

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The aim of this book is to provide an introductory explanatory commentary on the one hundred and fifty songs contained in the Book of Psalms in the Hebrew Bible. The title ‘Psalms’ is taken from the Greek Version (second century BC) in which the Book is entitled ‘psalmoi’ [ψαλμοι]. The Greek verb *psallein* means to pluck a stringed instrument with the fingers. Later it was used more generally for ‘to make music’ or ‘to sing’. The Greek *psalterion* refers to a harp and *psalmos* to the plucking with the fingers, and later to the song plucked in this way. Paul writes:

Sing psalms (*psalmos*) and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody (*psallein*) to the Lord in your hearts.

– Ephesians 5:19 (see also Colossians 3:16 and 1Corinthians 14:26)

The Hebrew equivalent of ‘psalmos’ is *mizmôr* [מִזְמוֹר], from the verb *zmr*: to sing to the accompaniment of music. Though the Hebrew text describes fifty-seven of the songs as *mizmôr*, the Book itself is given the name *tʰillîm* [תְּהִלִּים], ‘songs of praise’. The Book of Psalms is divided into five sections (reflecting the five books of the Torah), indicated by the solemn liturgical formula of praise which ends each section (see Psalm 41:13; Psalm 72:18-19; Psalm 89:52; Psalm 106:48; Psalm 150).

Some of the psalms are not so much prayers as reflections on God’s action in creation and in the history of the people of Israel, or on the meaning of life, or on the advantages of living in accordance with the covenant. Others celebrate the position of the king and Jerusalem and the temple in the life of the people. Most of the psalms, however, are prayers addressed to God which found their way into, or were composed for, the liturgical prayer of the community of ancient Israel and Judah.

It is this that makes the dating of the psalms difficult. If a hymn was composed to celebrate a military victory of King Ahab, we should expect those who were responsible for the liturgy at the time of King Josiah would adapt the psalm to celebrate the current victory. Likewise a hymn composed to lament the exile of the inhabitants of Israel would be adapted and sung to bemoan the exile of the inhabitants of Judah. It was typical of the writings of the Older Testament to reshape the sacred text to bring out a deeper meaning discovered in the text in the light of historical experience.

Some time after the return from exile in Babylon, the Psalms, along with the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, found a fixed form. So, while the disciples of Jesus carried on the tradition of seeing new meaning in the psalms in the light of their experience of Jesus (see Luke 24:44), they left the text intact, but read it in the light of the one whom they accepted as the Jewish Messiah. It is for this reason that we will find sentiments in the psalms that do not reflect the spirit of Jesus. At times we need to recall the words of Jesus: ‘It was said to you of old, but I say to you’ (Matthew 5:21-38). He was speaking in relation to the interpretation of the Ten Commandments, but his words apply just as importantly to the Psalms.

The psalms are still central to the Daily Prayer of the Christian community (the Divine Office).

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.’

He 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 X 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 wrote:

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. 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 he not say: ‘Where two or three are gathered in my name I shall be there with them’ (Matthew 18:20)?

In praying the psalms in the liturgy we would do well to heed the following advice given by Father Marie-Eugène OCD who writes:

Liturgical prayer, like every other prayer, is to be vivified by interior prayer. If the external movement that it imposes, the art that it cultivates, the sustained attention that it requires, should hinder or even destroy the contemplation that it is meant to serve, the devotion that it should stimulate, or the interior spirit that it wants to express, it would be mere external worship that God could not accept, according to the words of Scripture: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me’ (Isaiah 29:13, quoted by Jesus in Mark 7:6). The beginner must learn to pray with the Church, to enter into the majestic beauty of her ceremonies, to penetrate their symbolism and delight in her liturgical texts. We must above all seek in liturgical prayer the movements of the soul of Christ in the Church, listening to the movements of his Spirit of Love, and so learn in the school of Jesus Christ our Master his daily intimate and silent prayer.

– *I want to see God*, Christian Classics Inc 1986, page 191

Introduction

We have the assurance of hundreds of years of believers in ancient Israel and Judah that the psalms are inspired, and Jews and Christians continue to find them inspiring. We will utterly fail to appreciate their meaning or their value if we fail to read them in the spirit in which they were composed, cherished, copied, handed on, and prayed in the temple, the synagogue and the church.

Of course, as with all inspired words, they express all the limitations of the people and the culture that welcomed God's inspiration and wrote from it. If God is going to inspire someone, God has to inspire a real person to write in a real language. The psalms are not abstract revelations that have no connection with our human limitations. God inspires limited human beings, for there are no unlimited human beings to inspire.

As we read, study and pray the psalms, especially when we do so in the light of Jesus, we will come up against limitations in the understanding of God that is expressed in them. If we pray them as Christians, we will hear Jesus saying: 'You have heard that it was said, but I say to you' (Matthew 5:21-22). However, while recognising the limited understanding expressed in the psalms, Christians, following the example of Jesus himself, have continued to go back to them for inspiration.

Luis Alonso Schökel SJ in his beautiful two volume commentary on the Psalms (Spanish, *Los Salmos*, 1991; Italian, *I Salmi*, Borla 1992) lists some of the sentiments that one finds expressed in the psalms. They cover the whole gamut of human feeling.

affection	disquiet	passivity
affliction	displeasure	peace
ambition	disturbance	pessimism
anger	enthusiasm	piety
anguish	envy	preoccupation
annoyance	excitement	presentiment
antipathy	fear	rancour
aversion	fervour	regret
benevolence	greed	resentment
benignity	hatred	remorse
bitterness	hope	sadness
clemency	hostility	satisfaction
compassion	humiliation	serenity
comfort	illusion	shame
contempt	indifference	simplicity
cynicism	indolence	sincerity
delusion	insensitivity	sorrow
dependence	jealousy	suffering
desire	love	suspicion
desperation	mercy	tenderness
diffidence	nostalgia	waiting
disgust	optimism	yearning

In most of the psalms God is praised, so much so that the title given to the psalms in the Hebrew Bible is *tehillim* [תְּהִלִּים], ‘songs of praise’. The psalms also express longing, wonder, delight, thanksgiving and trust. The most prevalent theme is that of petition. It is not surprising that, as creatures totally dependent upon God, we should look to God for the graces we need. It is not that God needs our prayer to stimulate the giving of grace. Prayer is rather like a flower that opens its petals to the sun and rain. The sun of God’s warmth and care is constant. The nurturing and refreshing rain of God’s love is ever present. However, since God is love, God will not force grace, but awaits our welcome. In prayer we attend to God from within the situation in which we find ourselves. Hence all the different moods that find expression in the psalms.

In our turning to God, we focus our attention and we express our openness to receive whatever grace God is offering us – grace that, if we were not attending, we would fail to welcome.

