

When You Wonder What God Wants from the Nations

Psalm 96

INTRODUCTION

My notes

His salvation, his glory (his deeds) his fear his power, his holiness, tremble before him,

96:1

Tate

¶The meaning of the “new song” (see note 1.b. above), which is called for in v 1, is somewhat ambiguous; perhaps deliberately so. In terms of form critical history, the probability is that “new song” referred to the celebration of a military victory (T. Longman III, “Psalm 98,” *JETS* 27 [1984] 269) argues that each of the seven usages of “new song” in the OT (Pss 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa 42:10) occurs in a holy war context (plus the two NT occurrences, Rev 5:9; 14:3; see Longman, “The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif,” *Wtj* 44 [1982] 290—307). However, the use of the expression in its present context has been demilitarized and applied broadly to the comprehensive saving work of Yahweh. Thus in cultic terms the reference may be to a “new song” for a new festival occasion. Every festival, or other occasion of worship, merited a new song to celebrate Yahweh’s new and renewed works. If there were some sort of enthronement ritual, which celebrated Yahweh’s victory over his foes and the renewal of his reign as divine king, there would have been even more reason for a new song. The new, or renewed, reign of a king was the occasion for new expressions of celebration.

¶It is possible that the “new song” is the psalm itself which follows the summons (so Dahood, II, 357), perhaps having been a “new song” for some festival occasion. If we take our orientation for a “new song” from Isa 42:10 (cf. the “new name” in Isa 62:2), the emphasis will move toward a song which anticipates the new acts of redemption and deliverance which Yahweh is about to perform. The context in Isaiah is focused on the new works that Yahweh will do:

Remember not the former things,
Nor consider the things of old,
Behold, I am doing a new thing;
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
(Isa 43:18—19, RSV)

You have heard; now see all this;
and will you not declare it?
From this time forth I make you hear new things,
hidden things which you have not known.
They are created now, not long ago;
before today you have never heard of them.
(Isa 48:6—7b, RSV)

See Kraus, II, 835—36, 847. Another approach to the “new song” is that of an ever-new-song (Anderson, II, 682), which celebrates the “ever-newness” of Yahweh and his works:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is thy faithfulness.
(Lam 3:22—23, RSV)

All these elements of “new song” are probably valid in one context or another. In the context of Pss 96 and 98 it seems to me that the anticipation of new actions and victories on the part of Yahweh is dominant.

Ps 96 is a call for universal praise of Yahweh who is coming to judge the earth. The “new song” is to express a new realization and acknowledgment that the future belongs to Yahweh. “A new song must be sung for a new orientation” (Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 144). The new song is the song which breaks through the restraints of the present circumstances and voices expectation and confidence in the future works of God (see Kraus, II, 836).

The “glory” of Yahweh in v 3 refers to more than the majestic aura of the divine presence, though that is included. **“Glory is by and large that asset which makes people or individuals, and even objects, impressive, and usually this is understood as something that can be perceived or expressed”** (von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, tr. D. M. G. Stalker [New York: Harper & Row, 1962] I, 239). The possessions of Jacob in Gen 31:1 are his “glory,” that which gives him standing in society (cf. Job 19:9; 29:20). For the “glory” of a people and its leaders, see Isa 5:13 (cf. Isa 16:14; 17:3; 21:16; Jer 2:11). Yahweh’s “glory” is the manifestation of his presence, as in Num 16:19, 42; Ps 102:16, Isa 8:7; 40:5; 60:1—2; cf. Exod 16:10; 24:16—17; 40:34). His “glory” is also seen in the “work of his hands” (as in Ps 19:2) and in his “marvelous deeds” (תְּוֹלָדוֹתָיו) in Ps 96:3 (cf. Exod 3:20; 34:10; Josh 3:5; Job 5:8—15; 9:10; 37:14—16; Pss 9:2; 26:7; 40:6, etc.). The whole of the created world is filled with the “glory” of Yahweh (Isa 6:3), and his power over the processes of creation is acclaimed as “Glory!” in Ps 29:9. His “glory” also manifests itself in history (cf. Exod 14:4, 17—18; Ezek 28:22; von Rad, 239—40). Thus the “glory” of Yahweh is an active, not a static, concept. It is his presence, power, and action in the world. For the “glory” of Yahweh in theophanic contexts, see *Comment* on Ps 97:6. For discussion of “name,” see *Comment*, Ps 54:3.

96:2

96:3

96:4

96:5

96:6

96:7

96:8

96:9

96:10

Mays

Part two describes the prospect of the world and its peoples because the **LORD** reigns. Verse 10 states the twofold significance of the central declaration for cosmos and society. First, the world is reliable, the earth is stable, the human home is dependable. Life does not need to be lived in anxiety. So the very elements of the world itself are summoned to rejoice before the **LORD** because of the stability his power establishes (vv. 11—12). Second, the affairs of people will be ordered according to equity. History and society are not left to the capriciousness of fickle gods or the arbitrary decisions of human rulers. Instead, the **LORD** will rule with righteousness and faithfulness. There is a power that sets things right, a might that can be trusted. The ancient longing that stirred in human beings when they first thought of order and power in world and society, the longing for reliability in nature and justice in life, will be answered in the reign of the **LORD**.

96:11

96:12

96:13

Mays

When verse 13 says “he *comes* to rule [NRSV, “judge”] the earth,” to what does it refer? To a historical or a liturgical or an eschatological event? The language of the psalm and its connections with other texts in the Old Testament argue that these alternatives are not mutually exclusive for Old Testament faith. According to I Chronicles 16:23—33, Psalm 96 is one of the hymns of praise sung by Asaph and his choral guild before the ark after David brought it to Jerusalem. The procession bringing the ark of the **LORD** represented in liturgical drama his coming to his palace-temple as king (see Ps. 24:7—10). The reality behind the liturgical act was the marvelous works of salvation, the historical occasions when Israel had experienced the intervention of the **LORD**, moments Israel remembered in epic story (Exodus, Joshua, Judges, Samuel) and in poetry celebrating the **LORD’S** coming in theophany (Psalm 18; note the repetition of Ps. 29:1—2 in 98:7—9). Phrases and clauses from Psalm 96 and from Psalms 97 and 98 appear in the prophecy of the exilic Isaiah (compare vv. 11—13 with Isa. 40:10; 44:23; 49:13; 55:12; also 59:19f.; 60:1; 62:11). Isaiah saw the return of the exiles from Babylon as a revelation of the **LORD** as king and as a demonstration of his rule that proved that the gods of the nations were nothing. The past “comings” of the **LORD** have a future. The liturgy remembers and anticipates. The psalm always places those who sing it in the presence of the **LORD** who has come and will rule the earth in righteousness and faithfulness.

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Psalm 96

A Call for the Nations to Praise God what he has done, 1-6.

Singing and music are non-optional.

Somebody needs to declare his Glory among the nations, v 3,

Joy and "humility" fear.

A Call for the Nations to Praise God for his character, 7-9.

A Call for the Nations to Praise God for the fact that he is coming back, 10-13.