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Joy in the Old Testament

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All scriptural references are to the NRSV. At the back of this essay I have two appendices: a short excerpt from CS Lewis on the value of praising God and Tobit 13)

A couple of decades ago I wrote a book on the subject of joy and mourning in the Old Testament (A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance: The Expression of Grief and Joy in Israelite Religion). The major claim of the book was that the expression of joy (and especially the command “to rejoice before the Lord” [cf. Deut 12:7]) could be configured ritually. Whereas the lamenter fasts and refrains from praise, the one whose prayer has been answered is enjoined to praise God's name around the sacrificial altar. Significantly the Psalter, which is ordered to both the ritual life of the individual and the people Israel as a whole, concludes with five Psalms each of which begins and ends with the exhortation to praise the Lord (Psalms 146-150: the Hebrew hallelu-yah is rendered: “Praise the Lord”). The last Psalm is most emphatic because every verse exhorts the people to praise and its last verse could be paraphrastically translated: “Let every one, with every breath give praise to the Lord (Amos Hacham, Da’at Ha-Miqra).” (Because the value of praise is often underestimated by the modern Bible reader, I have included a reflection by CS Lewis at the end of this essay to spur the religious imagination as to its importance.)

In this essay I’d like to examine this ritual process through the lens of Psalm 22, a lamentation that moves from grief over God’s absence (vv. 1-21a) to a celebratory joy at his saving action (vv. 21b-30). The Psalm divides into two parts: a petition for help and (an implied) vow to praise God upon deliverance (vv. 2-21a) and a fulfillment of that vow to
praise (vv. 22b-30). The key transition can be found in vv. 19-22. In vv. 19-21a, the
Psalmist recapitulates his perilous situation and begs God to intervene:

19 But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
   O my help, come quickly to my aid!
20 Deliver my soul from the sword,
   my life from the power of the dog!
21 Save me from the mouth of the lion!

And in vv. 21b-23 we hear of God’s saving action and the fulfillment of the vow to praise:

21b From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued (lit.: answered) me.
22 I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
   in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.
23 You who fear the LORD, praise him!
   All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
   stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

What is crucial to grasp is that the moment of deliverance includes three key elements:
First, is the social. Praising God is not an act of the solitary individual but constitutes a
moment for communal celebration. The Psalmist begins with kinship terms to identify
those who will rejoice with him (“my brothers and sisters,” v. 22) but quickly transitions to
the nation as a whole (“all you offspring of Jacob,” v. 23). And then, somewhat surprisingly,
concludes with an injunction that the entire world acknowledge the power and dominion of
Israel’s God (vv. 27ff).

Secondly, the context of this conviviality is the sacrificial hearth. That is, the environment
of joy is cultic. As scholars have long noted, the Hebrew word todah means both words of thanksgiving (Ps 26:7) and the thanksgiving sacrifice (Lev 7:12-15). It is often difficult to know which meaning is intended. This ambiguity is certainly significant because it highlights the fact that praise and a celebratory meal went hand in hand (cf. the Rabbinic dictum: eyn simha ella ba-basar; there is no joy apart from the consumption of meat). The todah is a form of the shelamim (the well-being or peace) sacrifice. What distinguishes this sacrifice is that the best portions of the animal are consumed by the worshipper and his (or her) invited guests; only the blood and fat are turned over to God (Lev 3). In this way the social and ritual elements are closely bound together. It is incumbent on the worshipper not only to slay the animal properly but to make arrangements for its speedy consumption, otherwise the sacrifice will become invalid (Lev 7:15, cf. v. 18). In the courses I give at Notre Dame I like to call this sacrifice the “Bar-B-Que” sacrifice because one of its primary functions is to feed one’s invited guests. The joy inherent in roasting flesh (with the important exception of vegetarians in the modern period) is evident every football Saturday at Notre Dame.

The third element follows from the first two: there is a proclamatory (“evangelical”) function to the experience of joy. It is not the case that one is invited simply to rejoice with the celebrant. A key part of the ritual is the moment when the details of the saving event are recounted to all the participants.

22 I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! . . .
24 For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him. . .

26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever!

It is not enough that the “poor eat and be satisfied” (v. 26) but that they also must join in the act of praise: “The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD.” In other words, the audience is invited to become one with the moment of salvation that the lamentor has experienced.

In brief, the sacrificial repast and the joy it occasions becomes a moment of instruction.

