



The Old Testament believer's hope

"No-one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from his grave?" (Psalm 6:5). When we read passages like that in the Old Testament, what are we to make of them? Did the writers not have hope of life after death? If so, why did they speak as they did?

There are a number of similar passages in the Book of Psalms which present a very gloomy, not to say blank, picture of what awaits man after death. There is only the realm of silence (Psalm 115:17), the land of oblivion (Psalm 88:12).

It is therefore not surprising that some scholars have advanced the opinion that when these Psalms were composed, the reality of resurrection and life after death was unknown in Israel. They contend that it is only in the very latest additions to the Old Testament that the belief in an after-life begins to be articulated as part of Israel's faith.

Such a view is faulty in that it fails to take into account all the evidence that we have in connection with the faith of the psalmists.

The eternal covenant

Firstly, the Psalms are an expression of a living covenant faith. They grow out of the personal relationship initiated by God and appropriated by faith, which is thus able to approach God boldly and call him "My God" even in their darkest experiences.

The fact that they have a covenant faith indicates:

- a) that the psalmists consciously stand in the footsteps of the patriarchs, and so share in their view of life after death. That the patriarchs had such a view is evidenced by the discussion of Hebrews 11:16-19;
- b) the covenant was always expressed as an eternal relationship, and not merely a temporary, earthbound manifestation of God's grace. In Matthew 22:32 Jesus himself is prepared to argue from the covenant bond by which God denominates himself the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob to the continued existence in life of those who participated in it.

The eternal nature of the covenant bond was thus available to the psalmists to underwrite their expectation that death would not have the last word in their experience.

The Scriptures already given

Secondly, the psalmists were also those who had available to them the Scriptural canon of their day, and in particular the Pentateuch, where the history of Enoch alerted them to the existence of life above and beyond this earthly realm. In contradistinction to the other brief notices in the genealogy of Genesis 5, each of which ends with the solemn note *"and then he died"*, that of Enoch opens up a vista beyond: *"then he was no more, because God took him away"* (Genesis 5:24). That the psalmists linked this *"taking"* with something that they would themselves experience may be indicated by the use of the same word in: *"he will surely take me to himself"* (Psalm 49:15); and *"afterwards you will take me into glory"* (Psalm 73:24).

The testimony of the Psalms

These passages lead us into a third consideration — that the bleak, almost non-existent, view of life after death is not the only one presented even in the Psalms themselves. Apart from the concluding verses of Psalm 73, Psalms 16 and 17 come to mind in this connection.

In Psalm 17:14 David talks of *"men of this world whose reward is in this life"*, which certainly implies the existence of a group of men whose life is not primarily to be described as of this world, and whose reward is not limited to this life. From such a group he dissociates himself, and goes on to describe the divinely bestowed blessings that come upon those God cherishes not only now, but when they awake. This has always — and rightly — been taken as referring to experience beyond the grave.

Similarly, it is increasingly recognised that *"the path of life"* (Psalm 16:11) is not to be diluted to mean just a mode of living that ensures present survival. Life can frequently mean eternal life. This can be seen in the contrast present in Proverbs 11:19: *"in the way of the righteous is life, and in its path there is no death"*, where "no death" is now understood against the background of other ancient literature to be a term that is synonymous with immortality. The life of which the Psalms speak is therefore not just a God-blessed existence in present terms, but one that encompasses the reality of continued bliss hereafter. An insight that many a pious singer of the Psalms had before the discoveries of Ugaritic lexicography opened the eyes of the scholarly to its tenability.

Further questions

But while this fuller body of evidence amply justifies the belief that the psalmists and other Old Testament saints entertained the hope of eternal pleasures at the right hand of God, there remain two matters to be considered.

- a) Why is there not more explicit Old Testament teaching on life after death?
- b) How could positive views of the believer's portion hereafter co-exist with the negative sentiments of passages such as Psalm 6:5?

Little by little

Regarding the first matter, it is sufficient to emphasise the progressive nature of revelation. God did not reveal all at once. While the Old Testament believer did entertain positive hope for the future, it is far from certain that the contours of that hope were sharply delineated.

The examples of Enoch, or later Elijah, while opening their minds to the prospect of more awaiting God's servants hereafter, did little to give content to that hope. Indeed, it would be fair to say that the Holy Spirit did not reveal more because the time was not yet right until our Lord himself had been raised from the dead.

Even now, though our conceptions of what resurrection and eternal life involve have been greatly clarified by what we know through Jesus, there is still much obscurity and lack of detail. We now see only a poor reflection compared to the full knowledge we shall yet have. How much more intense was the contrast for those who lived in expectation of his first coming!

The gloomy view of death

Regarding the other problem of the negative expressions used regarding death, the explanation seems to lie in the fact that these are generally to be found in penitential psalms.

David in Psalm 6 speaks as one who has by his conduct laid himself open to God's anger and wrath (verse 1). Though he has enemies (verses 8 and 10), the experience he is undergoing is one of felt alienation from God through his own sin. It is precisely at such moments when the odious corruption of sin lies heaviest on the soul, that the blackest view of life and the world beyond are liable to be taken. If life — and eternal life at that — lies in God's favour, then the individual who is pressed under by the dire consequences of his own sin and cries out *"Be merciful to me, O Lord"*, can view death only in terms of what it involves for the unforgiven. That is the final separation of the soul from God, and its being sent to the region where his praise is not expressed.

But for the psalmist, the terror of remaining unforgiven is banished by the faith that realises: *"The Lord has heard my cry for mercy"* (verse 9) and so he is able to look forward once more to the realisation of all that is involved in the life and death bond forged by God's covenant love.

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