

# THE PSALMS: INTRODUCTION AND THEOLOGY

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The following is intended as a short introduction to the Book of Psalms. A first section considers the place of the Psalms—and psalmody—in the life of ancient Israel. The second treats the great themes of the Psalter, with close reference to a number of individual Psalms.

## Historical Setting

The first thing to notice is that the Book of Psalms does not represent the sum total of ancient Israel's hymnody. We know this because songs which are in all important respects like Psalms appear elsewhere in the Old Testament. The so-called 'Song of the Sea', Exod. 15, is a case in point. Here the Israelite people, having newly experienced deliverance from Egypt, give thanks to God. It is significant that they thus respond to what was to be recognised as the greatest event in their history in song. 2 Samuel 22 is another similar instance, though this time it is David alone who sings, the occasion being his victory over the Philistines. Interestingly, this song also turns up in the Book of Psalms (Ps. 18). Something similar happens in 1 Chr. 16:8–36, where David, having just brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem following its establishment as his capital, orders 'Asaph and his brethren' to sing in celebration. The song they sing bears a strong resemblance to various Psalms in the Psalter (especially 105 and 96) and may be a composition based upon them.

It is clear, then, that the Psalms as we know them had an existence of their own in the life and worship of Israel. On the one hand, their use was not confined

to their mere presence in a book. Rather the book is evidence of the rich spiritual heritage of a living, worshipping people. On the other hand, the Psalter does not preserve all that there was of Israelite hymnody. We must suppose that there were other songs, perhaps a great many, which are now lost to us. The fact that the writings of the sect that lived at Qumran in the second and first centuries BC, and which produced the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, included a number of Psalms not found in the Psalter suggests that the writing and using of Psalms was an ongoing activity which Israelite people saw as an essential part of their life before God.

Our next question is when were the Psalms written? What we have already said makes it clear that there is no straightforward answer to this. Some Psalm-writing was certainly very early. The 'Song of the Sea' suggests that it had begun long before David ever took up his lyre. David himself will have made his own contribution (though how great this was is not as obvious as appears at first), and indeed the picture given in Chronicles shows that he not only composed Psalms himself but set up the organisation which would produce the music of the Israelite

temple for generations to come (1 Chr. 25. Notice how the important names in this chapter, Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun, appear also in certain Psalm-headings, e.g., 73–83; 88; 62 & 77). It seems clear, therefore, that the Psalms tradition which is now so familiar to us, took its impetus from the genius of David, and indeed was probably well-formed by the end of the period of the first Temple (i.e. by 586 BC, when it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar).

How many Psalms, then, stem from the master? Many people are willing to take the headings of the Psalms at face value, and attribute to him all those which announce themselves as 'A Psalm of David'. This is not without problems. The heading of Ps. 51, for example, gives as its origin and inspiration David's penitence following his adultery with Bathsheba. Vv. 18 and 19 of the Psalm, however, contain a prayer for the re-building of the walls of Jerusalem, thus presupposing a historical situation which can hardly be squared with that of David, in whose time the city was not destroyed. It is possible, then, that the Psalm was not written by the king, but was simply found at some later stage of history to express something which corresponded with the known experience of David. (The other alternative here is to suppose that vv. 18 and 19, rather than the heading, were added at a time later than the composition). Another point sometimes made in this connexion is to say that the expression 'of David' need not imply his own authorship, but rather that it was intended *for* him, or indeed a successor. The important point is that the full extent of David's contribution to the Book of Psalms is not quite clear. The headings may testify to the process of gathering the Psalms into a book.

It is clear that such a process took place and that the state of the book as we know it is not just an accident. The figure of 150 seems to have had some significance in the collectors' minds. We know this because the total number has been maintained in the different ancient versions, even where there has been disagreement among them as to how exactly the individual Psalms should be divided up in order to arrive at it. (For example the Greek Old Testament regards Pss. 9 & 10 as one Psalm, as it does Pss. 114 & 115, but comes nevertheless to the figure of 150 by dividing 116 & 147 each into two). There are, furthermore, not one book but five, beginning at Pss. 1, 42, 73, 90 and 107. The significance of this division is not easy to fathom, (though we shall make a suggestion below). It does emerge, however, that when we think of the meaning of the Psalms we are looking at at least two stages. One is the stage of composition, or more accurately that of the original setting or kind of usage for which each individual Psalm was composed. The other is that of the gathering of the material into a book. We shall look at each of these stages in turn, before coming to consider theological themes.

### The Psalms and the Ancient Temple

There are numerous indications that the Psalms are no anthology of private poems. At times we can almost see and hear the Temple and events which are happening there. One of the best examples is 68:24, 25. The Psalm is a celebration of God's victory over

his enemies, at once re-calling those victories which had established Israel in her land long before and praying for continuing deliverance from future hostile attack. The verses cited show clearly that the prayer is actually taking place in the Temple. Once we have realised this we see the whole Psalm in a new light, and notice references to the Temple (if we had missed them) in vv. 5, 17, 18, and then also at vv. 29 and 35. Indeed all the thought and action of the Psalm is centred precisely on the Temple. God has demonstrated his power over his foes in his glorious march from Sinai to Zion. That is the meaning of vv. 7–10. (The imagery of v. 2 is also intended to recall the appearance of God on Sinai, Exod. 19). The point is to show that all the things that were true of God in his powerful self-manifestation on that holy mountain are true also in his dwelling on Zion. Specifically, the dominance over his enemies displayed then still stands, by virtue of his possession of the holy mountain of Jerusalem. There is, moreover, a reference in vv. 15, 16 to another sanctuary, evidently belonging to one of the peoples subdued by Israel on her entry into the land. The taunt here sings the triumph of God (or Yahweh, to give him the personal name by which he is known in the Old Testament) over the god that was worshipped there. Israel, then, was not the only nation to think of her God as residing on and ruling from a mountain. When Yahweh occupies Mt. Zion it is a statement for all the world to see that he reigns in Israel. (His victories show that his rule is not confined to Israel; nevertheless his sovereignty there is the primary significance of his dwelling on Zion). Clearly, therefore, the fact that the Psalm belongs to an event in the Temple is not accidental; its setting there is an important part of its meaning.

Other Psalms could be cited to make similar points. 81:1–4 opens with a crashing symphony, exciting our sense of hearing and leaving us wondering just what those ancient sounds were like. The event here is evidently one of Israel's annual feasts, usually identified as the Feast of Tabernacles (cf. Lev. 23:24). Ps. 84 depicts a pilgrimage to Zion, again presumably for one of the feasts, which drew Israelites from far and near (cf. Exod. 23:14–17). Ps. 24 probably has a similar setting, having the particular function of laying down the conditions of participation in whatever ceremony was about to begin, and finishing, in a crescendo which has captured the imagination of far later generations of musical composers, by announcing the entry of God himself to preside in his royal power. Other 'Zion' Psalms are 48, 50, 87, 122.

