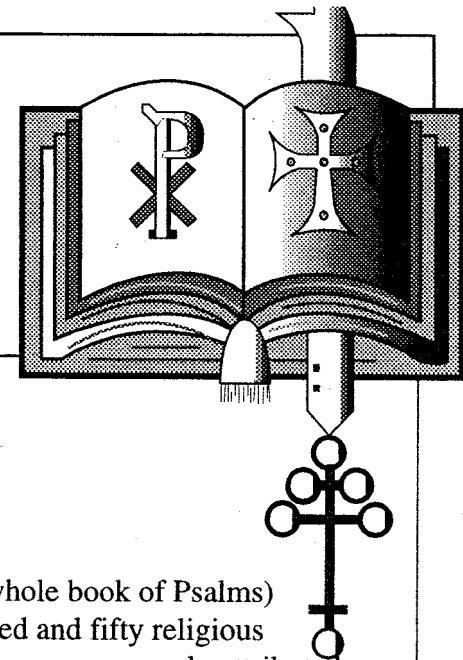


BRINGING LIGHT TO SCRIPTURE

A Newsletter of Biblical Literacy

This issue is dedicated to the Psalms



HONORING PSALMS

The title of the book, *The Psalms*, in Hebrew means “songs of praise.” The Greek ‘psalms’ means “a song sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments.” The Psalms are rarely interpreted, either as exegesis or metaphysically. They stand alone as a Psalter, a hymn book, a legacy of the early worshipers of Yahweh. Because they are not about persons, places, or things, the metaphysics are a little different. And because we, in Unity, rarely use parts of the Bible we cannot interpret metaphysically, the beauty and wisdom of the Psalms is an untapped resource.

The Psalms are ancient Hebrew songs of devotion, lament, temple ritual, confession, history, praise, curses, and thanksgiving. We cannot reconstruct the society of ancient Israel by reading the Psalms nor can we understand their theology. Rather, we need to know about their society and their theology in order to interpret the Psalms.

There is no one psalmist, clear and known, that we can wend our way back to through the mists of history to definitively understand. The body of poems lives only in the fact of its existence over the centuries. It is the meaning rather than the words which speak to us and which we identify with even today, thousands of years after they were first sung.

The Psalms as they appear in the Old Testament were composed over a period of at least 500 years. Probably the anthology as we have it was completed by the second century B.C.E. when the Septuagint, the translation of the Bible into Greek, was settled by the seventy scholars, setting forth the overall order and chapter divisions that we have now. The lower numbered Psalms are most likely the earliest written and the higher numbered

pieces came later.

The Psalter (the whole book of Psalms) comprises one hundred and fifty religious poems. Although they are commonly attributed to King David (about 1,000 B.C.E.), possibly half were written by him, or about him, or during his reign, or even “conceived as from the mouth of”.

David, as king and poet, musician, dancer, army commander and adulterer, has a significance in the history of Israel that give the Psalms relevance in understanding the people of the Holy Land. Because of the esteem in which David has been held, claiming that the Psalms were written by him has given them an assurance of permanence. The Jewish historian Josephus recorded that David “composed songs and poems to God in varied meter”.

The modern way of thinking, worshiping or communicating with God is in a personal, individual way while Israel was a covenant community whose primary bond was the worship of Yahweh. Israel had no individual worship. Only as a member of the community did the individual share in the promises and blessings of the covenant. To be cut

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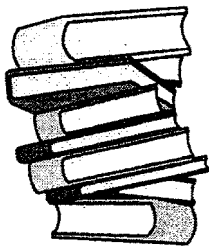
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BOOK CORNER



The only book on the metaphysical interpretation of the Psalms which I found was *Psalms of God: An Interpretation of My Favorite Psalms*, by Joseph Murphy, published 1972 by DeVorss.

I particularly liked his interpretation of Psalm 30:3. "Thou hast ...restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit." Murphy says: "It is necessary to remind ourselves that there are not only cemeteries in the earth where dead bodies are deposited, but there are also grave yards in the mind where millions bury their hopes, dreams, ideals and aspirations. In their mind they lay away the desires of their heart and ideals to which they aspire. They say to themselves: 'it can't be. It is too good to be true. The good things of life are not for me.' With this negative attitude of mind, they bury their hopes and their dreams. The answer is to meditate on expansion, growth and enlargement along all lines, visioning yourself as doing what you love to do, while knowing that the Power of the Almighty will back you up. If you do this regularly, you will have a garden in your mind which grows and brings forth strength, confidence and assurance all the days of your life. The pit spoken of is the mood of despondency, gloom, despair. When you realize that God flows through you, filling up all the empty vessels in your life, you will not go down into the pit of despondency."



