

THE
PSALMS

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THE
PSALMS

A COMMENTARY FOR PRAYER
AND REFLECTION

HENRY WANSBROUGH

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Introduction

The Psalter is Israel's prayer book but also the prayer book of the Church. Ancient tradition attributes authorship of the psalms to King David, a tradition that reflects the memorable story of young David playing the harp to soothe King Saul, and also reverence for David as founder of the temple liturgy. We do not know how the psalms were collected, how they were selected or how they were preserved—presumably in the temple. We know that some of them, like Psalm 112[113], were used in the celebration of family festivals, but of their wider liturgical use we know nothing. The Psalms of Ascent were presumably used by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem. Some of the psalms themselves suggest a refrain to be sung in response; some presuppose instruments, the clash of cymbals or a fanfare of trumpets. Some celebrate a public victory or lament a national defeat. But what of the more private psalms? Was there a store of them on which the worshipper could draw at request?

Like other collections of religious poetry, the Psalms express many moods, reflect on many situations and fit many different occasions. They cover, then, the whole sweep of Israel's history and spirituality. Some are based on ancient Canaanite hymns, still retaining traces of the pre-Israelite religion of Canaan—hymns to the god of storm, thunder and lightning (Psalm 28[29]). Others reflect the triumphs and glory of the monarchy in Jerusalem (Psalms 43[44] and 109[110]). Still others sing of the sadness of exile in Babylon, when the nation was carried off to captivity and servitude, leaving Jerusalem and its temple in ruins (Psalm 136[137]). It was

during this period of exile that observance of the Law became the dominant feature of Judaism, so the psalms of this period are characterised by love of the Law (Psalms 1 and 118[119]) and by the repentance for sin which was so evident in the spirituality of the exile (Psalm 50[51]). Still other psalms, especially the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 119—133[120—134]) may sing of the joy of returning to Jerusalem on pilgrimage for the great festivals. There are psalms of national victory and psalms of national defeat, psalms of individual achievement and psalms of individual failure, psalms that hymn the work of God in nature and psalms that celebrate the work of God in the history of Israel. Some psalms beg for release from trials; others thank God for deliverance.

By praying the psalms, we enter into the process of the gradual revelation to Israel, meeting God through the rough and sometimes primitive notions of early Israel, and seeing at the same time the hints of a fuller revelation which was to come in Jesus Christ. The expression of this fuller truth often uses the language of the earlier scripture, giving it a new meaning and a new light.

More than this, the psalms were the prayers of Mary and Jesus: Mary's Magnificat is shot through with reminiscences of the psalms, and Jesus is shown in three of the Gospels as dying with a psalm-prayer on his lips. As early as Peter's speech at Pentecost, the psalms began to be used (often stretching their original sense a little) to explain and comment on the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. This fuller, Christian sense of the psalms is part of the treasury and prayer of the Church.

Three technicalities

Translation

The original language of the psalms is Hebrew. Now Hebrew is a craggy and succinct language. Especially in poetry, each word is pregnant with sense and allusion. The eight Hebrew words of Psalm 19[20]:7 are rendered by 28 in English. This can give the impression of a series of uncoordinated hammer-blows of sense

or imagery. The Hebrew was translated into Greek a century or two before Christ. This version is called the Septuagint because, according to legend, it was produced by 70 translators. It often differs widely from the Hebrew text that we now have, and may represent a Hebrew version earlier than and different from what we now possess. In any case, English versions of the psalms often differ considerably as the translator struggles to express the sense and implications of the words. The translator must also decide whether to reproduce the ‘cragginess’ of the poetry (similar to the English poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and T.S. Eliot) or whether to offer a smoother and more flowing English text. Myles Coverdale’s version, used in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, is mellifluous and polished. In the New Jerusalem Bible, I tried to remain closer to the craggy and suggestive nature of the original Hebrew.

A note on numbering

The numbering of the psalms given here follows the Greek version. The Hebrew text divides the Greek Psalm 9 into two (9 and 10), and thus stays one ahead until Psalm 148. The Roman Catholic tradition follows the Greek numbering, but many Protestant versions adopt the Hebrew numbering, following Luther’s preference for the Hebrew. When using a Protestant version (such as NRSV or NIV), add 1 to all psalm references between 9 and 148.

