

Psalm 118

Glad Songs of Salvation are in the Tents of the Righteous

1. Introduction

Psalm 118 does not have a title in the Hebrew text, so we cannot be dogmatic about its composition. It contains a fascinating reference to Exodus 15:2 which it splits between vv. 14 and 28. The words of vv. 1 and 28 are associated with David (1 Chron. 16:34). The “gate” imagery of vv. 19-20 makes us think of Isaiah 26:2, the “stone” imagery of v. 22 makes us think of Isaiah 28:16, and the “day” imagery of v. 24 makes us think of Isaiah 25:9. That covers 750 years of Biblical history!

Whenever it was composed, it may have been used when the foundation of the second temple was laid (Tabernacles, 536 BC, Ezra 3:8-13) or when it was completed and dedicated (Passover, 516 BC, Ezra 6:15-22). Certainly, the two main halves of the psalm reflect the themes of humiliation (vv. 5-18) and exaltation (vv. 18-28). This would be consistent with the experience of exile (humiliation) and return (exaltation).

2. Messianic interpretation

The humiliation-exaltation motif is also consistent with the Messianic interpretation of the psalm which sees Christ in the “I” of vv. 5-7, 10-14, 17-18, 19, 21, 28. He is *the* “worship leader”. In fact, Psalm 118 is one of the psalms most often appealed to in the New Testament, for example:

- All four evangelists use vv. 25-26 in the Triumphal Entry narrative (Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:9; Luke 19:38 [only v. 26]; John 12:13), generally associating it with the royal promise of Zech 9:9 as an enactment of both texts;
- Jesus applied vv. 22-23 to his death and resurrection (Matt. 21:42);
- Peter uses v. 22 in Acts 4:11, speaking of the resurrection vindication of Jesus;
- Peter also uses the stone imagery of v. 22 in 1 Peter 2:4-8, as does Paul in Eph. 2:20-21;
- Heb. 13:6 cites v. 6 because of the Christian community’s oneness with Christ (cf. Heb. 2:10-18; 4:14-16; 12:1-2).

Leslie Allen comments, “The psalm is used to exegete the work of Jesus in theological terms, in connection with both the royal manifestation of the triumphal entry and the great twin themes of Christ’s humiliation and exaltation...Through Christ this psalm is shared with believers so that they may live in confidence inspired by the triumph he has already achieved.”

3. How the psalm was sung and structured

Psalm 118 appears to be a processional-antiphonal psalm, i.e. it may have been sung antiphonally (alternately) by two choirs or by a leader and a choir, as they processed up through Jerusalem to the temple. An example of similar singing is

found in Nehemiah 12:27-43. The following structure tries to reflect this by marking out portions for the “leader” (the person who says “I”, “me” and “my”) and the “congregation” (see end note!). You want to imagine the procession setting out (vv. 1-4); winding its way up through the city (vv. 5-18); arriving and entering the temple precincts (vv. 19-28); and concluding the song together (v. 29).

The structure I have developed below is also guided by the language used by the “leader”. In vv. 5-18 he does most of the speaking, and he tells us about his experience of distress and deliverance. But in v. 19 his language changes: he says less, but everything he says is directed by his desire to give God thanks. It is because of that distinct change in tone that I have put a break between v. 18 and v. 19, even though the speaker does not change.

Structure of the psalm

A¹ (vv. 1-4) *Opening responsive call to worship*

(*On the way up to the temple*, vv. 5-18.)

B¹ (vv. 5-7) *Leader’s 1st testimony: In distress I called, and the LORD helped*

C¹ (vv. 8-9) *Congregation’s 1st lesson: It is better to trust in the LORD than in men*

B² (vv. 10-14) *Leader’s 2nd testimony: In distress I took action, the LORD helping me*

C² (vv. 15-16) *Congregation’s 2nd lesson: The LORD works for the righteous*

B³ (vv. 17-18) *Leader’s 3rd testimony: My distress didn’t end in death; the LORD worked for me*

(*Arriving at and entering the temple*, vv. 19-28.)

