

Gordon McConville

HAPPINESS IN THE PSALMS

ABSTRACT

The article enquires into the nature of happiness or well-being in the Old Testament Psalms. It considers first the Psalms' use of 'happiness' language, then goes on to seek a broader basis for the enquiry in key concepts such as freedom and justice, making some comparisons with Greek ideas. Finally it seeks to build up a picture of the person at the centre of the Psalms, particularly as the one who speaks, chiefly from the perspectives of speech itself, the 'soul', and praise, in the expectation that this may provide a portrait of the fulfilled human being.

1. INTRODUCTION

The topic is chosen as part of an enquiry into ways in which the Old Testament might contribute to patterns of biblical spirituality. 'Happiness' is related to notions of well-being and fulfilment, which are encountered both in popular culture and modern thinking about spirituality broadly.¹ The Psalms, in my view, are an appropriate place in which to focus some biblical interpretation on the subject.² This appears already from the occurrence in them of the vocabulary of 'happiness'. Indeed, the opening line of the Psalter, 'Happy are those (*'ašrê hā'īš*) who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers...' (NRSV), suggests that human 'happiness' is a major concern from the outset. Psalm 1 is widely understood to establish the meditation and practice of the Torah as the central theme of the book, and happiness is evidently closely intertwined with this.

1 The current theological interest in happiness is illustrated by Charry (2010). In the wider culture, it is represented by works by Seligman (2004, 2011), who has now adjusted his former focus on 'happiness' to the concept of 'flourishing'.

2 For the Psalms as sources for spirituality generally, see Stuhlmüller (2002), Brueggemann (2002), Waaijman (2004), Firth (2005).

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2. INITIAL ACCOUNTS

This initial observation of a connection between happiness and a right relationship with God can be elaborated on by considering more closely the contexts in which the vocabulary of happiness occurs throughout the book. Clinton McCann has done this for Books 1 and 2 of the Psalms (Psalms 1-41), where he identifies eight 'beatitudes'.³ He finds that 'happiness has to do with the fundamental orientation of the self to God...', and especially highlights God's *instruction* of the Psalmist (by means of the Torah), together with notes of 'trust' and taking 'refuge' in God (1:2; 2:12; 40:5, cf. Psalms 32-33; McCann (2005:343-44).). Psalm 34, with its beatitude: 'Happy is the one who takes refuge in [the LORD]' (34:9, EV 8), leads into a meditation on the 'goodness' of God, who not only gives long life (v. 13[12]), but who can be trusted to deliver those who fear him from fear itself, as well as all troubles and want (vv. 5-11[4-10]). Finally (in Psalm 34), there is freedom from condemnation (*'āšām*) for those who trust the LORD (34:23[22]). The experience of forgiveness of sin as a cause of blessedness is also the theme of the penitential Psalm 32 (32:1-2).

Psalm 41 sounds a different note, namely 'openness to the needs of others'. Book I, therefore, counsels love of God (Ps 1) and neighbour (Ps 41). This, moreover, constitutes a kind of God-likeness, or *imitatio dei* (McCann 2005:344-45). Reciprocity between God and the human partner is expressed in the obligation upon the latter to 'do good' (34:15[14]) and be 'righteous' (34:20[19], 22[21]). Psalms 111-12 are corresponding acrostic Psalms which furnish an extended example of this idea of reciprocity. Psalm 111 celebrates God's righteousness, mercy, faithfulness, and the trustworthiness of his 'precepts', and Psalm 112 responds with a portrait of one who delights in God's laws, is righteous, trusting, faithful, and merciful to the needy. This person, moreover, is 'happy' (112:1).⁴

This kind of account moves towards a description of recognizably Old Testament beliefs and theological ideas, notably: the belief in an orderliness in the universe based in the character of God and his providential good purpose for humanity in creation (Ps 104) – an orderliness that is also beautiful and apprehended with joy;⁵ the concordance between righteousness and blessing typified (broadly speaking) by Deuteronomy and Proverbs; the belief that God

3 They are: Pss 1:1; 2:12; 32:1-2 (2x); 33:12; 34:9; 40:5; 41:2; McCann (2005:340-48). See also Mays (1994:40).

4 Cf. Deut 6.24-25, for a concordance between righteousness and 'good', where 'good' refers to the blessing that comes from every gift of God.

5 Psalm 104 is one of the few biblical texts dealt with by Otto Kaiser (Kaiser 2007), on which see further below. Seeing Egyptian antecedents for it, he finds in it the concept of divine creation and ordering of the universe, which he compares and

is good (e.g. Psalm 37), in particular, to Israel, because of the biblical narrative of the deliverance of Israel from slavery, its election as God's covenant people (the book of Exodus), and its possession of land and temple (the books of Samuel).

Such an account, however, raises certain questions that take us beyond the simple observation of statements based on terms. McCann is well aware that a systematic correlation of faithful obedience to God and happiness according to ordinary perceptions of this is resisted by the Psalms themselves:

... the shape of human happiness according to the Psalms has nothing to do with the normal definition of happiness or blessedness (one that is even found elsewhere in the Bible) in terms of material prosperity as well as physical security and well-being. (Rather).. happiness has to do with the fundamental orientation of the self to God... (McCann 2005:343).

