

## A HERMENEUTICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PSALMS

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### **Abstract**

*I apply Gadamer's view of historicity to undergo a hermeneutical understanding of the historical significance of Psalms, which narrates Israelites' history including creation, the patriarchs, Egyptian bondage, Sinai, the wilderness, conquest, life in the land, and the exile and return. Gadamer's concept of history composed of universal history, the concept of power, and the concept of Spirit are applied to explain the historical significance of Psalms. In terms of Christianity, which emerges as the centerpiece of the historical view of Western tradition, human history moves towards unity and freedom under the supreme sovereignty of Spirit, Who makes history.*

*Key Words: Gadamer, Psalms, universal history, freedom, unity*

### **I. Introduction**

In this paper, I apply Gadamer's view of historicity to undergo a hermeneutical interpretation of the historical significance of Psalms, which is indeed the narrative of Israelites' history in the Old Testament. And it is proved that the principle applied to interpret Psalms can be endorsed by the Acts of Spirit in the New Testament. The human history tends to move towards freedom and unity under the sovereignty of Spirit.

### **II. Gadamer's view of historicity**

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer portrayed his view of historicity from three angles, that is, universal history, the concept of power, and the concept of freedom. From the aspect of universal history, history is the scheme of whole and part. And the historical development is determined by the interplay of power, which results in unity in the universe. Furthermore, the historical scenarios highlights the concept of Spirit, which aims to emancipate the old creation from vanity and corruption for the purpose of genuine freedom.

First, in terms of historical universe, the whole course of historical reality, an unfolding of human life can be won from historical tradition. The succession of events can showcase the value and meaning of history from a teleological perspective, then creating historical importance.

We must ask how historians were able to understand their own work in terms of their own hermeneutical theory. Their subject is not the individual text, but universal history. It falls to the historian to understand the history of mankind as a whole. The individual text has no value in itself. The basic scheme, according to which the historical school conceives the methodology of universal history is therefore really none other than that which applies to every text: the scheme of whole and part.

Actually, Dilthey's logical analysis of the concept of continuity in history is, in fact, the application to history of the hermeneutical principle that we can understand a detail only in terms of the whole text, and the whole only in terms of the detail. We find that our texts are not only the sources, but historical reality itself is a text that has to be understood. The whole course of universal history can be won only from historical tradition itself.

Furthermore, Universal history is not a mere marginal and residual problem of historical investigation, but its very heart. Even the historical school knew that fundamentally there can be no other history

than universal history, because the unique significance of the detail can be determined only from the whole.

In addition, The unfolding of human life in time has its own productivity. It is the plenitude and variety of the human that realizes itself progressively in the unending vicissitudes of human destinies. A rich variety of individual phenomena is not only the distinguishing work of Greek life, it is the mark of historical life in general, and that is what constitutes the value and meaning of history. History has a meaning in itself. In its very impermanence lies the mystery of an inexhaustible productivity of historical life.

Thus, every event that is truly part of world history, that never consists solely of sheer destruction, but rather is able to engender in the fleeing present moment something for the future, includes within itself a full and immediate sense of its own indestructible value. The celebrated immediate relationship between all periods and God can very easily be combined with this idea of the continuity of world history. For continuity—Herder calls it 'order' in the succession of events—is the manifestation of historical reality itself. Persisting throughout the changing destinies of men, there is an unbroken continuity of life.

It should be pointed out that the structure of historical continuity is still a teleological one, and its criterion is the successful outcome. The ontological

structure of history itself is teleological, although without a telos. The concept of the event that is truly part of world history, which Ranke uses, is defined by this. It is such if it 'makes history', ie if it has an effect that lends it a continuing historical importance. This expressions means that in the infinite web of events there are particularly significant incidents in which historical decisions are, as it were, concentrated.

Second, in terms of the concept of power, history is interplay of powers, which are closely linked to freedom. And historical continuity sustains the power of unity, which according to Christianity is eternal redemption restoring man the immediacy of God.

Freedom is combined with power, germinal power. Without the latter the former disappears, both in the events of the world and in the sphere of ideas. The concept of freedom is linked to the concept of power. Power is obviously the central category of the historical view of the world. The concept of power has a central place within the historical world view because in it interiority and exteriority are held in a peculiar unity in tension.

It follows from this that power cannot be known or measured in terms of its expression, but only experienced as an indwelling. Interiority is the mode of experiencing power, because power, of its nature, is related to itself alone.

Freedom is combined with power. The power that makes history is not mechanical power. Ranke excludes this specifically by saying 'germinal power' and speaking of 'the primary and common source of all human activity'—this is, for Ranke, freedom.

