

THE PSALMS AND THE PRAYER OF PRAISE

By PHILIP KENNEDY

I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. (Ps 146:2)

Preamble

THE BEST FORM OF PRAYER is silence. If prayer is the process of making oneself lovingly aware of God's presence in absence, then the most effective way of praying is to keep quiet and say nothing at all. The moment we open our mouths stammeringly to name, thank, invoke, beseech, curse or praise God, we run the very real risk of misconstruing who or what God might be like.

What, then, is to be made of the ancient Book of Psalms, or the Psalter, as it is otherwise called? From beginning to end it constantly sings to and about God. It chants of triumph and lament. It intones thanksgiving, wisdom and adulation. Its emotions are deep and multiple. Its prose can be spellbindingly moving. It is rhapsodic in its praise of the Lord God, or (in transliterated Hebrew) *Yahweh 'elohim*. And yet, if God has never been seen or directly heard by anyone whomsoever, an unsettling question presses itself: are the psalms' praises mere wasted breath? Do they form a farrago of insubstantial nonsense? That is the driving question of this text. Herein I concentrate mainly on the theme of praise in the psalms. I aim to explore their doxological dimension, or their inclination to pray by affectionately acclaiming God as great and glorious.

In so doing I hope to avoid discussing psalmic praise abstractly. My interest is not so much to attend to psalms as historical relics from a bygone Semitic civilization, but more to focus on their use today. Plainly stated, I want to address the problematic status which the Psalter is accorded in these times, and to talk about the psalms' prayerful praises in relation to contemporary disquiet over the entire matter of lauding God as a totally powerful and beneficent creator. If God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent, then why is our planet *divinely* permitted to fester with malnutrition, murder and meanness? As Dostoyevsky knew only too well, the suffering of just one innocent child makes belief in God intolerable.¹

The one hundred and fifty psalms that form the Psalter are to this very day used as prayers by Jews, Christians and Muslims. While formerly it might have been appropriate for monotheists to employ the psalms fervidly to praise the Lord God, Adonai, or Allah, it is by no means clear currently that believers are blissfully untroubled by hymnic acclamations of God's goodness, power and perfection.

In broaching recent unease about prayerful tribute to God, there are five sections in my deliberations below. The first lists difficulties perceived at the moment in employing the psalms for divine praise. The second briefly describes the structure of the Psalter. The third elaborates the motif of praise. In the fourth place I amplify the first section by elaborating a further and more pivotal factor inhibiting psalmic praise nowadays, namely, the social construction of integrative symbolic world-views. This sounds a complicated matter, but it is actually quite basic and elemental to the way people conceive of themselves in relation to God and the cosmos. In a concluding section I declare my hand and explain why I think the psalms and the prayer of praise are essentially liberative for our world.

I: Problems with approbatory psalms

As the twentieth century draws to a close, there are at least five major factors contributing to a modern-to-postmodern discomfort with those psalms that praise a beneficent and potent Godhead.

In the first place, praising God as a sovereign Lord and victorious King has become appreciably more difficult to bear after the unspeakable modern nightmares of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Alarming, it should be recalled, the prototype of the North American weapon that brutally seared Hiroshima was called the 'Trinity Bomb', or the 'Trinity Test', a naming that is one of the most spectacularly blasphemous acts of human history, even though it might not have been intended as such. If a Trinitarian divinity – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – sustains the universe, then such a godly trio is most emphatically not honoured or praised by having a homicidal bomb named after it.² Moreover, if the Trinity is meant to be caring for the world, then what is the supposedly loving Lord God doing in the killing fields of Rwanda, Cambodia and Bosnia, 'the sweatshops of China, the brothels of Thailand, the South African townships, the streets of Kigali and Mogadishu, and the crack houses, glory houses, and needle parks of the West'?³ As Philip Toynbee observed of our times, 'We have become more sensitive to the evil of cruelty than any historical epoch has ever been before us'.⁴ In the midst of such a

heightened revulsion to ruthlessness it appears all the more awkward to praise a God who is said to have created such vicious creatures in the first instance, and who has the power to stop them perpetrating torture, but declines to use it.

