



Proclaiming the Incomparable God in the Register of Lament

KARL N. JACOBSON

INTRODUCTION: “WHO IS LIKE YOU, O LORD, AMONG THE GODS?”

While in modern terms—terms of plurality and inclusion and metaphysical (not to mention historical or scientific) uncertainty¹—the idea of a “god beyond compare” may be difficult for some and indeed perhaps for many, whether in American culture at large, academic culture in particular, or increasingly for religious culture, to entertain. Or endure. In biblical theology, whether Old or New Testament, such matters—matters not just of who God is, but *how* God is God, and how that matchless divinity is apprehended and communicated—are central. (There is a serious disconnect there, which makes the task of preaching a challenge; more on that to follow.) But whatever else may be at stake in the interchange between text and sermon (and there may be hosts, legions of such things), this reflection on and proclamation of the Divine Object is central.

¹ In less cynical terms, one might say humility.

Human language is certainly inadequate to express the wonder and grandeur of God’s essential being. Among the superlatives that the Bible uses to express the wonder of God, the word incomparable is used to express not only the greatness of God but that, in real terms, God is unlike any other essential form that can be humanly imagined.

The stuff of biblical theology, biblical exegesis, and biblical preaching is the stuff of Divine discourse—both first and second order, both subjective and objective. And from its very earliest stages, such discourse has dwelt on the incomparability of the Lord.

THE INCOMPARABILITY OF THE LORD AND SONGS OF VICTORY, BLESSING, AND PRAISE

In classifying what he understood as among the earliest poetic pieces in the Old Testament (Genesis 49, Exodus 15, Numbers 23–24, Deuteronomy 33, Judges 5), David Noel Freedman concluded that there are “two major types” of this earliest religious poetry, “Victory Odes, as seen in the Song of the Sea and the Song of Deborah; and Tribal Blessings: the Blessing of Jacob and the Blessing of Moses.”²

Freedman goes on to suggest that, in essence, victory and blessing (specifically of the tribes as a whole) have a shared origin or inspiration, namely Yahweh’s victories for the people. Victory is victory, and blessing is, essentially, a derivative of victory. Freedman then concludes,

Victories achieved by Yahweh’s interventions made the existence and viability of Israel a reality. It is no surprise that these decisive, if violent, actions are at the heart of Israel’s kerygma.³

Using an example of this from Exodus 15, Freedman writes, “The central theme of the poem is the unmatched power and authority of Yahweh, who has demonstrated this power in destroying the Egyptian host by sheer force.”⁴ A taste of Exodus 15 shows this particular aspect of God’s incomparability:

Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power—
your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy.
In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries;
you sent out your fury, it consumed them like stubble.
.....
The enemy said, “I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.
I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.”
You blew with your wind, the sea covered them;
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.
Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in splendor, doing wonders?

² David Noel Freedman, “‘Who Is Like Thee among the Gods?’ The Religion of Early Israel,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 319.

³ Freedman, “Who Is Like Thee,” 320.

⁴ Freedman, “Who Is Like Thee,” 327.

(Exod 15:6–7, 9–11)

The Song of the Sea is the climax of the first act of the victory story that is Exodus. Indeed, the whole of the Exodus story is about the incomparability of Israel's God, particularly in comparison to the pretender to godhead, Pharaoh. Repeatedly Israel's God is shown to be in control; repeatedly the force of the story is bent toward tying the power of death and life—and for Israel, freedom—to the name and indeed the divinity of the Lord.⁵

Indeed, the whole of the Exodus story is about the incomparability of Israel's God, particularly in comparison to the pretender to godhead, Pharaoh.

Other examples include Deut 33:26–27, which celebrates the Lord's victory over the other "gods"⁶; David's psalm of thanksgiving and its parallel, both of which ask the question, "For who is God, but the Lord? And who is a rock, except our God?" (2 Sam 22:32; Ps 18:31); 1 Samuel 2, in which Hannah sings a thanksgiving song for the Lord's victory over her barrenness⁷; Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple, "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love" (1 Kgs 8:23); and the culmination of the prophet Micah's work, in which God's clemency for Israel's remnant is lauded, "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession?" (Mic 7:18).

Not surprisingly, this adoration of the incomparable Lord is taken up in the hymnbook of Israel's worship as well. Psalm 97:9 sings of the Lord's kingship,

For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.