The religious life is not a set of static truisms. It is engaged and subject to both positive and negative evidence regarding the power (or, in our modern age, “existence”) of God. Psalm 10 brings this out very clearly. Evidence for God’s saving presence is not always at hand:

10:1 Why, O LORD, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

And this leads to spiritual confusion and despair. The wicked are convinced that the God of Israel is of no consequence:

4 In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, “God will not seek it out”;
all their thoughts are, “There is no God.”

6 They think in their heart, “We shall not be moved;
throughout all generations we shall not meet adversity.”

10 They stoop, they crouch,
and the helpless fall by their might.

What prevents the devout from rejecting the God of Israel themselves? Not much. Belief can hang perilously over the precipice of despair. So the Psalmist urges God to act in conformity to his name and reputation:

12 Rise up, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand;
do not forget the oppressed.

13 Why do the wicked renounce God,
and say in their hearts, “You will not call us to account”?

What we see in Psalm 22 is the religious function of the celebratory occasion. The words of doubt sown by the enemy are pulled out by the roots. In hearing the testimony of the redeemed amid great celebratory joy, the faith of the poor and lowly (those whose only hope is God) is strengthened.

Joy on this view is not simply a moment of exuberation; it has a profound epistemic value. It’s a piece of objective evidence that God’s promises are true. He is on the side of the lowly and does intervene to rescue the weak from the strong. These sentiments are often tenuously held by the believer. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI reminds us, belief is not something we can settle once and for all and then be on with the rest of our lives (First chapter of *Introduction to Christianity*). There is a reason that the saints prayed for the grace of perseverance as well; baptism is not sufficient. Every day the battle to affirm God’s
sovereign power must be engaged anew. And our moments of temporal (and so unstable) joy point toward the hope for an eternal and unshakeable joy at the eschaton.

The eschatological character of joy is ably attested in the book of Tobit. After Tobit has been “raised from the dead” by virtue of regaining his sight and meeting his just-married-son, he is instructed by the angel Raphael: “Bless God and acknowledge him in the presence of all the living for the good things he has done for you. Bless and sing praise to his name. With fitting honor declare to all people the deeds of God. Do not be slow to acknowledge him. It is good to conceal the secret of a king, but to acknowledge and reveal the works of God, and with fitting honor to acknowledge him” (12:6-7). Tobit fulfills the injunction in ch. 13. Strikingly his words of praise assume a proclamatory function to similar to that of Ps. 22. In view of the Israelite’s despair over their exile, Tobit leverages his own experience over against theirs. Just as God has raised him from the dead (13:2; cf. 11:15) so he promises to do for Israel as well (13:5). The joy of deliverance is not individualistic. Tobit’s recovery has no value unless the nation is able to participate in it as well. And even more. Just like Ps. 22, the praise of Tobit takes place over an ever-widening circle: first his own joy (13:2), then the nation Israel (vv. 5, 9) and finally the world at large (v. 11). As the book of Psalms end in praise so the psalm of Tobit (vv. 13-14). Though the redemption begins in a world bereft of cult, the joy of Israel and the world at large will culminate in the gloriously rebuilt city of Jerusalem (vv. 16-17).

In this brief essay I have suggested that the joyful experience of redemption as imagined in the Psalter and concretely depicted in the figure of Tobit has three essential components: the social, cultic and evangelical. As such, it is heavily invested in the engaged religious life
and has considerable epistemic value. The way of faith is always a journey beset by various dangers. Faith is not a commodity that we possess once and for all but a stance toward life that must be appropriated daily.
Tob. 13:1  Then Tobit said:
   “Blessed be God who lives forever,
   because his kingdom lasts throughout all ages.
2  For he afflicts, and he shows mercy;
   he leads down to Hades in the lowest regions of the earth,
   and he brings up from the great abyss,
   and there is nothing that can escape his hand.
3  Acknowledge him before the nations, O children of Israel;
   for he has scattered you among them.
4  He has shown you his greatness even there.
   Exalt him in the presence of every living being,
   because he is our Lord and he is our God;
   he is our Father and he is God forever.
5  He will afflict you for your iniquities,
   but he will again show mercy on all of you.
   He will gather you from all the nations
   among whom you have been scattered.
6  If you turn to him with all your heart and with all your soul,
   to do what is true before him,
   then he will turn to you
   and will no longer hide his face from you.
So now see what he has done for you;
   acknowledge him at the top of your voice.
Bless the Lord of righteousness,
   and exalt the King of the ages.
   In the land of my exile I acknowledge him,
   and show his power and majesty to a nation of sinners:
   ‘Turn back, you sinners, and do what is right before him;
   perhaps he may look with favor upon you and show you mercy.’
7  As for me, I exalt my God,
   and my soul rejoices in the King of heaven.
8  Let all people speak of his majesty,
   and acknowledge him in Jerusalem.
9  O Jerusalem, the holy city,
   he afflicted you for the deeds of your hands,
   but will again have mercy on the children of the righteous.
10  Acknowledge the Lord, for he is good,
   and bless the King of the ages,
   so that his tent may be rebuilt in you in joy.
   May he cheer all those within you who are captives,
   and love all those within you who are distressed,
   to all generations forever.
11  A bright light will shine to all the ends of the earth;
   many nations will come to you from far away,
   the inhabitants of the remotest parts of the earth to your holy name,
   bearing gifts in their hands for the King of heaven.
   Generation after generation will give joyful praise in you;
   the name of the chosen city will endure forever.
12  Cursed are all who speak a harsh word against you;
   cursed are all who conquer you
   and pull down your walls,
   all who overthrow your towers
   and set your homes on fire.
   But blessed forever will be all who revere you.
13  Go, then, and rejoice over the children of the righteous,
for they will be gathered together
and will praise the Lord of the ages.

