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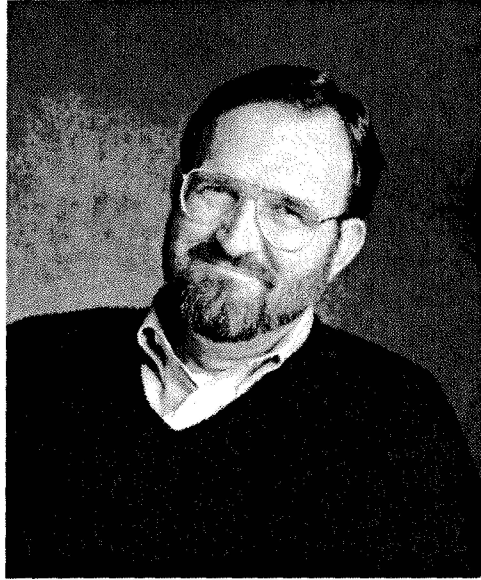


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LEARNING TO READ THE PSALMS

Howard R. Macy

To speak of “reading” the Psalms risks distorting from the outset how to approach them. We are prone to read informationally rather than transformationally, to read “objectively,” at a distance, merely indulging our curiosity and desire to control. Coming to know the Psalms requires more. It requires deep listening and engagement and these, at their best, in the context of the community of faith.

Rather than seeing the Psalms simply as “texts,” we more accurately approach them as the prayers and songs of a worshipping community going back as much as three thousand years. Jews and Christians have used them in temples and synagogues, homes and catacombs, cathedrals and monasteries, prayer groups and private devotion, and they still endure as the unrivalled community resource for prayer and worship. I join with those who believe that the Spirit of God guided in creating, preserving, and recognizing the value of these songs that have become scripture. I also affirm that the Spirit continues to teach through and enliven the Psalms to lead us to encounter with God.

The Psalms do not teach in as direct a way as the Torah, the Prophets, the Gospels, or the Epistles. Rather than words from God, in some sense, they are words to God. They are words of prayer—praising, pleading, trusting,

thanking, complaining. Yet, as we understand that it is God alone who teaches us to pray, attending to and entering these songs opens to us the geography and language of prayer. The Psalms give us words we could not find, permission to pray in ways that we scarcely dared, assurance that, even in dark times, God draws near in love and power.

In reflecting on how I approach the Psalms, I find that I use three complementary but distinct approaches. The first is analytical or exegetical, the second is imaginative, and the third is prayerful. Because I tend to impose my own time and culture on the Psalms, I need to explore how their first singers and hearers understood them. Because the Psalms are poetry and song, I need to see and hear them with a receptive imagination. Because the Psalms have their life in the heart of worship, I must learn to enter them in prayer.

Exploring the Psalms

For me, careful exegesis is a valuable approach to engaging the Psalms. Simply put, exegesis uses a variety of analytical tools to discover how the original singers and hearers of these songs might have understood them. Contrary to some contemporary approaches to interpretation, this assumes that we can discover what the first writers intended to say and that when we use these songs we should be guided by their message. Disciplined study can both forestall misleading interpretations and open refreshing insights that we might miss.

The work of analysis belongs to a community of readers, some of whom bring special technical skills. Much

of this work is available in accessible Bible commentaries for readers who want to explore it. One such technical skill is text criticism, which tries to establish as accurately as possible the original reading of the biblical text. Good translations and study Bibles clue ordinary readers about where this makes a difference in the text. For example, in Psalm 100:3 modern interpreters believe the reading "It is he that made us, and we are his" is more accurate than the traditional rendering "and not we ourselves."

Analyzing literary forms can also increase understanding. For example, the careful work of form criticism has identified specific forms for praise, thanksgiving, and lament songs and how they are organized internally. I have found helpful spiritual insight in the way that the lament song gathers complaint, confessions of trust, pleas for help, and expressions of praise. The form of the hymn itself also teaches the ways of worship.

We can also explore the Psalms by looking into their historical and cultural backgrounds. Unlike much of the Old Testament, we can rarely know the specific circumstances of most of the Psalms, though no doubt this actually contributes to their continuing timelessness and timeliness. We can reconstruct in some measure, though, the circumstances and activities of worship—architecture, instruments, ritual practices, processions, shouting, dancing, antiphonal singing. With this we can learn to enter into the spirit and majesty of lines like "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! That the

King of glory may come in" (Psalm 24:7).¹ Similarly, when we learn that shepherding language in ancient Israel referred to not only green pastures but also royal courts, it can add depth to "The Lord is my shepherd" (Psalm 23) and similar phrases. So can learning about shepherding itself.

