

SINGING THE WHOLE OF THE PSALTER, WHOLEHEARTEDLY

Ashamed of the Tents of Shem?: The Semitic Roots of Christian Worship

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Some who still sing the Psalms nevertheless try to avoid the distinctive features of the Psalms, and to deal with the Psalms in such a way that their differences from hymns of merely human composition are minimized. This wrong attitude toward the Psalms, if not checked by an intelligent appreciation of their real character and value, will ultimately lead (as it already has led in several denominations) to the abandonment of the Psalter as the book of praise. It is hoped that the present article may be used of the Holy Spirit to help some who dislike the Psalms, or who use them merely because of custom or tradition, to love the Psalms and to see them as part and parcel of the Biblical system of religion.

“God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem”—Genesis 9:27.

The German scholar Delitzsch remarked that we are all Japhethites dwelling in the tents of Shem. The prophecy uttered by Noah was that God would enlarge Japheth, and Japheth would dwell in the tents of Shem. In the Hebrew idiom, to dwell in the tents of someone means to be the inheritor of that person’s wealth and estate.

Noah’s prophecy concerns the broad lines of the future development of the various branches of the human race. God would enlarge Japheth. Japheth was the ancestor of the Indo-European peoples, to which we ourselves belong. It is a fact of history that for the last 2500 years the Indo-European peoples have been dominant in world affairs, not only in material and scientific progress, but also in political control of the major part of the civilized world. This dominance is today challenged by other peoples of the world, but it has not yet been completely overthrown. However, it is not this aspect of Noah’s prophecy that particularly concerns us in the present article. We are now concerned especially with the prediction that Japheth should dwell in the tents of Shem.

It is particularly in the matter of religion that the Christian people of Europe and America dwell in the tents of Shem. Our religion is an inheritance from the descendents of Shem. It has come down to us, in the providence of God, from Semitic sources.

Some people do not like this idea. In Nazi Germany before World War II, there was a violent revolt against it. The so-called “German Christians” attempted to purge Christianity and the Church from Jewish influences and traditions.

Some Germans went even farther than this, and brazenly returned to the idolatrous nature-worship of their pagan ancestors—the old German gods of storm and forest and mountain. But the old gods did not help them, and pagan Nazi Germany went down to dismal defeat.

It is still true that Christians of Europe and America dwell in the tents of Shem. Our religious heritage has come to us from the children of Israel, the children of Shem. Our very Christ was a Jew. Our Bible was written almost entirely by Israelites. Our religious thought-forms, vocabulary, sacraments, worship, church-government, all have come to us, humanly speaking, from Israel.

It is important to realize that this is not an accident; it is the intended purpose of God. God intended that the true, saving religion of Christianity should be given to the world through a Semitic, Israelitish channel. He purposed that Japheth should dwell in the tents of Shem. Our religion is not indigenous in our race. We Christians of the Indo-European race have a religion which came from a different source. We can never go back to the old gods of our ancestors. We have known the truth; the true light has dawned upon us. It is the light from God, but it has come to us through the channel of Israel.

Since this has been the plan and purpose of God, we should not despise it nor should we rebel against it. We might prefer that the Savior of the world had been a or a Roman, of the same race as ourselves. But God did not purpose it so. The proverb says that beggars cannot be choosers, and our position before God is that of beggars. We are thankful to have Christ as our Savior, and since it pleased the sovereign God to bring His Son into the world through the seed of Abraham, we can only thank and praise Him for it.

What does all this imply? It certainly implies, at any rate, that we should not seek to escape or evade those features of our religion which bear the label of Shem. We should not object to what bears the stamp of Israelitish origin. To do so is to rebel against the wisdom and goodness of God. God chose that the sons of Japheth, in the matter of religion, should dwell in the tents of Shem. We should respond: “Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight.”

There are many today who are tired of singing the Bible Psalms in the worship of God. This has various reasons, no doubt. Some are tired of singing the Psalms because they

are not willing to bear the cross of being different from the big, popular churches. The other churches sing popular hymns, and the Psalms seem to be not only different, but peculiar and old-fashioned.

Some object to the Psalms because they do not like the theology of the Psalms, with its emphasis on the righteousness and justice of God, and His destruction of His enemies.

Some object to the Psalms because they do not like the Jewish flavor and coloring of the Psalms—the names of people and places, the references to the history of the children of Israel, the Hebrew flavor of the language.

These objections to the Psalms all have one thing in common. No matter what the objection, it arises from a lack of real sympathy with and appreciation of the religion of the Bible. Those who object to the Psalms do not want to dwell in the tents of Shem. They do not like the form and pattern and structure of the religion that God has given to the world; they prefer something new and different, made by themselves. So they “heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears” and “turn away their ears from the truth unto fables” (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

We shall now consider some common wrong tendencies in the use of the Psalms.

Avoidance of the Proper Names in the Psalms.

