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# The Psalmists' Belief in God's Presence

WALLACE I. WOLVERTON

**M**OST STUDENTS of the Bible know that the prophets of the Old Testament had a special awareness of God's presence. It took the form of an inescapable immediacy; and the prophets' knowledge of God was an intimate person-to-person intercourse.<sup>1</sup> What of the psalmists? They often testified that God was near to them; but many times they complained that he was far off. What are we to make of this? Without entering into psychological implications (for our concern is not with the *nature* of the relationship of the psalmists with God), what were the conceptions which they apparently held regarding *God as Present Reality*? This study involves a theological, not a psychological, inquiry, if it is possible so to limit it. It requires an examination of the testimonies of psalmists concerning God's presence, or his "absence," as the case may be.

In surveying their testimonies one is immediately confronted with the problem of the contrast between God's presence and his transcendence. This relationship, transcendence-presence, must be explored, for it is met with frequently in the Psalter. In Th. C. Vriezen's *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* transcendence-communion is one of the structural appositions or dialectics utilized for organizing the beliefs of Israel. For the purposes of this inquiry, however, it seems that the dialectic transcendence-presence is less likely to include as much of the psychological dimensions as would an apposition which takes communion with God for one of its parts. Moreover, we shall see that the presence of God to the psalmist does not always mean communion; it can mean just the opposite.

Yahwism is partly indebted to more ancient religions for its conception of divine transcendence. The "high god" monotheism of Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia during the Late Bronze period set one god above all other gods, while these in turn frequently became the high god's manifestations. This high god was sometimes so exalted as to become remote. Now when in early Israelite history Yahweh appeared victorious over other powers he virtually assumed the "high god" position, but with a difference: all other gods were ultimately, if not originally, supposed to be nothings, or at best Yahweh's nameless messengers or servants. And, generally speaking, the dwelling place, temple, or throne of Yahweh or Elohim was in or above the heavens, high above the earth, and thus far removed from man's earthly plane. In short, transcendence was conceived spatially.

1. Cf. E. W. Heaton, *The Old Testament Prophets* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1958), pp. 45-54, for a useful discussion of this relationship of the canonical prophets with God. For a fuller discussion from a psychological and existential standpoint, cf. Sigmund Mowinckel, *Die Erkenntnis Gottes bei den alttestamentlichen Propheten* (Oslo: Grøndahl and Sons, 1941), pp. 3-11 and 54-64.

Another factor contributing to the notion of transcendence was not primarily spatial. This was the idea of holiness, which in its cultically developed form meant separateness or otherness. This also was an idea common to the ancient religions; and in this numinous sense Yahweh was transcendent as the Holy God. As the *Holy One of Israel* he was something else again, for in the prophets' developed teaching this meant that he was the Wholly Righteous One, i.e., *morally* distant in an absolute sense from sinful men.

The psalmists give eloquent testimony to these ideas of transcendence—God's spatial exaltedness, his sacred otherness, and his moral absoluteness. In common with the religious poets of the Near Eastern World they also attest to God's nearness or presence, spatially conceived. In other religions this was expressed in part by temples, statuary, and other cult objects which were hosts, so to speak, to the divine presence. While in Israel's cultus images were few and ultimately entirely eliminated, temples were eventually built, such as the one in Jerusalem, to enshrine the presence of Yahweh. These temples had a dual significance: not only did they symbolize Yahweh's localized presence but also they were thought to be gates to heaven out of which Yahweh moved to act upon the earth. Here at the temple he was also transcendent in both numinous and moral holiness. So it was both wonderful and dreadful to be near to him; and it could be most distressing if even at the temple, the locus of his presence, he seemed to remain deliberately aloof from his devotee. On the other hand, it could be a joyful thing to receive signs of his presence and favour.