WHY USE EXEGESIS?

Especially in Unity, when we believe that the Bible is interpreted metaphysically, why would anybody care about what was happening all those years ago, who the people were, or how their culture influenced them.

The way many Unity ministers make use of the Bible is in "prooftexting." We have a theme in a talk all picked out; we work out what we want to say metaphysically, and then we go to the

Bible for an appropriate verse to use to seal our pronouncements. This works for our purposes, but there are other options and other ways to use the Bible. By only doing prooftexting, we are missing the richness and depth to make our points clearer and more interesting. I find that it also gives me another way of saying the same Truth principles again and again.

Most people are fascinated by the Bible but they don't want to be beat over the head with it again. The abusive ways in which it has been used by various groups have only served to create guilt feelings in people thereby driving them from a rich source of comfort and inspiration. Some people have never read or heard the beautiful passages which declare again and again that God is with us.

Sometimes we react intensely to our past condemnation in regard to the Bible and we throw away the uplifting along with the censuring. Consider that there is a reason the Bible has endured all these centuries and that it can be useful in our mission of being a link in the great teaching movement of Jesus the Christ. Literalism is not the answer to how the Bible can provide comfort, inspiration, teaching, and exciting stories which hold the interest of the hearers. Exegesis does all this.

AN ELIZABETHAN VIEW



Richard Hooker, who lived during the time of Elizabeth I, said of the Psalms: "What is there necessary to know which the Psalms do not teach? They are a mighty augmentation of all virtue and knowledge... a strong confirmation to the most perfect among others. Heroical magnanimity, exquisite justice, grave moderation, exact wisdom, repentance unfeigned, unwearied patience, the mysteries of God, the sufferings of Christ, the terrors of wrath, the comforts of grace, the works of Providence over this world, and the promised joys of that world which is to come, all good necessarily to be either known or done or had, this celestial fountain yieldeth."

JUST THE FACTS

The Psalms are not the theology of the Jews.



Israel was a community; individuals did not go to the temple and pray the Psalms for themselves alone.



The prayers/psalms are for the whole community even if the speaker speaks in the singular.



In asking for God to smite their enemies, it was because those who weren't part of the Jewish community were not chosen and did not live according to God's laws. It was not personal retribution or hate.



The individual could not be separated from his family or tribe in this retribution. There was no hate-the-act-but-love-the-person belief system in the times of the psalmists.



There was not a formed belief in heaven or hell after death, so retribution must come in this lifetime.



There are 150 Psalms, half of which may have been written by David, or inspired by him or were written during his reign, or have something to do with him.



The Psalms were recited in the temple especially during festivals and holy days.



They were written at different times and reflect what was going on in the life of Israel at those times — good or bad.



There are four divisions: Praise, Lament, Thanksgiving and miscellaneous.

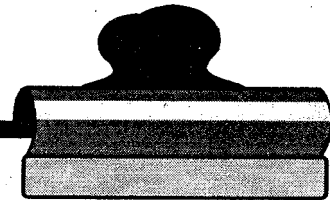


Other cultures at that time were writing/singing similar poems to their gods.



A LITTLE HISTORY

The most important of the ancient versions of the Psalms are the Septuagint, the Syriac, and the Latin. There is one manuscript of the Septuagint (4th century B.C.E) which contains all of the Psalms. It is the Codex Sinaiticus. The Syriac Old Testament which was made from the Hebrew probably in the 2nd century C.E. shows some dependence on a Jewish Targum and also upon the Septuagint. The Old Latin (pre-Jerome) version, of which there was more than one type, is chiefly of value for throwing light on the Greek text from which it was made. The Latin Psalters of Jerome (346-420 C.E.) was a rather hastily made revision of the current Old Latin and was based on the Septuagint. Subsequently adopted by the churches of Rome and Italy (until the sixteenth century), it is known as the Roman Psalter, and is still used in St. Peter's in Rome and in St. Mark's in Venice and in Milan.



