

Psalms Session 7 The Character of God

The Lord of the Universe

As we have seen especially in the hymns, God is portrayed in the Psalms especially as the creator, whose power is manifest in the world and on whom the world depends. God is King of the universe, and his kingship is conceived by analogy with human kingship. He is assumed to have absolute power, and to be less than fully accessible to human beings. But he is also the guardian of justice in the universe. Psalm 97, one of the psalms that celebrate the kingship of God, sums up the typical view of God in these psalms as follows:

Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

Fire goes before him, and consumes his adversaries on every side.

His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles.

The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,

Before the Lord of all the earth. (Ps 97: 2-5).

It should be noted that the idea that gods were the upholders of justice was not peculiarly Israelite, but was rather part of the common theology of the Ancient Near East. “Justice” (*tsedeq*) was even the name of a minor Canaanite deity.

But God is not always conceived as the Lord of the Universe. He is also the parent figure to whom people turn in time of distress. As we have seen in the discussion of the human condition, people could even aspire to a relationship of some intimacy with God. Many of the Psalms are psalms of petition, and presuppose that God may be approached and is accessible to human beings.

Slow to anger

By definition, the God of the Psalmists is a God who is expected to answer prayer.

Naturally, the psalmists tend to emphasize the mercy of God:

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 that he has made (Ps. 145:8-9).

This is essentially the same characterization of God that is found in Exod 34:6 and repeated several times in the Scriptures (e.g. Ps 103:8). The psalmists praise the faithfulness of God. In the refrain of Psalm 136, “His steadfast love endures forever.” The mercy and fidelity of God are the basis for the psalmists’ appeals “from the depths” and the subject of profuse thanksgiving. The Lord sets prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, and upholds the orphan and the widow (Psalm 146). All creation depends on him for its food in due season.

There is, however, another aspect to the character of God that is indicated already in Exodus 34 in the continuation of the passage on his graciousness and mercy:

Yet by no means clearing the guilty

But visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children

And the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.

God may be forgiving towards the penitent, but he is vindictive towards those who do not repent.

The vindictiveness of God is also a motif in the Psalms.

A God of vengeance

The dark side of the character of God appears forcefully in Psalm 94:

*O Lord, you God of vengeance,
You God of vengeance, shine forth!
Rise up, O judge of the earth;
Give to the proud what they deserve.*

In the Old Testament, vengeance is closely associated with justice. The idea is that people should get retribution befitting their actions. Nonetheless, the idea of God wreaking vengeance is troubling, especially for those who have been taught that we should love our enemies.

It must be born in mind that the Psalms make no claim to inspiration or revelation. They are expressions of human beliefs, hopes and fears. Psalm 94 tells us how one psalmist thought about God, although the view seems to be widely shared. One may reasonably suspect that the psalmist is projecting his own feelings on to God. In that sense, the problem posed by the Psalms is not the vengefulness of God, but rather the vengefulness of those who worship God.

The most vivid, and also the most understandable, expression of human vengefulness in all of the Bible is found in Psalm 137: 7-9:

*Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!"*

In this case, it is not difficult to empathize with the Psalmist. The Babylonians had shown no mercy to Jerusalem. The modern reader balks at the idea of vengeance wreaked on little children,

who could bear no responsibility for whatever had been done. In the ancient world, responsibility was often thought of in collective terms. So, for example in the Book of Joshua, when Achan is found to have violated the rules of warfare by taking booty for himself, not only is he stoned but also his sons and daughters and even his animals (Joshua 7:22-26). Nonetheless, the idea of dashing the heads of children against the rocks is troubling for the modern reader.

The Psalms are uninhibited in their desire for vengeance on those who are characterized as wicked:

O God, break the teeth in their mouths;

Tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord! . . .

Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime;

Like the untimely birth that never sees the sun (Ps 58:6-8).

Or again in Psalm 139:19:

O that you would kill the wicked, O God.

In fact, hatred of such people is deemed a virtue:

Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? . . .

I hate them with perfect hatred.

A virtue of hatred?