No discussion of the presence of God should neglect that distinctive feature of Israel's historic faith, its covenant with Yahweh. Again and again, within the terms of that covenant, Yahweh had promised to be *with* his people. When they forgot those terms or rebelled at them he removed himself as their guide and protector or "visited" them with punishments. Our psalms record such events. They also portray them as internalized in the life of the individual worshipper; he experienced God's presence, or he knew rejection as a definitely personal loss of God's presence. What is said about God's nearness or distance in relation to all this provides the data for a theological examination of the royal psalms<sup>5</sup> to see what light they may shed upon the statement.<sup>2</sup>

### I. GOD'S PRESENCE WITH THE KING

Israel believed that its king enjoyed a special relationship to God.<sup>3</sup> He had been chosen by God and crowned and anointed upon Mount Zion. Yahweh's revelation was vouchsafed to him, and he could rejoice in Yahweh's special

2. George S. Gunn in his recent book *God in the Psalms* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1956), while arguing for the suitability of the Psalms as a source for theology, does not himself explore the apposition transcendence-presence in any formal manner.

3. The God-to-king relationship followed the Mesopotamian more than the Egyptian pattern, cf. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament; Psalmen* (Wageningen, Netherlands: Erziehungvereins Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1960), pp. 18f.

protection, etc.<sup>4</sup> It seems reasonable therefore to begin our inquiry with an examination of the royal psalms<sup>5</sup> to see what light they may shed upon the presence of God with the king. Two psalms will serve our immediate purpose: 2 and 18.

In Psalm 2 the king stands to Yahweh in the relation of an adopted son: "You are my son. I myself have begotten you today. Ask me, and I will give you nations as your inheritance." In Psalm 18:4-20 the king recites an account of special deliverance. After addressing Yahweh in a most intimate fashion<sup>6</sup> he relates how when the battle was going against him he cried for help, and Yahweh heard him from his temple. Then God sent from on high and rescued him and brought him to a wide open place, out of his battle straits (vv. 16-19).<sup>7</sup> Yahweh was the source of his military prowess (vv. 32-40). There is no specific mention of the presence of God, although it is implied in the king's boast that Yahweh came to his aid: "He sent (or reached) from on high and took me"; and when he says: "Thou dost cause my lamp to shine . . . God brightens my darkness" (v. 28); and again: "By thee I can race to a raid. . . I can leap over a wall" (v. 29).<sup>8</sup> God's spatial *transcendence*, however, is asserted in these psalms. "He who sits in heaven laughs" (2:4). His abode was in the sky and he came down to earth to deliver the king (18:6-10). God *came to him*, the heavenly king to the earthly one. The commentaries differ as to a mythical or historical basis for Psalm 18. For our purposes the point makes little difference. The king was in any case thought to stand in a special, close relationship to God.<sup>9</sup>

The ideology of the royal psalms was imitated by commoners in Israel, just as the royal worship forms of Egypt and Mesopotamia were democratized. Probably in imitation of the royal psalm pattern, another psalmist said: "He will send from heaven and deliver me" (57:3).<sup>10</sup> The ideas in Psalms 2 and 18—that God is transcendently exalted in the heavens, yet is one who comes to save—are to be found in many thanksgivings and laments

4. Cf. Hermann Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933), p. 156, where other indications of special relationship are cited.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 140ff. Gunkel classified 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132, 144:1-11 as royal psalms.

6. The only case in the Old Testament where *raham* is used to express love for God. Kraus therefore thinks it is questionable (*Biblischer Kommentar*, p. 138). It does not occur in 2 Sam. 22, the parallel to Psalm 18.

7. Artur Weiser considers Psalms 18:4-20 a recital by the king in the cultus, in order that this event of deliverance might be internalized by the people as a realized presence of God. He notes the interplay of the perfect and imperfect tenses as an indication of this. Cf. *Das Alte Testament Deutsch: Die Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955), pp. 126f.

8. To verse 29 compare David's athleticism in his dance before the ark, to prove that the divine strength was in him (2 Sam. 6:14-15). The writer has witnessed such an exhibition in Africa when the legitimacy of a newly succeeding chief was in doubt. With this interpretation no emendation of the text of Psalm 18:29 or 2 Sam. 22:30 is necessary.

9. Another psalmist prays for the king: "May he be enthroned forever *before God!*" (Psalm 61:7). *Lifnê* here suggests a special closeness to God.

10. Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, pp. 148f. Cf. Kraus, *Biblischer Kommentar* on Psalm 57 as a royal form taken over by an unknown man. Alfred Jeremias gives examples of the insertion of individuals' own names in Assyrian prayers which were initially composed for the King. Cf. *Das Alte Testament im Lichte des Alten Orients* (4th ed., Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1930), pp. 640f.

of individuals. They are also found in the collective laments of the community, such as Psalm 80.

