

## Grasping at the power of Eschatological Hope

*Exploring the relevance of one of Israel's ancient songs*

In the gospel of John the phrase eternal life is not limited to the future, but embraces the immediate.

**John 5:24** <sup>24</sup> *Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.*

Interestingly this concept of the presence of eternal life existing in the present as a power and/or reality is found in the Old Testament in Psalm 133. Likewise the phrase 'Kingdom of Heaven' used in the New Testament is also understood to possess the now/not yet status given to the phrase 'eternal life'. According to the theology of the New Testament writers we already possess eternal life and yet we wait for the consummation of this reality into the present. This now/not yet idea is not foreign to the Old Testament but is embodied in the 'hope pieces' found at the conclusion of prophetic judgment speeches. The power of eschatological hope is the bringing of the future into the present. Meaning when we embrace the promises of the world transformed we bring the power of transformation into the present.

Psalm 133 also presents the possibility for humanity to exist as a singularity as found presented in the prayer of Jesus.

**John 17:22-23** <sup>22</sup> *The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,* <sup>23</sup> *I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

So, Psalm 133 is rich with theological truth and reality that is utilized by both Jesus and the New Testament writers. To review the specifics are: Firstly, Psalm 133 presents the possibility for humanity to exist in 'unity'. Secondly, Psalm 133 presents eternal life as a reality that can be present in the now.

The parts of the Psalm need to be understood. The Psalm consists of four major parts. The first part is the first line which presents 'the possibility'. The second part is the 'first metaphor'. The third part is the 'second metaphor'. The fourth part is the result of the actualizing of the possibility, (which is 'the blessing').

### The Possibility

Let me explain. The first line of Psalm 133 can be better understood by the English reader through the benefit of a more literal translation that adheres to the Hebrew word order. The first word of Psalm 133 is an exclamative. Meaning the Psalm begins with a word that denotes emotion, joy, or even equivalent to an enthusiastic 'yeah'.

*Psalm 133:1 Yeah! What good? What pleasantness? Sitting brothers as one.*

It is important the reader realize that the Psalm is a transformative hope piece that is meant to help the reader move from 'spiritlessness' to 'Spirit'. The Psalm is meant to manifest the power of the eschatological hope into the 'now'. This is accomplished through the use of poetic language. Language that uses idealistic memories of religious icons and the power of the theophany exhibited in nature.

## The First Metaphor

In the first metaphor, oil is used as a symbol of the Spirit present in the anointing of Aaron the first priest. This 'precious oil' flows down the beard of Aaron. The reader is invited to imagine Aaron standing as a man of age filled with wisdom anointed by God (Moses). His beard contributing to the evidence of God's faithfulness found in the experience of the aged. As the oil flows further it begins to flow over the ephod worn by Aaron.<sup>1</sup> Because the ephod is an esthetically pleasing object to view and contains the names of the tribes of Israel carved into the stones attached to it the reader finds the metaphor to reach beyond its symbolism and inspire the deepest feelings of the devout believer. Now, the reader understands the brothers or 'brethren' to be Israel. Yet Israel is supposed to be a nation through whom all the nations find blessing, thus the metaphor has the power to make the reader understand that 'brethren' is synonymous for all of humanity.

## The Second Metaphor

*NRS Psalm 133:3a It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.*

As the Psalm unfolds the second metaphor extends the readers activated imagination beyond the romantic memory of religious iconicity to the powers exhibited in the natural world. These natural powers are reminiscent of the theophanic appearances of God. In the Old Testament the presence and appearance of God is often accompanied by thunder, darkness, earthquakes, and a mountain.

Dew as a metaphor is used by the prophets and equated God's presence with the life exhibited by the faithfulness of the morning dew to freshen the earth. The blessing of God's life giving presence that was exhibited in the natural world through the dew from Hermon upon the sacred place of Zion is expressive of the truth that God transcends the idea of a holy place. If you will, the holy place is reduced to mere symbolic significance for relating to and knowing God. These two metaphors enable the reader to view the Psalm as a universal truth not bound by the structures of religious icon or symbol. The universal aspect of God's transcendent nature fulfills all covenantal promises through the power of the gift of life that comes from God.