The rest of this Introduction offers brief articles on key words that recur throughout the psalms. In the psalms themselves a reference to these articles is indicated by an asterisk (*) placed after the word. The Index lists these articles (in bold), as well as key themes treated in the psalms and the main psalms where these themes are treated. My main source for the material in these articles is the multi-volumed *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Editors Botterwech, Ringgren & Fabry. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1974-2004).

Throughout the translation I have avoided using ‘the Lord’ to translate the Hebrew name of God, but have chosen to use the four consonants used in the Hebrew. An explanation is offered in the article YHWH in this Introduction. In transliterating Hebrew consonants I have followed standard practice.

Important words that recur in the psalms

AFFLICTED (see ‘Poor’)

ANGER OF GOD

The psalms often express anger. Frequently it is anger at an injustice that is being suffered. This anger hardly needs explanation. What does need some examination is the frequent reference in the psalms (as generally in the Old Testament) to God being angry. As many as eight different words are used to bring out different nuances, but the most general image is that of ‘breathing fire’. Psalm 2 is a good example. The word for anger in verse five is *’ap* [אָפּ], which also means ‘nostrils’. In the same verse we find *ḥarôn* [חָרוֹן] ‘glowing’ (‘on fire’). *’ap* is used again in verse twelve where we also find the associated verb *’ānap* [אָנַף] ‘to snort with anger’. The Greek Septuagint translates *’ap* in verse five as *orgā* [οργη] and *ḥarôn* as *thumos* [θυμος]; whereas it translates *’ap* in verse twelve as *thumos*, and the verb *’ānap* as *orgizō*.

Sometimes, as in Psalm 2, God’s anger is portrayed as being directed against those who would oppose God’s chosen people, but mostly it is portrayed as being directed against the people of Israel for being unfaithful to the covenant. This is a common theme throughout the Old Testament:

You would not listen to me, says YHWH, and so you have provoked me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm.

– Jeremiah 25:7

It is essential to examine the religious context in which this talk of divine anger occurs. It is true that we can find in the Hebrew Bible a growing sense of personal responsibility, but it is always within the context of an assumption that God controls what happens on earth. If a person dies, they considered that it must be as a result of God’s decision. Earthquakes, storms, famine, destruction, sickness, winning or losing battles, in fact any and every event was a matter of divine decision. It is a logical step from such a view that negative experiences happen because God is punishing, angry at some human infidelity, personal, familial or tribal. Past horrors are used by the prophets to warn that they will be repeated (by God) if the people do not repent. They were especially critical of injustices that hid under the guise of religion.

When Israel was defeated in battle, it was concluded that God had chosen the foreign army to be his instrument in punishing his people:

I am beginning to bring disaster on the city that is called by my name, and how can you possibly avoid punishment? You shall not go unpunished, for I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitants of the earth, says YHWH of hosts.

– Jeremiah 25:29

However, it was also recognised that the foreign armies were not innocent. They should not glory in their victory over God’s chosen people, for God would punish them if they went beyond the mission given them by God.

Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. But this is not what he intends, nor does he have this in mind; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few.

– Isaiah 10:6-7

Rejoice and be glad, O daughter Edom, you that live in the land of Uz; but to you also the cup shall pass; you shall become drunk and strip yourself bare. The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter Zion, is accomplished, he will keep you in exile no longer; but your iniquity, O daughter Edom, he will punish, he will uncover your sins.

– Lamentation 4:21-22

At the same time, God retains a special place in his heart for his chosen people and is always ready to forgive:

Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, YHWH will be a light to me. I must bear the indignation of YHWH, because I have sinned against him, until he takes my side and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light; I shall see his vindication. Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, ‘Where is YHWH your God?’ My eyes will see her downfall; now she will be trodden down like the mire of the streets. ... The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might ... Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

– Micah 7:8-10, 16, 18-19

The appropriate human response to divine anger is fear (see the article ‘Fear of YHWH’). The people of the covenant should fear and not sin, for sin will not go unpunished. Questions were asked:

O God, shall one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation?

– Numbers 16:22

God’s anger was recognised as problematic, but the reality was obvious to all.

Isaiah portrays God as reluctant to express anger:

I do not want to be forever accusing, nor always angry, or the spirit would fail under my onslaught, the souls that I myself have made.

– Isaiah 57:16

While speaking of God’s anger, Jeremiah recognises that punishment is essentially something which we bring upon ourselves:

Your own wickedness is punishing you, your own apostasies are rebuking you. Consider carefully how evil and bitter it is for you to abandon YHWH.

– Jeremiah 2:19

Introduction

The insight that God loves the world and does not control the world brings about a radical shift in our thinking about God. God is the creator and so the ultimate cause of everything that is. God, however, has chosen to give us freedom (limited but real), and to respect it. This means accepting the consequences of our use of freedom, for good and ill. Knowing this, we look for scientific explanations of natural disasters and we look for human action or inaction to explain many of the awful things that occur. When we think of God we are not looking for the proximate cause of these negative experiences. We no longer think of God as the one who decides the victor in war, and when cities are devastated, when large populations die of hunger, when natural disasters wreak havoc, we no longer think that God is arranging this to punish sinners. Jesus revealed God as love. If we wish to see where God is active in the often random accidents as well as in the brutal violence that afflict our world, we look for the presence of love in the midst of human tragedy. Where we find love, there we find God.

In the Hebrew Scriptures God is a God of love, and it is divine compassion and mercy that transcends everything else: YHWH is essentially one who is 'slow to anger' (Exodus 34:6). This expression belongs to Israel's 'creed' (see Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). In Psalm 89 we read: 'I will punish their sins ... but I will never withdraw my love from them or fail in my faithfulness' (Psalm 89:93).

However, in ancient Israel, as in all cultures of the ancient world, God was thought of as controlling everything that happens, with the consequence that disasters were interpreted as divine punishment. Thanks to Jesus we have come to see that God is love – only love. Jesus is clear in his judgment of what sin is and what its effects are. He is clear, too, in his warnings of the effects of our refusal of the grace of repentance. This shows in Jesus' just anger and passionate concern to break through the apathy and hypocrisy that surrounded him. But he insists that God's initiative, God's will, is always loving. It is not God whom we must fear. Rather, we must fear our capacity to ruin our lives and the lives of others by hardening our hearts against grace (see Luke 12:4-7). Everything that God does expresses God's love, and divine love is offered to all unconditionally.

When we read of divine anger, we are not to read it in the context of divine punishment. Rather we are to think of what we do to ourselves and to others when we reject God's grace. We are to think of God as opposing evil, as determined to bring about justice. If we are going to speak of punishment as 'divine' we are highlighting the relationship of the 'punishment' to God. We are not saying that God punishes. Rather we are acknowledging two important truths: that God is the author of the order which sin violates; and that God uses even the evil effects brought about by sin to draw us to repentance.

But God does this only through love. God is constantly inspiring us to act against injustice. If we fail to listen, the good that God wishes to be done through us remains undone, for God respects our freedom. Others will have to respond. The language of divine anger reminds us that what we do really matters and that to receive divine pardon a change in human behaviour is required.

