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Deconstructing God in the Book of Psalms

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ABSTRACT

The influence of the Book of Psalms in the field of English literature is indisputable. More so the extent of its influence which is quite inestimable. This article aims to contextualize God through the poetry of the Psalms to those who have forgotten Him in the backburner of their lives even as it attempts to situate the Psalms under the spotlight of postmodernism using the lens of deconstruction – a literary tool of considerable relevance. If God is just mildly simmering in your life read on as we together *seek postmodern relevance in these postmodern times that we find ourselves in.*

INTRODUCTION

Imagine unwrapping something that is three thousand years old – *thirty centuries old*... the trepidation with which you would venture to unravel its secrets... its very antiquity makes it priceless! That inestimable treasure would be yours today when you hold the book of Psalms in your hand, and this article proceeds to do just that with the Hebrew Psalter – the Psalms.

But Deconstructing God? The word God instantaneously conjures up a variety of thought and an array of emotions depending on the individual – ranging from gentle atheists to hardcore fundamentalists– from casual thoughts or justified opinions to hard-earned beliefs. By all counts, however God is infallible and ineffable. Why would we attempt to deconstruct him? Because Deconstruction can help us make sense. It can help

us dismantle (de-construct) the various constructs foisted on the concept of God over the ages, even as it candidly speaks into our postmodern times. But isn't God beyond time? Yes, beyond space and age? But just like our ideas of our physical world change as we discover better tools over time, so to our understanding of God can be enhanced as we develop new methods and strategies. Deconstruction is so postmodern and so novel a tool, it's too tempting not to venture into the rarefied mysteries of the Psalms without it, in our attempt to glean an accurate construct of God as far as one is humanely and post modernly able.

DECONSTRUCTION

Deconstruction hitherto a prerogative of the academician is today invariably surfacing extensively in various fields of Art, Architecture, Literature, Music, Fashion design and even in deconstructed Cuisine. Deconstruction can also be defined as "a theory of literary criticism that questions traditional assumptions about certainty, identity, and truth;"¹ Developed as a literary theory for textual analysis by Derrida, deconstruction seeks to put together even as it '*cuminisectores*' a facet threadbare. As a tool of literary analysis combining 'Deconstruction' with Character Analysis would be invaluable to grapple with characters that are not so easily defined – yes God for example! Deconstruction is an attempt to pare down constituents, both real and assumed – to the essentials. In effect to go beyond the social, cultural constructs to the real essence.

Historically Aristotelian and Platonian thought influenced philosophers to depend on reason, even as the medieval philosopher Aquinas suggests "All the efforts of the human mind cannot exhaust the essence of a single fly"² Descartes went a step further and said God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, has infinite attributes as opposed to any created substance which has only one principal attribute³. In the Psalms,

God seamlessly alternates between the 'essence and presence' in a dialectic similar to what Plato succinctly expresses as Socrates' thought in *Phaedo* "*And the uncompounded may be assumed to be the same and unchanging, where the compound is always changing and never the same*"⁴ This essence and presence of God in his relation to man would be what we attempt to deconstruct. Aquinas who exemplified medieval philosophical argued metaphysically that we can seek to understand the essence of something without knowing anything about its existence. The presence of God as the central figure in the Hebrew Psalter is undeniable, the other main Characters in the book of Psalms being the Self and the other. But wouldn't deconstructing God fall in the realm of the esoteric. Can it be attempted by anybody? Is he not *extraordinary*? Is he so real as to commune with the ordinary, the nobody, with the normal and the abnormal? However when we attempt to rationalise this infinite being...this essence we do find ourselves superimposing our finite understanding on God, who is anything but finite. God is beyond language and thus the concept lends itself fittingly to deconstruction as a strategy – as a veritable postmodern understanding of the signifier and the signified.