The ‘titles’ of the psalms

Often, at the beginning of a psalm, a short phrase is given (in some editions printed in italics), which is not an original part of the psalm but (in the Greek text used for this book) constitutes ‘verse 1’ of the psalm. Where this is the case, the verse numbering will remain one ahead of the Hebrew version throughout. In this commentary, a reminder is given each time the psalm in question has a title as verse 1.

The titles are sometimes ‘stage directions’, naming the composer or the choir for which it was intended, or the instruments or the

tune to be used. Many of them, on the assumption that the psalms were written by David, attempt to fit the psalm into a particular situation in David's life. These titles are very old but are not part of the original psalm and do not have full biblical authority.

How to use this book

These meditations were written as daily reflection on the psalms. One possible way of using them has three elements: it follows the traditional monastic method of *lectio divina*, or prayerful reading, outlined by Guigo II, Prior of the Grande Chartreuse in 1170:

- First read the psalm slowly, carefully and thoughtfully, aware that God is speaking to you through it. Guigo likens this to rolling a grape around on the tongue.
- Then read the reflection, referring to the psalm to see what light the reflection throws on the psalm—whether what it says is true and helpful. This is a sort of studious reading. Perhaps look up any cross-reference given in your Bible. For Guigo, this is the prolonged chewing of the grape.
- Return to the psalm itself in prayer. What message has the Lord for you in this? In the first place it was not written for you, but it still has a message for you. Here is received the full flavour of the grape.
- Allow the tranquillity of God to flow over you and fill you with peace.

Book 1

Psalm 1: Blessed indeed is the man

This psalm is carefully placed at the beginning of the Psalter. It is a Wisdom psalm. A great deal of the Wisdom literature at the end of the Old Testament period gives rules and hints about how to get on in life. Much of the advice is in the form of wise proverbs, not always particularly religious: 'Bread is sweet when it is won by fraud, but later the mouth is full of grit' (Proverbs 20:17). However, through it all runs the thread that all wisdom comes from the Lord.

Sorting the psalms into categories sometimes contributes to easier understanding. Several of the psalms fall into this category of celebrating the blessing on those who set themselves to fulfil God's Law. Such psalms often begin, 'Blessed are those who...' (for example, Psalms 31[32], 40[41], 111[112] and 127[128]). Two of the special Wisdom psalms are our present psalm and the lengthy Psalm 118[119]. It has been suggested that they were placed at the beginning and end of a primitive collection of psalms as a sort of inclusive literary bracket, thus stressing the importance of observing the Law for all prayer and service.

These psalms of the Law are joyful psalms, for obedience to the Law is a joyful response in love to a gift in love. The Law is no burden but a pleasure and privilege. It is God's set of instructions on how to remain close to God, given to his own special people. It is both a gift in friendship and a revelation of God's own nature. Obedience to the Law is a matter of imitation of God: 'Be holy as I am holy' is the theme song of the Law in Leviticus. Obedience is not a way of earning salvation but is a loving response to a gift made in friendship. This is what makes it so full of joy.

This little psalm conceals its artistry. First comes the blessing on those who stand apart from sinners and delight in the Law. Then there is an image for this blessing—the tree planted beside flowing waters. In a dry land, water is the secret of life, and not every tree flourishes. I think especially of a particular tree, growing luxuriously beside the sparkling stream that runs from the Ain el

Qilt gorge down to Jericho. It always has a flock of sheep and goats enjoying its shade.

Then, in verse 4, the opposite of blessing is described, in the opposite order: first comes the image, chaff blown away by the wind, then the description of the wicked. Finally, the last verse sums it all up with a neat contrast.

Psalm 2: Why do the nations conspire?

Originally this psalm was a coronation song. The death of a king and the succession of a new monarch was frequently the signal for rebellion by subject peoples, whom the Lord here ‘laughs to scorn’ (as Handel’s *Messiah* puts it), for the Lord himself has decreed and anointed the new king. The ritual of kingship in Jerusalem took over much of the Egyptian coronation ritual. On the great Egyptian wall-carvings the king is shown being anointed and crowned by the deities of Upper and Lower Egypt. In the Egyptian ritual of coronation, the king was also adopted as son of the gods.

