

Reformation History

6. The Psalms

The Psalms have long been regarded in the Christian tradition as the heart of individual and corporate devotion. The fourth-century church father Saint Ambrose wrote:

David thus taught us that we must sing an interior song of praise, like Saint Paul, who tells us: I shall pray in spirit, and also with understanding; I shall sing in spirit, and also with understanding. We must fashion our lives and shape our actions in the light of the things that are above. We must not allow pleasure to awaken bodily passions, which weigh our soul down instead of freeing it. The holy prophet told us that his songs of praise were to celebrate the freeing of his soul, when he said: I shall sing to you, God, on the Lyre, holy one of Israel; my lips will rejoice when I have sung to you, and my soul also, which you have set free.

Throughout the Middle Ages the psalms circulated as a separate work and were highly valued in the prayer life of individuals and monastic communities. We have noted in our section on the Medieval Bible that among the most popular late-medieval devotional texts were the Books of Hours, which were beautifully illuminated collections of prayers and Psalms.

Martin Luther, as a young professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg, began lecturing on the Psalms in 1512, before he had even learned Hebrew, which he later did from the work of the great teacher Johannes Reuchlin. We noted earlier how few Christian scholars in this period possessed any knowledge of the ancient language, and how they were dependent on Jewish teachers for instruction. Luther labored continuously on his Bible translations, revising them constantly in the hope of finding an ever better

text. Although we attribute the German Bible translations that came to Luther alone, he did not work in isolation, but was dependent on the assistance and skill of his friends and colleagues. In 1524 Luther produced his German Psalter, which was enormously influential in the Protestant Reformation. It was widely printed and disseminated, and Luther's language of the Psalms shaped knowledge of scripture in his native tongue. But, as we remarked, Luther was constantly revising his work, always seeking a better translation, and a year later in 1525 another Psalter was printed with an afterward by Luther in which he refined his thought. In his afterward he wrote that the commands of God are fulfilled by faith and that the cross of persecution belongs to the believer's existence. As his knowledge of Hebrew developed his translations became more precise, and three years later he issued another version of his Psalter with a new preface. This time he wrote that the Psalms are the best set of examples and lives of the saints that give full expression of their attitude to God. He compared the Psalms to the legends of human saints by saying that the biblical texts do not record the deeds or actions of the faithful, but their prayers and songs. The Psalms provide glimpses in to the hearts and laments of God's community. In 1531 he wrote:

Moreover, it is not the poor every-day words of the saints that the Psalter expresses, but their very best words, spoken by them, in deepest earnestness, to God Himself, in matters of utmost moment. Thus it lays open to us not only what they say about their works, but their very heart and the inmost treasure of their souls; so that we can spy the bottom and spring of their words and works—that is to say, their heart—in what manner of thoughts they had, how their heart did bear itself, in every sort of business, peril, and extremity.

Luther continues a theme found in Ambrose which would prove central to John Calvin's deep engagement with the Psalms. Every human emotion, every state of despair and joy is given expression in words of these beautiful texts. "And (as I said) the best of all is," Luther wrote,

that these words of theirs are spoken before God and unto God, which puts double earnestness and life into the words. For words that are spoken only before men in such matters do not come so mightily from the heart, are not such burning, living, piercing words. Hence also it comes to pass that the Psalter is the Book of all the Saints; and every one, whatsoever his case may be, find therein Psalms and words which suit his case so perfectly, that they might seem to have been set down solely for his sake, in such sort that anything better he can neither make for himself, nor discover, nor desire. One good effect of which, moreover, is that if a man take pleasure in the words here set forth and find them suit his case, he is assured he is in the communion of the saints, and that all the saints fared just as he fares, for they and he sing all one song together, particularly if he can utter them before God even as they did, which must be done in faith.

Luther penned his final preface to the German Psalter just a year before his death in 1546. Once more, he admonished the readers to regard the Psalms as a manual for prayer and piety. In the Psalms one finds the words to express every possible human desire and emotion. The life of the devoted Christian should focus on the Lord's Prayer and meditation on the Psalms.

