

# A Question of Identity: The Threefold Hermeneutic of Psalmody

JAMES L. MAYS

I.

In his *Confessions*, Augustine tells how he used the psalms as his own prayer: "What utterances I used to send up unto Thee in those Psalms, and how I was inflamed toward Thee by them."<sup>1</sup> Athanasius said of the psalms: "They seem to me to be a kind of mirror for everyone who sings them in which he may observe the motions of the soul, and as he observes them give utterance to them in words."<sup>2</sup> He was seconded by Calvin who wrote in the introduction to his commentary: "I am wont to call them an anatomy of all parts of the soul; for no-one will find in himself a single feeling of which the image is not reflected in the mirror."<sup>3</sup>

The historic comment on the psalms is strewn with such observations. These remarks testify to a general and continuous experience. Christians found themselves and came to expression in the language of the psalms. Their own selves were identified with, and identified by, the self whose voice speaks in these prayers.

When Christians talked like that, they were referring especially to one group of psalms, the prayers and songs composed as the voice of an individual. It was these psalms in the first person that invited an awareness of self and offered language to self. There are far more psalms of this genre in the book of Psalms than hymns of praise and poetry of instruction. By the

---

*James Luther Mays is Cyrus McCormick Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Interpretation at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. He is a prolific author and editor and has recently served as president of the Society of Biblical Literature. In this article, based on a lecture delivered at Asbury Theological Seminary in the Ryan series, Mays explores how hermeneutical issues encountered in the psalms relate to contemporary practical concerns such as liturgy, pastoral care and personal piety.*

weight of their number they dominate the Psalter and give a cast and tone to the whole.

The majority of the first-person psalms are the prayers of a person in trouble. There are some fifty of them in the book. There is real variety in the group in length, arrangement and content, but they are held together as a group in two important ways. First, they are consistently composed of a common set of elements. They name God and speak in direct address to the Lord. They feature descriptions of trouble that is personal or social or theological in various combinations. Each is organized around a petition to be heard and helped. Trust is avowed. A promise of praise and sacrifice to testify to the sought deliverance is made.

The second common characteristic of these prayers is what may be called paradigmatic openness. Those who speak in the psalms describe themselves and their situations, but they do it in a way that draws a verbal portrait of a set of types rather than a report about a specific person. The language of description is formulaic and metaphoric. It creates types of persons and predicaments. The descriptions offer roles which suit the continuing structures of neediness in human experience. It is precisely this commonality and openness that have rendered this group of psalms so available for the uses of corporate liturgy and private devotion. For nearly two millennia, Christians have sung, chanted and murmured these psalms as their prayers. In acts of worship and devotion they spoke of God and self and world with the words the psalms provided. They found and knew themselves through these prayers.

It is, however, a fact that these prayers have become difficult and strange for contemporary Christians. Where our predecessors in prayer received and used this language with a sense of recognition, discovery and illumination, it has become problematic for many in our time. We hear these prayers of pain and anguish as coming from another quarter. This voice that speaks so insistently, pleads and protests and even argues. This voice that addresses an absent God directly as if God were there, a presence. This soul riven by a desperate dependence for rightness and life. This pilgrim that must make a way as if through a dark valley surrounded by foes to trust and obedience. This human whose desire will not be satisfied by anything less than the experience of God. This individual in the prayer psalms has come to be different, a stranger, sometimes embarrassing.

The public evidence for this sense of discontinuity with the tradition of psalmody began to appear, I think, in the movement away from a complete Psalter in communions that had always used one. Where selections of psalms for singing and reading were made, it was psalms of this particular group that were omitted. Those that were included were frequently edited to omit portions felt to be difficult. The first version of the contemporary Common Lectionary was sparse in its use of the prayers for help. Emphasis on worship as celebration made them sound incongruent in liturgy. Understandings and fashions of prayer that do not easily accommodate the stance

and mood of psalmic prayers are widespread. The prayer psalms visibly lost their place as the canonical core of corporate liturgy and private devotion.

What brought about the rupture between the self evoked in the psalms and the self-awareness of believers? The problem is more than simple historical and cultural distance. After all, the correlation had lasted nearly two thousand years. What are the reasons? A liberal optimism about the human condition? A stolid technical literalism that lost the feel for the poetic, metaphorical, mythic as media of reality? Theologies that obscured the face of a God who could (or would) answer the cry, "Hear me, help me"? Surely, various related reasons exist, sometimes gathered up under the sign of modernity.

