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TITLE:

- A. Write your own (short) psalm, using what you have learnt about the poetry, form, theology and composition of Israelite psalms.**
- B. Write a brief commentary on your own psalm, comparing it to similar verses in the book of psalms.**

- 1 The psalm*
- 2 Form and structure*
- 3 Sitz im leben*
- 4 Compositional features*
- 5 Use of metaphor*
- 6 Theological perspectives*
- 7 Use in worship*
- 8 The message of the psalm*

1 *The psalm*

Of Jonathan the Danburite. With stringed instruments.

- 1 The young man says in his heart,
 ‘It will go well with me.
2 God will shower his blessings like the rains;
 like the spring rains he will water the land:
 for I have trusted in him.’
3 But I am encompassed by suffering;
 and surrounded with many trials.
4 All who know me have deserted me;
 and my enemies seek to destroy me.
5 You have brought me to the brink of Sheol,
 so that I am near to despair:
6 I am drowning in deep waters,
 how can I go on?
7 Yet I will remember your deeds of long ago;
 the acts of your Anointed One, O LORD.
8 In Gethsemane he drank the cup of suffering;
 at Golgotha he drank it down;
 for the sake of your Name he drained it to the dregs:
9 and you delivered him from death.
10 Though he leads me through the deep;
 though he has directed my way through the deep waters:
11 Through all he will bring me so gently
 to his fountain of abundance;
 to Zion where his glory dwells.
12 Then I will praise the LORD in the assembly of the redeemed;
 in his holy sanctuary I will fulfil my vows.

* Verse numbers added for reference purposes.

2 *Form and structure*

The psalm is both in form and content an individual lament. It conforms quite closely to Westermann’s typical structure¹: an opening *address* (vv.1f); the *lament* itself (vv.3-6), with reference to *foes* (v.4), *God* (v.5) and *‘I’* (v.6); the hint of a *petition* (v.6b); a *confession of trust* (vv.7-9) in the form of a *reference to former acts* (see below); an *assurance of being heard* (vv.10f); and a *vow of praise* (v.12).

However the introduction differs from the usual form in incorporating wisdom motifs. V.1a is verbally reminiscent of Ps.14.1, and its idea of youthful naïvety echoes such passages as

Prov.7.7 and Eccles.11.9. Such contrasts between youth and age, ignorant folly and experienced wisdom are typical wisdom themes.

The *reference to former events*, more usually seen in communal laments, resembles Ps.77, with which the whole psalm has most affinity of all in the Psalter. Ps.77 too, rather than simply recording a transition from lament to praise, has the speaker appealing to God's acts of covenant salvation as a *reason* for such a transition². It is also unusual in presenting its lament in the past tense, as if it were a narrative recounting of a prayer unanswered until salvation history is remembered. This gives Ps.77 a didactic element which is shared by my psalm. Perhaps they both reflect stages in what Mowinckel calls 'a disintegration of the style'³ under wisdom influence.

3 *Sitz im leben*

The presence of overtly Christian references makes discussion of a setting in the temple cult problematic! In general the original use of the laments is uncertain, though the almost universal transition from lament to praise has suggested to some that individuals would bring their prayers to God in the temple and would be given a prophetic oracle between the petition and the expression of assurance⁴. But the didactic wisdom element of this psalm would seem to suggest a *sitz* in a teaching situation as much as, or more than, one of individual grief or prophetic utterance. Mowinckel suggested that the temple scribes

considered themselves the inheritors both of the prophets and of the psalmists. They became psalmists too, and to the ancient cultic poetry was added a newer, private, learned Psalmography.⁵ One could imagine the inheritors of this tradition using the psalm in an early Christian assembly as an accompaniment to the teaching of neophytes on such passages as 1 Peter 4.12-19⁶.

4 *Compositional features*

Linguistically, the psalm is written in the style of the NIV English translation, its 'New Internationalisms' perhaps being analogous to the alleged 'Septuagintalisms' of Luke's *Magnificat*⁷. In other words, it is written as a translation rather than as a Hebrew poem. Thus the

only phonological parallelisms occur in the alliteration in vv.8-9. These verses also contain a 'staircase' parallel in the tricolon of v.8 (which might also be described in terms of a 'narrative metaphor'⁸ of Jesus' last hours). All this tends to emphasise the centrality of Christ's passion to the psalm's message (*cf.* Ps.77 vv.16-19).

Rhythmically there are three stresses in each phrase throughout⁹, except for a single instance of *qînâ* metre at v.9¹⁰. This typical feature of lament¹¹ is offset by the *waw* adversative¹² of v.7, the total effect being an abrupt change of mood (*cf.* Ps.102 vv.11-12) from despair to hope, doubt to faith.