These Psalms tell us much about Israelite religion and piety. They remind us that that piety had an external fabric which is culturally far removed from anything we can experience in our modern worship, connecting as it did with widespread contemporary religious thought-forms, which were mythological, though the worship of the God of Israel was not. That external fabric is not the whole story, for there is a great deal of passion here too, with which we can identify more easily, especially within a Protestant tradition of Christian worship. We feel the longing of the pilgrim for Zion, and know that it is in reality a longing for God. 41:1, 2 illustrate this well, where the

craving is expressly for God, yet where the 'beholding the face of God' (v. 2) probably involves being present in the Temple. Ps. 73 makes the same point in a different way. The 'centre' of the Psalm is v. 17, where the Psalmist enters the Temple and suddenly his whole perception of reality is radically changed. Up to this point he has been making a complaint not unknown elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g. Jer. 12:1-4), namely that the wicked seem to prosper while the innocent suffer exploitation and misery. It is only when he turns his thoughts to the Lord that he can see the true lie of the land, and know again that ultimately God's purposes for the innocent are good and that the wicked walk in 'slippery places'. In translating the experience into terms which make sense to the modern reader, we find ourselves talking simply about prayer. For the Israelite, however, this praying, though it issues in an effect with which all can identify, is most appropriately localised in the Temple.

There are other Psalms, where the modern reader easily misses the reference to the cultic place or acts, because they lie hidden by the veil of assumptions which the Psalm-writer would naturally make but which are alien to us. The famous Ps. 23 is a case in point. Its power to be taken into cultures other than that of Israel needs no demonstration. Vv. 5, 6, however, are not as readily comprehensible as vv. 1-4. Christian interpretation has traditionally spiritualised the sentiments here, particularly in v. 6, where the reference to the Lord's house is commonly understood as heaven, and the dwelling in it eternal. The house, however, is once again the Temple, and the meaning that the Psalmist will enjoy the presence of God indefinitely and without interruption. A belief in life after death is not absent from the Psalms, as we shall see in due course, but it is probably not to be understood here. We do more justice to this Psalm by seeing it as an affirmation of faith in God because of his disposition to provide for the needs of the faithful and to protect them from danger.

### Great Occasions Only?

We have noticed that some at least of the Psalms seem to be best understood in the context of the great feasts of Israel, and therefore as the stuff of communal worship. It has for this reason sometimes been called the hymn-book of Israel. This both has truth in it and corresponds to the experience of many of us in modern worship, where hymns are used, often repeatedly, in worship-services. The idea needs some qualification, however. First, worship in Israel was not confined to the feasts. We know that the priests had responsibility for regular acts of devotion. Sacrifices were offered daily in the Temple, and were probably accompanied regularly by music and Psalm (Exod. 29:38-42; 2 Chr. 2:4). What sort of attendances these services would have got in the long reaches of an average winter it is impossible for us to tell. They may sometimes have been relatively quiet affairs, in which the *éclat* which seems to be presupposed by a number of the Psalms we have noticed would have been inappropriate.

There were certain occasions, furthermore, which

were more or less private, involving an individual or perhaps a family. Our background information for this comes from the Book of Leviticus, where descriptions are found of sacrifices which individual Israelites could bring on their own initiative and in the context of their own devotion to God. Lev. 7:11-15 prescribes the manner in which the so-called 'sacrifices of peace-offerings' was to be brought. This varied slightly depending on the particular purpose of the offerer, that is, whether he brought it in fulfilment of a vow, or in thanksgiving or simply as freewill-offering. It may be that such occasions also were accompanied by the music of the Psalms. Thus, Ps. 100 bears the heading 'A Psalm for the Thank-Offering'. This suggests that the Psalm was used on such private occasions, even though the Psalm itself may also have functioned on more public ones. There are other Psalm-headings which appear to suggest a connexion between their Psalms and particular sacrifices. (Cf. Pss. 38, 70, '... for the memorial-offering', RSV). And 107:22, 116:17 establish similar links.

It would be wrong, therefore, to think of the Psalms as having functioned only on the great festal occasions. Some biblical scholars have wanted to set more or less all the Psalms in the context of one or other of the annual feasts. They have gone further and suggested that the 'I' of many Psalms stands not for an individual who expresses his own feelings, but for the congregation, or nation, as a whole. On such a view Ps. 51 would be an act of penitence on the part of the whole people. It is more likely, however, that the Psalms were capable of serving in a variety of contexts. Equally, they are indeed often to be understood as expressions of personal piety. (This is part of the reason that their power is enduring). In a sense, however, it is wrong to make a hard and fast distinction between the religious experience of the individual and that of the whole people. Often we have a strong sense that a Psalm is expressing the experience of the Psalmist *in the context of* the worshipping community. This is sometimes signalled simply by shifts between 'I' and 'we' in the course of a Psalm. Ps. 20 is a prayer for the king uttered by the congregation. Notice the 'we/us' in vv. 5, 8, 9. Yet v. 6 is uttered by an 'I'. It is not necessary to think of different speakers here. Rather the Psalmist oscillates between his role as one who gives voice to the prayer of the whole people and his personal identification with the prayer that is being offered and the assurance that comes through it.

Ps. 22 has another angle on this elusive relationship between the individual and the community. Vv. 22, 25 picture the Psalmist's devotion *as witnessed by* the congregation. V. 22 is in fact a turning-point in the Psalm, bringing a change from the expressions of forsakenness which characterise the earlier part to a new mood of joy, trust and praise. Such changes are not uncommon in the Psalms. (We shall return to them below). Here it is sufficient to notice that the Psalmist's deliverance from his previous distress is shared with the congregation. His praise is put to their edification. He pays his vows (i.e. sacrifices in fulfilment of such) in their presence. Once again it is difficult to know how extensive the 'congregation' is here. The context may be the sacrificial meal which

was a constituent part of the vow-sacrifice, eaten over two days (Lev. 7:16). In that case the 'congregation' may be no more than those with whom the meal is shared, though they are evidently regarded here as standing for the entire assembly of Israel. (See Deut. 12:12 for an idea of how extensive such a gathering might have been). In Ps. 22, therefore, the relationship between the worship of the individual and that of the wider congregation is more formal and conscious than that which we noticed in Ps. 20. The individual's act of worship is complete when it becomes witness to the community; and the community is edified by the way in which God has dealt with the individual. A not dissimilar sequence of ideas is present in Ps. 51, where the restoration of the penitent has as one of its results his assumption (or perhaps resumption) of a prophetic role in Israel, in which, having experienced forgiveness himself, he in turn will call 'transgressors' to repentance (v. 13). The Psalm concludes with a prayer for Zion, in which the restoration of the penitent finds an analogy in a restoration of the whole community.

It has become clear that the Psalms are very often best understood in the context of worship in the Temple by the Israelite community. This 'community' might be more or less extensive. On the great festal occasions it will have been quite comprehensive; at other times it must have been rather small. However, while there is this community orientation, it is not less the case that the Psalms are properly the expressions of individual piety. Indeed the psychology and dynamics of the worship of Israel—as regards the individual in community, witness, edification and mutual support—are probably not substantially different from those of corporate worship today or at any other time. One consequence to be drawn from this is that the Psalms call us (as Heb. 10:25 does more explicitly) to cultivate corporate devotion, not as something optional in the spiritual life, but as quite central to it.