In Israel, of course, this divine sonship had a different root—God’s promise to David, through Nathan, of a dynasty that would never end (2 Samuel 7:4–17). David offered to build a house for the Lord, but the Lord replied with a promise to build David a house, with his own son as his successor: ‘I shall be a father to him,’ he promised, ‘and he a son to me’ (v. 14). Though the Lord might punish the king, he would never withdraw his love. This promise is the basis of Israel’s security and of the enduring hope for a Messiah who would rule the nations. The same promise is celebrated in another coronation psalm, Psalm 109[110], and is frequently alluded to elsewhere in the Bible. During the exile, Psalm 88[89] meditates on the failure of the kingship and reproaches God for renegeing on his promise.

The Christian tradition, beginning with the letter to the Hebrews (1:5), sees this promise as fulfilled in Christ. Perhaps even earlier, in the prayer of the apostles under persecution in Jerusalem (Acts 4:25–26), the Greek translation of ‘his Anointed’ (‘his Christ’) in Psalm 2:2 is used to identify the risen Christ as this anointed Messiah.

Jesus himself was hesitant about the title ‘son of God’, never openly accepting it. When Peter at last recognises Jesus as ‘the Christ’, Jesus reacts not with congratulations but with a warning that he is to triumph only after suffering (Mark 8:29–31). When the high priest challenges Jesus, ‘Are you the Christ?’ Jesus replies by diverting attention to his favourite title, ‘the son of man’ (Mark 14:61–62). This is probably because of the political associations of the concept of Messiah at the time, as an anointed king who would expel the Romans. For Jesus, it is not his own kingship but the kingship of God that fills his horizon.

Nevertheless, as early as Paul, ‘Christ’ (the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew ‘Messiah’) had become a standard name for Jesus. At Antioch, the great Jewish colony on the coast of Syria where Paul set up his first base for the proclamation of the gospel, the followers of Jesus first gained the name (possibly a slightly derisory nickname) ‘Christians’—those who acclaimed Jesus as Messiah. They saw in Jesus the fulfilment of the anointed king promised in this psalm.

After the opening Wisdom psalm (Psalm 1), this psalm is really the beginning of the first book of Psalms. A royal, Davidic and messianic psalm is a feature of the seams between the five books of the Psalter.

Psalm 3: How many are my foes, O LORD!

In this psalm, the title is verse 1.

This is the first of the ‘Psalms of David’, a series that runs to Psalm 40[41]. The title added later at the head of each of these psalms attributes them to David and usually situates them at some particular moment in David’s life. These indications are not to be taken too seriously. The situating of this psalm, ‘When he was fleeing from his son Absalom’ (that is, when Absalom had rebelled against his father and made a bloodless entry into Jerusalem, 2 Samuel 15:23–33), is particularly forced.

This is also the first of the psalms of confidence in distress, a frequent motif in prayer. It raises again the unanswerable question of how the psalms were preserved and used. Were psalm sheets kept in the temple and handed out on request to worshippers who asked for a particular type of prayer? That seems too modern an idea. In any case, we cannot tell. Sometimes the psalms seem to concentrate too much on the negative side of life. However, we are all drawn more quickly to prayer by threats to our comfort and prosperity! The calm confidence of the psalmist, who is content to brave the threats of the surrounding legions of enemies and go quietly to sleep, is a model for Christian trust in the Lord.

‘I shall awake, for the Lord sustains me’ (v. 5) is, by extension, understood in the Christian tradition as an allusion to Christ’s resurrection. The verb used for ‘awake’ in the Greek is often used also of the resurrection. The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead becomes clear only in Daniel 12:2–3, written a couple of centuries before Christ, but the Greek Bible (particularly in the psalms) shows many signs of a tradition developing towards that belief. The translations chosen for the Greek Bible (the original Bible of the Christian Church) are a valuable indication of the developments of

thinking within Judaism, and many regard the so-called Septuagint as an inspired translation. There is a longing for the continuance of a relationship with God instead of the unsatisfactory, powerless half-life in Sheol, where no one can praise God. With this longing goes a groping towards the belief in resurrection, in the form of a conviction that God will not abandon his chosen ones. Our link to God is a permanent, not a transitory, relationship. To God, all are still alive, even those from remote ages. As Jesus says in reply to the Sadducees, 'He is God, not of the dead, but of the living' (Matthew 22:32).

