:

When I see the heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and stars you have set in place,
 what are mortals that you think of them,
 humans that you attend to them?

(Ps 8:3-4)

The contemplation of the night sky leads the speaker to contemplate how insignificant and negligible human beings are. In a cosmic perspective, we are negligible. And yet--

You have made them little less than gods,
 adorned them with glory and majesty,
 given them rule over your handiwork,

put everything at their feet . . .

(Ps 8:5-6)

Humanity's place in creation is so insignificant, and yet in this part of it we have been given great power--supreme power within the world. The important point here, of course, is the word "given." A great king assigns a newly acquired country to a vassal king, giving him all the trappings of kingship and supreme authority in his own realm, and yet the vassal king is completely dependent on the great king. In the same way, the gift to humanity of supreme power and authority in the world is a trust from God, an assignment of responsibility for which we are accountable to God, on whom we remain totally dependent. If we are crushed by our sense of our own insignificance, this psalm reminds us that we nevertheless have great power and responsibility. If we are swollen with a sense of our own power, this reminds us that our power is to be exercised in recognition of our ultimate dependence on, and powerlessness without, God.

Most of the hymns are public expressions (the call to worship is always in the plural) accompanied by instrumental ensembles, jubilant shouts, dancing, sacrifices, and processions, and were probably used on regular, official occasions of worship. They therefore come primarily from the state temple in Jerusalem and were produced by its the official priesthood for the largely elite group living around the central institutions of palace and temple. These are precisely the two most powerful institutions in the society. Hence, their emphasis on the permanence of the order of creation--

He set them up [the basic components of the cosmos] for ever and ever,
established an order that shall not pass away.

(Ps 148:6)

--corresponds to their interest in the stability of the present social order. While the leaders of the society in Jerusalem may consider themselves "little less than gods," with the world at their feet, the average Judean peasant would wonder at his insignificance not only under the night sky, but also under the wealth and power and demands of the city folk in Jerusalem. The wise scribes of temple and palace may enjoy contemplating God's provision for all creatures in the created world, but the peasant struggling for his daily bread may not be so impressed by, nor feel so good about, the way God takes care of the raven and the lion and the fish. While the elite may be happily amazed at the power they have been granted, the peasantry have precious little God-given power to wonder at. In other words, the hymns are much more directly expressive of the point of view of the religious establishment than of the majority of Judeans. And while the "wicked" and "sinners" of Ps 104:35 might be thought by critical outsiders (certainly the later Qumran community, for example) to be the Jerusalem establishment itself, they were doubtless identified by those who sang the hymns in Jerusalem with any who threatened their way of life.

On the other hand the hymns are not explicitly oppressive. As we noted, Psalm 148 puts kings, princes, and judges alongside ordinary people--male and female, old and young--as owing praise to God. While it does not exactly say that all are equal before God, it expresses the same sense of common human dependence on a transcendent power that we find in the first part of Psalm 8. One ongoing value of the hymns is that they place the powers that be on notice that before the Creator their position is not privileged above that of any other member of the society.

B. Complaints (te*pillôt)

Complaints generally address God directly with rebukes for leaving the speakers in their present suffering and with appeals to pay attention and intervene on their behalf in a situation they believe God can change. They may be uttered by individuals crying out of personal suffering or by the larger community or its representatives speaking out of a social crisis.

The main rhetorical thrust of the complaint is to get God's attention and to motivate God to intervene on the sufferer's behalf. Thus common elements of the complaint include an initial invocation, description of the suffering, assertions of innocence (generally in the pre-exilic period) or confessions of sin (sometimes in the post-exilic period), reproaches of God for the suffering he has brought on or permitted, questions asking why God does not now help, petitions for help, imprecations against enemies, promises of future acknowledgement and gifts (vows), and even affirmations of confidence. Sometimes added to the complaint is a reference to the divine response and blessings or hymnic elements, the complaint overlapping in this case with the thanksgiving.