We have not thus said everything there is to say about the function of the Psalms in the spiritual life of Israel. There may indeed have been functions which have little to do with communal Temple worship. Again the modern analogy helps. The fact that we sing Psalms in church does not mean that we cannot also use them by the sick-bed or on other occasions which call for specific pastoral resources. How much of this kind of flexibility there was in ancient Israel we do not know, though we can imagine that the Psalms formed part of the equipment of all those who had responsibility for 'instruction' in Israel. This brings us to the next point for our consideration.

### The Psalms as Torah

In the preceding section we concentrated on the fact that the Psalms are the worship of the pre-exilic Temple. We also proposed at the outset, however, that they have meaning not only in that 'original' context, but also in the way in which they were gathered into a book. And so we take up the point about 'instruction' just made. There are several Psalms which suggest that, as a whole, they came to

be the stuff of devotional meditation. The most important of these is Ps. 1. Part of its importance lies in its very position at the head of the Psalter. The fact that it lacks a heading (a rare thing in Book 1 of the Psalms), together with its subject-matter, has led many people to think that it was intended, by those who gave the Psalter its present form, to act as an introduction to the whole book.

There are two important features of Ps. 1 which invite this judgement. The first is simply that it states in a programmatic way some of the themes which are to recur throughout the book, namely the blessedness of the righteous and the corresponding wretchedness of the sinner, both underpinned by the searching justice of God. Many of the Psalms, as we shall see, treat these themes out of experiences of confusion, doubt, even agony. There is none of that here, but rather the sure confidence which represents, when all is said and done, the settled convictions of the faithful. The Psalms are to be read as proceeding from faith and producing it in turn.

The second feature which suggests that Ps. 1 stands in an introductory position is its idea of meditation on God's law. The word translated 'law' is Torah. Torah in the Old Testament has two major and distinct connotations. The primary one is the law in the sense that it was given to Israel when God revealed himself to the people through Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exod. 19–24). This has come to be identified with the Pentateuch as a whole (though it may be more closely associated with Deuteronomy in 2 Kings 22:8). The other, secondary meaning of Torah is instruction and meditation based upon the law. Malachi 2 deals with Torah as that instruction which it was the duty of the priests to conduct in Israel. Ps. 119 is the classic example within the Psalter of meditation upon the law as an ideal, and indeed of the meditation itself. Ps. 19:7–14 is another in the same spirit, albeit much shorter. There is some evidence that in the course of time the two understandings of Torah grew together somewhat, so that the deposit of instruction and meditation upon the Torah in Israel came itself to be thought of as Torah. An extreme conclusion of this tendency is the situation in first-century Judaism where the traditions of interpretation of the law had come to have almost as much authority in the life of the people as their scriptures had. Another effect of the tendency, however, was that the Old Testament as a whole was thought of, in a loose sense, as Torah (a loose sense because the term continued to denote in a stricter sense the Pentateuch alone). The prefixing of Ps. 1 to the collection, therefore, probably signifies that the book which lies before the reader is itself worthy of meditation. It reveals, therefore, an important new stage in the use of the Psalms by ancient Israel. Their usefulness did not die with the particular situations in which they were first written and for which they were first employed. Rather, they have become as a whole part of God's word to the succeeding generations of Jews.

### The Psalms as a Book

As part of the same process by which the Psalms

came to be thought of as Torah, and therefore fit for the meditation of the faithful, they became a book. We have noticed already that the Psalter has certain outward features of a book. It is divided into five sections (also known as 'books'). So too does the fact that there are certain obvious groupings of Psalms according to subject-matter, or other shared characteristics. There is, for example, a preponderance of Psalms ascribed to David in Books 1 and 2. Ps. 72, indeed, the last in Book 2, actually tells us that the prayers of David are ended, v. 20 (even though some more appear in Book 5, namely Pss. 138–145; see below). There is also a group of Asaph Psalms at 73–83, and of Korah at 84, 85, 87, 88. The connexions in these cases are based on authorship. In the group 93, 96–99, however, the uniting characteristic is thematic, namely a celebration of the kingship of God. The same is true of the Hallelujah Psalms, 146–150. A final group is 120–134 which have in common the heading: A Song of Ascents. The term is usually taken to refer to pilgrimage, the ascending in question being up and into the Temple. This is slightly curious as only one of the Psalms in the group seems clearly to be a pilgrimage Psalm (viz. 122). It may be, however, that at some stage these Psalms were gathered together for use in a particular entrance liturgy. They were in any case a recognisable group when the Psalter was compiled into its present form.

These, then, are the obvious observations to be made about the form of the Book of Psalms. They leave unanswered the more difficult questions: why do the Psalms come in the precise order in which they do? Why do the Davidic Psalms peter out at 72, to reappear later? Are there any more subtle reasons for the grouping of Psalms than those which a merely superficial perusal reveals? It would be out of place to dwell at length on these questions, because in the end the possible answers are inevitably speculative. I shall make just two points. The first is that it is often possible to observe links between Psalms at the level of catchwords or leading ideas. Thus, Book 1 has a number of Psalms, sometimes in close proximity, in which the idea of hiddenness—usually that of God, but with variations—plays an important part (10:1, 11; 13:1; 17:8; 19:12; 22:24; 27:5, 9; 30:7; 31:20). A consecutive reading of Book 1 throws up these different usages of the idea, and promotes reflection of them. Thus, though it is a recurring fact of experience that God seems hidden from the view of the worshipper (10:1, 13:1 etc.), it is also true that he "hides" him in the shadow of his wings' (17:8, cf. 31:20), that he has precisely *not* hidden his face from the one who cries to him (22:24, cf. 27:5) and indeed that there is a kind of hiddenness of the worshipper's own self which requires to be revealed for the purposes of confession and restoration to a right relationship with God (19:12). The effect is not a systematic treatment of the idea of hiddenness, but rather to produce contrasts and ironies, jolting the reader by new angles. Sometimes this happens within a single Psalm (27:5, 9); the recurrence of the same idea from Psalm to Psalm is simply a way of producing irony by repetitions of thoughts in slightly new guises. (Another example of the same phenomenon is the ideas of dumbness and silence in Pss.

38:13; 39:2, 9, 12. Notice the variety of angles on the theme in Ps. 39, from the Psalmist's silence of distress to the prayer that God should not hold *his* peace).

