

Psalms 44 and 104 as a Reflection of the Human Condition and the Faith of Israel

By Alexander Peck

This article focuses on two psalms – Psalm 40 (a lament) and Psalm 104 (a hymn) – and discusses how they portray the human condition and how it is approached through the faith of Israel. What is described reflects, to a degree, the human condition presented in the Book of Psalms and how the faith of Israel addressed the situation.

Psalm 44 – A Communal Lament

The Human Condition

Israel, the people of God, experienced Yahweh's apparent aloofness or absence, the testing of their faith, inexplicable suffering, as well as an awareness of sin – all part of the human condition.

Psalm 44 is a communal lament, reflecting a national catastrophe. However, the psalm transcends its original setting and addresses the human condition of a people of faith who at times experience *Yahweh's apparent aloofness or absence*.¹ God, who had powerfully revealed himself in Israel's history (vv. 1-8), now seemingly remains hidden (vv. 23-24). The people who had believed in God, and extolled his virtues, are no longer able to understand the way God is acting.²

¹ John F. Craghan, *The Psalms: Prayers for the Ups, Downs and In-Betweens of Life: A Literary-Experiential Approach* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1985), 142. Anderson writes that "in community laments the distress may be military crisis, drought, famine, scourge . . ." (*Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, p. 58).

² Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 357.

The Israelites in Psalm 44 experience a closely related condition for the people of God – the *testing of faith*. This occurs through finding themselves, as Anderson states, “in the interim between God’s promise and the fulfilment of the promise.”³ Faith is being tested because there are no clear proofs that God is in control of the human situation.⁴ In fact, it seems as if the odds were against believing and trusting that Yahweh was with his people.⁵ The people of God were painfully aware of the misery of their situation and yet unable to understand why it was occurring (vv. 9-21).⁶

A further human condition addressed in Psalm 44 is that of *inexplicable suffering* – suffering that occurs for no apparent reason and results in “concomitant mental anguish”.⁷ The peoples’ conscience remained assured of their genuineness, earnestness, and integrity (vv. 17-21). No infringement of the Covenant had occurred (v. 17) to justify their punishment.⁸ As a result, they protest based on their innocence⁹ – and, in some ways, approach the boundary between accusation and judgment of God.¹⁰ In sum, using Weiser’s words, “it is the enquiry into the divine purpose of suffering, the meaning of which is not understood, which causes the affliction of the people to turn into a crisis of faith.”¹¹

Finally, in Psalm 44:17-21 there is an awareness of the human condition of *sin and suffering*. While a direct cause and effect relationship between sin and affliction is an oversimplification, Psalm 44 is a valuable reminder regarding consciousness of sin and the

³ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 50.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁶ Laurence Dunlop, *Patterns of Prayer in the Psalms* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 109.

⁷ Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., *The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and in the Ancient Near East: No. 127 SBL Dissertation Series* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 95.

⁸ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 358.

⁹ Ferris, Jr., *The Genre of Communal Lament*, 97. Ferris uses the expression “a protestation of innocence”.

¹⁰ Ibid. Ferris adds that “they never quite reach a point where God is judged”.

¹¹ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 358.

punishment it merits.¹² As Nowell writes, “at a deeper level the insight is correct: there is a connection between sin and suffering . . . sin causes suffering.”¹³

The Faith of Israel

In the midst of their human dilemma, the Israelites display covenantal faithfulness and obedience, a waiting on God, an appeal to the steadfast love of God, and a righteousness that is from God.

Despite the affliction in the context of their situation, the Israelites in faith choose to continue in the way of *covenantal faithfulness and obedience*.¹⁴ In the manner of the Israelite psalms of lament, they maintain the conviction that Yahweh is trustworthy and faithful (v. 26).¹⁵ Anderson notes that “these cries of distress are motivated by the deep confidence that God is an active God who intervenes to deliver.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, the affliction is brought before God with candour.¹⁷ Their words may not delight one’s sensibilities, yet the people mean what they say – they are unafraid to pour out their experiences to God (vv. 9-14).¹⁸

Although the Israelites experienced “the wilderness of isolation”,¹⁹ they also realized that when God is silent, for the people of God there must be a *waiting for God* to show himself (v. 23).²⁰ Furthermore, the Israelites had the conviction that God is the judge and redeemer, with sovereign power over all forms of distress (vv. 1-8).²¹ Accordingly, the lament can be

¹² Joseph Jensen, *God's Word to Israel*, rev. ed. (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982), 226.

