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If the bulletin makes it clear that Scripture is an important part of Christian worship, then we can be sure people will get the message that the Bible is crucial in shaping their lives as Christians. But, when the role of Scripture in worship is negligible, when Scripture is used only to launch a sermon, what is communicated is that the Bible is marginal in Christian life, too. The use we make or fail to make of Scripture in our worship says far more about Christian discipleship than we may realize.

The first step toward making our worship more biblical is in giving the reading of God's Word a central role in Christian worship on any occasion. . . .

Scripture is read, not just for a sermon text, but to hear what Word God addresses to the gathered congregation. Preaching usually builds on that but Scripture is read for its own sake as God's Word. . . .

It needs to be communicated to all that the centrality of Scripture stems from its functions as proclamation of God's Word to the gathered people. . . .

JAMES F. WHITE, "MAKING OUR WORSHIP MORE BIBLICAL," *PERKINS JOURNAL* (FALL 1980): 34:38-39.

Corporate worship brings together all the elements in a congregation to celebrate the gospel.

C. WELTON GADDY, *THE GIFT OF WORSHIP* (NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE: BROADMAN PRESS, 1992), 60.

## WORSHIP IN THE PSALMS EXODUS 15 AND THE PRAISE OF GOD PART TWO

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*Ronald B. Allen*

In the first part of my two part installment, I wrote around the edges, as it were, of Exodus 15. This is, as I argued, the first psalm in the Bible. I also referred to the psalms and the Philistines. In my naïve enthusiasm, I once expected all Bible readers to share my love for all the psalms of the Scriptures. I report, with sadness, that I have learned this is not actually the case. My hope in these two articles is to assist a few "Philistines" that they might come to experience some of the wonder of the biblical psalms. So, if you have a friend who suffers from "Psalmic-Philistinism," perhaps you might pass this article along. God clearly desires singing, even from Philistines.

The magnificent poem of Exodus 15 was written by Moses as a celebration of the greatest dramatic event in the entire story line of Hebrew Scripture—namely, Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from Egypt in the crossing of the Red Sea. The prose account of the story is presented in Exodus 14. The poetic response follows in Exodus 15. This is much like the story of Deborah's victory over the armies of King Jabin of Hazor. The account is given in prose, in Judges 4, and then in a celebrative psalm of praise, in Judges 5.

### THE THEMATIC VERSE

One great, even unexpected, issue in this psalm relates to its theme. The theme is quoted in two other passages in the Hebrew Bible. It is remarkable to observe that the three

passages in which the verse is found correspond to the three most significant events in the whole biblical story: (1) Israel's redemption from Egypt, (2) Christ's atoning work on the cross, and (3) the coming of God's blessed Kingdom on earth.

Exodus 15 is, as we have noted, the celebration of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. In verse 2 we have monumental words: "The LORD is my strength and song, / And He has become my salvation."<sup>1</sup> These words are quoted in two central passages: (1) Psalm 118:14, and (2) Isaiah 12:2. The significance of these two citations would be difficult to exaggerate.

Psalm 118 is one of the principal psalms of the Passover liturgy, the *Haggadah*.<sup>2</sup> It is, in fact, the climactic psalm, sung following the celebrative meal. This psalm is intensely messianic, including the words describing the stone that the builders had rejected now becoming the "cornerstone" (see Psalm 118:22).<sup>3</sup> In our Lord's passion, this psalm would have been particularly meaningful. His singing of this poem was a part of his divine preparation for the cruel and hateful events he would face, following his observance of the Seder and his transforming institution of the Lord's Table.<sup>4</sup> In the context of this grand psalm, on the eve of the atonement, Jesus was given the words of faith and confidence in the Father that mirrored the words of Israel fifteen hundred years earlier: "The LORD is my strength and song, / And He has become my salvation" (Psalm 118:14). These were the words that God would use in the hours that lay before him. As God had delivered his people in the past, so now he would deliver his Son. They had passed "through the water" to the other side. He would pass through death itself to the other side.

The second great quotation of the theme verse from Exodus 15 is found in Isaiah 12:2. This passage is the psalm of the millennium. The context for the psalm is

found in Isaiah 11, one of the most compelling descriptions of the conditions in the kingdom reign of the Savior in all of Scripture. Isaiah 12:1 begins, "In that day." The day is that of chapter 11, the day of the Kingdom. The words of Exodus come here in even grander power: "For *Yah*, the LORD is my strength and song, / And he has become my salvation" (Isaiah 12:2). Here the name of God, *Yahweh*, is buttressed by the short form "*Yah*." So again these words are used in a most significant manner. The same *Yahweh* who delivered Israel from the Egyptians and who would later deliver Christ from death would now (in this future vision) establish his great Kingdom on earth. And again, he and he alone is the glorious Savior.