And Ps 113:5–8 praises God for delivering the poor ones,

Who is like the Lord our God,
who is seated on high,
who looks far down
on the heavens and the earth?
He raises the poor from the dust,

⁵ Again and again, the case is being made that through wonders and signs and the ultimate victory over Israel's enemies in the sea, "You shall know that I am the Lord," (see Exod 6:7, 7:5, 8:10, 8:22, 9:29, etc.); rhetorically all of this is in response to Pharaoh's question in Exod 5:2.

⁶ See also Psalm 82, which while it does not specifically employ the idea of incomparability, is nevertheless an example of it, as the Lord sits in judgment over the other divine beings, finds them guilty and wanting, and sentences them to death.

⁷ It is interesting to note that in the Gospel of Luke, the incomparability of the Lord is not a part of what is borrowed from 1 Sam 2:1–2. "My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God."

and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of his people.

God's incomparability in each of these cases is celebrated, remembered, and proclaimed. These poems are not merely descriptive, they are paeans, proclamatory praises. Israel's kerygma, its proclamation—the remembering of, transmitting of, and passing on of its story—is rooted in the power of Yahweh on its behalf. Its proclamation is at its root victory and blessing.

THE DIMENSIONS OF THE LORD'S INCOMPARABILITY

The proclamation of God's incomparability marks, in a sense, a shift in, or at least a particular element of, theology. There is movement from questions like "Is there a God?" "What is God?" and "Who is God?" to "Who is *like* God?" This shift is what takes place in the exodus story specifically, and over the course of both Old and New Testament theology more broadly. At the beginning of the exodus story, when Moses is commissioned to return to Egypt and lead the people of Israel out of the "house of slavery," we read that,

Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" (Exod 3:13)

This is a question of introduction. After the parting of the Red Sea and the defeat of Israel's enemies, "Who is God?" is no longer the question. That question has been answered, and indeed becomes the first of the Ten Words that the Lord speaks to the people from Sinai, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod 20:2). And, when the people are through the sea and free, their question changes: "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you . . . doing wonders?" This is a question of comparison.

"Who is *like* our God?" is, of course, a question that is both theological—making a case for the Lord—and rhetorical—it begs the answer, "No one, no other, is like our God."⁸

This question and claim find their way into two appellatives used to name God; the well-explored phrase הוהוּ הוהוּ, the Lord's beginning to reign, and the epithet הוהוּ (Most High). Ps 97:9 is instructive at this point. In the NRSV Ps 97:9 reads,

For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.

⁸ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 250.

The keys here are the phrase *most high* and the word *exalted*, which in Hebrew are derived from the same root: לַעֲהָ. In the NRSV of Ps 97:9, “most high” is not capitalized, which is a decision perhaps based on the infrequency of the Lord being found in apposition with *’elyon*. But there are examples of this in Ps 7:18 and Ps 47:3. The first colon of Ps 97:9 is verbless, and so the matter of where one decides to assume the verb *are* comes into play is open. In the second colon, the verb is *exalted*, from לַעֲהָ, which parallels the preceding “most high” nicely. One might translate this verse as follows:

For you, O Lord Most High, are over all the earth;
you are most high above all gods.

Regardless, the point of these parallel clauses is clear. The Lord who is “most high” over all the earth, is also exalted above all gods; the Lord is the incomparable God, the *Most High God*. What is more, as Dean McBride says,

The Lord who is “most high” over all the earth, is also exalted above all gods; the Lord is the incomparable God, the Most High God.

Most High (Hebrew *Elyon*) is an appellation generally expressing the Lord’s sovereignty . . . and occasionally elsewhere (Isa 14:14; Ps 82) it denotes the executive of the divine assembly, comprising the subordinate gods.⁹

Psalm 97 is one of the לַמֶּלֶךְ הוֹדִי psalms, which often begin by saying, “The Lord is king,” or “The Lord reigns.” The dimensions of the Lord’s incomparability are encompassed in the Lord’s (most) highness, as king.¹⁰

Outside of the psalms that laud the Lord’s kingship, there is another dimension of God’s incomparability that is widely manifested in the Psalter. This has to do with what the incomparable God *does*; the incomparable God is the God who performs “wonders.” As Brevard Childs puts it,

Yahweh is praised for his greatness and power (vv. 1b, 3, 6, 7, 11, 12).
Often this description in praise of Yahweh is not directly related to the

⁹ S. Dean McBride, “Deuteronomy Annotations,” in *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 303.

