

Psalm 113

Who is Like the LORD Our God?

1. Background

Pss. 113-118 form “the Egyptian Hallel”. At the family celebration of Passover, Pss. 113-114 were sung before the meal, and Pss. 115-118 were sung after. Thus these were the last songs sung by Jesus before his arrest (so the hymn of Matt. 26:30, sung after the fourth cup of the Passover, Matt. 26:26-29, was Ps. 118).

2. A literal (and rather wooden) translation

¹ Hallelujah!

Praise, O servants of Yahweh,
praise the name of Yahweh!

² May the name of Yahweh be blessed,
from now and to for ever;

³ from where the sun rises to where it sets,
praised be the name of Yahweh!

⁴ Exalted One over all the nations is Yahweh;
over the heavens is his glory!

⁵ Who is like Yahweh our God
(the One who makes preparation on high to sit down;

⁶ the One who comes down low to look)
in the heavens and in the earth?

⁷ He is the One who raises up from the dust the weak;
from the ash heap he exalts the wanting:

⁸ to cause him to sit with the princes,
with the princes of his people.

⁹ He is the One who settles the barren woman of the household
as the joyful mother of sons.

Hallelujah!

3. Introduction

Psalm 113 is closely related to the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10). That is appropriate since Hannah was a barren woman to whom God graciously gave a child – her experience was that described by v. 9 of the Psalm. Hannah’s song was a model for the song Mary (Luke 1:46-55) – Mary was not barren, but a virgin, and her conception of Jesus was even more miraculous than Hannah’s

conception of Samuel. Indeed, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the genealogy of Jesus includes several divinely granted conceptions by barren women (Sarah of Isaac; Rebekah of Jacob; and Ruth of Obed).

Psalm 113 comprises three stanzas of six lines each:

- The first stanza (vv. 1-3) the call to praise. It is bound together by the threefold “Yahweh’s name” and is framed by the call to “praise!” in the first and last lines.
- The second stanza (vv. 4-6) speaks of God’s glorious exaltation. It is framed by the “nations” and the “heavens” (v. 4) and “the heavens and the earth” (v. 6).
- The third stanza (vv. 7-9) concerns the way in which God transforms the lives of the destitute. It is framed by “raising” (v. 7) and “seating” (v. 9).

The second and third stanzas are linked by the verbs “to exalt” (vv. 4a, 7b) and “to sit” (vv. 5b, 8a). Thus the LORD’s heavenly status is echoed in the way in which he bestows his grace on humans.

The question of v. 5a (“Who is like Yahweh our God?”) is central. The praise of Yahweh’s name in vv. 1-4 is then matched by the demonstration of Yahweh’s kindness in vv. 7-9. The servants of Yahweh (v. 1) are those he has delivered from poverty and fruitlessness (vv. 7-9).

The whole is framed with “Hallelujah!” (literally, “praise Yah!” where “Yah” is a contracted form of “Yahweh”, the name of God).

In Hebrew the Psalm is very artistic (though this isn’t evident in the literal translation!). Notice, for example, the repetition of prepositions: “from...to...from...to...” (vv. 2-3); “over...over...” (v. 4); “in...in...” (v. 6); “from...from...” (v. 7); “with...with...” (v. 8).

4. Notes

(a) Stanza 1 (vv. 1-3) “Yahweh’s universal praiseworthiness”

“How can God be praised enough? To worship adequately would take the rest of time and the concerted tongues of all creatures on earth. No less response in time or space is worthy of God” (L.C. Allen, p. 136).

“In these calls to praise there is more than mere repetition. There is point in specifying the Lord’s *servants* and His *name*, since worship to be acceptable must be more than flattery and more than guess-work. It is the loving homage of the committed to the Revealed” (Kidner, p. 401).

“The name of Yahweh” = everything by which Yahweh makes himself known. The Bible (history, law, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, epistle and vision) is the exposition of Yahweh’s name, the “full account” being given by the incarnate Word (John 1:18).

The name “Yahweh” is related to the Hebrew verb “to be”. So the name “Yahweh” speaks about God’s being – God is in himself and of himself. But his name also

speaks about his being present – God is present with his people, to save, to bless and to rule over them.

The name “Yahweh” occurs almost 7,000 times in the Old Testament. The next most common name is “Israel” which is used about 2,200 times. David is used about 1,000 times; Moses almost 800 times; Jacob about 350 times; and Abraham 175 times.

So the Bible is the story of Yahweh and Israel; with a “supporting cast” of other characters. The fact that God has gone to such pains to reveal who he is demonstrates that God wants us to know him: especially he wants us to know him through his Son (John 17:6,26).

(b) Stanza 2 (vv. 4-6) “Yahweh’s transcendent greatness”

“Here this transcendence is memorably suggested by the perspective of verse 6, where the very heavens are almost out of sight below Him. He is, as JB puts it, ‘enthroned so high, he needs to stoop to see the sky and earth!’” (Kidner, p. 402).

The true God is uncreated and unconstrained by circumstances – his plan is unchanged and unchanging. That is good news – it means that God’s word is reliable and God does everything he says he will do.

Verse 5 asks, “Who is like the LORD our God?” “The LORD our God” is an echo of the covenant relationships. It means that the greatness of God’s power and the certainty of his purpose is for our benefit as well as for his glory. “Israel proudly affirms that the God to whom they are related by covenant (‘our God’) is greater than all else that stands for power” (Allen, p. 136).

“V. 6a indicates not God’s omniscience, as in Ps 33:13-15, but deliverance, as also in Pss 106:44; 138:6” (Allen, p. 136).

(c) Stanza 3 (vv. 7-9) “Yahweh’s condescending kindness”

God “is anything but aloof. Verses 7 and 8 anticipate the great downward and upward sweep of the gospel, which was to go even deeper and higher than the *dust* and the throne of *princes*: from the grave to the throne of God (Eph. 2:5f.)” (Kidner, p. 402).

God sits on high – but he also causes the poor to sit on high (a peer among the princes), and he makes the barren sit in happiness (a mother among her children). God’s grace is to share his greatness, his exaltation.

Verse 9 suggests that the Psalm is a meditation on the story of Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2, esp. 2:4-8).

A barren woman (Sarah) was at the root of Israel’s existence. Indeed Israel’s story includes a number of barren women whose lives were transformed by the gracious intervention of the LORD: Rebekah, Rachel, Naomi and Ruth, Elizabeth – and climactically, the virgin Mary, whose song (Luke 1:46-55) is a re-working of Hannah’s song and Ps. 113 (“he has regarded the lowly estate of his maidservant”; “he has exalted the lowly”; “he has helped his servant Israel”).

“The psalm finishes with what seems an anticlimax, and it must not be disguised. It is here that God’s glory most sharply differs from man’s: a glory that is equally at home ‘above the heavens’ (4) and at the side of one forlorn person. There is plainly much more than rhetoric in the question of verse 5, ‘Who is like the Lord our God?’” (Kidner, p. 402).

“The beneficent will of Yahweh was ever being worked out not only for a society whose members were integrated but also for the nucleus of the community, the family. God’s desire was for each to be united and fulfilling its purpose in harmony. To that end Yahweh redresses the balance in a Godward direction: the human exaltation of v 7 corresponds to God’s own in v 4, and the seating and settling of vv 8-9 to the kingly session in v 5. This is one aspect of the ideal that Yahweh’s own characteristics be reflected among the covenant people. Grace is the impartation of divine glory; it bestows a measure of divine power and honor” (Allen, p. 136).

So it is the poor, the weak and the despised (1 Cor. 1:27-29) who are exalted with Christ (Eph. 2:5-6).