If pity is shown to the wicked without their learning what saving justice is, they will continue to act wrongly in the land and they will not see the majesty of YHWH.

– Isaiah 26:10

To speak of divine anger is to speak of God's passionate concern for justice. God's initiative is always to put things right. It is to speak of the terrible things that we bring upon ourselves and others when we reject God's inspiration and act against the truth. This terrible situation (this 'anger') is 'of God' in the sense that it is related to God and is the result of our failure to welcome God's grace and live in God's love. Talk of divine anger reminds us that God hates sin, and that we should hate sin as that which cuts us off from God, the source of life and of all that is good.

Through sin, as Jesus reminds us in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), we leave our Father's home and find ourselves feeding the pigs. None of this is God's choice. The Father awaits us with tremendous love. The God of Jesus utterly respects human freedom even when we choose to abuse it. God, however, is not a victim of our wrong choices, nor is God a bystander. God constantly pours into our hearts the love that will bring about reconciliation, justice and peace, provided we welcome God's grace and have the courage to follow God's inspiration.

ANOINTED

David was chosen by God to be king and anointed by the prophet Samuel (1Samuel 16:12-13). The title 'the anointed one' ['Messiah', Hebrew *māšîaḥ*, מָשִׁיחַ] was attached to David's descendants on the throne of Judah, and functioned as a royal claim to YHWH's election and covenant (see Psalms 2, 18, 20, 89, 132). After the exile, in the absence of a king, we find it used of the High Priest (see Leviticus 4:3; Zechariah 4:14), and even of all priests (see Exodus 40:15). It is used of the prophets (see Sirach 48:8), and exceptionally of the patriarchs (see Psalm 105:15). In the long post-exilic period, when the people of Judah were under the power of Persia, Greece and Rome, there arose a hope that one day God would restore the kingdom of Israel through a Messiah. In the Book of Daniel we read: 'From the time that the word went out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the time of an anointed prince' (Daniel 9:25). The Greek Septuagint Version translated Messiah by *Christos* [Greek *χριστος*], whence the English 'Christ'.

ASAPH

Asaph is recorded as being one of the leading Levites whom David 'put in charge of the service of song in the house of the Lord, after the ark came to rest there' (1Chronicles 6:31; see 6:39). 'On that day David first appointed the singing of praises to YHWH by Asaph and his kindred' (1Chronicles 16:7. Note the psalm that follows). Some speculate that before carrying out their ministry in the temple of Jerusalem, this guild of singers and musicians worked at the sanctuary of Bethel, in the northern kingdom, some 18kms to the north of Jerusalem.

AWE (see 'Fear')

Introduction

BEING ('Soul')

The Hebrew *nepeš* [נֶפֶשׁ] refers to a person's throat (see Psalm 105:18). It is through the throat that we receive the breath we need for life, and the food and drink for which we hunger and thirst. It is frequently used as the equivalent of our 'life force' or 'vital energy', especially as desiring what we need to be alive. *nepeš* occurs 144 times in the psalms, often referring to our longing for God, the only one who can breathe into us our life force:

With all my longing (*nepeš*) I thirst for God, the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?

– Psalm 42:2 (see Psalm 63:1)

On the day I called, you answered me, you increased the strength of my soul (*nepeš*).

– Psalm 138:3

Return, O my soul (*nepeš*), to your rest, for YHWH has dealt bountifully with you.

– Psalm 116:7

Whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from YHWH; but those sin who violate my soul (*nepeš*); all who hate me love death.

– Proverbs 8:35-36

The translation 'soul' is faulty if we understand soul as distinct from body, for our vital self is not something we have that is distinct from our physical body. Hebrew *nepeš* refers to who I am rather than to anything I have. It is the person as alive, energetic, enjoying life ('*élan vital*') and yearning for its fullness. When Psalm 63:1 and 84:2 refer to our *bašar* [בָּשָׂר] and our *nepeš*, they are not speaking of separate parts of us that make up the whole. *bašar* is my person as fragile, broken, vulnerable, corruptible, inclined to sin. *nepeš* is my person as receiving vital energy and life force from YHWH: 'YHWH God formed humankind from the dust of the ground, and breathed into the human nostrils the breath of life; and so humankind became a living being [*nepeš*]' (Genesis 2:7).

BLESS (compare 'Happy')

When YHWH is the subject of the Hebrew *brk* [בָּרַךְ] reference is being made to the ways in which God blesses (graciously favours) his creatures, especially his chosen people. When YHWH is the object of *brk* we are praising God for a blessing already received or requested. When one person 'blesses' another it is an expression of a prayer that YHWH will bless that person, especially one who shares in God's covenant with his chosen people. We find 'bless' over seventy times in the psalms.

O help your people, and bless your heritage; be their shepherd, and sustain them forever.

– Psalm 28:9

YHWH gives might to his people. YHWH blesses his people with peace.

– Psalm 29:11

God blesses us. Let all the ends of the earth revere him.

– Psalm 67:7

May YHWH bless you from Zion. May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.

– Psalm 128:5

The opposite to ‘bless’ is ‘curse’. To curse someone is to want them cut them off from communion, and so from God’s blessing. For the distinction between ‘blessed’ and ‘happy’ see the article ‘happy’.

CHRIST (see ‘Anointed’)

COMPASSION (compare ‘Grace’ and ‘Kindness’)

The Hebrew for ‘womb’ is *reḥem* [רֶחֶם]. We find it in Psalm 22:10, 58:3 and 110:3. It is likely that there is a connection with the verb *rḥm*, which occurs in four psalms. In Psalm 102:13, 103:13 and 116:5 it speaks of the tender compassion that YHWH has for his people. Psalm 18:1 is unique in that it is used for the love which the psalmist has for God. The noun *raḥ^amîm* [רַחֲמִים] occurs in 11 psalms and speaks of God’s tender compassion, as does the adjectival form *raḥûm* [רַחוּם] which occurs in 6 psalms. Being ‘tenderly compassionate’ is one of the qualities attributed to God in the creedal formula that recurs throughout the Bible. See the texts in the article ‘Grace’.

COVENANT

The Hebrew *b^crit* [בְּרִית] refers to a demand placed by a person in power upon another (see Psalm 78:10; 105:8; 111:9). Sometimes it also includes a commitment and can be accompanied by an oath. The one on whom the demand is being imposed is placed under an obligation. Sometimes it involves a covenant in which two parties commit themselves to a treaty that includes mutual obligations. Sometimes, for example, a king will undertake to offer protection to vassal kings, who swear allegiance to the overlord and undertake to support him with troops, taxes, provisions etc. The people of Israel use this word to describe the commitment of love offered them by YHWH and the obligation they have undertaken to do God’s will. Exodus 24 describes the ritual associated with the ‘covenant’ made with Moses and the people.

