

looking back from it to the time of Abraham and on from it to the conquest of Canaan. Psalm 106 traces the same story from Egypt, through the journey and the conquest, to the time of the judges, now with an almost wholly negative tone.

In answer to the question of when liturgical psalms would have been used in Israel, scholars have suggested a variety of special occasions, sometimes with very little, if any, basis in Scripture. But there was one such occasion, touched on in earlier psalms (most recently 81),¹⁷⁹ about which the Bible tells us a lot. This was the feast of Tabernacles, which as well as celebrating the completion of the harvest included every seventh year a reading of the law God gave through Moses,¹⁷⁹ and recalled every year the time when God brought his people out of Egypt and through the wilderness.¹⁸⁰

So on the one hand a real, not hypothetical, festival draws thousands of worshippers to Jerusalem and over an eight-day period commemorates the exodus. On the other hand a collection of seventeen psalms (two for each day of the festival, and one extra either to begin it or to round it off?), not only reflects the exodus story frequently, but at certain points connects with it in detail and in order - Psalm 95 with Exodus 17; Psalm 99 with Exodus 24; and Psalm 103 with Exodus 34. In fact it is possible, as we shall see, to plot correspondences between all seventeen psalms and a sequence, in order, of readings from Exodus.

It seems not unreasonable, therefore, to think of Book IV as a collection for use at Tabernacles; or, given that that is only a theory, at least to call it an Exodus Collection.

Psalm 90

According to its heading, the psalm that introduces Book IV is *A prayer of Moses the man of God*. In that, and in other respects too, it is unique in the Psalter; and even in the rest of the Old Testament, perhaps only Isaiah 40 matches its opening verses for their awe-inspiring contrast between the greatness of God and the littleness of man. From them comes one of the best known of all English hymns, Isaac Watts's 'O God, our help in ages past'.¹⁸¹

1. *Man frail, and God eternal* (vv. 1-6)

'Man frail, and God eternal' was the title Watts gave to the first part of his hymn. Its nine stanzas, six of which are in common use today,

¹⁷⁹ See pp. 237ff.

¹⁷⁹ Deut. 31:9-13.

¹⁸⁰ Lev. 23:39-43.

¹⁸¹ So most modern hymn books print its first line. This was John Wesley's alteration of the original 'O God, our help'. Watts wrote another paraphrase of the same psalm, in a different metre, whose first line is 'Lord, what a feeble piece!' So it is when compared to this one, perhaps Watts's finest.

are for once a real paraphrase. Their lines are woven from the Old Testament text as it stands, without the New Testament gloss that their author so often adds, as for example when he turns Psalm 72 into 'Jesus shall reign'.¹⁸²

With the phrase *from generation to generation* the NEB reflects the Hebrew of verse 1 - the sweep of the ages from man's point of view, Watts's 'Our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come'. It is balanced by *from everlasting to everlasting* (v. 2), the same thing from God's point of view. The nine stanzas of the hymn, covering only verses 1-6, stress the reassurance of verse 1 ('Under the shadow of thy throne Thy saints have dwelt secure'), returning to it at the end with 'our eternal home'. The psalm as a whole has a darker tone. It stresses not the continuity of all the generations, but the transience of each of them, in a series of striking pictures.

Dust does not figure in the Hebrew of verse 3b, but the NIV is probably right to repeat it from verse 3a.¹⁸³ Thus reinforcing each other, the two lines look back to Genesis 2:7 and 3:19: 'God formed man from the dust ... "Dust you are and to dust you will return."¹⁸⁴

The thousand years of verse 4 are not exactly Watts's 'thousand ages in thy sight ... like an evening gone', though what he says is true enough. The psalmist's theme is the brevity, not of time itself, but of human life, and he surely has in mind the extraordinary ages of the people of antiquity recorded in Genesis 5, several of which exceeded 900 years. 'Even those whose life-span was near-millennial ... came to death like all others.'¹⁸⁵

A flood is the first picture in verse 5: 'Time like an ever-rolling stream Bears all its sons away.' Watts found it explicit in his AV, and it is implicit in the NIV's verb 'to sweep away'. The second picture is sleep, whether we are meant to think of a day that is ended by sleep, or 'a dream' that 'dies with the opening day'. The third, following through into verse 6, is the grass of the Middle Eastern countryside, not the evergreen plant of temperate climates but one that can both spring up and wither in the space of a few hours.

The psalmist speaks considerably more about the frailty of man than about the eternity of God. We may say readily enough that we believe God is eternal, but we need to be reminded repeatedly that our life in this world is not. For every advance in medical or environmental technology helps to reinforce the illusion that it could

¹⁸² See p. 1249.

¹⁸³ Less likely is the view of some, that when 'God causes one generation to die off,' i.e. to turn to dust, v. 3a, 'He calls another into being,' i.e. to turn back, v. 3b (so Luther; and see Delitzsch, vol. 3, p. 51).