The 23rd Psalm for Busy People

*The Lord is my pace setter, I shall not rush!
He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals.
He provides me with images of stillness
which restore my serenity
He leads me in the ways of efficiency
through calmness of mind
And His guidance is peace.*

*Even though I have a great many
things to accomplish each day,
I will not fret, for His presence is here
His timelessness, His all importance
will keep me in balance.*

*He prepares refreshment and renewal
in the midst of my activity.*

*By anointing my mind with His oils of tranquility
my cup of joyous energy overflows
Surely harmony and effectiveness
shall be the fruit of my hours
For I shall walk in the pace of my Lord
and dwell in His house forever."*

—Toki Migashina

from the newsletter (Evergreen, February 1996) of
St. Clare's Episcopal Church of Blairsville, Ga.

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HONORING PSALMS *(continued from page 1)*

off from the shared means of grace is, in the words of the fugitive David, to have “no heritage of Yahweh” (1 Samuel 26:19), the greatest calamity imaginable.

If you wanted to contact Yahweh, you came to the temple at the stated time and with the other people. For this reason the book of Psalms lies at the very heart of the Old Testament. There are many references to ritual acts throughout the Old Testament but the Psalms give an awareness of the pervasiveness of worship in the Hebrew faith.

To be cut off from the shared means of grace is, in the words of the fugitive David, to have “no heritage of Yahweh” (1 Samuel 26:19), the greatest calamity imaginable.

There have been many attempts to update the Psalms. Every generation complains that they don't speak to the current conditions. And yet in every generation some defend the old English of the King James Version as the only way to appreciate the Psalms.

The word Selah (Psalm 3:2) is not usually spoken. It appears 71 times in 39 different Psalms. Even though the term appears often, its meaning is not clear. Most scholars concur that the term designates some sort of musical or liturgical cue for singers, musicians, or other leaders of worship. If it is derived from the Hebrew root, “to lift up,” it may suggest lifting up the sound of the music to play or sing louder. Another possibility is that selah is derived from an Aramaic root which means “to turn, to bend, or to pray.” This may have been a cue for the worshipers to kneel, bow, or to fall prostrate in humble, respectful submission to God.

From the Metaphysical Bible Dictionary: “Selah is the state of mind in prayer in which we relax from our affirmation of Truth and thanksgiving for good received and to be received, and “wait” on God in the stillness, that the Holy Spirit may reveal more of its inspirations to us

and that it may establish our thoughts and our heart more firmly in the divine harmony and good.”

Enthronement Psalms: An example of an Enthronement Psalm (eight have been identified) is 29:10, where “God's enthronement is forever.”

Wisdom Psalms: This type (nine of them) is not easily identified for many of the Wisdom Psalms can be classified with other types. They are much like proverbs with short, memorable sayings of common wisdom. Often light is contrasted with darkness, good with evil, and the righteous with the wicked. Also included in Wisdom Psalms are those that focus on the Law. Read Psalm 1: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked....”

Liturgical Psalms: Some of the Liturgical Psalms are related to a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Temple (“I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the LORD.” Psalms 122). Others are entrance liturgies that were used as the worshipers stood outside the Temple gates awaiting entrance (“Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?” Psalms 24).

Sacred History Psalms are also called Psalms of the Mighty Acts of God and Salvation History Psalms. These Psalms are all very long. They recount in chronological order the mighty acts of God for the people and in delivering them from their bondage. Psalms 33 gives an account of the Creation of a place to live.

Psalms of Praise: There are at least fourteen Psalms that may be classified as Psalms of Praise. (“O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!” Psalms 8) Praise is frequently seen in Psalms of Thanksgiving and in Psalms of Lament, Enthronement Psalms, Wisdom Psalms, Sacred History Psalms, Royal Psalms and Songs of Zion. In Psalms of Praise there is also found a remembrance of God's gracious deeds as Creator, Deliverer, and Sustainer.

Looking at the differences between praise and thanksgiving is pretty clear in the traditional way of looking at the Psalms, but in Unity the line is a little blurred. They gave praise for the

power of the Creator and thanksgiving for answered prayer. We pray in the knowing that we are One with God, that God is Omnipotent and All-Good. At the same time we give thanks that our good is only waiting for us to receive it. Ancient Hebrews worshiped the transcendent Yahweh while in Unity, we know that we also have the immanent Christ Within.

Laments (seventy of them), or what we more commonly call complaints or grievances, emphasize negative emotions and experiences. These Psalms may make us uncomfortable but the psalmists speak so eloquently of their distress that we can use their words to help us unburden ourselves to the One who knows us and loves us above all others. Psalms 51: "Have mercy on me, O God,..."