A number of commentaries place Psalm 80 in the time of the kingdom. As in the royal psalms already discussed, God is transcendent in his heavenly abode, from which he moves to accomplish salvation. He dwells above the cherubin, and he looks down from heaven. He is urged to stir up his warrior strength and to manifest it for the sake of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, who presumably have suffered a military reverse. "Let thy face shine that we may be delivered" (v. 7). "Come to inspect this vine! O God of Hosts, do thou return!" (v. 14).<sup>11</sup> It seems clear that God had been absent but now, it is hoped, he will come to Israel again.

## II. GOD'S PRESENCE WITH THE DEVOUT

The dialectic transcendence-presence in the theology of Israel is probably best expressed by Isa. 57:15: "I dwell on high, as the Holy One [AV "I dwell in the high and holy place"]; but with him also that is contrite and humble in spirit." The passage is post-exilic. Israel seems never to have lost its belief in God's transcendence; indeed this feature tended to be emphasized, and intermediary manifestations of God became more and more necessary in post-exilic Judaism. However, a pietistic tendency in Israel's thought also insisted upon God's presence in the manner expressed by the second part of the Isaiah passage. Psalm 102, for instance, maintains the transcendence of God; yet asserts that from his holy height he looks down to earth and hears the groan of the prisoner (vv. 19-20). This looking down is expressed in Psalm 113 as *looking far down* as if to span a great distance (*hammashpili lir'oth*) "in the heavens and in the earth" (i.e., upon all creation)<sup>12</sup> "he raises the poor from the dust; the needy he lifts up from the ash heaps" (vv. 5-7). Or he looks down to see if there is anyone who is wise, any who seeks him (Ps. 53:2; 14:2). The Psalmists attest that God, although transcendent, *comes* to men in their time of troubles; and for men of pious disposition he has special concern. There is a tendency to believe that these devoted men are most likely to enjoy his presence (e.g., "God is present with a righteous generation" [14:5]); but we shall see that his advents, and his continuing presence, are not to be counted upon as a matter of course.

## III. THE ABSENCE OF GOD

What are we to make of the frequent assertion that God is far off or somehow removed? In Psalm 44 (generally recognized to be late) God is believed to have rejected his people for, it is said, he had not gone out with their

11. Hebrew is *shuv-na'*, which I read, with Kraus, "return." The LXX puts this word before the other imperatives thus: "Turn, we pray thee; look from heaven, and behold and visit this vine." In any case the plea is for a return of favour and concern, to be manifested in a coming-to-visit, a kind of advent. *Peqodh* with *re'eh* seems to have the force of coming-to-see, or coming-to-inspect.

12. A note in *Biblia Hebraica* suggests that this phrase should come just after, "Who is like our God?" The meaning for this study remains the same.

armies (v. 9). The people claim that they have not forgotten the name of God or worshipped a strange deity. Therefore God should awaken from his sleep and no longer hide his face. The theology seems to be quite primitive for such a late psalm, but in public laments we might expect archaic expressions. National reverses meant in effect God's absence, although in this psalm there appears to be no cause for this absence in any unfaithfulness of his people. Even God's supposed drowsiness has not prevented his knowledge of their faithfulness: "for he knows [even] the hidden things of the mind" (v. 21). They sense his nearness in his omniscience, but are aware of his refusal to be with them and to act in their behalf. Such a Job-like sentiment is also found in individual laments. In Psalm 35 a man who seems to be involved in a court case feels that God sees what is taking place but is far off from him and requires arousing.<sup>13</sup>

#### IV. GOD'S HIDDENNESS

Herbert Schrader in his *Der verborgene Gott* has shown the far-reaching implications of Israel's second commandment. The prohibition against images of Yahweh meant that the God of Israel intended to be an essentially hidden god.<sup>14</sup> The less orthodox Yahwist might resort to various kinds of fetishism to achieve some sense of spiritual security in the face of unseen powers,<sup>15</sup> but the pious Yahwist often felt that God was deliberately hiding; i.e., he was refusing to give the kind of manifestation which would assure his devotee that he was at hand. In Psalm 10 the afflicted soul felt that Yahweh was both far off and hiding his face. He begged Yahweh to bestir himself and raise his hand in his behalf (vv. 1, 12). In verse 11 it is not clear who said it, the afflicted or his oppressor, but someone either complained or took comfort in the fact that "God has forgotten. He has hid his face. He will never see." Koehler thinks this means that when God hid his face he could not see; but this interpretation is doubtful in the light of other passages which tell of his hiding his face, although seeing from behind a veil, so to speak. But Koehler rightly says, "The face of God is the revelation of the grace of God."<sup>16</sup> "Face" is also a word signifying God's *presence*, for "When one seeks out a holy place in order to come in prayer and sacrifice into closer contact with God, one can say that one seeks God's face."<sup>17</sup> "Face" may also mean favour and may be withheld for a time; in which case the psalmist may cry out, "How long, O Yahweh! Wilt thou forever forget me? How

