Psalm 103: God is Love. He will have Mercy and Abundantly Pardon

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PSALM 103 is one of the Old Testament's sublimest utterances on a theme which is basic to both Judaism and Christianity, namely that God is love and in all of his dealings with men that love is manifest. Such a doctrine did not spring up spontaneously; it was the product of profound reflection upon history and personal experience. Nor did the prophets do all the thinking. Psalmists and priests also did their part.

Hermann Gunkel, pioneer of form criticism in the Old Testament,[1] has demonstrated that all except a few of the Hebrew psalms can be traced to a *Sitz im Leben* related to the cultic worship of ancient Israel, some having served the whole congregation when it worshipped as a nation and some the individuals who worshipped alone or with their families and immediate friends, being concerned in their devotions with intensely personal confession, petition, thanksgiving, or protestation of innocence. Gunkel places No. 103 amongst national hymns of thanksgiving, and no doubt it was often so used, but most commentators, even amongst his loyal disciples, feel obliged to discuss it as an individual utterance. Professor Elmer A. Leslie, than whom none could be more faithful to a master, makes peace with the ghost of Gunkel by assuming that the psalm was sung by a soloist as a part of congregational worship.[2] Perhaps so, but more probably it was prescribed as a solo for only those individuals who, while at the temple on festal pilgrimage, took opportunity to fulfil vows of thanksgiving previously planned. The completion of such vows involved sacrifices of some kind, along with suitable prayers and hymns, all of which required the assistance of a priest. It is improbable that many such pilgrims were competent to compose their own litanies, but as good pastors the priests were ready to provide each with a suitable liturgy and assist him in it. No doubt this psalm was often prescribed as an individual hymn of thanksgiving for healing and forgiveness. In brief, it formed part of a Hebrew "Book of Common Order" which apparently represented a combination of prayerbook and hymnary. It was there because of its fidelity to the best in religious experience and because it had been canonized by the judgment of wise and godly men.

So much for the usage whereby the psalm was preserved. How did it originate? Who composed it and why? Exegesis ultimately demands the sincere attempt to become *en rapport* with an author, and no amount of talk about *Gattungen* can obviate that necessity. Witness Fleming James's title *Thirty Psalmists*, not *Thirty Psalms*. In religion, as in patriotism, manners, aesthetics, and all other aspirations of the human spirit, the

current runs from the noble individual to the group, not contrariwise. The Church at its best aspires to the faith of its choice saints at their best. Religion may be the deposit of a widespread common experience, and creeds may be composed by councils, but no hymn was ever "sired by a syndicate". Poems are written by individuals, and the great poets are those who, while speaking for themselves, speak also for the universal soul of man. Professor Samuel Terrien[3] holds the author of Ps. 103 to be an un-creative thinker, while I myself would say that he was definitely creative although not necessarily original. One can be creative without being original. Obviously he drew upon extraneous sources. He paraphrased a couplet from II Isaiah—unless it was the other way round, for priority in literary dependence is difficult to determine with finality—while both he and II Isaiah were apparently indebted for the metaphors about human frailty to Ps. 90; he was familiar with the Genesis accounts of creation, the fall of man, and the flood; and he was quite probably influenced by prophetic teaching on the subject of divine mercy.[4] Yet, true religion is such that it must be indigenous to all saints; otherwise we preachers are merely repeating what our ears have heard.

The major premise in this psalm is that God is like a father. He forgives and redeems his erring people. He is not an arbitrary, relentless administrator of justice meting out to men the precise retribution appropriate to their misdeeds. His judgment seat is a mercy seat where those who fear him are dealt with in loving kindness. He makes himself known by redemptive acts in history and in the personal experience of his saints. But not everybody in ancient Israel agreed with that proposition. There was no want of men, whenever the national spirit or the spirit of any individual saint was distressed, to insist on the basis of "strong Biblical evidence" that God was inexorably relentless in the visitation of their iniquity upon all who displeased him.[5] Concerning such radiant faith Kittel has this to say, and he is right: "What this acknowledgement means we cannot realize till we consider how strongly on the whole in the religion of the Old Testament the fear of the destroying might of Yahweh predominated over trust in his goodness."[6] And Terrien aptly says this: "In words which shoot a glimpse of the Gospel in (*sic*) the Old Testament the poet achieves nothing less than an epigrammatic creed; he explains the essentials of divinity (vv. 11, 12) and uncovers the supreme mystery of the Godhead."[7]

Incidentally, this psalm becomes the more remarkable if we remember that it may have been written by a priest and was certainly used by priests in cultic worship. Now it was priests above all others who magnified the terrible holiness of God which made him so implacably intolerant of offences against his dignity. But here, in and by means of psalms like this, we have priests making sure that Israel's religion does not come to rest in a settled conviction that the ways of God with erring men are best revealed in stories like those of Nadab and Abihu, Dathan and Abiram, the seventy curious men of Bethshemesh, or the watchful Uzzah who died beside the

ark at the threshing floor of Nacon when the oxen stumbled.[8] This is not to say that the priests treated sin lightly, but that they desired to present God as father rather than judge and treated men as sons first and as sinners afterward.