A second modern development that complicates a simple-hearted psalmic praising of God has to do with exuberant human self-confidence. Once upon a time, human beings would pray to the Deity if their crops failed or if a child fell perilously ill. Now they are more likely to buy fertilizers for sick crops and rush ailing children to a consultant paediatrician. With the breathtaking achievements of modern medicine, physics, astronomy and techno-tele-media, a goodly number of people in the present live quite happily without singing the wonders of an unseen Potency. In the current context of sophisticated sciences and technologies the very idea of enthusing over God can appear as a crude atavism or infantile regression. Indeed, for some, praising God is a naked attempt to manipulate an illusory deity with fawning flattery. These discomforted individuals chime with Plato, who warned in his *Republic* that the gods cannot be beguiled by human beings.⁵ Nor can they be bribed with offerings or won with words.

A third worrying factor in relation to psalms and the prayer of praise turns on human gender. Like cricket and football, the psalms are overwhelmingly and unrelievedly hyper-masculinist. Prominent among their metaphors for tagging God are the ancient masculine political titles of 'Lord' (see Pss 2, 3, 4, 18, 21, 55, 85, 103 and 132), and 'King' (see Pss 5, 44, 47, 74, 84, 93, 97, 99 and 145). Well might one wonder just how God the Most High could possibly have been identified with something so limited as a male aristocrat. The point is, God – I imagine vividly – is totally devoid of a human-like gender.⁶ Why should young girls today – or boys for that matter – be encouraged to pray to God *mainly* as if God were a man, prince, master, lord, baron, viscount or king? If God were such, I for one would certainly stop looking for God.

A fourth state of affairs that has rendered the straightforward commendation of God's wonders uneasy is as simple to state as complex to grasp. Humans today are very acutely aware that the world is liberally peppered with hundreds of religions – or at least a multiplicity of denominations within religions – which in their very diversity invoke a panoply of deities.⁷ In such a religiously polychromatic setting, the very identity of the God who is to be praised is by no means clear. Who is God? What is God? Where is God? When is God? Is 'God' a name, a noun, or a verb? Is God a person or a thing (neither actually, I suspect!): a 'Him', 'Her', or 'It'? Is 'God' quite literally

'No-thing'? If theists adulate God as a loving, merciful creator, have they entirely forgotten that according to the Bible God can also be a terrifyingly vindictive liquidator? One need only read the story of the devastating flood in Genesis to be disabused of the idea that the Lord God is innocuously meek and mild.⁸ For the God-Destroyer purposefully drowned every living thing in sight apart from Noah and his beasts – or so the story says.

A fifth and final objection to psalmic praise relates principally to Christians. These refer to their favoured prayer as 'the Lord's Prayer'. The Lord in question is Jesus himself. They accept that their preferred invocation stems from Jesus. Its most striking characteristic is its utter simplicity. It is essentially a list of quite direct and uninhibited requests. Consequently, if Jesus taught his disciples and friends simply to ask God for things – 'Give us this day our daily bread' – then why set about lavishly complimenting the Divinity? Surely God has no need to be told how gorgeous God is!

II: The Psalter

Before proceeding to consider the topic of praiseful prayer in the psalms more attentively, a brief comment on the Psalter as such would not be out of place.

The psalms were originally composed in Hebrew, yet the most ancient extant collection of them is a Greek translation that is roughly twenty-two centuries old.⁹ The standard Hebrew version currently in use dates from about a thousand years ago. As a whole, the Psalter mirrors an understanding of God that is often evident elsewhere in the Bible. It envisages God principally as a Creator and Redeemer.

The sacred Scriptures of the Hebrews are called the *Tanakh*. Christians normally, though not entirely appropriately, refer to this body of writings as the 'Old Testament'. The overture to the *Tanakh* is a collection of five books, from Genesis to Deuteronomy (the Pentateuch), which serves as the core of the Hebrew *Torah*, or Law. Just as the *Torah* is fivefold, so too is the Psalter. The latter's structure imitates the former. The five major sections of the Psalter are these: Psalms 1–41; 42–72; 73–89; 90–106; 107–150. At the end of each of the first four divisions is appended a doxology, or formula of praise.¹⁰ The last five psalms in the collection begin with 'Praise Yahweh'. Together they bring the entire Psalter to a strong plauditory finale.

The single most significant category of prayer in the psalms is not praise but lament. There are about forty psalms of lamentation in the entire collection, some on behalf of an individual, with others issuing from a community. A celebrated example is Psalm 55:

Give ear to my prayer, O God;
do not hide yourself from my supplication.
Attend to me, and answer me;
I am troubled in my complaint.
I am distraught by the noise of the enemy,
because of the clamour of the wicked . . .
My heart is in anguish within me,
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.
(vv 1, 2-3a and 4)¹¹

Another significant part of the Psalter is formed by liturgical psalms, or texts used for cultic, ritualized worship. Psalm 15 is a clear specimen.