The first point about the structure of the Psalter is at the level of the relationships between the individual Psalms. Our second point relates to the higher level of organisation, as between the several 'Books' which constitute the large whole. Here we draw attention to an observation made in a recent study of the Psalms. It is pointed out there that the 'joins' between the Books appear to have special significance. It is interesting that the last Psalm of the second Book, and therefore of the first and major collection of David Psalms, viz. 72, has as its heading 'A Psalm of Solomon'. This is at first glance odd, since the Psalm is also called a prayer of David at v. 20. However, the heading is comprehensible if we bear in mind the point made earlier about the possible meanings of the headings, and take this one to mean 'for Solomon'. The significance of the placing of this Psalm (with its heading) here seems to be to parallel within the Psalter the passage of David from history, to be replaced by his son. Both in the biblical account of that transition (2 Sam. 7–1 Kings 2) and here in the Psalms, the point is that the promises made to David (of his sonship of God and security on Zion, God's holy mountain: Ps. 2) now hold equally good for Solomon. The purpose, therefore, of David's sudden disappearance from the Psalter at this point is a positive, symbolic one. Though David is no more, the promises to him still stand. Ps. 89 is the next important landmark. Here, the promises to David are once again recalled, and celebrated at length, but give way in the end to the searching question why they are not fulfilled and enjoyed in the community's current experience (vv. 38–51). The perspective here may well be that of the exile or beyond, when Israel no longer has any earthly king. The question was posed sharply then, how could the Davidic promises stand? It is very interesting that the almost despairing note on which Ps. 89 (and Book 3) ends quickly gives way to celebrators of the kingship of God in Pss. 93, 96–99. (We have already identified these as a group). The kingship of David, of course, had never been intended to threaten that of God, but rather to represent it on Earth (Ps. 2 again). The emphasis in these Psalms, however, is that God is king with or without David (or his successor) on Zion. In the Babylonian exile the point would be extended to affirm that kingship even in spite of the loss of the ancestral land. God is king of the whole Earth, Ps. 96:1, 97:1, 100:1. Further Psalms (e.g. 104) take up the interest of God in his whole creation. Finally David himself returns to the picture (Pss. 138–145), perhaps as an affirmation that even the promises made to a human king have not been lost for ever. These are now irrevocably transformed, however, so that such a king is thought of in terms of God's ways with the whole world which he has made.

On the basis of a progression such as this in the way in which the Psalms are structured, we can think of them as a Book which can be read, with a 'message' emerging from the turning pages. However, the point must be strongly qualified. The structure thus described can be no more than a

skeleton. It cannot sum up the meaning of the Psalms. This is in fact far richer. Many Psalms do not fit the picture very well. Indeed, there can be no definitive or 'prescribed' meaning of any individual Psalm, as each of them has the power to speak in many different ways. We have attempted, however, to see one way in which the Psalms might be thought of as a Book, and thus to make sense of the form in which they have been preserved for us.

### The Psalms as Theology

We come to consider the message of the Psalms in more detail. Many of the great biblical themes are here, portrayed with all the power and engagement of the poet's experience. It needs to be said at the outset that the Psalms' capacity to convey their meaning to the faithful of the present day, Christian or otherwise, is remarkable in view of the factors which would seem to lock them into an age long gone. A king who could often act like a priest; priests who performed daily rituals in a Temple; national traditions involving a deliverance centuries earlier from a neighbouring superpower; a perpetual struggle with the nations surrounding their borders over issues, like idolatry, which seem like echoes from a lost world; these were the stock-in-trade of the Psalmists as they contemplated their universe. The writer well remembers, from childhood, the alienness of many of the Psalms as he sang them regularly in church, wondering what 'Israel' had to do with Belfast or London (let alone Jerusalem with Athens). It is important to notice, as we turn to the theology of the Psalms, that we must make certain mental shifts in order to bring their message into our experience. I do not wish to exaggerate the difficulty of doing this, because I think that most of us do much of it very naturally, as the 'success' of the Psalms as a spiritual resource testifies. For that reason we shall proceed without special treatment of the point.

#### 1) God and man

Basic to the message of the Psalms is their pre-occupation with God and man. This might seem obvious. The point is, however, that the Psalms, in common with Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, often look at the relationship in a more fundamental way than other OT books do. They ask basic questions about existence, and are often not immediately satisfied with the confident pronouncements found elsewhere. Take the matter of God's sovereignty. It is never actually doubted that God *is* sovereign in the Psalms. Indeed in any account of their theology one must start precisely here. What we do not find, however, is a systematic exposition of the theme, such as one would (rightly) expect to discover in a textbook of theology. Rather, we have numerous reactions to the fact of God's sovereignty in the world, *as it impinges upon the experience of the Psalmists*. Thus there is both confidence and doubt, joy and agony of soul, and some hesitations and transitions between the two. The underlying mood is one of confidence. But it is often hard won. And it is in the

winning of it that the Psalms become powerful for every new generation of readers.

The confidence of the Psalms is soon found. We have seen it in Ps. 1, in its keynote position, and declaring God's good purposes for the righteous together with his wrath against the wicked. There is no wavering, either here or elsewhere, on these categories. Right is right and wrong is wrong. The Psalmists know what is what in this respect because of God's revelation of himself and his standards at Sinai (Exod. 19–24), and the distinction is everywhere assumed. God is not only known by Israel, but he is known to be good, to desire what is good and to reward the good (cf. Deut. 5). The great exposition of the theme in the Psalms is Ps. 37. This can be seen as an extension of the theology of Ps. 1. But there is more here than the basic affirmations of that Psalm. This one recognises that faith in God's goodness is not a mere theoretical truth. Rather it must be grasped in the midst of life, and life pitches the pious into conflicts. The 'righteous' and 'wicked' do not travel along separate tracks towards their separate destinies. Rather, 'The wicked plots against the righteous' (v. 12). The confidence of the Psalmist, therefore, is that, God will deliver him out of his present trials. This in fact the Psalm affirms throughout. The opening exhortation is that the hearers should not 'fret'. In their endurance they will 'dwell in the land, and enjoy security' (v. 3). Such words may well have been spoken to Israel at times of great national peril, when, as at so many times in her history, her tenancy of the ancient promised land looked seriously threatened. The assumption of the Psalm seems to be, indeed, that things are currently going the way of the 'wicked'. This appears from the encouragements to 'be still' and to 'wait patiently' (v. 7), as well from the 'Yet a little while' of v. 10, which promises a time in the future when 'the wicked will be no more' and 'the meek shall possess the land' (v. 11). The attacks of the wicked need not only be interpreted of national peril, however. There is also a vulnerability of the innocent individual to the deprivations of his ruthless neighbour. For these the Psalm contains encouragement: their 'little' is better than the plenty that is ill-gotten (v. 16); God will provide for their needs as long as they live (vv. 25–28); the innocent will not ultimately fall, nor will the wicked endure, though he seem grand and unassailable (vv. 23f., 35f.).

This, then, is the confidence which is so often on the Psalmists' lips. Many Psalms open, and thus set their tone, with statements of trust (e.g. 11:1, 6:1f., 18:1f., 23:1, 25:1f., 26:1). The vocabulary of trust is rich. It can be a 'fleeing' to God, or a 'leaning' on him, or a 'resting' in him. And the imagery used of God—rock, shield, fortress, shepherd, shelter—is just as varied, drawn from the life of a society in which security was elusive. The Psalmists' confidence was an active dependence that sought God's protection and succour for all of life. Here, indeed, is Old Testament *faith*, for which the Psalms are our greatest resource as we come to an understanding of it. For the OT writers, faith is no mere assent to a series of propositions (though it is that too), but it is a courageous facing of life in the knowledge that God is

by one's side, and that his intentions for the faithful are entirely good.