13. Ps. 35:22-23. Cf. 7:6-7.

14. Cf. H. Schrader, *Der verborgene Gott* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1949), pp. 65ff.

15. Yehezkel Kaufmann makes a careful distinction respecting Israel's idolatry. The biblical indictment of idolatry shows that "the popular idolatry was not authentic polytheism, with mythology, temples, and priesthoods. It was vestigial idolatry, a vulgar superstition of the sort that the ignorant level of monotheistic peoples practice to this day. YHWH was God, but the vulgar believed also in the virtue of idols, amulets, spells and pagan rites; saw no harm in traffic with satyrs and demons; believed in the influence of the host of heaven." (*The Religion of Israel* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960], p. 142.).

16. Ludwig Koehler, *Old Testament Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, n.d.) p. 124.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

long wilt thou hide thy face from me?" (13:1-3).<sup>18</sup> The community of Israel in a collective lament could cry out in the same way about their God who hides in the time of national calamity. In Psalm 89, the last section of which is a public lament, it is alleged that the great promises made by God to the Davidic dynasty have been forgotten by him: "How long, O Yahweh! Wilt thou hide thyself forever [and] thy wrath burn like fire?" (v. 46).

There was a tendency to believe that when God hid himself, i.e., withheld his grace or favour, the individual or the community became prey to inimical forces.<sup>19</sup> This, however, is only partly the case with orthodox Yahwism, for in accordance with the teachings of the prophets Yahweh himself was the author of many of their miseries (not all, because man brought much upon himself). Therefore, if like Job they could not find the cause in themselves it was probably Yahweh himself who for reasons best known to himself had sent their afflictions. Moreover, he was deliberately hiding; although he was near enough to hear their cries and to know what befell them. The nearness of God was felt in a wrath which burnt like fire. In this case the dialectic transcendence-presence was quite a different reality from that expressed in Isaiah 57:15. It now means, "I dwell on high, as the Holy One; but also I dwell close in dreadfulness, and not in fellowship." Such a theology is not congenial to the average reader of the psalms; yet it is discernible in a psalm which bewails the destruction of the temple:

Why, O God, *hast* thou so long forsaken? Why *doth* thy wrath smoke against the flock of thy pasture? Remember thy congregation which of old thou hast acquired, the tribe of thine inheritance which thou hast ransomed—  
Mount Zion in which thou *didst* dwell (74:1-2).

God *has* forsaken; and his wrath *is still felt* as a present reality.

## V. FORSAKEN IN SICKNESS

It was also believed that when God turns his face away from men, or from any of his creatures, they began to sicken and die.<sup>20</sup> So in a very real sense of the words, they lived by the grace of God, for life was a bestowed favour. Health was the sign of God's presence in weal and favour. What then of old age and its attendant weaknesses and illnesses? This was a real problem to the Israelite. While realizing the fact that man perished "as the flower of the field" he nevertheless hoped for strength and vigour right up to the last; and the feebleness of old age became a theological problem. This is clearly attested in Psalm 71. An old man who had been dependent upon God from his childhood prays that God will not dismiss him in his old age when his

18. Cf. the lament of Nebuchadnezzar in Kraus, *Biblischer Kommentar*, p. 100.

19. Sigmund Mowinkel's well-known thesis, that the individual laments (*Klagepsalmen*) show the enemy to be a sorcerer whose adverse occult practices are directed towards the psalmist, is accepted (without its rather elaborate extensions) by the writer. The theological problems still remain with the psalmist: Why, and how long will God permit the enemy to practice his machinations? Cf. *Psalmstudien I* (Amsterdam: P. Schippers, 1921).

20. Cf. Ps. 89:46-47; 143:7; 104:29.

strength fails, or be far from him; may he haste to his aid!<sup>21</sup> In verse 21 he prays: "Let my strength increase! Do thou surround (me) with thy consolation."<sup>22</sup>

Most of the psalmists believed that God was only a god of the living who had no concern for the dead. One man who suffered both wickedness and enmity begged God to *turn* towards him (in psalm language *shuvah* may also mean *return*) and save him. His rescue must come *in this life* because death would cut him off from God completely: "For there is no thought of thee in death; in Sheol, who praises thee?"<sup>23</sup> Psalm 88 speaks of the dead as those "whom thou dost remember no more; and they are cut off from thy domain."<sup>24</sup> There are few indications of any differing view, and although the problem of death was one of the most critical of all problems<sup>25</sup> the psalmists with few exceptions<sup>26</sup> persist in their belief that death separates from God.

If we remember that the wealful presence of God was signalized by health and vigour it will not be surprising to find that the psalmists believed sickness meant, in effect, God's absence. In Psalm 88 a man who had been sickly from his youth feels rejected by God. He had recently been close to death, and this close brush was regarded as God's doing. Weakness may result from God's having hidden his face (143:7; cf. 30:3; 13:1-4). Indeed the psalmists generally feel that God has caused their illnesses.<sup>27</sup> This view was different, as we have seen, from that of the Babylonians, who believed that demons caused their sickness. The difference was one of the outcomes of developed monotheism. The Hebrew idea caused great theological difficulty and a certain ambivalence: God had abandoned them, therefore they were sick; yet they felt in a more positive way that it was God's *direct* doing. And the same god who had visited them with illnesses was the very one who must restore health and vitality. They had no recourse to another god in order to outwit the one who troubled them. This conviction accounts, no doubt, for the intensity of their supplications and for the exaggerations in the descriptions of their plight. God's mind and attitude towards them might only be changed by the force of their pleas and persuasions.

## VI. AWAY FROM GOD

The belief that God was present in Zion and, by extension, that he hovered over his own land meant anxiety for his worshippers when they went away. This was keenly felt by the exiles in Babylon. It was not possible to sing the exultant *shir* to Yahweh in a strange land (137:4)—not

21. The LXX has *prosches*, "draw nigh," at v. 12.

22. The Hebrew is difficult at v. 21*b*. The versions have "return and comfort me."

23. Ps. 6:4*f*.

24. Ps. 88:5; lit., "hand." Cf. 115:17.

25. Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, p. 185.

26. Psalms 48, 73, and 139 may be late exceptions. Cf. the discussion of this problem by R. Tourney and R. Schwab in *La Sainte Bible; les Psaumes* (2nd ed., Paris: Cerf., 1955), pp. 45*f*. Psalm 139 is very likely late, as both its teaching and its linguistic forms indicate. Cf. W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Psalms* (London: S.P.C.K., 1959), p. 553.

27. Cf. Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, p. 191; Ps. 38:2-3; 39:10-11; 51:7-10.



that all singing ended for the exiles, but that the inspiring *shir* accompanied by priests' trumpets and led by the Levitical choir could not be undertaken.<sup>28</sup> (These musical efforts at the temple probably had helped the congregation to realize the presence of God.) To be out from under God's care caused the absent one to thirst for God (63:1, 7). His heart was faint ("I cry unto thee in the weakness of my heart from the end of the earth") and he longed to take shelter under the wings of God.<sup>29</sup> Many interpreters stress the pain of separation from the temple itself. Our point is, however, that at one time in Israel's history, probably in pre-exilic times, spatial separation from the "place" of God meant spiritual separation. In Psalm 55 the suppliant suffers a double estrangement, from a trusted friend and from his homeland (vv. 13-14). He is in a strange city where violence threatens (vv. 9-11). In the second part of this psalm, probably a separate unit originally (vv. 16ff.), he finds asylum, very likely in the temple. Psalms 42 and 43 form a single unit. In them the psalmist is away from the temple and God has forgotten him. In this alien place at the sources of the Jordan he is mocked with the question: Where is your God? He longs to appear before God, i.e., at the Holy Mount where God dwells. Meanwhile he feels rejected, while his enemy scorns him.