Other psalms are more concerned simply to recount events in Israel's history. One need only think of the longish Psalm 78:

The Ephraimites, armed with the bow,
turned back on the day of battle.
They did not keep God's covenant,
but refused to walk according to his law.
They forgot what he had done,
and the miracles that he had shown them.
(vv 9-11)

III: Psalms of praise

The list of psalm-types could easily be extended to include royal and thanksgiving songs. However, as stated earlier, the burden of this article is to attend to the laudatory psalms.

Concerning these, the first observation to be made is that the prayerful activity of praising is not shallow cajolery, but fond recognition. By definition, to praise is warmly to evince approval or commendation. The noun 'praise' comes from a Latin term, *pretium*, meaning 'prize' or 'price'. So the root idea of praising is the fond recognition and acclamation of someone's or something's intrinsic worth. In the prayer of praise one affectionately and joyfully acknowledges goodness, merit and value:

Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.
Praise befits the upright.
Praise the Lord with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.
Sing to him a new song;
play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts.
(Ps 33: 1-3)

Those verses evince delight, elation and exhilaration. Not a whiff of self-interested desire to manipulate God is to be sensed in them.

Which leads me to a second general observation about psalms and the prayer of praise. To grasp why praising God is an all-important activity in the late twentieth century, it helps to recognize that the passion driving the psalms in the adulation of God is not a desire for personal aggrandizement. Nor is it a wish to build up the mosque, synagogue or basilica. On the contrary, one praises God *for* the world *in* the world. And this world of ours, despite its beauty, is awash with misery. In such an environment prayerful praise points. It points to its Deity. It points human beings Godwards, so to speak. It directs bullies, extortioners and murderers in the direction of a divine Judge of Justice. It aims street urchins, prostitutes and rent-boys towards a God who loves them more than any one of us has ever loved anyone, and who pines for the liberation of social outcasts from all that degrades them. If prayerful praise does not point thus, then it disappoints because it loses ground to Macbeth's grim creed (to paraphrase): life is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, and signifying absolutely nothing. When the prayer of praise operates well, then it echoes Hamlet: there is more under the heavens than has been dreamt of by philosophers.

Quite apart from doxological prayer considered in general, what can be said more precisely about those psalms whose salient feature is to praise God?¹²

The Hebrew word for the Psalter is *tehillim*. Technically, this term refers to a specific type of psalm as well as serving as a name for the entire collection. The literary type which it designates in the Psalter is called a 'hymn' in English.

Examples of hymns of praise are Psalms 8, 19, 29, 33, 65—66 (vv 1—12), 100, 104—105, 111, 113—114, 117, 135—136, 145—146 and 148—150. It should be pointed out that the categorization of psalms into different genres is a matter of the deepest dispute. Some would wish to list the 'Songs of Zion' as hymns of praise: Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84 and 87. Others would add the 'Enthronement Psalms': Psalms 47, 93 and 95—99. Such psalms lend themselves to thrilling musical settings, such as Samuel Sebastian Wesley's of Psalm 96 in the 1830s.

A standard hymn has a threefold structure. Normally it begins on a note of praise by declaring its intention to bless or exalt Yahweh. If not, it summons others to do so. For instance: 'Make a joyful noise to the Lord [Yahweh], all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence singing' (Ps 100: 1—2); or 'Praise the Lord, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples' (Ps 117:1). A second part flows from the first and explains or suggests why Yahweh is worthy of praise.

To illustrate: 'Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; *for he is gracious*, and a song of praise is fitting' (Ps 147: 1; emphasis added). A third concluding section is variable. Occasionally it restates the intention of the introduction. Psalms 8, 103—104 and 135—136 have such conclusions. In other cases it closes the psalm with a wish or blessing, as in Psalms 29, 33, 146 and 148.

Here then is a textbook example of a hymn of praise:

Praise the Lord, all you nations!
 Extol him, all you peoples! [Part A]
 For great is his steadfast love towards us,
 and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever. [Part B]
 Praise the Lord. [Part C]

(Ps 117)

Psalm 29 provides a taste of a more embellished showpiece. It begins thus: 'Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and power' (v 1). Its middle section justifies why God should be praised at all: 'The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord over mighty waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty' (vv 3–4). The tone of heady enthusiasm is continued in verse 9: 'The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!"'. One hears in such prose a prototype of the ecstasy, the overwhelming sense of joy and rapture exhibited in today's night-clubs, shown on dance floors, and celebrated in discos! The conclusion of Psalm 29 contains a wish and a benediction: 'May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!'