The problem of experience, which the Psalms, along with other parts of the Old Testament such as Job and Ecclesiastes, address to the theological postulates inscribed in the 'happiness' language, is acute, however, and a satisfying account of 'happiness' needs to address it directly. A further question concerns the particularity of some of the concepts noted above, which becomes problematical in the case of happiness in the disturbing instance of Ps 137:9: 'Happy shall he be who takes your little ones, and dashes them against a rock!' (ESV). Does the 'happiness' of Israel depend on the discomfiture of others, and even on acts of violence? And so our initial circling of the subject rather quickly reveals the need to refine both question and approach.

A rather different approach to McCann's is that of Norman Whybray, in one of the few studies that attempts to describe systematically 'the good life' in the Old Testament. Whybray, in his discussion of the Psalms, aims to uncover 'how the ancient Israelites viewed the good life and the extent to which they believed that they had attained it or that it was within their grasp' (Whybray 2002:142).⁶ To this end, he addresses the topics: place and security; power; wealth, prosperity and sustenance; health, longevity, death; family; law and justice; wisdom; pleasure and enjoyment; God. His method in practice is to comb the Psalms for evidence of an 'Israelite' view of these matters. For example, he finds that the Psalmists in general do not place a high value on the possession of wealth, but rather think it less important than keeping the commands of Yahweh (Ps 119:14), and that it is characteristic of the righteous to help the poor rather than seek to get rich themselves (112:9). Wealth is

contrasts with the Stoic concept of 'logos', or 'world-reason'. Both of these informed Sirach, in his view (Kaiser 2007:90-95).

6 The book is posthumous and produced from notes by his students.

often associated with the wicked; conversely the righteous trust in God to provide all they need. On the topic of health and longevity, he observes that Psalmists can praise God for his mercy towards them in view of the fact that they are mortal (Ps 103:13-14), and praise can be offered by the living on the grounds that the dead cannot do so (115:17; Whybray 2002:151).

Here too, a picture is unfolding. On the wealth theme, Whybray concludes: 'All these things speak of the modest aspirations of an agricultural and pastoral people' (Whybray 2002:151). This says much about his purpose, namely to try to describe a certain mindset, attitudes held in common by the Israelites. Undoubtedly, an understanding of theological concepts is an inevitable aspect of an enquiry like this. (A study by Lee, for example, argues plausibly that a belief in God's *hesed* – faithfulness, steadfast love – underlies the well-known phenomenon in the Psalms of the return to confidence after lament (Lee 2005:224-47)).

Whybray's survey tries to go to the Psalms' characteristic concepts. Like McCann, he sees that happiness depends more on having a good relationship with God than on material well-being, and also that the external trappings of success often belong to the wicked rather than the good. However, the search for characteristic ideas of the Israelites has its own limitations, for it is not clear in what way the Psalms can disclose these. While Whybray is sensitive to the fact that the Psalms express deep human emotions (2002:160), his descriptive 'history of religion' aim obscures the specific contours of the experiences and sentiments displayed in them, and tends to understate their intensity. Here too, the serious perplexities surrounding belief itself tend to be underplayed. I think the theological conundrums posed by the concept of happiness are not sufficiently considered. One of these is the paradox of freedom through obedience to commandment, to which I shall return.

3. A BROADER CANVAS

The cases cited indicate the need to consider what is involved in assessing the Psalms' contribution to the notion of human happiness on as broad a canvas as possible. Otto Kaiser has provided one useful vantage-point for this, though he does not address the Psalms as such, in his somewhat philosophical *Des Menschen Glück und Gottes Gerechtigkeit* (Kaiser 2007). Kaiser examines the Hellenistic biblical literature (mainly The Wisdom of Sirach) against a wider Hellenistic background, with relatively little about the (other) canonical biblical literature. It is surprising, initially, that discussions of 'happiness' as such (*Glück*) are scarce in this volume.⁷ The point is instructive

7 It is referenced five times in the index, while the other titular term of the book, 'justice' (*Gerechtigkeit*) appears only three times (including once under '*Gott*').

for it alerts us to the complexities involved in thinking about the notion in itself, not least its philosophical and cultural entailments. In a sense, Greek philosophy as such may be regarded as a quest for happiness in the face of adversity and in the light of inevitable death. Kaiser chiefly investigates issues of divine determination, human freedom, the notions of harmony and beauty in the cosmos, and the problems of suffering and evil. In the Hellenistic literature he reviews, he finds a concomitance between wisdom, virtue and happiness. Wisdom (and thus happiness) consists in bringing the human will into harmony with a divine providence that by definition meets all human needs (Kaiser 2007:11, 76-77). According to Kaiser, the Stoic cosmic theology postulates a created harmony in all things (*logos*, 'Vernunft', that is, 'reason'), such that all that happens stems from this 'reason'. This providential harmony is entirely compatible with the virtuous life, so that virtue is inseparable from the 'inner goods' of life.⁸ Only the wise are happy, because they know they act according to divine 'reason', and being without passion, their happiness cannot be disturbed by external influences.