#### VII. GOD'S NON-COMMUNICATING PRESENCE

Psalm 22:1-21 deserves special attention for two reasons: first, because it has come to epitomize the depth of suffering experienced by one who feels abandoned by God, a prototypal complaint of the godforsaken; and secondly, because it expresses the distress suffered when God was absent in his transcendence. The following retranslated passages display this notion<sup>30</sup>:

Why hast thou forsaken me? [Thou art] far from  
 my cry, [from] the words of my entreaty (v. 1).  
 My God, I cry in the daytime and thou dost not answer;  
 and at night I do not keep silence (v. 2).  
 Thou art transcendentally holy, thou Praise of Israel (v. 3).  
 Be not far from me because affliction is near;  
 and there is no helper (v. 11).

Verses 21b-31 constitute a song of ultimate salvation. In verse 24 there is the testimony that God eventually did not despise his lowly estate or hide his face, but heard his cry.

In this psalm we discover the tension in transcendentalist ideas which involve exaltedness, moral absoluteness (v. 3; cf. Isa. 57:15), hiddenness (v. 24), and the distance felt as the result simply of non-communication (vv. 1, 11). The effects of God's removal are loss of the regard of others

28. Cf. Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), Vol. III, p. 334.

29. Ps. 61:2-4. Cf. 42:6; 84:2; 120:5.

30. In the very limited reconstruction of the Hebrew text at v. 1 I have followed Kraus' suggestions (*Biblischer Kommentar*, p. 175). My translation of v. 3 requires little textual emendation, God as the "Praise" (sg) of Israel" being attested by Dt. 10:21; Ps. 109:1; and Jer. 17:14.

and the loss by the psalmist of his own self-respect (vv. 6-7), a condition which becomes unbearable when his enemies close in upon him (vv. 12, 13, 16) and he becomes distraught with fear (vv. 14, 15, 17). His plight is made more lamentable when he considers how devoted to God he had been even from childhood (vv. 9-10). Even recollection of the salvation-history had not served to quell his fears (vv. 4-5); he could not, so to speak, internalize God's past saving acts in the history of his people, and transcending the dimension of time find Yahweh near to him. Communion with God, as a correlative to "social" proximity, or *personal* nearness, was denied him. In the Old Testament there are few testimonies of the desperate need for God's communicating presence so eloquent as Psalm 22. We sense that God is near enough to hear, but is socially distant, permitting, if not causing, the psalmist's afflictions. We sense also that the presence of God *comes*, even *hastes to his aid* (vv. 19f.; cf. 38:22). The second part of the psalm (many commentators hold it to be a separate composition) tells of a deliverance; but we get no indication, such as we found in the royal psalms, that God came or reached down from heaven to help the man. Rather it would seem that God came out of hiding: "and he did not hide his face from him" (v. 24). Communion was restored. The feeling that God was transcendentally absent changed to an assurance of God's sustaining presence, as a result of God's initiative. There was little, it seems, that a suffering soul in such circumstances could do but wait and cry out.<sup>31</sup>

Some psalmists held to the rather primitive notion that God was sleeping or drowsing, or was simply inattentive. But some of them who put emphasis upon his high transcendence also stress that he is nonetheless very attentive: he sees and knows all. From his holy temple, from his throne in heaven, "his eyes look [at the labourer, LXX], his eyelids try [i.e., look narrowly at] human beings" (11:4). "Although exalted, Yahweh sees the lowly; and he knows the haughty from afar" (138:6).<sup>32</sup> He knows man's thoughts from afar; darkness and light, day and night make no difference (139:2, 11-12). He knows the path or way of the righteous ones (1:6; 142:3). Even the hidden things of the mind (44:21) and the psalmist's guilt and foolishness are not unknown to him (69:5); the psalmist's iniquities and his most secret matter (hidden sinful conduct) are in the light of God's countenance (90:8). He tries the hearts and kidneys (7:9); he keeps count of the psalmist's tossings (or "wanderings") and tears (56:8). God has seen his lowliness and knows that his soul is in straits (31:7); his "times" (LXX, "lots") are in God's hand (Vulgate, "in manibus tuis sortes meae," v. 15). God's omniscience is, moreover, deduced from the fact of his creation of the world:

Will not he who planted the ear hear?  
Or the fashioner of the eye take notice?  
Yahweh knows the thoughts of men, that they  
are [only] breath (94:9, 11).

