



INTRODUCTION

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My first task this evening is to express our sadness at the death of two people who have made major contributions to the Bible Week. The first is Professor Erich Zenger whose work as a Bible Scholar and a leading figure in Jewish-Christian dialogue here in Germany has influenced our studies, and who lectured here on Leviticus when we celebrated the Bible Week's fortieth anniversary. The second person was more intimately a part of the Bible Week for many years and we feel a personal loss with the death of Douglas Blackman. Our hearts go out to Sima who nursed him through the final difficult months of his life. We will use the opportunity of our services to remember them later this week, but we wanted the opportunity on this opening evening to mention their names and record our sense of loss and sorrow.

Many of you will know that I have spent the last seven months in Japan. Since I was not just a short-term tourist I had to carry my "Alien Registration Card" with me at all times. I have never been conscious before of being an "alien", though as George Steiner pointed out, all of us are strangers and "aliens" virtually everywhere on this planet. But I used the image of being an alien when introducing my lectures on the Hebrew Bible in Japan. Because in the world of the Hebrew Bible, we are all of us visitors, strangers and aliens. It is not our world and it takes a lot of time and imagination to enter it. Like visitors to any other unknown place we have to behave in appropriate ways, and bring to our Bible study the same kind of sensitivity we would bring to any strange country that we are visiting for the first time. We need time to acclimatise. We need to learn what we can about the language that is spoken, though recognising that we may never quite grasp the nuances and inner connections of what is being said. We need to keep our eyes and ears open to what is going on around us. We need to be careful not to make immediate judgments on what we discover based on the values we are used to in our home society. We need to try to learn how any piece of behaviour fits into the local culture and society as a whole. And, of course, if we don't understand something, we should ask.

Because we study a new group of a dozen or so Psalms in sequence each time, we never know quite what to expect. In this week's mixture we find some which contain pleas for help from God because of dangerous and threatening enemies. Sometimes the prayer of the psalmist is very moving and we can identify with it until it suddenly changes into something like a curse on those enemies which we find disturbing. Other Psalms are more universalistic, inviting the nations of the world to join in singing praises to God. One of them reflects the challenge faced by the nation after a military defeat. Throughout there is a curious mixture of the intensely personal and the collective, sometimes with particular emphasis on the importance of the king. There are a lot of puzzles to untangle in our daily study groups.

Some of the headings relate the Psalms to events in the life of King David, though we are used to discounting these as later additions. The first Psalm in this week's list, Psalm 58, includes in its heading "Al tashchet", "do not destroy". The same heading occurs in Psalm 57 and 59, so some Jewish commentators assume that all three belong together, and reflect events concerning David's struggles with King Saul. Radak, Rabbi David Kimchi, reads the phrase as David's plea to God, "do not destroy me". The Bible scholar Harry Torczyner, who adopted the name "Tur-Sinai" when he left Germany for Palestine in 1933, suggested that the phrase refers to David's instructions to his men not to destroy King Saul on the two occasions when he was in David's power. I mention this because whatever the historical problems in associating these psalms with David, they do come alive if we read them as a reflection of the inner life of that complex man. The David of the narratives in the Book of Samuel is ambitious, an intriguer, politically astute, a brilliant soldier, sexually driven, a loyal friend. But he is also a poet and musician, aware of his intimate relationship with God, a man who feels responsible for his actions and sins, both because of their private consequences for his family and the damage they do to the nation he is trying to establish. However we see David in these stories only from the outside, through his actions and sometimes from his personal witness. However, the feelings of threat from dangerous enemies, the passions, the anger, the curses, the self-justification to be heard in the appeals to God within some of these Psalms do fit someone with the complexity, the drives and extraordinary life of a David. Historically they may or may not belong to David, but psychologically and from the literary point of view they do make sense as reflections of his inner life.

Precisely because the Psalms we will be studying this week are such a diverse group, it becomes more and more puzzling that they belong together in the same collection. Or rather, the problem is that because they are in the same collection and labelled as "tehillim" praises of God, we are almost forced to treat them all as spiritual songs to be accepted uncritically for liturgical use, and then we find ourselves embarrassed by their actual content. Before they became "the Psalms", they were individual compositions with their own internal logic and context and purpose. Let's try to meet them as far as we can on their own terms, just like the unexpected people we encounter on our visit to this unfamiliar world.

Gefördert durch:



aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages