

The Psalms

Sinking, by Ruth Pitter

O I am spent, I have no more strength to swim.

The blessed sun touches the bitter sea's rim:

I cannot see the headland or the little town,

All my limbs are weary, and I must go down.

O is it sleep or love or death I most need,

And what peace shall I find in the arms of the weed?

The gulf-weed shall take me and cradle me in brown

Wide-waving tresses, for I must go down.

Go down under the sweet, the bitter flow:

You are the blind, but the blessed spirits know

Whether in sleep, or love, or death you must drown;

Cease then your striving, sink and go down.

Background

- The latest psalm was written almost 2,500 years ago, and the earliest probably 3,500 years ago, the oldest being by Moses (90) and the most recent written after the exile (137).
- The psalms are cited directly 116 times in the NT, more than any other book of the NT.
- Psalms is the oldest commentary on the Pentateuch
- The psalms give us important new information about the covenant with David
- Psalms combine generality and specificity
- The psalms have five books with a concluding doxology, and there are differences between the books—book 1-3 probably being written earlier; the first having most of the Davidic psalms; differing preferences in the use of Yahweh v. Elohim when naming God; the mood moving generally from lament to praise throughout

Hebrew poetry

- Hebrew poetry is characterized not by rhyme or meter but by *terse phrases, imagery, and parallel structure*; Hebrew poetry uses parallelism to “rhymes” ideas
- Parallelism builds power; parallelism is memorable. “We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow these grounds...”
- Not all parallelism functions the same (synonymous; antithetic; synthetic; etc.)
- Chiasmic parallelism uses inversion, as in **ABC...C’B’A’**: “Ask not what your **country** can do for **you**—ask what **you** can do for your **country**.”

Q: Chiasmic parallelism can point to key ideas. What idea does it point to in the chiasmic Psalm 2?

- There are various types of psalms: hymns of praise (e.g. 103), laments (51), thanksgiving psalms (36), psalms of confidence (91), royal psalms (47), wisdom psalms (119) and imprecatory psalms (137)

- Psalms were used personally and corporately; Psalms 120-134 were used during Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

How to read the Psalms

- The Psalms are written in the context of the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants with God, both of which were vassal-suzerain—a treaty of a lesser nation with a greater king
- The covenant implies a close connection, and not merely a mystical one: the psalmists spoke to a God who acted in concrete ways in history, and not just in the distant past
- You should ask of the Psalms: How does the psalm fit its title and implied context? Is this psalm used in the NT at all? Does this psalm reflect an Old-Covenant theology? How does the psalmist use parallel structure and imagery? How might the psalm be applied to Jesus, either as God or as Messiah? What are the dominant emotions in this psalm? What type of psalm is this?
- Since they were used in temple worship, entering into the Psalms can be like entering into the sanctuary and into God's presence. On a more personal level, the Psalms allow us to enter into the devotional life of the Psalmist.

We must ask how we can understand the Psalms as God's Word, and then we shall be able to pray them. It does not depend, therefore, on whether the Psalms express adequately that which we feel at a given moment in our heart. If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray. If we were dependent entirely on ourselves, we would probably pray only the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer. But God wants it otherwise. The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart.

—Bonhoeffer

Q: We find the resources to love others as we dwell on both our love for God as God's love for and delight in us. Read Psalm 35, which mentions God's delight in the Psalmist. What role does delight play in the life of the psalmist, or the community who reads the psalm together?

Q: The Anglican BCP from 1549 includes the prayer, "Give us peace in our time, O Lord, because there is none other that fightest for us, but only thou, O God." How was God fighting for the psalmist? How does God fight for you? (See also Neh 4:19; Zech 14:3.) How should we read "imprecatory" Psalms (psalms which direct curses toward others) in light of Romans 12:14 ("Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them"), Mt 5:44, etc.? Is it wrong for the Psalmist to pray for justice?

Q: How does John 15:25 make use of Ps 35:19b? Is John mapping the messianic *pattern* of David's life onto Jesus? Does this reading of Ps 35 make it inevitable that Jesus experience rejection by his own people?

Favorite Psalms (# "votes"): 23 (6), 27, 91, 104, 121 (4), 19, 42, 46, 103, 139 (3), 8, 84, 137, 145, 147, 148, 150 (2)

Fun Fact: Prior to 1750, both Jews and Christians read parallel phrases in the psalms as if they presented distinct ideas. After all, why would the author repeat himself or herself? After 1750 an influential interpreter convinced everyone to read them completely synonymously. Commentators now allow a much greater range between these extremes. (Longman, 97)