The sufferers reproach God with neglect: he has gone to sleep (44:23) or forgotten them (44:24); but also with more active mistreatment: he has hidden his face (27:9; 44:24; 88:14) hiding himself from them (89:46), has become angry with them (27:9; 74:1; 79:5), rejected them (27:9; 44:9; 74:1), thrown out or abandoned them (27:9), is oppressing (90:15), or abusing them (60:3). The frequent question "Why?" expresses the inexplicability of this divine behavior in the eyes of the sufferer(s). The question "How long?" assumes that the suffering has been going on for some time and that the speaker(s) are nearing the end of their tether. The suffering itself is made worse by the public shame the people experience, the mockery and abuse of neighbors (79:4 and especially 123:3-4).

Individuals, unprotected by God, find themselves vulnerable to demonic forces, sickness, hostile neighbors, or the jaws of death. Individual sufferings may be expressed by terms describing the physical, mental or emotional extremity of the individual, but also by reference to or quotation of threats of attacks--physical, forensic, or magical--by vague, undefined enemies scoffing at the shame of the persons's suffering and uttering malicious lies, mocking their faith in a god who is not helping them.

Although from elsewhere in the Bible it is clear that the suffering of the community might arise from a drought or plague, in the Psalms the communal complaints arise primarily out of defeats by external enemies. Unprotected by God, the community too is subject to hostile and threatening neighbors who also mock their faith in a god who is not helping them.

In terms of our theme, complaints generally arise when God is not experienced (as in the hymns) as creator and provider and guarantor of order and justice. In the complaints, the sufferers feel their own lack of power and see the power of God and/or other people(s) as causes of present suffering. Both God and people(s) seem to have abandoned their solidarity with the sufferer. It is not suggested that God lacks the power to help, but rather the determination. God has either overlooked the sufferer, been distracted, is not paying attention; or else God is deliberately hurting the sufferer. Threatened and abused by neighbors, and feeling abandoned or mistreated by God, sufferers nevertheless turn to God with complaints. Powerless as they feel, they exercise the little power that remains to them--the power to use every rhetorical means to prevail upon God to respond. (It is not primarily here a matter of ethical norms, although references to the innocence of the sufferers imply that God is acting unjustly in allowing the suffering to continue, and confessions of sin admit that the sufferers may be partially responsible for bringing on suffering by violating such norms.)

The social location of those using the communal complaint is different from those using the individual complaint. The communal complaint is used on the occasion of a communal catastrophe--whether defeat in war, drought, or plague. In the former case, the community may be defined as the nation. Drought or plague may be more localized and hence the community may be a district. In any case, the communal lament is used, like the hymn, by the leaders of the community who also call for general mourning, fasting, and offering of sacrifices. The religious leaders complain to God, representing all who are suffering as a result of the catastrophe. God's blessing and protection have obviously been removed and God is the only one who can restore wellbeing (šālôm). Hence the community urges God to act on his assumed solidarity with the people, boldly asserting their solidarity with God, whose failure to help must surely be an oversight ("Why?") or temporary ("How long?"). The complaint draws the community together in its suffering and, in its desperate hope in God, strengthens it for survival and recovery.

The individual sufferer may be located anywhere in the society, though perhaps most frequently in the most vulnerable majority. Both sufferer and tormentors are members of the same community (55:12-13; 41:5-9). Thus the individual complaints testify to the breakdown of community solidarity. The sufferer sees this as a consequence of the enemies' disregard of God, and feels God's disregard of himself or herself. One clear aspect of most complaints is characteristic of suffering generally, namely, the sufferer's feeling of isolation from the rest of society: he or she feels ostracized or pilloried. That such isolation is not quite literal, however, is implied by the very existence of the complaint--it certainly implies the individual's access to and support by the local religious expert. Further, given analogies with other more fully documented societies, it is highly likely that in most cases the individual would be accompanied by a small group of family members and/or neighbors who supported him or her against the malevolence of the hostile group (see also on the thanksgiving below). In any case, conflict within the community is to be taken for granted. The complaint to God is an act of faith in God--in God's intervention, vindication, deliverance--when faith in the larger community is impossible. As in the case of the communal complaint, so the individual complaint asserts, despite appearances, the relationship between God and complainant, and, in the context of this defiant act of worship in however fragmentary a "community," strengthens the individual for survival and recovery.

