



A SCIENCE & RELIGION COMMENTARY

PSALM 29

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Psalm 29 is a Psalm about God, but it's also about thunder and lightning. The word *qol*, the Hebrew word for voice, is also the word for thunder, and what Psalm 29 describes is clearly a thunderstorm. Seven times the phrase *qol Yahweh*, "the voice of the Lord", thunders through Psalm 29. Seven times God's voice reverberates through Psalm 29. Any wonder, then, that Psalm 29 has come to be known as the "Psalm of the Seven Thunders"?

However much we may be enamored of our human-made powers, they pale in comparison next to the powers unleashed by some of the common events of creation. The electrical differential that produces a lightning bolt is on the order of several million volts. The temperature of a lightning bolt is 30,000 degrees Kelvin, or 50,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Thunder results from the superheating of the air adjacent to the lightning bolt, which produces a shock wave degenerating into a sound wave similar to a sonic boom. A thunderstorm will always be the original and best Shock and Awe show.

It wasn't all that uncommon in ancient civilizations for thunder and lightning to be associated with God or the gods. In other religions of the ancient world, thunder was considered to be the voice of a god associated with nature. In the Canaanite collection of the gods, for example, the nature-god Baal (erstwhile God of fertility and war) carried 7 arrows of lightning in his quiver, and thunder resounded when Baal went to war.

We might wonder how such a song as this became a part of Israel's worship hymnal. Psalm 29 is thought to be one of the oldest Psalms. Although it is designated a "Psalm of David", much of it pre-dates King David and the rest of the Psalter. In fact, it is thought to have been taken over with few changes from a pre-Israelite, Canaanite hymn to the God Baal. We have Canaanite hymns which contain

some of the same phrases as Psalm 29. Also, the reference to 7 thunders is a little too neat to be a coincidence. We might be inclined, when hearing of these origins, to be dismissive of Psalm 29 as a vestige of paganism, of remnants of nature religion that Israel did not manage to entirely weed out. We might be tempted to put it on the D-list of recommended Psalms: use very infrequently and only half-heartedly. Use it too often and Christians will start dancing around the Maypole and practicing fertility rituals.

There are three things that make Psalm 29 distinctively Jewish and Christian.

Monotheism: For the Israelites, thunder and lightning were not signs of nature's power or the voice of some nature God, but a sign of the glory and majesty of the God of all creation. There is no pantheon of gods with whom the God of thunder must go to war. A nature God only rules nature, and often must go to war against the other gods to maintain its territory. Israel's God was Jahweh, the God of glory, the God of all creation, whom nature and society and all peoples and all things in heaven and on earth were subject to. When the thunder sounded, the God who holds all of nature's power and order in his hands drew near. God speaks, the earth shakes. The thunder was a voice that said that the majestic and glorious God ruled over all things. Israel's faith was in one God, not in one military God among many.

Kabod -- "Glory!": The response to those who hear the voice of the Lord is not "Power", or "Obeisance", or "Cringe in Terror!" Instead, all cry "Glory", or in Hebrew "Kabod." Kabod literally means heaviness, or weightiness. The true God is a God of substance, of weight, of majesty, of fullness -- a God of substantiality, one not to

be trifled with. The thunderstorm is a fitting manifestation of the glory of God.

Shalom – Peace: The final request of Psalm 29 is not subservience, or a meek bow before God's iron-fisted rule. There is no mention of spoils of war or conquering armies or triumphant parades. Rather, the concluding request is for Shalom, peace. This is nothing that Baal would give, for gods of war only give war. The God of Israel brings peace.

Preaching Suggestions

So how should we understand Israel's use of the thunderstorm as a referent to the voice of God? I would suggest that we see it as a searching, searching in human terms, for a way to convey one aspect of the presence of God. It's saying, "When our God speaks – it must be like this, given God's power and majesty." But it's not a voice of terror, or a voice of repressive power, or a voice of domination – although clearly this would be open to such a God if God so chose – but a God whose glory is seen in and shared with creation and whose deepest desire for creation is shalom. The aspects of Psalm 29 which make it distinctively Christian and Jewish are the elements to be drawn out in preaching.