¹⁸⁴ In Genesis the word for 'dust' is different, but the word for 'return' is the same.

¹⁸⁵ Motyer, p. 545.

be. It is easy to snigger at the maudlin death-bed scenes of Victorian fiction, but as someone once said (the modern world has forgotten who), 'Blessed are those who mourn.'¹⁸⁶ Every death is a little undermining of humanity's pride in this respect.

2. Man sinful, and God wrathful (vv. 7-11)

There is a reason for the shortness of human life, the burden of verses 3-6. *Thou turnest man back to the dust ... for we are consumed by thy anger* (vv. 3, 7 RSV). The little word *for* throws a narrow but intense beam of light on a range of Bible questions - the great age of Methuselah among them! Why does the story of the Garden of Eden seem so unreal to the modern mind, the stuff of legend? Why is such a steep decline in life expectancy noted at the beginning of Scripture? Indeed, why do human beings die at all?

The Bible's answer is summed up here in Psalm 90. We are mortal because God is angry, and God is angry because we are sinful. When we say that man is a creature of dust, we mean not simply that he was made of it but also that he returns to it (v. 3). Genesis 3:19, which recorded the pronouncement of this doom, is the background to that verse; and Genesis 3:17, which records the reason (Adam's disobedience), is the background to verse 8: *You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.*

The effect of God's wrath at the sinfulness of humanity is that our days pass away under it. Even more to the point, they 'decline', as the verb might be translated - the word is the one Jeremiah uses, as the destruction of Jerusalem draws near: 'Woe to us, for the day declines, for the shadows of evening lengthen!'¹⁸⁷ - as though human life passed its noontide when Adam fell, and has ever since been growing steadily darker and more chilly.

That long, long descent may be exactly the reason why our psalmist says, *The length of our days is seventy years*. What a decline from the thousand years of verse 4, which the old patriarchs only just missed! The curve has levelled out, we still have our threescore years and ten, *yet their span is but trouble and sorrow*, and they still lead inexorably downward to the grave.

Such are the wages of sin.¹⁸⁸ Verse 11b is difficult, but may well mean that God's wrath towards men is proportionate to the reverence they fail to show towards him. That, at bottom, is what sin is.

3. Man praying, and God answering (vv. 12-17)

The psalmist has already accepted that he is a part of sinful humanity, as guilty as anyone else. Now he puts into the words of

¹⁸⁶ Matt. 5:4. ¹⁸⁷ Jer. 6:4 RSV. ¹⁸⁸ Rom. 6:23.

six prayers, one for each remaining verse, the response that every humble penitent should make to the God of eternity, once it is grasped that he is also a God of wrath.

First, *Teach us*. The numbering of days is a lesson not in elementary arithmetic but in life-changing theology. Teach us not how many days we have lived so far, still less how many may be left to us, but *why* it is that our years are so comparatively few (why seventy, and not a thousand - why, indeed, the patriarchs were limited even to a thousand), and why they are so beset with trouble. In the words of Augustine, noted in connection with Psalm 32, the beginning of knowledge is to know yourself a sinner. That is why. That is the heart of wisdom.

Secondly, *Relent*. *Turn* and *return* in verse 3, and *relent* in verse 13, all represent the same word. It was a key word in two of the psalms of Book III, 80 and 85.¹⁸⁹ God will continue to turn sinners back to dust, as it were - that is, to bring about the death which is the consequence of sin - and only a repentant sinner, one who turns from his sin, has any hope of seeing God turn from the course of inexorable justice.

But there is that hope. It is based on the covenant love of God, it looks forward to a new morning after this 'long day's journey into night',¹⁹⁰ and therefore it can pray thirdly that he will *satisfy* the penitent with joy and gladness. So is the declining day of verse 9 to be followed by another morning, after all? And will it be in this life or the next? Either way, there is some remarkable insight here.

Fourthly, *Make us glad* with blessings in proportion to our afflictions. A daring prayer! Yet it falls short of the great New Testament promise; for 'our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all'.¹⁹¹

The last two prayers, for God to reveal to us both himself and his deeds and for his favour to rest on us, belong together. They show a humble grasp of the fact that there is something even greater than his wrath. In New Testament terms it is the grace that meets the demands of justice and righteousness and can therefore bless sinners in spite of their sin. Here too the gospel was to bring a richer meaning to the psalmist's words. He no doubt had in mind that his work might turn out to be of value, and not wasted, in this life. But it is the resurrection life that Paul has in mind when he assures us, 'You know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.'¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ See pp. 235 and 252.

¹⁹⁰ The title of Eugene O'Neill's play of 1940.

¹⁹¹ 2 Cor. 4:17. ¹⁹² 1 Cor. 15:58.

