

The Joy of Worship

Psalm 84

October 24, 2021

Psalm 84 in NRSV is given the subject annotation of, “The Joy of Worship in the Temple.” That seems to be a modern addition, absent in KJV and RSV. The longstanding annotation (here from RSV) is “To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.” “The Gittith” seems to have been the tune to be used. The same is prescribed for Psalms 8 (credited to David) and 81 (credited to Asaph). It’s also possible that the word “gittith” identifies a musical mode or instrument, possibly originating in the (Philistine) city of Gath. The “Sons of Korah” were a guild of Temple musicians, along with Asaph, and others. I Chronicles 6:33 lists a Heman of the “Kohathites” who was appointed by David as a singer, and his ancestry is traced back to Korah, a grandson of Levi. Later mention of musicians in Chronicles mentions Heman as one of the schools of musicians (II Chr. 20:19). So the Korahites are the same as those of Heman. Asaph was a different Levite whose ancestry did not trace through Korah but to Shimai, a different grandson of Levi. There is also mention of the Korahites as gatekeepers (I Chronicles 9:19, 26:1,19).

So, does any of that matter? Until I began preparing for this lesson, I would have said, “No.” Do we really know anything about the particular writer of individual psalms, other than those attributed to David? Well, maybe. I had never thought of the connection of the “Korahites,” the school of musicians indistinguishable by me from other psalmists, to the Korah of Numbers 16, the instigator of the revolt against Moses. Our lesson writer made that connection, and supposes that the Korahites were, for that reason, somewhat under disgrace, or perhaps even exile from temple service. (See the top paragraph p. 45 of the lesson book.)

This psalm does convey a sense of longing and love for the Temple that might be expected of someone exiled from his true home, and who is longing to return. Psalm 42, also of the Sons of Korah, speaks to me in the same way, longing to renew a connection to God. I have not taken the time to carefully study the remaining Korahite psalms, 44-49, 85, 87, and 88. Psalm 87 also expresses joy. Psalm 42, and especially Psalm 88, express a despondency, a desperate longing for God’s help. The lesson writer’s idea seems to be that Korah’s history may explain both a joy in the temple, or a longing to renew such a connection. This seems to make some sense.

Psalm 84

The Joy of Worship in the Temple

To the leader: according to The Gittith. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.

**¹How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!**

**²My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.**

**³Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God.**

**⁴Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise. *Selah***

**⁵Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.^[a]**

**⁶As they go through the valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.**

**⁷They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.**

**⁸O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob! *Selah***

**⁹Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.**

**¹⁰For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.**

**I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.**

**¹¹For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favor and honor.**

**No good thing does the Lord withhold
from those who walk uprightly.**

**¹²O Lord of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.**

Footnotes a. [Psalm 84:5](#) Heb lacks *to Zion*

There are two hypotheses about how this psalm was composed. One is that the writer was a devout Judean (likely a Levite) who for some reason was exiled from the Temple, and wrote these verses thinking of earlier times when in the Temple. Another possibility is that the psalm was by someone who had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to the Temple, and this is similar to other pilgrim psalms. One commentator thinks it was a holiday psalm for the Feast of Tabernacles. All three of these ideas are not mutually exclusive. I can picture in my mind an exile taken off to in Babylon, a contemporary of the prophet Ezekiel, during the days of Zedekiah, the last king of Judah. He is remembering Jerusalem, and the experience of being in the Temple. He longs to return. But within a few years, Jerusalem and that Temple would be destroyed.

The psalm also moves across three sections. In verses 3 and 4 we have the perspective of a dweller in the Temple. Then we hear from one who is a worshiper, and finally to one who is willing to be just a doorman. In verse 4, **“Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.”** There is good reason to think that the outer chambers of the Temple proper contained apartments in which priests who were “on duty” lived. In *Nehemiah* there is mention in 13:4-9 of Tobiah making for himself an apartment in the Temple in a large room that had been designated to store wine and grain offerings. The *Mishna* (additional Jewish writings) records that priests on duty slept in a “Chamber of the hearth” within the Temple. The Temple Sanctuary and Holy of Holies were surrounded by a double wall. In between those walls were chambers which were used for various purposes, likely including the housing for priests on duty. The Psalmist may even be remembering when he found joy in serving in that way. Now, he envies the birds who make their nests within the Temple grounds.

