

# 2 : Songs of Celebration

In Judaism, Psalms 113-118, known as the Hallel psalms, are to be sung at the three traditional Pilgrimage Festivals mentioned in the Torah, namely Passover (celebrating the Exodus), the Feast of Weeks (celebrating the five books of the Torah given to Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai 49 days after the Exodus), and the Feast of Booths, or Ingathering (celebrating the end of harvest time, and the dependence of the People of Israel on the will of God). We shall look at the first four of the Hallel Psalms.

New Testament accounts of the Last Supper tell us that Jesus and his disciples sang a psalm or hymn after the meal before leaving for the Mount of Olives, and this might have been the Hallel as Mark tells us that 'On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, 'Where do you want us to go, and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?' (Mark 14:12)



Manna raining from heaven, Maciejowski Bible, Anon, c.1250

## Read Psalm 113

*'From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets,  
the name of the LORD is to be praised.'* (v. 3)

We see the importance of the Hallel Psalms in the way composers have adapted them into choral works, particularly this one which forms the basis of compositions by Mozart, Monteverdi, Mendelssohn, Handel, and many others. It is both poem and hymn, divided into three sections (each with three verses) and a question at its centre, giving a lovely symmetry to the piece which may have been part of the temple liturgy. The themes within it appear to connect with both the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-15) and that of Mary (Luke 1:46-55).

Although this psalm does not explicitly reference the Exodus, the author is clear that the Creator of the universe, exalted and enthroned on high, cares enough for his creation to stoop down and show love and compassion to the suffering and needy, even picking them up and placing them in positions of prominence, and therefore more than worthy of our praise.

For this reason, it forms an excellent introduction to the small collection of Hallel Psalms.

## Discussion

Q) Is there a single phrase in this psalm that stands out as you read it?

Q) Would you say that the words of this psalm transcend the centuries since and speak to the world today, and if so, in what ways?

Q) Verses 7,8 are almost identical to Hannah's words in 1 Samuel 2:8 and reflected in Mary's words in Luke 1:46-55. Is there a message here for our own generation?

## Read Psalm 114

*'Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord,  
at the presence of the God of Jacob.  
who turned the rock into a pool,  
the hard rock into springs of water.'* (vv. 7,8)

This psalm is certainly more concise than many, composed of four verses (or stanzas) of two lines, and within them the author has attempted poetically to squeeze the whole salvation history of Israel, not allowing himself to be bogged down with detail or timing of the journeys out and into the land. The first two stanzas recall highlights of the exodus and the last two consider their enduring significance.

God reminds Moses in Exodus 19:3-6 that the people have seen how God brought them out of Egypt, and therefore if they are obedient and keep their part of the covenant God has made with them, their reward will be to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

This first stanza is all about a Covenant People. In the second and third, we find the exodus and entry into the land presented dramatically, with the elements as characters in the play and several unanswered questions.

The final stanza refers to questions already asked and declares God, the Lord and Master of the universe, to be none other than 'the God of Jacob'. Throughout all of Israel's history, God has been in control, accomplishing that which to human minds seems impossible.

# sample

### Discussion

Q) This piece of poetry is so different in style from the last one. Is this a good thing for the reader, and where lies the challenge as we read it?

Q) So much history into a few verses. If asked to sum up half of your life in a couple of sentences, how easy a task would that be?

Q) At its heart, this is a poem about a covenant people and a covenant God. How do you understand this relationship between God and a nation?

## Read Psalm 115

*'Not to us, LORD, not to us  
but to your name be the glory,  
because of your love and faithfulness.'* (v. 1)

The third of the Hallel Psalms praises God for his great faithfulness towards Israel, which is powerful enough to silence those poking fun at them when disaster or enemy strikes and asking, 'Now where is your God?'

These are people who choose to put their trust in gold and silver idols, precious in earthly value but totally powerless.

Compare that to the people of God, led in their worship by the priests. They do not rely on images made by hand; it is God alone who they trust. Three times the author exclaims 'trust in the LORD!' (vv. 9-11). God will remember them and protect all who 'fear the LORD', for this is the Creator God who has given this world to his people, to care for it and live from it.

This is the God who is worthy of praise, both now and for evermore.

Why, when there is no mention of Egypt or God rescuing his people from slavery, does this psalm form part of the Hallel collection?

Well, the psalm acknowledges that the God of Israel is a living God who responds to the prayers of his people, but whatever power the foreign nations around them claim to possess, they are truly non-existent. Hence the contrast between the God of Israel and those of their neighbours.



Bacchiacca, Moses Striking the Rock, c.1525

## Discussion

Q) How would you answer the question 'Where is your God?' in times of trouble?

Q) Do you still see evidence of people putting their trust in objects and symbols, and what does that suggest to you?

Q) How does verse 16 connect with the bigger picture of our relationship with God?

# sample

## Read Psalm 116

*'What shall I return to the LORD  
for all his goodness to me?*

*I will lift up the cup of salvation  
and call on the name of the Lord. (vv. 12,13)*

There is no title given for this psalm, and no indication of the author, although it may have originated during the post-exilic period, with the author sharing his or her individual experience of the LORD's salvation on behalf of the wider community of which they were a part.

The second half of the psalm appears to be a mirror of the first, but that may have been the poet's aim, as it is less like a hymn than some in its construction. However, there are some familiar repeating themes with a need for deliverance (v 3); a plea for God's help (v 4); the experience of deliverance (v 6) and a general thanksgiving (v 7).

Because of its more general theme of thanksgiving, and not dwelling on those things (and enemies) causing the author's current troubles, we have a rather beautiful psalm that can speak to, and be used, both by individuals and congregations.

The preacher Charles Spurgeon looked beyond the mere words on a page and saw it as 'A Psalm of Thanksgiving in the Person of Christ'. The city of Belfast has the Latin Vulgate translation of verse 12 as its motto, Pro Tanto Quid Retribuamus or 'what shall we give in return for so much'.

## Discussion

Q) Is the city of Belfast's motto, based on verse 12, one that you could embrace, and how does it speak to you?

Q) Can you see this, as Charles Spurgeon did, as a psalm that speaks not just about its time but also reflects the image of Christ?

Q) These four psalms and the two which follow have a special place in the hearts of the Jewish people as they remember their history and relationship with God. What would you say were the major themes of that relationship based on your understanding of the Old Testament?

## For further thought:

Spend a few minutes trying to sum up how you see God having worked in and through your life.