Another formulation is found in Cicero's account of the 'paradoxes' of the Stoics (*Paradoxa Stoicorum*), namely that 'the wise alone are free', and freedom is the ultimate good (Kaiser 2007:226-28). The uniting theme of the 'paradoxes' is inner freedom in the face of adversity ('die innere Freiheit des Weisen angesichts der Schläge des Schicksals' (Kaiser 2007:185)).⁹ Freedom is therefore like virtue, in the sense of being attainable independently of outward circumstance. Kaiser's thesis regarding Sirach is that he has drawn on both the Stoics and the biblical traditions. This is evident in his understanding of 'wisdom' as virtually equivalent to Torah. However, Sirach cannot entirely accept a simple equation of Torah with the Stoic *logos*, because he distinguishes a general wisdom given by God to all nations and the special wisdom given to Israel in the Torah (Kaiser 2007:49, cf. pp. 108-09). Yet his understanding of freedom in relation to moral responsibility is that such freedom was given to all human beings at creation, which, as Kaiser notes, leads him to be silent about the biblical idea of a 'fall' (Kaiser 2007:40).

The review to this point alerts us to some of the issues involved in investigating the notion of happiness in the Psalms. Sirach parted company with the Stoics at the point of the particularity of God's dealings with Israel. This

8 'So sind die Tugenden zugleich Mittel zu einem glücklichen Leben und Ziel des glücklichen Lebens, weil sie es vollenden' (Kaiser 2007:14).

9 The six paradoxes are as follows: 1. Only the moral [*kalon/das Sittliche*] is a good. 2. Virtue is sufficient for happiness. 3. Bad deeds [*Verfehlungen*] resemble each other, as do good deeds. 4. The fool [*Jeder Unverständige*] is sick in the mind [*geisteskrank*]. 5. Only the wise is free, and the fool is a slave. 6. Only the wise is rich (p. 185). These are 'paradoxical' in the sense of running counter to ordinary human values regarding property and aspiration (pp. 185-86).

particularity is bound to enter into any account of the theology of the Psalms. Indeed accounts of happiness in the Psalms themselves tended towards abstract concepts and risked underplaying the singularity of experience, especially of adversity. In what follows I want to consider the way in which the Psalms portray the human person at the centre of the quest for happiness, taking up especially the ideas of freedom, justice, and human destiny.

3.1 Freedom

The Old Testament's concept of freedom is dominated by the redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt. As such it is a deliverance into another kind of service, the service of God. It is not a theoretical notion of personal liberty, therefore, but is rather informed by the belief that human fulfilment comes about in submission to God rather than to tyranny. The story of the exodus even helps construct the character of God in the Old Testament, for He is the one who delivers from tyranny, calls human beings into a life of justice and right relationships, provides them with laws and institutions tending to this end, and enables them to participate in the full life that is his gift. Freedom defined in this way is extended to specific aspects of Israelite life, such as the statutory release of slaves after a period of service, with the intention of enabling them to participate fully in the goods of life, on the grounds that they are full members of Israelite society. The well-known Jubilee laws, periodically restoring land lost through debt to families who originally held it, are another similar case.¹⁰ Old Testament law in general has the function of enabling Israelites to live in freedom so understood.¹¹ It follows that, not only is the character of God disclosed in the biblical narrative broadly understood, so is the character of Israel. That is to say, Israel's destiny as a free people is worked out, or rather, they are called to work it out, in their specific life with the God who has met and known them. In this sense a biblical spirituality is inseparable from a biblical ethic, on which Stanley Hauerwas has written:

...the Bible is fundamentally a story of a people's journey with their God. A "biblical ethic" will necessarily be one that portrays life as growth and development (Hauerwas 1984:24).

One way in which the Psalmists meditate on this freedom is in their Torah piety, as is evident in the Psalter's greatest meditation on the Torah, Psalm 119. The theme of freedom does not appear explicitly here, yet is everywhere presupposed. The celebration of the Torah is conducted as a prayer of the Psalmist. The opening verses closely resemble those of Psalm 1, proclaiming a correlation between 'happiness' and obedience to the 'law of the LORD' (vv.

10 The important texts are Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25.

11 See Crüsemann (1996:215-34); cf. *idem* (1983).

1-2). Personal fulfilment and freedom go hand in hand here. The former is evident in the emotive language that pervades the Psalm. The Psalmist uses a range of vocabulary to express his 'delight' in the commandments, one of its most characteristic motifs (*hāpēš* v. 35; *šā'a*, vv. 16, 24, 47, 70, 77, 174; *šūš*, v. 14). He 'treasures' them (*šāpan*, v. 11), 'longs' for them (*gāram*, v. 20; *yā'ab*, v. 131), 'loves' them (*'āhab*, v. 97), 'pants' for them (*šā'ap*, v. 131). Other volitional terms are prominent too: 'I have sworn an oath...to observe' (v. 106); 'I do not forget' (v. 109); 'I seek you with my whole heart' (v. 10, cf. 145). In this way the Psalmist proclaims his whole being to be satisfied by the commandments.¹²

This satisfaction is not easily won. The Psalm bespeaks growth, change, maturing. The keeping of Torah requires learning, understanding and discipline, and these are played out in the Psalm against a background of wisdom gained in life-experience. 'How can a young man keep his way pure?' (v. 9) – a beginning of life near the beginning of the Psalm; 'If your law had not been my delight I would have perished in my misery,' (v. 92); 'Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,' (v. 98); 'I understand more than the aged,' (v. 100); 'I get understanding,' (v. 104); 'The wicked have laid a snare for me,' (v. 110); 'I hate the double-minded,' (v. 113); 'I have done what is just and right,' (v. 121); 'My eyes fail from watching for your salvation,' (v. 123); 'Let me live that I may praise you,' (v. 175). The Psalm thus climaxes with a prospect of life continuing in worship. In the life of devotion, there is wisdom, salvation and peace.

