

THROUGH THE PSALMS
With
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The Psalms are a puzzle to us. We use them frequently in worship. Some are the most beautiful poetry and depict movements of the spiritual life in ways which speak directly to our hearts. Some of these nestle cheek by jowl with imagery that is angry and violent. The transition can be swift. Consider Ps 137.

Many Christians selectively edit their reading of the psalms, and forget about the ones they don't like. I hope in what follows that we may see how reading all the Psalms, even those which seem repugnant to us, is part of allowing God into all of our lives and the difficult realities of those lives.

What follows is drawn from Walter Brueggemann's small book, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002). He brings together insights both from the "spiritual" and academic reading of the Psalms to address how we can use the Psalter in its entirety.

He notes the following general points which underpin the Psalms:

- Orientation- Disorientation- Reorientation
- This is found in liturgy (Baptism)
- The fate of Jerusalem
- Life is about balancing loss and gift
- Challenge dominant culture by talking about what we would rather ignore- on personal or public level.
- Demand that we look realistically at life: no room for denial or self-deception.

First Movement- Orientation

- Created by faithful people
- Serene about faith, know God as trustworthy
- Things are settled and beyond doubt
- Happy, in a well-ordered world
- No surprise, no fear
- Express a creation faith- “the world is a well-ordered, reliable and life-giving system” (p.17). Profound trust in God as one who makes this so.
- No space for chaos.
- Thanksgiving a major element
- Social function: provides “sacred canopy” where faithful live without anxiety.
- Psalms help to keep this reality in place, not just remind us of it. They assist an ongoing creation.
- Probably comes from the secure and the well-off (Ps 16:6).
- Danger- can be used to assert status quo and right of privilege
- May be used for social control- to inculcate behaviour based on rewards
- May be used to imply that those who do not know this reality have somehow gone wrong.
- That said, these Psalms have been used and affirmed not just by the privileged, for whom they offer hope that God has yet brought creation to fulfilment.

Four Kinds:

- Songs of Creation about regularity which is God’s gift (Ps 8, 33,104, 145)
- Songs of Torah, in which the Law is not just about moral values, but God’s will and purpose. Coherence goes hand in hand with obedience (Ps 1, 15, 19, 24, 119)
- Wisdom. (Ps 14, 37)

- Occasions of Well-Being. The system works. There is a correspondence between God's will and what society does. What is God's will in heaven may be experienced on earth. Often seen in the cycle of life events. Stress goodness of God in creation (Ps 131, 133).

Second Movement- Disorientation

- The church continues to sing of orientation in face of disorientation
- It may be from hope, but it could be from denial
- Use of psalms of disorientation is not denial of faith, but its affirmation
- Demands we do not pretend the world is other than it really is
- Demands we do not withhold anything from God
- Demands a God who is present in the "dark times" of life
- "Fidelity" not "immutability"
- In the dark places, God gives new life
- Psalms "evoke reality" and ask us to accept this is what it is like (precede experience)
- Take us from safety and control
- "Expressing which matches experience", not religious sensitivity or facades
- No matter how crude- always to God, ready to hear as things are.
- Common Pattern: Plea [address to God/ complaint/petition/ motivations*/imprecation (genuine not pretended communication) Then Praise [assurance of being heard/payment of vows/doxology and praise]
- Plea to praise a liturgical movement? Cf Deliverance oracles where God promises to intervene for petitioner (Jer 30: 10-11; Isaiah 41:8-13, 43:1-7.)
- Airing grievance sets us free.
- Personal complaint songs: 13, 35, 86

* Motives vary: innocence, guilt, God's goodness, valued by God, nature of God

- Communal:74,79, 137
- Disorientation as dialogue. Need to listen as well as speak.
- “Trouble in relationship”. Who is to blame? God, for not ensuring stability- and so urged to act in new way...Some acknowledge fault is Israel’s (more like prophecy- and complaint in mouth of God)... Even if God not blamed, the only one who can resolve the situation.

Third Movement: Re-Orientation

- Not simply a return to the old order, follows on from disorientation- and often starts there....
- Never a “natural” solution or outcome, but a transformation brought about by God.
- Personal Thanksgivings- rescue from real distress or problem (30,34, 40, 138)
- Communal Thanksgivings- celebrate the salvation of the people as a group- may evolve in individual form or become general praise (65, 66, 124, 129)
- Kingly psalms – stress the liturgical “new kingship” of God. Similar to victory songs (Exodus 15). Similar to ANE victory songs, strong “historical/remembering” element. Often draw on covenant-Sinai rather than temple traditions. Often include Davidic kingship- authorizes the shape of Israel. Christians may use to reflect on the kingdom of God. (29, 47, 93, 97, 98, 99, 114)
- Hymns of praise- public songs sung in abandonment in praise of God: tend to declare new order rather than describe the old. Life handed over to God (100, 103, 113, 117, 135, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150)

Psalms and Theodicy (God’s sense of justice)

- Psalms were not just private, spiritual documents
- They include a strong sense of justice
- Communion with God- fair deal – justice
- Relates to how society is ordered
- Raises questions about our ordering of society

- We live at a time when much consensus about God's justice is being replaced by criticism of that consensus as including unjust elements. We may choose to reject God along with social structure, or hold that God is reliable even though the consensus is flawed
- Theodicy raises questions about the character of God, of society and seeks to reform or revolutionise both or either of these.
- Psalms remind that quality of society and relations with God are intimately linked
- Orientation-disorientation- reorientation provides a model in which we may challenge established consensus, raise true and hard questions about theology and society, and emerge with a truer picture of the nature of God and the society he envisions....

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