The Starting Point for the Psalms: Understand the Bible

BY BERNARD F. BATTO

ike most aspects of biblical studies, the interpretation of the psalms has undergone continuous development throughout the long history of the church. This development in understanding is evidence of a healthy contempozizing of the scriptures that must be part and parcel of a living and dynamic community of faith. To stand in such a community of faith is to make the traditions of the past one's own in light of changed circumstances.

Already in New Testament times this process of contempozization was evident. The church, struggling to understand Jesus in light of the Scriptures (the Old Testament), heard in the psalms promises of or statements about the Messiah (see Luke 24:44). In Acts 13:30-41, for example, Jesus' resurrection is seen as a fulfillment of "the book of David" (as the Psalter was traditionally called):

We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm [v 7], "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee." And as for the fact that he [God] raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption . . . Therefore he says also in another psalm [16:10], "Thou wilt not let thy Holy One see corruption."

Other psalms were used in a similar manner.

It was only a short step to a Christological reading of the whole Psalter. That was the approach of St. Augustine, who understood every psalm as either a prayer spoken by Christ or a prayer to Christ. No doubt it was this viewpoint that led to the Psalter becoming the basis of the church's official prayer; in the Liturgy of the Hours the church prays the psalms in Christ. At the cost of oversimplification, one can say that, with but few modifications, this remained the basic approach to the psalms in the church up until the modern era.

With the advent of the critical era in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a new style of interpreting the psalms emerged. In keeping with the intellectual spirit of the times, emphasis was now placed on recovering the historical circumstances in ancient Israel in which individual psalms were written. Much labor was spent on attempts to determine the author and date of composition for each psalm. The traditional view that the psalms were composed by David was replaced by the conviction that the majority of the psalms were written very late in the Old Testament period, during the Babylonian Exile (sixth century B.C.) or later. A great number of psalms were thought to have been composed no earlier than the second century B.C. Today we recognize that much of this early critical scholarship was wide of the mark. Nevertheless, it served as an important stepping stone to the "form-critical" study of psalms, which is a more valid approach to the understanding of the psalms.

The great contribution of the form-critical approach is the recognition that, before we can validly translate the meaning of the psalms, we must first understand what the psalms meant within their original cultural context in the ancient Near East. It further recognizes that all human communication takes place within set "forms," whose use is determined by custom or "setting in life." Every society has its own specific forms; these may vary in meaning depending upon the circumstances or setting in which they are used. Thus in our own society everyone knows that a letter written to a close friend

Prof. Batto is an associate professor of Old Testament at the University of Dallas, and served as a member of the faculty of the 1983 NPM School for Cantors in Fort Worth.
takes a different form than a letter written to a business. Likewise, forms vary from culture to culture. In our country one customarily wears black to a funeral to express grief; in traditional China, however, one would wear white in the same circumstances. Literature is subject to similar conventions. Two books about the bishop of Rome would necessarily have to be interpreted very differently if one is a novel and the other a biography. The interpretation of the psalms—or any book of the Bible for that matter—must begin with an appreciation of their form and the "setting in life" during biblical times.

Scholars usually divide the psalms into four or five categories, based on literary type and function. Psalms designed primarily to praise God as creator or for God's wonderful acts of salvation in ages past are called hymns. Those psalms which seek God's help in present distress are known as laments; these may be either individual or community laments, depending upon whether they are spoken in the name of one person or of the whole community. Thanksgiving psalms, whether individual or communal, were sung in gratitude to God

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for favors received, such as deliverance from the enemy or recovery from illness. Royal psalms include a variety of psalms concerning the king, from songs composed in honor of his coronation or wedding to laments seeking divine succor in battle. Additionally, there are a number
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of minor types such as wisdom psalms, songs of Zion, and liturgies of various kinds. Because the psalms were intended as stock prayers for typical occasions, the language is accordingly stereotypical rather than specific. It is this characteristic which makes the psalm's application so universal, even today.

One of the very important results of the form-critical study of the psalms, in terms of their applicability to liturgy, is the recognition of their communal character. Very few, if any, of the psalms originated in what we might call private devotion. For the most part the psalms were composed for and used within Israel's public worship. The ancient Israelites were extremely conscious of their solidarity with one another. Quite in contrast to our modern preoccupation with individualism, the Israelites understood themselves to be intimately bound together with one another through their covenant with God. First and foremost, they were a chosen people, not chosen individuals.