Also, ideas used by historians, such as power, force, determining tendency, all seek to reveal the essence of historical being, in that they imply that the idea is always represented in history in an incomplete way only. It is not the plans and views of those who act constitutes the meaning of the process, but it is historical effects which reveal the historical powers.

Power is real always only as an interplay of powers, and history is this interplay of power that produces a continuity. If the reality of history is conceived as an inter-play of forces, this concept is obviously not enough to make its unity necessary.

There must be the something that emerges in the continuity of events as a goal giving an orientation to the whole. No preconceived idea concerning the significance of history should prejudice historical research. However, the self-evident assumption of historical research is that history constitutes a unity. The idea of the unity of world history includes the uninterrupted continuity of the development of world history. Thus it is not by chance that the unity of history depends

on the unity of Western civilization, to which Western science in general and history as science, in particular, belong. And it is also not by chance that the Western civilization is characterized by Christianity, which has its absolute temporal moment in the unique redemptive event. Ranke recognizes something of this when he saw in the Christian religion the restoration of man to the ‘immediacy of God.’

Third, in terms of the concept of Spirit, a theological understanding of history is based on the concept of Spirit, the essence of the divinity. Spirit manifested in logos/the Word will redeem the old creation, bringing about freedom in new heaven and earth.

Hegel’s explanation of the unity of world history by the concept of Spirit. That the goal of Spirit is achieved in the perfect self-consciousness of the historical present which constitutes the significance of history is an eschatological self-interpretation which basically destroys history by turning it into a speculative concept. The historical school was, instead, forced into a theological understanding of itself.

The phenomena of historical life are seen as the manifestation of universal life, of the divinity. The complete surrender to the contemplation of things, the epic attitude of a man who is seeking to tell ‘the tale of world history’ may in fact be called poetic, in that for the historian God is present in all

things, not as a concept but as an ‘outward objectification.’ And the world of history depends on freedom, and this remains an ultimately unplumbable mystery of the person. Only the study of one’s own conscience can approach it, and only God can know the truth here. The aim of historical research is to reconstruct from the fragments of tradition the great text of history. Indeed, Hegel taught reason in everything, even in history, he was the last and most universal representative of the logos philosophy of the ancient world (Gadamer, 153-196).

### III. Israelites’ history in the narrative of Psalms

Based on chronology, the time line of Israelites’ history in the narrative of Psalms can be as follows: Israel and creation, the patriarchs in retrospect, Egyptian bondage, Sinai, the wilderness, conquest, life in the land, the exile and return.

#### 1. Israel and creation

Our discussion of creation and its place in Israel’s understanding of history will come under theology. Suffice it to say at this point that in the scheme of things, creation marks the beginning of history. While the Psalms are not concerned with when history began, creation marks the boundary line between the divine and the

human orders. Yet God the Creator establishes the boundary in such a way that his existence is intertwined with the created order:

O Lord my God, you are very great;

You are clothed with splendor and majesty.

He wraps himself in light as with a garment;

He stretched out the heavens like a tent

And lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters.

He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind.

He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants. (Ps 104: 1b-4)

The Psalmist understands quite well that the Creator not only brought the world into existence, but the world is an expression of himself. It is a metaphor of his being.

## 2. The Patriarchs in Retrospect

All three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, merit mention in the Psalms. Abraham takes the place of honor as the “servant” of the Lord, where the Abrahamic covenant is the centerpiece of Psalm 105. As the Psalmist writes his brief history of the exodus, that event which, more than any other, made the promise to Abraham a reality, the focus of the covenant is the gift of the land to Abraham and his descendants. In fact, the psalm, after a stanza of praise (vv.1-4), recounts the covenant with Abraham, of which the central feature was

the land, and then closes this brief theological history by tying together the Abrahamic covenant and the exodus, thus completing the promise that God made to Abraham and confirms to Isaac and Jacob:

For he remembered his holy promise

Given to his servant Abraham.

He brought out his people with rejoicing,

His chosen ones with shouts of joy;

He gave them the lands of the nations,

And they fell heir to what others had toiled for—

That they might keep his precepts and observes his laws.

Praise the Lord. (105: 42-45)

## 3. Egyptian Bondage

The historical memory of the Psalms recalls the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt. We see the picture of slave labor in Psalm 81: 6-7a: “I removed the burden from their shoulders;/their hands were set free from the basket./In their distress you called and I rescued you.” Psalms 103:6-7 and 105: 23-25 contain oblique references to their suffering, in each case followed by the reference to Moses as their deliverer. Psalm 105: 23-27 recalls that Egypt was an alien land for the Israelites, and the Lord made them so numerous that the Egyptians conspired against them:

Then Israel entered Egypt;

Jacob lived as an alien in the land of Ham.

