

INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

INTRODUCTION

“It is my view that in the words of this book the whole human life, its basic spiritual conduct and as well its occasional movements and thoughts, is comprehended and contained. Nothing to be found in human life is omitted” (Athanasius, *Ad Marcellinum*).

The Psalter “might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is a fine enchiridion or handbook” (Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 35:254).

In the Book of Psalms “there is nothing wanting which relates to the knowledge of eternal salvation” (Calvin, *Commentary*, p.xxxix)

In modern times the most poignant and moving use of the Psalms among Christians is found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s little book *Life Together*, written just as WWII was to break out. Bonhoeffer headed a theological seminary of the Confessing Church at Finkenwalde. These young pastors would be the core of those who would oppose Hitler and Fascism in the tumultuous years that would follow. Bonhoeffer himself would be hanged for his part in the plot to assassinate Hitler. His theological education was new in Germany; a communal life in which Jesus’ call to discipleship was taken seriously. The Psalms were central to living under the Word, both written and living. Here are some of his ideas.

“It is God’s word and, with few exceptions, the prayers of men as well...How can God’s word be at the same time prayer to God?” He notes the difficulty we have with some the psalms, the protestations of innocence, the bitter psalms calling on the judgment of God and the Psalms of the passion like 22. His answer,

“A psalm that we cannot utter as a prayer, that makes us falter and horrifies us, is a hint to us that here Someone else is praying, not we; that the One here protesting his innocence, who is invoking God’s judgment, who has come to such infinite depths of suffering, is none other than Jesus Christ himself. He it is who is praying here, and not only here but in the whole Psalter.”

“The man Jesus Christ, to whom no affliction, no ill, no suffering is alien and yet who was the wholly innocent and righteous one, is praying in the Psalter through the mouth of his Church. The Psalter is the prayer book of Jesus Christ.”

THE BOOK OF PSALMS IN THE BIBLE

Historical

The book of Psalms as we know it today, 150 song and prayers, classified into five books, is a product of a traumatic event in the Bible that we call the Babylonia Exile.

Book I Pss 1-41

Book II Pss 42-72

Book III 73-89

Book IV 90-106

Book V 107-150

Many of the songs in these five books are products of the period of the monarchy 1000BCE to 587BCE brought together from their past to help them live through the trauma they were experiencing. Many of them were composed before the exile and then used during and after the exile to help people in worship experience the pain and find new hope.

What is the exile? It is that last date that is the key, 587BCE. The leadership of Judah is decimated and population deported to Babylon. Some flee to Egypt as well, most notably the prophet Jeremiah and found a temple there and a thriving Jewish community. In Babylon the exiles also do well, but long for home and in 539 begin, at the fall of the Babylonian empire and the rise of the Persians in the form of Cyrus, planning to return to Jerusalem. The temple was rebuilt by 515BCE but it bore no resemblance to the great edifice of Solomon. Ezra and Nehemiah later set out to establish the city and the law but there is always underlying questions about what had happened to Judah and its relationship to God. The questions then turn from historical to theological.

Key theological problems

The Exile meant the loss of the land, the temple and the monarchy. These had been the core elements of the relationship with God. They were tied up with promises of God, covenant promises and now all that seemed overturned. Who was God? What did God want? How should we be the people of God? Why has this happened to us?

After the Exile the temple was rebuilt (516 BCE) but it was paltry compared to its former glory and by the time Herod was to rebuild it 500 years later to a huge glorious edifice it was all but too late. The Romans destroyed it in 70CE and all that remains are the foundation blocks that make up the Wailing Wall.

The monarchy was never restored although some tried and they were never truly autonomous again until the present day. They hated their overlords but could mostly do little about them. The old way of understanding God had gone. A new way had to be negotiated. They had to find new ways of living as the people of God.

In the Psalms this is reflected in the way the Psalter is put together. Books I-III address these painful questions and if you want to get a sense of the pain and hopelessness read Psalm 89 which is the conclusion to these three Books and the fulcrum for the Psalter.

On the other hand, Books IV-V take a different perspective. They make the claim that it is possible to live under God's rule without temple, monarchy and land because God rules in the midst of events and circumstances that seem to belie it. God's rule is contested, will

continue to be contested within and without the people of God. Exile is painful (135-137) but it is liveable.