Psalm 4: When I call, answer me, O God of my righteousness

In this psalm, the title is verse 1.

This psalm is built on a contrast between trust in the Lord to provide what is needed and a certain materialistic preoccupation with acquiring the good things of this world. The psalmist is confident that the Lord hears prayers and grants what is needed. The opening mention of 'distress' is hardly sufficient to suggest upset or discomfort; it simply makes us aware that the Lord's protection is needed and is forthcoming.

The psalmist is sure that the Lord works wonders for his faithful ones; the Lord 'listens when I call to him' (v. 4). What exactly is this sureness of answer to prayer, and can we count on it so securely? How does God manage it if I want a fine day for my cricket match and the neighbouring farmer wants rain for his crops? A mature Christian may still desperately want something and pray for it fervently, but all the while his or her prayer includes an implied conditional clause: 'if it is your will and plan'. The mature Christian is still a child of God, turning to the Father in confidence but also

in realisation that no human being can fully understand God's purposes. The sufferers who go in fervent and desperate prayer to a healing shrine such as Lourdes may not be granted the cure they seek but do win at least the strength to endure, and perhaps to understand, the suffering. In the last analysis there will always be cases where the book of Job provides the only solution: we cannot understand God's reasons but are made strong and trustful enough to bow before the vision of his wisdom and greatness.

By contrast, those who do not have this confidence are heavy of heart and chase after illusions, all the while complaining that no one offers them happiness. There is a touch of humour in the contrast between their frenetic and grumbling pursuit of happiness and the psalmist's contented and simple relaxation in the Lord. There is also a touch of irony in the fact that these seekers after happiness in material wealth also invoke the Lord in their search, expecting to be given such happiness on a plate, and asking to bask in the light of his face. Yet their plentiful harvest of corn and new wine does not bring them the contentment that the psalmist wins by trust in God.

The mention of keeping silence 'on your beds' (v. 5), and of falling asleep and resting secure (v. 9), suggests that the time of praying is evening, after a day spent in awareness of divine protection. In St Benedict's arrangement of the Psalms, this belongs to the monastic night prayer of Compline.

Psalm 5: To my words give ear, *O LORD*

In this psalm, the title is verse 1.

This is a simple morning prayer, rejoicing in the protection of the Lord at daybreak, contrasting the favour of the Lord toward

his faithful with the Lord's detestation of evildoers, liars and the violent. The psalmist has a reassuring confidence in God's response to prayer and the closeness of God to those who come to pray to him. There is, however, a note that falls badly on the Christian ear—the appeal to God for judgment on the evildoers' guilt. It is not even an appeal for personal vengeance on unfair treatment, but seems quite unprovoked—apart from a passing reference to 'those who lie in wait for me' (v. 9).

It is possible to consider this jarring note as an expression of the desire for the annihilation of evil itself, a pious prayer that justice may triumph. More honest, however, is the admission that this desire for vengeance does exist in Old Testament morality. 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth' (Deuteronomy 19:21b) was already an advance on a morality where there were no limits to revenge exacted, where someone could be killed for the sake of an eye or a tooth. The Psalter leaves no doubt that Israel found it reasonable actually to pray for vengeance, as the so-called 'cursing psalms' show. The haunting Psalm 136[137] ends with a blessing on those who dash Babylonian babies against a rock, and Psalm 108[109] is (from the literary point of view) a deliciously and artistically comprehensive curse on the psalmist's enemies.

It was Jesus who outlawed all forms of revenge, with his command to 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:44). The desire for vengeance is a very deep-seated human instinct. We must, furthermore, grant that revelation is a slow process and, at the same time, admit that we have no reason to believe that we have yet reached the full implications of Christ's teaching. We cannot take on board too much at one time. Despite the implications of Pauline teaching, for many centuries Christendom continued to tolerate slavery and enjoy its benefits. For many centuries war and its accompanying slaughter were considered an acceptable last resort for solving disagreements under certain circumstances (the criteria of 'just war' theory). The suitability of the death penalty as the ultimate punishment is also still debated among Christians and non-Christians alike.

