

# THE PSALMS

## Preliminary notions / introductory questions on the Psalter

### **Numbering of the psalms:**

- 150 psalms; some were accidentally separated or joined (9-10; 19; 42-43... 147)
  - Hebrew - Protestant Bibles and modern Catholic *Bibles*: the basic numbering
  - Greek, then Latin - *formerly* Catholic Bibles; still some *Liturgy* (Mass, Office)

### **“Headings” (or “titles”) of the Psalms:**

- **musical annotations** (choir, instruments, melody...)
- **attribution to an “author”** (David, Asaph, sons of Core... Moses, Solomon)
  - ambiguous meaning: composer, dedicated to, repertory?
  - according to certain Jewish traditions and some Fathers of the Church, the whole Psalter was composed by David. The Church does not teach that *all* the Psalms were written by David, though it seems that the collection began with his compositions, and the psalms attributed to him are about a third of the entire number of psalms.
  - some psalms are not attributed to any particular person
- **literary indications:** the type of composition (e.g., psalm, hymn, prayer...)
- **supposed circumstances of composition:** 13 psalms, all of them attributed to David, have been subsequently related to different events in his life (based on 1-2 Samuel) but are really of very scanty historical value.

## Initial context of the psalms

### **Their historical- political context:**

- It’s helpful if one can “locate” a particular psalm in its historical epoch, at least when historical references are given: the monarchy, exile, the return...  
At any rate, the Psalms bear witness to nearly the entire history of the OT,  
- - and in their messianic interpretation, to the entire life and mission of Christ.

### **Their liturgical context:**

- pilgrimages (121-123; 128-131; cf. Is 30,29),
- feasts (81) and processions (42-43; 118; 132),
- the Temple (84; 99; 100) with their sacrifices, promises, etc. (16; 51; 116),
- priests and levites (134; 16; 84), evidences of liturgical *prophecies* (50; 81),
- penitential liturgy (Joel 1,13-16; 2,12-17)

## Literary aspects of the psalms

### **Types (“literary genres”) of the psalms:**

- according to content / purpose: petition, thanksgiving, praise, contrition...
- according to who is the subject of the prayer: individual, (king), community

### **Literary characteristics:**

- synonymous parallelism, corresponds to rhyme in modern English poetry
- images used in the psalms (e.g. Ps 102; 22; 23)

## The psalms and Jesus

### **The psalms as Jesus' own prayer**

(St. Augustine called him "that wonderful singer of the psalms"):

- in his own personal prayer (Jewish piety)
- in the synagogue service (responsorial psalm)
- use by Jewish pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem
- in the liturgy of the Temple (e.g. priestly blessing)
- in his own teaching (according to the Gospels, esp. Ps 110)
- from the Cross (Ps 22:2; 31:6)
- in his post-Paschal teaching (Lk 24:44-45)

### **The psalms in their messianic fulfillment and christological meaning**

Jesus as the speaker / subject / **the "I" of the psalms** (fulfillment of the psalms by Christ the perfect man: especially psalms of praise, petition, or of the just one who is persecuted such as Ps 22)

Jesus as the one to whom are addressed / the object / **the "You" of the psalms** (especially in the penitential psalms or others which it did not seem fitting to put on Christ's lips, e.g. Ps 51). The use of the title "Lord" (*kyrios*, used instead of the divine name *Yahweh* in the Greek version of the Bible, which Christians adopted) facilitated this interpretation.

## The psalms in the life of the Church

### **Use of the psalms in Christian preaching and prayer in the NT:**

The Psalter is the book of the OT most frequently cited by the NT: in the Gospels (especially the Passion Narratives), in the preaching of the Good News in Acts of the Apostles, in Paul's letters, Hebrews, 1 Peter, James, the Book of Revelation [= 112 explicit quotes and something on the order of 100-400 allusions]

Recommendation of the psalms in Christian prayer: Ef 5,19-20; Col 3,16

Newly composed Christian "psalms" ("canticles") in the NT: the Benedictus, Magnificat..., prayer-texts of St. Paul, and hymns in the Book of Rev.

Some 141 verses of different psalms cited in the NT... yet these are just a vestige of a greatly extended and frequent use of the psalms in the early Church...