This personal fulfilment is also predicated on the Psalmist's freedom to choose to obey the commands, since he repeatedly declares intentions which he expects to fulfil. Yet he knows too that his freedom of action is inextricable from his dependence on God. He prays to be taught, to be given understanding, that his heart and eyes might be 'turned' to God's commands (vv. 33-40), and this orientation is also pervasive. An account of the relationship between his declared intentions and his recognized need of God's action in 'turning' him towards the good is not attempted in the Psalm, but it thus fits within a biblical anthropology, which asserts both unqualified human responsibility and radical need of the sovereign God. These occur here as unquestioned dimensions of the satisfied life.¹³

The Psalm may be invoked in one further respect as testimony to a biblical view of human fulfilment, namely in relation to the Psalm itself as a composition.

12 For the emotional intensity of Psalm 119, see also Waaijman (2002:714-15).

13 On the complex relationship between human freedom and constraining factors beyond a person's control, see Hauerwas (1984:35-49). Addressing the question whether persons are really free, he invokes a notion of 'agency', by which we claim we have the power to be 'persons of character' (1984:41).

This Psalm, more than any other, draws attention to itself as an expression of piety. It is literally the a-z of Torah-keeping, incorporating a panoply of the language of command and obedience, which corresponds to its picture of complete devotion. Not only are things being said in it, but something is being done. There is an act of composition, a labour that is advertised by this *pièce de résistance*, a bravura that says: watch this! The *persona* being constructed in the Psalms not only keeps God's commandments but ponders them, and here before us is a manifest case and outcome of such pondering. When the Psalmist says: 'With my whole heart I seek you' (v. 10), he is, by the same token, depositing the evidence. Indeed, the act of composition is an exertion of that human freedom and responsibility to honour God in obedience that is consummated in human fulfilment. The *thought* of the Psalter is embodied here in the act of piety of the *person* who is everywhere implied.¹⁴

3.2 Justice

The topic of justice is also played out in the Psalms in specific human experience. It takes us into one of the controversial areas of Old Testament interpretation. In depicting human fulfilment, parts of the Old Testament are sometimes thought to proclaim a regular or typical connection between commandment-keeping and blessing. The covenantal theology of Deuteronomy, with its vision of an ordered society based on the keeping of Torah, is often characterized as the orthodox or 'official' theology perpetuated by a religious élite, and found in other Old Testament literature such as Proverbs. Over against it is ranged a theology of protest, as in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. Psalm 119 might readily be placed in the first category, because of its insistence on a synthesis of commandment-keeping and 'delight'. This dichotomous view of Old Testament theology, however, is overstated.¹⁵ Psalm 119 itself illustrates the point, in those sections of it which evoke conflict in the life of the Psalmist. In vv. 49-56, for example, the 'blessing' declared in the final verse of the section comes in spite of the Psalmist's 'distress', derision by others, and anger at disregard of the Torah by the wicked. Similar trajectories occur in vv. 65-72; 81-88. There are strong elements of Lament in these paragraphs, which attest to the Psalmist's persecution by others and his endurance of bitter experiences (vv. 67-71, 85-87). Indeed, in vv. 67-71 he is only prevented from 'going astray' by a humbling experience which he attributes to God, but is connected with the false accusations of enemies. His delight in the Torah,

14 Waaijman also observes the nature of the Psalm as a 'performance', and notes the function of Scripture in the process of the human-divine relationship: 'In the torah the divine-human relationship is incarnated' (2002:713).

15 For an important rejoinder to it, see Van Leeuwen (1992:25-36).

therefore, implies a more profound understanding of fulfilment than a simplistic equation of legal observance and blessing.

This tendency in the theology of the Psalms finds its strongest expression in Psalm 73. The Psalm begins: 'truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart' (Ps 73:1 MT; so KJV; RSV mg; *contra* RSV, REB).¹⁶ The Psalm addresses the problem of perceived injustice (the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper) in the context of an understanding of God as intent upon working righteousness in the world, and having a particular purpose for Israel in that plan. It is a narrative of an experience. The Psalmist's 'feet had almost stumbled', that is, he had almost lost his faith; (cf. Ps. 119:67-71). He (and others) had been perplexed by the prosperity of the wicked. ('I couldn't understand it', v. 16; 'I was embittered, pricked in heart, stupid, like a brute beast toward you [God]', vv. 21-22). This self-description from a later vantage-point expresses the disjunction in the Psalmist between his mental attitude at this stage and his basic framework of belief. His state of mind was, however, a function of the Psalmist's failure to perceive the true way of things, which he recovered by a renewed vision of God (v. 17) and a reaffirmation of a sense of God being with him (vv. 23-25, 28).¹⁷ This entailed the belief that God would do right in the end – possibly *post mortem* (v. 24).¹⁸