DELIVERANCE (see ‘Saving help’)

FACE OF GOD

To speak of God’s face shining upon us is to speak of God favouring us with love.

YHWH bless you and keep you; YHWH make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; YHWH lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

– Numbers 6:24-26

O God be gracious to us and bless us and show the radiance of your face.

– Psalm 67:1

Show to your servant your radiant face; in your kindness save me

– Psalm 31:16

Not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory. It was your right hand, and your arm, and the light of your countenance, for you delighted in them.

– Psalm 44:3

Happy are the people who acclasp you, YHWH. They will walk in the light of your countenance.

– Psalm 89:15

Introduction

FEAR OF YHWH

The most common word for ‘fear’ in the psalms (it occurs 83 times) derives from the Hebrew verb *yāra*’ [יָרָא]. It is important to read ‘fear of YHWH’ in the context of the Hebrew understanding of God, and especially of God’s ‘anger’(see the article ‘Anger of God’). If we oppose God’s will we must fear the consequences. Those who act unjustly, those who oppress the poor, cannot expect to avoid suffering the consequences of such behaviour. As the Hebrew understanding of God was refined, so was their understanding of fear in relation to YHWH. The Book of Proverbs is enlightening when it explains that ‘the fear of YHWH is hatred of evil’(Proverbs 8:13), and equates it with knowing YHWH: ‘The fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom; knowledge of the Holy One is insight’(Proverbs 9:10). ‘The fear of YHWH is a fountain of life’(Proverbs 14:27). Isaiah speaks of the fear of YHWH as one of the gifts of the Spirit (Isaiah 11:3) and he writes: ‘The fear of YHWH is Zion’s treasure’(Isaiah 33:6). In a person who is striving to know and do God’s will it is the opposite of pride and self-reliance.

It is the experience of knowing the Holy One: knowing that God is transcendent and awesome. In this sense it is better translated ‘fear from (given as a gift by) YHWH’. The Greek Septuagint usually translates the Hebrew ‘Fear of YHWH’ literally, but in three texts (Proverbs 1:7; Isaiah 11:2 and Isaiah 33:6) it uses *eusebeia* [εὐσεβεία], the Greek word for ‘religion’, the equivalent of the Roman ‘*pietas*’. Basic to religion is the realisation that God is God and we are creatures, totally dependent upon God. All we have is gift, and if we reject the gift we reject life. This should lead to fear – not fear of God, who is love, but a profound sense of awe accompanied by fear of our capacity to misuse our freedom and lose the communion with God in which life ultimately consists.

Our understanding of ‘fear of YHWH’ has been further transformed by what Jesus revealed about God. The expression occurs only twice in the New Testament (2Corinthians 5:11 and Acts 9:31). Over and above a sense of awe in God’s presence and a profound humility before God, it includes a hatred of sin and a real fear of one’s capacity to turn from grace and lose one’s way.

FEELINGS (see ‘Heart-Kidneys’)

FLESH

When the Hebrew Bible speaks of human beings as ‘flesh’[Hebrew *bāśār*, בָּשָׂר], the focus is on our absolute dependence upon God, our belonging to the earth, our inherent weakness, and our inclination towards sin and death.

All flesh is grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

– Isaiah 40:6

God, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them. He remembered that they were but flesh, a breath of air that passes and does not come again.

– Psalm 78:38-39

O God, you are my God, for you I arise at dawn. My whole being thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

– Psalm 63:1

With all that I am I long, indeed I faint for the courts of YHWH; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

– Psalm 84:2

FURY (see ‘Anger’)

GLORY

The Hebrew *kābōd* [כְּבוֹד] derives from *kbd* meaning ‘heavy’, and so ‘important’, ‘weighty’, ‘worthy of respect’. It is associated with whatever the culture thought of as demanding respect, and so with power, strength and wealth. The Greek Septuagint normally translates it by *doxa* [δοξα]. We find it used 51 times in the psalms. YHWH reveals his glory in the temple (Psalm 63:1-3; in the splendour of creation and in powerful action in the world. Isaiah (6:3) describes his vision in the temple and the cry of the seraphim: ‘Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’. The prophet Habakkuk, who lived in the years just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, encouraged his contemporaries to continue to trust in YHWH: ‘The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of YHWH, as the waters cover the sea’ (Habakkuk 2:14). The appropriate response to the revelation of God’s glory is awe and praise.

Let them give glory to YHWH, and declare his praise in the coastlands.

– Isaiah 42:12

I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory.

– Isaiah 66:18

When we read the word ‘glory’ in the light of Jesus, we must reconsider what it is that earns respect. Furthermore, when we speak of God as all-powerful we must remember that God’s power is the power of love. We give glory to God by recognising God’s love in action in our world, and by committing ourselves to welcome it and to be instruments of God’s love to others.

GLOSS

A gloss is a short explanation written in the margin by a scribe. Sometimes, by mistake, a later scribe included it in the text itself. The included comment is called a ‘gloss’.

GRACE (compare ‘Compassion’ and ‘Kindness’)

The verb *hānan* [חָנַן] means to show favour [Hebrew *hēn*, חֵן], to be gracious. It implies that the person showing favour (frequently God) is pleased with the person to whom the favour is shown. The one showing favour is ‘gracious’ [Hebrew *hannûn*, חַנּוּן]. When used of God it refers to the many particular ways in which God graces his people, or an individual. Psalm 4:1 is the first of many times in the psalms where we hear a plea to God to show favour. ‘Gracious’ is one of the qualities attributed to God in the creedal formula that recurs throughout the Bible:

YHWH, YHWH, a God tenderly compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness and faithfulness.

– Exodus 34:6

Return to YHWH, your God, for he is gracious and tenderly compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness.

– Joel 2:13

I knew that you are a gracious God and tenderly compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness.

– Jonah 4:2

Introduction

You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and tenderly compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.

Nehemiah 9:17

YHWH your God is gracious and tenderly compassionate, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him.

– 2Chronicles 30:9

We find this creedal formula a number of times in the psalms:

You, O Lord, are a God tenderly compassionate (rahûm) and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in kindness and faithfulness.

– Psalm 86:15

YHWH is tenderly compassionate (rahûm) and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in kindness.

– Psalm 103:8

YHWH is gracious and tenderly compassionate (rahûm).

– Psalm 111:4

Gracious is YHWH, and righteous; our God has tender compassion (rhm).

– Psalm 116:5

YHWH is gracious and tenderly compassionate (rahûm), slow to anger and abounding in kindness.

– Psalm 145:8

GUILT (compare ‘Sin’ and ‘Transgression’)

The Hebrew ‘āwōn [אָוֹן] is found 31 times in the psalms. It denotes the burden of guilt that weighs down the sinner and includes the consequences of transgression or sin. The weight can affect the victim of the sin and the community. The psalmist pleads for YHWH to remove this burden, and cultic acts were performed to support the plea. Appeal was made to God’s kindness (see ‘Kindness’) and to the covenant (see ‘Covenant’).