One of my favorite analytical tools is exploring the meanings of words, trying to reach behind the limitations of translation. (Almost anyone can do this by comparing translations and using study tools such as commentaries and theological wordbooks.) It deepened my understanding, for example, when I discovered that the same Hebrew word translated "meditate" in Psalm 1 is translated "plot" in Psalm 2. Suddenly it made a sharp contrast between giving your focused attention to living in God's way (Psalm 1) and steadily focusing your attention to rebelling against God's purposes (Psalm 2). Similarly, I have loved with many others the assurance that God's "goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (Psalm 23:6). But it still cheers me to know that the word "follow" has more to do with pursuing than tagging along behind. To be pursued by God's "mercy" (Hebrew *hesed*), God's never-give-up-on-you love, is reassuring, indeed.

Seeing the Psalms

Reading analytically offers fine rewards, and it would be easy to stop there. For me as a person trained in biblical studies the texts often tease me to explore yet one more

¹ Bible verses are from the New Revised Standard Version.

word or phrase, usually with profit. Others, less tempted by such habits of study, may be satisfied by the informational reading that they use to manage most of their everyday reading of newspapers, reports, textbooks, junk mail, and more. We tend to scan, skim, and read words well but superficially. That kind of reading probably serves us well, but it won't lead us adequately into the Psalms.

The main drawback of informational reading is that the Psalms are poetry, and you don't read poetry like the classifieds, obituaries, box scores, or editorials. (Nor do I suggest that you read the classifieds like poetry.) Just like some of my students who confess they don't like poetry, I suspect that many of us don't read much poetry at all. Learning to read the Psalms (not to mention the Old Testament Wisdom Literature and the Prophets) requires that we try.

One useful approach is to learn something about how the structure of the poetry works, just as in a literature class we might learn about rhyme, rhythm, and the stress pattern in iambic pentameter. Many people find the Psalms more accessible when they know how the repetition and development of ideas grows out of the Hebrew poetic principle of parallelism. It's an interesting and useful pursuit, and those who understand it can better read the Psalms both for artfulness and accuracy. Structural understandings alone, however, won't unpack Hebrew poetry any more than mastering iambic pentameter will reveal the treasures in William Shakespeare's sonnets.

Poetry, including the Psalms, invites us to read with our imaginations and our hearts. The language is vivid, visual, sensate. It is filled with stirring images and, in the Psalms particularly, with high exaggeration (or hyperbole). It is trying to crack open places of complacent thinking, to jolt lethargic hearts. It stretches to say things we can hardly speak of, to point to the mysteries we know are true but don't have the words for. To read the Psalms well, we must learn to listen on these terms, for there are some things that we can know only by heart.

It helps me to think of reading visually, that is, reading slowly and attentively enough to let pictures unfold and to savor them. Many of the word pictures are right at hand because they come from nature. We can recall seeing dry, cracked ground thirsting for rain. We can imagine timely, abundant rain making the earth glad. When I get to hear the crashing waves of the ocean, I can imagine it roaring its joy in God's rule, and with it forests and hills singing and rivers clapping their hands. In my mind I can feel the shelter of strong walls or high mountain caves, the comforting provision of green pastures and gentle waters.

The language of hyperbole invites us to enter more with the heart than with reason. The singer's awareness of sin leads him to say that his iniquities are "more than the hairs of my head" (Psalm 40:12) or that he was a sinner even from conception, a wicked zygote (Psalms 51:5). This is not the language of definition and proof texts, as it is often taken. Nor is the witness that God removes our transgression "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12) or the confession (or complaint?) that we can't escape God's presence—from the heavens to Sheol, east to

west, in the darkness (Psalm 139). This is the language of high exaggeration that points beyond itself to even greater realities.

Reading the Psalms in this way requires patience, waiting, a receptive imagination. Sometimes we can act to grow our imaginations a bit, perhaps by experimenting with vivid language of our own in response to the Psalms or by being more attentive to our experience, or by sharing the experience and vision of others. I like illustrated “coffee-table” books to help with this, particularly those that picture the land and living culture of those who first sang these songs. In any event, we can act purposefully to receive the poetry of the Psalms and let it blow the doors off our hearts and minds and open us to new worlds of knowing God.