31. Cf. Ps. 33:18-22.

32. Cf. Ps. 35:22; 113:5-6.

These notions of omniscience, linked as they are with transcendence, may or may not be cause for satisfaction. There may be comfort or discomfort in the realization that, although transcendent, God sees, hears, indeed *knows* all. But such omniscience is really a kind of presence; to a sinner God may be actually "too close for comfort," and in no way comforting. But God's full knowledge of man's undeserved trials brought a degree of comfort in the hope that he would eventually come to help. However, when those trials were the result of guilt, and had been visited upon him by God, man might still cry out for relief, well aware that God knew his culpability. This realization of God's presence *in judgment* could be at times so uncomfortable that, as in Psalm 39, the sinner would cry out,

Turn thy gaze away from me, that I may be glad  
before I go away and be no more (v. 13).

And in Psalm 51:9 are the familiar words: "Hide thy face from my sins!"

### VIII. GOD'S PERSONAL PRESENCE

We have seen how the presence of God was believed to be the result of his own initiative. This appears to be an earlier conception as in the case of God's coming to the aid of the king. A psalm which borrows much of the terminology of the royal psalms (e.g., God is his shield; answered him when he called; smote all his enemies) speaks of God as man's guardian during sleep (3:5).<sup>33</sup> By contrast to those psalms which suggest that God has to be aroused, Psalm 121 speaks of Yahweh as a constant, never-sleeping watcher over his faithful one (vv. 4, 7-8). There are many expressions for God's providence, such as *covering*, *surrounding*, *steadying*, and the like, which of course imply his near presence. He *covers* his faithful ones (5:12): "Thou hast covered my head in the day of battle" (140:7); "Under his feathers may he cover you" (91:4). He *surrounds* his people: "The angel of Yahweh camps all around those who fear him" (34:7; cf. 32:7). He also supports or *steadies*<sup>34</sup>: "Yahweh steadies the righteous ones" (37:17); "Though he fall he will not be prostrate because Yahweh steadies his hand" (v. 24); "Yahweh is a sustainer to all who fall, and an uplifter to all who are bent down" (145:14); "My soul did cleave after thee; thy right hand did sustain me" (63:8); "Thou art the maintainer of my lot" (16:5). One of the favourite words of the psalmist is *hasah*, which means both *to trust in* (God) and *to take refuge in* (him). Indeed the psalms are replete with expressions which denote refuge, stronghold, and the like to describe the sense of security one feels in God. But to go into these any further would carry us beyond the limits of this investigation.<sup>35</sup>

33. Cf. Ps. 4:8; 127:2.

34. The Hebrew verbs are *samak* and *tamak*.

35. For a thorough exposition of the psalmists' religious experience the reader is referred to H. J. Fanken, *The Mystical Communion with YHVH in the Book of Psalms* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954).

Does this nearness of God result solely from the divine initiative? For the most part, yes. But there is one remarkable passage which implies initiative on the part of the psalmist: "I have set<sup>36</sup> Yahweh always before me" (16:8); and another suggests the same thing when it says of the insolent that "they have not put thee before them" (86:14).<sup>37</sup> Does this mean only to keep in mind the idea of God, or his commands, or his faithfulness, or some other characteristic? Or does it mean calling him to mind and *as a result* enjoying his presence? If so it would imply God's constant presence, waiting only to be recognized.

Reference has already been made to Psalm 139 in another connection. It is unique in its testimony concerning God's omniscience and omnipresence. Oesterley gives a most discerning treatment of this psalmist who, he says, "was far in advance of most of his contemporaries in his conception of God." But his is no pantheistic conception. "The stress which the psalmist lays on the Personality of God shows that he is far from holding any pantheistic conception, after the manner of Greek speculation; to him (to use modern expressions) divine transcendence and divine immanence centre in Divine Personality."<sup>38</sup> But in the light of what we have seen in this survey is it after all proper to use the expression, divine immanence? Oesterley has suggested that this psalmist was overpowered by the realization of God's *personal* presence. We have seen that this presence results generally from the divine initiative in a *coming* to be present. If one psalmist finds that he cannot escape that presence, that he meets God everywhere (vv. 7-10), it is probably because, as in Psalm 23:6, God's goodness and mercy pursue him. That God would be with him even in Sheol certainly marks an advance in thinking. But even in this remarkable psalm we do not find a doctrine of divine immanence. Such a conception seems to be unsuited to Hebrew thought. To say that God may always be present in a personal relationship with a man is not the same as saying that he is present *in* Nature or *in* his Creation. Certainly there is no testimony in the Psalter for the latter conception.