During the Reformation commentaries on the Psalms were written by the leading churchmen and women, including Martin Bucer and Katerina Schutz-Zell. In 1557 John Calvin, very much at the height of his authority in Geneva, published his exhaustive work on the Psalms, which runs to several volumes. His commentary is remarkable for a

number of reasons, not least of which is that it was to this interpretive work on the Bible that he appended an account of his life. John Calvin was not overly inclined to write about himself directly, although we know he often made references to his life and experiences through descriptions of biblical characters. In 1557, however, Calvin wrote an extensive recollection of his life as a young Frenchman who was forced into exile.

Calvin's account in his preface to his Psalms Commentary is not an autobiography in our modern sense; it is more of a spiritual autobiography, an account of his conversion to the Gospel. Calvin shapes the story around a comparison with David.

For although I follow David at a great distance, and come far short of equaling him; or rather, although in aspiring slowly and with great difficulty to attain to the many virtues in which he excelled, I still feel myself tarnished with the contrary vices; yet if I have any things in common with him, I have no hesitation in comparing myself with him. In reading the instances of his faith, patience, fervor, zeal, and integrity, it has, as it ought, drawn from me unnumbered groans and sighs, that I am so far from approaching them; but it has, notwithstanding, been of very great advantage to me to behold in him as in a mirror, both the commencement of my calling, and the continued course of my function; so that I know the more assuredly, that whatever that most illustrious king and prophet suffered, was exhibited to me by God as an example for imitation.

Calvin saw in his rise from an obscure family to the role of preacher of the Gospel as modeled on David's calling.

My condition, no doubt, is much inferior to his, and it is unnecessary for me to stay to show this. But as he was taken from the sheepfold, and elevated to the rank of supreme authority; so God having taken me from my originally obscure and

humble condition, has reckoned me worthy of being invested with the honorable office of a preacher and minister of the gospel.

Calvin's high estimation of the Psalms, a view that shaped the Reformed tradition, is poignantly offered in the preface in words that have become well known.

The Psalms. The varied and resplendent riches which are contained in this treasury it is no easy matter to express in words; so much so, that I well know that whatever I shall be able to say will be far from approaching the excellence of the subject. But as it is better to give to my readers some taste, however small, of the wonderful advantages they will derive from the study of this book, than to be entirely silent on the point, I may be permitted briefly to advert to a matter, the greatness of which does not admit of being fully unfolded. I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul;" for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.

Calvin's image of the Psalms as the "anatomy" of the soul was a well-known image in Christian writing, and we find echoes of Luther's thoughts about the full range of emotions found their words. Distinctive to Calvin's vocabulary was the image of the mirror, which Calvin used frequently in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. For Calvin, creation reflects God's goodness and purpose. The Psalms, in turn, mirror every aspect of our lives. In a related image, Calvin speaks of Christians as wearing the spectacles of faith to read the Word of God and behold God's presence in the world.

In the Reformed tradition the Psalms acquired a particular role in worship. The Psalms were sung in Calvin's Geneva, forging a tradition that would shape worship throughout France, the Low Countries, Scotland and in the New World. Although Luther was a great writer of hymns, Calvin looked to the singing of the Psalms as worthy praise of God.

Now what Saint Augustine says is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God unless he has received them from Him. Wherefore, when we have looked thoroughly everywhere and searched high and low, we shall find no better songs nor more appropriate to the purpose than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit made and spoke through him. And when we sing them, we are certain that God puts the words in our mouths, as if He Himself were singing in us to exalt His glory.

The Geneva Psalter, which was the work of various churchmen, including the poet Clément Marot, became an instant bestseller. Calvin and his followers believed that singing the Psalms was the best way to learn them by heart. He even argued that children would be able to teach them to their parents. The singing of the metrical Psalms became central to the worship of Calvinist communities in France, the Netherlands, and Scotland, where it remains to this day in certain churches.

We cannot overstate the importance of the Psalms to the devotional life of the Protestant reformers. They picked up on well-established traditions of the church, but in the tumult and change of the sixteenth century the Psalms of David were held to have a particular resonance.

Questions for discussion:

How has the Reformers' understanding of the Psalms continued down to the present day?

How does the persona of the interpreter play a role in biblical interpretation?

How does the private and public performance of the Psalms contribute to their meaning?

For further reading:

G. Sujin Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-century Debates Over the Messianic Psalms* (Oxford, 2010), Especially chapters 2 and 3.