Praying the Psalms

In *Answering God*, Eugene Peterson insists that we can come to know the Psalms only by praying them. The more I use the Psalms, the more I agree with him. For one thing, as he teaches, the language of the Psalms is the language of intimacy and relationship, not the language of description or information. To understand the language of encounter, we must enter and embrace it, not stand outside it. We best understand the language of adoration and confession, despair and doubt, thanksgiving and trust when we share it rather than when we observe it.

I have already observed that in praying the Psalms God teaches us to pray, opening the themes and language of prayer. Yet, as we enter them, the Psalms do more than give us the language we need. They also become a mirror,

revealing obscure or hidden realities about who we are, how we live our lives, and how we respond to God. As we enter into the language of relationship, God uses them to search us out, to challenge, to comfort and to renew. This is one of the reasons that Peterson, Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the historic practice of the Church in the daily office and the lectionary insist that we need to pray all of the Psalms, even the ones that seem difficult for us.

The Quaker insistence on integrity, which I heartily share, rejected early on using prayers from government-approved prayer books, honoring instead prayer prompted directly by God. I remember well, in what I now regard as youthful arrogance, inwardly judging a minister who used a prayer book to lead in public prayer. The poor guy, in my mind an impostor of sorts, surely didn't know God well enough to really pray. In my experience, sometimes overly earnest worship leaders, urging me to pay attention to the words of songs and sing them like I really mean it, have heightened the question of integrity. Yet using the Psalms, all of them, does not violate this concern. Other Christians who, like Friends, rejected the prayer books, never abandoned the Psalms. Indeed, for some of them, these were, and are even now, the only songs they would sing in worship. They knew that entering into the Psalms is a way of being present to God, expectant and vulnerable, as well as a way of being fully part of God's people.

One approach to the Psalms I find helpful is meditation on scripture or *lectio divina*, "holy reading." Guides to this ancient practice describe it helpfully in a variety of ways, though at its heart it is quite simple. It is reading patiently,

attentively, expecting that God may encounter us and teach us through the text. As we read, a word or phrase may particularly grab our attention; guides will refer to this variously as a warming, a stop, an almost visual lighting, a sizzle. Whatever that bump may be, it invites us to wait there, to brood over and savor the text, to wait to see how this may be an opening to God's moving in us. When feeling released from that place, we can read on or, depending on our leading, conclude in a way appropriate to that experience.

A similarly helpful approach is to pray the scripture. At one level, of course, we enter into the words of the psalm, which is a prayer, and we use those words to express our own heart, to guide us in prayer. But we can go beyond that by taking the words of the psalm and expanding them, letting them guide us as we offer our own hearts to God in praise, in pain, in confusion, in neediness, in deep gladness, wherever we may be. It's another way of letting God help our prayer as well as hear our prayer.

Two other particular practices help me enter the Psalms in prayer and worship. The first is simply reading the Psalms aloud. It engages more fully our senses and energies—seeing, speaking, hearing, making choices in interpreting—in ways that are surprisingly helpful. The second is to sing the Psalms. After all, they are songs, and the coupling of lyric and melody is very powerful. We largely guess about what the original musical forms might have been, but the Psalms have gathered many musical settings over the years from chant to chorale to jazz. Using those that reach us individually can open new insights and deepen the Psalms' transforming power in our lives.

Finally, I've become increasingly aware that we sing and pray the Psalms in the context of the community of faith. At one level I know that these songs come to me from the "blessed fellowship" or "communion of saints," from the people of God who first wrote and sang them and the people who have cherished them through many centuries. I am also moved to know that in any moment I read, pray, and sing the Psalms, I am joining countless others around the world, in many places and many conditions, who are sharing the same songs. We sing with each other. But, in our local fellowships and in solidarity with the people of God around the world, we may also sing on behalf of one another.

For any of us at any given moment, not every psalm speaks to our circumstances. We may not resonate with words of praise, or of thanksgiving, or of complaint, or of pleas to be delivered from persecutors. At any moment, however, each psalm speaks directly to some in the larger fellowship. So we can sing each other's songs in the spirit of rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. As we enter in, the Psalms may alert us to the condition of others, tendering our hearts and inviting our care. We can sing songs gladly in support of others, and sometimes on behalf of others who are in such straits that they cannot even sing for themselves.

The Psalms are an inexhaustible treasure. Though I've studied and taught them often, they still invite me to understand them more thoughtfully, receive them more imaginatively and enter them more prayerfully. My journey has just begun.

Bibliography

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