

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – September 9, 2018

Psalm 146

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Psalm 146

(From *Homiletics*; “Five Thoughts for November 6”, Nov. 4, 2012)

The English liturgical exclamation, "Hallelujah!" is derived from the opening and closing words of the last five psalms in the OT -- hallelu-yah -- translated by NRSV as "Praise the LORD!" The Hebrew phrase is a plural imperative of the verbal root h-l-l, which means "to praise," plus Yah, a poetic shortened form of Yahweh. This collection of psalms, sometimes called Hallel by biblical scholars, closes ancient Israel's theologically and emotionally variegated hymnbook on a sustained note of praise. Today's psalm, Psalm 146, is part of this collection (see C. A. Briggs, *Psalms* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907], vol. 2, 530).

An overview of Psalm 146 reveals that it is a declaration of intent (v. 2) followed by (a) a warning against false trust (vv. 3-4) and (b) the rationale for the psalmist's declaration (vv. 5-10). The psalm combines elements from Israel's royal theology (v. 10), wisdom schools (v. 5), prophetic tradition (vv. 7-9) and ancient liturgical poems (v. 5b). This combination of discernible elements is one of the indicators of the psalm's late date (probably coming from the Greek period of the 4th century B.C.). Unlike some other late compositions in the psalter, however, the elements of Psalm 146 are harmoniously and sensitively combined and probably functioned very successfully as part of the temple liturgy.

After the opening plural imperative (v. 1a), which is likely a liturgical gloss added to the body of the psalm (cf. Psalms 103:1; 104:1, 35), the psalmist turns introspective with the self-address, "O my soul" (v. 1b). The vocative "O" is not indicated in the Hebrew; it is added for the sake of English poetic meter. The use of the word "soul" to mean "self" does not reflect the full-blown Hellenistic dualism found later in writings such as the NT, but it does indicate a kind of psychological interiorization that is not characteristic of the earliest phases of Hebrew biblical literature or thought. It is the sort of reflectivity characteristic of and urged by the sage, one of the several indicators of the influence of the wisdom schools on this psalm.

The imperative becomes declaration in verse 2, which is the heart (although not the bulk) of the psalm. The psalmist makes a vow -- temple declarations were always *de facto* vows -- to praise the LORD "as long as I live" (v. 2a). The phrase is not empty; it reflects both the anthropology of the OT as well as a central theologoumenon of ancient Israelite religion, which is that the human person is a psychosomatic unity who has existence only while biologically

alive; that religion (denoted *pars pro toto* by "praise") is the privilege and ability only of the living (cf. Psalm 88:5, 10); and that there is a permanent and unbridgeable gulf between the living and the dead (1 Samuel 28 notwithstanding; cf. Isaiah 8:19). There is an implied "Get on with it!" in the psalmist's declaration to praise while still able to do so (and in the opening plural imperative).

The plural imperative verb form continues in the injunction of verse 3, "Do not put your trust in princes." Who is being addressed is not specified; the only vocative in the psalm so far is the psalmist's "soul," and the plural imperative here makes that referent impossible (since Hebrew *nephesh* is grammatically a feminine singular noun). The unspecified addressee is the generic "you" (plural), which the members of the temple congregation would naturally and unconsciously have applied to themselves. It is impossible to know at this historical distance how specific this political admonition was or was intended to be. Whether Israel's political leaders were being warned away from entangling foreign alliances (as the prophets often urged; cf. Briggs, 531) or whether the Israelite people themselves were being urged to remember their own leaders' powerlessness in the face of conquest, deportation and exile is not clear, perhaps deliberately so. The overall thought, of course, is very much at home in the OT.

Unlike prophetic denunciations of foreign alliances, however, the psalmist's reasoning is more anthropological than political. Princes and mortals are unreliable less because of their national self-interest or poor judgment and more because of their inescapable mortality (v. 4), an idea much more common in the wisdom tradition than in the prophetic tradition (cf. the opening words of Ecclesiastes, where the word "vanity" means "insubstantiality"). The warning is found also in Psalm 118:8-9.

Another of the clues to this psalm's late date is found in the language of verse 5, where the Aramaic relative pronominal prefix *she-* is used to describe the happy. The Hebrew-Aramaic literally says, "Happy [is] the one who..." and the verse then goes on to say that the person will be happy whose help is the "God of Jacob," using a divine epithet often found in royal psalms (that is, psalms focusing on Zion, e.g., Psalms 20:1; 24:6; 46:7, 11; 76:6; 84:8). The expression's use in poetical parallelism with "the LORD (God) of hosts" (e.g., 84:8), as well as its royal context, connotes militaristic imagery (as the "hosts" were the heavenly armies that fought alongside Israel's mortal warriors).

The psalmist's language shifts from the geopolitical to the cosmic, with a concomitant shift from the divine warrior to the divine creator (v. 6). Israel's fortunes rest not in the hands of one god among many, but rather in the hands of the one Creator of all that is (which would include other gods, were this psalm to acknowledge them). The terms "heaven," "earth" and "sea" encompass the three arenas that made up the totality of creation (with "earth" including the underworld). The constancy of nature is probably what it meant by describing the LORD as the one who "keeps faith forever" (v. 6b).

The psalmist's language shifts again, this time to the realm of human relations, specifically the relations between the powerful and the weak, the rulers and the ruled (vv. 7-9). The almost certainly deliberate ambiguity in the psalmist's language in these verses allowed the psalm to be applied equally to Israel's internal ordering of its political life, and also to describe Israel's relationship with its more powerful neighbors. It was certainly the case that Israel's rulers (official as well as unofficial in the persons of the rich and powerful) were expected to uphold justice for individual oppressed Israelites (v. 7); it was equally true that Israel was convinced that such behavior mirrored (and was expected to mirror) the LORD's protection of the nation itself.

The "prisoners" referred to meant either Israelites imprisoned in Israel itself for economic or political reasons or Israelite prisoners of war in other countries. The word would not have been applied to foreigners held in Israel's prisons.

The strangers ("resident aliens" is a better translation of the Hebrew *gerim*, formerly translated "sojourners"), orphans and widows mentioned in verse 9 were the traditional classes of vulnerable persons for whom the king was

expected to exercise protective oversight. The biblical notion of justice was not, as it later became in western countries, blind. Justice, as a royal duty, was both the occasional correcting of specific wrongs and also the ongoing protection of those who had fallen through (or who never were part of) the kinship-based safety net of ancient Israelite society. Obviously, as much of the biblical narrative attests, kings fulfilled this fundamental obligation with varying degrees of fidelity and success, with the evidence suggesting that breaches opened often enough for sentiments such as today's psalm to become part of Israel's sacred record.

The psalm concludes with both a hopeful assertion and an implied criticism (v. 10). The hopeful assertion is that Zion's divine patron, the LORD, will not be thwarted by the wicked, who will come to naught (v. 9). The implied criticism is that it is Israel's God, rather than Israel's sovereign, who ultimately reigns in Zion. Such a thought carried Israel through centuries of historical vicissitudes and proved to be among the most durable of biblical ideas.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?