‘O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come.

When guilty deeds overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions.

Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts.

We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple’ (Psalm 65:2-4).

HAPPY (compare ‘Bless’)

‘Happy’ (Hebrew ‘ašrē, אֲשֶׁרִי) is found in liturgical texts from the period of the second temple. It occurs 26 times in the psalms. It is to be distinguished from the more ancient ‘blessed’ (Hebrew barûk, בָּרֹךְ) in that the focus of blessed (see article) is on what God does, whereas the focus of ‘happy’ is on what we are to do (or are doing) to receive God’s blessing by being faithful to the covenant (see the beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-11). To declare someone ‘happy’ is to congratulate them for behaving with true wisdom, especially in their relationship with God.

A wise person will have praise heaped upon him, and all who see him will call him happy.

– Sirach 37:24

HEART - KIDNEYS

Feelings are associated with both the heart [Hebrews *lēb*, לֵב] and the kidneys [Hebrew *kēlāyôt*, כְּלָיֹת]. The heart is associated with emotions, thoughts, intentions that are considered more rational. It is sometimes better translated by the English ‘mind’. The kidneys are associated with more mysterious feelings.

‘When my heart was embittered,
When my feelings [kidneys] were disturbed ...’ (Psalm 73:21).
‘Prove me, YHWH, and try me; purify my kidneys and my heart.’

– Psalm 26:2

HELP (see ‘Saving Help’)

HONEST (see ‘Upright’)

HOPE

In English ‘hope’ is closely associated with ‘expectation’ and ‘desire’. In the psalms it is better to think in terms of trust, such that the future can be left confidently in God’s hands. The following three Hebrew words are sometimes translated ‘hope’.

1. *qwh* [קָוָה] (which appears 14 times in the psalms), and the associated noun *tiqwâ* [תִּקְוָה] (which occurs 3 times). The Septuagint picks up the meaning accurately, translating it by *menein* (to await).

2. *bāṭaḥ* [בָּטַח] (which appears 48 times in the psalms). Though the Septuagint frequently translates this by *elpizein*, it means ‘trust’ rather than ‘hope’. There is no need to be concerned when our trust is in YHWH.

3. *yāḥal* [יָחַל] (which occurs 19 times in the psalms). For the most part the Septuagint varies between *hupomonein* and *elpizein*. Like *qwh*, it focuses primarily on trusting ourselves to YHWH, secure in his love.

HOSTS

The Hebrew *šēḇā’ōṭ* [שְׁבָאוֹת] is a plural. The singular *šāḇā’* [שָׁבָא] refers to military service – though four times it refers to ‘work in the tent of meeting’ (Numbers 4:23). It refers to an army arrayed for battle (Judges 4:2), to the heavenly army of YHWH the king: ‘I saw YHWH sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to his right and to his left’ (1 Kings 22:19), and to the heavenly bodies of fire (stars etc) which they thought were living beings: ‘Look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven’ (Deuteronomy 4:19). The plural *šēḇā’ōṭ* as attached to YHWH first appears in 1 Samuel 1:3 which speaks of the father of Samuel who ‘used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to YHWH of hosts at Shiloh’. At that time, the ark of the covenant, considered to be YHWH’s throne, was housed in the sanctuary of Shiloh. The title affirms the majestic splendour of YHWH, as the king of all the armies of heaven and earth. God could use foreign armies to punish an unrepentant Israel: ‘You have rejected us and abased us, and have not gone out with our armies’ (Psalm 44:9).

Introduction

JUDGMENT (compare ‘Just’)

The Hebrew *mišpāṭ* [מִשְׁפָּט] derives from the verb *šāpaṭ* [שָׁפַט]. meaning ‘to judge’. *mišpāṭ* refers basically to the judgment (‘decision’, ‘verdict’) made by a judge. It occurs 65 times in the psalms. Ideally the judgment will be made according to justice (see ‘Just’).

JUST (‘Righteous’) (compare ‘Judgment’)

We are dealing with two Hebrew words here which are often interchangeable: *ṣēdeq* [צֶדֶק] and *ṣāqā* [צָדִיק]. The key concept is that of order. *ṣēdeq* emphasises order (54 times in the psalms), whereas *ṣāqā* emphasises action that is in accord with order (34 times in the psalms). YHWH is the origin of order. A person is just [Hebrew *ṣaddîq*, צַדִּיק] who acts in accordance with who he or she is, and with his or her position in society. *ṣaddîq* occurs 50 times in the psalms. YHWH is just because YHWH always acts in accordance with who YHWH is. This is expressed most clearly in the creedal formula:

YHWH, YHWH, a God tenderly compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, and abounding in saving kindness and faithfulness,
keeping saving kindness for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children
and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.

– Exodus 34:6-7

YHWH will always act as YHWH was seen to act in the Exodus. As the idea of YHWH is purified, especially by Jesus, so does our understanding of God’s justice. Since we know that God is love, God’s initiative is always loving, and everything that God does expresses this love. God’s justice is God’s acting always and only out of love. Furthermore, in regard to us, God’s judgment is always in accordance with the way things really are with us.

We are just in so far as we, too, act according to who we really are. A king does what a king is to do. A priest does what a priest is to do. A judge does what a judge is to do, and so on. Each person is to act in accordance with the order established by God. A just person, then, is one who does God’s will. This is well expressed by the English ‘righteous’, especially when we note that righteous derives from two words: ‘right’ and ‘wise’. A righteous person is one who is wise as to what is right and acts accordingly.

KINDNESS (compare ‘Compassion’, ‘Grace’)

The Hebrew *ḥesed* [חֶסֶד] is found 127 times in the psalms. Its primary reference is to the basic relationship that binds a family or clan together. It refers to an attitude that is mutual and enduring; the focus is on the kind deeds that give expression to this familial kindness. It can exist outside the family or clan, but then, since it lacks a natural basis, the mutual agreement to exchange kind acts is commonly supported (guaranteed) by a treaty or an oath.

It is used of YHWH who is kind, gracious and merciful towards his creatures.

I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in kindness (hesed), and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know YHWH.

– Hosea 2:19-20

When used of YHWH it is extended to cover the whole of creation, and it loses the dimension of mutuality, for creatures cannot show hesed to God. It is often linked with 'emet [אֱמֶת] (see Exodus 34:6; Psalm 25:10; 4:11-12; 57:4; 61:8; 85:11; 86:15; 89:15; 115:1; 117:2; 138:2), where 'emet emphasizes the permanency, certainty and lasting validity of the hesed of YHWH. Being 'full of kindness' is one of the qualities attributed to God in the creedal formula that recurs throughout the Bible. For the texts see the article 'Grace'.

The Bible uses an abundance of words to speak of God's kindness. God 'sends' kindness (Psalm 57:3); 'remembers' kindness (Psalm 25:6); 'shows' kindness (Psalm 85:7); 'keeps' kindness (Psalm 89:28); 'surrounds' with kindness (Psalm 32:10) are just a few examples.