IV: The social construction of integrative symbolic world-views

Notice the dislocation between the places I have just mentioned. The psalm speaks of singing God's glory in a temple. Ecstatic revelry nowadays is more often than not conducted under the glare of psychedelic stroboscopic lights in Amsterdam, Paris, Sydney, Brasilia and Cape Town. Drugs and drinks – or God's vivifying Holy Spirit – fire the whole process along.

We return, therefore, to the vexed question of why so many of our contemporaries prefer to hallow value at parties rather than in cultic worship.

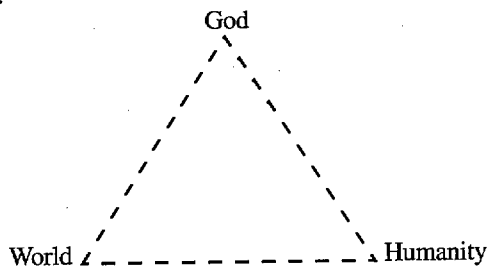
During the past two hundred years, an extremely powerful idea has slowly gestated. Put in grandiose terms, it could be called the social

construction of integrative symbolic world-views. That is, human beings, by conceiving overarching symbols to designate what life is for and about, strive to integrate all that is known of their habitat under the umbrella of their major cultural symbols. In a less airborne manner, the idea I am trying to explain could be referred to as the notion that human beings imaginatively create structures of meaning to give them direction, point and purpose in their lives. Here we land in the magnificent realm of religion, philosophy, cosmology, and those wondrous stories of Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy and Mickey Mouse. Fanciful myths, like the saga of Robin Hood, bring hope and joy to millions.

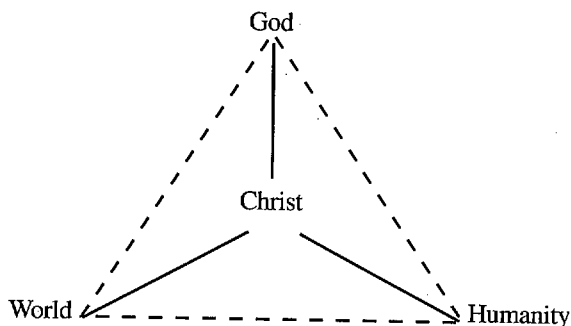
On a philosophically higher plane, we can say that human beings love to construct world-pictures to avoid the terrors of cultural chaos. Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, James, Freud, Dewey, Foucault and Derrida all contributed to a sophisticated intellectual explanation of why humans compose symbolic world-images aflutter with gods, angels, fairies, hobgoblins, small mischievous sprites called leprechauns, and devils.

If this modern idea is legitimate in its suggestion that human beings produce architectonic symbols or stories to furnish their lives with purposeful orientation, then theology is to be seen in a new light. It is itself regarded as a totally human endeavour, driven by human norms and criteria in the direction of specifically human objectives. Therefore, in religious or theological language, 'There is no ideational content other than that found in human practice and thought'.¹³ In other words, we possess no divine concepts of the divine; only human concepts. All language about a putative divine revelation rests merely on a human judgement that God has manifested Godself in history. There are no videos of God telling us this!

That said, when monotheists create structures of meaning to orientate their lives, they construct three major intertwined symbols of God, humanity and the world. We could call these, in turn, the theological pole, the anthropological symbol and the cosmological picture. The interplay between the three cardinal symbols can be rendered diagrammatically thus:¹⁴



Christians add a fourth symbol, of 'Christ', colouring the other three by linking them to Jesus of Nazareth who is proclaimed as a messiah or Christ. The diagram opposite would subsequently need to be altered to look like this:



Now the point to be driven home at all costs is this: if any one of the three (or four) categories changes over time, then so too will the others. What has happened with modernity is that the anthropological and cosmological poles have changed radically, yet religions have been somewhat slow to revise their language about God in view of the insights of modern sciences.