## IX. CONCLUSIONS

This survey of psalm testimony concerning God's presence, while not exhaustive, has dealt with the most obvious and significant evidence. This evidence may be sufficient for drawing a few tentative conclusions. They are not intended to be systematic.

1. According to earlier conceptions (assuming that the royal psalms are early), God comes from out of the region of his transcendence to be

36. Two Hebrew verbs, both from the Semitic root *shawah*, form their intensives in the same way; but one means *to set, to put*, and the other means *to make like or even*. Our text may invoke both meanings, giving the sense, "I have always put the likeness of Yahweh before me"; not *imaging*, precisely, but nevertheless *objectifying*—a kind of confrontation in which the psalmist appears to exercise initiative.

37. Cf. Ps. 54:3 where aliens are criticized in the same manner.

38. Oesterley, *The Psalms*, pp. 553-7.

present as a helper or deliverer. This was at God's own initiative. As the matter came to be understood, he was not bound to come at the call of his devotee, although the latter might act as if God wanted prompting, or even as if his removal were considered an arbitrary or capricious action.

2. God's omniscience seemed to suggest a continuing presence of a sort, not necessarily helpful, i.e., a personal and communicating presence. On occasion this form of presence was deemed unbearable.

3. A very few of the psalmists suggest that God's presence might generally be counted upon; but this would depend in large measure upon the faithfulness of the devotee.

4. There is no evidence in the Psalms for a belief in divine immanence. The presence of God in the psalmists' belief is the result of his advent.<sup>39</sup>

5. The theological dialectic transcendence-*presence*, not transcendence-*immanence*, is the tension which is characteristic of the theology of the Psalms.

6. Consistent with the conclusions herein drawn is the Old Testament theology of the Creator who, while above or over against his creation may come into it, or be present with it or some part of it, in a special way, for his own purposes. The psalmists are unanimous in their belief that the personal presence of God results from some such entrance or advent.

It is difficult to draw theological conclusions from such a diverse body of material. If some of the basic presuppositions of the worshipping Israelites have been uncovered, the effort has been worth while.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps we should call these presuppositions notions, or at best ideas. The worshipping Christian who makes use of the Hebrew Psalter should know what these ideas are. Some of them he would then disqualify as primitive or definitely sub-Christian. Others will strike him as poignantly true to his own religious experience. And it is entirely possible that the Christian doctrine of Advent will take on added theological importance; for is it not true that God comes to us out of the realm of his transcendence, in a *personal* encounter? This in the biblical faith.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to this, the idea of divine immanence tends theologically toward a monism, and religiously towards an absorptive mysticism. The Church's use of the Psalter down through the Christian

39. It has been said that the Old Testament has no notion of a historyless relation between the realm of the gods and the realm of men, but tells of the *nearness* of God as the *coming* of God. Cf. Martin Schmidt, *Profet und Tempel: Eine Studie zum Problem der Gottesnähe im Alten Testament* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1948), p. 10.

40. G. Henton Davies, in his article "Presence of God," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), Vol. III, pp. 874f., notes the recent interest in "the image and genuinely Israelite mythology of the presence of God in the Bible." In his article he does not pay special attention to the psalmists' belief but deals quite at length with the interesting tabernacling-presence theme. He says that this theme in reference to Yahweh may be described "in terms of *synecdoche*—i.e., *pars pro toto*; identity; extension of the personality; and the value of Yahweh without his identity, a curious kind of presence-in-absence."

41. Edmond Jacob in his *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York; Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 12, says that "a perfectly objective study makes us discern already in the Old Testament the same message of *the God who is present*, of the God who saves and of *the God who comes*, which characterizes the Gospel" (italics mine).

centuries is a profound testimony to her intuition of the living reality of God's personal presence as encountered by the psalmists; and devout Christians will continue to find in the Psalter the words which speak to their own condition, whether it be of estrangement from, or nearness to, the Living God.