¹³ Irene Nowell, "The Cursing Psalms," *Bible Today* 32 (1994): 220.

¹⁴ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 358.

¹⁵ Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁷ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 358.

¹⁸ Toni Craven, *The Book of Psalms* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 39-40.

¹⁹ Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 50.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

viewed as an expression of praise – even praise to God in a time of his absence.²²

Additionally, in Psalm 44, a hymn of praise (vv. 2-3) is located at the beginning, seemingly placed to prepare for the confession of confidence which follows and then the appeal.²³

Moreover, for the Israelites, their faith and prayer appealed to the *steadfast love of God*, where that love is also praised as the ultimate motive behind his redemptive work (v. 26).²⁴ They rejected the thought to renounce their loyalty to God.²⁵ To the contrary, as Weiser asserts,

“[the] suffering is recognized as a cross which is laid upon man by God and on that account must be endured even if the tormenting question of the reason and purpose of that suffering remains unanswered.”²⁶

In Psalm 44:22 lies a pivotal statement demonstrating how the faith of the Israelites addressed this situation. The words, “for your sake”,²⁷ show that the reason or purpose for suffering is hidden in God – and he is, for that reason, also the only one who in their situation can help them to endure.²⁸ In the end, the Israelite’s prayer of faith appeals to the steadfast love of God (v. 26).²⁹ As Weiser aptly summarizes:

That love of God is the hidden pivot of the whole psalm round which the hymn and the lamentation, the divine redemptive work in history as well as man’s present temptation, revolve.³⁰

²² Ibid.

²³ Ferris, Jr., *The Genre of Communal Lament*, 94.

²⁴ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 359.

²⁵ Ibid., 358.

²⁶ Ibid., 359.

²⁷ Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985), 1056.

²⁸ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 359.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 359-360.

Finally, in Israel's relationship of faith with Yahweh, the question of sin raises the matter of *righteousness*. Anderson offers an explanation:

“Righteousness” – in the sense that Israel uses the term – is being *in right relation* with God, that is, trusting in his word. Such a relationship is not an achievement of man; it is something that God initiates . . . More and more we are coming to realize that such a passage [Genesis 15] presupposes a cultic situation – as reflected in the psalms of righteousness (innocence) – in which God accepts a man as “righteous”, that is, as being in a trustful relationship, and therefore imparts to him “righteousness”, that is, the status of a right relationship . . . what members of the Israelite community experienced in worship [was]: the divine recognition of “righteousness”, or the right relationship of trust and dependence upon God which amounts to “salvation”.³¹

Psalm 104 – A Hymn

The Human Condition

Psalm 104 includes and addresses three other aspects of the human condition: creation is absolutely dependent on God, the Creator's ample provision for daily needs, and the problem of wickedness.

Regarding the human condition, Psalm 104 shows that the entire *creation is absolutely dependent on God*, and would die without him.³² Yahweh is the Lord of life.³³ He gives life through his life-giving Spirit (v. 30). Anderson argues in favour of *creatio continua* and states that “creation is not just an event that occurred in the beginning, at the foundation of the earth, but is God's continuing activity of sustaining creatures and

³¹ Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 69.

³² Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989), 304. Eaton mentions “the *total* and *constant* dependence upon him of all these living things [emphasis mine]” (*Psalms: Introduction and Commentary*, p. 251).

³³ *Ibid.*, 303.

holding everything in being.”³⁴ In other words, the Creator-King remains constantly involved with his handiwork.³⁵ If Yahweh were to remove his presence and life-spirit (life-force³⁶), all of life would break down and return to dust (v. 29).³⁷

While the human condition is one of the total and constant dependence on the Creator-King,³⁸ God in his free grace also richly blesses humans with *ample provision for daily needs* (vv. 13-15).³⁹ Indeed, God is both the source and sustainer of life.⁴⁰ He takes care of all living beings “at the proper time” (v. 27).⁴¹

Finally, the human condition involving the *problem of wickedness* is briefly addressed in Psalm 104:35 – “Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more.”⁴² This petition, on the basis of the whole psalm, explains Kraus, is that “for human beings who turn away from God, do not praise him, but live conscious only of self and in self-reliance there is no longer room in the vast realm of joy, order, and dependence directed to God.”⁴³ In other words, those who fail to recognize the Creator-King as the source of all their benefits, and who refuse to join in with a grateful response, would be outside the covenant of grace and would have no place on God’s earth.⁴⁴

³⁴ Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 664. Eaton states that “the thought seems to be of the continuing acts of Creation seen in the new seasons and generations” (*Psalms: Introduction and Commentary*, p. 251).