14 Happy are those who love you,
and happy are those who rejoice in your prosperity.
Happy also are all people who grieve with you
because of your afflictions;
for they will rejoice with you
and witness all your glory forever.

15 My soul blesses the Lord, the great King!

16 For Jerusalem will be built as his house for all ages.
How happy I will be if a remnant of my descendants should survive
to see your glory and acknowledge the King of heaven.
The gates of Jerusalem will be built with sapphire and emerald,
and all your walls with precious stones.
The towers of Jerusalem will be built with gold,
and their battlements with pure gold.
The streets of Jerusalem will be paved
with ruby and with stones of Ophir.

17 The gates of Jerusalem will sing hymns of joy,
and all her houses will cry, ‘Hallelujah!
Blessed be the God of Israel!’
and the blessed will bless the holy name forever and ever.”
[p. 93] But the most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or [94] the giving of honour. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless (sometimes even if) shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite games—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious, minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least. The good critics found something to praise in many imperfect works; the bad ones continually narrowed the list of books we might be allowed to read. The healthy and unaffected man, even if luxuriously brought up and widely experienced in good cookery, could praise a very modest meal: the dyspeptic and the snob found fault with all. Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible. Nor does it cease to be so when, through lack of skill, the forms of its expression are very uncouth or even ridiculous. Heaven knows, many poems of praise addressed to an earthly beloved are as bad as our bad hymns, and an anthology of love poems for public and perpetual use would probably be as sore a trial to literary taste as Hymns Ancient and Modern. I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously [95] praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: "Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?" The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can’t help doing, about everything else we value. I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with (the perfect hearer died a year ago). This is so even when our expressions are inadequate, as of course they usually are. But how if one could really and fully praise even such things to perfection—utterly "get out" in poetry or music or paint the upsurge of appreciation which almost bursts you? Then indeed the object would be fully appreciated and our delight would have attained perfect development. The [96] worthier the object, the more intense this delight would be. If it were possible for a created soul fully (I mean, up to the full measure conceivable in a finite being) to "appreciate", that is to love and delight in, the worthiest object of all, and simultaneously at every moment to give this delight perfect expression, then that soul would be in supreme beatitude. It is along these
lines that I find it easiest to understand the Christian doctrine that "Heaven" is a state in which angels now, and men hereafter, are perpetually employed in praising God. This does not mean, as it can so dismally suggest, that it is like "being in Church". For our "services" both in their conduct and in our power to participate, are merely attempts at worship; never fully successful, often 99.9 per cent failures, sometimes total failures. We are not riders but pupils in the riding school; for most of us the falls and bruises, the aching muscles and the severity of the exercise, far outweigh those few moments in which we were, to our own astonishment, actually galloping without terror and without disaster. To see what the doctrine really means, we must suppose ourselves to be in perfect love with God--drunk with, drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up within ourselves as incommunicable, hence hardly tolerable, bliss, flows out from us incessantly again in effortless and perfect expression, our joy no more separable from the praise in which it liberates and utters itself than the brightness a mirror receives is separable from the brightness it sheds. The Scotch catechism [97] says that man's chief end is "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever". But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.