There is, however, another side to the Psalmists' experience. It is said that doubt is always part of healthy, growing faith. The Psalms certainly suggest that this is the case. Doubt for the Psalmists, however, is perhaps not what we in the C20th would expect it to be. There is never a questioning of the *existence* of God in the OT. Even the fool who says in his heart 'There is no God' (Ps. 14:1, 53:1) almost certainly means that God does not *act*. (This is also the tone of the sceptical utterances to which Ecclesiastes gives some rein). While for modern people it may be the question of God's existence which causes doubt in religious faith (because of the modern European philosophical tradition), for the Psalmist it was the question of his *goodness*. This follows from the fact that it is his goodness which is the substance of their faith, as we have seen. Doubt, then, for the Psalmist, is expressed in the question, What if, after all, God is not *good*, and indeed, good to me, now?

This frame of mind is evident whenever the Psalmists speak of God as 'hidden'. Ps. 10:1: 'Why dost thou stand afar off. O Lord? / Why dost thou hide thyself in times of trouble?' (Cf. 13:1, 22:1f., 88, 89:46). Ps. 10 goes on to paint a picture which is in direct opposition to that which we saw in Ps. 37. Here, the wicked prosper; they persecute the poor and innocent, and there is no retribution. The circumstances, in fact, are rather similar to those which underlie Ps. 37. Here, however, the innocent person who has suffered at the hands of the ruthless looks at his situation and thinks: 'God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it'. Despair comes when the vindication of the righteous, so central to the psalmists' faith, does not. The prosperity of the wicked is the greatest stumbling-block to OT faith. Ps. 73 is another great treatment of the theme, in which the Psalmist confesses how he had 'almost slipped' (v. 2), because he had deduced from the success and impunity of the ruthless that God had abandoned the faithful. Ps. 73 stands, in the end, very close to Ps. 37. But it gives far freer rein to the kinds of doubts to which even the latter Psalm is a response. Those doubts challenge the basic tenets of the faith. If experience does not bear out the affirmations which God is said to have made about himself in revealing himself to Israel, does it follow that he has not spoken after all? Is God finally unknown? Is there no difference in the end between goodness and wickedness?

These then, are the doubts with which the Psalmists wrestle. It is important to note, however, that it is a wrestling. It is not a lining up of one set of statements or experiences against another set. And it is the wrestling which interests us.

#### *Lamentation*

The wrestling to which we have referred takes place primarily within those Psalms which have been called Psalms of Lament. The name comes from a classification of the Psalms according to types, of which the most important are Hymns and Thanksgivings as well as our Laments. It will be clear that the former

two types are those which express trust in Yahweh in straightforward ways. An example of the Hymn is Ps. 29. The Psalm opens with a call to praise God (vv. 1, 2), evidently delivered in the Temple (v. 9), in the presence of the congregation. The body of the Psalm consists of the act of praise itself, which majors on the character and majesty of God (vv. 3-10). And the Psalm ends with a prayer for the people (v. 11). (Other examples of the Hymn are Pss. 8, 19, 33, 100, 145-150). The Thanksgiving, which is far less frequent and often difficult to disentangle from the Hymn, focusses not so much on the character of God as such, but upon some particular deliverance from danger or evil, whether threatening the community as a whole, or an individual. The best example is Ps. 124. The identification of 'types' of Psalms along these lines is one more way of throwing light on the nature of Israelite faith. The underlying confidence of which we have spoken comes to expression in the two types we have just mentioned.

The Lament, however, is perhaps the most interesting, because it is here that that honest questioning of God which we have already noticed comes to the fore, and finds expression in Psalms which have formal features, as well as theme, in common. An example will illustrate the point. Ps. 13 begins with the question that more than any other single feature typifies this kind of Psalm, 'How long, O Lord?' The Psalmist is suffering in certain circumstances to which he desires to see an end. He uses the language of God's hiddenness (v. 1), and goes on to speak of his own inner pain and sorrow (v. 2), a state of mind brought on by some humiliation in the face of an enemy. The assumption of the Psalm, unspoken here though explicit elsewhere, is that the personal enemy is also 'wicked', (cf. 17:13, in a Psalm of the same type). The Psalmist is therefore aggrieved. There is something deeply wrong about his suffering. His impulse, however, is to take the matter to God, and the inner agony is thus turned into prayer. This is the first characteristic of the Lament. The agony of soul is not simply harboured; rather, it comes to expression in address to God. Were it not so, we should not possess the Psalm!

This brings us to the second important characteristic of the lament, namely that it records (in every case but one!) the turning of the corner in the Psalmist's bleak experience. In Ps. 13 this moment comes in vv. 5, 6. Here we have a complete change of mood. From impatience and pain we have moved to confidence and rejoicing. God no longer seems remote and uncaring; rather the Psalmist is taken up with thoughts of his bounty. What has happened? It has sometimes been thought that the change is brought about by a liturgical device, namely that an oracle of re-assurance has been uttered (though not recorded) between, in this case, vv. 4 and 5. In the preceding Psalm (12) we have an example of what such an oracle might have looked like, when words of God are spoken (v. 5) in response to a lament not unlike that in Ps. 13. However, it is unusual to have an answer from God actually recorded in the Lament Psalms, and unlikely that, as a rule, the change of mood in them is to be explained in this way. This is not to say that God does not answer the Psalmist

when he prays. It is simply to say that the answer scarcely comes as a matter of predictable liturgical form. This would amount to not taking the Psalmist's disturbed state of mind seriously. Clearly, an answer *has* come to the Psalmist. But it has come simply because he has prayed. In bringing his plea before God he has been reminded of the reality of his spiritual situation and experience. He knows again what he has always known; he returns to his own position of equilibrium, which is one of faith and trust. God has spoken, therefore, by reminding him of the great things he has done for him in the past, and the adversity of the present pales into insignificance beside the thought of it.

The Psalm of Lament, therefore, is perhaps the most powerful instruction in prayer in the Old Testament. The change of perspective in Ps. 13 is no isolated example. Again and again the same sort of experience is recorded for our benefit. (Other Laments are Pss. 3, 5, 7, 22, 27, 42–43, 44). Nor should it be thought that the agony of soul that is the stuff of these Psalms is in any way qualified. It is often very deep, and almost certainly covers every kind of human misery. The picture in Ps. 42:3 is intense: 'My tears have been my food day and night . . .'. These are not the sentiments of someone who is just a bit fed up. The answers which the Psalmists receive, furthermore, are neither given nor received glibly. Some Psalms testify to a cycle in the experience, which shows an awareness that in matters of the spirit nothing can be taken for granted. Ps. 42 exhibits this, with its dual refrain. To the question: 'Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?' comes the answer: 'Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God' (v. 5). This is immediately followed, however, by a return to: 'My soul is cast down within me, . . .' (v. 6), only to be answered again by the dual refrain at v. 11 and at 43:5. (Pss. 42 and 43 are usually regarded as a single Psalm). Something similar happens in Ps. 27, where the calm expressed in v. 5 returns to urgent petition in v. 9. Ps. 12, too, ends on a kind of down-beat. Finding encouragement in God, therefore, requires a persistence in prayer, each re-assurance leading, not to complacent idleness, but to more prayer.

