

Psalms Session 6
The Human Condition

Life in the ancient world was nasty brutish and short, and ancient Israel was no exception. The Psalms, more than any other book in the Bible, provide a window on the existential experience of ordinary people.

Out of the depths

Many of the psalms of complaint are cries of despair: “out of the depths I cry to you O Lord” (Psalm 130:1). Life is lived in the shadow of death, and of the netherworld Sheol:

For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.

I am counted among those who go down to the Pit . . .

like those whom you remember no more,

for they are cut off from your hand.

You have put me in the depths of the Pit,

in the regions dark and deep. (Psalm 88:3,5b-6)

Human life was not entirely extinguished at death, but afterlife in Sheol was nothing to look forward to. Sheol is imagined as a dark damp basement, a pit from which there is no escape. There is no enjoyment in Sheol. The dead cannot even praise the Lord (Psalm 115:17). Indeed, in Sheol there is not even remembrance of God (Psalm 6:5). Consequently, life is lived in fear of going down into Sheol:

The waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in deep mire where there is no foothold . . .

Do not let the flood sweep over me

or the deep swallow me up

or the Pit close its mouth over me (Psalm 69:1-2, 15).

A temporary reprieve

When the Psalmist prays to be delivered from Sheol, the request is for a temporary reprieve or for a postponed sentence. Several psalms give thanks to God for deliverance from Sheol. In Psalm 18, the Psalmist says that

The cords of Sheol entangled me,

The snares of death confronted me (vs. 5).

But God

Reached down from on high,

He took me out of mighty waters (vs. 16).

This does not mean, of course, that the Psalmist will not eventually die.

In Psalm 16, the Psalmist expresses profound trust in God:

I keep the Lord always before me

Because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices

My body also rests secure.

For you do not give me up to Sheol,

Or let your faithful one see the Pit (vss. 8-10).

This passage is taken as a messianic prophecy in the Book of Acts, and used to argue for the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 13:35). In the Old Testament context, however, it simply means that God is keeping the Psalmist alive for the present. Human mortality is not in doubt. The fear is of

premature death. A life well lived ends in fullness of days, when a person is gathered to the ancestors.

Only rarely does the Psalmist entertain thoughts of possible immortality. An intriguing example is provided by Psalm 49. The Psalmist declares emphatically that

When we look at the wise, they die;

Fool and dolt perish together

And leave their wealth to others . . .

Mortals cannot abide in their pomp;

They are like the animals that perish . . .

Like sheep that are appointed for Sheol;

Death will be their shepherd;

Straight to the grave they descend . . .

Sheol will be their home.

Yet he concludes

But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol,

For he will receive me.

Hope springs eternal. Even though death is the common human lot, perhaps God will make an exception for me.

The Hebrew Bible does, in fact, note a couple of exceptions to the rule of mortality. Enoch, before the Flood “walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him” (the same verb “to take” that is used in the psalm). Elijah was taken up to heaven on a whirlwind, and no one knew the place of Moses’ burial. These, however, were very much exceptions. It would

seem that some people in ancient Judah entertained the hope that they too might be exceptions to the common fate. We read in Psalm 73: 22-24:

I was stupid and ignorant

I was like a brute beast toward you.

Nevertheless I am continually with you;

you hold my right hand...

and afterward you will receive me in glory (NRSV: with honor).

Belief in the possibility of a beatific afterlife only became widespread in Judaism in the Hellenistic period. The earliest witnesses, in the books of 1 Enoch and Daniel, date to the early second century BCE. It is possible that Psalms 49 and 73 date from this period, but clear evidence of their date of composition is lacking.

What are human beings?

The conviction that life is ephemeral places a question mark after the value of life.

O Lord, what are human beings that you regard them,

Or mortals that you think of them?

They are like a breath; their days are like a passing shadow. (Ps 144:3-4).

Or again:

You have made my days a few handbreadths,

And my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.

Surely everyone stands as a mere breath.

Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.

Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;

They heap up and do not know who will gather (Ps 39:5-6).

These passages are reminiscent of the Book of Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth, with its insistence that “all is vanity and chasing after wind.” (Compare also Psalm 103: 15-16: “as for mortals, their days are like grass...”). Other passages recall the Book of Job, which has an even darker view of the human condition:

You turn us back to dust,

And say ‘turn back, mortals’ . . .

For we are consumed by your anger;

By your wrath we are overwhelmed.

