

01. The psalms are human documents

Praying the psalms with Jesus

Psalms 51-100



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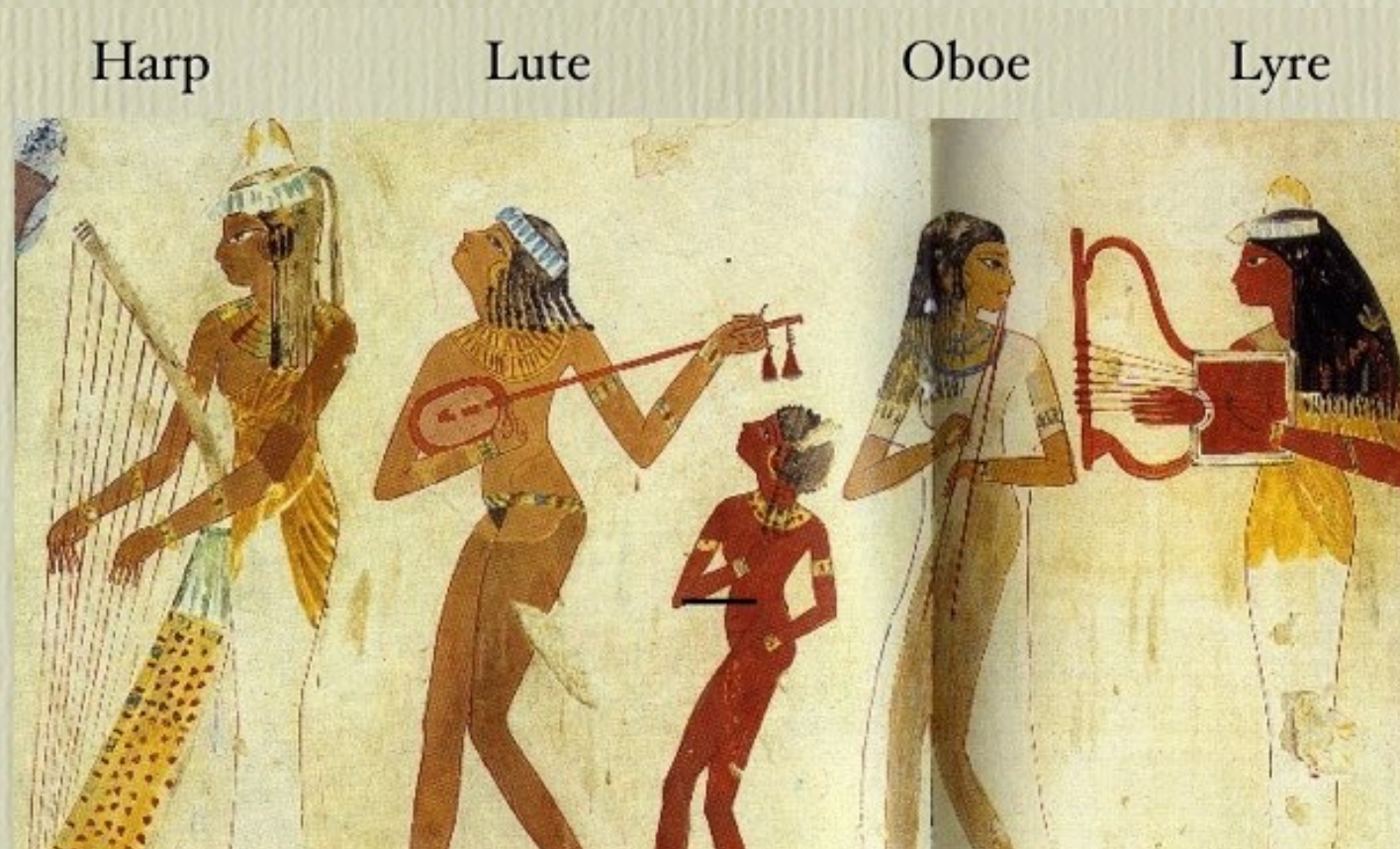
We have the assurance of hundreds of years of believers in Ancient Israel that the psalms are inspired, and Jews and Christians continue to find them inspiring.