"Have mercy on me, O God", in Unity terms would more aptly be phrased: "I know that you do not judge me, O God. Help me to understand the Truth of who I am."

The Imprecatory Psalms are cries for vengeance on an enemy. Many people are so rebuffed by them that they never appreciate the richness of the whole psalter. This is what usually happens to people who start at Psalm 1 and try to read clear through to Psalm 150. They are disheartened to find that not all the Psalms are as uplifting and spiritually nourishing as Psalm 23. These Psalms are vindictive, crying to God to smite an enemy. And so we read some of the Psalms of Confidence and Psalms of Trust first.

These set the stage for the laments and make them more understandable as a part of the culture of the times. Remember that the people believed that everything that happened in their lives was caused by Yahweh — the good and the bad. God was intimately involved in every aspect of their lives — whether or not they had children, whether or not their flocks or garden flourished, whether or not the sun/wind/rain was benevolent or absent, whether or not they defeated their enemies or were taken off into exile. As a communal people, they shared in the good and bad — on a grand scale —and interestingly they did not seem to blame anyone else for their troubles, even when they would have certainly, by our standards, been

justified (i.e. when King David took a census, 2 Samuel 1: 9-25, and the people were punished.)

The Psalms of Confidence ("The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want." Psalms 23) are regarded as an offshoot of the individual lament, for both elements are present.

The Psalms of Trust are written in the first person as prayers or affirmations of faith and confidence in God. They express an absolute dependence upon the Creator, Redeemer, God. The content of these Psalms transcends all of the intervening centuries so that the words may be read and prayed today. "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" (Psalms 27)

And now to the Laments. Lament, as a verb, means to express sorrow or deep regret, to mourn, to wail or complain. As a noun it means an expression of sorrow or mourning, a dirge or elegy.

*They gave praise for the power of the
Creator and thanksgiving for answered
prayer. We pray in the knowing
that we are One with God,
that God is Omnipotent and All-Good.*

Individual Laments ("Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing..." Psalms 6) are the commonest type in the Psalter. Such a Psalm is the cry of an individual to God for succor from any number of difficulties.

Even if we don't resonate with the strongest of the vindictive Psalms we may resent the prosperity of the wicked (our neighbor next door for instance, as in Psalms 73:3 "For I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.") There is no better place to express these dark feelings than in the compassionate ear of our loving God. In the secret places of our hearts there are times when we too desire revenge or vindication. Many people are uncomfortable with such strong emotions and deny their existence foregoing an opportunity to bring these up from the subconscious into the consciousness for healing.

(continued on page 6)

HONORING PSALMS *(continued from page 5)*

While we read these pleas for vengeance in the context of the gospel where Jesus admonished his followers to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27), remember that the psalmist lived in Old Testament times.

There are times when we question the Presence of God. ("How Long O LORD? Wilt thou forget me forever?" Psalms 13) This question is asked in thirteen Psalms and does not deny the depth of the psalmist's faith but rather is a very human cry.

There is also the question "Why?" Why does God allow some things to happen? Why does God not act more quickly or decisively? Or, why is God absent? "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (Psalms 22:1) To stop with the first cry of despair (as it seemed that Jesus did on the cross), is to miss the expression of trust and confidence in God in later verses of this (and other) Psalms. "He has not hid his face from me but has heard.." (Psalms 22:24)

Whether in praise, thanksgiving, or lament the psalmists' thoughts and feelings are turned Godward, and their words furnish us with the supreme example in the Old Testament of humanity's search for and experience of the living God.

As a community, the Hebrews endured many times where a group lament was needed. Since God was seen as the king who rules, the warrior who leads forth in battle against the enemy, and the magistrate who establishes peace in the land, it was natural for them to lament as a community in their defeats. Psalms 80 gives voice to this lament: "Stir up thy might and come to save us!" The psalmist always affirms that God will answer their prayers and come to their rescue.

...their words furnish us with the supreme example in the Old Testament of humanity's search for and experience of the living God.

Given the reality of injustice in 1997 at home

and around the world, the misuse of the environment and the economy, and of natural disasters occurring around the globe, prayers of lament could be quite appropriate. Lamenting the discrimination and indifference that continues in all lands would seem relevant as we affirm the Presence and Power with the helpless and forgotten.