What is striking about this Psalm too is the role of the person at its centre. In this respect it is like the Lament psalms, in which typically a Psalmist who is in some kind of distress is led to renewed trust, confidence and praise. Psalm 6 affords a ready example of this, with its definite change of tone at v. 9[E8] – '...the LORD has heard my weeping!' In Psalm 73, as also in Job, the problem of evil or injustice is not treated in a theoretical way, but by means of a personal experience. The Psalmist has been tempted to abandon trust in a God whose desire and purpose is justice; he was envious and angry, emotionally affected by the prosperity of the wicked. The turning-point too comes in a moment of fresh perception, which is not accounted for in a theoretical way, but is a change occasioned by a turn to prayer and encounter with God (v. 17). The psalm is sometimes regarded as a 'Wisdom'-psalm, with its correspondence between wickedness and 'folly' (v. 7), its question whether God *knows* (v. 11), and its other language of understanding, perception and counsel (vv. 16, 17, 24). The renewed vision of the psalmist, furthermore,

16 See Tate (1990: 228, 233-35); also his reference to Brueggemann (1984:116), and to Buber (1952:35-36), who in different ways recognize the 'Israeliteness' of the sentiments expressed.

17 This passage is noted by Whybray (2002:159).

18 It seems to me that there is an important difference between the Psalms and the philosophers in their approach to death. The Psalmists appear to regard their mortality as an occasion of praise. The philosophers tend to a kind of negation of it, and so to an intense focus on the present.

is equivalent to 'understanding' (*'ābînâ lē'ahārtām*, v. 17). It is therefore an important testimony to the nature of biblical wisdom, rooted as it is in a passionate search for God and truth.

The experiential nature of Psalm 73 raises a further question about the person at the centre of it, namely whether the movement from crisis to confidence is a sort of 'return' to the *status quo ante*, or whether it implies an advance. (The experience of Job lies in the background to this question, where the restored Job at the end of the book is scarcely the same person encountered at the beginning). There are signs in some Laments of a movement forward. Psalm 73 finishes with the Psalmist's recognition that his chief good is simply to be 'near God'; the expression of renewed confidence includes the unusual 'afterward he will receive me with/to glory/honour' (v. 24 – which is variously interpreted, but which may be one of those hints in the Psalms of a hope for survival after death); and there is at least a new understanding of the precariousness of life without God, however enviable it may look superficially.

Psalm 17 is another Lament with an unusual and controversial finish. The Psalm includes a petition for deliverance from an attack of enemies, possibly in the form of some false accusation. It combines an intense experience of God with a love of righteousness, which overcomes hostility and culminates in a vision of God. The Psalm is rich in imagery of darkness and light, and of vision. The opening prayer asks God to 'see the right' (v. 2); and in the end the Psalmist's new confidence takes the form: 'I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied.' What is involved in this 'beholding the face' of God (v. 15E) is this Psalm's unknown quantity. What has the Psalmist 'wakened' from? Is this satisfaction on awaking to the vision of God something wholly new in his experience? Here too the elusiveness of an evident meaning has led some to think that this is an intimation of immortality. As in Psalm 73, an intense experience, involving an attack on the Psalmist's person (here his integrity) leads through to something that does not look quite like a return to the *status quo ante*, but a new way of seeing God and the world.

4. THE PSALMS AND THE PERSON

The centrality of the Psalmist to the Psalms has emerged strongly from the foregoing, and is, I think, a key factor in their contribution to the notion of human fulfilment. It is not accidental that the thought of the Psalms is largely carried by a figure who speaks in the first person singular. What sort of construct is the 'I' of the Psalms? Is there a way in which we might access this figure's experience?

This is a different question from those usually posed in relation to the singular speaker in the Psalms, such as the identity of the speaker, whether the king, or some other representative figure,¹⁹ or in regard to some *typical* experience (the form-critical method), as in the return to confidence after lament, where Psalms with first-person speech are often classified as ‘individual lament’, or ‘individual song of thanksgiving’.²⁰ Modern interpretations of the Psalms are often rightly reticent about specifying the individual Psalmist’s experience that may lie behind the origin of the Psalm or its use in the worship of a community.²¹ Even so, this very preoccupation tends to pre-empt any exploration of individuality as such.

I propose instead to consider the figure who appears in the first person singular in the psalms rather as a character in a narrative, and so to examine the ways in which s/he is presented, imagined, addressed (e.g. in Pss 103; 119). This approach is to be distinguished from ‘autobiography’, the category rejected by Mowinckel.²² The constructed figure I have in mind is no more the subject of an auto/biography than any other narrative figure. However, I am interested in a narrative investigation of what it is to be human, something which is not describable in ‘categories’ (such as form-criticism’s distinctions between the lamenter, the wise, the confident etc.). The person at the centre of the Psalms participates in a story, which is carried by speech, and presupposes his or her presence within a community.

4.1 The speaking person

Therefore this approach places the *speaking person* at the centre. What picture of the person can we discern in the Psalms? I want to suggest that a picture emerges of a human being in the making, one in the process of attaining wisdom, self-understanding – and thus ‘happiness’. We have seen already that this emergent ‘happiness’ is achieved through the worst kinds of adversities, in trajectories which open on to futures not yet fully known. Furthermore, I think that the Psalms themselves play a part in this: that is, the implied figure is created in part by his or her making and use of the Psalms.

