



INTRODUCTION TO PSALMS – BOOK THREE

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This week we are reading Psalms 73-89 that make up the third collection within the Book of Psalms. According to Jewish tradition the five ‘books’ that make up the Book of Psalms are the work of David, his equivalent collection to the Five Books of Moses. In line with that analogy, this, the third book, would be equivalent to the Book of Leviticus. Indeed there are a number of elements within this collection that relate to the Temple and its cult, but these can also be found in many other Psalms as well, so pursuing this possible relationship may not be the most fruitful approach to the collection.

Though David is credited with the authorship of one of them, Psalm 86, eleven out of the seventeen are ascribed to Asaph, an important figure in the musical tradition of the Temple. With all such ascriptions in the Psalms we do not know how much historical credence to give to them, assuming that they are the work of later editors. Nor do we know whether the named person is the actual author or simply someone formally associated with a particular number of Psalms. However for the purpose of this introduction I want to assume that Asaph is the actual author of these eleven Psalms as a way of approaching this particular collection. Because what I find interesting is the authority with which he speaks. The first one in the series Psalm 73, is a very revealing account of his struggle to understand as a religious person why wicked people seem to prosper, and how he personally came to terms with this problem. But in the rest of the Psalms, a mixture of lamentations about the fate of the nation alternating with celebrations, Asaph speaks as the voice of the nation itself. Securely locating himself within the framework of the covenant between God and Israel, he feels able to rehearse their history in a critical way, recounting their repeated failures to live up to their relationship with God. But he is equally willing to challenge God for failing to support the nation in its times of crisis, and indeed overseeing the destruction of both the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom, with the fall of the Temple itself. Is there enough consistency in the tone, in the certainty with which he speaks, in the breadth of his understanding of the prophetic view of history, to identify a single person? Can we gain some understanding of the role he played not only within the Temple cult but also in the society as a whole? Was he perhaps something like a ‘poet laureate’, charged with recording officially the mood of the nation in the light of the great events that they had experienced, and offering a public meditation?

It is sometimes the case that the opening words of a particular Psalm set the tone for what follows, or even offer a kind of riddle that can only be resolved as one reads or studies the later parts of the text. On that analogy, I wonder whether the opening Psalm of this collection, Psalm 73, also provides a key to the rest of the Asaph Psalms, or even Book three as a whole. If that is the case, then the opening words of Psalm 73, and in fact the opening word itself, presents an extraordi-

nary challenge to the reader. For in the Hebrew the first word of Psalm 73 is an emphatic, adversative 'But!', 'ach!', or, if one wants a more precise term, 'Nevertheless'! That is to say, in the face of whatever the Psalmist is confronting, however unlikely his conclusion may be, he wants to assert a contrary position. And this 'but' addresses the greatest paradox of Israel's existence and indeed its relationship to God: 'Nevertheless, God is good to Israel!' It is the ultimate statement of theodicy, the defence of God's actions or inactions, in the light of human suffering. Nevertheless, God is good to Israel! But even Asaph, at least in this personal Psalm, has to set limits on the human capacity to understand or accept the mystery of God's actions. For the sentence continues: 'Nevertheless, God is good to Israel, *l'varei leivav*, to those who are pure in heart.' That phrase echoes an equally demanding expectation of human conduct to be found in Psalm 24: Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord, and who shall stand in His holy place, one who has clean hands, *uvar leivav*, and a pure heart, who has not taken God's name in vain, and has not sworn deceitfully (Psalm 24:3-4). For such people, Asaph says, God's ways are transparent, and the trials to which they are subjected, somehow understandable and acceptable. But how does that work for the nation as a whole? How do the people understand their destiny, the triumphs and tragedies of their existence? Is there even a God who determines their fate? Perhaps for them, Asaph has to recall the long history of God's deeds, the mythological struggles with the forces of chaos, and the special history of God's dealings with Israel. He locates the blame in their own failings, but acknowledging such things offers a way forward, new possibilities and hope. However such is the nature of Israel's relationship with God that God too can be challenged, for theodicy, if it is to be honest and effective, cannot simply locate the faults and failures in human hands. God's ways may be mysterious, but God too has a responsibility for our creation and our nature.

So, one way to approach the texts before us, is in terms of that great 'But', that 'Nevertheless', that asserts faith and trust in God in spite of all the vicissitudes of life. How far this is Asaph's message, and how far he is successful in meeting the challenge in his time and place, and in every time and place since then when his Psalms are read, is the question, and the riddle, I would like to offer as we begin our studies this week.