The psalm falls naturally into the following divisions wherein each major thought suggests its successor in a chain of ideas.

I. Personal reason for thanksgiving: pardon, healing, restoration to a full, rich life, vv. 1-5.
II. God's goodness also manifest in Israel's history, vv. 6-10.
III. God is like a father; and as Creator he sympathizes with man's limitations, vv. 11-14.
IV. Man is ephemeral but God endures; therefore divine love and care are assured to all generations, vv. 15-18.
V. A doxology in which all creation is summoned to the praise of God, vv. 19-21.

Vv. 1-5 explain why the psalm was written. The author had recently recovered from a serious illness in which, "like a true Hebrew",[9] he had recognized the rebuke and chastisement of God. Fully restored to bodily vigor and mental peace he betook himself to the sanctuary for formal thanksgiving, but being a poet in his own right he composed his own hymn, which so pleased the priests in charge that they added it to their collection.

To address one's soul is merely a Hebrew device for addressing oneself—which some languages do not possess. The word *nephesh* has been well described as "a pronoun at large". "All that is within me" is an elaboration upon "soul", the whole complex of psychological functions attributed to the vital organs called "covered" or "hidden" parts in Ps. 51: 8. "Benefits" (v.2) comes from the same verb (*gamal*) as does "rewarded" in v.9. It involves the idea of reciprocity in which one person's act is conditioned by another's, whether these be gracious or ungracious. Both shades of meaning are present in I Sam. 24: 17. The word "forgive" (*salach*) in v.3 is used only of divine pardon prompted by divine grace. It suggests restoration to favor, the putting of all memory of offence out of mind and implies no necessity for atonement or expiation. Forgiveness and healing are equated by the parallelism here because even the most devout looked upon disease as divine chastisement, however mysterious. "Redeem" in v.4 involves the verb *ga'al,* "to play the part of next of kin", a noble and cherished ideal of Hebrew society. It appears in Job 19: 2, but here it is coupled with *chesedh* (Cf. Hos. 6: 6; Micah 6: 8) which denotes the deathless devotion of a blood-kinsman. R. S. V. translates *chesedh* by "steadfast love", which is at least better than "loving kindness". "Tender mercy" turns on the Hebrew term *racham,* commonly (but badly) translated by "pity". It denotes the feeling of a mother for her child and is cognate with the term *rechem,* "womb". "Destruction" or "the pit" simply denotes death, which no Hebrew seemed to fear as the normal consequence of old age but which

all resented when it came untimely. As a healer God rescues his own from death, which would rob him of them. "To satisfy with good things" suggests the provision of a rich and happy life. The Hebrew is obscure but the sense is clear.

The recitation of his personal experiences reminds the saint that God has dealt similarly with the nation as a whole. Thanks to the Hebrew instinct for a feeling of "corporate personality" his mind fluctuated naturally between personal and national experiences. Not for one only, but for *all* in covenant relationship with him (cf. v.18) God "does righteousness". "To do righteousness" suggests ethical conduct, especially as fidelity toward one's own, but in usage the idea runs over into that of goodness, mercy, and kindness. "Justice for all the oppressed" implies deliverance for the victims and retribution for the offenders. The author is probably thinking of Hebrew history as well as of divine providence in personal cases. To Moses and to Israel ever afterward God has made known his "ways" and his "works", i.e., has revealed what he *is* and what he *does* through great redemptive acts. This is what Professor Ernest Wright delights to call "theology as recital".[10] V.8 contains an extremely strong affirmation of God's graciousness as opposed to arbitrary justice and of his fidelity to his own. There again we have those words *chesedh* and *racham* (cf. on v.4), but with them another, *chanan,* which means "to be gracious", "to show favor", and a graphic idiom, *'erekh appayim,* which means "patient", "slow to become angry". Strangely enough, the much abused word "love" (*'ahabh*) does not occur in the psalm. The Hebrews preferred *racham,* for which we seem to have no perfect translation. Our English "chide" misses the point in v.9 where the Hebrew *ribh* suggests the relentless pressing of a charge in court (cf. Micah 6: 1, 2; Jer. 25: 31). God is not the kind who demands "the last farthing" (Matt. 5: 26). Vv. 10f. emphatically state that man's sinfulness is not the measure of God's mercy. He does not repay us "tit for tat". (Observe the word *gamal* again. Cf. on v.2, and cf. Rom. 12: 17.) On the contrary, God's steadfast love is more like the overarching heavens above the earth or like the waters of the flood which "prevailed" over the earth. Note an allusion to the flood in the use of *gabhar,* the same word that occurs in Gen. 17: 18,19. However, God's grace is at least partially conditioned by the attitude of man in that it is effective only for such as "fear" him, i.e., those who reverence and serve him.[11] In v.14 we have a lovely allusion to the older creation story (Gen. 2: 7). He who himself formed us out of dust is not apt to forget the limitations from which we suffer (cf. Job 10: 8-13; 14: 15). God soon discovered in Eden that the man he had made was weak.

