

2. Solving Psalm 90 for X

The typical Christian churchgoer seldom even asks what the biblical heritage is pointing to with the word "God." As a way back to some clarity on this topic, I am proposing a fresh look at one of the clearer Psalms. Let us look at Psalm 90 with the words for God removed and an "X" put in their place. This "X" indicates the unknown. We are going to use this Psalm as a formula with which we will solve for X – that is, to solve for the unknown God, to see what meaning X could possibly have in the text of this Psalm (*I am using the New English translation with a few word changes*).

X has been our refuge
from generation to generation.
Before the mountains were brought forth
or earth and world were born in travail,
from age to age everlasting, X has been our worship.

X turns humans back into dust;
"Turn back," X commands, "you offspring of humanity"
For in X's viewpoint a thousand years are as yesterday,
a night-watch passes, and X has cut us down.
Humans are like a dream at daybreak.
They fade like grass which springs up with the morning,
but when evening comes is parched and withered.

We are brought to an end by X's fury,
and silenced by X's rage.
X lays bare our illusions
and shines the light on our addictions.
All our days go by in the shadow of X's negation.
our years die away like a murmur.
Seventy years is the span of our life,
eighty if our strength holds.
The hurrying years are labor and sorrow,
so quickly they pass and are forgotten.

Who feels the power of X's fury
Who feels X's negation more than those who worship X.
Teach us, X, to count our days carefully,
that we may enter the gate of wisdom.

(The remainder of this Psalm was probably added later to the original version.)

So, what is X? What meaning can we put in the place of these Xs that will render this text meaningful? If we put "a being alongside the natural world that shares our values," the text does not make sense. Even if we put in place of X "a being alongside other beings" we imply that X is limited by other beings. But the text of the Psalmist says X was: "Before the mountains were brought forth or earth and world were born in travail, from age to age everlasting." This X is not "a being" certainly not a being that comes into being and goes out of being, not like a star, not like a galaxy. When Paul Tillich deals with this topic, he suggests that X is not "a being," but the Ground of Being, the mystery, depth, and greatness of our existence, the Eternal Ground out of which all finite beings emerge and into which all finite beings return. Just as Earth is the ground for a blade of grass, so this Eternal Ground is ground for the Earth and all other identifiable "things."

Also “X” is not an idea that makes sense of everything. Indeed, X is not an idea of any sort. The X of this Psalm is an active force or power or source of all happenings. Indeed, X is a mystery we can’t get our minds around. Is X simply nature? Not exactly, for X is the source of nature. Natural beings can pass away, perhaps all of nature will pass away. In the Big Bang cosmology, accepted by most contemporary physicists, nature had a beginning, time had a beginning, space had a beginning. In this reigning contemporary cosmology nature is not from everlasting to everlasting. So X in this Psalm is not the cosmos. X is something more Eternal, more Everlasting than the cosmos.

Nevertheless, X is intimately associated with the events of our lives. Indeed, X kills us as well as births us. X limits us as well as provides support for our being. X even exposes our well-hidden delusions. Indeed, X humiliates us for having opted for illusions and half truths.

To make sense of Psalm 90, we are required to notice that X is that inescapable Mystery that trembles us, shakes us, humbles us into a full recognition of our finitude. Is it not true, as Rudolf Bultmann says, that all our attempts to be secure do not make us secure? X is the invincible power that makes our lives insecure. Is it not true that our hope that a “peak” moment in our lives will last forever is disappointed? X is that invincible power that moves the wheel of time. Is it not true that we desire to be relieved of our solitude through finding enough loving relations; yet solitude returns in every moment of serious life choices or in the facing our own death? X is what makes solitude an inescapable part of our lives. Is it not true that our knowledge is limited and our actions are impermanent? X is that inescapable power that renders all thought and actions finite. So, in this sense, X is not itself something finite or limited. “Infinite” is a word we need to associate with X. We humans cannot comprehend Infinity, but X is the sort of Infinity that we can confront every day as we become aware of our finitude. X is that Mysterious, Unknown, Inescapable, Whatever that renders us finite, renders our days countable.

Such a meaning for X solves the text of the 90th Psalm. Clearly, this Psalm writer was under the impression that the proper object of worship for Israel was X. This X was the “God-devotion” of this Psalm writer.

Some say, “But this is just the Old Testament. If we read the New Testament, we get a different picture of what the word ‘God’ points to.” No, we don’t. In the next discourse I will show how this same God is the Father to whom Jesus prays and the God referred to in the letters of Paul. If we are to fully understand any verse in the Bible, we must begin with this clarification of what those writings point to with the word “God.”

Obviously, questions arise for us. Does this “Almighty” understanding of God mean that our lives are like a record of music whose grooves are already determined? No, it does not mean that. The music of our lives has not yet been written. Both Old and New Testaments assume that humans make choices and that those choices make a difference in how life works out. This may appear to be a paradox, but we can notice that it is a paradox that is true to our life experience. We might say that God *determines* humans to be *free*, and that God’s future determining depends upon our choices. Our role in determining history does not mean that we can make life work out exactly as we might like. And certainly we cannot make ourselves infinite with no limitations. But within the limits of our finitude, “freedom” means that our choices matter. We are *determined* by X to be *free*. We are indeed challenged to opt for choices that affect our future confrontations with X. For example, if we decide to flee from X, we will be caught by X to our chagrin and despair. If we decide to fight with X, we will lose the fight to our damage and despair. If we choose to be open to all that X brings us, we will have selected our best case scenario. The choice to live realistically will be

supported by the Final Reality we are meeting in the above solution for X.

Indeed, this Invincible, Inescapable, Final Reality will faithfully lead us step-by-step through all the layers of our substitutes for Reality toward our home base in Reality. This is the sort of "love" for us that Reality has: Reality rescues us from illusion and restores us to realism. And when we come home from the far countries of delusion, Reality will be there prepared to celebrate with us our return. And when we returnees attempt to live out our realistic awareness in the various rounds of our lives, we will be assisted in this by Reality. Yes, the Reality that is truly Reality is the Reality that is faithful to us. When we choose realism, Reality is our support. When we choose to flee Reality, Reality works to bring us home. This may feel harsh to our hope for escape from what is real. Nevertheless, this harsh Reality (according to Biblical faith) is dependable and benevolent. This harsh Reality is the devotion, the worship recommended to us by Old and New Testaments alike. This Infinite, Inescapable, Intimate Reality is recommended to be our God, our Good. We simply have to take the leap of trust to know whether or not this is true. The writer of Psalm 90 has taken this leap. The Psalmist asks X to teach us to value each of our precious days, and he (or she) counts this path as wisdom.