Psalm 6: O LORD, do not reprove me in your anger

In this psalm, the title is verse 1.

This is the first of the psalms of real distress, expressed with extreme drama or perhaps even exaggeration. Then suddenly it issues in a sharp turnaround, to confidence that the Lord has heard the prayer and already solved the problem.

These two phases are characterised respectively by the Lord's anger and his faithful love. The psalmist does not deny that punishment is due, but begs to be spared and appeals to God's faithful love, finally thanking God for deliverance from the threatening disasters. How can these two fit together?

The anger of the Lord is, of course, an anthropomorphism. Another anthropomorphic expression for it is the Lord's 'jealousy'. Frequent enough is the declaration that God is a jealous God. Divine jealousy is not like human jealousy. Human jealousy is hankering after qualities or possessions that one sees in others. Divine jealousy is a refusal to tolerate the attribution to others of the honour or obedience due to God, particularly if such honour is attributed to other deities—personifications of other systems of value. It is a refusal, therefore, to tolerate upset in the due order of the world, of which God is the ultimate guarantor. God's 'anger' is the attribution to God of the human emotion that so often precedes and occasions punishment. However, human anger so often involves the notion of losing one's temper that some translations use the expression 'wrath' of God, making it a quasi-technical term to avoid the implication that God has somehow 'lost the plot'.

The paradox is at its sharpest in the revelation to Moses at Sinai of the meaning of God's special, personal name. After the Israelites have broken the covenant and Moses has smashed the tablets of the Law, God passes before Moses crying out, 'The LORD, the LORD,

God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy... yet letting nothing go unchecked, and punishing...' (Exodus 34:6–7). This is the definition of God that echoes through scripture, alluded to again and again throughout the Old Testament. The paradox consists in the juxtaposition of compassion and punishment. How can God punish and yet be compassionate? Is God's forgiving punishment less severe than it should be? Hardly, if the punishment is intended to be therapeutic. Perhaps it is like a loving parent who punishes to bring the recalcitrant child back to the true path, but can lighten the punishment without reducing its effect by simultaneously showing the reality of his or her love, in some way sharing the child's pain.

Psalm 7: O LORD, my God, I take refuge in you

In this psalm, the title is verse 1.

This psalm may be seen as falling into three distinct but related parts. Verses 2–6 form an appeal to the Lord for protection, suggesting that the psalmist is being pursued by someone whom he attacked, though the attack does not seem to have been unprovoked. Verses 7–13a appeal to God specifically as a just judge, who can be relied on to reward integrity and punish the opposite. Verses 13b–17 somewhat return to the first part, stressing the justice of God in foiling the unprovoked attack of an enemy. Finally the psalmist sums up the prayer in a verse of praise for God's saving justice.

God's justice is understood throughout the Bible in two senses. Firstly, God is a just judge in the ordinary sense of the word, assessing merits and faults and assigning their just rewards; this is the sense found in the second part of the psalm. Secondly, but perhaps more importantly, God's justice is a saving justice. It is

often put in parallel with ‘salvation’ or ‘deliverance’, as in Isaiah 46:13, ‘I am bringing my *justice* nearer... my *salvation* will not delay.’ The two nouns are obviously in parallel.

Human justice consists in conformity with the law (observing speed limits) or moral demands (repaying debts), but God’s justice is conformity to his own promises. For the Israelite, and subsequently for the Christian, God’s saving justice does not condemn us for our failures but quite the reverse: it is our only hope. God can be relied upon to fulfil his promises, especially the promises made to Abraham and the promises involved in the series of subsequent covenants to David and Jeremiah, and finally the new covenant in Christ’s blood. All we can do is put our trust in this saving justice of God.

Paul meditates on this saving justice in the letter to the Romans: ‘Abraham put his faith in God and this was reckoned to him as saving justice’ (4:3). Human ‘justice’ cannot be earned by good deeds but is simply a matter of hanging on by our fingertips to God’s saving justice—that is, trusting in his promises to save. We are justified—that is, put in a state of salvation—only by being clothed with God’s own saving justice. In the last analysis, God’s promises are fulfilled by Jesus’ obedience on the cross, which ‘fulfils all justice’. We profess our faith in and our dependence on that obedience by being baptised into Christ’s death, and so bathed with his saving justice.