The same verse that describes the saving work of God at the Exodus is used in the context of the eve of the atonement and of the advent of the consummation of the ages. How truly remarkable this is! What other verse is used in such great ways as is this little verse from the singing of Moses?

#### A LITTLE CONTROVERSY

As important as these words are, they are not without controversy. Here again are the words of Exodus 15:2: "The LORD is my strength and song, / And he has become my salvation." This idea is absolutely wonderful, but it has become the center of a minor controversy. The unexpected linking of two dissimilar words, "strength" and "song," where we expect synonyms, has led a number of scholars to speculate on alternative renderings.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most common stylistic elements in Hebrew poetry and prose is what scholars call *hendiadys*, the use of two words to express one idea. Biblical Hebrew has a paucity of adverbs and adjectives. Words are enriched, sharpened, honed, not by helping words, but by placing parallel terms in close connection. Thus, the expression,

“the LORD is my strength and power,” would be a “natural,” as would the expression, “the LORD is my song and my melody.” But the tying together of “strength” and “song” in this verse seems, well, just a bit odd.

My view is that this odd linkage of terms is precisely what Moses intended! I understand that we should not seek to emend the words into a more expected one. If we always seek to find the common expressions, we will never grant the possibility of rare constructions. The words “strength” and “song” form a biblical “odd couple,” but they lead to a connection that is precious: “the Lord is my strong song.” In this manner, the words “strength” and “song” go together in a new way. To put it even more clearly, this unexpected phrase leads to the wonderful idea: “the Lord is my reason for singing.”<sup>6</sup>

#### THE PRAISE OF MOSES AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

In the flow of the psalm, we discover elements of the idea of God’s praise, as we journey along with the experience of the people as it is lived anew in the figures and forms of Hebrew poetry. Along the way we pick up several ideas. The praise of God in this psalm is wonderful in itself; it is also instructive for the people of faith in succeeding generations, including our own. There are several salient points I wish to draw from this great psalm:

- Biblical praise is forensic, a vocal and public act of corporate worship.
- Biblical praise is often musical in expression.
- Biblical praise is offered to God by those whom he has redeemed.
- Biblical praise proceeds from a context of saving faith.
- Biblical praise centers on the Lord, but may be very personal in its expression.

- Biblical praise, the sacrifice of one’s lips, brings new beauty to God.

**Praise Is Forensic.** The idea of the forensic nature of biblical praise is the principal contribution of Claus Westermann in his seminal book, *The Praise of God in the Psalms*.<sup>7</sup> Biblical praise, he discovered, is not something done in silence or in solitude. Biblical praise is a public act and is done aloud. The song of Exodus 15, to put it bluntly, was not designed to be hummed in one’s “quiet time.” This was a song to sing aloud in the great congregation. In the context of instruments and dancing, great joy and exuberance, the people lifted their voices together and sang of the triumph of their great God. There is something almost magical about this; actually, it is better than magic. It is divine. The conjoining of voices and instruments in joyful responses to the living God enlivens the singers. A halting whisper in private becomes a glad sound in the context of the congregation.

**Praise Is Musical.** True theology is theology that sings.<sup>8</sup> These words of James B. Torrance are intended to relate our singing to the singing of Christ to the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. The words also remind us of the signal importance of song in biblical worship. Praise may be done in a variety of ways. Certainly the spoken word is one of the most powerful. But even more powerful than the spoken word is the musical word. When our words of praise to God are set to music they can be more focused and thoughtful than in simple narration. When that music is sung to the Father in the power of the Spirit and in conjunction with the singing of the Savior, there is little more powerful in the universe.

**Praise Is from the Redeemed.** God is praised in the psalms, both for who he is and for what he does. Those psalms that praise God for his essential goodness and

majestic power are called Psalms of Descriptive Praise (Psalm 113). Those psalms that praise God for specific answers to prayer, or in response to marvels one has experienced at his hand, are called Psalms of Declarative Praise (Psalm 40). Exodus 15 is a Psalm of Declarative Praise. The people who sang that day were not singing in a general way about vague notions of a distant deity. They were singing in a focused manner on the topic of the very real marvels that God had done for them in their very midst. They looked at the water in terror. They shivered at the thought of the mountains which hemmed them in, against the waters. They screamed in terror at the approach of the Egyptians with their powerful chariots. They looked at spouses and children. They wept. They despaired.