We will fail to appreciate their meaning or their value if we don't read them in the spirit in which they were composed, cherished, copied, handed on, and prayed in the temple, the synagogue and the church.

They continue to reveal aspects of God to us, and something of ourselves in relation to God, to the world and to each other.

Pope Pius X in his Apostolic Constitution on the Psalter
(Divino Afflatu, 1911), quotes from Saint Athanasius:

“The Book of the Psalms is like a garden which contains the fruits of all the other books, grows a crop of song and so adds its own special fruit to the rest. It seems to me that for the person who recites them the psalms are like a mirror in which we may see ourselves and the movements of our heart and mind and then give voice to them.”



Pope Pius goes on to quote from the Confessions of Saint Augustine (Book 9.4)

“I wept at the beauty of your hymns and canticles, and was powerfully moved at the sweet sound of your Church’s singing. These sounds flowed into my ears, and the truth streamed into my heart, so that my feeling of devotion overflowed, and the tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them.”

Pope Pius continues: “Who is not fired with love by the faithful portrait of Christ the Redeemer whose voice Saint Augustine heard in all the psalms, singing, sorrowing, rejoicing in hope, sighing in distress?”

In promulgating the new form of the Divine Office (1970),
Pope Paul VI writes:

“Christian prayer is primarily the prayer of the entire community of humankind joined to Christ himself. Each individual has his or her part in this prayer which is common to the one Body, and it thus becomes the voice of the Beloved Spouse of Christ, putting into words the wishes and desires of the whole Christian people and making intercession for the necessities common to all members of the human race. It obtains its unity from the heart of Christ himself.

Pope Paul VI continues:

“Our Redeemer, as he himself had entered into life through his prayer and sacrifice, wished that this should not cease throughout the ages in his Mystical Body, the Church, and so the official Prayer of the Church is at the same time the very prayer which Christ himself, together with his Body, addresses to the Father.

Thus, when the Divine Office is said, our voices re-echo in Christ and his voice in us.”

We can hear Jesus praying because: 'Jesus is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them' (Hebrews 7:25).

Did Jesus not say: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name I shall be there with them' (Matthew 18:20)?



When we think of Jesus praying the psalms we encounter a serious problem. For there are images of God in some of the psalms that fall short of how Jesus knew God to be.

1. In the psalms 'enemies' are identifiable enemies who, because they were Israel's enemies were assumed to be God's enemies. It was assumed that God hates them, and so should we. The psalms invite us to pray that God will destroy them.

Jesus' attitude and behaviour is in stark contrast. He tells us to love our enemies, because God loves them (see Matthew 5:44-48).

2., The psalmist states that sinners are to be avoided.

Jesus teaches that we are not to hate sinners, for that would mean hating ourselves. We are to love sinners with God's love.

3. In the psalms God is frequently portrayed as being angry and vengeful.

In Jesus' well-known parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-31), the father is anything but angry with his wayward boy. He was longing for his return and when the boy did come home, the father welcomes him with love.



The psalmist looked forward to the coming of God's Messiah who would 'break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel' (Psalm 2:9). This contradicts everything we know of God as revealed by Jesus.

It was typical of the writings of the Hebrew Bible to reshape the sacred text to give expression to the people's faith in the presence of the Living God in their present experience. A psalm composed to lament the exile of the inhabitants of Israel in the eighth century BC would be adapted and sung to bemoan the exile of the inhabitants of Judah at the beginning of the sixth century.

It would have been in keeping with this tradition for Jesus' disciples to adapt the psalms in the light of what they came to know of God through Jesus.

The problem is that some time in the second century before Jesus the Hebrew Scriptures, including the psalms, stopped adapting and took on a fixed form. So those who knew Jesus left the text intact, but attempted to bypass the difficulty by interpreting offending texts in an "allegorical" sense. This was done at the expense of the meaning intended by the psalmist.

Why put ourselves through the torture of praying in this way while having to contradict our prayer? Jesus said that he ‘came to seek and save what was lost’ (Luke 19:10). He taught us not to condemn each other in our sin, but to embrace each other in love, and so attract each other out of our sin.