You have set our iniquities before you,

Our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

For all our days pass away under your wrath;

Our years come to an end like a sigh.

The days of our life are seventy years,

Or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;

Even then their span is only toil and trouble;

They are soon gone, and we fly away. (Ps 90: 3, 7-10).

On the one hand, this passages affirms the sentence of Genesis after the Fall, that unto dust we must return. On the other hand, it suggests that the brevity of human life is a punishment for our own sins, imposed by an angry God.

A more positive view

Considering this rather gloomy view of the world, we might expect the Psalms to be somewhat depressing, but this is not generally the case. The psalmists seldom abase themselves. The famous phrase of Ps 22:6: “I am a worm and no man” is atypical. In contrast, the poet of the Thanksgiving Hymns found in the Dead Sea Scrolls typically belittles himself as “a creature of clay, fashioned with water, foundation of shame, source of impurity, oven of iniquity, building of sin” (1QH^a 9:22; trans. F. García Martínez and E. J. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* [Leiden: Brill, 1997] 159). The Psalmists fear of death is offset by his trust in the benevolence of the creator, passages like the one quoted from Psalm 90 above notwithstanding. The question about the value of human life posed in Psalm 144 is also asked in Psalm 8:

What is a human being (Adam: the NRSV translates human beings in the plural) that you are mindful of them

Mortals (literally “a son of man”) that you care for them?

But this time the Psalmist gives a much more positive answer”

Yet you have made them a little lower than God (or ‘divine beings,’ elohim)

And crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;

You have put all things under their feet.

This passage echoes Genesis 1, where humanity (Adam) is created in the image of God. This ensures the intrinsic value of human life, regardless of its brevity and transience.

The value of life is also ensured by the possibility of a relationship with God. Perhaps the most beautiful expression of trust in divine providence is found in Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . .

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death (NRSV, the darkest valley)
I fear no evil, for you are with me.*

Likewise, Psalm 27:1:

The Lord is my might and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?

The presence of God transcends the fear of death, not by promising an afterlife but by providing deep contentment in the present which is sufficient.

The presence of God in the Temple

Some passages in the Psalms express a desire for a closer communion with God. In Psalm 63:1 we read:

*O God you are my God,
I seek you, my soul thirsts for you,
My flesh faints for you as in a dry and weary land
Where there is no water.*

This desire is satisfied to some degree in the Temple:

*So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
Beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life
My lips will praise you (Ps 63:2-3).*

Similarly Psalm 84 declares:

*My soul longs, it faints for the courts of the Lord,
and adds that “a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.”*

It is apparent from these psalms that the glory of God was somehow represented visually in the temple. Many scholars think that there was a statue of YHWH, and perhaps also of the goddess Asherah, in the Jerusalem temple in the pre-exilic period. The evidence is inconclusive. It may be that the worshipper imagined the glory of the Lord above the throne supported by cherubim, or that the glory was evoked by a cloud of incense. It is clear, in any case, that worshippers could gaze upon the glory of the Lord in the Temple in a way that was not possible elsewhere.

It is also clear that the Temple was the visual expression of the presence of God in Jerusalem. Psalm 46 refers to Jerusalem as “the holy habitation of the Most High,” and adds: “God is in the midst of the city, it shall not be moved.” The belief in the divine presence was a great comfort to the people of Jerusalem in times of trial. When the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem, however, the belief in the inviolability of the Temple proved illusory, and gave the people a false confidence, as we see especially in the Book of Jeremiah. (Compare Jer 7:4: “Do not trust in these deceitful words, we have the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord”).

The statement in Psalm 63:3 that “your steadfast love is better than life” is the ultimate answer of the Psalter to the problem of death. It points to a transcendent experience, an experience of ultimate value that is not negated by the inevitability of human mortality. A similar value is attached to human love in the Song of Songs, which declares that “love is as strong as death” (Song 8:6). It is this ability to find enduring value in ephemeral life that gives the Psalter its positive tone and offsets the depressing prospect of the gloom of Sheol.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is Sheol? What happens to people after death, according to the Psalms?
2. Is there any possibility for a beatific afterlife in the Psalms?
3. What is the basis for trust in the Psalms?
4. How can people experience the presence of God in the Psalms?

Further Reading:

See the commentaries on the individual psalms.

Walter Brueggemann, "On 'Being Human' in the Psalms," in Brown, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, 515-28.