Hence, whereas the Bible assumes the universe is roughly six thousand years old, contemporary astronomy and quantum physics can argue persuasively that the cosmos is much older.¹⁵ Whereas all premodern theology and biblical studies presuppose that the universe comprises heaven above, earth here-and-now, and hell in the nether regions, the Hubble Space Probe has refracted light from a galaxy that is eighty-two thousand, six hundred million million miles away. Present-day astronomy is so sophisticated that it *knows* of the supernova NGC 1987A, which is one hundred and sixty-nine thousand light years distant in the galaxy listed as the Large Megellanic Cloud.

So it is that Ptolemaic cosmology together with Aristotelian and Newtonian physics are rendered more than highly questionable by recent astronomy and quantum mechanics.

The psalms praise a 'Him', a Lord in heaven above, who created our world six millennia ago. We realize now that such a conception of reality no longer ranks as a viable position. Hence the contemporary awkwardness when singing the psalms. God is not gendered, and the universe is bedazzlingly vaster and older than hitherto perceived.

Conclusion

Well might one wonder at this juncture whether the psalms can still be employed intelligently as a new millennium begins to dawn.

In spite of all the mitigating factors I have outlined above, I would still hazard the view that praying the Psalter's hymns of praise is worth while in our world. I say this for an extremely simple reason. If a liberating, compassionate, just God is not praised, then idols of human fabrication readily rush in to fill a vacuum created by human eclipses of God. And the idols, with tiresome regularity, result in unbridled acquisitive avarice, exaggerated pride and violent bloodletting. These three human maladies have already scarred our ecosystem irreparably. Hegel once called human history a 'blood-bench' – he was right. So too was Adorno who observed that the past ten thousand years of history have been a steady progression from the sling-shot to the megaton bomb. Without invoking an *extraordinary* deity, one is left to the *ordinary* vagaries of bullies and cut-throats.

I cannot know for sure whether such a deity exists, but in our current world, I am prepared hopefully to sing:

O God of our salvation;
you are the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas.

(Ps 65:5)

NOTES

¹ See his *The brothers Karamazov* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), ch 4.

² A quick mind would retort, however, that if the God of Genesis is a Destroyer who deliberately drowned almost all living things in the Flood, then a mightily malignant bomb could also legitimately be given the divine name of 'Trinity'. I am indebted to Robert Brockbank of Magdalen College, Oxford, for this insightful comment.

³ My language here is borrowed from L. E. Goodman, *God of Abraham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p x.

⁴ Philip Toynbee, *Towards the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1982), p 18.

⁵ See the *Republic* II, 377–385 and 368e. For a subtle analysis of Plato's ideas in this context, consult Goodman, *op. cit.*, pp 4–5.

⁶ See Gail Ramshaw, *God beyond gender: feminist Christian God-language* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

⁷ Read Steve Bruce, *Religion in the modern world: from cathedrals to cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); John Hick, *The rainbow of faiths: critical dialogues on religious pluralism* (London: SCM, 1995); and Reinhold Bernhard, *Christianity without absolutes* (London: SCM, 1994).

⁸ For a brilliant characterization of God as Destroyer, see Jack Miles, *God: a biography* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1995), pp 39–60.

⁹ One must be careful on this point, since the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls – which have not yet been published in their entirety – could well lead us to date the psalms rather differently.

¹⁰ Consult Claus Westermann, *The living psalms* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), p 8.

¹¹ All the biblical citations in this article are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible [Anglicized edition] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹² For a good rundown of the characteristics of individual psalms see John Kselman and Michael Barré, 'Psalms' in Raymond Brown and others (eds), *The new Jerome biblical commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), pp 523–552.

¹³ Charles Davis, *Religion and the making of society: essays in social theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p 116.

¹⁴ I have taken these illustrations (together with many of his ideas), from Gordon Kaufman, *In face of mystery: a constructive theology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp 394–395.

¹⁵ Even though quantum theory is the most spectacularly successful cluster of ideas ever devised by human beings, it remains a difficult theory to penetrate for those who are not mathematically numerate. The natural language of physics is mathematics. Even so, there are a few excellent studies aiming to introduce a common readership to the splendours and intricacies of quantum theory. For neophytes, I would recommend J. P. McEvoy and Oscar Zarate, *Quantum theory for beginners* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1996). For more advanced questers I would suggest Tony Hey and Patrick Walters, *The quantum universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 1994). For a book with more astronomical detail one would do well to scan George Smoot (with Keay Davidson), *Wrinkles in time: the imprint of creation* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1993). See too, Barry Parmer, *Chaos in the cosmos: the stunning complexity of the universe* (New York and London, 1996), and John D. Barrow, *The artful universe* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1995).