When we find sentiments in the psalms that do not reflect the spirit of Jesus, we need to recall the words of Jesus: ‘It was said to you of old, but I say to you’ (Matthew 5:21-38).

That religious texts, judged to be 'inspired' are still human texts is fundamental to the study of any and every religious text.

God reveals God's Self to everyone. A person becomes aware of this when he or she has an insight into the Mystery, the Presence we call God.

Whoever we are when we give expression to an inspired insight, it is we, not God, who are expressing the insight.

The words will be inspired to the extent that they come from a genuine communion with God and are sensitive to the movement of God's Spirit inspiring them.

What do we mean when we say that words of a psalm are inspired?

1. We are not saying that an *outside God* puts words in a psalmist's mind.
2. We experience God when we experience our own heart in communion with reality, and so with God. A psalmist's words are said to be inspired when they are judged to be in touch with reality and to come from an enlightened heart.
3. The words of a psalm are said to be inspired and are treasured and handed on because they speak to our heart, and are judged to come from the prophet's heart-communion with God.
4. This is not true of all their words, for at times their words reveal the limits of the psalmist's insights and the biases of those who treasured and handed on their words.

We are assured by hundreds of years of praying the psalms that they are indeed inspired by God. At the same time they are still human expressions of religious insight. They must be understood within the context of the situation in which the revelation was received.

The history of religious thought reveals that there are people of every religious persuasion who, rather than take the trouble to examine religious texts in their context, prefer, for reasons of security and power, to take the texts as coming directly from God.

This seems to give the text a divine and unalterable aura. It might appear to offer more security, 'knowing' what God is revealing without having to take the trouble to check our thinking.

It is certainly easier not to have to work to discover what the human author intended to say, and how the text was understood by those to whom it was addressed. Security, ease, and power can be very tempting.

We would do well to listen to Jesus as he tells us: 'the truth will set you free' (John 8:43).

The Gospels and the Letters of the New Testament are responses to Jesus.

Christians continue to treat Jesus' words and actions found in the Gospels with the greatest respect for they offer a privileged window into the way Jesus' disciples came to see him.

However, we believe that it is Jesus himself who reveals God. Christianity is not a 'Religion of the Book'. It is a Religion of a Person, Jesus.

The words of the New Testament point to Jesus. They are written by people who, while in many ways transcending their culture, were still limited human beings with limited insight. God inspires limited human beings, for that is what we are.

Raymond Brown (Theological Studies 1981)

‘The Bible is the literary objectification of a faith that is a response to revelation’(page 9).

He goes on to define Scripture as: ‘divine revelation to which human beings have given expression in words’(page 13).

Schmaus, Dogma I, 188

‘What we encounter in the Sacred Scriptures is first of all the objectivization of the belief in and understanding of Christ which was possessed by the Church or the local congregation.

In other words it is the answer to the revelation of God. In this answer, however, the word of God itself is expressed, for this word has entered into the answer of the Church and is effective in it. On the other hand we must not forget that God’s word, which enters into our human answer of faith, nevertheless always transcends it.’

We believe that Jesus is the perfect human expression of God's Word, God's Self-revelation. Jesus' words and actions, recorded in the Gospels, take us into the heart of Jesus, into his prayer-communion with God. His words and his deeds are a precious gift, for they give expression to his person, and to his intimate communion with God whom he addressed as 'Abba' ('My dear Father'; Mark 14:36).

We are graced to share Jesus' experience, 'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (Galatians 4:6; see Romans 8:15). 'Our Father in heaven' (Matthew 6:9).

Jesus experienced himself as God's 'Son'. 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30).

'All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matthew 11:27). This love gave authority to his teaching and to the healing power to his ministry.

Jesus wanted to share this intimacy, this love, with everyone.

'May they be one, Father, as we are one' (John 17:11). 'May they all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (John 17:21).



The point I wish to establish in this introductory presentation is that if we are to pray the psalms as disciples of Jesus, if we are to pray the psalms with Jesus, we need to check that the image of God presented in a psalm reflects the way Jesus sees God. Only then can it be Christian prayer.

When this is not the case we must listen to Jesus as he says: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you!'



Come Creator Spirit, come