

# For Musicians & Clergy: Scripture

## Psalms of Tragedy and Joy

BY THOMAS BOYER

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Lament and praise are the two dominant themes that mark the Psalms of Israel, and they become the two grand categories for grouping the psalms. The psalms express the diversity of human life. They reflect the individual's joy and sorrow between birth and death. These two types of psalms are subdivided simply into both "community" psalms and "individual" psalms. Consequently we end up with four major categories, and finally one last type that takes care of the rest: the psalms of descriptive praise or "hymns."

### Community Lament

These psalms often don't receive much attention from the church. There is something about us that makes these psalms avoidable—perhaps it is that we tend, in life, to avoid disequilibrium, incoherence, and unrelieved asymmetry. These psalms express the experience of these things. The wishful optimism of our culture often causes us to turn away from them, but a church that goes on singing "happy songs" all the time in the face of raw reality is doing something very different from what the Bible does. These psalms do something very important—they bring to speech and address *everything* to God. The important thing about Israel is that it did not banish or deny the darkness from its religious experience or enterprise. It embraced the darkness as the very stuff of new life.

This type of psalm begins with a call to God, which is often combined with an introductory petition for help. Then comes a three part section called the "complaint": 1) accusation against God,

2) the "we" complaint, and 3) the complaint about enemies. The goal of the complaint is the "petition." This includes a review of God's acts, the petition itself, and then the divine response followed by the vow to praise. In outline form, then, it looks like this:

1. Plea—a complaint that God should correct a bad situation.

a. Address to God. Usually intimate and personal;

b. Complaint. Usually overstates the case and holds God accountable for it;

c. Petition. In bold imperative God is asked to act decisively. The speaker assumes some rights;

d. Motivations. Sometimes this is less than noble. It's sometimes like a bribe;

e. Imprecation. The demand is so strongly stated that it sounds resentful. A cry for vengeance often shows up. Psalm 109 is an example.

2. Praise—something has changed, whether a circumstance or an attitude, we don't know. There is movement from plea to praise. It includes three parts.

a. Assurance of being heard;

b. Payment of vows;

c. Doxology and Praise. The God who was accused is now acknowledged. Examples can be found in Psalms 44, 60, 74, 79, 83, 89.

It is probably easiest for us to resonate with the personal psalms of lament. One reason for this is that the category of the personal has become our mode of experiencing reality. We have experienced the loss of public awareness and public imagination. We are a privatistic people and do not often think about public disasters as concerns for prayer life. If we do, we treat them as somehow

a lesser item. We have nearly lost our capacity to think theologically about public events. We must recover this capacity if we are to overcome our general religious abdication of public issues and the malaise of indifference and apathy that comes with it.

To gain access to the psalms of communal lament we must think through the public sense of loss and hurt and rage that we have in common as a result of, for example, the various massacres wrought in the name of authorized governments, the endlessly exiled situation of Palestinians, the reality of worldwide oppression that is not "natural," but is caused by "the enemies" who trample on the public life and public future of large groups of people. Look at Psalm 74.

### Individual Lament

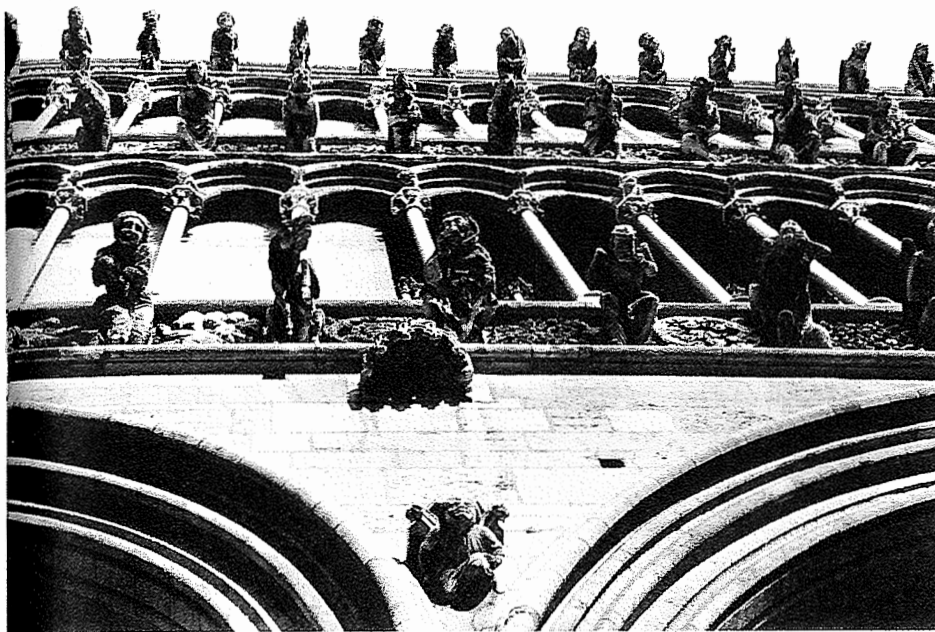
The issue in these psalms is that something is wrong in the relationship with God and must be righted. The relationships of the lamenter to God, to self, and to others are unfolded in these psalms. The secret of these psalms is apparent in the fact that a reversal occurs while the lament is being prayed. More is at work here than just a change of mood. We are dealing with the direct witness, the direct reflection of an intervention from outside, from beyond; we are dealing with an activity of God that actually had been experienced and that was concretized, as a result of such experience, in the structure of these psalms.

