

INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

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The Psalter is an unruly but integral collection of the sacred verse of ancient Israël. The poetry resonates not just from word to word, or from verse to verse, but dynamically across the whole range of the collection. Meanings echo back and forth across the expanse of the Psalter, «deep calling out to deep» (Psalm 42:8), as the consolations and challenges of inspiration roll over us. Verses appear and reappear, each time contributing something a little different. So it is that the Psalter must be confronted globally. Any word here or there may contribute substantially to the meaning of a verse many psalms away. The Psalter as a whole wants to help us understand each individual psalm.

Synoptic Scholarship

The word "synoptic" is usually associated with the gospels. The three "Synoptic Gospels" (Matthew, Mark and Luke) narrate many of the same events in words that are similar yet different. The similarities reveal shared sources, while the differences clarify editorial priorities. Some pericopes have parallels also in the Fourth Gospel, or in the apostolic writings. So the notion of synoptic study extends beyond the gospels proper.

Significant parallels also exist within the Hebrew Bible. Chronicles re-narrate many of the same events already found in Kings. Psalms 14 and 53 are the same psalm reworked by two different hands, while Psalms 111 and 112 are mirror psalms which come from the same hand. Psalm 18 appears with variations in 2 Samuel 22. As with the gospels, similarities reveal common sources, and the differences belong to the editors.

Long before the invention of form criticism, comparison of texts was important in the creation of biblical concordances, dictionaries and grammars. Lexicographers fix the definition of a word by comparing available contexts in which that word appears. A word that appears many times in the literature can be fine-tuned, but words that appear only once (hapax legomenon) or twice (bis legomenon) are notoriously difficult. The Psalter is a nice environment for word honing, because of the parallel structure of Hebrew verse. Synonyms and antonyms are clustered, shedding light upon one another.

The Masoretic scholars of the Ninth Century produced the so-called Masorah Gedolah (abbreviated Mm for Masorah Magna), a concordance of the grammar, vocabulary and idioms of the entire Hebrew Bible. Numbers cross-reference passages which illustrate similar Hebrew usage. One stands in awe of the erudition of those medieval scholars who lay the foundation for modern scholarship by their scrupulous attention to detail and encyclopedic knowledge of the text.

Synoptic Spirituality

In his work *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine encourages comparison of biblical passages. He says that one can never go wrong in interpreting difficult passages, if one's interpretation is supported by clear passages. This follows from the doctrine that the Holy Spirit cannot contradict himself. Even if the human authors did not see a connection between two passages, the Spirit foresaw the possibility of their shedding light upon each other. Augustine cautions, however, against undisciplined exegesis, such as the interpretation of literal passages figuratively or of figurative passages literally.

Ancient Jewish exegetes had the custom of bringing together different passages of Scripture to clarify one other. Because the human authors were not seen as having equal rank, the Rabbis had a fixed rule (Gezerah Sheba) of interpreting Law with Law, Prophets with Prophets and Writings with Writings. Saint Paul, who was well schooled in rabbinic exegesis, follows this rule in his letters. The Letter to the Hebrews observes this rule when it begins with a chain of psalm quotations. First Timothy evens the playing field with the doctrine that «all Scripture is inspired of God and useful for teaching» and so post-apostolic writers freely combine texts from any part of Scripture.

Synopsis of the Psalms

Those who pray the psalms as well as those who study them can benefit from a book lining up the parallels within the Psalter as well as with the rest of the Scripture. At prayer, the Church has covered the entire Psalter in a single day (by hermits), in a single week (by Benedict's Rule and the traditional Roman Office), in a three-week cycle (many Benedictine monasteries today) or a four-week cycle (the contemporary Roman Office). A month-long cycle suits the busy needs of modern life, but may be too long for links between psalms to be clearly seen. Consequently, even those who pray the psalms frequently may need a tool to confirm intuited connections.

