

# ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN

## An Exegetical and Theological Study of Psalm 73

**Theresa Nadupadavil<sup>♦</sup>**

**University:** Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore

**Faculty:** Theology (Biblical Theology)

**Director:** Dr Joy Philip Kakkanattu

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### **Introduction**

Psalm 73 occupies a very important place among the 150 psalms in the Psalter due to its profound theological insights and artistic greatness. It summarises the theological message of the Psalter, which is called a mini Bible, and is even entitled as the microcosm of the Old Testament. The beauty of this prayer along with its theological and canonical importance is evaluated, admired and expressed in many commentaries, books and articles. This recognition is reinforced in some monographs, yet, the theological consideration is not their focus. Hence, the overall purpose of the present study is threefold: 1) to present a systematic analysis of Ps 73's place in the Canonical Psalter and to trace its literary background; including its genre, *Sitz im Leben*, structure, date, and authorship; 2) to make a close reading of the psalm which really suffer with text critical problems for its interpretation; and 3) to give a fresh theological understanding of the text and to examine its relevance in today's context. To accomplish the aim of our study, a diachronic and synchronic reading of the text is presumable.

The study is structured in seven chapters besides a general introduction and conclusion. It begins with a canonical and literary study to open our discussion in the exegetical part. The successive chapters (two to six) present a synchronic reading of the psalm, unit by unit. The final chapter is a theological reflection that synthesises the fruits of the foregoing chapters.

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<sup>♦</sup>**Dr Sr Theresa Nadupadavil, SABS**, teaches at various theological institutes in India and is the author of two books in Malayalam: *Anudinadhyanasahayi* (Daily Meditations) and *Samarpithajeevithavum Samakaleenavelluvilikalum*. Email: srtheresabs@gmail.com

### Findings of the Research

In the internal theological movement of the Psalter, Psalm 73 restates the premise of Psalm 1, yet it goes beyond that idea of retribution and finally reaches to the self-abandonment of praise of Psalm 150. Thus, Israel's life that is reflected in the Psalter is recapitulated in it and is accentuated by its proper placement in the canonical Psalter. In the groupings within the Psalter – Elohistic Psalms, Book III, and Asaphite Psalms – Psalm 73 displays their common thematic, linguistic and stylistic characteristics. Therefore, the inclusion of the psalm in these groupings is not accidental, but intentional.

Though considerable space has been devoted to form-critical questions, the attempts to categorise this psalm into a particular form prove that it does not fit neatly to any genre. Nevertheless, it exhibits clear contact with the wisdom traditions in the Old Testament. The same is true to the psalm's situation, structure, date and authorship. Yet, the question of the fate of the righteous and the wicked indicates a situation characterised by social injustice and related suffering. Though variously proposed structures are seen, they almost unanimously point to the direction of seeing the psalm as a unity, with verse 17 as the focal point. In the light of situation-date-authorship examination, a pre-exilic date to the psalm is most probable.

The exegetical study is arranged in five chapters. Psalm 73 presents a well-knitted piece of poem, using well-crafted figures of speech. The translation of the text with accompanying critical notes is an attempt to enjoy the beauty of the poem as well as to make a step in our crossing the threshold of its theology. Thus the second chapter of the study treats the most developed part of Psalm 73, the unit that consists of verses 2-12. Almost all the terms and phrases used in this unit are decisively employed to provide a picture of the wicked and to facilitate the identification of them indicating that their prosperity and wealth are the result of their oppression and injustice.

The social oppression of the wicked is delineated by the nominatives "pride" (*g'wh*), "violence" (*hms*), and "oppression" (*'shq*), and by the verbs "strike" (*ng'*), "scoff" (*mwq*), and "increase" (*shgh*). The accusations against the wicked are similar to the prophetic critique, which cluster around the issues of failure to exhibit undivided loyalty to Yahweh and the failure to establish justice within the community. Hence, it seems that the wicked are the wealthy class of Israel, most probably the leading section of the people, who were accused by the prophets especially by the pre-exilic prophets. In a culture where the dogma of divine retribution is pervasive and where material

prosperity has long been regarded as the most obvious sign of divine blessing, the question remains unanswered.

The following unit (verses 13-16) is treated in chapter three. While lamenting on God's favouritism towards the wicked and his disregard of innocent (vv 13-14) the singer of the psalm seeks an answer from God, because he wants something that is beyond the conventional understanding of divine justice. This is what he tries to convey with the employment of four verbs *amr* (to say), *spr* (to tell), *hshb* (to think) and *yd'* (to know). They denote a meditative process which reaches to a subjective realising and acknowledging of Yahweh's ways. His desire for this knowledge is the reason for the absence of prayer for any action against the enemy. The psalmist has no plea for mercy, no complaint about enemies, and no petition for judgement. Eventually he is led to the conviction that everything is to be left to the divine authority and wisdom.

The psalmist is conscious of being confronted by the holiness of God so that holiness becomes the starting-point of his thoughts with v 17. The new insight mentioned in v 17 may well have taken a revelation from God, but it is not a unique event. It is not primarily a matter of rational perception, though not against rationality. The annihilation of the wicked is communicated through the nominatives *'hrt*, *hlqt*, *msh't*, *shmmh* and *blht*. Despite the difficulties to arrive at a satisfactory meaning, they express the idea of total destruction that definitely designates the death of the wicked. The plural forms are employed to intensify the state of terror and their destruction. Throughout the verses 18-20, Yahweh's active role is accentuated. Thus the psalmist agrees that God rules the world with moral symmetry and thus he reaffirms the principle of divine retribution.

The self-portrayal of the psalmist in verses 21-22 is integrated as a whole by incorporating his past suffering and doubt, present condition of his innermost being and oriented it towards his communion with God. Therefore this portrayal implies not his disappointed mind, but his higher knowledge of "God's ways." The psalmist wholeheartedly acknowledges God's power and control over his life here on earth and in heaven while accepting his nothingness. An amazing attainment of this end is presented through the skilful employment of the terms and expressions. The psalmist could reach the certainty of the nearness of God and its permanency without re-establishing the "prosperity of the just" in the world. With the use of the terms "afterwards," "glory," "to take," it attains an extraordinary vision and assurance of the heavenly life of the psalmist.

The dogmatic statement, "God is good to Israel" summarises all the history of Israel. It is true that Israel's identity was shaped by its memory of deliverance from Egypt and other wonderful deeds of the Yahweh for its sake. However, the psalmist with a further note "to those who are pure in heart," recalls the covenant promise. That is, the righteous person is blessed and he will prosper like a tree that is green and fruitful (cf. Ps 1:1-3). Those important theological questions that the psalm raises are: the theology of *šalôm*, divine justice, retribution and the concept of afterlife in the Old Testament. In the context of our present society the original situation of the psalm seems repeating, and hence its theological message is still valid that is to be pondered and practised.