¹⁰ “The proclamation ‘The Lord is king’ is made ‘among the nations’ (96:10) and is immediately followed by an announcement that specifically counters Ps 82:5. Whereas the reign of the gods meant that ‘all the foundations of the earth are shaken,’ God’s reign means that ‘the world is firmly established; it shall never again be moved’ (96:10; ‘shaken’ in 82:5 and ‘moved’ in 96:10 translate the same Hebrew verb).” J. Clinton Jr. McCaan, “The Single Most Important Text in the Entire Bible,” in *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 68. It should be noted that this two-fold idea, of God’s reign and God’s most highness, is already present in Exodus 15; the question, “Who is like you, O Lord?” (v. 11) is followed by the claim that “the Lord will reign” (v. 18).

sea event, but in the hymnic style of the participle celebrates Yahweh's glory as "fierce in action," "doer of wonders."¹¹

God's specific, historical incomparable wonders in Israel's past—in the exodus event—become short-hand for that incomparability in general terms—this is, God's incomparability stated, or celebrated, implicitly.¹²

CORRELATE: "WHO IS LIKE YOUR PEOPLE, LIKE ISRAEL?"

Briefly, it is also worth noting that there is a correlation between the incomparable God and the people this God has chosen. This, too, is expressed in various ways.

David's prayer after he has brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 7 puts it this way,

Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods? (2 Sam 7:23; cf. 1 Chr 17:21)

Who is like your *people*, like *Israel*? The clear claim here is that because the incomparable God works wonders for God's chosen people, those people are incomparably special, incomparably blessed.

In Deuteronomy 4, the nearness of this great God is claimed, both in terms of God hearing Israel's prayers¹³ and in providing God's word for guidance:

For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? (Deut 4:7–8)

And, again in Deuteronomy, the incomparable blessing is in being the Lord's *saved* people, the ones whom God has saved and elevated through God's saving wonders:

Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph! Your enemies shall come fawning to you, and you shall tread on their backs. (Deut 33:29)

¹¹ Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 50.

¹² As Hans-Joachim Kraus puts it, "Any statement about the holiness, justice, mercy, truth, and faithfulness of Israel's God contains within it a testimony to his incomparable perfection. . . . When we speak of Yahweh's 'perfection,' we mean the *proprietas Dei*, which in the Psalms tend to be incomparable and unalterable." Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 41. For a detailed exploration of both the explicit and implicit expression of the incomparable God's wonders, see Karl N. Jacobson, *Memories of Asaph: Mnemohistory and the Psalms of Asaph* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

¹³ One may think, here in contrast, of the contest between Elijah and the four hundred prophets of Baal; Yahweh hears, Baal does not (1 Kings 18).

As Ps 144:15 puts it, “Happy are the people to whom such blessings fall; happy are the people whose God is the Lord.”

In all of this, there may also be the sense that this special blessedness means something. God’s people have a calling, as 1 Pet 2:9–10 (quoting Hosea) has it,

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God’s people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

PREACHING THE INCOMPARABLE GOD IN THE REGISTER OF LAMENT: “IT IS MY GRIEF THAT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE MOST HIGH HAS CHANGED”

As was noted above, there are psalms that echo the victory odes of Israel’s early religious tradition. These psalms (18, 97, and 113) are, predictably, in the pattern of praise. But there is a slightly larger body of psalms that strike a very different tone, especially Psalms 35, 71, 77, 83, 86, and 89.

Returning to the exemplar of the early praise of the Lord in Exodus, Freedman notes the apparent irony inherent in the psalm. “In the poem itself,” he writes, “the incomparability of Yahweh is affirmed (Exod 15:11) but paradoxically by a comparison of Yahweh with other gods.”¹⁴ There is a further, deeper irony yet to come. As Childs observed,

The narrative account [of Exodus 14] had closed with the remark that the people “feared Yahweh,” and “believed in him” (v. 31). The content of this belief is now expressed by the song. It is a characteristic feature of the Old Testament faith that the great acts of God are joined to the faith of the people which the event evoked.¹⁵

And, apparently, this same believing people are justifiably angry with this same God in whom they believe when it appears that this God is not up to the task of being—or at least not actively making an effort to be—that incomparable, wondrous God. A different kind of irony calls upon the incomparability of Yahweh not in terms of victory but in terms of defeat—as a part of lament, complaint, and call for help. A number of the lament psalms call upon the incomparability of God, and again there is variety in how that incomparability is employed.