³⁵ VanGemeren, “Psalms”, 659.

³⁶ Eaton uses the term “life-force” (*Psalms: Introduction and Commentary*, p. 251).

³⁷ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 303. According to Eaton, in Ps 104:29, Hebrew uses the same word for “breath” and “Spirit” (*Psalms: Introduction and Commentary*, p. 251).

³⁸ H. H. Eaton, *Psalms: Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 251.

³⁹ VanGemeren, “Psalms”, 661. Kraus writes that “the cheering and refreshing gift of the Creator reaches the innermost being of humankind, and it is reflected in the brightness of a face glistening with oil” (Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*, p. 300).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 303. Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible*, 1140.

⁴² Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., *Holy Bible with the Apocryphal Deuterocanonical Books* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 742.

⁴³ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 304.

⁴⁴ VanGemeren, “Psalms”, 664.

The Faith of Israel

In view of the given human condition described in Psalm 104, the Israelites respond with continual praise, an adoring acknowledgment of God's self-revelation, and hope of the final consummation.

The Israelites in Psalm 104:33-35 exemplify a faith response whereby the people of God can react to the deeds and gifts of Yahweh only with *continual praise* that is also conscious of its dependence.⁴⁵ The psalm begins and ends with the words, "Praise the LORD" (vv. 1, 35).⁴⁶

Furthermore, Israel's faith-filled response is an *adoring acknowledgment of God's self-revelation*.⁴⁷ In other words, it is a response that acknowledges that the Creator has formed the world, that he continually empowers life, and he will ultimately secure its perfection.⁴⁸ Joy in God's creation expressed in the poem, as Eaton describes, "rises from awareness of the active Lord, transcendent yet wonderfully present."⁴⁹

Finally, the Israelite faith included the *hope of the final consummation* – a time when all opponents of the Creator-King will have vanished from the earth.⁵⁰ There is no vindictiveness in the psalmist's petition (v. 35)⁵¹, nor is it an imprecation⁵², only a longing for a world fully established by God. Of such a world, Kraus eloquently writes:

⁴⁵ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 304.

⁴⁶ Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible*, 1138, 1141. Eaton states that "Praise ye the Lord" is a formula found only in the Psalms (*Psalms: Introduction and Commentary*, p. 252).

⁴⁷ Eaton, *Psalms: Introduction and Commentary*, 252.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ VanGemeren, "Psalms", 664.

⁵² A. Cohen, *The Psalms: Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (London: The Soncino Press, 1985), 343.

In the creation that is open to God, guilt has no place. Here there radiates faith in a new creation, a world freed from guilt and failure. It is the conclusion of the song that the human being can only give praise all the days of his life.⁵³

An appendix at the end of the article presents a table showing how Psalms 44 and 104 are a reflection of the human condition and the faith of Israel.

⁵³ Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 304.

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Appendix

**Psalms 44 and 104:
A Reflection of the Human Condition and the Faith of Israel**

Psalm 44 (A Lament)

<i>Elements of the Human Condition</i>	<i>Faith Response of Israelites</i>
• God's apparent aloofness or absence	• Covenantal faithfulness and obedience
• The testing of faith	• Waiting on God
• Inexplicable suffering of the righteous	• Appeal to the steadfast love of God
• Sin and suffering	• A righteousness from God

Psalm 104 (A Hymn)

<i>Elements of the Human Condition</i>	<i>Faith Response of Israelites</i>
• Creation being absolutely dependent on God	• Continual praise and consciousness of dependence on God
• God's ample provision for daily needs	• Adoring acknowledgment of God's self-revelation
• Problem of wickedness	• Hope of the final consummation