The Lord made his people very fruitful;

He made them too numerous for their foes,

Whose hearts he turned to hate his people,

To conspire against his servants.

He sent Moses his servant,

And Aaron, whom he had chosen.

The plagues are of major interest in Psalms 78 and 105. Although there are some differences in their order as compared to the Exodus narrative, neither the order nor an exhaustive list seems to be the interests of the psalmists. Rather they focus on the fact of the plagues as God's way of manifesting his great power before their enemies. The purpose of the list in Psalm 78 is to remind the Israelites that their ancestors rebelled against the Lord in the wilderness despite the fact that he had performed these great miracles in their midst (vv. 41-42), a sober reminder that they should not repeat this response of ingratitude. Psalm 105, on the other hand, lists the plagues among God's miraculous works that were designed to teach Israel to "keep his precepts and observe his laws" (v.45). In any case, of particular interest is the fact that the death of the firstborn, so climatic in the Exodus order of the plagues, is also the climax in both lists found in Psalms 78 and 105. More than that, the tenth plague is also mentioned in 135:8 and 136:10.

In summary fashion Psalm 136:11-12 announces God's deliverance of Israel with

an "outstretched arm," the same characteristic term the Exodus narratives employ (e.g., Ex 6:6). It is not an overstatement to say that the Psalms are replete with the imagery and terminology of the exodus event.

#### 4. Sinai

It may seem surprising that Sinai, as important as it was in the faith of ancient Israel, should have such a low profile in the Psalms, mentioned only twice in Psalm 68. When it does occur by name, one of those two references is to God rather than the place. The term "the One of Sinai" occurs in Psalm 68:8. In the fusion of images, the psalmist draws together the events of saving history: the exodus, Sinai, wilderness, and conquest:

When you went out before your people, O God,

When you marched through the wasteland,

The earth shook,

The heavens poured down rain,

Before God, the One of Sinai,

Before God, the God of Israel.

You gave abundant showers, O God;

You refreshed your weary inheritance.

Your people settled in it,

And from your bounty, O God,

You provided for the poor. (vv. 7-10)

The ability the psalmist had for theological fusion is quite impressive. Just as he compressed together the saving events, he

also fused together Yahweh's descent upon Sinai and his entrance into the sanctuary in Jerusalem.

#### 5. The Wilderness

The psalmists for the most part put a negative spin on Israel's experiences in the wilderness and give this era a negative assessment generally. Psalm 95 offers the clearest assessment of the wilderness era:

For forty years I was angry with that generation;

I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,

And they have not known my ways."

So I declared on oath in my anger,

"They shall never enter my rest." (vv. 10-11)

Indeed, the observations on the wilderness that we find in the Psalms are much in line with the negative view of the same era that we find in the Books of Exodus and Numbers.

#### 6. Conquest

Next to the exodus, the most frequently mentioned period of history in the Psalms is the conquest. Psalm 105 recalls the Lord's covenant with Abraham in which he promised him the land of Canaan: "To you I will give the land of Canaan/as the portion you will inherit" (v.11) Yahweh both initiated the promise and fulfilled it—that is the way the Psalms look at the

conquest. This is illustrated clearly in Psalm 44: 2-3, where the psalmist extols Yahweh for the conquest of the land and attributes the credit directly and only to him:

It was not by their sword that they won the land,

Nor did their arm bring them victory,

It was your right hand, your arm,

And the light of your face, for you loved them. (v. 3)

#### 7. Life in the Land

Psalm 78 provides a general view of life in the land, a very negative one in fact. It sounds prophetic in its description of the high places that Israel built and their practice of idolatry (vv. 56-59). While the date of this psalm is debated, its composition must be well into the monarchy, since God's choice of David concludes the psalm. In fact, the reference to the sanctuary in verse 69 would suggest that the psalm was written after the construction of the temple. Israel's inclination to embrace the religion of Canaan was quite apparent when the psalmist wrote this theology of history:

But they put God to the test

And rebelled against the Most High;

They did not keep his statutes.

Like their fathers they were disloyal and faithless,

As unreliable as a faulty bow.

They angered him with their high places;

They aroused his jealousy with their idols.

(vv. 56-58)

The description of Israel's life in the land in 106:34-43 is a summary view of the Book of Judges. The Israelites did not destroy the Canaanites as the Lord had commanded them to do, but instead they adopted their customs, worshipped their idols, and even sacrificed their children to the gods of Canaan. The result was that the Lord handed them over to their enemies.

