An Exposition of Psalm 68

By Benjamin Shaw

As with several of the longer psalms, this psalm presents a number of problems for the interpreter. There does not, at first glance, appear to be a clear sequence of thought in the psalm, and there are echoes of a number of other Old Testament passages throughout the psalm. Mitchell Dahood, the author of the Psalms volumes in the *Anchor Bible Commentary*, said that this psalm is "widely admitted as textually and exegetically the most difficult and obscure of all the psalms."[1] But if a clue is taken from the opening verse of the psalm, the main difficulties may be unraveled, if not entirely removed. As a result, much good sense and encouragement for the church may be drawn from the psalm.

The chief clue is found in the connection between the first verse of the psalm and the opening section of Numbers. Numbers 1–10 tell the story of the people of Israel preparing to move on from Sinai. The census in chapter 1 is followed by directions pertaining to the arrangement of the camp in chapter 2. Chapters 3–4 focus on the duties of the Levites, particularly as those duties concern the transportation of the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle. The relationship of chapters 5–8 to this preparation for leaving Sinai is less than clear. Chapter 9 picks up the narrative of movement again with the account of the observation of Passover prior to leaving Sinai. Chapter 10 gives instructions regarding the trumpets, which are used to call the people to march and to battle. The chapter concludes with the summary statement regarding what transpired whenever the ark set out and when it rested (10:35). When the ark prepared to move, Moses would make the following proclamation: "Arise, O Lord, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you." When the ark rested, Moses would announce, "Return, O Lord, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel."[2] Thus Israel's move through the wilderness, under the leadership of God via the Ark of the Covenant, presents the reader with the image of an army on the move, heading to its final destination, with victory in mind.

The opening verse of Psalm 68 is an almost word-for-word quote from Num 10:35. This is the clue to the reader as to how the psalm is to be read: it is to be understood as a reiteration of the pronouncement of Num 10:35. The army of God, under his leadership, is again on the march. This perspective on the psalm is confirmed by a consideration of the other echoes in the psalm. The psalm contains clear allusions to a number of other passages in the Old Testament that date before the time of David.[3] The particular passages most frequently alluded to are Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 33, and Judges 5. In addition, there are a number of other allusions to various passages in the Pentateuch, especially Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Exodus 15, often called the Song of Moses, or the Song of the Sea, recounts the victory of God over the army of the Egyptians. But it does not stop there. The last section of the song (vss 13–18) speaks in terms of the coming conquest and the establishment of God's habitation in the land of promise. Though the conquest was put off by forty years due to the disobedience of the people, this concluding section of the Song of the Sea was indeed fulfilled in the decades that followed the conquest.

Deuteronomy 33 is commonly called The Blessing

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1. Cited in David R. Tasker, *Ancient Near Eastern Literature and the Hebrew Scriptures About the Fatherhood of God* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2004), 136

2. I am citing from the ESV in this paper.

3. The psalm title, "To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David. A Song," indicates Davidic authorship. Most modern commentators reject that identification, but there is no compelling reason to do so, as the scriptural allusions and the few historical allusions precede, or are contemporary with, the time of David.

of Moses. It corresponds to Genesis 49 in that both chapters pronounce the blessing of the patriarch on the nation. It is significant that the psalm alludes to Deuteronomy 33 more than to Deuteronomy 32, because the latter is largely negative in tone and content, predicting the failure and judgment of Israel. The former is much more positive in tone, lining out the glorious future of the people of God. In particular, it moves from Sinai to Jeshurun, and the Lord becoming king there. Since the chapter dates to the time of Moses, an explicit reference to Jerusalem would not be expected, and Jeshurun is clearly a name for Israel. The word occurs only in Deuteronomy 33 and Isaiah 44.

Judges 5 is the Song of Deborah. It celebrates the victory of Israel over its enemies, acknowledging that the victory was wrought by God. But it also links to Sinai (vss 4–5) in the language of God marching forth.

All three of the major passages from which Psalm 68 draws have a number of things in common. First, the Lord moves from Sinai to the land of promise at the head of his people. Second, the Lord leads his people in victory against his (and their) enemies. Third, the Lord reigns as king over his people in the land of promise. The additional passages alluded to in Psalm 68 emphasize these same themes. Thus it is fair to consider the psalm itself as a presentation of these themes in a coherent fashion.

For most interpreters, the subdivisions of the psalm are clear (note, for example, that the ESV, the NIV, and the NASB all divide the psalm as follows: 1–3, 4–6, 7–10, 11–14, 15–18, 19–23, 24–27, 28–31, 32–35). The difficulty is that there does not appear to be a clear sequence to the psalm, either as a narrative (as, for example, Psalm 78) or as to a logical development of thought (as, for example, Psalm 73). This suggests to me that David is doing something else here. In light of his drawing on older biblical material (especially Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 33, and Judges 5), it is my conclusion that David has penned a series of impressions based on this older material. For the most part this series is historically sequential, but it is more pictorial than it is narrative.

