

BOOK IV: PSALMS 90 - 106

Although the psalms of this collection are not linked by name with the temple choirs, as were most of those in Books II and III, most of them are psalms for public worship (note the titles of 92 and 100: 'A Song for the Sabbath'; 'A Psalm for the thank offering'), and they have given the Christian church a number of its canticles (95, 98, 100) and hymns (based on, e.g., 90, 92, 100, 103, 104). Unless one assigns a cultic origin to everything in the Psalter, one can say with Kirkpatrick¹ that in general the psalms of Book I (1 - 41) tend to be *personal*, those of Books II and III (42 - 89) to be *national*, and those of Books IV and V (90 - 150) *liturgical*, i.e. concerned with the regular corporate praise of God.

In Book IV God is predominantly named Yahweh (the Lord).²

1. Kirkpatrick, p. lviii.

2. In most Bibles the word 'Lord' is printed wholly in capitals (LORD) when it represents the name Yahweh rather than the Heb. for 'master'.

Most of these psalms are anonymous; but Psalm 90 is attributed to Moses, and Psalms 101 and 103 to David.

Psalm 90. 'O God our help'

Only Isaiah 40 can compare with this psalm for its presentation of God's grandeur and eternity over against the frailty of man. But while Isaiah is comforting, the psalm is chastened and sobering, even though the clouds disperse in the final prayer. A closer companion to the poem in some respects is Genesis 1 - 3, on which the psalmist evidently meditates; and this is appropriate, since the title names him *Moses, the man of God*. (For a discussion of his authorship see Introduction, p. 50.)

In an age which was readier than our own to reflect on mortality and judgment, this psalm was an appointed reading (with 1 Cor. 15) at the burial of the dead: a rehearsal of the facts of death and life which, if it was harsh at such a moment, wounded to heal. In the paraphrase by Isaac Watts, 'O God, our help in ages past', it has established itself as a prayer supremely matched to times of crisis.

90:1, 2. *God the eternal*

This opening of the psalm corresponds to the close, in that God is seen here as *our* God, whose eternity is the answer, not simply the antithesis, to our homelessness and our brevity of life. The middle stanzas will display the darker side of the picture, revealing our membership of a race under judgment; but that fact is not given the first word or the last.

1. *Lord*, in this verse, is a title, not a substitute for the name Yahweh (see on 86:8). So God is addressed as our sovereign as well as our shelter: we are his to command, though he is also ours to enjoy. For *dwelling place* (*mā'ōn*), LXX and Vulg. read 'refuge' (*mā'ōz*). Either would be true, but 'dwelling place' is specially relevant to this psalm's emphasis on human rootlessness, and is a metaphor found also in the Blessing of Moses: 'the eternal God is your dwelling place' (Deut. 33:27). The personal prayer of 71:3 (AV, not RSV) makes it a truth to live by: 'Be thou my strong habitation, whereunto I may continually resort.'

2. Two translations of the middle line of this verse are possible,

as it stands. The first is, literally, 'or ever thou hadst travailed in birth with the earth and the world' – a vivid metaphor but more in line with non-Israelite thought than with the biblical insistence on the Creator's distinctness from his work.³ The second (cf. Anderson) is 'or ever the earth and the world travailed in birth (with them)', i.e. to produce the mountains (cf. 104:8; and cf. the sea issuing as if from the womb of earth, Job 38:8). But God's immemorial majesty, which is the theme of the verse, has disturbing as well as reassuring implications, as the psalm goes on to show.

90:3-6. *Man the ephemeral*

Although *dust* is a different word from that of Genesis 3:19 ('you are dust, and to dust you shall return'), the idea of returning to it (*Turn back*) almost certainly alludes to the curse of Adam, and uses the same verb.⁴ This accounts for the stress on God's wrath as the reason for man's transience; but that theme will not emerge until verse 7. For the moment it is the transience itself that occupies us, in a series of devastating comparisons.

4. Some Jews and Christians have attempted to map out the ages as a 'week' of thousand-year days because of this verse. But this is to overlook the last phrase, *or* (lit. 'and') *as a watch in the night*, which rules out any such woodenness of interpretation. The comparison is like that of Isaiah 40:15ff., where the nations are 'like a drop from a bucket, and ... as the dust on the scales'. It puts our world into its context, which is God, and our time-span into its huge setting of eternity. This is humbling to human pride (the point of this verse), but heartening with regard to God's interventions and their timing (the point of 2 Pet. 3:8f.).

5. The swift changes of metaphor add to the sense of insecurity and flux; there is no compelling need to tidy them out of the text, with some modern versions, though the text has its difficulties. *Swamp ... away* is more literally 'flood ... away', as if by a rainstorm

3. In Prov. 8:24f. it is the divine Wisdom that is 'brought forth' as God's offspring, before the material world is made.

4. Also *children of men* could be translated 'sons of Adam', but the allusion, if it is there, is not emphasized.

or a swollen river. The word used here for *dream* is 'sleep', which could be an expression for death (cf. 76:5 [6, Heb.]; Job 14:12) but is probably rightly understood by RSV, etc.; cf. Psalm 73:20, though the latter uses the normal word for dream.