#### 8. The Exile and Return

No event in Israel's history was so devastating and yet so profoundly reforming as the exile to Babylonia. Psalm 106: 44-47 preserves words that were inscribed upon the suffering hearts of the Israelites of that time:

But he took note of their distress  
 When he heard their cry;  
 For their sake he remembered his covenant  
 And out of his great love he relented.  
 He caused them to be pitied  
 By all who held them captive.  
 Save us, O Lord our God,  
 And gather us from the nations,  
 That we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise.

While the return had not yet occurred, the psalmist anticipated it and called Israel to praise the Lord (v.48). The following psalm joyfully celebrates the return:

Let the redeemed of the Lord say this—  
 Those he redeemed from the hand of the

foe,

Those he gathered from the lands,  
 From the east and west, from north and south. (107:2-3)

The psalmist describes the hopeless and depressed condition of exiles:

Some wandered in desert wastelands,  
 Finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty and their lives ebbed away. (vv. 4-5)

We have seen that the order of events, when that order can be discerned in the Psalms, is the same as we see in the historical narratives: the exodus, Sinai, wilderness, and conquest. Except for the psalmists' occasional embellishments, which may be merely poetic license, or in some instances represent an oral tradition, they describe these events with remarkable accuracy when compared to the narrative accounts.

Further, we have observed the psalmists' inclination to describe the Lord as the initiator and executor of historical events, sometimes at the expense of moving the human actors like Moses and Joshua to the background.

While the Psalms would not be an adequate source for Israel's history if taken by themselves, they are nevertheless a great enhancement to our understanding of this history and the God who orders it (Bullock, 100-117).

IV. A theological and hermeneutical



interpretation of Israelites' history

Israel's religion is a religion of history, in no sense cyclical, but in every way teleological. History had a beginning, revealed to Israel by her God, a beginning which shapes her understanding of her own identity in her present; and that history is aimed at a goal, directed at every step by her God, for whom she waits in hope. Her hope is the visible and tangible appearance of the royal rule of God over the whole world. For Israel this will mean complete deliverance and transformation of her present condition, and the inclusion of all the world's people at the turning point of salvation (Edwin, 157).

Furthermore, the dimension of time is even more prominent in Psalm 90. Psalm 90 occupies a crucial place in the Psalter. After Books I-III have documented the failure of the Davidic covenant, Psalm 90 opens Book IV, the theological heart of the Psalter with its emphasis on God's reign. It is particularly interesting, given the placement of Psalm 90, that it is the only psalm in the entire Psalter that is attributed to Moses. In a sense, Moses' career centered on the problem of space—namely, getting Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land. However, Moses' problem was time—namely, he ran out it. Our time is not all there is to measure. God's time is primary, and as Psalm 90 suggests, our time must be measured finally in terms of God's time (McCann, 155-56).

And God is termed "our Lord," in Hebrew *adoneinu*, literally, "our Master." Throughout the Bible, Hebrew *'adon* appears predominantly as a royal title. What it connotes when applied to God is spelled out in Psalm 135: 5-12, where it means that He possesses absolute supremacy, omnipotence, sovereignty over nature, and master over history (Sarna, 52). God has the ultimate supremacy over Israel's history no matter in term of space, time, and historical destiny. The same principle can also be endorsed by Acts in the New Testament, which holds that Spirit dominates and leads the historical development of churches, a congregation of real Israelites in faith.

The ultimate grounds for the Gentile mission are found in the Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the work of Christ and his church, and the commands of Christ Himself. In almost every passage, reference to salvation for the nations is connected with Christ. He brings about God's universal salvation in his life and work, and commands his disciples to proclaim this salvation to the nations. Therefore the ultimate basis for Gentile mission is in the life and work of Christ who fulfills the Old Testament prophecies and commands others to proclaim to the nations what he has done (Puskas, 125).

In addition, the theme of the plan of God plays an important role in Luke-Acts. The author refers to God's guidance of events from the very beginning of the

Gospel through the end of Acts. At key points in the narrative, such divine control is emphasized; however, Luke intends throughout to convey the message that God's guidance is comprehensive in scope and consistent in nature, underlying all the reported events (Squires, 76).

#### V. Conclusion

“Having made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he purposed in himself for the administration of the fullness of times; to head up all things in the Christ, the things in the heavens and the things upon the earth” (Ephesians 1:9-10). “For the creature has been made subject to vanity, not of its will, but by reason of him who has subjected, in hope that the creature itself also shall be set free from the bandage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:20-21). The developmental trend of human history, in terms of Christianity, is in line with the administration of the supreme God, moving towards freedom and unity. This can be proved in Psalms and Acts.

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