Then they were delivered! They were the ones who saw the waters blown on one side and then on the other. They were the ones who walked where waters once had ruled. They were the ones who stood with their loved ones on the distant shore. They were the ones who had observed as their enemies were drowned in the resurgent waters. Thus they sang: "You blew with Your wind, / The sea covered them; / They sank like lead in the mighty waters" (Exodus 15:10).

Only the redeemed can sing songs of redemption. What point would this song of Israel be in the mouths of Moabites or Edomites?<sup>9</sup> Similarly, of what value are the words of songs of our redemption when sung by the lost? What value is the blood of Christ to the secularist? What meaning is there in the cross for one who has no love of God? Redemption songs can be sung in praise to God only by those who have experienced his redemption. Such songs from unredeemed are merely verbal clutter.

#### PRAISE IS ROOTED IN FAITH

It is also essential for us to understand that the people who sang these happy words on that glad day were people

of faith—saving faith. The last two verses of Exodus 14 speak of the consequences of God's acts of deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. We observe that the people had witnessed God's actions and that they had responded in fear and in faith (v. 31). The terminology of fear and faith is of great significance here. This is not the fear of terror, but of wonder; not of fright, but of awe, not of horror, but of worship. The positive sense of the "fear of Yahweh" in the Hebrew Bible is tantamount to speaking of saving faith. This is at the core of biblical wisdom (Proverbs 1:7), and is the heart of biblical faith (Genesis 22:12).

The words of Exodus 14:31, "and believed the Lord and his servant Moses," are even more important in this regard. The words of Genesis 15:6 are well known. Abram's faith was accounted by God as righteousness. This is the foundation of the concept of salvation by grace through faith in the Bible; see Paul's development of this grand theme in Romans 4. Less well known, however, are the words of Exodus 14:31. In the Hebrew text, the construction of the words leads to this more literal rendering: "and believed in *Yahweh*." That is, the construction is the same here as in Genesis 15:6, "And Abram believed in *Yahweh*" (except the verb is in the plural). My point is that God who accounted the faith of Abram as righteousness in Genesis would have done the same for the nation here in Exodus. They, like their grand ancestor, had responded in saving faith. And in great song they expressed the content of that faith. This is the meaning of the words, "He is my God, . . . My father's God" (Exodus 15:2). Moses and the people who sang with him were asserting that they had the same faith in *Yahweh* that their father Abram had experienced. The praise of God that matters comes from the people of faith.

#### PRAISE CENTERS ON GOD

Biblical praise is both directed to the Lord and is cen-

tered on him. A reading of the wording of this lovely psalm bears this concept out fully. He is praised for what he has done and for his essential holiness, majesty and wonder. But biblical praise also includes the first person pronouns. I insist on this, because we hear so often that only “objective” hymns are worthy of Christian worship, and that “subjective” songs are of a lower, baser quality. This is simply not the case. Any fair reading of the Psalms shows that first person pronouns abound! Real people speak from real issues of their real need for the presence and power of loving God. And real people speak from real joy of their real praise of living God.

Notice the opening words of the psalm of Exodus 15 again, “I will sing to the Lord.” The direction and center of praise is in *Yahweh*; the one rendering the praise is the individual who is a part of the larger community. Biblical praise centers on God, but it may be very personal in its expression.

### PRAISE AND BEAUTY

The second part of Exodus 15:2 is remarkable in its use of terms for praise. The term “exalt” is in fairly common use in the Psalms. But its meaning is difficult to understand. God is exalted, but still *we may exalt Him*. Our words and songs, our uplifted hands and joyful gestures—these in some mysterious manner bring some sense of exaltation to God. The very act of singing to him and the raising of our hands to him are means of acknowledgment of the wonder that is his. And in some way we add to that wonder in our very acknowledgement.

Similarly, the word for “praise” in Exodus 15:2 has a lovely role to play. It is a rare word for “praise.”<sup>10</sup> The term here is *nawa'*, a word meaning “to make beautiful.” This is astonishing! We worship the Beautiful One. In our worship we bring more beauty to him. We acknowledge that he and

he alone is Beautiful. And in that act, we bring more beauty to his throne.