Psalm 71 expands on the typical element of trust one expects in the prayer for help, combining the “great things” with the question, “O God, who is like you?”

¹⁴ Freedman, “Who Is Like Thee,” 328.

¹⁵ Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 248–49.

(71:19d). Psalm 86 does the same, making the trust-filled statement, “There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours” (86:8).

A different kind of irony calls upon the incomparability of Yahweh not in terms of victory but in terms of defeat—as a part of lament, complaint, and call for help.

Psalm 89 is a royal psalm for thirty-seven verses, then turns to lament in its final verses, 38–52. The incomparability of God is employed differently here. First, it is longer, more expansive:

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord,
your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.
For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord?
Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord,
a God feared in the council of the holy ones,
great and awesome above all that are around him?
O Lord God of hosts,
who is as mighty as you, O Lord?
Your faithfulness surrounds you.
(Ps 89:5–8)

And second, with God’s incomparability established and the covenant promises restated, when the psalm turns to lament, the disconnect between past and present, between expectation and reality, is heightened and central.

In the other three lament psalms, the incomparability of God plays yet another role. In each of Psalms 35, 83, and 77, the question of the Lord’s incomparability actually replaces the expected expression of trust or confidence.

Psalm 35 calls upon God the warrior to come to the psalmist’s defense and, more, to (be) the psalmist’s offense against his enemies. What is endured now (false witness and mockery), once reversed, will lead to a “then” marked by praise of the incomparable God. “*Then* my tongue shall tell of your righteousness” (v. 28), “*Then* I will thank you in the great congregation” (v. 18), “*Then* my soul shall rejoice in the Lord. . . . All my bones shall say, ‘O Lord, who is like you? You deliver the weak’” (vv. 10–11).

Psalm 83 does something similar, concluding with the plea that God would let the enemies “know that you alone, whose name is the Lord, are the Most High over all the earth” (v. 18).

Lastly, Psalm 77 is an expanded, lamenting reflection on what God has done, the “deeds of the Lord,” God’s “wonders of old” (77:11):

Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is so great as our God?
You are the God who works wonders;

you have displayed your might among the peoples.
(Ps 77:13–14)¹⁶

But the question of God’s incomparability is set up despairingly,

And I say, “It is my grief
that the right hand of the Most High has changed.”
(Ps 77:10)

James Limburg puts it this way, “The Psalm reports that remembering the Lord’s works in the past aided in the struggle of trying to understand God’s apparent lack of action in the present.”¹⁷ The confidence that is an expected part of the lament takes on a particular form in Psalm 77. Instead of true confidence, reflection on God’s incomparability takes the place of the expected expression of trust.¹⁸

In other words, in the prayers for help, the incomparability of God is not a celebration of victory, rather it is an accusation of dereliction.

ENTER THE PREACHER: THE TASK OF PREACHING AND THE INCOMPARABLE GOD

First, a word about what I think preaching is for, what *it does*. While I am sure there are many ways to put this, to me the purpose of preaching is to raise the dead; to raise the dead in any number of ways:

- To save, by the foolishness of our proclamation (1 Cor 1:21).
- To elect and create faith.
- To name, forgive, and transform sin.
- To inculcate, to give knowledge, and to bespeak vision.
- To enervate, raising people out of complacency.

Such life-speaking preaching must be informed by the psalms of lament if true life is to be spoken to the real death that one’s people are suffering.

Back, then, to the disconnect. As I began, I mentioned the tension between the claim of the incomparable God and the mix of pluralistic cultures in which

¹⁶ Writing on Psalm 82, McCaan says, “according to Psalm 82, what it means to be God—what characterizes divinity—is to protect and provide for the lives of the most threatened and the most vulnerable” (McCaan, “Single Most Important Text,” 66). The dimension of the Lord’s incomparability, compared to the other gods who are judged and sentenced, is this care for the poor, and in this psalm the poor one cries out to God complaining that God is not being God.

¹⁷ James Limburg, *Psalms*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 261.