The deepest anguish of spirit expressed in the Psalter comes in Ps. 88. This is the one Psalm where the corner is not turned. It is hard to imagine a blacker picture. The Psalmist, possibly in the throes of a terrible illness, is besieged by thoughts of death, and finds no comfort either in God or in human fellowship. The sense of crushing isolation is close to derangement. And the mood is transmitted to the reader, especially if he is expecting the sort of volte-face we have observed in other Laments, when the Psalm tails off with: 'Thou hast caused lover and friend to shun me; my companions are in darkness'.

Can anything be redeemed from this? Two things may be said. First, the Psalm is the ultimate demonstration of the truth that no darkness is too bleak to preclude a turning to God in prayer. For prayer this is; it is throughout addressed to God. God, indeed, is seen as the author of the Psalmist's troubles. This perspective is not uncommon in the OT, indeed, it is

one of the distinctive features of biblical religion. If it seems to suggest that God is cruel or unjust, it should rather be seen under its positive aspect, namely that, just because God is in every situation, it is not beyond him to redeem it. To ascribe the origin of one's injuries to God is to hold on to a hope of deliverance from them—for if they fall *outside* the scope of his power what hope can there be of deliverance? There is, therefore, implicit hope in this Psalm. Why, it may be asked, does it remain only implicit? The question is probably best answered from experience. The fact is that there are moments in life—for some, if thankfully not for all—when the sort of sentiments expressed here are all that can be voiced. In black despair the merest contact with God can be the lifeline to a recovery that still lies in the future. Even in this cold, dark Psalm there are signs that God is known for the goodness which is his (steadfast love, v. 11; thy wonders, v. 12, a reference to his deeds on behalf of Israel in the past). For the moment, however, what is remembered by the mind cannot be felt in the heart. In one sense, therefore, the Psalm stands as a caution against the false idea that there is anything automatic or mechanical about the victories in prayer which are won in the other Psalms of Lament. These come in God's time. Conversely, however, the present Psalm does not stand alone. We know it as having things in common with other Psalms of Lament, and indeed as standing in the context of the Psalter as a whole. And therefore we know that the experience recorded for our instruction here is not presented to us as a final comment on the spiritual life.

For completeness on the Psalms of Lament, it should be said that there is a class of Psalms sometimes referred to as Community Laments. These have in common with the Individual Laments which we have discussed the element of disturbance because of adverse circumstances and the feeling that God is not acting, in this case on behalf of the community. Examples are Pss. 44, 74, 79, 80. They also differ from the Individual Lament in that they do not clearly exhibit the element of re-assurance. They are perhaps better thought of as petitions—an idea which is in any case not far removed from that of Lament.

In sum on the Laments it should be re-emphasised that the tone that dominates them is not in the end scepticism or despair. The reverse is the case. Because they manifest a faith that has been through the fire and come out as strong as ever, they become even more powerful as statements of confidence in God than the more straightforward Hymns and Thanksgivings. It is these above that speak to the reader and worshipper who finds that the reality of faith is hard and characterised by both elation and reverses. In *their* reality they have become enduring.

## Other Themes

### 1. Sin

Of the theological themes which we now come to examine that of sin is taken first because it is a presupposition of so many of the others. Its importance

for us lies in the fact that it is, in the theology of the Psalms, so characteristic of the human frame, and therefore of the relationship between God and human beings. To say this is not to call into question what has already been said about the clear distinction made in the Psalms between the 'righteous' and the 'wicked'. Quite what it means to be righteous, in the Psalmists' terms, we will take up below. Suffice it to say at this stage that it does not mean 'sinlessness'. Even those who enjoy a relationship with God are in some way shaped by sin. This is what is meant by Ps. 51:5, where the Psalmist laments that he was 'brought forth in iniquity'. The comment here is not upon the act of procreation in itself (despite centuries of the church's teaching to this effect, inducing guilt feelings where they were in no way due), but on the fact that there is in human beings a disposition to sin which expresses itself from the earliest days of life. Theologians have sought to capture this variously in doctrinal formulations. (Think of the Calvinistic 'Original Sin' or the Jewish 'Evil Inclination'. Others have softened the disposition to sin into a matter of solidarity rather than inheritance. We need only observe here, however, the Psalmist's awareness that his sin has always been with him).

Ps. 51 draws our attention to one more preliminary, namely that all sin is against God, v. 4. To say this does not mean that the effects of sin were not felt by other people. On the contrary, the Psalms are full of the knowledge that one man's wrong act is his neighbour's oppression. However, it is important to understand that sin for the Psalmists does not *merely* consist in its observable effects on other people. The modern excuse 'It doesn't do anyone any harm' would not wash with the author of Ps. 51. Sin has an absolute character. Wrong is wrong because it is called wrong by God.

The Psalms do not only give us basic theological data about sin. They also picture its hold on the human heart. Ps. 36 illustrates this well, with its portrayal of the progress of sin in the life of the sinner. The beginning is a whisper '... deep in (the) heart'. There is no fear of God there, and so the whisper is heard (v. 1). Next the sinner is found persuading himself that his sin will have no adverse consequences for him (v. 2). He has taken up the initiative himself. And it is important to notice that he comforts himself in the course on which he has embarked by means of false belief, namely that God can neither know nor act. Immoral action and wrong belief about God are inseparable bedfellows. In v. 3 the sinning has become habitual; his whole conversation is now dominated by it. To choose what is good and right is no longer a live option. Finally v. 4 finds him plotting evil even in his idlest moments, caught now in a vice which grips his whole life. The picture is an immensely persuasive one of the insidious power of sin to bring its victim ever more under its sway. Because sin is like this, there can be no such thing as the trifling peccadillo. One thing does indeed lead to another in the life that does not listen to God.

## 2. *Confession and Forgiveness*

If sin is a powerful theme so too are those of confession and forgiveness. Ps. 51., already noticed for its statements about sin itself, is really devoted to these. There the act of confession (and implicit penitence) is both preceded and followed by a prayer for cleansing (vv. 1f., 6f). Thus the Psalmist prays not only for forgiveness, but that his thoughts might henceforth be purified. He knows that he needs God's help in this, simply because he knows himself. Finally there is total restoration, for the sinner sees as the end point of the cleansing process his entering again into the privileged position of teacher to other sinners (v. 13). The Psalm of confession thus becomes a tribute to the mercy of God.