Verses 1–3[4]

The picture here is that of Israel moving out from Sinai in military array, with the Ark of the Covenant leading the way. Verse 1 is an almost word-for-word borrowing from Numbers 10:35. The ESV has chosen to translate the verbs as simple futures, though I think the choice of the NIV and NASB translators to translate them as jussives is more likely correct. It is not a mere announcement of God moving forth at the head of his people, but a plea that it might indeed be so. As God moves out, the enemies flee and the people of God rejoice. An illustration here regarding the response of God's enemies is the fear that Midian expresses regarding Israel in Numbers 22. The reader has been treated in the preceding chapters to an exceedingly bleak view of Israel. But all Barak sees is a massed horde, about to move in and take over.

Verses 4–6

The image here is of Israel moving through the wilderness. The Israelites are the orphans whom God has adopted as his children. Israel is the widows whom God has taken in marriage. The Israelites are the solitary ones to whom God has given families. They are the prisoners whom God has freed. These are the ones who praise God as he leads them out, riding through the desert. But the rebellious will live, and die, in the parched land of the wilderness. The entire story of Numbers 11–21 is in view here.

Verses 7–10

In these verses, the image is the end of the wilderness wanderings. The God of Sinai is the God of Israel, bringing his people into their inheritance. With allusions to Exodus 19:18 and Judges 5:4–5, David pictures God going before his people in power as they prepare to move in to their inheritance. There he provides a dwelling for his flock. There he provides for the needy. This section is illustrated from Numbers 27–36, which recounts much of the planning for entry into the land. The entire book of Deuteronomy also is in view, as Deuteronomy consists of Moses' addresses to the people prior to their entry into the land.

Verses 11–14

The image here is the conquest under Joshua. Recalling Exodus 15:20 and the celebration at the Red Sea, the reader is also shown the easy defeat of the enemies in Joshua 1–11. The image of the women dividing the spoils further adds to the picture of victory in battle. The lying among the sheepfolds, recalls Genesis 49:14, with its image of Reuben settling into his inheritance. The figure of the dove with silver and golden wings is an

4. I will be using the English versification throughout this exposition. The Hebrew versification includes the title as the first verse, so the psalm in Hebrew has thirty-six verses, while the English has thirty-five verses plus the title.

image of true shalom: peace and well-being enjoyed in comfort. The Almighty scatters kings before the people, as refreshing to the people of God as snow on Zalmon.

Verses 15–18

This section moves us from the time of the judges to the time of David. Rather than choosing the imposing mountains of Bashan as his dwelling, God has instead chosen a much more modest place. Yet that more modest place is the place where God himself will dwell. The primary image is of the Ark of the Covenant having now moved from Sinai to the mountain where God would set his name. The people of God have followed in vast array, led up to God's dwelling place by the Ark going before them. There God receives tribute as the reward of triumph, but the gifts are received only to be distributed among the people of God. An illustration here is drawn from 2 Samuel 6:16–19, where David, having successfully brought the Ark to Zion, distributes gifts among the people.

Paul draws upon this passage in Ephesians 4. In the opening section of that chapter, Paul focuses on our call as Christians to live together as a body unified in Christ by the Spirit. He moves from that consideration to make the point that Christ has given various gifts to his body, the church, to the end that we might be properly joined and held together in him. The passage that Paul draws on to make this transition is Psalm 68:18. He cites the verse as follows: "When he ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." Thus Paul clearly sees the psalm as referring to the ascension of Christ, from which the church receives great benefits. That certainly matches the sense of the psalm, which presents the ascension of God into his dwelling place.

There are essentially two changes that Paul made to the psalm in his citation. The first is that he has changed the second person "you" to the third person "he." That makes sense, as in the passage Paul is speaking of Christ in the third person. The second change seems to be much more significant. The text of the psalm reads, "and receiving gifts among men." Paul presents it as, "he gave gifts to men." So did Christ receive gifts, or did he give gifts? The Aramaic Targum of the psalm and the Syriac translation both have "gave" in place of the Hebrew text's "receiving." So it may be that Paul was influenced by these versions. It is more likely, however, that Paul is seeing the meaning of the psalm more clearly than a cursory reading would show. The ascending king, leading a host in his train, did indeed receive gifts. However, these gifts would not have been for the king himself, but would rather be distributed among his followers. The king received in order to give. Thus Paul sees the full picture of the psalm section: God incarnate, leading his people in triumph to his dwelling place, receiving gifts which he then distributes among his people.