Psalm 8: O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name!

In this psalm, the title is verse 1.

This joyful psalm is a celebration of the creation, bracketed at beginning and end by praise of God’s majestic power. The first

creation story in Genesis has the appearance of narrating what happened long, long ago. In fact, it is a theological statement in story form of the present, permanent relationship of the universe as we know it to the divine power that even now holds it in being. Psalm 8 is not an account but a celebration of that relationship. By its very being, the creation praises God: even the mouths of infants who cannot yet articulate words praise God in a way quite sufficient to confound his enemies.

Three little points may add to our appreciation of this psalm. First, the order differs from the account in Genesis. Human beings remain the crown of creation, made in God's image, but the order is different. In Genesis, the climax comes at the end of the creation story; here, human beings come immediately after the creation of the heavens and are followed, not preceded, by the animal creation. This bears some similarity to Genesis 2:20, where Adam completes God's work of creation by naming the animals and so giving them their intelligible nature.

Second, what are we to think of the phrase 'little less than the gods' (v. 6)? Is this an assertion that other gods exist? No; rather, it is using the language of the surrounding peoples and indeed the Canaanites, who honoured or worshipped a variety of divinities. Baal, the chief god of Canaan, was a storm-god, represented as hurling a bolt of forked lightning. Often, Hebrew literary forms lean towards such language, sometimes comparing these gods to the Lord, sometimes downgrading them to the status of angels. The letters to the Colossians and Ephesians take stock of the situation explicitly: in Christ everything has its being. 'Everything visible and everything invisible, thrones, ruling forces, sovereignties, powers—all things were created through him and in him' (Colossians 1:16).

Third, the psalm is playfully anthropomorphic: the heavens were shaped by the fingers of God (v. 4). The beginning and end are more theological: the praise is given to the name of the Lord. The name of the Lord bespeaks the divine power. When God reveals the meaning of his name to Moses (Exodus 34:5–7), he reveals the nature of his saving power. In Isaiah we read, 'I am the LORD;

that is my name! I shall not yield my glory to another' (42:8). In the same way, in Acts, Christians are baptised 'into the name of the Lord Jesus' (see 10:48; 19:5), and are those over whom the name of Jesus has been called. That is, Christians are those who put themselves under the power of Jesus.

Psalm 9[9—10]: I will praise you, LORD, with all my heart

In this psalm, the title is verse 1.

Here begins the dislocation of numbering, for Psalm 9 in the Greek version is divided into Psalms 9 and 10 by the Hebrew. The Greek version, the original Bible of the Christian Church, represents the state of the Hebrew in the second century before Christ, so the division in the present Hebrew text must have been made after that. Further indication that the whole poem was originally one comes from the lettering. The psalm is an alphabetical psalm—that is, each quatrain begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, working through from beginning to end. In other psalms the same neat device is used—for example, in Psalms 111[112] and 112[113] there is a new letter for each line; in Psalm 118[119] stanzas of eight lines begin with the same letter.

The psalm is redolent with the spirituality of the Lord's care for the orphan, the oppressed, the needy and the poor. Although God's care for the poor is a theme that runs throughout Israel's literature, pre-exilic spirituality is rather more robust: material success is a blessing from the Lord. From the exile onwards, Israel was more conscious of its own failures and of its continuously oppressed state. The exiles had lost their confidence and concentrated on their guilt, continually expressing their repentance. This was reinforced by circumstances. First there was the state of servitude in the

Babylonian exile. Then, after the return to Judea, came harassment from those who had stayed behind or had been transported there, and oppression by one foreign power after another—Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians, Romans. So in their enforced humility the Israelites saw that this itself was a blessing, that the blessing of the Lord is upon those who trust not in themselves but in God's own saving power. The poor of the Lord are under the shelter of his wings and under the special blessing of his hand.

This spirituality receives its full expression in the prophets of this period, especially Zephaniah. The poor of the Lord are those who accept this state of dependence and put all their trust in God's power and willingness to save: 'Seek the LORD, all you humble of the earth' (Zephaniah 2:3). God declares, 'I shall leave surviving a humble and lowly people, and those who are left in Israel will take refuge in the name of the LORD' (3:12–13). This line of thought runs straight through to the Beatitudes in Luke ('Blessed are you who are poor', 6:20) and to Mary's canticle of the Magnificat.