So where does one even begin. Careening at the edge of this precipice one can either soar to the 'icarian' skies or plunge deep into the unfathomed. As the Psalmist expansively illustrates his humanness even as he attempts to relate it to the omnipresence of God,

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. ⁵

However the poetry of the Psalms reveals a God, though unfathomable as nevertheless someone *willing to be understood – a God that's reaching out*. A God that speaks through the poetry of Psalms. Using dialogue and modes of communication to reveal and determine character is an essential and indispensable literary tool. The Psalms read as a script provides insight and revelation on a God who is infinite and boundless yet nevertheless interacting with the finite. Indeed what sets the Psalms apart is that the Psalms, in true postmodern tradition strikes a chord with the reader, being perfectly suited to reader response theory, in which the reader is an active participant in the understanding and interpretation of the given text. A reader of the Psalms is invariably drawn in as it echoes the Self – giving voice to the unarticulated yearnings of the soul. The poems thus become reflections of the self... and at times these boundaries blur even as we glimpse and consider the image of God reflected in the Self. So obviously this isn't only about God this is also about you and how you understand God.

Furthermore, viewing God conversely through the eyes of the other, what is the general construct that we find built around this Judeo-Christian God: Gargantuan, white-haired and white bearded? This is of course a popular image further indoctrinated and popularized by classical artists – Michelangelo's, Creation of Adam for example, but are we still caught in this 14th century imagination or are we evolving into a better understanding of this 'Ground of Being'⁶? Some of the most common accusations directed against the Judeo Christian God are that he is a manipulative puppet master or an egoistic megalomaniac bordering on obsessive control disorder. Other popular indictments also include Nietzsche's 'God is dead'⁷ or Khrushchhev's juvenile "flew into space, but didn't find God there. Believers speak of a God that invites us to partake of his flesh and blood! A God who is three person. A God who avenges. A God who personifies love. Scouting for contemporary constructs of God one lands squarely on ethnologist and

evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' vitriolic rants in *The God Delusion*. *"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."*⁸ However even a cursory deconstruction of God with the help of the Psalms help us objectively arrive at a better understanding of God, easily revealing a God who is severely misunderstood, a God who is actually eclipsed by the numerous constructs foisted on him. At the very least as we place God on trial, the Psalms can amply serve as a defendant's script and give God a voice

If one ventures to view the Self as a Character in the Psalms, how does one dismantle these popular images of God created by Atheists, Agnostics, Believers and Biologists et al, to arrive at a core element that is real and resonates to the self because it is true? How does the Self make sense of the Essence? How does one arrive at an unshakable individual belief? How do we possibly deconstruct someone that is omnipresent and omnipotent. Undoubtedly there may be a million answers that are propagated to do that but for the purpose of this paper I hope to deconstruct the character of God and attempt to answer that, through what the Book of Psalms propounds and offers. The Psalms can be posited as a doorway that opens up to this path lending itself amply to deconstruction. People generally turn to God in the face of calamity, desperate uncertainty, pain, devastation or in the silence of their desperation. But then there are countless others who live their lives either careening from one accomplishment to another or muddling along through the mundane routine of humdrum lives. Some are blissfully ignorant, some are mildly conscious of this hulking presence, this massive being behind the mists and some are recalcitrant, unwilling to articulate the sullen silence of a stony sky. The bright and blinking lights of technology and entertainment with

its clamouring immediacy effectively arrests and holds our focus. Its mind numbing charms are transient and shallow. The delights it provides wear off soon enough yet we continue to totter from one high to another...eventually to tire even as we dimly sense that there is more to us than this. There is more to life than just living it. Yes there is more to life than devoting it to a cause. Legacy, Heritage, Eternity are concepts that begin to dimly beckon. We reach through the mists. We reach toward Love...and God is love⁹.

One of the foremost assets of the Psalms is that the character of God or rather the various aspects of God that is revealed in the Psalms is unveiled in humanly conceivable and absorbable portions. Take for instance Psalm 117 which is one of the shortest psalms – a 5 lined poem. The poem highlights one of the greatest this marvelous quality of God, which is the love he has for us which is you, me and everyone else.

For great is his love toward us,¹⁰

However, the love that we are talking about here is not limited to a corpus 'us' but also registers on an individual level as when the psalmist cries out:

For great is your love toward me;¹¹

This is a love that should be experienced on a personal level,

Taste and see that the LORD is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.¹²

Because he would not rebuff anyone who seeks him

No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame¹³

Most of us would have at some point in our life experienced the pain of being rebuffed, the shock and the betrayal might seem too much to bear. But here is a God that would never rebuff you or hurt you. The character trait that is revealed in this is of a persona that is love. A love that can transcend all faults, overlook

all failures and uplift. The Psalms abounds with references to this great and inestimable love that reaches out to us mortals,

How priceless is your unfailing love, O God!¹⁴

And again,

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;¹⁵

it is hard to read the Psalms and not be reminded of this God that typifies love, a abounding love¹⁶ that fills and overflows the spaces between the lines of the Psalmic poetry. A language of love just beneath the surface of the text, wherever you dip into the psalms you come up with love – a love that fills our earthly abode.

