

Psalm 115:1-18 [LXX 113:9-26]

Evening Prayer Sunday Week 2

Because the Greek Septuagint (and consequently the Latin Vulgate and the Christian liturgical texts) kept the Hebrew Psalm 9 and Psalm 10 together as a single psalm, the numbering of the Greek, Latin and liturgical psalms up to this point has been one behind the Hebrew numbering. This would lead one to expect Hebrew Psalm 115 to be Psalm 114 in the Greek Bible. However Hebrew Psalm 114 does not end with the cry ‘Praise YH! [Hal’lû Yâ]’, like Psalm 113 and Psalm 115. It is perhaps for this reason that the Septuagint has Psalm 115 as a continuation of the previous psalm, numbering it Psalm 113 and counting the verses from verse 9.

It is a polemic against idols from the period of the Exile. Before the Exile there was an attempt to educate the people away from having idols, because of the danger of falling back into an identification of YHWH with an idol (see the account of the golden calf, Exodus 32, and the idols in Bethel, 1Kings 12:29). During the exile, they had to face the impression that Marduk, the god of Babyon, had defeated YHWH, Israels’ God. Furthermore they could only point to a destroyed sanctuary when asked: ‘Where is your god?’ Their response was ‘Our God is in heaven. He is the creator of heaven and earth’ (see Genesis 1). This psalm belongs with parts of Second Isaiah in mocking the popular Babylonian idol-worship:

The iron smith fashions it and works it over the coals, shaping it with hammers, and forging it with his strong arm; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it; he prays to it and says, ‘Save me, for you are my god!’ They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, ‘Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?’ He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, ‘Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?’

– Isaiah 44:12-20

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops, their idols are on beasts and cattle; these things you carry are loaded as burdens on weary animals ... Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save. To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, as though we were alike? Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales-- they hire a goldsmith, who makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship! They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries out to it, it does not answer or save anyone.

– Isaiah 46:1-7

YHWH will not be mocked

As we pray this psalm we must recognise that there is a continuing danger of vainglory and of worshipping the works of our hands!

Put no trust in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

– Psalm 62:10

¹Not to us, YHWH*, not to us, but to your name give glory*, by your kindness* and your faithfulness.

The psalmist acknowledges that even the community is incapable of giving glory to God. He implores God to glorify himself by revealing his kindness and faithfulness by acting in history. See the article ‘Glory’ in the Introduction.

I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh.

– Exodus 14:4

Before all the people I will be glorified.

– Leviticus 10:3

I am against you, O Sidon, and I will gain glory in your midst. They shall know that I am YHWH when I execute judgments in it, and manifest my holiness in it.

– Ezekiel 28:22

On the day that I show my glory.

– Ezekiel 39:13

I am YHWH, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

– Isaiah 42:8

For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for why should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.

– Isaiah 48:11

²Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’

The people of Judah are being mocked because the temple has been destroyed, thus ‘proving’ that YHWH is of no consequence.

My tears have been my food by day and by night, as they say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’

– Psalm 42:3,10

Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’

– Psalm 79:10

³Our God is in the heavens and does whatever he pleases.

This is their response:

My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfil my intention.

– Isaiah 46:10

We find these verses repeated almost word for word in a later psalm:

The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear, and there is no breath in their mouths.

Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them.

– Psalm 135:15-18

Compare also:

Thus says YHWH: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?

– Jeremiah 2:5

They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame – those who trust in carved images, who say to cast images, ‘You are our gods.’

– Isaiah 42:17

The first appeal is to the people of Israel assembled in prayer. The second appeal is to the priests. The third to all who look to YHWH in reverence.

The psalmist is confident that YHWH will respond with a blessing.

May YHWH, the God of your ancestors, increase you a thousand times more and bless you, as he has promised you!

– Deuteronomy 1:11

We recall Jesus’ words in his parable about the ultimate judgment:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father.

– Matthew 25:34

⁴Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.

⁵They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.

⁶They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell.

⁷They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no voice in their throats.

⁸Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them.

⁹O Israel, trust* in YHWH! He is their strength and their shield.

¹⁰O house of Aaron, trust* in YHWH! He is their strength and their shield.

¹¹You who fear* YHWH, trust* in YHWH! He is their strength and their shield.

¹²YHWH has been mindful of us; he will bless* us; he will bless* the house of Israel; he will bless* the house of Aaron; ¹³he will bless* those who fear* YHWH, both small and great.

¹⁴May YHWH give you increase, both you and your children.

¹⁵May you be blessed* by YHWH, who made heaven and earth.

The heavens, earth and underworld

¹⁶The heavens belong to YHWH; the earth he has given to human beings.

¹⁷The dead do not praise YHWH, nor those who go down into silence.

¹⁸But we will bless* YHWH from this time on and forever more.

Praise YH! [Hal^{el}û Yâ] .

O Lord, look down from your holy dwelling, and consider us. Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear. Open your eyes, O Lord, and see. For the dead who are in Hades, whose spirit has been taken from their bodies, will not ascribe glory or justice to the Lord. But the person who is deeply grieved, who walks bowed and feeble, with failing eyes and famished soul, will declare your glory and righteousness, O Lord.

– Baruch 2:16-18

The final shout is used also in the beginning and end of Psalm 113, the first of the so-called Hallel Psalms.