19 See, for example, Eaton (1976).

20 Craig C. Broyles looks for the causes of the Psalmist’s distress, e.g. on Psalms 42-43; Broyles (1988:201, and 179-212 generally). Steven J. L. Croft follows S. Mowinckel, when he argues that the Psalms are not autobiographical but ‘liturgies composed for *certain categories of person* in certain types of situation in the temple cult’ (Croft 1987:12 emphasis added)

21 See, for example, the discussion of the setting of Psalm 103 in Allen (1983:20).

22 See n. 20.

In saying this, I am paying attention to the force of language itself (in certain contexts) to effect change. Walter Brueggemann has made a point like this in relation to the Psalms, drawing on Ricoeur. Referring to what he calls the 'declarative hymns and songs of thanksgiving' (e.g. Ps 124), which celebrate some still-present act of deliverance, he claims that they recognize that

...a newness has been given which is not achieved, not automatic, not derived from the old, but is a genuine newness wrought by gift (Brueggemann 1980:9).²³

Brueggemann supports his view by calling on Ricoeur's idea of the dynamic of life as disorientation and re-orientation (Brueggemann 1980:5).²⁴ In this context he invokes Ricoeur's understanding of language as transformative. Ricoeur discusses the power of language to reveal and create. Beyond the words themselves, there is 'discourse', a 'saying' that breaks into 'speaking', which he describes thus:

Saying is what I call the openness, or better the opening-out, of language. You have fathomed that the greatest opening-out belongs to language in celebration (Ricoeur 1974:96).²⁵

The relevance of this notion to the Psalms is clear. The Psalms as *acts* become part of the answer to the questions they pose. (They are not *merely* linguistic acts, but acts of worship, often implying commonality and specific context. But perhaps all of this is entailed in Ricoeur's 'language in celebration'). The Psalmist becomes, in some sense, a new person.

4.2 The *nepes̄*

In this picture of the person emerging in the context of language and community, it is worth pausing over the Psalmist's own awareness of inwardness. What is involved when the speaker addresses his/her *nepes̄*, as in the great hymn Psalm 103 (vv.1-5)? The term *nepes̄* is quite widely used in the Psalms as a way of speaking, somehow, of the person's innermost being. The term has a range of potential meanings. Physiologically, it meant 'throat' (Ps 63:6[EV5] [so HALAT 3]; Isa 5:14, of Sheol; Isa 29:8), or 'neck' (Ps 105:18; Jonah 2:6[EV5]; Ps 69:1[EV2]), but it can be 'breath' (Job 41:13 [EV21]), and sometimes simply a person (Gen 36:6; 1 Sam 22:22 - as in 'the ship went down with the loss of 200 souls'); cf. *nepes̄ ḥāyâ*, i.e. applied to the life of animals (Gen 1:20, 24);

23 On the connection between the two forms he cites Gunkel: 'In the alternation between lament and song of thanks there unrolls the whole life of the pious' (1980:10).

24 He notes that the same idea is also used by Paul Tournier (1968:97-111).

25 This is cited in part in Brueggemann (1980:26, n. 37).

in one famous text ‘the blood [of the animal] is the life’ (Lev 17:11), and this also applies to humans (Gen 9:5-6 – God will require a reckoning ‘for your lifeblood’, *dimêkem lenapšôtêkem*). HALAT 3 gives further: ‘personality’; ‘life’; ‘soul’, ‘as seat and bearer of feelings and sensations’ (p. 673); and finally ‘soul of the dead’ (Lev 21:11).

There is no systematic anthropology here, indeed it is not easy always to distinguish between the various proposed meanings just named. In Psalm 63:6[5], for example, *nepes̄* is assigned the meaning ‘throat’ (HALAT), but RSV translates: ‘My *soul* is feasted as with marrow and fat’. The Psalmist’s sense of who s/he is does not distinguish soul and body as separate entities. There is wholeness here, but yet the essence of the person is not fully known.

Psalm 103 expresses this powerfully. Here, the speaker and his/her *nepes̄* are formally distinct, and this is maintained throughout vv. 1-5. The speaker exhorts his *nepes̄* to bless Yahweh; not only his *nepes̄*, but also ‘*wêkol qêrābay*,²⁶ ‘all that is within me’ (this ‘not only...but also’, or ‘a what’s more *b*’, is in line with recent thinking on line-forms in Hebrew poetry). Physiologically the *qêrābay* may simply descend deeper into the body than the *nepes̄* (= ‘throat’), the pairing thus picturing the innermost being in an exploratory way, in what Allen calls a ‘total emotional response’ (Allen (1983:18). The commingling of the material (physical) and immaterial is striking: Yahweh’s ‘benefits’ (*gêmûlāyw*) embrace both forgiveness of sin and healing of disease, preservation of life from ‘the Pit’, standing for an immediate danger, or perhaps some ultimate dereliction, and ‘crowning with steadfast love and mercy’. The satisfying with ‘good’ might be material or spiritual, and the picture is rounded out with a metaphor of renewed youth.²⁷ What is striking is that the ‘soul’ is finally not distinct from the public person, who sins and needs forgiveness, suffers illness and danger, and hopes for satisfaction and renewing. In view of this portrait, the referent of ‘all that is within me’ is not something determinate or realized. The language of ‘soul’ recognizes that there are depths to human being that may not be fully known. But they belong nonetheless to the person

26 For the form *qerabay*, see Allen (1983:18), where he defends the plural, with the meaning ‘entrails’, on grounds of post-biblical usage.