Ps. 32 is also worth pausing over, for it depicts far more graphically than Ps. 51, the inner release that confession brings. Here is a man suffering hideously under the heavy hand of God, as he sees it (vv. 3f.). Health, both physical and mental, is pouring away. And the cause is sin that has not been confessed to God. The remedy is at once simple and complete. He confesses (v. 5), and the 'guilt', which incidentally embraces in Hebrew thought the torment which it brings in its wake, is removed. The Psalmist has a new perspective. When he urges others not to be like 'a horse or a mule' (v. 9), he is no doubt remembering his own former stubbornness. Once again the Psalm of confession testifies most strongly to the goodness (or 'steadfast love') of God (v. 10). Only hard-headed persistence in sin can deprive a man of its benefits.

## 3. *Innocence and Righteousness*

We have seen that the Psalms often depict the sinfulness of people, and that the way to enjoy the fellowship of God is via the path of penitence. There are nevertheless a number of Psalms in which a kind of innocence is required of the believer, and sometimes actually claimed by him. Chief among those which demand a 'pure heart' are Pss. 15 and 24. Ps. 24:3 asks who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? The question is echoed by 15:1. Both Psalms have been called 'Entrance Liturgies'. That is, they may well have been used on occasions of approach to the Temple, and intended to establish the basis upon which the worshippers were considered fit to enter and participate. While neither can be thought an exhaustive description of the righteous life, the standards are set high, perhaps in reality unattainably so. If these requirements seem intimidating, we need to be reminded that the Psalmists do not consider even themselves sinless. When we have seen this we can observe more freely what is the special function of these liturgies. Their aim is to remind those who would worship in the Temple of the holy character of God. Worship in his house is not to be lightly undertaken. The worshipper should examine himself as to his sincerity and real intention to live a life that accords with God's standards.

More difficult perhaps are those Psalms in which the Psalmist actually declares his innocence. Examples are Pss. 7, 17 and 26. The claims made in the last of these, for example, can seem extravagant, especially

to those who have been schooled to be wary of all confidence in one's own righteousness. Again, however, this is not a claim to be without sin. It is probably best seen as a declaration of faithfulness and sincerity. Indeed it may be helpful to see it as a response to the demands made in Pss. 15 and 24, parallel therefore to the kinds of vows made at modern baptismal or covenant-renewal services. (Cf. 'Do you turn from sin?' Ans. 'I turn from sin'—words from a Church of England baptismal service). 7 and 17, on the other hand, may be declarations of innocence in the face of particular accusations of guilt.

It is natural to follow these thoughts about the nature of innocence in the Psalms with some consideration of righteousness. Whereas innocence means freedom from sin and guilt, righteousness means more specifically a meeting of the requirements of God. At issue is one's standing with God, and the basis of it. The Psalmists are not in doubt that there is a class of people who can be called 'the righteous'. Recall the confident distinction made in Ps. 1, where the fates awaiting righteous and wicked are so starkly contrasted (v. 6). (Other Psalms where the idea is prominent are 34 & 37; the list could be far longer). However, when we ask, What is righteousness? we are struck by one very important consideration, namely that it is first and foremost a characteristic of God. 'Gracious is the LORD, and *righteous*', Ps. 116:5. The word in Hebrew is *saddiq*. When, therefore, a man is said to be *saddiq*, he is said to have a characteristic of God himself. The point is well illustrated by Ps. 7, where v. 9 refers to 'the righteous', and these stand in a corresponding relationship to God, who is described in the same way in v. 11. There are similar correspondences in relation to other characteristics of God. Faithfulness ('*emunah*') is first God's, then man's. Even that most frequently invoked attribute of God, his 'steadfast love' (*hesed*), is mirrored in man. The *hasid* (cf. the Jewish sect called the *hasidim*) is one who shows that loyalty to God which God himself habitually shows to men. There is therefore a whole cluster of ideas which show that the Psalms' picture of the moral life is essentially an imitation of God, a re-forming in man, it could be said, of the 'image' of God (Gen. 1:26) marred, if not lost, in the first great disobedience (Gen. 3).

Granted, then, that righteousness is first an attribute of God, how does man go about getting it? The question brings the next surprise, for a few important texts show us that it is *given* by God. The clearest example of this is in Ps. 143:1f. Here the Psalmist implores God to listen to his prayers on the grounds of God's faithfulness *and* righteousness. The important thing is that these two ideas are put in tandem. God's righteousness is part of his movement towards the suppliant in faithful, saving love. The second verse is equally telling. Why does the Psalmist appeal to God's righteousness? Because 'no man living is righteous before thee'. It is because he is not righteous himself that the Psalmist appeals to the righteousness of God. The point can be backed up by just two more references. 36:6 also put God's righteousness in parallel with his disposition to save. And while 32:11 calls on the righteous to 'be glad in

the LORD', v. 2 of the same Psalm has shown by what token they may be called so, namely because God has 'imputed no iniquity' to them. The language is very close to that of much Christian formulation of the basis of human salvation. In particular righteousness as saving stands close to Paul's understanding of Christ as a manifestation of the righteousness of God (Rom. 3:21).

#### 4. Judgement

If judgement is a taboo idea in the twentieth century it is otherwise in the Psalms. What strikes us first is that the Psalmists actually desire judgement. This is because one very important dimension of it is deliverance of the innocent from the oppressor. In this sense 'judge' comes very close to 'save'. In Ps. 7, for example, the appeal 'Judge me, O LORD, . . .' (v. 8) is quickly followed by the affirmation that God 'saves' the upright in heart (v. 10). English translations sometimes use the word 'vindicate' to try to catch the sense in these cases (e.g. 26:1, RSV). Those who benefit from God's activity in judgement are the innocent, and indeed the poor. (Poverty is sometimes seen as close to innocence in the Psalms. There is a connexion here with Jesus' 'Blessed are you poor', Luke 6:20). Ps. 72 illustrates the point. This Psalm is a kind of charter for the king. The first few verses spell out his primary duty, namely to establish justice, which is the same as 'giving deliverance to the needy and crushing the oppressor', v. 4. Because judgement is deliverance of the innocent it can be greeted or anticipated with great joy, as in Ps. 96, in which the whole creation breaks into exultation '. . . for he comes, he comes to judge the earth', vv. 11–13.

There are, however, two sides to the story. Judgement is always 'in righteousness' (9:8, 67:5). And if it has the character of deliverance, there must be a 'flip-side' in judgement *against* the oppressor. Ps. 82 pictures God's sentence on those who have held authority on earth and abused it. For their own failure to act justly they themselves fall under God's judgement.

The judgement theme is thus bound up with others we have noticed. It assumes God's control over the whole earth; and it pictures his action on behalf of the weak. It also appeals to faith in the same way that Psalms of Lament did. That is, it requires the worshipper to accept that the merely human view of things is imperfect. The world may seem to be in the hands of those who abuse authority, but there is a far greater power hidden behind events, and which will inevitably be made manifest in the end. The judgement theme takes us close to the heart of the theology of the Psalms. There is a huge gulf between things as they seem and things as they really are. What seems like a hopeless situation, or even a hopeless world, is in reality full of hope, because God is sovereign. In this lies the Psalms' perennial modernity.

