

*Finding God in the Psalms*



*Finding God  
in the Psalms*

Sing, pray, live

TOM WRIGHT



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*For Annabel*

*I shall walk at liberty, for I have sought your precepts.*

Psalm 119.45



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## *Chapter 1*

### *Introduction*

THIS BOOK IS A PERSONAL PLEA. THE PSALMS, which make up the great hymnbook at the heart of the Bible, have been the daily lifeblood of Christians, and of course the Jewish people, from the earliest times. Yet in many Christian circles today, the Psalms are simply not used. And in many places where they are still used, whether said or sung, they are often reduced to a few verses to be recited as a ‘filler’ between other parts of the liturgy or worship services. In the latter case, people often don’t seem to realize what they’re singing. In the former case, they don’t seem to realize what they’re missing. This book is an attempt to reverse those trends. I see this as an urgent task.

Suppose the Psalms had been lost and had never been printed in any Bibles or prayer books. Suppose

they then turned up in a faded but still legible scroll, discovered by archaeologists in the sands of Jordan or Egypt. What would happen? When deciphered and translated, they would be on the front page of every newspaper in the world. Many scholars from many disciplines would marvel at the beauty and content of these ancient worship songs and poems.

The Psalms are among the oldest poems in the world, and they still rank with any poetry in any culture, ancient or modern, from anywhere in the world. They are full of power and passion, horrendous misery and unrestrained jubilation, tender sensitivity and powerful hope. Anyone at all whose heart is open to new dimensions of human experience, anyone who loves good writing, anyone who wants a window into the bright lights and dark corners of the human soul – anyone open to the beautiful expression of a larger vision of reality should react to these poems like someone who hasn't had a good meal for a week or two. It's all here.

And astonishingly, it doesn't get lost in translation. Most poetry suffers when translated into other languages because it relies for its effect on the sound and rhythm of the original words. It's true that the Hebrew of these poems is beautiful in itself for those

who can experience it. But the Psalms rely for their effect on the way they set out the main themes. They say something from one angle and then repeat it from a slightly different one:

*By the word of YHWH the heavens were  
made,  
and all their host by the breath of his  
mouth. (33.6)*

*I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings from of old.  
(78.2)*

*You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
(139.3)*

Even when this doesn't happen line by line, it often happens between different sections of a psalm or in the balance of the collection, or a part of it, as a whole.

The important point here is that some of the most important things we want to say remain just a little beyond even our best words. The first sentence is a

signpost to the deep reality; the second, a signpost from a slightly different place. The reader is invited to follow both and to see the larger, unspoken truth looming up behind. This means that not only can the effect be maintained in translation, but the effect is itself one of the deepest things the Psalms are doing, making it clear that the best human words point beyond themselves to realities that transcend even high poetic description. (Something similar is achieved elsewhere in the Bible – for instance, in the provision in Genesis of *two* creation stories, offering two picture-language images for a reality that lies beyond either.)

All this, as I said, should capture the attention and generate the excitement of anyone sensitive to powerful writing on the great themes of human life. But for those who, in whatever way, stand in the spiritual traditions of Judaism and Christianity, there is all that and much, much more. That makes it all the more frustrating that the Psalms are so often neglected today or used at best in a perfunctory and shallow way.

In some parts of contemporary Christianity, the Psalms are no longer used in daily and weekly worship. This is so especially at points where there has been remarkable growth in numbers and energy, not

least through the charismatic movements in various denominations. The enormously popular ‘worship songs’, some of which use phrases from the Psalms here and there but most of which do not, have largely displaced, for thousands of regular and enthusiastic worshippers, the steady rhythm and deep soul-searching of the Psalms themselves. This, I believe, is a great impoverishment.

By all means write new songs. Each generation must do that. But to neglect the church’s original hymnbook is, to put it bluntly, crazy. There are many ways of singing and praying the Psalms; there are styles to suit all tastes. That, indeed, is part of their enduring charm. I hope that one of the effects of this little book will be to stimulate and encourage those who lead worship in many different settings to think and pray about how to reintegrate the church’s ancient prayer book into the regular and ordinary life of their fellowships. The Psalms represent the Bible’s own spiritual root system for the great tree we call Christianity. You don’t have to be a horticultural genius to know what will happen to the fruit on the tree if the roots are not in good condition.

But I’m not writing simply to say, ‘These are important songs that we should use and try to

understand.’ That is true, but it puts the emphasis the wrong way round – as though the Psalms are the problem, and we should try to fit them into our world. Actually, again and again it is we, muddled and puzzled and half-believing, who are the problem; and the question is more how *we* can find our way into *their* world, into the faith and hope that shine out in one psalm after another.

As with all thoughtful Christian worship, there is a humility about this approach. Good liturgy, whether formal or informal, ought never to be simply a corporate upsurge of emotion, however ‘Christian’, but a fresh and awed attempt to inhabit the great unceasing liturgy that is going on all the time in the heavenly realms. (That’s what those great chapters, Revelation 4 and 5, are all about.) The Psalms offer us a way of joining in a chorus of praise and prayer that has been going on for millennia and across all cultures. Not to try to inhabit them, while continuing to invent non-psalmonic ‘worship’ based on our own feelings of the moment, risks being like a spoilt child who, taken to the summit of Table Mountain with the city and the ocean spread out before him, refuses to gaze at the view because he is playing with his Game Boy.