27 The question of the relationship between ‘soul’ and ‘body’ arises in ancient and modern thought. The psychiatrist C. Robert Cloninger distinguishes three approaches in modern thought: skeptics and materialists (Hume); dualists (including Kant and Freud), and ‘transcendentalists’ (including Hegel), who ‘recognize the whole of being and emphasize the role of intuition in human experience’; Cloninger (2004:35). *Psyche* and *soma* are not by definition to be understood dualistically, and one must be wary of false contrasts and generalizations. I am most grateful to my colleague Prof. John Cox for pointing me to Cloninger’s work.

who has a visible presence in the ongoing life of a community. The human figure postulated here, by its own language, is ‘unfinished’.²⁸

4.3 The person and praise

Equally importantly, this utterance of the self is an utterance of praise. The sense of self is inseparable from the sense of God. This is nowhere clearer in the Psalm than in its orientation to death (vv. 15-16), which again is part of an utterance of praise. The human person will die, but ‘the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him’. How does this follow? It means at least that God will go on being faithful to future generations (v. 17), but does it just mean that? It is remarkable that the Psalmist is able to turn from thoughts of his own death to praise of the everlasting God (and here without any hint of an afterlife). In fact, the voice of the worshipper moves on to an invocation of praise that sings of God’s cosmic rule, and calls on angels, hosts, (heavenly) ministers and his very works to ‘bless’ him – finally returning to the opening invocation: ‘Bless the LORD, O my soul’. The self takes a humble place in the context of this universe of praise, but here the poet once again calls on himself in his innermost being to join with it, in a finale that expresses immense desire. As the self cannot be separated from its public, historical existence, so it cannot be extricated from participation in universal praise.

One can find these elements – self-interrogation, the inescapability of God, and powerful desire – in many places in the Psalter. Psalm 139 develops a theme of *God’s* knowledge of the Psalmist: God knows him in a way that is ‘too wonderful’ for him (139:6); it extends to his formation in the womb, ‘when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth’, and also to his destiny, his whole life, before it even began. This microscopic focus on the Psalmist’s life has a counterpoint in another vision of God’s inescapable (but benign) universality (vv. 7-12), and yet these two superficially opposite perspectives become one. For the passage on his formation in the womb is

28 The view adopted here may be distinguished from that which sees the ‘soul’ as a kind of spiritual potentiality or inner energy of the person; cf. Eichrodt (1967:134-42). Eichrodt writes of ‘...the practice of the Psalmist in addressing himself as *napšî*, setting his whole being over against himself as a kind of higher ego (Pss. 42.6, 12; 43.5; 62.6; 103.1f., etc.)’ (1967:138). And ‘...in such instances a certain solemnity or special emphasis is in mind’ (ibid.). He thinks that in cases where *nepeš* is used to express deep emotion it comes close to ‘our concept of “soul”’. However, he also says ‘the Hebrew mind was far from conceiving of a soul in the sense of a spiritual *alter ego* of the physical person’ (1967:139). For Eichrodt, the use of *nepeš* is a matter of expressing the inner energy of the person, making statements (of emotion or worship) more intense (ibid.).

immediately followed by: 'How precious to me are thy thoughts, O God. How vast is the sum of them!' And then there is a merging of the Psalmist's mind (at least as he supposes) with the mind of God: 'O that thou wouldst slay the wicked... Do I not hate them that hate thee!' And so we return to the opening theme: 'Search me, O God, and know my heart...! – and lead me in the *derek 'ôlām*, which may be 'the everlasting way', or 'the ancient way'. In either case, the closing sentiment expresses a desire, and the self is once again placed in a perspective that far transcends his immediate life.²⁹

4.4 The person in the Psalms as a book

In the preceding I have been working on the hypothesis that the book as a whole develops a certain *persona*, especially in the 'I'-voice, and have drawn on a number of Psalms, of different kinds, from across the book. This supposition has been pursued more systematically in the recent development of a 'canonical' approach to the Psalms. In this approach, the Psalter is treated as a book, a composition which has been brought to its 'final form' by a 'canonical redactor' (this from the general inspiration of B. S. Childs, but a whole literature on the subject has now been spawned).³⁰ Clinton McCann claims, as we saw, that the opening beatitude of Psalm 1 declares that the possibility of happiness, conjoined with righteousness, is the topic of the whole Psalter, and that the unfolding book (a book of five books) works out how this may be so (McCann 2005:340).³¹

This point has been developed to an extent in studies of sections of the Psalter. Patrick Miller found Psalms 15-24 to be a distinct sub-unit, framed by 'entrance-liturgies' – 'Who shall dwell on thy holy hill/who may ascend the hill of the LORD?' (Ps 15:1; 24:3 – RSV). He then argues that the group of Psalms depicts a righteous figure, one who answers to the questions put in the entrance-liturgies. This figure is the king, who is generally in view in Books 1-2 through the superscriptions, particularly so in Psalm 18, a lament of David closely similar to 2 Samuel 22, and with an extended superscription making the link to his life. The king is specifically the *deuteronomic* king, that is, portrayed as righteous, and conforming to the Torah, according to the law of the king in Deut 17:14-20 (Miller 1995:127-42).³² One of the observations made in a reading like this is of a progression from the profoundly dark experiences

29 There are many other possible developments of this line (e.g. Psalms 42-43).

30 See in addition to McCann, Wilson (1985); Hossfeld and Zenger (2008); Creach (1996); Howard (1997).

31 He cites Mays (1994:40); '...the psalm is there to invite us to read and use the entire book as a guide to a blessed life'.