In the complaint, the helpless, oppressed, despairing--from individual to nation--both question, and put themselves at the mercy of, the God of justice and draw strength from this encounter to face and outface the assaults of the larger human community.

C. Thanksgivings (tôdôt)

Thanksgivings often fulfil a promise. A common element of the complaints is the "vow" or promise to publicly acknowledge God's response to the sufferer's complaint after he or she has been restored. The promise is part of the persuasive rhetoric of the complaint, but it is also a solemn commitment, which is then fulfilled in the tôdâ. The noun tôdâ means essentially "acknowledgement" and refers specifically to a sacrifice and to a rhetorical form--both acknowledging God's hearing and delivering of the speaker (56:12; 109:30).

The oral acknowledgment, the thanksgiving song, is a report and testimony to the congregation. It begins with the speaker's announcement that he or she is going to extol God, and goes on to recount the individual's past suffering, his or her appeal to God (referring essentially to what we have in the complaints), and God's hearing of the appeal and deliverance of the sufferer (e.g. Psalm 30). The speaker often concludes by calling on the congregation to recognize what God has done and to join in praising God. Thanksgivings testify to God's

deliverance of an individual from suffering and to the delivered person's gratitude, and invite the congregation to draw general lessons from this for their own future (e.g. Psalm 32).

Like the hymns, the thanksgivings rejoice in God's manifest goodness, but here on the personal, not on the cosmic scale. God is seen to have vindicated his own justice and to have vindicated the sufferer's faith, and the lesson is spelled out for the community: you can all trust this God, who responds to those who call on him. The thanksgiving is a reassertion of divine solidarity with those who are faithful to God--and, by implication, a criticism and exposure of those who had concluded that God had indeed abandoned the sufferer, whether because God was ineffective or because the sufferer deserved to be abandoned.

Like the complaints, the thanksgivings are ad hoc, not part of major, regular, religious gatherings (but see Ps 107). They are used following the sufferer's deliverance or restoration, and probably before a small local congregation of the sufferer's faithful supporters--those present for the earlier complaint service--perhaps enlarged by others who are not persistently hostile to the speaker. Indeed, it is possible that, if the sufferer has been healed from sickness or depression or vindicated at court, so that the grounds for mockery or spite by those he called his enemies are now removed, they too may in some cases join in welcoming him or her back to the community of those blessed by God.

The perspective of the thanksgiving is that of someone who has experienced extraordinary deliverance from suffering after appealing to God. It is likely that there were also communal thanksgivings following divine responses to communal complaints. In any case, thanksgivings would have encouraged and empowered not only the individual or community giving the testimony and praising God for deliverance, but also the community hearing the testimony. Here, perhaps, was the strongest cultic experience of God's solidarity with the community, however defined.

D. Conclusions

Praise has always been part of the church's life. Hymns are the essential expression of the recognition that all of humanity, the most as well as the least powerful, are essentially equally dependent on the continuing power of God the creator and God's continued support of creation. This implies that to damage any part of God's creation, whether by sins of commission or omission, is to fall into the category of "sinner." And further, given the Bible's correlation of the created order with a moral order, it implies that the violation of fundamental laws of justice too is to become one of those who the psalmist wishes would disappear from the earth and be no more. Today, praise of the Creator can and should be informed by the knowledge that the universe is not fixed in structure; that, though it may be governed by fundamental laws, it is forever changing; and that human society is even less fixed and that the diverse human societies on earth are also constantly changing.

