

Psalm 118

The Right Hand of the LORD Does Valiantly!

1. Exodus 15 and the structure of Psalm 118

The proposed structure outlined below and diagrammed in the translation overleaf is a slight modification of the structured proposed last month. The antiphonal interchange between the individual singer and the choir of singers is the same; but I have now taken account of the way that the Psalm uses Exodus 15.

Exodus 15:1-18 is the first song in the Bible. It is the Song of Salvation sung by Moses at the Red Sea. This song is the mother of all the “songs of salvation” in the Bible, of which Psalm 118 is one of the foremost. (The last thing that the Bible calls a song is “the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb”, and it is found in Revelation 15:3-4.)

It is noteworthy that Exodus 15 and Psalm 118 both report a journey. Exodus 15 speaks prophetically of that journey (conflict with the surrounding nations, Exodus 15:14-16), and points to the destination, i.e. God is going to bring his people to his sanctuary (Exodus 15:13-17). Psalm 118 describes the conclusion of that journey as Messiah conducts his people (through conflict with the surrounding nations, Psalm 118:10-12) up to the temple.

Psalm 118 takes Exodus 15:2 and splits it in two. It uses the first half in verse 14 and the second half in verse 28. It then takes words from Exodus 15:6,12 and blends them into “the sound of joyful shouting and salvation” which is heard in verses 15-16. The result of this use of Exodus 15 is to mark out three “panels”, of 10 verses, 4 verses and 10 verses respectively:

- The first panel (vv. 5-14) tells us about Christ’s conflict with his enemies.
- The second panel (vv. 15-18) tells us about Christ’s concert of confession with his people.
- The third panel (vv. 19-28) tells us about Christ’s coronation.

This purpose of the Psalm is then seen (again) to lie in the central section: the concert of confession in which Christ leads his people in the praise of his Father because of the Father’s work to save them. This ties in with the opening and closing confessions that “the LORD is good; yes, his covenant love is for ever!”

Structure of the psalm

Introduction (vv. 1-4): *Communal confession*

Panel 1 (vv. 5-14): *Conflict*

Panel 2 (vv. 15-18): *Central concerted confession*

Panel 3 (vv. 19-28): *Coronation*

Conclusion (v. 29): *Communal confession*

2. Notes on vv. 5-28

(a) Christ’s conflict (vv. 5-14)

V. 5 Straits – a narrow, confined place. But the LORD set the psalmist in a broad place – a place where he had breathing space and living room.

Vv. 7,13 Haters and pushers. But the LORD was at the psalmist’s side giving him help. Actually, what he says is “helpers” – this is a plural of intensification – the LORD was the best helper, the perfect helper, the true helper.

Vv. 10-12 “The fourfold *surrounded* is menacing enough, and the similes of swarming bees and the crackle of fire bring out the unnerving closeness and fury of the attack” (Derek Kinder). But three times the psalmist affirms, “In the name of the LORD I will indeed destroy them”, and summarises his experience of conflict with words from the *Song of Salvation*: “The LORD is my strength and song, and he has become my salvation.”

Incarnation brought the Son of God into “a tight spot” – he allowed himself to be pushed about by circumstances so that like all other humans he learned what it means to have to trust God for support, guidance and deliverance. He also endured conflict with the religious leaders, especially during Passover week. But he went to Gethsemane with the words of v. 14 running through his mind.

(b) Christ’s concerted confession with his people (vv. 15-18)

Vv. 15-16 are a recasting of Ex. 15:6,12. Ex. 15:6-12 sings of how God destroyed Pharaoh and his army. That historical act of judgement is therefore behind the congregational confession of vv. 15-16. The Red Sea crossing (Israel’s death and resurrection) is also suggested by the words of the psalmist in vv. 17-18, “I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD. The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death.”

The declaration of God’s saving work is the central significance of Ps. 118.

(c) Christ’s coronation (vv. 19-28)

The chief cornerstone is the principle stone in a building. It’s the stone of special significance. It’s the stone which – because of the importance attached to it – has the honour of unifying the whole structure.

God the Father bestowed that honour on Christ (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:6-7). This is how Peter understood the stone imagery – see his preaching in Acts 3:11-26 and his defence in Acts 4:8-12.

“He who in His state of humiliation is the despised and rejected One is become in His state of glorification the eternal glorious Temple in which dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and is united with humanity which has been once for all atoned for. In the joy of the church at the Temple of the body of Christ which arose after the three days of burial, the joy which is here typically expressed in the words: ‘From with Jahve, i.e. by the might which dwells in Him, is this come to pass, wonderful is it become...in our eyes,’ therefore received its fulfilment” (Franz Delitzsch).

Panel 1: Conflict

(Leader)

- ⁵ From distress I called to Yah;
Yah answered me [setting me] in a broad place.
⁶ Yahweh is for me – I will not fear;
what can man do to me?
⁷ Yahweh is for me as my Helper;
and as for me, I will look upon my haters.

(Congregation)

- ⁸ It is better to take refuge in Yahweh,
than to trust in man.
⁹ It is better to take refuge in Yahweh,
than to trust in princes.

(Leader – quoting Exodus 15:2a)

- ¹⁰ All nations surrounded me;
in the name of Yahweh I will indeed cut them off.
¹¹ They surrounded me, indeed they surrounded me;
in the name of Yahweh I will indeed cut them off.
¹² They surrounded me like bees;
they were extinguished like thorns on fire;
in the name of Yahweh I will indeed cut them off.
¹³ You pushed me hard, to the point of falling;
but Yahweh helped me.
¹⁴ ***Yah is my strength and my song;***
and he has become my salvation. (Ex. 15:2a)

Introduction: Communal confession

(Responsively)

- ¹ Give thanks to Yahweh for he is good,
Yes, his covenant love is for ever!
² Oh let Israel say,
“Yes, his covenant love is for ever!”
³ Oh let the house of Aaron say,
“Yes, his covenant love is for ever!”
⁴ Oh let those who fear Yahweh say,
“Yes, his covenant love is for ever!”

Panel 3: Coronation

(Leader)

- ¹⁹ Open for me the gates of righteousness;
I will come in by them – I will give thanks to Yah.

(Congregation)

- ²⁰ This is the gate that belongs to Yahweh;
righteous people will enter in by it.

(Leader)

- ²¹ I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
and you have become my salvation.

(Congregation)

- ²² The stone – the builders rejected it –
has become the head cornerstone.
²³ This has come straight from Yahweh;
it is a wonder in our eyes.
²⁴ This is the day on which Yahweh acted;
let us rejoice, let us be glad in him.
²⁵ Please, Yahweh, please save [us]!
please, Yahweh, please cause [us] to prosper!
²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of
Yahweh;
we bless you [plural] from the house of Yahweh.
²⁷ Yahweh is God and he caused light to shine for us;
bind the festive sacrifice with cords up to the
altar horns.

(Leader – quoting Exodus 15:2b)

- ²⁸ ***You are my God and I will give you thanks;***
my God I will exalt you! (Ex. 15:2b)

Conclusion: Communal confession

(All together)

- ²⁹ Give thanks to Yahweh for he is good,
Yes, his covenant love is for ever!