4. *Man captive, and God rescuing*

Few commentators reckon that the heading *A prayer of Moses* means that Moses was actually the author of Psalm 90. Most would place it, like so many similar psalms, in the time of the exile. Likenesses Deuteronomy 32 and 33 are not in themselves sufficient reason to date it in his time.

Those who think he did write it generally hold that it belongs to 'the wearisome years of divine alienation' in the desert of Sinai;¹²⁷ those who do not, that Israel was at that time a new nation soon to conquer a new country, whereas the psalm is about a people in decline, tired and time-worn.

But push the date back forty years, and a different picture emerges. Moses is an exile in Midian, or even, perhaps, still a prince in Egypt. Israel is indeed not yet a nation, but she has long been a people; God has already been her dwelling-place through all the generations since Abraham. Moses at forty has been educated as an Egyptian, but knows himself to be an Israelite, and when he goes 'out to where his own people [are] and [watches] them at their hard labour',¹²⁸ the fact that they have been 'enslaved and ill-treated four hundred years'¹²⁹ is quite enough to account for the agonized soul-searching of Psalm 90. 'Israel is still in the night of trouble,' says Kirkpatrick,¹³⁰ and the morning of verse 14 - the morning when she is going to see the host of Egypt washed up dead on the shore of the Red Sea (Exod. 14:23-31) - is as yet in the unimaginable future.

Read the psalm in that light, and verse after verse falls into place. We begin to grasp that the Egypt of Moses, which we think of as 'Ancient Egypt', was the New Kingdom, and that eighteen dynasties of its kings had already passed away. Israel's Sovereign, Adonai (vs. 1, 17; we recall from 81:5¹³¹ that she had not yet experienced him as Yahweh the Rescuer, though the name was in use, as in v. 13), was surely greater than any of them. Well, was he? We see in the sufferings of the brickfields the misery of verses 7-11 and the afflictions of verse 15, and the longing expressed in verse 17 that there might be something better to show for all this toil than a couple of Egyptian store cities.

It is hard to see why *Moses the man of God* should not be the one who first prayed this prayer. In any case the compilers chose well in prefacing Book IV with a psalm that sits so aptly alongside the first two chapters of Exodus. It would be, and perhaps it was, a fine and solemn introduction to the feast of Tabernacles.

¹²⁷ Mayes, p. 545.

¹²⁸ Exod. 2:11.

¹²⁹ Gen. 15:13.

¹³⁰ Kirkpatrick, p. 552.

¹³¹ See p. 237.

Psalm 91

Few psalms could be at once as encouraging and as thought-provoking as this one, paraphrased for modern church use as Timothy Dudley-Smith's 'Safe in the shadow of the Lord' and Henry Lyte's 'There is a safe and secret place'. The sense of security which is incidental in 90 ('Under the shadow of Thy throne Thy saints have dwelt secure') is the main thrust of 91; but it is not cheaply won.

1. *A motto unfolded*

I shall not be the only reader to whom verse 1 in its *sv* form has long been familiar yet slightly mystifying: *He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. But dwell and abide*, neither of them in common use today, surely mean roughly the same thing? Parallelism is all very well (as in v. 13, *You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent*), but to declare that the person who lives in God's shelter will live in God's shelter is not poetic, merely fatuous. Perhaps it means that line 1 is what you have to do, and line 2 is what you discover when you do it: in other words, take refuge in him, and you will find safe lodging.¹³²

This opening verse is the text or motto for the rest of the psalm, which unfolds in two nearly equal sections what is implied in it. In each the psalmist first claims that the Lord is his own refuge, and then turns at once to his fellow-believer¹³³ and encourages him or her likewise to take the implications to heart. *He is my refuge ... Surely he will save you* (vs. 2-3); *the LORD ... is my refuge, and if you make the Most High your dwelling ... no harm will befall you* (vs. 9-10).¹³⁴

Each half then sets forth a series of vivid pictures of the perils that can beset God's people and the protection he provides for them.

2. *A comprehensive insurance policy*

Seven such perils are listed in verses 3-8. The memorable quartet in the middle, *the terror of night ... the arrow that flies by day ... the pestilence that stalks in the darkness ... the plague that destroys at midday*, are flanked by snares and slanders in verse 3¹³⁵ and the fall of many in verse 7. The list is pervaded with the assurance that none

¹³² The word is the same as 'endure' in 49:12; see p. 1178, and Kirkpatrick, p. 555.

¹³³ The *you* is singular throughout.

¹³⁴ Reversing the two lines of the *sv* of v. 9 gets closer to the original Hebrew, and makes good sense of a difficult verse. Cf. the *sv*.

¹³⁵ Many commentators follow the *sv* in reading the Hebrew not as *pestilence*, which appears in v. 6, but as 'word' (same consonants, different vowel-pointing).