By the same token, the theme of judgement gives modern readers some of their most acute problems in reading the Old Testament. The prayers for the downfall of the enemies of God's people sometimes seem actually to be vindictive—even to spoil otherwise delightful Psalms! The gentle pathos of the

exiles' desire for Zion turns very sour with the prayer for a slaughter of Babylonian innocents (Ps. 137). In a sense this is not a problem that is capable of solution. If we cannot in conscience take words of this sort upon our own lips then we cannot. It is impossible to decide whether the Psalmist, in uttering them, is mirroring the holy wrath of God, or whether there is something culpable in his thoughts. Something must be said, though, to redress the balance a little. There is first the matter of convention. It was something of a commonplace in the Ancient Near East to depict the downfall of enemies in exaggerated terms. This sort of language found its way in particular into those parts of treaties which spelt out the sanctions for breaking their terms. The Israelites in exile were in a sense suffering under just such terms of a 'treaty' they had with God (cf. Deut. 28:15–68). The prayer of Ps. 137 can be seen, then, as a prayer for the restoration of God's favour to them, and a turning of the treaty-sanctions on their oppressors. The fact that it is couched in conventional language may suggest that it is not actually as vitriolic as appears at first reading.

There is secondly the fact that discomfiture of enemies is the obverse of judgement-as-deliverance. You cannot have the one without the other. It is not a simple surgical procedure, therefore, to amputate these rather unpleasant parts of the Psalms. The theology that is in them is implied by the other parts which we happily accept. The Christian is unlikely to want to copy the words of the Psalmist. Yet he too waits for the judgement of God.

### 5. Future Hope

There are two parts to this topic. The first concerns life after death. The Psalms give little away about a belief in survival beyond the grave. Their hopes and fears are largely played out on earth and in time. Sometimes, indeed, there is the distinct impression that an after-life is actually ruled out. (See the categorical statement in Ps. 6:5). By and large, life and death in the Psalms are qualities. Life is blessing and death its opposite. 'Death', therefore, can invade life, in the form of illness, fear of poverty—everything, that is, that is a denial of what life should be. The 'death' in Ps. 18:4, 5 is the fear of it; deliverance from subjugation—into a 'broad place', v. 36—is life.

However, there are moments when an assurance about a life beyond the present one comes to the Psalmist. The clearest cases are in Pss. 49 and 73. 49:15 stands as a riposte to the pessimistic refrain: 'Man shall not abide in his pomp/He is like the beasts that perish', and as an answer to the statement of v. 7 that 'no man can ransom himself . . .'. There is a dim foreshadowing here of a ransom for sinful humanity of which the Psalmists could not know.

The phrase '. . . he will receive me' was significant in 49:15. It crops up again in 73:24. The phrase itself may hint at a future life, in the light of 49:15. And the whole thrust of Ps. 73 suggests that this is the meaning. Its purpose is to show that God rights wrongs however much the wrongs may seem to have a foothold in the world. Part of the answer that comes to the Psalmist here is that, whereas the wicked walk

in ultimate danger, God's final act towards him—'afterward'—will be to receive him.

The other way in which the Psalms may be regarded as expressing hope is Messianic. This is not in the form, strictly speaking, of prediction. Rather it centres on what is said in the Psalms about the king—which means in the first instance the ruling King of Israel. In David and his successors the promises of God to Israel are concentrated in the Psalms. Ps. 2 pictures a kind of adoption of the king as God's son, his elected regent, ruling on God's own mountain, Zion. The interests of the people, furthermore, are bound up with those of the king. Ps. 20, for example, is a prayer for him, in which those who pray show that they see their destiny attached to his. Ps. 80:17 even applies to the king the term 'son of man', which Jesus would later use of himself. In their royal theology, therefore, the Psalms begin to make clear that God's purposes for his people are somehow being carried forward in a human person. There are signs too that the king of the day could not always match up to the kind of things that are said of the person in question. Ps. 72 celebrates the extent and power of the king's rule in the world. The language, however, is extravagant. He receives homage from the kings of the earth in acknowledgment of a reign which is universal and appears to have no end. This is not just courtly exaggeration. Rather it expresses a confidence that God will indeed rule through such a king. If none of the kings of Israel could fit the bill then someone in the future would. It is in this sense that the Psalms are Messianic. God in his relationship with the human king of Israel showed something of the way in which he desired to relate to his people and indeed to the whole world. But the intention would only be fulfilled in a King, who would also be Son, and indeed Priest (cf. Ps. 110:4), in a way which even the best of the kings of Israel could only imperfectly ape.

### The Psalms as Worship

The Psalms are, in the last analysis, worship. They took their origin, as we saw, in the praise of the Temple of Israel, and echo still wherever God's people meet. Their power is best felt and known in their use. This is not to say that the Psalms are only in place in the church or meeting-house. Experience teaches that they function effectively in private meditation as in ministering to those in special need. Nevertheless it is worth spending a moment on their function as communal praise. Two points may be made.

The first concerns the fact that the Psalms are said and sung by individuals in community. This is part of their effectiveness. Even as they are uttered *by* the community they are declared *to* the community. They serve to remind the people of their situation before God. The very agreement to come together and utter again the things that are believed re-inforces the believing. We have noticed earlier how the Psalms are sometimes in the form of witness by the individual to the assembled congregation (cf. again 22:22, 25). We can also consider how the words of the Psalms, written—for us as for most temple-worshippers—

well in the past, as a result of the experience of someone not even known to us, come to be effective for every new congregation of believers. In our use of the Psalms together we do not insist that every member of the congregation should be able to say beforehand that the sentiments about to be expressed in the Psalms are exactly his or hers at that very moment. Indeed there are such violent emotional lurches in some Psalms that it would be impossible to conspire to 'feel' all the things that are said in the reading of them. That is not how the Psalms work. We are not obliged to try to re-live the 'original' experience. Nevertheless, in a remarkable way, the person who goes in in distress, may yet go out in joy, led along by the train of thought in the Psalm, affirmed by the agreement of the congregation to utter it as a testimony to the God they know.

The second point concerns genuineness. One of the besetting temptations of the ancient Israelites was to believe that religion consisted in maintaining the worship *system*. The Psalms are themselves products,

in a sense, of that system. However, the Psalmists are not willing to become its tools. It is clear from the Psalms that what counts before God is the worship of the heart. For this reason there are certain emphatic rejections of the idea that it is enough to go through the motions. The hardest-hitting are 40:6-8 and 50:7-15. Here the Psalmists are very close to the prophets (cf. Isaiah 1:10-17; Micah 6:6-8). The message in these places is not that all organised religion should be abolished. God's message has come to a *people*, and there will consequently always be some need to make an 'organised' response to him. The Psalms do require, however, a careful self-examination in matters of worship. The worshipper is in an assembly, but not just of the crowd. 'For God alone' says the Psalmist 'my soul waits in silence' (62:1, 5). This above all is the attitude that the Psalms both facilitate and require.

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