Psalm 10[11]: In the LORD I have taken refuge

This psalm of confidence is based on the presence of the Lord among his people. Is this presence 'in heaven' or 'in his holy temple' (v. 4)? The lines and the thoughts are in parallel, a frequent phenomenon in Hebrew poetry—or, rather, the one widespread structural element of Hebrew poetry. While English poetry often achieves its balance by a rhyming syllable at the end of the line, Hebrew poetry gains its balance by parallelism. Two lines make roughly the same statement: for example, 'O God, come to my assistance // O Lord, make haste to help me.' Sometimes one of the two statements is phrased negatively: 'Lord, deliver me from my enemies // do not let them triumph over me.' This gives a satisfying

rhythm. In the case of this psalm, whether the Lord is in his temple or in the heavens, the assertion is that the Lord is in control.

The psalm expresses in several different ways the protective presence of God. This is a fundamental theme in the Bible. His eyes watch over the world (v. 4) and, conversely, the upright will ever see his face (v. 7). On Sinai Israel experienced the presence of God among them, choosing them to be his own people. He remained present among them, and Moses went to consult him at the ark of the covenant, housed in the middle of the camp, in the tent of meeting. It was an awesome encounter. The splendour of the Lord was such that Moses subsequently had to keep his face veiled (Exodus 34:33): 'the Israelites could not look Moses steadily in the face' (2 Corinthians 3:7). When David had captured Jerusalem and made it his capital, he made it also God's capital by bringing the ark, the presence of God, into Jerusalem. It was a protecting presence but a presence not to be trifled with, as the fate of Uzzah showed (2 Samuel 6:7).

In the Gospels it is perhaps Matthew who most stresses this presence, which is now the divine presence of Jesus in his Church. Jesus' name, 'Emmanuel', means 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23); in 18:20, Jesus promises to the Church, 'Where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them.' Again in Matthew, corresponding to the initial bracket of 'Emmanuel' is the final bracket, as Jesus, the risen Lord and glorious Son of Man, sends out his apostles, promising, 'I am with you always, to the end of time' (28:20).

Psalm 11[12]: Save me, O LORD

In this psalm, the title is verse 1.

The sadness that the psalmist feels here stems from being enmeshed in a web of lies. To be misrepresented or misunderstood is an ulti-

mate frustration, and here it seems that the false representation is being passed round deliberately, maliciously and rapidly. A right to truth and a good reputation is one of the basic human rights, without which no security is possible. It is one of the major social values, put forward by the Ten Commandments themselves, and the psalmist longs for it, contrasting the web of lies with the purity of God's truth, truthfulness and trustworthiness—to which he applies the lovely image of sparkling silver 'seven times refined' (v. 7).

Another 'gold standard' (or perhaps we should say 'silver standard') enters into the calculations here, namely salvation. The first word of the psalm is 'Save!' and verse 6 repeats this confidence in the Lord's 'salvation'. Here the salvation envisaged is obviously rescue from deceit and misrepresentation, but in Christian prayer the concept is used widely and often thoughtlessly. What does God save us from? From hell, from evil, from slavery to sin, from enemies, from poverty and oppression, from ourselves? Is the basic worry about threatening disaster an unnecessary pessimism for Christians? The image of God as Saviour stems originally from God's rescue of Moses and his people from slavery in Egypt—the great salvation of the exodus. A repetition of this rescue was Israel's expectation in the dark days of the Babylonian exile.

Primarily the Saviour is God, for the title is transferred to Jesus only rarely in the New Testament. In the Gospels it is used almost exclusively by Luke. He uses the concept of Jesus (the name means 'Saviour') in contrast to the saviour-gods of the Roman world. In that uncertain world of unpredictable disaster, it was common to be initiated into cults of mysterious magical deities that promised stability and safety. Luke presents Jesus as the only true Saviour. Jesus travels through Galilee rescuing people from all the fears of sickness, death, alienation, addiction, unknown and threatening powers and taboos, emptying the worm-can of fear. Whatever we fear, Jesus is ultimately the guarantor of liberty and safety.