Thirdly, though most of the *cola* have simple 'synonymous' parallelisms (mainly in the form of 'semantic focusing', in Robert Alter's phrase¹³), there are two chiasmic cola at vv.2 and 12, both intended to emphasise the middle component. In v.2 the stress on 'rains/spring rains' shows the young man's concentration on blessing more than God, on gift rather than Giver. In v.12, conversely, the emphasis on 'assembly/holy sanctuary' is on God's dwelling rather than the worshipper. There are no chiasms at a higher level than that of the colon.

5 *Use of metaphor*

The central metaphor is that of 'deep waters', common in the psalms (*eg.* Pss.18.16; 69.2,14), but also a Biblical symbol of death from Exodus (15.5), through Jonah (*ch.*2), to the New Testament (*eg.* Mat.11.23). These waters represent the cosmic waters of chaos thought of (at least poetically) as beneath the earth¹⁴, and so associated with *sheol*, death and separation from God:

The essence of all that is frightening is to be forsaken by God, and that is what is being suffered in this sphere of death.¹⁵

The concept of the deep as 'chaos' and 'desolation' goes as far back as Gen.1.2, and there is at least a hint there of creation as God's triumph over the deep, such as is certainly prominent in the Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma Elish*. This mythical substrate is certainly alluded to by the

Psalms (eg Pss.74.13ff; 89.9f), and probably forms the background to the use of ‘deep waters’ as a metaphor of personal agony elsewhere in the Psalter.

In my psalm, specific troubles such as suffering, trials, desertion by friends and threats from enemies are built up¹⁶ until they threaten imminent dissolution (*‘the brink of Sheol’*, v.5), and utter despair. This is summed up in ‘deep waters’ (v.6). The sensation of drowning is a very potent image developing naturally from the metaphor, making a cosmological symbol dreadfully personal¹⁷. He cannot go on, and yet will perish even if he stays where he is.

As the narrative of lament (vv.3-6) unfolds, what seems at first to be the fault of misfortune, of disloyal friends or malevolent enemies, is finally attributed to God himself, initially in the manner of complaint. But it is this very recognition of God’s sovereign involvement which gives hope of a response to his cry in v.6b, for the LORD’s victory over the waters in the myth means that he has the power to save, if he be willing. So when the metaphor is taken up again in v.10, though the deep waters remain the despair does not, for God’s presence in them has been understood. First he acknowledges God’s leading, then a way appears, and finally the deep becomes an easy path to God’s salvation (echoing Israel’s experience at the Red Sea).

In Hebrew cosmology, there was a physical connection between the waters of chaos and the water which God provides as blessing. This might be in the form of the rains (*cf.* Pss. 147.8; 84.6), or a river (Ps.84.6), and especially the prophetic river of Zion (Ps.46.4; *cf.* Ezek.47.1-12; Zech. 14.8)¹⁸. Both these concepts are taken up in the psalm, the first in the context of common earthly blessings (v.2) which seem to blind the young man to the dangers of life; and the second in the fountain of Zion (v.11), which can only have an eschatological, spiritual meaning. In this way the deep waters are transformed from being perceived as the antithesis of God’s blessing to being the means for its final attainment, or even in some way a part of it.

Overall then the use of the metaphor of ‘deep waters’ in the psalm involves its transformation from being the quintessential expression of separation from God to being the actual prerequisite of final salvation.

6 *Theological perspectives*

The main theological theme of all the laments is *salvation*. They are in very essence pleas for salvation which, as Longman points out, depend on God's *hesed*, or covenant-lovingkindness, to his people Israel:

We sense God's intimate presence in the shouts of rejoicing and the cries of lament in the Psalter. The psalmist knows that God hears him... God is '*my* God' or '*our* God.'¹⁹

Furthermore, the element of *hope* always depends on *faith*. Confidence may be found in God's power as Creator (eg Ps.74.16f), in his salvation of Israel (Ps.77.11-20), or simply from his nature (Ps.6.4), but *faith* that he *will* save by his covenant grace is always either expressed (as Ps.6.8-9) or implicit. This is what makes Begrich's theory of a 'cultic oracle' unnecessary, even misleading.

In the case of my psalm, faith in salvation history is the key as in Ps.77, but it is faith in the salvation of the cross rather than that of the Exodus. But the cross showed that Christ's suffering was the very means of salvation, and transformed the believer's understanding of his own suffering (Rom.8.17, 1 Pet.4.13 *etc*). Unlike the canonical Psalms, then, this poem represents God not only as *the conquering* Saviour, but as the *suffering* Saviour.

The participation of God in his people's suffering is at the heart of the 'mystery of godliness' (1 Tim.3.16), and this New Testament insight answers many of the problems raised in the more radical Wisdom teachings like Job and Ecclesiastes.