The earth is filled with your *love*¹⁷

A love that invites you to bask and revel in it even as the Psalmist revels in it, poised for new discoveries and revelations as he cries out,

Show me the wonders of your great *love*,¹⁸

Or as he says with quite assurance

I will be glad and rejoice in your love¹⁹

It is a love that can also provide a quite assurance and protection as in,

But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned

child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content.²⁰

and also a love that protects

appoint your love and faithfulness to protect him²¹

and again in another Psalm,

that those you love may be delivered.²²

God is love is today a cliché that has become so trite that it seems to have lost all meaning and the intended effect of this divine love has dulled and become jaded. However deconstructing the sentence, God is love reveals a depth of feeling, that the simple statement belies. In deconstruction if we were to go by “every word is a hypothesis”²³ we are left with questions that we seek to answer as to Which God? What God? What about the word is? Is it a Verb? an action? Or a doing? Or a being? Does it mean right now? Or for all eternity? and Love? Love as an emotion? Love as an action? How do we define Love? Love as a depth of immense feeling? So how does one reach a space where one can feel, bask in and actually experience that *transforming love*. A love one can count on unlike Human Love that involves a give and take. A love that can literally take your breath away and make you tear up, a love that can envelop you in it, and overwhelm you, a love that can fill you till you can’t hold it in anymore and it overflows to our fellow human beings especially the hurting ones. A love that provides you with an assurance that you can feel in your gut even as it brings your heart to your throat. And then who is this God? What is this love? Is the saviour we need? The hero we are looking for?

The entertainment world of today is filled with heroes and heroines who save the world, albeit with different motivations – revenge, honour etc. These heroes are further propelled into the societal consciousness by advertising blitzkriegs and suave marketing that endear themselves to the public imagination and us the lesser mortals – the victims... and then there is God. Saving the world out of love. The original superhero. In God’s eyes every one is a hero. His advertisements are the best kind – based on individual conviction – there is really no need to sell God. Very often it is our experiences that shape our responses and understanding of God. Permeable identities, lack of value and significance are one of the primary short falls of a postmodernist. An engagement with God would provide us the security that we as humans seek. Postmodernism revels in the

thought of relationships in which what we can know about the other is what they reveal of themselves. Why should we have such difficulty with the idea of God revealing *Himself*? God is love is a trite cliché that has lost the depth of its meaning through overuse. Deconstructing God through the Psalms reveals a God that is supremely capable of revealing himself by communing through different aspects of his Being, being different things to different people and meeting each of us at the point of our need. The Psalms ventures to deconstruct God and presents him in various different ways. He is depicted as:

God as a *Shield* (Psalm 3:3; Psalm 28:7; Psalm 119:114)

God as a *Rock* (Psalm 18:2; Psalm 42:9; Psalm 95:1) Psalm 19

God as a *Shepherd* (Psalm 23:1; Psalm 80:1)

God as a *Judge* (Psalm 7:11)

God as a *Refuge* (Psalm 46:1; Psalm 62:7)

God as a *Fortress* (Psalm 31:3; Psalm 71:3)

God as *Avenger* (Psalm 26:1)

God as *Creator* (Psalm 8:1; Psalm 8:6)

God as *Deliverer* (Psalm 37:39-40)

God as *Healer* (Psalm 30:2)

God as *Protector* (Psalm 5:11)

God as *Provider* (Psalm 78:23-29)

God as *Redeemer* (Psalm 107:2)²⁴

God as a *King* (Psalm 5:2; Psalm 44:4; Psalm 74:12)

God as a *Defender* (Psalm 68:5)

God as a *Father* Psalm 2, Psalm 103

A thought that is oft repeated in many a Psalm is that he is near to those who seek him: so where do we search for him? All around us? Through nature? In the silence? Through literature?

Through creativity? The Psalms? Actually all of the above and more if one goes by the poetry of the Psalms. But like all successful relationships the relationship that one can have with God can also grow stronger and more beautiful the more heart you invest in it.

NOTES

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