Pss 1-3 act like an introduction and pursue the main themes. How to live with God's blessing Ps 1; God's anointed and the world's ridicule Ps.2; and Ps.3 the trials of the people of God. But the Psalter ends on a different note. Pss 146-150 end on the note of praise. This is how it will all end. In between are the questions, the difficulties and the joys of being the people of God who live by faith and faithfulness.

These are the questions Jesus was dealing with when Jesus came. Jesus came to Israel to end the exile. That is the point of Jesus' ministry: He did not come for Christians he came for Jews. He came to proclaim that God rules. That is what the term the kingdom of God or heaven means. God rules in Jesus. Repent and trust Jesus and the exile is over. Jesus message will be contested violently but God still rules and rules to bring the exile to its end. It is the same message as the Psalms.

These Pss stem directly from the worship of community and individuals. Worship is central and sometimes it is possible to identify particular occasions and sometimes not. For instance, the Pss. of Ascents probably reflect the worship and theology associated with pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Feast of Tabernacles. This is why most churches use Pss in worship both private and communal.

Theological themes of the Psalms

So it is that the Pss make public the inner life of Israel both personal and communal. They express pain fears, delights and hopes of both community and individuals.

How then can one be happy? Ps 1 begins the Psalter with the affirmation that human happiness is the complete orientation to God, a God centred life. That is how God's rule works now, in the God centred life.

That is why in Ps 2.12, another part of the introduction, *we take refuge in God* which is a description of living in dependence on God for our life and our future unlike the other nations. The Pss are full of terms like trust, fortress, stronghold, rock to emphasise the trustworthiness of God so that we can live a God centred life.

To be happy is to trust one's whole self, existence and future to God.

Now we can understand terms like righteousness. This is not a moral term but a relational one. It describes the person who takes refuge in God or depends on God or trusts in God. They are not morally superior people, the self righteous, whose good behaviour place God under an obligation to reward them. That is how Christianity (and the OT) is often read in church and in the media.

But the righteous person are those who acknowledge their dependence on God for life an future. Their basic happiness derives from God's forgiveness and God's covenant love and God's peace. Their relationship with God has been put to rights.

Now of course, there are moral consequences of such trust but that is not what these words are about. The righteous will seek peace because they trust the God of peace and live life dependent on him.

The wicked then are not obviously bad people, rapists, murderers, thieves but people who decide to live autonomously, who live self-centred, self-directed and self-ruled lives. If we cannot get this into our heads and persist in reading these terms as essentially moral we will misread the Psalms and the prophets. The wicked will do things that suit their life of autonomy and we will come across it and the pilgrim will feel their disdain and hostility.

It is a bit sobering that the highest value and virtue in western democracies, autonomy, is the essence of wickedness in the Psalms.

All of this only makes sense in the light of the most fundamental affirmation of the psalter.

God rules is the fundamental view of the Psalter no matter what things look like. The rule is opposed constantly and circumstances seem to tell a different story but trust it; God rules now.

God's rule may be opposed (Ps.1) or God's Messiah and God's place held in contempt (Ps.2) or God's people despised (Ps.3) but God rules now. And this is the only true source of happiness and life even if it is counter-intuitive.

Rule or sovereignty usually means the power to enforce one's will. The Psalms insist that God does not do this. God invites people to trust him enough to do his will and then offers empowerment to do so. This kind of rule is resisted. God must therefore either enforce divine will or suffer the consequences of human disobedience. It is the latter that that God chooses. So God becomes vulnerable for the sake of relating to human kind. God's power is that of unbounded love and that is the meaning of covenant love.

From this it is clear that God wills justice and peace for all. God wills economic and political systems that exclude no-one from access to life or future. God will be content with nothing less than peace on earth. God will not be content until all are happy as in the definition of Psalm 1.

Obviously then judgment will come to the self-directed because they do not care for God's rule of justice and peace. Such judgment is not mechanical but relational and we Christians know that from the cross: Choosing to live outside the relationship of trust means rejection, by definition.

Therefore the dominant voices in the Psalms are praise and cry. They are as inseparable as cross and resurrection. God's choice to exercise sovereignty of justice and peace in steadfast love means praise and cry are inseparable parts of the human condition.

The Book of Psalms may begin with the pain and puzzlement of Pss 2-3 but it ends with Pss 148-150 the most triumphant songs of praise in the book. Why? Because that is how it all

ends. It ends in praise. We live in the in-between times, between Pss 2-3 and Pss 148-150 and that is where the majority of the Psalms find their locus.