There is currently a revival of interest in this sector of psalmody. In part the interest has been stimulated by the liturgical renewal with its concern to restore the psalms to their traditional role in the materials of worship. The latest version of the Common Lectionary uses far more of the prayer psalms than the earlier one did. There seems to be a feeling of canonical guilt at work in this and a determination to be more inclusive. In part, the interest expresses the realization of pastors and pastoral care disciplines that these psalmic prayers give people language to express the distresses that press against the limits of our customary banal, trivial, deceptive talk. Rage, frustration, depression, grief and failure all can find a voice here not available in the usual confines of liturgy or the normal circumspection of pastoral engagement. These are positive and promising moves toward the recovery of psalmic prayer.

But, one must entertain serious doubt whether these moves get at the central alienation between people and psalms. It probably will not work simply to put these prayer psalms back in the service. They will likely remain the utterance of some person unknown and not understood. It will not do to employ them simply as a resource of counseling and therapy, a tool of catharsis that uses them to express a self-consciousness that is already there. The authentic use of the psalmic prayers in the tradition has involved not just the expression of the self through the psalms, but also (and most important of all) a self-realization that comes with using these prayers.

## II.

What was the nature of the transaction between these psalms and those who prayed them? With that question on my mind I came upon a comment in the Mishnah Tehillim on Psalm 18: "R. Yudan taught in the name of R. Judah: all that David said in his Book of psalms applies to Himself, to all Israel and to all the ages." That is, the identity offered by the psalm is not simple but complex, not singular but threefold. Whoever prays Psalm 18, said these rabbis, assumes a self constituted of a relation to David and the people of God and mortal humanity.

One recognizes the parallel to early Christian interpretation. Augustine, commenting on Psalm 3, provides a typical illustration. Here are some

phrases culled from his discussion about who speaks in the prayer: "Christ speaks to God in his human nature...both the Church and her head...cry out with the lips of the prophet...which of the faithful cannot make this language their own?"<sup>4</sup> Again, the hermeneutic of a threefold identity. The individual in the psalm is constituted of an interrelation between Christ, Church and Christian.

It would be easy to dismiss this transaction as a hermeneutical artifact, the practice of allegory or typology. I do not, however, think it is fair to the matter to assess this understanding as merely the result of a theory of reading applied in a somewhat technical way. It is, rather, an account of what happened when the psalms were used as Scripture and liturgy—that is, when in the synagogue the prayers of David were read as liturgy of the congregation and meditation of the pious; and when in the church, the psalms were read under the direction of their use by Christ in the Passion as the liturgy of worship and the prayers of believers. Hermeneutical theory, to the degree that was important, was generated by practice rather than the other way around.

It may be important for our history-oriented mentality and its concern about original meaning to bring yet another matter into consideration. This approach did not originate in the synagogue and churches of the first centuries of our era. It is a continuation of what happened in making the book of Psalms. To put the development in a sentence: Prayers written to provide individuals with appropriate typical languages became corporate liturgy and were related to the scriptural narrative of David. The semantic horizon of the redaction and collection of the psalms was this literary process.

As I have thought about this testimony of the rabbis and Augustine it has begun to dawn on me what is at issue here—a way of prayer far more profound than the one I practice, one learned because the communities of faith prayed these psalms in an awareness of the three selves of which their identity was constituted.

A way of prayer that is *Christological*, not just *autobiographical*.

A reading of these psalms as words that witness to the identification of Christ with our humanity.

A way of prayer that is *corporate*, not just *individual*.

A use of these first-person psalms as the voice of the community and of others in it in vicarious representative supplication.

A way of prayer that is *typical*, rather than *subjective*.

A saying of these psalms to create a consciousness of who and what we are, rather than as expressions of a consciousness already there.

I want to reflect on each of these ways of construing the first-person prayers in the psalms *in the form of questions*—questions because this three-

fold hermeneutic of prayer involves habits of consciousness that are difficult to acquire in our time.