We can also use the laments to begin our inner work of wondering why we don't do what we desire, but instead, continue to live out of old habits. Lamenting lack of trust, fear of the future, or anxiety for loved ones can be useful in moving to the next step in soul growth.

When Jesus quoted the most well known lament, Psalms 22, on the cross ("My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me..."), he surely didn't believe that God had truly deserted him. Jesus knew the whole Psalm and how it moves from lament to affirmation of trust. From the middle of verse 21, the Psalm turns to testimony of God's greatness and deliverance: "...he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him."

To hate God (Psalms 68:1-3) "let God arise, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him!", in ancient times was to not live by God's laws, not to be one of the Chosen, and to worship other Gods. Metaphysically, to hate God is to disavow or deny the Divine Presence within yourself or another.

Lamenting lack of trust, fear of the future, or anxiety for loved ones can be useful in moving to the next step in soul growth.

God is Truth. God is Love. God is Good. The enemies of Truth and Love and Good are fear, hate, ill will, jealousy, anxiety, appeasement, indifference, and all other negative thoughts and attitudes. God is Spirit within you, i.e., your mind, thoughts, imagination, and the creative powers within you, your very life. There is as much God in you as you have appropriated in the way of wisdom, truth, beauty, joy and love. The

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enemies of God are in our own mind and must be eradicated. Fear, worry, doubt, etc., are clouding our concept of God and by letting the Light shine into our consciousness, they will "flee before" God's love.

The Psalms of Thanksgiving are as useful now as they have been throughout history. They are mostly interspersed with both praise and lament. Thankfulness can be for a multitude of reasons such as Psalms 30: "O LORD, my God, I cried to thee for help, and thou hast healed me."

There are one hundred twenty seven references to the Psalms in the New Testament, attesting to the intimacy that Jesus and the disciples had with the psalter. It was Jesus' prayerbook at the synagogue and his hymn book in the temple festival. He used it in his teaching, quoted it to Satan during the temptations, sang the Hallel from it after the Last Supper, quoted it from the cross, and died with it on his lips.

While it may seem that the Psalms actually anticipated Jesus, it is really only by interpreting them in retrospect that we can say that. It is only by seeing the New Testament as more important than the Old Testament that we discount the Old Testament as only a forerunner to the Gospels. The Psalms were written for the people of their time and had great meaning for them in that context. Be careful not to attribute too much in the way of prophecy in them. The concepts of the Good Shepherd (John 10; Psalms 23), the Beatitudes (Matthew 5; Psalms 37, 72, 106), and the Light of the World (John 8:12; Psalms 97:11; 119:105) are founded on the Psalms.

Paul used the Psalms to make his theological arguments of the problems of mankind and how God has answered the need through Jesus Christ. Peter and John quote Psalms 2:1-2 (Acts 4:26) as their defense when challenged by the religious leaders.

It is not necessary that we read these words as our own prayers. It is only necessary that we understand what motivated the ancient psalmists so that we can appreciate and use the Psalms in our prayer life.

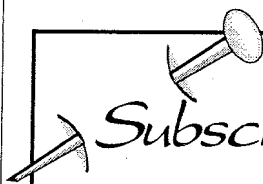
Reading Psalms or verses until you feel inspired to pray, meditate or journal is highly

recommended. It is almost certain that you will find some idea to ponder. Incorporating the Psalms into your prayer life is to blend the holy past with your sacred present.

Bernard Anderson, writer and theologian, suggests that we think of Psalms as "The songs that accompany the people of God on their journey through history." Each time we personally read a Psalm, we can feel that we are a part of the great community which might be also praying or meditating over that Psalm or another part of the psalter. This communion of saints can be reassuring us that we are not alone either in our lament or our praise.



Incorporating the Psalms into your prayer life is to blend the holy past with your sacred present.



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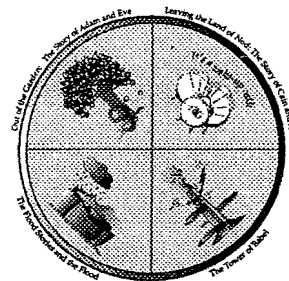
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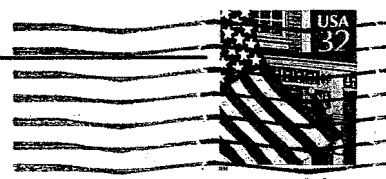
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