While we cannot show kindness to God, YHWH's kindness to us requires that we show this kindness to others:

What does YHWH require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness (hesed), and to walk humbly with your God?

– Micah 6:8

Return to your God, hold fast to kindness and justice, and wait continually for your God.

– Hosea 12:6

A throne shall be established in kindness in the tent of David, and on it shall sit in faithfulness. a ruler who seeks justice and is swift to do what is right.

– Isaiah 16:5

Thus says YHWH of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another.

– Zechariah 7:9

The psalms speak of God's 'faithful ones' (Hebrew hāsîd, חָסִיד). These are those who welcome God's kindness to them and who are faithful to the covenant.

KORAHITES

We find these mentioned in the titles of Psalms 42 – 49 (except Psalm 43), and Psalms 84-88 (except Psalm 86). This is the name of a clan of the tribe of Levi (Exodus 6:24; Numbers 26:58). They had an important role in the temple in Jerusalem.

The Korahites, were in charge of the work of the service, guardians of the thresholds of the tent, as their ancestors had been in charge of the camp of YHWH, guardians of the entrance.

– 1Chronicles 9:19

The Korahites stood up to praise YHWH, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

– 2Chronicles 20:19

It is suggested that before this they may have been a guild of singers attached to the sanctuary of Dan.

Introduction

LAW ('Torah')

The word *tôrâ* [תּוֹרָה] occurs 36 times in the Psalms (26 of them in Psalm 119). Its basic meaning is 'instruction' (from the verb *yarâ*, 'to teach'). In the Wisdom Literature it is used of the teaching given to children by their parents, or to pupils by their teachers (see Proverbs 1:8; 3:1; 13:14). For the most part as used in the Hebrew Bible the reference is to God's will as mediated through the priests and the prophets:

Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of YHWH,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction (*tôrâ*), and the word of YHWH from Jerusalem.

– Isaiah 2:3

Originally *tôrâ* seems to have referred to an oracle declaring God's instruction' in a particular situation. Sometimes by a priest. In the prophet Malachi we read:

The lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction (*tôrâ*) from his mouth, for he is the messenger of YHWH of hosts.

– Malachi 2:7

Jeremiah speaks of the *tôrâ* that YHWH has revealed through the words of his prophets (see Jeremiah 26:4-5).

Later, *tôrâ* referred to the collection of such oracles. Hosea declares that God has rejected a priest 'because you have forgotten the law (*tôrâ*) of your God' (Hosea 4:6). And in Isaiah we read:

Hear the word of YHWH, you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

– Isaiah 1:10

From referring to the collection of instructions (see 2Kings 22:8), *tôrâ* came to be applied to the whole of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (in Greek, the 'Pentateuch' or 'Five Scrolls') and is distinguished from the Prophets and the Writings (see the Prologue to Sirach and Luke 24:44). However, here the translation 'law' is clearly inadequate. Perhaps 'way' would be better since, while these books do instruct the people on the 'way' they should respond to God's will, their focus is on the 'way' that God has been present and has acted in their history.

LIFE (see 'Being')

LOVE (see 'Kindness')

LOW (see 'Poor')

MASKIL

Thirteen psalms are designated in their title by the word *maskîl* [מִשְׁכִּיל], from the verb *šākal*, meaning to have insight. It may indicate a psalm that teaches, or perhaps one that is to be played with special skill (see 2Chronicles 30:22).

MIKTAM

Six psalms (Psalm 16 and the five psalms from 56 to 60) are designated in their title by the word miktām [מִכְתָּם], possibly from the verb kātām, meaning to score: to arrange for playing by a musical instrument. The Septuagint translates it as ‘inscribed’.

NEEDY (see ‘Poor’)

OFFENCE (see ‘Transgression’)

OPPRESSED (see ‘Poor’)

PEACE

The Hebrew šālôm [שָׁלוֹם] means ‘peace’, but much more than the absence of war. It includes growth, prosperity, completeness, wholeness, and harmony. It is the result of God’s blessing.

Let me hear what God YHWH will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

– Psalm 85:8

This is expressed beautifully in the priestly blessing:

May YHWH bless you and keep you;
May YHWH make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
May YHWH lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

– Numbers 6:24-26

It is our responsibility to welcome God’s grace, and so this divine blessing of ‘peace’ is conditional upon our living a righteous life:

The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.

– Isaiah 32:17

Speaking of Jesus who brought together the Jews and the non-Jews into one family of love, Paul writes:

He is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

– Ephesians 2:14

POOR (‘afflicted’, ‘needy’, ‘oppressed’)

The Hebrew ‘ānî/‘ānāw [עָנִי/עָנָו] occurs 38 times in the psalms. It refers to a person or a people who suffer affliction (Psalm 9:12; 22:24; 25:16; 102:1). When their condition is brought about by another person or another class or nation, they are spoken of as ‘oppressed’ (Psalm 10:12; 679:32; 76:9). The English regularly translates as the ‘poor’.

The Hebrew ‘ebyôn [עֲבִיּוֹן] is found 23 times in the psalms, and in over half of these it is linked with or in parallel with ‘ānî/‘ānāw. The English regularly translates as the ‘needy’. As these words are used in the psalms they go beyond the state of affliction or oppression and include an important spiritual element. The poor are those who cry out to God and trust that God ‘does not forget the cry of the poor’ (Psalm 9:12).

Introduction

YHWH, who is like you? You deliver the poor (‘ānî) from those too strong for them,
the poor (‘ānî) and needy (‘ebyôn) from those who despoil them.

– Psalm 35:10

I am poor (‘ānî) and needy (‘ebyôn), but the Lord takes thought for me.
You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God.

– Psalm 40:17

It is the king’s duty to see that the poor are treated justly:

Give the king *your* justice, O God, and *your* righteousness to a king’s son.
May he judge *your* people with righteousness, and *your* poor (‘ānî) with justice ...
May he defend the cause of the poor (‘ānî) of the people,
give deliverance to the needy (‘ebyôn), and crush the oppressor.

– Psalm 72:1-4

The poor belong to God, not to the king.

Justice for the poor is one of the main themes of the prophet Amos (8th century BC):

I, YHWH, will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy (‘ebyôn) for a pair of sandals. They trample the head of the poor (dîl) into the
dust of the earth, and push the needy (‘ebyôn) out of the way.

– Amos 2:6-7

Jeremiah condemns those responsible for the failure of justice:

They have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness;
they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper,
and they do not defend the rights of the needy (‘ebyôn).

– Jeremiah 5:28

He reminds the king of his father, King Josiah:

He judged the cause of the poor (‘ānî) and needy (‘ebyôn); then it was well.
Is not this to know me? says YHWH.

Nehemiah 5 gives a vivid description of a catalog of afflictions.