### **Responsorial psalms in the Mass (from the third century on...)**

### **The psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office)**

Our "daily bread in the wilderness" (Thomas Merton)

Confluence of two streams: the Desert Fathers and the Cathedral traditions, resulting in the monastic Office, the "Opus Dei"...

The musical dimension: psalmody, especially gregorian chant

### **The Liturgy of the Hours as the summit of prayerful use of the Psalter:**

Tens of thousands of Christian believers (Catholic, Orthodox, some classical Protestants) across the entire globe, use the psalms intensively, several times a day and during the night week after week, month after month, year after year, all their life long, with the psalms as their daily Christian bread. The psalms are introduced in the Office by antiphons and titles, sung according to special music adapted for the psalms and their various meanings, concluded by the Trinitarian doxology, sometimes accompanied by a psalm-prayer and completed by the other Scriptural parts of the Office, especially the evangelical canticles of Morning and Evening Prayer (and Compline), and the Scriptural and Ecclesial texts of the Office of Readings which help to reveal their Christian fullness of meaning.

### **Difficulties and helps for praying of the psalms:**

After many years of giving workshops on the psalms to men and women, and especially to young religious in formation, I've become convinced that there are three basic difficulties encountered in the personal and communal praying of the Psalms, and also some rather simple remedies to these same difficulties.

#### **Three common difficulties:**

- A. *Not understanding what a given psalm means:* one doesn't understand or "get" the historical or symbolic references. There are words, expressions, names and events which don't mean anything to the one who reads them ("the Day of Midian", "Sihon, King of the Amorites", "as at Meribah in the desert", etc.) and images or symbols which no longer 'speak' to our experience today ("oil running down the beard, onto the collar of Aaron", "bulls of Bashan", "the Lord of hosts") and leave one indifferent.
- B. *Not being in tune with the feelings expressed by a given psalm* or group of psalms: it might be a question of lamentations psalms when one is happy, psalms of the just man persecuted when one feels secure, or praise and thanksgiving psalms when one is anguished, despondent, or lacking in faith and motivation to pray. (This problem only occurs in community prayer, because in personal prayer one can always choose those psalms which reflect one's own 'mood' or state of mind.)
- C. *The style of community praying* doesn't help one to pray, in fact it positively *impedes* one from entering into the psalms: either too much of a hurry in reciting the psalms which doesn't leave one any time to *meditate* on them, or again such a routine, monotonous way of reciting the psalms that one loses all sense of beauty / interest in really *praying* them, and just wants to "get through it all." (This difficulty also mainly occurs in community, because in individual prayer with the psalms one can easily vary one's style of reading / prayer to suit one's needs.)

#### **A few suggestions to counteract or overcome these difficulties:**

- A. Study and careful meditation of a particular psalm (during a day of retreat, a free morning or afternoon) by means of an attentive reading (or *lectio divina*) using some commentaries or biblical resources in order to understand its historical references and structure, and to 'open up' its key phrases and concepts. There are an almost infinite number of commentaries on the psalms from recent years and dating back 5-10 centuries, indeed back to the times of St. Augustine. Done on a regular basis (even once a month) over a period of several years –better yet accompanied by an occasional course on the Bible– will most assuredly produce astounding results in one's comprehension and assimilation of the *entire* psalter. A worthwhile investment of your time and effort, considering the psalms will be your 'daily bread' for the rest of your life!
- B. An introductory motivation (orientation) which suggests how a particular psalm might be related to the needs and experience of the greater Body of Christ can be of immense help in this regard. This remedy consists in recognizing that we pray the psalms not only in our own name or because of our own psychic needs and existential state, but also as members of the Church, in the name of all humanity. There's always some group of people –personal acquaintances, or at least people whom we know about from others– who are living the predicament or intense situations described in the psalms, and we can pray in their name, for them.

*Note:* There are some excellent liturgical resources which help one to appreciate both the key historical, structural and theological elements of the psalms of the Office (A), as well as suggestions for whom to pray a given psalm in today's world (B).