Those dedicated to the study and translation of the Psalter must constantly check words and phrases against other contexts in which they may be found. So the same tool that is useful in prayer could prove indispensable for study purposes. Past translation efforts have been impeded by the absence of such a tool. Thus the same word or phrase may be seen translated in wildly different ways from place to place, making it impossible for the final reader to see any connection at all.

With the document *Liturgiam authenticam* of 2002, the Vatican issued new guidelines for a more literal, "formally equivalent" translation standard, and that kind of scrupulous effort needs awareness of parallels in order to achieve its own stated goals. It was too easy in the past to gloss over difficult passages by paraphrasing everything under the rubric of "dynamic equivalence." The translation contained in this volume has sought to meet this new, higher bar of scrupulous faithfulness to Hebrew idiom. Further discussion of poetic devices, including the recurrence of certain parallel passages, may be found in the introductory notes to each of the psalms.

Hebrew Loan Words

Liturgiam authenticam indicates that biblical words which have survived into the liturgy should be retained in their original form. Instead of translating words like "amen" or "alleluia" into their etymological meaning, they are to be left transliterated. In English, this principal has a wider application. English is a hybrid language with many tens of thousands of loan words borrowed from Latin, Greek, French, Hebrew and other languages. If a Hebrew word appears in English literature, has a recognition value to English readers, and has found its way into the English dictionary, then it is not really just a Hebrew word any more.

Some of these Hebrew "loan words" include:

SABAÖTH — "armies" or "hosts"

TORAH — "teaching" (of God through Moses) MESSIAH — "anointed one"

SHALOM — "peace"

SHOFAR — "ram's horn"

SHEÖL — "netherworld" 16:10, 30:4, 49:16, 86:13 BELIAL — "destruction"

ADONAI — "My Lordship" (divine title)

SHADDAI — "My Avenger" or "My Nurturer" (divine title)

Divine Names and Appellatives

Because the Sámi people of northernmost Scandinavia live in a circumpolar region, they have more words for snow than any other language on land. Because the Hebrew people have been conscious of God for millennia, they possess an abundance of names and titles for God. As the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, Syriac, Latin and other languages, seven different Hebrew words became reduced to "God" or "Lord." Since these divine appellatives form part of the way that Hebrew authors did theology, the impoverishment of vocabulary has cheated the Judaeo-Christian world of access to the clarity of Hebrew thought. Here the seven terms are treated distinctly from each other. Two of the terms are left transliterated, the other five are translated:

EL — God (basic word in Semitic languages)

ELOAH — Godhead (the divine nature)

ELOHIM — Divine One (plural used with singular meaning)

ADON — Lord (basic word in Semitic languages)

ADONAI — Adonai (transliteration)

YAH — Yah (transliteration) YAHW'Ħ — The Lord of Being (lordship expressed with verb "to be")

Tonus Peregrinus

The principle of "formal equivalence" seems to require that poetry be translated as poetry. To ensure that this translation preserves the cadence of Hebrew poetry, the text has been accented for chanting on Tonus Peregrinus, an ancient Hebrew tone absorbed into the repertory of Gregorian Chant (*Liber usualis*, 117; *Antiphonale monasticum*, 1218). In the Roman Office—but not the monastic—the one psalm which employs this tone is Sunday Vesper Psalm 114 (*Liber*, 254), which celebrates exodus from Egypt and entry into the Holy Land. Eric Werner discovered that the Jews of Yemen use that same tone with the same psalm ("Die jüdischen Wurzeln der christlichen Kirchenmusik." in *Geschichte der katholischen Kirchenmusik*, 1. ed. K. G. Fellerer. Kassel and Basel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 1972; pp. 22–30). The wide geographical diffusion of this melody signifies great antiquity, perhaps as far back as the Second Temple.

Despite its migration westwards, Tonus Peregrinus can still be employed for chanting the original Hebrew text. Past attempts at setting English texts to this and other ancient tones have had limited success, because the modern translations did not try to retain an original rhythm and pulse. If a translation can be fluidly sung on this tone, then Hebrew cadence has clearly been maintained.