Zion occurs 38 times in the Psalter; Israel 62 times; Ephraim 5 times; Melchizedek once. There are numerous others: Oreb and Zeeb, Zeba and Zalmunna, Jacob, Lebanon, Kadesh, Jordan, Hermon, Mizar, Tyre, Shechem, Succoth, Gilead, Moab, Edom, Egypt, Ethiopia, Tarshish, Sheba, Seba and so forth.

The objection is raised that these ancient persons and places have no connection with us today. They are just a lot of dusty history from two or three thousand years ago. Why should we sing about Zeba and Zalmunna? It sounds as if we were to sing about Hokus and Pokus, or Dasher and Prancer, Donder and Blitzen. So runs the objection. But wait. After all, do Zeba and Zalmunna have nothing to do with us today? If we are attached to the biblical religion we will realize that they have a lot to do with us today. Our religion did not drop to us out of the sky directly from God. He gave it to us through history, and that the history of Israel. The history of Israel was a history of redemption by the almighty power of God; it was a history of overcoming powerful enemies by the almighty power of God. The enemies were real; they were contemporary manifestations of Satan's kingdom. They were terribly real. But they were crushed by the wonder-working power of almighty God, the covenant God, Jehovah, the God of Israel. This was the importance of Zeba and Zalmunna.

Our religion today, if it is biblical Christianity, is a religion of overcoming powerful enemies by the supernatural,

almighty power of God. We should always think, when we read or sing about Zeba and Zalmunna, of how salvation is not by our might, nor by our power, but by the almighty power, the supernatural grace, of God.

Evil is not abstract, but concrete; it is identified with particular persons. To destroy the evil, the persons must be dealt with by God's mighty power and righteous judgment. Isaac Watts said he would make David talk like a Christian. He denatured the Psalms, and he sophisticated them. Watts quite failed to appreciate the real beauty and glory of the Psalter. Since Watts time, some Psalm-singing denominations have shied away from the proper names in the Psalter, and have tried to screen many of them out of it. Zion is changed to “the church,” and Jerusalem likewise; many of the others are omitted or smoothed over in some way. This yields us a denatured Psalter. No wonder the next step is to give up the Psalms in worship. They have already given up the real vigor and beauty and power of the Psalms by omitting the proper names.

Zion and Jerusalem are the tents of Shem, and it is God's plan for us to dwell in them. Shall we object to that? Those who try to eliminate the proper names of the Psalter show a lack of vital consciousness of the organic connection of the Gospel with the Old Testament. They fail to realize that the real meaning of these proper names, as Zion, is intimately connected with the Biblical doctrine of salvation by free grace. These proper names, and the Psalms with them in, are to be used in the worship of God to the end of the world. They are God's record, God's monument, to the great work of redemption wrought out in history of old. These proper names are not the shame and weakness of the Psalms; they are the honor and the glory of the Psalms.

Avoidance of the “Imprecatory” Psalms.

Of the 150 Psalms in the Psalter some six are commonly classified as “Imprecatory” Psalms—the 55th, 59th, 69th, 79th, 109th and 137th. Many other Psalms contain “imprecatory” elements, namely, divinely inspired prayers for the destruction of certain wicked men, enemies of God.

The Psalter is constantly being reproached because of the “imprecatory” psalms. It is said that these psalms breathe a savage spirit, that they are alien to the “spirit of Jesus,” that they are not suited to Christian devotion, and so forth.

These objections spring partly from a misunderstanding of the Psalms themselves. The objectors often regard them as mere human compositions. They see in them simply David's private wrath against his personal enemies. But such is not the character of these Psalms. They are divinely inspired and they are directed against implacable enemies of God and of God's kingdom. They are so cited in the New Testament (Psalm 69:25 and 109:8 quoted in Acts 1:20). Nor are the “imprecatory” Psalms really contrary to the “spirit of Jesus” or the “spirit” of the New Testament. All that is found in them can

be matched by statements of the New Testament, and none is more terrible than the words of Jesus Christ against those permanently identified with Satan's kingdom.

The objections also arise partly from a false idealism in religion, which regards Christianity as merely a matter of ideals. Christianity is not merely a matter of ideals; it is not even merely salvation; Christianity is *divine redemption from an objective realm of evil*—from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, from Satan's kingdom.

Christianity involves divine judgment on sin and sinners as truly as it involves divine redemption for God's people. The false notion that God is nothing but love is responsible for much of the opposition to these psalms. The present writer recalls hearing a young woman, a member of a Psalm-singing church, say of Psalm 137: "I just HATE that psalm!" The most charitable explanation of this attitude toward a part of God's holy Word is that this young woman really understood neither Psalm 137, nor the real character of biblical religion as divine redemption from an objective realm of evil. She had no doubt been fed on a false religious idealism that thought of God as nothing but love, and left His justice entirely out of the picture.