Both metaphors serve to build upon the actualizing of the possibility found in the first line. That possibility is humanity found sitting at the table of hospitality pursuing peaceful resolution to all their conflicts. When people are capable of sitting together then there is hope for peace even amidst disagreement. Further when people are sitting all together or as 'one' then acceptance and understanding are present in their relationship. The idea of relationship is further established when the reader understands the word 'brothers' to be applied to all humanity. So, we might translate the first line again with some interpretive license:

*Psalm 133:1 Wow! Can you imagine the beauty and peace present when humanity learns to live as one!*

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<sup>1</sup> (1) A sacred vestment originally designed for the high priest (Ex 28:4 ff; 39:2 ff), and made "of gold, blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen," held together by two shoulder-pieces and a skillfully woven band which served as a girdle for the ephod. On the shoulder pieces were two onyx stones on which were engraved the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. It is not known whether the ephod extended below the hips or only to the waist. Attached to the ephod by chains of pure gold was a breastplate containing twelve precious stones in four rows. Underneath the ephod was the blue robe of the ephod extending to the feet of the priest. The robe of the ephod was thus a garment comprising, in addition to the long robe proper, the ephod with its shoulder pieces and the breastplate of judgment. ISBE ed. By Bromiley BW 6

## The Blessing

*NRS **Psalm 133:3b** ..... For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.*

*My Translation: For it is there Yahweh commanded the blessing life unto forever.*

The final or fourth part of this eschatological hope Psalm takes us back to the first line. The locative word 'there' is identifying the action of humanity to sit as one (pursuing peace) and not referring back to Zion. The first line was the manifestation of all the good that the two metaphors could inspire. Now the first line is the object of the blessing commanded in the last line. Thus the blessing of 'eternal life' arises from human activity, an activity that belongs to all humanity and not just Israel. The universal aspect of all Old Testament hope pieces is found here in Psalm 133. The truth of the gospel is found in Psalm 133. The possibility for human beings to live at peace is not just an eschatological hope, it is also an effort to which we are to commit ourselves in relation to others. When we can sit together in understanding and peace we can experience the power of the blessing 'eternal life' in the now.

The need to learn to be peace makers is part of the developmental process for the maturation of all believers. Jesus said

**Matthew 5:9** <sup>9</sup> *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

We live at a time when Christianity needs to be re-established as a faith that pursues peace and loves others (especially her enemies). Peacemaking is not the business of politicians and kings, their business is war, the expansion of their will and the good of their people over the good of other peoples. It is the place of the church to speak for peace. Peace is achieved through understanding, through give and take, through acceptance of the other (and the other is always different). Peace is always purchased at a cost. Christianity is not the business of the state it is the person of Jesus alive in his people. Christianity can not be enforced upon a culture or upon a people through the medium of governmental powers. Since the inception of the church, whenever the church is identified with the government then the faith of the church is reduced to violent expansionist activities. The voice of the church today should be a voice for the pursuit of peace.

In the book of Samuel one of the commanding Generals named Abner has some words that need to become our words.

**2 Samuel 2:25-27** <sup>25</sup> *The Benjaminites rallied around Abner and formed a single band; they took their stand on the top of a hill. <sup>26</sup> Then Abner called to Joab, "Is the sword to keep devouring forever? Do you not know that the end will be bitter? How long will it be before you order your people to turn from the pursuit of their kinsmen?" <sup>27</sup> Joab said, "As God lives, if you had not spoken, the people would have continued to pursue their kinsmen, not stopping until morning."*

We are brothers with all of humanity and yet we insist on the killing of one another as the solution to our problems. As long as we live by the sword we will perpetuate the power and response of the sword in the world. The industrial military complex will continue to devour our freedom and replace it with the power of the sword as the voice of America. The sword does not speak for God. We must remember that the word of God is more effective than the sword. We must pursue dialogue and understanding with all 'others'. We must learn to bring the power of eternal life into the present by sitting down at the table of the Lord. We must learn to universalize symbols and allow the power of the symbol to once again guide us to the God of all. We must partake of the flesh and blood of Christ by entering into his sufferings, by dying for the world through bringing a message of peace.

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