PSALM

Fifty-seven of the songs found in the psalter are entitled ‘psalms’ [Hebrew *mizmôr*, מִזְמוֹר], from the root *zmr* [זָמַר], meaning to sing to the accompaniment of musical instruments. The English title for the Book comes from the Greek *psalmoi*. The title in Hebrew is *tehillîm* [תְּהִלִּים] - ‘songs of praise’.

REDEEMER

The Hebrew *g’l* [גָּאַל] means to restore or repair, to liberate, set free or redeem. It is sometimes used in parallel with *yāša’* [יָשַׁע; save], *‘āzar* [עָזַר; help] and *pādāh* [פָּדָה; ransom]. It is used of the obligation of the nearest relative to defend one’s rights or to avenge one’s death. YHWH is spoken of as a redeemer (Psalm 19:14; 78:35). YHWH defends the cause of those who have no one to defend them, such as the widow and the orphan:

Their Redeemer is strong; YHWH of hosts is his name. He will surely plead their cause.

– Jeremiah 30:34

The king is supposed to do the same (Psalm 72:14). Often the text indicates what it is that a person is being redeemed from: every evil (Genesis 48:16); violence and oppression (Psalm 72:14); the enemy (Jeremiah 31:11); various dangers (Psalm 107:2); death (Psalm 103:4). Classical uses are redemption from Egypt (Psalm 106:10) and Babylon (Isaiah 48:20). A difficult text (because the text is disturbed) is found in Job. He seems to be speaking of a heavenly defender in the court of God:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God.

– Job 19:25-26

RESURRECTION and AFTER-LIFE

Traditionally, the Jews, like their Gentile neighbours, assumed that at death a person went to the underworld (šē'ôl, שְׁעוֹל; Hades). Here the dead person had an existence that was shadowy and lifeless. There are indications of this idea in the sacred Scriptures:

My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.

– Psalm 88:3-5

The dead do not praise YHWH,
nor do any that go down into silence.

– Psalm 115:17

Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you;
those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.
The living, the living, they thank you, as I do this day;
fathers make known to children your faithfulness.

– Isaiah 38:18-19

Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades
in place of the living who give thanks?
From the dead, as from one who does not exist, thanksgiving has ceased;
those who are alive and well sing YHWH's praises.

– Sirach 17:27-28

At the same time, they longed for an enduring relationship with God, who would somehow, and against all the evidence, preserve them from death and the underworld:

My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.
For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit.
You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

– Psalm 16:9-11

God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.

– Psalm 49:15

Introduction

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me with honour.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

– Psalm 73:23-26

The notion of resurrection from the dead, at least as an image, is found in two texts from the exile (Ezekiel 37:1-14 and Isaiah 53:8-12), and in a post-exilic, apocalyptic text included in the scroll of Isaiah:

The dead do not live; shades do not rise —
because you have punished and destroyed them,
and wiped out all memory of them.

– Isaiah 26:14

The text continues:

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise.
O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a radiant dew,
and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

– Isaiah 26:19

Faith in the fidelity of God grew into an explicit belief that God would raise to life after death those who put their trust in God and were faithful to the covenant. The situation that brought about this conviction was the martyrdom of many pious Jews at the time of the Syrian persecutions (168-165BC). It seemed impossible for God not to reward with life those who gave their lives so heroically for their faith. The first explicit statements concerning the resurrection from the dead belong to this period:

At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book.
Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,
some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

– Daniel 12:1-2

Our brothers after enduring a brief suffering
have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God's covenant;
but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment
for your arrogance.

– 2Maccabees 7:36

In the middle of the first century AD, the Pharisees were among those who espoused the notion that God would in some way raise the just to fullness of life. Some seem to have expected this to happen when history attained its final goal and God's reign would be fully realised. Others may have been thinking in terms of the end of the space-time universe which we know, though this seems less likely. In either case the dead would experience a delay. It was as difficult for them as it is for us to think of after death without thinking in temporal terms. The whole idea of life beyond death was rejected by the Sadducees because it was a notion not found in the Torah (see Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8).

Besides the notion of the resurrection of the dead, there were the extraordinary stories of Enoch who ‘walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him’ (Genesis 5:2), ‘He did not experience death’ (Hebrews 11:5). There was also Elijah who ‘ascended in a whirlwind into heaven’ (2Kings 2:11). Popular legend led to other famous people being thought of as having been taken up into heaven without dying. The Book of Wisdom picks up the idea:

There were some who pleased God and were loved by him,
and while living among sinners were taken up. They were caught up
so that evil might not change their understanding or guile deceive their souls.

– Wisdom 4:10-11

Into this world came Paul, the Pharisee who had become a follower of Jesus. He proclaimed that God had already raised Jesus to life and taken him up into glory as the first fruits of those who would believe in him. Jesus had destroyed death. Furthermore he would come and gather up his disciples to share his glory. The dominant image seems to have been that of Enoch and Elijah, and Christians hoped that God would come and sweep them up into life with Jesus without their having to die. Obviously this would not happen to those in the community who died, so this gave rise to the question: what would happen to them? When Jesus came – something they expected it to happen soon – and gathered the living up into glory, would the dead remain dead and be separated from the rest of the community while they awaited the general resurrection? Or would God do to them what he did to Jesus: bring them back to life and then take them up into glory?

RIGHT, RIGHTEOUS (see ‘Just’)

SAVING HELP (‘deliverance’)

The verb *hōšîa*‘ (to ‘help’, ‘save’ ‘deliver’) and the noun *yēšû‘â* (‘help’, ‘salvation’, ‘deliverance’, ‘victory’), from the Hebrew root *yš‘* [יָשַׁע], occur 136 times in the psalms. They speak of the presence and action of YHWH who answers our cry for help and who comes powerfully to his people to help them in their trouble. The accent is on YHWH’s bringing divine help (peace, health, victory, forgiveness, life) to us in our difficulties, not on protecting us from having to face them. The classical text is Exodus 14, which describes the action of YHWH at the Red Sea.

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to YHWH ... Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the *salvation* that YHWH will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. YHWH will fight for you, and you have only to keep still ... Thus YHWH *saved* Israel that day from the Egyptians.

– Exodus 14:10, 13-14,30

The prophet Jeremiah lived through the disaster of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Yet he could write:

Thus says YHWH: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say, ‘*Save*, YHWH, your people,
the remnant of Israel.’

– Jeremiah 31:7

Introduction

Reflecting on the victory of Cyrus of Persia over the Babylonian armies and the imminent return of the exiles to Jerusalem, the prophet writes:

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces *salvation*,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns' ...
All the ends of the earth shall see the *saving help* of our God.

– Isaiah 52:7,10

The same prophet recognised the universal scope of YHWH's love:

Turn to me and be *saved*, all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other.