Complaint has not been so pervasive in the life of the church. Between the glorification of suffering quite early in its history and its repeated reversion to the belief that suffering is a consequence of sin, it has often been thought that suffering, rather than something to be complained about, was something to be born stoically (via St. Paul?), either as a blessing in disguise or as a deserved punishment. Complaint has too often been displaced by confession. By accepting this we have ignored not only much of the Old Testament, but also the model of Jesus, who generally responded to the complaints and appeals of the suffering without reference to sin, and who in his own suffering quoted the classical complaint: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

People do suffer in situations in which they feel powerless and abandoned by God's power to save. Should not the church be more honest about suffering as a negative experience usually quite unrelated to sin, and encourage its expression in complaint to God, whether by individuals or by groups? Only so, it would seem, can sufferers truly engage God in their suffering and grow into a new relationship with God, gaining the strength to outface their enemies or to accept the inevitable--and the wisdom to know the difference. (Moreover, as Westermann has suggested, it may be that prophets took up the complaints of the powerless and in part served as God's answer to their cries, converting them into indictments and as such carrying them and addressing them to the centers of oppression. If this connection is valid, more direct use of complaint by suffering communities may inspire more present days prophets.)

Thanksgiving, in the sense in which it is found in the biblical songs of thanksgiving, still finds expression today in informal services in which individuals testify to how God has heard their cries and saved them from their suffering and go on to draw the lesson for the listening congregation--God does intervene to save, and God can save you too. In most formal services, it has been lost to general thanksgivings, which serve much the same function as hymns, being concerned with God's general characteristics and with the general order of providence (but see Ps 107). The biblical thanksgiving is an acknowledgment not only of God, but of a particular experience of deliverance, release, or restoration. It testifies, not so much to the universality of God's reign, but to the reality that God can transform an individual's world for the better. It demonstrates that God still comes to the aid of those who suffer and invites the community to join in solidarity with future sufferers.

One unique and powerful psalm bears significantly on our themes in quite a different way. Psalm 82 makes creative use of the world of myth to inspire the community's faith in God's inauguration of a universal, just rule of the world. The gods, presented as governing the world (perhaps with each god having its own nation--cf. Deut 32:8-9; Josh 11:24; Micah 4:5) are depicted in assembly. God (Yahweh), as one of the gods, stands before them and accuses them of injustice (v. 1). He rebukes them specifically for favoring wrongdoers and calls on them to defend and vindicate the vulnerable and oppressed (vv. 2-4). Verse 5 registers the gods' failure to comprehend, their continuation in "darkness," in consequence of which (given the biblical association of moral order and cosmic order) the foundations of the earth give way. Divine injustice threatens cosmic collapse. At this, God speaks again, saying, "I had thought, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you'; but you will all die like humans, fall like any potentate" (vv. 6-7; compare Luke 10:8 and John 12:31). The gods have proved themselves incompetent to run the world, so God announces the end of the gods and their reign. At this point, the psalmist's use of myth ends. A liturgical response follows, in which the congregation acclaims the obvious successor to govern the world: "Arise, God, rule the earth; for you will take possession of the peoples" (v. 8).

Unlike the complaints, the psalm deals not with the injustice suffered by "me" or "us," but by people around the world; and holds not Yahweh, but the gods of the nations responsible. By having Yahweh expose the gods' conduct and fate, it clears the way for his takeover--the beginning of the kingdom of God. And so the community acclaims the beginning of the reign of the one just, and therefore worthy, governor of the world.

Composed in the small province of Judah in the vast empire of Persia, this psalm reflects both the powerlessness of the speaking community and its solidarity with the sufferings of other communities. In it, the religious leadership looks beyond the people of Judah (whom Yahweh

already governs), to address the reality and importance of the suffering of people in other nations and cultures. By rhetorically granting the existence of other gods whose failures are responsible for this universal injustice, and mythologically recounting Yahweh's address to the assembled gods--exposing their failures and their demise--it gives the community hope in God's imminent assumption of sole authority and power in the real world. Instead of looking back at creation, it looks forward to the coming of God's kingdom. It thus anticipates our continuing prayer: "thy kingdom come." That hope and that prayer surely entail faithful practice of behavior appropriate to that new order.

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