¹⁸ John Goldingay (*Psalms: Volume 2, Psalms 42–89* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 460) summarizes the role of the mnemohistorical recitation nicely, “In the context of the opening lines, vv. 13–20 do not represent a move from gloom to confidence, from protest to praise, as if the suppliant’s questions are resolved by the recollection of the Red Sea story. Rather, their distinctive effect is to leave God and suppliant with the acts of the past that contrast with the present. . . . In a sense, then, vv. 13–20 function in the place of the actual plea in the psalm, which is otherwise missing.”

we live. There is also real tension between preaching an incomparable God and an inscrutable one, a disconnect between preaching a God who is great, a doer of wondrous things, and the experience of a God who seems distant at best, disinterested for worse, and, perhaps *at* worst dismissed as dead or a delusion made out of whole cloth by human need. There is a disconnect, in other words, between paean's to God's marvelous deeds and the dearth of such wonders in the face of suffering and struggle and need. There is a tension between God's victories, God's saving actions in the past, and the expectation of a final victory in the end, on the last day. Patrick Miller describes it like this,

The Day of Yahweh was a time when . . . God would destroy [the people's] enemies (Amos 5:18–20). This “Day of Yahweh,” which was rooted in the early notions of Yahweh as warrior and in the recollection of the early wars of Yahweh, became one of the prime categories for Israelite eschatology and apocalyptic, as official and popular theology anticipated the march of Yahweh and his armies against the armies of the nations and the forces of darkness.¹⁹

This becomes a particularly painful tension for we who are waiting when our present reality seems so disconnected from either the remembered past and the promised future. Any list of what we are waiting through would be incomplete, but one cannot help but think about the shootings in the Tree of Life Synagogue and the bar in Thousand Oaks. Between the historical faith of God's early victories and the eschatological expectation of the final victory comes the space of lamentation that this is not, yet, that time. This is where the believer lives, in the now. And this tension is the space into which the preacher casts her voice. Proclamation in the register of lament is preaching in/of the meantime.

In *Theology Is for Proclamation*, Gerhard Forde describes the nature and challenge of preaching like this:

Proclamation is not “about” something other than itself. It does not point away from itself. It does not signify some other thing. It is the saying and doing of the deed itself.²⁰

Preaching the incomparability of God in the register of lament does this by being *true* to the present. In order for the new life of hope to be called out of death, the reality of hopelessness must not be ignored. As Frederick Buechner has it,

As much as it is our hope, it is our hopelessness that brings us to a church of a Sunday, and any preacher who, whatever else he speaks, does not speak to that hopelessness might as well save his breath.²¹

¹⁹ Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 8.

²⁰ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 2.

²¹ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 55.

Such preaching, both in Israel's poetry and in our present context(s), employs the incomparability of God in a different and important way, what we might call a variation of proclamation *sub contrario*. In this case, the "opposite" is the way in which God seems to be (not) working for the benefit of the lowly and needy. The problems of the world are a reflection that belies claims—or at least evidence—of God's sovereignty.

Forde goes on to say that such "proclamation as primary discourse demands an answer."²² In the case of preaching these psalms, though, the demanded answer is not the response (whether positively or negatively) of the listener but the response of the God who is overdue for some wonders.

Such preaching names the need for lament and gives voice to it in houses of worship, where such hue and cry—complaint to and even against God—has so often been suppressed and even silenced.

PREACHING TO GOD'S INCOMPARABLE PEOPLE

Preaching the psalms of lament, particularly the lamentation around the incomparability of God, is much needed in our churches. Much needed because such preaching is honest; honest to the disconnect people are feeling right now—not uniquely now or more so now or in some strange new way now, but certainly *right* now, in the culture in which we are living. And as Frederick Buechner says,

The preacher tells the truth by speaking of the visible absence of God because if he doesn't see and own up to the absence of God in the world, then he is the only one there who doesn't see it, and who then is going to take him seriously when he tries to make real what he claims also to see as the invisible presence of God in the world?²³

Preaching the incomparable God in the register of lament calls God's people into their peculiar role as believing complainers, as the lamenting faithful.

Such preaching names the reality and, in doing so, claims the possibility of the incomparable God changing that reality. When the psalms seize upon the incomparability of the Lord, they engage in world-making, world-changing possibility. Through the foolishness of their proclamation, they lay claim to—and indeed demand—a different reality that only the incomparable God can bring about. And so the dead may be raised. ⊕

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²² Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 2.

²³ Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, 71.