



The Psalms and the Rule of God

It has been said that the songs of a nation are more important than its laws. Songs get to the deep places of the heart, while the force of law is kept at the surface of things. Whoever would rule a people must therefore write their songs, as well as their laws. To recognize the truth of this, is to be prepared to acknowledge the great importance for the Christian church of the sacred songs contained in the Old Testament book of Psalms.

The Psalms are the songs of a people. In them, praise, thanksgiving, complaint, lament, blessing and curse are spoken from the hearts of the people of Israel. Whether the psalmist is in the royal court or in the temple, with a family or alone in his room or on the desert, it is the heartfelt desire of an Israelite which comes to expression. And of more than one: that these psalms were collected from the great surplus that have been forgotten gives them, presumably, the imprimatur of generations of critical and practical review. Their collection into a book of Scripture means that these songs speak from the heart of Israel, to the heart of God. Yes, Israel was prepared to be ruled by God in the singing of these songs.

The Psalms have long since also become the songs of others beside Israel. By including the entire collection in their scriptural canon, Christians too have acknowledged a willingness to be ruled through these ancient Israelite songs. In practice, of course, Christians have not given equal weight to every psalm in the collection. Indeed, many of them have often been regarded as beneath the standards of Christian piety. Nor have Christian interpreters always taken the meaning of a given psalm in the sense its original composer had for it. On the contrary, Christians took strikingly broad liberties with the old meanings, following a practice of reinterpretation already well established in Israel's own use of the psalms. Christians were especially radical in the uses they made of psalms for the purpose of christological confession. The record of the first stages of this transformation is contained in the New Testament. The process continued in the long history of psalm interpretation down through the Christian centuries, and continues today.

Reflection on the Psalms in more recent years has in several ways challenged the appropriateness and adequacy of the Christian use of the Psalter, however. New sensitivity to relationships between Christians and Jews in response to the Holocaust has no doubt had something very important to do with this new direction. Christians have become more fully appreciative of the bonds of faith between the two communities, and also more aware of the possible perils of rewriting Israel's old songs. Christian theologians have consequently attended with new earnestness to the older meanings as they emerged from their peculiarly Israelite contexts.

Equally if not more significant for a new perspective on the Psalms is the way in which

the broader world context of the Christian church's mission is encouraging new attention to the Psalter as a fresh resource for the renewal and strengthening of Christian faith. The sheer power and rich diversity of the songs brought forth from the hearts of newly-awakened peoples in the twentieth century has sent the Christian community into the mines of its tradition, where it hopes to locate and bring up coal for new fires, from veins long forgotten and ignored during the long centuries of the Church's confident domination of Western civilization.

This new look at the Psalms is controversial and full of tension, as one should expect when matters so close to the core of biblical piety are at stake. While the fact of Christian reinterpretation is now quite easily acknowledged, both the recovery of older Israelite meanings and the acceptance of new songs are urged upon the church as vessels of new spiritual power for a changing rule of God in the hearts of the people of the world. The question at stake here seems to be: will these songs become the songs of the world, and will the God of Jesus rule through our singing of them?

The controversy and tension of this discussion are reflected in the articles on the Psalms contained in this issue of *Word & World*. The opening essay by *Dorothy Parkander* demonstrates the centrality of Psalms to the Christian witness in Scripture and tradition. The matter of the Psalms, she argues, is the presence of God in the community of faith; the manner of the Psalms is the work of poets, Hebrew and Christian. *Patrick D. Miller, Jr.* discusses current issues in the scholarly study of Psalms: what, once again, was their function in ancient Israel? what rules governed their reinterpretation or re-use within the Biblical tradition and the collection of the Psalms into Scripture? and what does the study of Psalms as literature contribute to our understanding of them? Then in a study of Psalm 109, *Walter Brueggemann* brings into view the powerful social message of particular psalms. He argues that social process is an integral part of the psalmist's understanding of God's faithfulness. *Erhard S. Gerstenberger* strengthens this point by showing the similarities between Old Testament psalmody and the "new songs" of Latin American liberation movements. Moving in a somewhat different direction, *Roy Harrisville's* study of psalmic elements in Paul's letters is a carefully detailed analysis of early Christian reinterpretation of the Psalms. He argues that Paul's radical christological reading of the Psalms followed a "transcendentalizing" method developed previously by the teachers of Israel, and learned by Paul as a student of the Old Testament. In a final article,

page 121

James Limburg shows us how recent studies on the Psalms actually help us to new depths of understanding, using the powerful Psalm 121 as a case study.

The Resources section contains three essays closely related to the theme of these articles. *Barry Bence* offers substantial practical advice on how the Psalms can be effectively used to strengthen Christian ministry. *Delmar Jacobson* models an approach for the Christian preacher in the exegesis of royal psalms. And *Bradley Holt* discusses how the common prayer of the church can be used more intentionally to keep both global and local concerns before congregations. Finally, *Donald Juel* has written the Texts in Context feature on the portions of the Book of Acts which appear in the ecumenical lectionary during the Easter season of this year.

D.H.O.