



INTRODUCTION TO PSALMS 107-118

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Every Psalm is a riddle passed down to us from a very different language, culture and civilisation. Each raises its own questions and may need its own unique approach as we try to find answers.

Psalm 107 praises God for rescuing people from a variety of life-threatening situations. Already twenty years ago Professor John Jarick, who lectured here last year, tried to find a pattern to the structure based on verse three¹. God gathered them from 'the East and the West, from the North and from the Sea.' But what is 'the sea' doing in the spot where we would expect to read 'South'? Some amend 'yam', 'sea', to 'yamin', 'right hand', and hence translate as 'South'. Perhaps we can find a better solution.

Psalm 108 is largely an amalgam of verses drawn from Psalm 58:8-12 and Psalm 60:7-14. Why? And how might this affect the meaning of all three Psalms?

Psalm 109 is notorious as one of the so-called 'imprecatory' Psalms, where the Psalmist curses his enemies. As a result, a number of rather self-righteous commentaries can be found along the lines: 'What is a nasty Psalm like this doing in a nice book like the Book of Psalms?' To which come defensive apologetics suggesting that it is OK to get angry and let off steam. Sadly, all these opinions seemingly arise because the commentators have read the Psalm in translation. The Hebrew suggests a very different reading so that we ourselves experience the pain of a victim of prejudice and hatred.

Psalm 110 is also the victim of a mistaken translation of the opening words, resulting in an enormous weight of messianic, theological interpretation. It is also a very difficult Psalm to understand, but such obscurities, of course, can be quite useful where messianic speculations are concerned.

Psalms 111 and 112 seem to be a matching pair. Both are alphabetic, share much vocabulary and compare the qualities of God and of the righteous individual.

Psalms 113-118 are known in Jewish tradition as the Egyptian Hallel, or simply, the Hallel. They are read in synagogue on a variety of festival occasions and at home during the Passover Seder service. But this usage presents at least two problems. Firstly, because they are linked together liturgically, it may be difficult to consider them apart, yet each has its individual theme and agenda which deserve separate treatment. The other problem, perhaps especially for Jews, is the way the liturgical context has stamped its own priorities on these Psalms. Especially the way they are chanted or sung emphasises particular phrases, which may distort the internal structure of the

¹ John Jarick 'The Four Corners of Psalm 107' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59 (1997) pp 270-287.

Psalm itself. So we may have to do some unlearning in order to do each of them justice. For example, how do we solve the riddle posed by verse one of Psalm 115. What happens if we separate out the different voices in Psalm 118?

I would like to end with a bit more detailed discussion of Psalm 117. Since it is the shortest Psalm, and indeed the shortest chapter in the entire Hebrew Bible, it may tend to be overlooked. But browsing the internet I discovered that Martin Luther devoted a thirty-six page pamphlet to it, so I feel challenged to offer a few comments of my own.

The opening verse is quite clear, a call to all the nations to praise God: *'hal'lu et Adonai kol-goyyim'*. Some Christian websites see it as a universal call to all nations to worship God, and even as a specific invitation to undertake missionary activity. Following conventional translations, the second verse explains why this should be so; because God's mercy, *hesed*, is great towards us. 'Us' presumably refers to Israel as the source of the authorship of this Psalm. Hence one interpretation, that the nations witnessing God's evident love for Israel are moved to praise God, and indeed wish to have a share in that divine *hesed* as well, alongside Israel.

This appeal to the nations to praise God is not unique to this Psalm. According to Psalm 98 God has revealed His righteousness in the sight of the nations ... all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. So all the earth is invited to shout praises to God, to sing and play before God. (98:3-6) So if this Psalm is truly universalistic, it is quite legitimate to read 'all the nations', *'kol goyyim'*, in verse one as actually including Israel. Israel is also called a 'goy', a nation, sometimes positively (a holy nation in Leviticus 19:1) but also negatively, 'a sinful nation' (Isaiah 1:4). By this logic *'alenu'*, 'upon us', in verse two, suggests that God's *hesed* does indeed rest upon all the nations, of which Israel is but one small component. On this reading the Psalm becomes truly universal.

But verse two also contains an example of a common literary device in Biblical poetry, where a fixed phrase, like 'heaven and earth', is split into two, the words divided between the first and second part of the sentence. Here we have the key words *'hesed'* and *'emet'*, 'truth. They were paired in Exodus 34:6 to express the 'faithful love and loyalty' that God displays to Israel as a partner in the covenant. Here they are split between the two halves of verse two. But what does *hesed* mean in this verse when used with the verb *'gavar al'*, to be powerful? The literal meaning is 'God's *hesed* is great over us or upon us', rather than the conventional translation 'God's *hesed* is 'great towards us'. The same phrase occurs elsewhere in Psalm 103. 'As high as the heavens over the earth, so great is His *hesed* upon those who fear Him'. (103:11). But *'gavar al'* is also used to mean 'to overwhelm', as in 2 Samuel 11:23: 'For the men were more powerful than us' or 'overwhelmed us'. So the sentence could mean that, *hesed*, God's demanding love is too overpowering for us, Israel alone, to bear. That is why the Psalmist may have felt compelled to call upon the nations to join us in praising God, so as to share the burden of that enormous responsibility. That would be a very different way of reading the universal call of the Psalm.

I offer this as an unlikely but nevertheless a possible reading of the Psalm. At the very least such a reading would remind us of the overwhelming nature of a relationship with God, a relationship that we tend to tame, domesticate and sentimentalise. So let us, as usual, take the Hebrew text seriously, question the choices made by those who make translations, and allow even such familiar Psalms still to surprise and challenge us.