For Musicians & Clergy: Scripture

The Psalms: A Closer Look

BY THOMAS J. BOYER

According to recent studies and contrary to what used to be thought, the psalms do not seem to have been taken over automatically from the synagogue services, except perhaps by the Judeo-Christian communities. But after 70 A.D. and the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, these communities ceased to have much influence in the church as a whole. It was the Greek speaking Gentile churches that shaped the Christian liturgy. It does not seem that these churches would have made much use of the psalms as hymn texts for singing.

The Christian mysteries were celebrated to the accompaniment of Christian hymns newly composed for that purpose, and there seem to have been many of them, such as this one from Philippians:

Though he was in the form of God,
Jesus did not deem equality with God
something to be grasped at.
Rather, he emptied himself
and took the form of a slave,
being born in the likeness of men.
He was known to be of human estate,
and it was thus that he humbled himself:
obediently accepting even death,
death on a cross.
Because of this,
God highly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name
above every other name.
so that at Jesus’ name
every knee must bend
in the heavens, on the earth,
and under the earth.
and every tongue proclaim
to the glory of God the Father,
Jesus Christ is Lord!

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Such an ancient hymn reflects the creative spirit of the Gentile communities who did not grow up praying the psalms, and hearing them in the synagogues. But the style is familiar, and it looks for all the world like a psalm in the strictest sense. What seems to be the case is that the psalms were used in the same way that other parts of the Old Testament were used—they were read aloud and commented upon primarily as prophecies of the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. This is probably why the synagogue communities sometimes ceased using certain of their own psalms as they began to hear and realize the Christian use, understanding, and expectations attached to the old psalms.

The historians tell us that toward the end of the second century, the new Christian hymns began to lose favor and the psalms took their place. The heretics, particularly the Gnostics, had composed many hymns expressing their particular belief and doctrines contrary to the church’s insistence on the reality of Christ’s humanity and his single personality. These Christological controversies made the Christian communities suspicious of all the new hymns, and after about 200 A.D. the church began to do what it always does in times of controversy, it ran backwards to safety in old, tried and true ways and customs.

Suddenly the Psalms came back on the scene, acknowledged because of
their orthodoxy and their authority, and they became the choral elements of the liturgy—a place they have held ever since.

The "Fathers of the Church," particularly Augustine and Ambrose, had, in the psalms, a ready-made issue for their writing and prayerful teaching. In a collection of homilies, Augustine established principles that governed the constant use made of the psalms by the church. He developed typology that concluded that God so directed the course of salvation history that in the Old Testament there are figures or types of persons and events that prophetically lead to the New Testament with corresponding persons, things, and events. For instance, David presages Christ; therefore the "I" in the psalms can be thought of as Christ speaking, "We" in the psalms becomes the Body of Christ who are prefigured by Israel.

This Christian understanding of the psalms allows three ways of interpreting them:

1. The psalm may be spoken by Christ to his Father.
2. The psalm may be spoken by the church to the Father.
3. The psalm may be spoken by the church to Christ himself.

I think we are better off leaving this just as it is. Because this understanding is part of our tradition and has already influenced our prayer of the psalms, it works fine. But I think we can enrich our use of the psalms even more by a more careful and detailed look at them. The Christian community has an unfortunate tendency to pick and choose among the psalms, leaving out of its prayer and worship those difficult to reconcile with this old interpretation method. This practice limits the work of the Lord, and is an editorial behavior that robs us of some wonderful prayer forms.

A look at the psalms in print reveals that they are given titles, but it's important to realize that these titles came long after the psalms were printed, which happened long after they were composed. The titles tend to give three types of information: 1) they tell from which smaller collection they may have been taken; 2) the type of psalm it is and musical accompaniment; 3) and occasionally, they tell what event it may correspond to in David's career.

In short, the titles are less helpful than we might hope to expect. They tell us nothing about authorship, nor are they particularly helpful in indicating anything about the content or the events from which they arose.

It appears that several collections of Hebrew poetry and prayers came to be formed, and a five-fold division within the psalter is indicated by the doxologies that appear at the end of psalms 41, 78, 89, and 106. Most of the psalms were composed in the first instance for liturgical celebration. They convey the entire range of human emotions before God: praise, thanksgiving, complaint, resignation, joy, anguish, trust, and awe. Prayer is the issue in the psalms. They do not simply ask for things—what they express is the human condition in the presence of God. The psalms are the human response to God's word and actions, and consequently they are not all confined to the book called Psalms. The psalms are sung prayers or prayed singing. They unite for us three kinds of compositions that are often separated: 1) prayers (words directed to God), 2) poetry (poetical expressions of thought), and 3) song (they go beyond speaking or recitation and become music—even in some cases when they are just recited, they are so beautiful that they become musical).

As I have already said, the psalms were not first written and then sung; it was the other way around. They were sung for a long time before they were ever written down. They originated in worship. But we must understand that the Hebrews' experience of worship was different from ours—very different. They did not have worship at a set time on a specific day. For these people worship was the very heart of their life. It was the natural and undisputed center of the community's experience. Everything that happened in their lives came into contact with worship and was related to it. If there was a great national crisis—a drought, threat of attack, defeat, or plague—they all came before God in lament and supplication. If there was something like that happening to an individual, that too came before God. The contrary experiences as well gave rise to praise, thanksgiving, honor, recognition, and awe. All of life was permeated by worship.

Before we move into the psalms themselves, there are one or two observations to make about the parallel nature of Hebrew poetry. Two sentences are lined up parallel to one another. They are similar to each other, complement one another, or contrast with the other. This creates three kinds of parallelism:

a) synonymous (Ps. 103:1) "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me bless his holy name."

b) synthetic (Ps. 103:2) "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits……"

c) antithetic (Prov. 21:26) "All day long the wicked covets, but the righteous gives and does not hold back."

There is no metrical pattern imposed from without, as Latin and Greek poetry experienced. The rhythm arises from the sentence itself, and it frequently varies. Not many psalms are built on a specific rhythm pattern. So, this poetry is built on the patterns of ordinary speech. Its rhythm is thus not artificial, but natural.

In the Hebrew language, sentences rather than words or syllables are rhymed. The rhyme occurs in the meaning.

In the next issue, we will turn to the psalms themselves and explore their dominant themes of praise and lament.

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