32 Jamie Grant has developed this line of thinking for three sub-groups of psalms, namely Psalms 1-2, 18-21, 118-119 (Grant 2004).

portrayed in Psalms 18:22 to the confidence of Psalm 23 and finally the praise uttered in Psalm 24. Nancy deClaissé Walford puts it like this:

The lamenting king in Psalm 22, who is surrounded by bulls and dogs and evildoers, expresses confidence in Psalm 23 in the LORD as “shepherd-king” who provides for the psalmist’s needs – green pastures, still waters, right paths, protection, a secure dwelling place. And in Psalm 24, the king leads the congregation in a celebration of the LORD’s sovereignty, justice, kingship and glory’ (DeClaissé Walford 2005:151).³³

The identification of the speaking person as the king should be qualified with the observation that the king, in this deuteronomic perspective, functions as the ‘ideal Israelite’. That is, the representation is not exclusive to the king, but precisely conveys the Israelite, in both history and community. What is interesting here is the construction of a figure across the various Psalms, implying a kind of coherence among the several voices, even though these voices express sharply different sentiments in particular places. Noteworthy too is that the personality in view does not actually have to use the first person singular – which does not occur in Psalm 24 – but only has to speak. The culmination in Psalm 24 may be taken as an expression of praise (implying a *leading* in praise) by the same person who speaks as ‘I’ in Psalms 22-23. The utterance of praise becomes part of the construction of the central figure in these Psalms.

There is an analogy to Psalm 24 in the final run of Psalms in the book as a whole, Psalms 146-150, in which the ‘I’ speaker retreats from view and yet is present in the words and act of praise itself.³⁴ Here at the end of the ‘narrative’ of the Psalms as a whole are the unrestrained expressions of praise in the final five ‘Hallelujah’-Psalms (146-50). In these, there is no more Lament; there is (after 145) no more David, nor memory of Davidic disappointment; there is in this climax virtually only the voice of the worshipper in praise. This is a kind of destination, albeit provisional. If it seems to be something distilled, timeless, remote, pure, it has behind it all the perplexity that this great book unfolds with an honesty as fierce and disturbing as that of Job. The ‘I’ itself even seems to recede behind the invocation to all creation to ‘praise the LORD’. Yet this is the same voice that we followed through all the Lamentation. It is the voice of one who is not to be identified with David or any other individual (even if David

33 She also shows the close textual interconnections between these last three Psalms of the group.

34 In these Psalms without the Davidic superscription, the ‘I’ is expressed in Psalm 146; in Psalm 147, the speaker includes himself once in ‘our LORD’, and also addresses Jerusalem-Zion (second-person singular, vv. 12-14); no subject is expressed in Psalms 148-50.

is sometimes used as a model, he fades out; things are never quite the same after Ps 89!). The 'I' is simply the human being in God's world. To stretch the thought almost to breaking-point, it is the voice of the one who was utterly abandoned in Psalm 88, just as it is the voice of delight and confidence, often hard-won, in many other places. 'Happy is the man...whose delight is in the law of the LORD' (Ps 1:1-2). By this stage we have seen something of what that might mean. The 'endless Hallelujah' that Psalms 146-50 seem to want to initiate comes from a voice that has endured all that a human being can endure, but has become wise, and now leads the creation in praise, and in so doing, fulfills the mission of the *'adam* in Genesis 1.

5. CONCLUSION

I have attempted in the foregoing to explore the nature of the person encountered everywhere in the Psalms as the first-person speaker, in answer to the question how that person projects a concept of human 'happiness' or fulfilment. I have suggested that access to the notion of human happiness in the Psalms requires an approach that goes deeper than either signals from 'happiness' terminology or an account of 'Israelite' conceptions of the 'good life'. The topic has to be explored rather in terms of the grand themes of human existence, such as freedom and justice, themes which occur in non-biblical discourses about happiness, but which are reflected in specific ways in the Psalms. The theme of justice in particular allowed the figure of the Psalmist to be portrayed in a maturing that demonstrated a capacity for truth and fullness through and beyond the hardest edges of experience in conflict with belief.

In the formation of the human person, worship plays an inescapable part. The function of the Torah in constructing the character is fundamental, but this notion also has a correspondence in the forming of the Psalms themselves as linguistic and liturgical performances. The Psalms pay close attention to the inner being of the person. This is inseparable from the person's outward life, however, and does not come to full articulation, but is represented as potential, characterized by desire, and as moving towards fullness in the activity of praise. The vocation of the Psalmist, as human person, is expressed, not only in the discourse of individual Psalms, but in the canonical movement of the Psalter, where the individual voice retreats behind an expression of pure praise. The person, tested and mature, participates in a testimony to the still expected fulfilment of the destiny of humanity.

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