



INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Magonet

This year's selection of texts, from the fourth book of Psalms, contains many that are familiar to Jewish participants because of their regular liturgical usage. This has advantages because of our knowledge of the text and its language. However, the same situation can also be a disadvantage; our very familiarity, and our experience of using a particular psalm on a regular basis, may lead us to feel that there is nothing new to be found there. Hopefully, the different context of the Bible Week may help us see these texts afresh, especially because of the challenge that can be posed to us by those for whom these psalms are relatively new. Their questions, whether for clarification of the text, or because of puzzlement with the meaning of a particular phrase or other broader concerns, may help us discover some new perspective. So I want to reinforce the point to all of us, that there are no silly questions, no wrong questions, at this Bible Week, because any question may potentially open up the text to new understandings.

In our respective traditions we are accustomed to using fragments of psalms, entire psalms or even groups of psalms, such as the Hallel Psalms, in our liturgical or personal prayer life. As scholars we often look for some kind of unifying theory to explain the internal logic or structure of an individual Psalm, or what might be considered its essential theological message, or how it might fit logically into its wider context within the Book of Psalms as a whole. But all of these approaches risk sharing the same tendency: namely to be selective in what we focus on in order to fit the framework that we are trying to construct. Hence the question: what do we do with the bits that do not fit, that resist a convenient interpretation? Of course, we may simply ignore them, or even remove them on the basis of some well-argued rationale. But, if we are honest, they remain a nagging irritation, disturbing whatever system we are constructing. So it is important to keep such inconsistencies in mind. Perhaps one day, when seen through a different set of assumptions, they may be found to fit into a broader synthesis. But they may remain forever unresolved, as a reminder that not everything in a psalm, as in life, can be tidied up.

Another question concerns some of the psalms included this year, namely those associated in Judaism with the welcoming of the Shabbat, those which address the theme of God as Sovereign over the world. My question is about how we are to understand certain phrases. For example Psalm 96:8 offers an invitation to the 'families' of the world: *havu ladonai k'vod sh'mo s'u minchah uvo'oo l'hatsrotav*. 'Give to the Eternal the honour due to God's name, take up an offering and come into God's courts.' Are such passages to be understood simply as rhetorical, addressed to Israel alone, so as to impress upon the psalmist's own people the universal nature of God's authority? Or are they to be understood quite literally, as actually part of a liturgy welcoming some delegation of foreign worshippers into the Temple. There is some evidence for the latter view, enough to raise questions about the nature or purpose of that particular psalm in its context. Of course, one interpretation need not rule out the other, but alongside the theological issues we

may discover in the psalm, I am curious as to what it might tell us about the openness of the Temple to foreign visitors and the practical implications that would flow from this.

Finally, I want to ask what we are to make of certain terms and phrases that are to be found within this collection, in particular, those that belong to aspects of the tradition of Israel's covenant with God. For example in Psalm 102:13 the psalmist says to God: *'Zikhr'kha l'dor vador'*, 'Your remembrance is for every generation', and verse 22 states: *'I'sapper b'tsion shem adonai'*, 'to tell in Zion the name of God'. When combined together the two echo precisely the revelation to Moses of God's name at the 'burning bush' in a fine example of Biblical parallelism: *'zeh sh'mi l'olam v'zeh zikhri l'dor dor'* 'This is My name forever, and this is My remembrance for every generation.' (Exodus 3:15). It is as if the psalmist has used this event and this key text from the tradition as a building block for this composition, by splitting the original parallelism of the verse into its two constituent parts and redistributing them. Or take Psalm 103:8-10 which is a meditation on the revelation of God's attributes to Moses in Exodus 34:6, a text used with variations in other places throughout the Hebrew Bible: *rahum v'hannun adonai, erekh appaim v'rav-hesed'* 'Loving and gracious is the Eternal, long suffering and great in faithful love'. The psalmist in this version actually 'improves' God's loving care by expanding on the original Exodus verse. Does the inclusion in these psalms of what appear to be conscious echoes of earlier key religious expressions tell us anything about the wider context in which they are to be understood? To take a different example of such possible borrowing with a purpose, Psalms 96-99 make use of the terms *'kavod'*, usually translated as 'glory' and *'kadosh'*, usually translated as 'holy'. Yet we know from the passage in Isaiah 6:3 *'kadosh kadosh kadosh adonai ts'vaot, m'lo khol ha'aretz k'vodo'* 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory', that in this setting, these two terms reflect respectively the 'otherness or transcendence' of God, *kadosh*, and the 'presence or immanence' of God, *kavod*. So to what extent might these terms retain such a meaning when they appear together in other liturgical contexts? I raise the question particularly because of the three-fold appearance in Psalm 99 of the word *'kadosh'*, used as a marker to divide up the psalm, twice as *kadosh hu*, 'holy is he' (verses 3 and 5), and once, as the climax to the psalm *kadosh adonai eloheinu*, 'holy is the Eternal our God' (verse 9). Is that three-fold use a conscious echo of the Isaiah passage, which, like the climax of the psalm itself, also speaks of God enthroned in the Temple in Jerusalem? That is to say whatever the local significance of such terms in a particular psalm or group of psalms, we also need to be mindful of the broader Biblical context in which they are to be found, and ask to what extent that might also play out in the particular psalm we are reading.

These are a few of the questions that interest me this week, and I am sure that each of us brings our own questions to these challenging passages. As I once learned from Rabbi Shmuel Sperber, questions are very important. At a shiur in London he said: 'Religion offers answers without obliterating the questions. They become blunted and will not attack you with the same ferocity. But without them the answer would dry up and wither away. The question is a great religious act; it helps you to live great religious truth.'¹

¹ Quoted in *seder ha-t'fillot, Forms of Prayer Volume 1 Daily, Sabbath and Occasional Prayers* 8th edition. Movement for Reform Judaism 2008 p 578.