So the psalm's 'contribution' to theology is to provide a New Testament answer to a recurrent 'Wisdom' problem ('Why do the godly suffer?'), and a New Testament hope for the believer's lament ('Christ suffered *with* and *for* you, and God will save you as he saved Christ').

Various other common themes also occur in the psalm. Zion as the place of the LORD's dwelling (eg Ps.9.11) and even as the fountain of life (Ps.36.9)²⁰; the Davidic King (the 'royal psalms.')²¹; and the relation of personal prayer to the great congregation (eg Ps.22.25)²² are represented. But the reference to Christ gives them all an eschatological slant which transcends and fulfils their OT usage, though they would be comprehensible to the worshipper in the first temple.

7 *Use in worship*

The main problem with using such a psalm in worship is that of passing off the merely human as canonical. That aside, such a psalm might be read during worship in a service whose emphasis was on Christian suffering, introducing the congregation to the linking of our suffering and Christ's suffering, and thus preparing them for teaching on this, as I suggested in the section on *sitz im leben*. Such use brings a didactic message into the actual life-experience of the church, and so makes it more real.

The psalm is also sufficiently like a typical lament to be used to express any feelings of suffering, or even during a time of confession and absolution in Christ's name. The use of the laments in such contexts is less common than it should be, but would help Christians move towards a more balanced spirituality of 'rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn'. The 'art of complaining prayer' is much needed.

The practice of chanting psalms in church has unfortunately largely disappeared, especially in my non-conformist tradition. However, the psalm could be re-cast in a metrical version for use in worship, in the same context as reading it. Such a version already exists²³, but is more suitable for singing by an individual than a congregation. Nevertheless, the performance of psalms by individuals or choirs can be very edifying in church, and this would seem to have been the norm in temple times.

8 *The message of the psalm*

In summary, then, the psalm takes a naïve and superficial of life in God and exposes it to the psalmist's real experience of the deep waters of suffering. Through the remembrance, in faith, of Christ's own suffering we are encouraged to see his solidarity with us as his people, and his substitutionary atonement. Through the recollection of God's vindication of Christ by the Resurrection our own grief is transformed to hope that he will also deliver us, both from the present trial, and also eschatologically.

The psalm's message is summarised in the sentence of vv.10-11:

Though he leads me through the deep;

 though he has directed my way through the deep waters:

Through all he will bring me so gently

 to his fountain of abundance;

to Zion where his glory dwells.

(2159

words)

References

- 1 Westermann, 1981, p.64.
 2 ‘The confession that all God’s ways are holy (v.13) emerges, not from the consciousness
 of separation from the *deus absconditus*, but from the encounter with the great wonders
 and works of the *deus revelatus*.’ (Kraus, 1989, on Ps.77).
 3 Mowinckel, 1962, vol.2 p.111.
 4 Begrich, *Das priesterliche Heilsorakel* (ZAW 52 1934) p.43 note, quoted in
 Westermann, *op. cit.* p.74.
 5 Mowinckel, *op. cit.* p.106.
 6 As a matter of record, the psalm was closely adapted from the author’s own 1976 song,
 which arose from his own experience but was always intended for use with young
 Christian audiences to counter a simplistic ‘bless God and he’ll bless you’ theology.
 7 Bruce, 1971, p.71.
 8 Alter, 1985, p.39.
 9 However, ‘There is little evidence that the counting of stresses was actually observed as a
 governing norm for a poem.’ *ibid.* p.9.
 10 Kidner, 1973, p.2.
 11 This was, fortuitously, even more marked in the original song, where the phrase was
 ‘how can I go?’
 12 Westermann, *op. cit.* p.64.
 13 Alter, 1987, p. 616.
 14 Day, 1992, p.130.
 15 Kraus, 1988, p.78.
 16 ‘This complexity of distress causes all clear contours of the experience of specific
 misfortune to become blurred. Comprehensive terms and metaphors that transcend the
 individual signalize the affliction.’ *ibid.* p.77.
 17 This spiritual despair is so powerfully expressed by Bunyan in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, as
 Christian sinks in the River of Death and cries: ‘*I shall not see the land that flows with
 milk and honey.*’ (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1965, p.198).
 18 Ps.46.4 actually juxtaposes this idea with the waters of chaos in the previous verses.
 19 Longman, 1988, p.57.
 20 Kraus, 1988, p.68f.
 21 *ibid.* p.72.
 22 *ibid.* p.77.
 23 *Through the Deep Waters*, by Jon Garvey ©1976.

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- J Day, *Psalms* (Sheffield: Academic Press 1992) pp.130-132.
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- T Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Leicester: IVP 1988) ch.3
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