Generally, the structure of these psalms conforms to the previous pattern. There is complaint and petition directed to God. Because the complaint is often directed toward enemies and because the full center of gravity in these psalms is often in this direction, some of these psalms recede into the background in the reading and praying of the Christian church. The most important element in these psalms is the *Confession of confidence*. The psalms that emphasize this element receive particular attention in the Christian church (e.g., Psalm 23). Unfortunately these are often misinterpreted and watered down. These psalms come out of dire threat. They are not sentimental. The images are tough and demanding.

These psalms are all the direct or indirect echo of what happened to Israel as a people among peoples in the days of its political heights and depths. They are about the victories and defeats, or

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The psalms are the core of spirituality for the church.

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pressure from enemies and liberation from enemies. They do not transfer to the history of Christ's church in any direct manner. In them we have the foundation of what all the psalms are—and we cannot understand and pray them apart from this basis within the history of Israel's own history.

Most of these psalms are post-exilic. Psalm 124 and 129 are good examples. These often take the form of being general hymns of praise and sometimes seem to be communal responses to communal laments. They seem to go together like two acts of drama. This is especially true of the next category.

#### Individual Praise

There is liturgical action in many of the psalms—but in these it is most obvious. It is easily discerned:

"I will come into the house with  
burnt offerings;  
I will pay thee my vows,  
that which my lips uttered  
and my mouth promised when  
I was in trouble."

(Psalm 66)

The psalm of individual praise is related to the psalm of individual lament

by means of the vow to praise which the latter brings to its conclusion. In fact, the vow to praise at the end of one becomes the announcement of praise at the beginning of the other, as a comparison of Pss. 13:6 or 56:13 with 30:1 indicates.

The main part of these psalms is the account that confesses God's deed, almost always divided into a review of the crisis and an account of the rescue. Narrative praise, as a response to God's deed by a person who has liberated, heard, healed, and delivered, is something that has occurred everywhere where people live their lives in the presence of a personal God. These psalms are immediate echoes of God's acts that have been experienced by the community or by an individual member of God's people. They are at the center of the psalm material. Psalm 30 is the best example.

#### Descriptive Praise/Hymns

There are unique psalms, liturgical hymns of a congregation gathered for worship. There is probably no way to assess the significance of the psalm of praise in postexilic worship. The book of Tobit in the Apocrypha shows how pious Jews, scattered far and wide from their homeland, nevertheless lived in the psalms. By using the psalms in their homes, such diaspora Jews participated in the worship of their people, a worship that could not be restricted in time and

place. It was in this way that the psalms of praise, especially, moved from the worship of the temple into the synagogues and then into the early Christian church. From there, in turn, they moved into the houses and families of many places, in many ages. Whenever a song of praise is raised, there worship takes place, whether it is in a room where a family gathers, in a cathedral, or in the cell of a prison.

These psalms have only two parts:

- 1) the call to praise
- 2) the unfolding of that praise.

The basis statement concerning God's majesty and his mercy stands at the center of all of Israel's descriptive praise. These psalms go beyond the hour of rescue as they look back—they begin to look at the new life that has been given.

#### Conclusion

The psalms are the core of spirituality for the church because they were the core of the spirituality of Jesus Christ. The words mediate to persons and communities the presence of God. That is what you do as musicians and especially as cantors. When we pray the psalms either in the community or in private, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who count our prayers. Those witnesses include first of all the Jews who have cried out against Pharaoh and other oppressors, and includes all those who hope for justice and liberation. This does not reduce the psalms to political documents. It rather insists that our spirituality must answer to the God who is present where the questions of justice and order, transformation and equilibrium are paramount. We cannot be positivists about our spirituality, as though we live in a world in which all issues are settled. The spirituality of the psalms assumes that the world is called to question in this conversation with God, and that our conversation is vigorous, candid, and daring. At times God assumes different roles in these conversations. Sometimes God is the har-binger of the new justice to be established. Sometimes God is the confusion because God is sovereign in ways that do not strike us as adequate. We might wish for a God removed from such a dynamic, for a spirituality not so inclined to conflict. But the psalms reject such a way with God as false to our daily life, and false to the members of this people who know they do not belong to the Egyptian empire but who hope for a new life in a kingdom of justice.