– Isaiah 45:22

Many personal names in the Bible derive from this word. Those most commonly known are Joshua, Elisha, Isaiah and Hosea. It is significant that the name 'Jesus' also derives from this root, being the Greek rendition of Joshua (see Matthew 1:21). From the same root comes the word 'Hosanna' (Matthew 21:9; John 12:13) – a cry to YHWH to come to our aid.

Since YHWH is a 'saving God' we should cry to YHWH in our distress, trusting that YHWH hears our cry and will come to aid us. Remembering the ways in which YHWH has responded in the past brings peace and joy in the knowledge that whatever our sufferings, YHWH will save us. YHWH is the one who brings ultimate (eschatological) salvation. Jesus went through a terrible death. God did not intervene to protect him from it, but God did raise him to himself. Obviously God does not intervene to ward off the terrible consequences of the cosmic condition or of human sin.

But the Christian knows that God is always present with powerful grace, and that whatever may happen to us, God's will is to raise everyone to be with Jesus forever. If we welcome this grace, we, too, will be raised to eternal life. This was Paul's message at the beginning of his first missionary journey:

You descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear God, to us the message of this *salvation* has been sent.

– Acts 13:26

Luke concludes Paul's preaching in Rome with the same message:

Let it be known to you then that this *salvation* of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.

– Acts 28:28

SELAH

It is likely that the word *selāh* [סֶלָה] was originally part of the instruction for the conductor, and not part of the psalm itself. The Greek Septuagint translated it by *diapsalma*. It is likely that it indicated the place for a musical interlude in the psalm. We find it seventy-one times in the psalter.

SIN (compare ‘Guilt’, ‘Transgression’)

1. The Hebrew *ḥāṭāʾ* [חָטָא] is used of an offence committed against someone with whom one is in an established relationship. The offence can be deliberate or unintentional. There is no necessary connection with law. Furthermore it covers not only the offence but also the consequences for the sinner and for whatever it is that he has polluted through his sin. In the psalms it is often in the context of specific cultic actions and can mean ‘an offering made for sin’. The sin can be ‘forgiven’ by a third party (see Exodus 10:17; 1Samuel 15:25) or by the person against whom the offence was committed (see Genesis 50:17; Exodus 32:32).

The psalmist pleads with YHWH to remove (Hebrew *nāṣāʾ*, נָסָא] the sphere of guilt from the sinner (Psalm 32:5). YHWH is also asked to ‘look away from’ the sin (Psalm 51:11); to ‘cover over’ (Hebrew *kāsâ*, כָּסָה] the sin (Psalm 32:1); to rub it out (Hebrew *māḥâ*, מָחָה] (Psalm 109:14); to wash it away (Hebrew *kābas*, כָּבַס] (Psalm 51:4,9); to purge it away (Hebrew *ṭāhar*, טָהַר] (Psalm 51:7); to atone for it (Hebrew *kipper*, כִּפֶּה] (Psalm 79:9); to not remember it (Hebrew *zākar*, זָכַר] (Psalm 25:7).

2. The Hebrew *ʾāšām* [אָשָׁם] is often indistinguishable from *ḥāṭāʾ*. If there is a distinction, authors differ in their interpretation of that difference. Like *ḥāṭāʾ* it can stand both for the sin and the offering made for the sin. Some suggest that it includes the idea of a compensatory payment, and, in some texts, it seems to imply gross negligence. We find it in only three psalms. In Psalm 34:21-22 it means ‘to be declared responsible/guilty’. In Psalm 68:21 it means ‘to be responsible/guilty’. In Psalm 5:10 it is used in a causative sense (the only such use in the Bible) and means ‘to cause someone to bear the consequences of irresponsible behaviour’.

SOUL (see ‘Being’)

SPIRIT (‘Breath’)

‘Spirit’ translates the Hebrew *rûaḥ* [רוּחַ]. It means ‘breath’, and, since God gives life to us by sharing his ‘breath’ with us (Genesis 2:7), it means the life which we have from God: ‘In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being’ (Job 12:10).

TRANSGRESSION (compare ‘Sin’ and ‘Guilt’)

The Hebrew *pešaʾ* [פֶּשַׁע] denotes a break in relationships caused by an act against just order that is so serious as to provoke outrage and threaten serious sanctions. It can be a break between persons or countries. The Greek Septuagint ranges across eight different words to pick up the nuance in different contexts. Accused by Laban, Jacob replies: ‘What is my transgression? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me?’ (Genesis 31:36). In the prophet Amos (chapter 1) we have YHWH accusing various nations of atrocious ‘transgressions’ that demand the severest of punishments. In regard to YHWH it denotes a rebellion that breaks communion – a break that YHWH wants to mend. A key text is the creedal formula which asserts that YHWH is the one who forgives ‘guilt and transgression and sin’ (Exodus 34:7).

Introduction

TRUST

The most common word for ‘trust’ is the Hebrew *bāṭaḥ* [בָּטַח]. It occurs 48 times in the psalms. Though the Septuagint frequently translates this by *elpizein*, it means ‘trust’ rather than ‘hope’, as its focus is on present trust rather than on a hoped-for future.

UPRIGHT (‘honest’)

The basic meaning of Hebrew *yāšar* [יָשָׁר] is straight, level or flat (physically). Metaphorically it refers to conduct which is right, honest, upright.

VERDICT (see ‘Judgment’)

WAIT (see ‘Hope’)

WRATH (see ‘Anger’)

YHWH [Hebrew יְהוָה]

This is a personal address for God, generally regarded to be a verbal form derived from the root *hyh* [Hebrew הָיָה], ‘to be/cause to be’. From the burning bush God revealed himself to Moses as being determined to free those enslaved in Egypt:

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.

– Exodus 3:7-8

Moses was the one chosen to carry out God’s will and God assured him: ‘I will be with you’(Exodus 3:12). Moses wanted to know God’s name but had to be content with knowing that God is the One who is:

You shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM [Hebrew *ehyeh*, אֶהְיֶה], has sent me to you ... ‘YHWH, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’. This is my name forever.

– Exodus 3:14-15

Throughout this commentary YHWH is written in capitals to highlight the fact that it is a proper name and in deference to the Jewish practice of not pronouncing the divine name or writing it in its pronounceable form. When they read YHWH, they bow their head and say the word ‘*adonay*’ (‘Lord’). The translators of the Greek Septuagint followed this practice by translating YHWH as ‘*Kurios*’ (Lord), which is followed also in the Greek New Testament and most modern English translations. The Jerusalem Bible is among those translations that translate it ‘*Yahweh*’. As you read YHWH you may prefer to follow the general practice and say ‘the LORD’, or you might say ‘my saving God’. ‘Saving’ reminds us of the connection with the burning bush and God’s determination to save his people from slavery. ‘My’ softens the more abstract ‘God’ and underlines the aspect of personal communion. Whatever title we use, we should keep in mind that the letters YHWH point to the mystery of a God who is infinitely beyond all our human titles, but who nevertheless comes intimately close to us.