Verses 19–23

This is the most difficult of the sections, but only because our modern tastes are offended by the almost casual brutality of the images. God has delivered his people. He has settled them in their inheritance. But victory came at the expense of the enemies of God. Those enemies have been struck down, and those enemies will now be brought to the people in order that the people of God may share in the victory of God. Those who think they can oppose God without cost are surely brought up short with these images, as are those who think that there is a free and easy way to heaven. There is not a single passage in the Bible that refers to God's victory over his enemies that does not include similarly brutal images. As just one example, the reader is directed to consider Ezekiel 38–39. See also Deuteronomy 32:39–43.

Verses 24–27

The chief image here is that of God parading into his throne room, leading his rejoicing people behind him. David may well have drawn the image from the rejoicing procession that brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6). All the people are represented here, both the tribes of the north (Zebulun and Naphtali) as well as the tribes of the south (Benjamin and Judah). Further, both of the southern tribes are royal tribes (Saul and David), pointing to the submission of God's appointed kings to God himself who is the true king.

Verses 28–31

The primary image here is that of the nations coming to God, bearing gifts. Egypt, the beast that dwells among the reeds, has been rebuked. Those who delight in war have been scattered, and God's ancient enemies, especially Egypt, but also Cush (Gen. 10:7–14, see also 1 Kings 10: the visit of the Queen of Sheba), now come to him, stretching out their hands. God has truly won the victory, not only by destroying impenitent enemies (vss 21–23), but also by taking enemies and making them friends.

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Editorial. **Continued from Page 2.**

never was a biblical and systematic theologian, he would have still been churchman. The bride of Christ was Murray's first passion, such that he would not have been able to conceive of the Christian life without or outside the church. As a churchman he served actively and faithfully performing committee work, including doing committee work for a General Assembly (Orthodox Presbyterian Church) committee on song in worship.

In a day when anything goes in worship Murray is once again a fresh breeze coming into a spiritually stale land. Murray's work on worship, especially his biblical-theological argument for exclusive Psalmody, has been helpful for his generation and ours. And while we are not all exclusive Psalmists here on the staff of *The Confessional Presbyterian*, we all recognize the glory and value of the Psalm-singing tradition within the history of Presbyterianism. For this reason alone, our taking up the debate in our *Sic et Non* section, as well as offering his piece on worship and the Psalms, is appropriate given Murray's good contribution to this on-going discussion. We also offer here several articles which in someway address the issue of Reformed churchmanship and worship.

Yes, Reformed churchmanship and worship are woefully waning traits of today's Reformed churches. Murray understood both exceedingly well. And he did not understand them so well despite his commitment to Reformed biblical and systematic theology, but precisely because of it. Reformed biblical and systematic theology on the one hand, and Reformed churchmanship and worship on the other, are for Murray the warp and woof of Presbyterianism. His legacy may not be explicitly expressed on every page of this issue, but it nevertheless informs the issue as a whole. And for that reason the editors commend to you the following articles for the advancement of that kind of Presbyterianism to the glory of God and in service to His church.

The Editors▪

Sanctification, the Law, and Good Works. **Continued from Page 28.**

appears to be, within the corpus of American Reformed writings, an agreement on what sanctification is and is not. Sanctification, in the greater scheme of redemption, is a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, sanctification does involve the activity of believers. Regenerate persons, motivated by the renewed disposition and energized by the Holy Spirit, are guided by the law to do good works which God ordained for their earthly conduct (Eph 2:10).[25] The good works serve as reminders and encouragements that the Holy Spirit is active in transforming the regenerate soul into the image of Christ. As good works encourage the heart, one can see that the law is a trustworthy guide and hedge from sin (Ps 119:11). The law really does militate against sin. The demands of the law constantly remind believers of their total dependence on the sanctifying Spirit of Christ (1 Cor 1:30,31; 2 Cor 3:17,18) and the need to judge all labors by God's holy standard rather than the world's.

The relationship between sanctification, the law, and good works is a close one in the theology of the American Reformed Tradition. Although it is often frowned upon to introduce new material into a conclusion, it may be helpful for the reader to be reminded that the representatives we have surveyed all practiced covenant theology and believed it best exemplified the teaching of Scripture. With this conviction came the biblical consciousness that a covenant "consists of two parts: on the one hand the promise on the part of God; on the other the stipulation of obedience on the part of man. For as God promises in it to be our God, he wishes that we also in turn should be his people" (Turretin 2:703).

Furthermore, the fact that the Christian life is exemplified by struggle, necessitates the inclusion of the law and good works.[26] The struggle is against sin and sin is lawlessness. Law then must be involved so that one may properly identify one's sin and turn in repentance to follow the proper course, the course that imitates the Savior, the good works set forth in the law.

There is a consensus among American Reformers when one comes to the doctrine of sanctification—the law and good works are essential elements of the doctrine. This consensus is built on the fact that Christ became for us sanctification. In the life of Christ the law and exemplary works were accomplished by Christ for the elect. The Spirit uses these same means to apply and fulfill the sanctification that Christ obtained for us. And so "the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:4).