5b, 6. It is tempting to link the phrase *in the morning* (5b) to the vanished dream or sleep of 5a (cf. NEB, 'like a dream at daybreak'); but verse 5b, as it stands, reinforces the next verse with the repeated picture of early promise; one which will make its failure all the more frustrating. The reiterated word *renewed* points to a landscape reclothed in morning freshness, and so to the human scene as a whole, ever renewed but ever fading. It is a favourite biblical figure: cf. 37:2; Isaiah 40:6ff.; 1 Peter 1:23-25; but note our Lord's unusual handling of it in Matthew 6:28-30.

90:7-12. *Man under wrath*

At the heart of these verses lies the truth of, e.g., Psalm 30:5 (AV, RV, NEB): 'in his favour is life', of which we now explore the converse. As verse 3 has shown (see above), the setting is the fall, which reveals death as our sentence, not our intended lot. Its universal shadow is a standing reminder of our human solidarity in sin, and of the seriousness with which God views this.

7, 8. We are shown God's wrath as doubly irresistible, by its vigour and by its justice, leaving us with no resource (7) and no excuse (8). *Consumed* is literally 'finished', 'spent': there is nothing left. *Overwhelmed* is the word used of an army facing disaster (Judg. 20:41) and of Joseph's brothers in their dismay at the moment of truth (Gen. 45:3). As for *our secret sins*, they must include those that we would disguise even from ourselves. On *the light of thy countenance*, in such a context, see the quotation from C. S. Lewis in the comment on Psalm 14:5a.

9. Both lines of this verse speak of anticlimax, and see it as further evidence that man is under judgment. The first line uses the figure of the day that passes its zenith: the verb *pass away* is that of Jeremiah 6:4, 'Woe to us, for the day declines ...'. The closing *sigh* or murmur (rather than 'tale', AV, etc.) is even more expressive,⁵ and its

5. T. S. Eliot ends his poem 'The Hollow Men' on a not dissimilar note, though it is no guide to eschatology!

effect is, if anything, heightened in the unaltered form of the verse with its sense of prolonged effort that comes to nothing: 'we bring our years to an end ...' (RSV mg., RV, PBV).

10. The decline and fall of the previous verse are painfully predictable and scarcely worth postponing. Perhaps the seventy or eighty years⁶ are also tacitly contrasted to the lifespan of the patriarchs, to which the thousand years of verse 4 may incidentally allude (cf. Anderson).

11, 12. In spite of all these signs of God's displeasure, the message never registers until God brings it home to us. As Weiser points out, 'the poet observes that part of the nature of sin is that men hardly ever realize the ultimate relationship between mortality and sin, because they live for the moment ...'. The psalmist includes himself among those who need this lesson. But he has learnt it well. Perhaps nowhere outside the book of Ecclesiastes is the fact of death so resolutely faced, or the fear of God⁷ so explicitly related to it (cf. Eccl. 12).

90:13-17. *God of grace*

With the boldness of verse 1, which claimed relationship with God, the remainder of the prayer largely begs for a reversal of what has gone before.

13. God had rebuked man with his 'Turn back!' (3); now man returns this cry to God: 'Turn back' (*Return*) - for mercy. The second line of the verse is closely echoed in the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:36, Heb.), in God's intention to do the very thing for which this pleads.

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper.

6. The sonorous expressions *threescore and ten*, ... *four-score* are a relic of old English; the Heb. simply has 'seventy ... eighty'.
7. The difficult line 11b is probably to be understood as in RV: 'And thy wrath according to the fear that is due unto thee'. I.e. the measure of the homage we owe is the measure of our judgment if we withhold it. But the fear that God desires is filial: see the paradoxical duplication of the word in Exod. 20:20.

14, 15.⁸ The contrasts continue. Whereas 'all our days' are, by our deserts, 'under thy wrath' (9), within the covenant *all our days* can be joyful. And here is a longer-lived *morning* than that of verse 6. The New Testament, incidentally, will outrun verse 15's modest prayer for joys to balance sorrows, by its promise of 'an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison' (2 Cor. 4:17).

16, 17. The crowning contrast is between what was seen as perishable in verses 3-12 and the abiding glory of what God does. Here is a heritage for our *children* in a transitory world; here is delight (17a; *favour* is too colourless a word); here, too, the possibility of labour that is 'not in vain' (cf. 1 Cor. 15:58). Not only God's work (*thy work*) will endure, but, with his blessing, *the work of our hands* as well. It has been worth facing the unwelcome facts of time, wrath and death, to have been moved to such a prayer and such assurance.

Psalm 91. *Under his wings*

This is a psalm for danger: for times of exposure and encirclement or of challenging the power of evil. Some of its language, of strongholds and shields, reminds us of David, to whom the LXX ascribes it; other phrases echo the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32, as did Psalm 90; but it is in fact anonymous and timeless, perhaps all the more accessible for that.

The changes of person (obscured in some modern versions), from 'I' to 'you' and on to the divine 'I', mark the divisions of the psalm and are indicated in the three main headings suggested here.

91:1, 2. *My refuge*

There is no need to alter the flow of these two verses, which, as in AV, RV, read well as a self-contained statement (1) followed by a vow of trust (2). I.e. 'He who dwells ... will abide in the shadow of the

8. Briggs draws attention to a linguistic link between verse 15 and the Song of Moses, in the parallelism *shewit, libet* (Deut. 32:7). Both forms are unusual, and the former is found only in these two places.