In particular, I propose in this book that the regular praying and singing of the Psalms is *transformative*.

It changes the way we understand some of the deepest elements of who we are, or rather, who, where, when and what we are: we are creatures of space, time and matter, and though we take our normal understandings of these for granted, it is my suggestion that the Psalms will gently but firmly transform our understandings of all of them. They do this in order that we may be changed, transformed, so that we look at the world, one another and ourselves in a radically different way, which we believe to be God's way. I hope my exposition of these themes will help to explain and communicate my own enthusiasm for the Psalms, but I hope even more that they will encourage those churches that have lost touch with the Psalms to go back to them as soon as possible, and those that use them but with little grasp of what they're about to get inside them in a new way.

The Psalms thus transform what I have called our 'worldview'. I use this term in a specific way that I have developed over the last twenty years. A 'worldview' in this sense is like a pair of spectacles: it is what you look *through*, not what you look *at*. Worldviews, in this sense, are complex and consist of the swirling combination of stories, symbols, habitual praxis and assumed answers to key questions (Who are we? Where are we? What's wrong? What's the

solution? What time is it?). This developed notion of ‘worldview’ has its roots in some aspects of continental philosophy, though I have developed it slightly differently; I have set it all out in various places, such as the volumes in my series *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. There is, however, a quite different meaning of ‘worldview’ that has recently become popular in some circles in America, particularly under the influence of Francis Schaeffer and his disciples. There it is used to refer to a basic kit of would-be Christian assumptions that for some reason have taken on a particular political slant. That is not what I am talking about, as will become clear.

This book makes no attempt to discuss who wrote the Psalms or when. Nor do I discuss the theories as to how they have been shaped and edited into their present format. Those are important questions but not for this book. Jewish and Christian traditions see King David, a thousand years before Jesus, as the writer of the Psalms; scholarly tradition, eager as always not to appear naive or to be taken in by previous beliefs, has dated them much later – within the last three or four hundred years before Christ. Our knowledge of Israel’s early history is patchy at best,

forming a very uneven surface on which to hit the billiard balls of ancient evidence around the table. One cannot prove that any of the psalms go back to King David himself, but one cannot prove, either, that none of them do. Many of them clearly reflect both the language and the setting of much later periods. As with our modern hymnbooks, this may be due to subsequent editorial activity, or it may be that they were composed by writers who thought of themselves as standing within a poetic tradition they themselves believed to go back to Israel's early monarchy. These debates have sometimes reflected modern theories of 'inspiration' (does it happen through one individual or through a community?), but there is no sign that the ancient Israelites or second-Temple Jews were worried about such things.

It seems wisest to think of the Psalms, in their present form, being collected and shaped in the time of the exile in Babylon (beginning in the sixth century BC), when paradoxically the people who found it unthinkable to sing the Lord's song in a strange land may have found that actually singing those songs (and writing some new ones) was one of the few things that kept them sane and gave them hope. That they formed the basic hymnbook of the second Temple in

Jerusalem (beginning with the reconstruction of the Temple after the return from exile, which began near the transition from the sixth to the fifth century BC), as well as of the thousands of local Jewish gatherings (in 'synagogues') around the world and in the holy land itself, we should have no doubt.

A caveat is in order at this point. It is likely that in the first Temple in Jerusalem, and perhaps in the second as well, rebuilt after the exile, the actual singers were Levites who were trained to make music on behalf of all the people. As with the sacrificial cult, the people would come to the Temple, but the regular officials would perform the final act on their behalf. This doesn't mean that the majority of worshippers were ignorant of what was being sung or unmoved by the words or the music. It just means that they almost certainly had more of a sense of corporate solidarity than is common today in modern Western individualism. The worship was that of the whole people of God, even if some people were set apart, trained and equipped to offer it publicly. Away from the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jews developed centres of meeting and worship referred to as 'synagogues'. Frustratingly, we do not know as much as we would like to about how first-century Jews ordered their regular worship in the synagogues, either in the holy

land itself or around the Jewish diaspora. It is highly likely, though, that the Psalms featured prominently and that ordinary worshippers were encouraged to join in and make them their own.

This means, of course, that the Psalms were the hymnbook that Jesus and his first followers would have known by heart. Even in today's world, where electronic gadgets have radically reduced the need for memorization, most of us can remember the songs, whether sacred or secular, that were popular in our childhood and teenage years. Jesus and his contemporaries would have known the Psalms inside out. Paul would have prayed and sung them from his earliest years. What Jesus believed and understood about his own identity and vocation, and what Paul came to believe and understand about Jesus's unique achievement, they believed and understood within a psalm-shaped world. That same shaping, remarkably, is open to us today. That is the burden of my song.

Because this book is more than simply an intellectual argument, I also want to draw on my own experience as an example of how the Psalms can work in the actual day-to-day business of living. So I have included an afterword entitled 'My Life with the Psalms' where, I hope, I can say by example what I have argued for in the previous chapters.

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