D¹ (v. 19) *Leader’s 1st confession: Open up because I want to enter and thank the LORD*

E¹ (v. 20) *Congregation’s 1st direction: This is the LORD’s gate*

D² (v. 21) *Leader’s 2nd confession: I want to thank you (LORD) for your salvation*

E² (vv. 22-27) *Congregation’s 2nd direction: This is the Stone; the Day; the Coming One*

D³ (v. 28) *Leader’s 3rd confession: (LORD) you are my God, and I give you thanks*

A² (v. 29) *Closing united worship*

Is this just a random interleaving of words sung by different people? Of course not! The interaction between the “leader” and the “congregation” deserves consideration. They clearly work together. In vv. 5-18 the leader takes the lead, telling about his experience of salvation; and the congregation learns the lesson that “it is better to trust in the LORD than in men... [or] in princes!” But in vv. 19-28 it is the congregation that does most of the talking, apparently directing the leader to the correct way to enter and give thanks.

It is possible that vv. 15-18 form the heart of the psalm. I think this is highly likely! It means there are two sections of 10 verses each before and after the heart of the psalm, i.e. vv. 5-14 and vv. 19-28. The first of these sections ends with the words of Exodus 15:2a (“The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation”); and the second section ends with words from Exodus 15:2b (“this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him”).

In that case, at the heart of the psalm, leader and congregation exult together in the salvation of the LORD. The congregation exults, “The LORD works salvation for the righteous!” And the leader exults, “The LORD worked salvation for me!” Isn’t that an attractive picture of Christ and the Church rejoicing together in what God has done?

The point is this: that this is genuinely responsive singing in which the singers aren’t just singing off the same psalm-sheet – they are working together to develop this song of salvation.

4. On the phrase “to give thanks”

The psalm opens and closes with the exhortation, “Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.” The word translated “give thanks” is used five times in the psalm (vv. 1-4, 29). That is more often than in any other chapter of Old Testament. It is worth considering what this word means, because it does not correspond exactly with the English phrase “to give thanks”.

The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* says of the Hebrew word “to give thanks”: “This verb was predominantly employed to express one’s public proclamation or declaration (confession) of God’s attributes and his works. This concept is at the heart of the meaning of praise. Praise is a confession or declaration of who God is and what he does...The best rendering of the term is ‘confession’...Therefore, [‘give thanks’] is one of the key words for ‘praise.’ It is continually found in Hebrew poetry in parallelism with such praise terms as ‘to praise,’ ‘to praise with musical instruments,’ ‘to exalt,’ ‘to remember,’ ‘to glorify,’ and ‘to declare.’”

The idea of “confessing” is clearly appropriate to v. 28 where the leader emphasises his personal, covenantal commitment to the LORD: “You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God; I will extol you.” It is very important that this is read in the light of v. 27, “The LORD is God...” Bare theism isn’t enough – we have to be clear about who God is.

So in v. 28 the leader is saying, “Yahweh, you are my God.” By implication he is also saying, “So Baal, and Marduk and Amon Ra are not my god. I disown them and any claim they may have on me. I trust exclusively in you, Yahweh. You and you alone are my salvation.”

This confessional aspect of the word “to give thanks” is especially important today in the climate of pluralism, relativism and aggressive ideology. The Christian who “gives thanks” in Biblical terms is saying, “I reject pluralism. I reject atheism. I reject Allah. But I confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world. And in dependence on divine grace, I take him to be my Saviour and my Lord.”

It may be as costly and as distressing for the Christian to make this confession as it was for the worship leader in Psalm 118. But only if we are willing for the humiliation of vv. 5-18 (the cross) will we also win through to the exaltation of vv. 19-28 (the crown). In the same way Paul confessed his desire, “that I...may share [Christ’s] sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:10-11).

Note The AV translates v. 25 “Save now, I beseech thee, O LORD: O LORD, I beseech thee, send now prosperity.” The ESV translates it “Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success.” Neither the first person singular “I” nor the first person plural “we” is found in the Hebrew. The Hebrew does not indicate whether one or many people are speaking in this verse; and it is literally translated, “Ah now! Yahweh save please! Ah now! Yahweh, cause to prosper please!” The choice between one or many speakers is a matter of interpretation. I have taken it that the speaker is the congregation (“we”), since this fits the structure outlined above, and is consistent with the idea that the leader’s words in the second half of the psalm are all tuned to thanksgiving. Moreover, when the “Hosanna” was sung during the Triumphal Entry, it was sung by the people (the “congregation”) and not by Christ (the “leader”).