One way to look at the psalms is as a meditative and prayerful response by the people of God to the mystery of salvation effected in their midst and proclaimed in the Scriptures. Accordingly, psalms may contain an invitation to praise God (Ps 100), the king over all the earth (Pss 93, 95-99) and lord of all (Pss 8, 29), the creator (Pss 19, 104, 148), who by many awesome signs and wonders saved their fathers, despite their sinfulness, out of Egypt (Pss 114, 105, 106, 135, 136) and made them into a glorious nation under the Davidic kingship (Pss 78, 132). In times of distress the community called upon their God to save them, confident that he is always true to his covenant with them. Thus, whether laments were uttered in the name of the king (Ps 89) or in the name of the community (Pss 44, 60, 74, 80 et passim) or in the name of an individual (Pss 9-10, 22, 25, 28, 31, et passim), it was always as a member of God's covenanted people. Even songs of thanksgiving by individuals and the vows that accompanied these songs were performed publicly in the temple (Ps 116:14-19). In the biblical tradition the believer always sees himself or herself standing in solidarity with the whole people of God;

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salvation is experienced as a member of the community and not in isolation from it. One's prayer should follow the same pattern.

One of the greatest obstacles in praying the psalms today is the tremendous cultural gap separating twentieth century Christians from the ancient Israelites. It is much more than the difference between chariots and jet planes, or between stone tablets and computers. Rather it is a completely different understanding of humanity and the world. The ancient Israelites were far from primitive in their knowledge but neither had they the benefit of our modern scientific knowledge. "Mythological" is perhaps the most adequate word to describe their understanding of the world. Whereas our age understands the world to be governed by natural laws (gravity, thermodynamics, evolution via mutations, etc.), the Israelites—like all ancients—believed that the world was governed directly by God through his constant and immediate control. Where God's personal activity did not reach, there was non-existence or chaos. The ancients conceived of creation as a continual battle by God to overcome the nihilistic force of chaos (see Is 27:1; 51:9-11). This force of chaos was personified as a kind of watery dragon, known variously as Leviathan, Rahab, Sea, or River. Should God ever relax in his vigilance
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over chaos, then chaos with all its nihilistic power would come cascading down upon them. That, of course, will never happen because God never relaxes his vigilance. Nevertheless, the force of chaos continues in the sin and evil, in the sickness and death, in the cheating and the brutality which surround humanity on every side.

This mythological conception of the world is the wellspring of the powerful images in many of the psalms. For the psalmist every evil was understood as the power of chaos threatening God’s good creation and one’s own existence. Thus both death and illness were the power of chaos threatening God’s creative work. The threat of “enemies”—a common motif in the psalter—is likewise an aspect of chaos closing in. Sometimes all these themes are brought together in one place, as in Ps 18. Here the psalmist speaks as one in dire straits, although the exact nature of his distress is not revealed. The powers of chaos—death/Schoel (vv 4-5), Sea (vv 15-17), enemies (vv 3, 17, 37ff.)—have almost overwhelmed him. But then he remembered God and his prayer roused the Lord to don all his creative might and

once again smite the Sea-dragon (vv 6-19), thereby releasing God’s devout servant from the clutches of chaos or nonexistence and restoring him to the fullness of life.

Like so much else in the Bible, we need to translate these mythological motifs into more familiar theological terms. The psalmist’s meaning becomes more accessible to us once we translate chaos as evil or Satan. It then becomes readily apparent that the psalmist speaks of nothing other than the saving power of God as he transfers us out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light. The psalmist voices our own confidence that the Kingdom of God has come into our midst.

We have now returned to the point at which we began, namely, the necessity of contemplating the psalms. When properly understood, the psalms are as relevant to the people of God today as they were in Old Testament times. The psalms still echo the joys and the sorrows, the aspirations and the failures, the praises and the laments of the worshipping community. Certainly the psalms can express our personal feelings in private prayer. But they are even more appropriate as the communal voice of the church praising God for his saving power at work in our midst. It is not surprising that the psalms figure prominently in Christian worship, especially in the Liturgy of the Hours—the official prayer of the Church—and in the Liturgy of the Word as the community’s response to the proclamation of the Good News of our salvation.