But the excursus into history and the story of Creation forcibly reminded the poet of the brevity and frailty of human life in contrast to the eternity of God; hence the adaptation of a couplet which occurs also in Isa. 40: 6, and which probably originated in different form with Ps. 90. "As for man, his days are as grass." Did not God say to man when he was expelled from

Eden, "Dust thou art and to dust shalt thou return"? Yes, but even at the gate of Eden judgment was tempered with mercy; so, let us not forget the rainbow cast by that mercy upon the dark cloud of human sin and failure. Hence, "The steadfast love of God endures forever". The author of Ps. 90 forgot his rainbow completely and the prophet, as might be expected, made the *word* of God endure forever; but this man is thinking of how God deals with sinners whom he loves. His *steadfast love* endures forever. Although "brief life is here our portion", we enjoy divine compassion and the same is sure for our children to all generations.

Vv. 19-21 require no special consideration beyond the observation that such doxologies were a favorite technique with psalmists. The allusion to God as king in heaven is quite common in cultic hymns, especially those used at the Feast of Tabernacles.[12] Heaven is bidden to unite with earth in the praise of God's goodness. There is warrant in the New Testament for the thought that the praise of grateful men is blended with that of the heavenly host (Rev. 4: 4-11). We find a similar but more elaborate doxology in Ps. 148.

Finally, some homiletical and practical observations:

1. Ultimately all religion goes back to personal experience. Whoever speaks in the name of religion should begin by addressing himself and should hear in response his own soul's "Amen". Moreover, if it be *true* religion it must turn upon experience with the *goodness of God,* for he who has not known God in his goodness has not known God as he really is. Here, of course, the Gospels take precedence as religious literature over even the prophets and the psalmists.

2. For all that is tragic in history because of the sinfulness of men, there is much of the sublime and it springs from God's self-revelation in history as a redeemer. Such a revelation can be appreciated only by the backward look, and even then only the eye of faith can see it.[13]

3. It is not enough to think of God as Creator, sovereign Lord, or judge alone. It is imperative for our spiritual peace that we know him as Father as revealed in Jesus Christ. That is not to make sin less but more, for sin against a father is worse than any offence against authority based upon impersonal relationships. Sin against a father is sin against love; yet sin against love is the only sin that can be forgiven. Many words and phrases in Ps. 103 are calculated to show that our religion is grounded, just as Jesus maintained that it was, in those relationships which make the family. The cross of Christ itself has significance only in the light of what the psalmist calls *chesedh*, that steadfast loyalty which prevails within the bonds of kinship.

4. The one real antidote for despair over the frailty and futility of human life is a sound conviction of the eternity and unfailing constancy of the steadfast love of God. Only through such a faith can we leave the unseen future in his hands. The psalmist had no clear conception of a life after death with God, such as the Christian has; yet, apart from the offices of

Christ, the Christian's faith is the same as his. We cannot drift beyond the love and care of "him who holdeth our soul in life".

5. Religious optimism is largely the by-product of simple gratitude. Blessed is he who has a gift for gratitude, who can "count his blessings". That is the sovereign catalyst which reduces all experience and all reflection to worship.

NOTES

1. H. Gunkel, *Ausgewählte Psalmen*; and *Die Psalmen*. H. Gunkel and J. Begrich, *Einleitung in die Psalmen*. For a short explanation of form criticism in the Psalter cf. Adam Welch, *The Psalter in Life, Worship and History*, and for a complete survey of the literature A. R. Johnson, *The Psalms* in *The O. T. and Modern Study* (H. H. Rowley, ed.).

2. *The Psalms*, p. 46. But, according to *Tractate Sopherim*, XIX, 2, Psalm 103 was customarily used in the early Christian Era for the Day of Atonement—in which case it would have been a congregational hymn. Vv. 15–17 are heard at every Jewish funeral service.

3. *The Psalms and their Meaning for Today*, p. 207.

4. Cf., for example, Hos. 11; Isa. 55; Jer. 3. Numerous other references could be cited.

5. Only a few of innumerable references can be cited. Cf. Ex. 32:25–35; Num. 14:28–30; 25:1–9; I Sam. 3:14; 15:1–16:13; II Sam. 21:1–14; II Chron. 24; Ps. 106; Isa. 1:21–31; Jer. 15:1–13; Amos 1:1–2:16.

6. Quoted by Fleming James in *Thirty Psalmists*, p. 48.

7. *Op. cit.*, p. 208.

8. Lev. 10; Num. 16; I Sam. 6:19; II Sam. 6:6–8.

9. Fleming James, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

10. *God Who Acts*, Ch. I.

11. I understand "the fear of the Lord" as a comprehensive term covering all that goes to make up a proper attitude toward God.

12. The Feast of Tabernacles coincided with the beginning of the new year, at which time it was apparently customary to celebrate the annual enthronement of Yahweh as Lord of Creation. For most convenient references cf. A. R. Johnson, *The Rôle of the King in the Jerusalem Cultus*, Ch. III in S. H. Hooke (ed.), *The Labyrinth*, or introduction to Leslie's *The Psalms*, and James's *Thirty Psalmists*, or Ch. VII in W. O. E. Oesterley's *The Psalms*, Vol. I.

13. As an excellent modern illustration of historians who can discern the hand of God, cf. Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History*.