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Verses 32–36

God has finally achieved the full victory, and the kingdoms of the earth rejoice. The one who rode through the desert from Egypt now rides in the heavens. He speaks, and the universe

25. Donald McKim, "William Perkins and the Christian Life: The Place of the Moral Law and Sanctification in Perkins' Theology," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 59 (April 1987):129.

26. The Christian life as "struggle" is certainly evident in Calvin's exposition on the Christian life (*Institutes* 3.6–10). Also, see Gerstner's discussion of this emphasis in Edwards' theology (works cited above 3:230–43).

listens, for his is the voice that spoke the heavens and the earth into existence. This is the God who empowers his people. May he be blessed forever.

Final Remarks

This psalm tells a story, but not by means of a narrative. Instead we are given a succession of images, drawn from both the history of Israel in her experience with God, and from her prophetic future. The psalm shows by means of these images that God will not have his people from one people only, but will own all the kingdoms of the earth. To him every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord.▪

Let's Do Presbyterianism: The Trinitarian Foundations of Biblical Church Polity. **Continued from Page 76.**

have independent and non-denominational churches in which the one is splintered into the many and eventually lost. By far, the latter is the predominant form of evangelical ecclesiology today. It is generally characterized by emphasis on the individual and personal to such an extent that the covenantal and corporate nature of the church is lost, or at least marginalized. Because of our history, here in America independency is the most attractive and popular form of church government. Now, in the early church there were many forms of Trinitarian errors floating around. To the one extreme, there were those who emphasized the unity of God such that the persons became mere apparitions. This was the error that was known as modalism. On the other hand, the persons were so emphasized that each person of the Trinity were given their own independent status as divine such that the unity of God was compromised. This is known as tritheism—a heresy repopularized today in the theology of post-modern theologians like Jürgen Moltmann.

The answer to these errors is a balanced view of the Trinity in whom unity and diversity, the one and the many, are equally ultimate. I would argue that our ecclesiology should, because it does in the Bible, reflect and imitate God by making unity and diversity, the one and the many, the individual and the corporate, equally ultimate. And I believe I have shown that that balance is reflected in Presbyterianism.

Now, that does not mean Presbyterianism can never go bad. It can, and it has. Sin still pollutes the church because the church is made up of sinners who still war against the flesh. And so, any church government will only function well if its members are faithful to their Lord and his Word. But, that does not change the fact that Presbyterianism (though corrupted in the past and the present) reflects its Triune God and is modeled on the teaching of the Bible as a whole.

Yes, it remains a counter-cultural ecclesiology. It is completely contra mundum. But that is why it's also refreshing. It is refreshing because it is so different from what everyone else is doing. Radical independence, or tyrannical corporate solidarity, is the order of the day. For once, as Christians, let's do something different. Let's do Presbyterianism.▪

Which Comes First, The Intellect or the Will? **Continued from Page 128.**

Edwards—or finds him unconvincing or misguided. Yet how would Edwards come across this way if he isn't already being read through the lens of faculty psychology—as he surely was in the eyes of Charles Chauncey?

Plantinga reads Edwards as a sort of intellectualist with the priority of the intellect in the workings of true affections. That would be true after a fashion, as long as it was understood that Edwards was trying to move away from faculty psychology and *not* away from making legitimate distinctions of the powers of the human soul. We can speak of a "priority" of the intellect in Edwards only so long as that priority is understood in terms of taxis or functional order—and not primacy of importance.

Plantinga also seems to equate the affections with emotions. Plantinga recognizes that sin, for instance, can be understood as *blindness*, as a not seeing God or the great things of the gospel as the truly lovely things they are. But sin is also a *willful* blindness. It *is* a hatred of the loveliness of God and his attributes. *We* are responsible for our failure to see. We can distinguish the powers of the soul, but we cannot separate them. And we should not consider the intellect or the will more important than the other. After all, God made us with both. Admittedly, sin has wreaked havoc in this area just as it has in others. We sinful human beings tend to prize one power over the other. We still struggle with the same extremes Edwards faced.

So What?

So what is the difference between Edwards and Plantinga? It *may* be minimal in practical effect. Plantinga's discussion would have benefitted from an historical awareness of the context of the Great Awakening, from a knowledge of Edwards' desire to transcend faculty psychology, and from a correct definition of the religious affections. The way Plantinga asks the question, "which comes first" suggests to me that he doesn't realize that for Edwards, the affections involved both the intellect and the will. Either option is possible for Edwards as long as both are understood to be involved in the exercise of true religious affections.

Is there much difference between Plantinga the concurrentist and Edwards? Sometimes I get the impression that he