The Power of God in the Psalter

Abstract

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The wide range of expressions for the power of God and the high frequency of these statements suggests that ‘power’ is both an important aspect of God’s being and an essential topic in the Psalter. Therefore, it is no surprise to discover that only three psalms do not contain a direct or at least an indirect reference to the power of God. According to my investigation there are altogether 1249 references in the Psalter expressing the power of God. This number of references does not include expressions of divine power which do not result in a characterization of God. These ways of speaking about God’s power are not included in my research project. Only those ideas will be considered which have attained a fairly high degree of conceptualization, so that their connection with the notion of God’s power is well-established. Numerous of occurrences in the Psalter comply with this criterion. Nevertheless, I have come to the conclusion that they may all be assigned to four categories:

1) Manifestations

Manifestations designate God’s powerful acting, which has to be understood as a consequence of his divine character. Manifestations capture linguistically how divine power can be perceived by humans. The only criterion for a word to be regarded as a manifestation is that it be explicitly combined with a term for power in the psalms. 926 references witness this combination. The manifestations have not been chosen by external criteria, rather by evidence internal to the texts. To convey an idea which characterizations and acts are regarded as manifestations, the semantic field of help and salvation may serve as an example: gʾl qal. (to redeem), yšʿ hiph. (to deliver), yĕšûʿâ (salvation), yešaʿ (rescue, salvation), nṣl hiph. (to deliver), ʿzr qal. (to help, succor), ʿezer (help), pdh qal. (to ransom), plṭ pi. (to bring into security) etc. Half of God’s acts of deliverance are combined with explicit mention of his power.

2) Metaphors

zĕrôʿa (arm), yād (hand), yāmîn (right hand) and qeren (horn) are the most significant substantives designating God’s power which are used as metaphors in the Psalter. With only 78 references, they make up the smallest of the four groups.

3) Names of God

ʾābîr Yaʿăqōb, Yhwh Ṣĕbāʾôt, ʿelyôn, Šadday and šēm are divine names which include the element of God’s power. 143 references reflect this usage.

4) Terms for power

ʿōz, gĕbûrâ, kōăḥ and ḥayil are the most significant terms for expressing the power of God in the Psalter. One hundred and two references form a strong basis to place at the centre of my thesis.

I have ordered these categories by considering the extent to which each one gives concentrated literary expression to the idea of God's power. Thus, the most literary diffuse expressions of divine power are where the divine being and action are described. The most concentrated expressions of divine power are found in the fourth category, where a single word characterizes and focuses the expression of divine power. This last category which will be the focus of my research encompasses hundred and two references distributed among fifty psalms.

Preliminary investigations have revealed that the frequency and semantics of those terms designating God's power in the Psalter differ remarkable, yet in spite of all differences, there is no doubt that they all belong to the semantic field of 'power', covering a wide range of notions. There is, moreover a general pattern to the manner in which the power of God has been conceptualized in the psalms. There are three different ways in which God's power is recognized and expressed by these terms. The first, and most frequently employed, describes how God makes a human participate in his power or expresses a human request for participation in the divine power. The second way in which God's power is expressed occurs less frequently: power is mentioned as a characteristic of God implying a certain impact on the world and on humans. Third, with almost equal frequency we find the idea expressed that divine power appears in God's acting on the world and in relation to humankind.

Assuming that all references to God's power in the Psalter have a relational character my research project will try to work out how these three modes of conceptualizing and expressing divine power are interrelated. Furthermore, I will seek to investigate whether any other ideas have exerted influence on the development of these modes. I aim at reconstructing how the notion of God's power has evolved throughout the history of theology in the Psalter.