### III.

The first question: Can we, should we, find in these prayers of dereliction and trust an evocation of the Passion of our Lord? I am not proposing that we understand them as prophecy in the specific sense that term has in the classification of literature. These psalms were not composed aforetime to predict events and experiences of suffering that would come true in the life of Jesus. There is a nod toward this approach in the New Testament (John 19:28). There is a long and important tradition of reading psalms as prophecy in the history of Jewish and Christian interpretation, but that approach is not underwritten by what has been learned about the character and purpose of the psalmic prayers.

They are, rather, the literary deposit in the Scriptures that testifies to the range and depth of anguish that can and does come to those who are mortal and vulnerable and undertake to live unto God. They are the classics of life that undergoes the worst in faith and for the faith. They are the paradigms of the soul that uses affliction, alienation, pain and even dying as occasions to assert the reality and faithfulness of God. As such they can show us in detail the mortality that belongs to Christ in His identity with us.

The Gospels draw on the psalms to tell the story of Jesus more than on any other sector of the Old Testament. Particularly, the narrative of the Passion of Jesus uses language and motifs from them extensively. Features from Psalms 22 and 31 and 69 appear recurrently in the narrative. These psalms are not used as prediction and fulfillment, but as elements of the story itself. The self-description of those who pray in the psalms becomes a scenario which Jesus enacts. He identifies himself with and through them, assumes their afflictions, speaks their language.

The way that the Gospels use the psalmic prayers to tell the story of Jesus, the way that Jesus enters into the identity of the voice and experience heard in the psalms, must mean that these prayers are meant to be a major commentary on the meaning of His affliction. The relationship advises that the sufferings of Jesus were not unique. Their significance does not lie in the amount or measure but in the typicality. The identification of Jesus with the self who speaks in the psalms is the sign of the representative and corporate reality of His Passion. He suffers and prays with all those whose suffering and praying is represented by such prayers. He enters into their predicament. The hurt and cry of that great choir of pain is gathered into His life and voice. Henceforth the voice of affliction in these psalms is inseparable from the voice of Jesus. They are the liturgy of His incarnation, the language of His assumption of our predicament.

He is one of us and one with us in our mortal humanity. Yet, can we rely on our own experience, our self-consciousness, our language to grasp what His Passion, His identification with the human predicament involves?

We are too petty in our complaints, too limited in our empathies, too inhibited in our language. We will usually trivialize, but these psalmic prayers for help do not trivialize. Indeed, they seem one vast exaggeration until read toward His life. When we ask with Gerhardt's great hymn on the Passion, "What language can I borrow to thank thee, dearest friend, for this thy dying sorrow?" can there be any other answer?

Can we learn to say these prayers as a way of hearing Christ pray in and for our humanity? Can we say them as the voice of His unending passion in and for our mortality?

#### IV.

The second question: Could the problem of our relation to the persons praying in these psalms lead us to a different understanding of how we use the first-person pronoun when we pray, the meaning with which we say "I/me/my"?

The use of the first-person psalms in Christian liturgy and devotion is complicated by a difference between Israel and contemporary Christians in consciousness of self and social group. The first-person pronoun had a different content and structure then. The Jews received identity and significance from identity with the group. To say "I" meant to speak of one's group as well as one's person. We bring our identity to a group, differentiate ourselves within it, join it, accept its ways and opinions, expect the group to nurture the individual and to justify itself to the individual.

In Israel, there was a real corporate identity which could say "I" authentically. And the individual said "I" in congruence with and not in distinction from the group. So the use of the first-person psalms by individuals today will work differently. We contextualize them in our identities. We wonder at the disparity between our experience and the experience described in the psalms because we don't think of ourselves typically or corporately.

Can we learn to say these prayers in liturgy and in devotion as an act of empathy and sympathy, as an expression of solidarity with others? Could we give voice to their pain and need, make these supplications serve as intercessions for them as one with us, as the body of Christ, as the totality of humanity?

The psalmic prayers come to us from the history of their use with the "I" already expanded to "we." It helps us to use our imaginations and remember how many countless thousands in all the ages have left their marks on these prayers: Jeremiah and Jesus and Paul and Augustine and Calvin and Wesley and the highlanders of Scotland and the Huguenots and...you complete the list. Know that history, and you cannot say and sing them without hearing the echoing chorus of "all the Saints from whom their labors rest, who thee by faith before the world confessed."