Our lives are lived in the realities of pain and rejection on the one hand and the glory of praise on the other. Sometimes this is given the name eschatological living; living in the present in the hope of the future. The future reality determines the present life, constrained as it may be by the human pursuit for autonomy, self dependence, self rule, and self direction.

That is why the Psalms are full of praise and full of cry. So dominant is this that one scholar has suggested that we ought to read the psalms with the following pattern in mind:

Psalms of orientation; when things are going well,

Psalms of disorientation: when things fall apart, and

Psalms of new orientation: when we make it through the disorientation and find a new place to stand.

It is probably a bit cute but look for these kinds of movements. They correspond to life movements and worship movements. They also correspond to well-known themes in Christian life; life, death and resurrection.

The Psalms as worship¹

This Psalms have had a lot more influence than providing a few theological themes for the grist of OT aficionados. The Pss have been and are the most used part of the OT among all forms of Jews and Christians. They have exercised a powerful influence over people's lives, shaped the way people have behaved, moulded their relationship to God and informed their ethical understanding.

From that use and history three facets of their power emerge.

First, they have been sung.

That seems obvious but often overlooked. "Let me make the songs of a nation and I care not who makes its laws" said Andrew Fletcher a Scottish politician in the early seventeenth century. Songs transform ordinary reality, ordinary words.

Second, they invite us to identify with the poet.

This is done in many ways. The poet may offer a blessing and invite the reader to enjoy the blessing. So look at Ps.1: "Happy or blessed are those who..."

Then the author may well use the first person. So Ps 34.1 "I will bless the Lord at all times." Then in that Psalm the author reworks it as a command in 34:8, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Then there follows a blessing in the third person on those who do so (34.8).

"Blessed are those that take refuge in him". So we start with the first person that involves

¹ Gordon Wenham, Reflections on *Singing the Ethos of God*, in *European Journal of Theology*, 18:2 pp.120-124. Much use made of his insights in this section.

me personally then I follow the identification through to its conclusions. Psalm 34 is a good example and vss. 11-14 draws the lessons for life of such an identification.

The psalmist proposes a relational ideal that is open to the reader to experience.

Third, they are prayed.

We can listen to theology lectures, we can listen to recitations of the Law as was done in the Jewish tradition, we can listen to sermons. These are on the whole silent passive affairs.

But what happens when we pray especially if the prayer is sung? Let's read Psalm 7:8-9;

"The Lord judges the peoples;

"judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness

"and according to the integrity that is in me.

"O let the evil of the wicked come to an end,

"but establish the righteous,

"you who test the minds and the hearts,

"O righteous God."

The Psalmist affirms God will judge the nations and then invites God to judge him affirming that God tests the mind and heart. This is very disturbing. Is this what you really want?

You see in theology the judgment of the nations is an academic idea to be debated. Here it is prayed and sung to be lived by. The writer, the pray-er, the singer give active consent to the standards of life implied in the Psalms. The affirmation that God will judge the wicked is turned in active prayer and worship that God will judge me.

We are performing here in prayer and song an act of commitment. So what looks like a statement of fact, "The Lord judges the peoples" become words that alter the relationship with God that mere listening does not. I am committing myself to patterns of behaviour, standards of integrity and roles in relationship with God that no theological or verbal statement would ever make me do.

APPENDIX

THE PSALTER: A CHRONOLOGY

Many psalms already in circulation	Babylonian Exile 596(7)-586(7)	Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah 40-55	Nebuchadnezzar
Throughout the Exile and the following years Psalms are collected	First return of exiles 539(8)	Ezra 1.1-5.13	Cyrus 559-530 Conquered Babylonian empire
And they are composed	Reconstruction of Temple begins 520	Haggai 1.1-15; Ezra 3-6	Darius I
And all the time they are being collated	Temple construction completed March/April 515	Ezra 6.14-15	Darius I
They begin to take their present form as Psalter	Ezra come to Jerusalem 457	Ezra 7-10	Artaxerxes I
Other literary activity in this period included the collection and collation of the Torah, prophets and wisdom in the forms that we now know them.	Nehemiah governor of Jerusalem 444- 432	Nehemiah	Artaxerxes I
			Greeks overthrow Persians at battle of Issus 333 and death of Darius III 330
The canon of scripture now seems well established, including the Psalms.	Sirach's grandfather c 200 Sirach Greek version 132	Sirach Prologue	Seleucid or Syrian rule