C. There are diverse ways to pray the psalms (in community) which can help one to meditate and assimilate the psalms.

- One of the most elemental (but also superficial) changes is varying the alternation of speakers (all together, side to side, reader and assembly, each one in turn reading a paragraph, etc.).
- A more significant and long-term enrichment comes from occasionally reading a psalm (aloud or silently) and then after a period of silence inviting those who wish to repeat aloud a phrase which particularly struck them (with the liberty of turning it into a brief personal prayer). It takes time, but greatly helps one enter into and meditate the psalm.
- Another method is to ‘update the language of a psalm by ‘rewriting’ it using more meaningful language and references (instead of Jerusalem, the Church; instead of sacrifices, gifts to the Lord; instead of gentiles enemies, those who tempt one to sin, etc.). This last method is, however, more arbitrary and can only be done individually. It’s not recommendable to be done communally, since not all would be in agreement on the same ‘updating’, and it’s best not to alter the biblical text itself with which we pray.

A second, more profound way of personally assimilating the psalms’ message is to look for (be aware of) a line or phrase of even a single one of the psalms in each ‘hour’ of the Office which particularly strikes you. Stay with that line or phrase a moment during the recital of the psalm (if you can do so without disturbing the communal prayer), and then in moments of silence go back to the same phrase and repeat it to yourself until you memorize it, and then carry it with you during the entire day. Sometimes such phrases will stay with you during weeks or even months, and may become important guideposts in your spiritual journey.

Another major help in the communal praying of the psalms is to put them to *music* (since the psalms were meant to be sung!), according to your particular community’s traditions and possibilities:

- ‘recto tono’: to just sing on a *single* note. [It’s still better than just reciting.]
- to use psalm tones (of which there are a large variety, from very simple ones to more complex ones). This is the normal way to put psalms to music, and has been the preferred method throughout the centuries of Church history.
- Then there are also *songs* based on the psalms (whether standard metrical songs or special ones, i.e. particular versions of individual psalms) put to a much more complex music which is very attractive and upbeat, still more interesting than psalm tones, but also require more time & expertise to learn and to use in community.

*Note* that the second of these options (psalm ‘tones’) provides a universal basis for the musical rendition of the psalms, and favors the text over the music (since the music is supple, and adaptable to any given psalm or translation), and is more reposeful, whereas the latter option (psalm songs) provides for an occasional artistic display (it favors the music over the text, since the text has to ‘fit’ the music, and simply can’t be altered), but can liven up a moment of prayer. The two, then, can be judiciously combined, with psalm tones providing the stable (staple!) backdrop, and sung versions of occasional psalms offering a specific highlight.

### Brief bibliography of useful books on the Psalms

ANDERSEN, B., *Out of the Depths: The Psalms speak for us today*, Philadelphia: Westminster 1970. 200 pp. (paperback).

A “study book” on the psalms according to their different literary genres, written in a way very easy to understand. Excellent book.

BOTZ, P. *Runways to God: the psalms as prayer*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press 1980.

A useful resource to the Christian meaning of the Psalms; very good for Lectio Divina.

FLANNERY, A., ed., *Making the most of the breviary*, Suppl. to *Doctrine & Life*, 13: 56/57, Dublin: Dominican Publications n.d.

A series of articles introducing the “new” breviary after Vatican II. Excellent article on the psalms by Liam Walsh OP (“Key to the Psalms”, pp. 28-74), plus two others on the OT and NT canticles.

RYAN, M.P., *The Psalms. The Fides Translation*, Chicago: Fides 1955. 306pp.

Very nice, easy to understand introduction (30pp.) and then a very attractive presentation and translation of the psalms.

SABOURIN, L., *The Psalms: their origin and meaning*. New York: Alba House 1974. 450pp.

Extensive study of the psalms: an excellent book to research particular points about the psalms, whether their history, literary style, teaching (content) or particular types (genres) of psalms. Each psalm is commented individually in this book (cf. index on p. 445).

STUHLMUELLER, C., *Psalms 1; Psalms 2*, *Old Testament Message*, 21-22, Wilmington Delaware: M. Glazier 1983. 322 and 226 pp..

Excellent study of the psalms. A very good introduction to the psalms in general (45pp.), and then a study of each psalm, one by one, with anywhere from 2 to 8 pages of commentary on each psalm.