Some years ago, an orthodox Jewish student named Meir Soloveichik came to Yale Divinity School, to learn about Christianity with a view to understanding Jewish-Christian relations. Soloveichik, a scion of a famous family, has since become a prominent leader in the orthodox movement, who has also appeared at political events. On the completion of his studies at Yale, he wrote a piece for *The Christian Century*, entitled “The Virtue of Hatred.” He argued that the

essential difference between Judaism and Christianity is that Christianity teaches that we should forgive wrongdoers, whereas Judaism insists on justice. He recounted a story about Simon Wiesenthal, the Nazi-hunter, who was called to the bedside of a dying Nazi, who wanted to be forgiven. Wiesenthal refused, saying that God could choose whether to forgive, but that he could not. Soloveichik argued that Wiesenthal was right. Forgiveness should not be freely give. It should be earned.

Jesus tells his followers to forgive their enemies, but such forgiveness is hardly characteristic of how Christians actually behave. Equally, many Jews would be unhappy with Soloveichik's embrace of the virtue of hatred, and no Christian would dare to characterize the difference between the two religions in this way. But Soloveichik's argument resonates with many people, Christian as well as Jewish. There is a deep-rooted sense that people should pay for their crimes. The Psalms routinely affirm that God will destroy the wicked, even when they are not at all vengeful in tone. So, Psalm 145:20 says:

*The Lord watches over all who love him
but all the wicked he will destroy.*

The New Testament ends with an orgy of violent destruction in the Book of Revelation, and even the Gospels look for a second coming of Christ and a judgment where the wicked will be assigned to perdition. Nonetheless, the idea that hatred can ever be a virtue is problematic. Even if evildoers deserve to be hated because of their actions, feelings of hatred have a corrosive effect on those who nurture them. Forgiveness is not only a benefit to the wrongdoer. It also helps the aggrieved to heal and to move on with their lives.

Emotion or Instruction?

The problem with the psalms that ask for vengeance is not so much a matter of the character of God, who is always a judge as well as a deliverer. The vengeance of God can even be a reason for human restraint, if it is understood that vengeance is something that should be left to God, not pursued by human beings. Compare Deuteronomy 32:35:

*Vengeance is mine, and recompense,
for the time when their foot shall slip,
because the day of their calamity is at hand,
their doom comes swiftly.*

Even the Book of Revelation arguably leaves retribution to God, and thereby deters human violence. The problem in the Psalms is rather the kind of human character they project. It makes a difference here whether we see these psalms as emotive expressions or as moral instruction. There can be little doubt that most of the psalms originated as emotive expressions. Their strength lies precisely in their ability to articulate the full range of human emotions, from anguish to joy. Anger, and the desire for vengeance, are also basic human emotions that cannot be denied or suppressed. For victims of Babylonian terror, or victims of analogous terror in the modern world, Psalm 137 is cathartic. To be sure, it does not express the noblest of sentiments, but it is at least honest and forthright. By providing verbal expression for anger and vengeance, the psalm can act as a kind of safety valve that acknowledges the feelings without necessarily acting on them. If the Psalmist took it upon himself to take Babylonian children and dash their heads against the rock, that would be quite a different matter. There is a big difference between a fantasy and a dirty deed. The power of the Psalms is that they depict human nature as it is, not necessarily as it should be or as we would wish it to be.

That said, the psalms that pray for vengeance must be used with caution. Even if they do not call for human violence, they form attitudes that can be conducive to action. If people are convinced that God will destroy their enemies, it may be difficult to refrain from giving him a helping hand. This problem is by no means peculiar to the Psalms, but is also endemic to the prophetic and apocalyptic literature, which often fantasizes about the destruction of the wicked.

As we have seen in connection with the Wisdom Psalms, many scholars think that the editors of the Psalter wished to present it as book of instruction. The placement of Psalm 1, a wisdom psalm, at the beginning of the Psalter is often cited as evidence for this position. No doubt there is much to be learned from the Psalms. They teach the majesty of God and the needfulness of humanity, and encourage people to trust in the mercy and fidelity of God. Yet the prayers for vengeance serve as a reminder that the Psalms must also be read critically. The Book of Psalms is not a book of moral instruction. It is primarily a record of ancient Israel and Judah at prayer. Countless generations of Jews and Christians have felt the words of the Psalter appropriate to express their own prayers and feelings. The need to express feelings, however, is no guarantee that those feelings are edifying, or that they can serve as moral guidelines.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are the main characteristics ascribed to God in the Psalms?
2. What is meant by the vengeance of God?
3. Is there a virtue of hatred in the Psalms?
4. Should the psalms be read as expressions of human feelings or as moral instruction?

Further Reading:

See the commentaries on individual psalms.

Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).