In verse 1, God is given the title “Lord of hosts.” The precise meaning of “hosts” is uncertain. It is the military term for an army. The “host of Israel” was the army mobilized of all men available, those “able to draw the sword.” The standing army was typically much smaller. David seems to have had a commander of his army, Joab, and three particularly notable warriors. Below them were thirty important but lesser commanders, including Uriah (Bathsheba’s husband) and perhaps scores, but not many hundreds, of additional soldiers in regular service. But for a war, many others would be called up, much as in modern times a nation might call up the “reserves” or “National Guard.” So, in this sense, the hosts is perhaps the army of Israel. A wider interpretation is the host of heaven. In ancient times these might be thought of as an army of angels, or perhaps the power inherent in the celestial bodies, the sun, moon, stars and planets, a “heavenly host.” That

host would appear attending God's throne-room in visions, such as that of the prophet Micaiah's vision in 2 Kings 22:19, and in passages elsewhere.

Another title for God that appears just in the next verse is, "the living God." In its simplest sense, this is a distinction from the idols and false gods worshiped by pagans and even some Israelites. But, in this context, and in Psalm 42:2, it may more accurately mean, "the God of my life."

With verse 5-7, the context seems to shift to the pilgrimage experience. The people of verses 5 and following have been worshipers at the temple. That's in contrast to the residents of verses 3-4. The location of the "valley of Baca" is uncertain. The name may come from the baka shrub or tree, or perhaps the balsam tree. The particular valley was presumatively rather sterile normally. But the pilgrims find the valley much less dry than expected. Consider how much seasonal rains can change a landscape. In dry weather pools dry up, springs eventually cease flowing, and plants wither. Then, rain comes. Rivulets turn into raging torrents, pools appear, and soon the withered grass is green with life. Interestingly, one ancient text reads "blessings" instead of pools. Either way, the pilgrims, perhaps returning from the Temple, find the earth a place of abundance and life. This may be indicative of a Feast of Tabernacles connection, since that's about the time the rainy season begins. As a metaphor, perhaps our valley really was that way all along, full of blessings, for those who could see and receive God's presence and grace.

Verses 8 and 9 may have been added later as this psalm was adapted to be a liturgy. I've read that they don't quite fit in a literary sense. Instead, they can be thought of as a response to what the psalmist is saying. "Our shield" and "your anointed" most likely refer to the king. That is consistent with this psalm being written during the monarchy period.

Verse 10 shifts perspective. The psalmist would be a doorkeeper, to be there in the house of God. Very interesting! That is one of the roles ultimately assumed by the descendants of Korah, according to Chronicles. Now, we have to keep in mind that Chronicles is late, well after the exile. There is no mention anywhere in the Bible of Korah's descendants being punished in later days for his revolt in the time of Moses, except 16:32 implies all died with Korah, which obviously wasn't true. In fact, the survival of Korah's sons at the time of the revolt is explicit in Numbers 26:11. But they may have been squeezed out, or into a lower class of service at the temple. I've become aware that there was a lot going on in temple politics. I am not sufficiently knowledgeable about so as to reach conclusions. I

don't know what standing those Jews who trace back to Levi via Korah have in contemporary time or even during the First Century. Did they or do they still face prejudice on Korah's account? I didn't find anything on it.

In verse 11, "God is a sun ..." is an expression found nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible, though Malachi 4:2 is close. Virtually every other polytheistic culture had a Sun god. The Egyptians had Ra, the Greek's had the god Helios (meaning "the Sun") and there was also the better known Roman/Greek Apollo. A more normal expression is "My light and my salvation," as in Psalm 27:1. That is likely the sense in which "sun" is meant in this verse. God as a shield is a much more common expression. At least after the exile, Jewish writers tried to avoid anything that would connect God to the polytheistic views and practices that had brought the disaster of the exile. This interesting expression here may be another relic of this psalm's origin during the time of the kings of Judah.

It is interesting that nowhere in the psalm is worship explicitly mentioned. There is no description of sacrifices, of other temple rituals, or of processing into or out of the Temple. The closest the psalmist comes to that is in verse 2, "... my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God." It is being in the Temple, there in the presence of God, that brings joy to the psalmist. Not the particular rituals or practices. He is home. Home within God's family, and knowing God is present with him. That is true whether he might be a dweller in God's service there, a transient pilgrim, or even the lowest functionary. Safety, security, and comfort are found in God's presence. Being there is enough. And, perhaps, even if he is a disgraced son of Korah. That won't matter to God.

Verses 11 and 12 together are a faith-filled conclusion to the psalm. Whatever the circumstances the psalmist may be in, however far removed from the temple now, he longs for that home in God's presence. It is a home that we as Christians also long for. We do so however much we may feel removed from such a place in our everyday lives. We live with God's promises, and we live in the joy of knowing those promises are true. As Christians, these words are reinforced through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, or Savior, as testified in the New Testament.

Prayer: God of grace, we worship you! You call us your own, so we pray that you will walk beside us as we seek to be at home with you. Open our hearts to your welcome. Amen.

I have drawn on information from the *Interpreter's Bible* vol. 4, and also the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, especially concerning Korah, as well as some internet sources. No space to be more specific.