Such is a very one-sided view of God. "Behold the goodness and severity of God" (Romans 11:22)—not only the goodness of God, but also the severity of God. The Psalms give the whole picture, not just one side. They portray not only God's love and salvation, but His justice and retribution meted out to wicked men. Christ's kingdom is not advanced without Satan's kingdom being destroyed.

Emphasis on the Subjective Element Only

There is observable a constant tendency to use only those portions of the Psalms which deal with subjective salvation—a Christian's religious experience—such as the consciousness of God's love, of forgiveness, of God's care. The tendency is to regard these experiences of the Christian life as divorced from the foundation on which God has built them, namely, historical redemption from an objective realm of evil. Take, for example, Psalm 118, that incomparable song of gracious supernatural redemption, a song which will stir the very heart and soul of any Christian who loves the biblical religion. This 118th Psalm formed the climax of the Hallel which our Savior and His disciples sang after the institution of the Lord's Supper, before they left the upper room to go to the Garden of Gethsemane.

Here is the Christian's subjective experience of salvation, the wonder of salvation by divine grace:

O praise the Lord for he is good;
His grace is ever sure.
Now let the tribes of Isr'el say,
His mercy doth endure.

In my distress I sought the Lord,
Jehovah answered me;
He set me in a spacious place,
A place of liberty.

The mighty Lord is on my side,
I will not be afraid;
For anything that man can do
I shall not be dismayed.

Salvation's joyful song is heard
Where'er the righteous dwell;
The right hand of the mighty Lord
In valor doth excel.

I shall not die, but live and tell
Jehovah's power to save;
The Lord hath sorely chastened me,
But spared me from the grave.

But this exultation in personal salvation is based on the objective foundation of historical divine redemption from evil. The same Psalm which exults in subjective salvation also glories in the foundation of objective, historical redemption:

That stone is made head corner stone
Which builders did despise;
This is the doing of the Lord,
And wondrous in our eyes.

The Lord is God, and he to us
Hath made the light arise;
O bind ye to the altar's horns
With cords the sacrifice.

There you have it. Salvation's joyful song is heard, true; but only because there was One who was despised and rejected of men, who yet was made the head stone of the corner by God, and bound as a sacrifice to the horns of the altar. Every time we sing those solemn sacred words we should think of how our blessed Lord was nailed to the cross of Calvary for our redemption.

Back of our personal experience of God's love, God's forgiveness, God's care, God's answer to prayer; back of our joy, our peace of mind, our hope—back of all these lies a historical work of redemption, without which our Christian experience today could not exist. This historical work of redemption is wrought out by the almighty power of God in human history, from Genesis to Revelation, from creation to consummation, but especially in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the solid granite rock on which our personal experience of salvation rests. Such is the structure of real, biblical Christianity. It is

solid, hard and strong as granite, the true rock of ages, the foundation of God's almighty work of historical redemption from evil.

In the Bible, the present subjective experience of the Christian is joined organically with the historical work of redemption. What God has joined together let no man put asunder. To sever these two is basically wrong, and the tendency to do so, which is observable on every hand even in psalm-singing churches, is an indication of how far we are being influenced, unconsciously, by modern religious liberal idealism.

The trend of modern hymnbooks is largely toward the over-emphasis of the subjective experience at the expense of the objective foundation. Even those churches that do not use the hymns, often show the same tendency by people's manner of picking and choosing among the Psalms. A psalm will be announced for singing, and two or three stanzas dealing with the objective foundation will be omitted, while the remaining stanzas, dealing with subjective experience, will be sung. Thus in our folly we are like a man who enjoys eating apples but despises apple trees and regards them of little or no value. Admittedly we cannot eat the roots, bark and branches of the apple tree; but are they therefore to be neglected and treated as of no importance? Shall we put asunder what God has joined together? Do we not thereby reveal a deadly weakness, a serious failure to grasp the real character and structure of biblical religion?

Those very features of the Psalms that are objectionable to the modern spirit are the real strength and glory of the Psalter. They are essential to its truly biblical character and emphasis.

Those who love one aspect of the Psalms only, while finding other aspects alien to their religious life, or even unpleasant and objectionable, are already involved in a process which, if not reversed, will in the course of time lead to the complete rejection of the Psalter as the manual of praise. But that is not all. This same process, if not checked, will in the course of time lead to a complete departure from the biblical religion of redemption from an objective realm of evil, to an alien type of religion, a type of religion that is divorced from historical facts and that is merely subjective and idealistic. It will lead to the type of religion that, instead of saying "I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," says instead: "I believe in goodness, truth and beauty." And in that subjective idealism there is no salvation.

The Psalms are balanced, they are free from all one-sided emphases. They have stood the test of time. Let us hold on to them, love them, glory in them, sing them heartily, and never, never apologize for them or be ashamed of them. They are our heritage, a part of the tents of Shem that God has planned and prepared for us to dwell in to His glory and our own good.