But our corporateness is a fact not only of yesterday but today. Could the use of these prayers remind us and bind us to all those in the worldwide Church who are suffering in faith and for the faith? All may be well in



our place. There may be no trouble for the present that corresponds to the tribulations described in the psalms. But do we need to do more than call the roll of such places as El Salvador, South Africa and China to remember that there are sisters and brothers whose trials could be given voice in our recitation of the psalms? The Early Church believed that it was all the martyrs who prayed in their praying the psalmic prayers.

Would it be possible to say them for the sake of and in the name of the fellow Christians known to us? We do make intercessions for them, but perhaps these psalms can help us do more than simply, prayerfully wish grace and help for them, help us to find words to represent their hurt, alienation, failure and discouragement.

Then there is the whole world of humanity beyond the Church known and unknown to us who have neither the faith nor the language to hold their misery up before God. In the day-to-day course of events they may become simply part of the scenery of life, features in the newspaper, in the evening news. These prayers are so poignant and vivid that they give concreteness and personal actuality to what is happening beyond the range of our personal experience.

The Apostle said, "If one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 Cor. 12:26). He also said, "Bear one another's burdens." Can these prayers become a way of doing that?

## V.

The third question: Could the problem of our relation to the person praying in the psalms lead us to a deeper, truer, more ultimate awareness of who/what we are, why and that we need to pray for help?

The problem is certainly there. We live and think and feel as part of modern Western culture. It is true of our culture that it is not informed with the active consciousness of mortality that was characteristic of earlier ages, and is still characteristic for much of the rest of the world. But these psalmic prayers give the clear impression that they were composed in a culture and out of a consciousness structured by a sense of life's vulnerability.

In recent years the Israelis have been conducting an archeological excavation of a cemetery at a location near the walls of Jerusalem called Giv'at ha-Mivtar. The burials in the cemetery are dated to the second and first centuries B.C. As the archeologists have cataloged and identified the remains in the cemetery, they have learned that about sixty percent of the people who were buried there had died before they reached the age of twenty-five. Only six percent were sixty years old or older. It doesn't take much imagination to grasp what that meant for the sense of life.

The change from that kind of situation is very recent. A few years ago a professor at the University of North Carolina published a book titled *Children of Pride*. It is composed of a collection of letters which he found and edited, letters that had been written between the members of a family who lived in the early 1800s just south of Savannah, Georgia. The letters are filled

with the news of sickness and dying as part of the normal scene. The regular occurrence of illness and death created such a regular part of the texture of life that it is difficult for a contemporary to imagine what it must have been like. As I read the book I remembered the dying of my grandfather who acquired an aerecipilis infection in 1928 for which there was no help. Today, treatment for that illness is a fairly simple matter of several antibiotics. Now the old outnumber the young and the problems we ponder are the problems of people being kept alive.

But, is it the truth about us that we are not still essentially needy—that is, mortal, limited in our competence to manage what happens to us, vulnerable to events and to others—that we do not need divine help? In the long view, ultimately speaking, there is no technical or scientific solution to the reality of human finitude and sinfulness. To be human is to desire life and right-ness, and because we cannot autonomously secure either, to be essentially needy.

Could we use these prayers to learn that, admit that, learn from them to nurture a consciousness structured by an honest sense of our finitude and fallibility? The Jewish novelist, Isaac Bashevis Singer, once said, "I only pray when I am in trouble. But I am in trouble all the time."<sup>5</sup>

## VI.

The answers to these questions—for each of us and for the contemporary community of faith—can be found only in the practice and experience of prayer. Can we discover through these psalm-prayers an identity that is Christological, corporate and typical? Can they break up and break into our preoccupying subjectivity and imperious individualism? Can their use bring us intimations of the consciousness the apostle spoke of when he wrote such sentences as: "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24); "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 14:27); and "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20)?

## Notes

1. *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, ed. W. J. Oates (New York: Random House, 1948), 1:132.
2. Athanasius as quoted in A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* (Cambridge: University Press, 1930), p. ciii.
3. John Calvin, *Commentary on The Book of Psalms*, trans. J. Anderson (Edinburgh: Printed for The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 1:xxxviii.
4. *The Works of The Fathers by Translation, Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. J. Quasten and W. J. Burghardt, no. 29 (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1960).
5. E. H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms As Tools For Prayer* (Harper and Row, 1989), p. 99.