Well, putting some of these ideas together may encourage even a Philistine to wish to sing. And he or she may, when that song comes in faith in the Savior God, the one adored in this first psalm in the Bible.

### Author

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### Notes

1. All Scripture quotations in this article, unless otherwise noted, are from the *New King James Version*.
2. The *Haggadah* is the recitation for the Passover Seder (“seder” means done “in order”). The standard, traditional *sefer* calls for Psalms 113-114 to be read or sung *before* the dinner, and Psalms 115-118 to be read *after* the dinner. A lovely example of a traditional *Haggadah* is in the Art Scroll Mesorah Series; Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Family Haggadah* (New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1999).
3. The traditional translation here, “the chief cornerstone,” is actually a bit misleading. The cornerstone would be the first stone to be laid, on which the whole building is based. The “Cornerstone” prophecy is actually in Isaiah 28:16. Psalm 118:22 is the “Keystone” prophecy. A stone that might have been rejected by the builder would be one that would not work in the building of a straight line of the base with a wall containing an arch. But the very stone that would not work on the vertical

elevation might be perfect for the “key” position that holds the arch together as both sides “fall together” upon that keystone. In his death, Jesus was like a rejected stone; in his resurrection he is like the keystone. See, e.g., Acts 4:11, where the verse is cited by Peter as being fulfilled in the resurrection of our Lord; this is in his address to the Sanhedrin.

4. I have written more fully on this psalm in my book, *Lord of Song: The Messiah Revealed in the Psalms* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1985), 87-101. See also Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen and H. Wayne House, eds., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 725-26.
5. See, for example, the suggestion of Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and Richard Polcyn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 397, n. 2.
6. This is a point I make more fully in my forthcoming book, *Leading the Church in Worship* (Nashville: Word Publishing, scheduled in 2001).
7. Keith R. Crim, trans. (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox, 1965), 30. I have used Westermann's approach as the basis for my chapter, “Praise on Target,” in *And I Will Praise Him: A Guide to Worship in the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 57-72.
8. James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), x.
9. However, should people from Moab or Edom come to faith in *Yahweh*, then these songs would become their songs as well. That is, when people came to faith in the living God, even though they were foreign nationals, they would be brought into God's family and they would share in the history of God's people (even though it had not been their history). Witness the words of the people of Bethlehem concerning the Moabite woman Ruth in Ruth 4:11-12. The once-foreign woman is viewed now as a native of the land because she had come in faith to the living God. See my treatment of Psalm 87 which presents the same idea, “Psalm 87: A Psalm Rarely Sung,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1996); see also *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, 706-07. The same is true for us, of course. We have been grafted in as wild olive tree branches (Romans 11:17). The history of Israel is now our history as well.
10. I discuss a number of words for praise in my chapter, “Praise on Target,” in *And I Will Praise Him*, 73-89.

Evidently if the cult were addressed to the world, then indisputably it would have to be adapted to the world's capacity of understanding. But the cult is addressed to God, and that is something—we must recognize it, alas!—which we have been apt to forget, as a result of the over-emphasis on sermons, and the under-emphasis on the sacraments, which has characterized the form of worship traditional in our confession. . . . The Church, the Body of Christ, the sacerdotal people, fulfils in the world a mediatorial function. That is why worship must not be confused with evangelization or with service, and why, in consequence, any ulterior motives of evangelism have nothing directly to do with the celebration of worship. Let the Church seek—and today more so than ever—to reach contemporary man, to go out to meet him, to go with him two miles rather than one: that is essential. But it is not through the cult that it must try to do this. The cult is something quite different: it is the sphere where finally, step by step, the Church will bring together in adoration, praise and thanksgiving those whom it has reached by evangelization. . . . In the cult the primary concern throughout is to enable the Church to find its orientation towards God and to live it out. That is why, not in its worship, but alongside it, the Church has an absolute obligation to pursue an evangelistic effort in which it goes out to seek men and bring them back to the Lord, that they may live in his joy. If living in the Christian period has made us largely forget the duty of evangelization, or if it has located evangelization chiefly in the cult, the end of the Christian period must not lead us into the opposite error of forgetting the necessity of the cult for its own sake.

J. J. VON ALLMEN, *WORSHIP: ITS THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE*  
(NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1965), 77-79.