

## INTRODUCTION

*James Baaden*

Thank you. It is truly an honour to be called upon to speak about our texts this year. In my case, what I offer is not any kind of overview but more a series of reflections on some themes that seemed to present themselves.

No overview, no, but of course we are aware that we are dealing with the last Psalms this year, the final elements in a series of 150 works. True, there are Eastern Christian traditions which maintain a Psalm 151, even Syriac Orthodox communities that have 155 Psalms. But we can safely say that we are dealing with what we all regard as the last Psalms, the final texts.

What does it mean to be the last? Well, for us here here, it means that we shall take leave of the Psalms – after 20 years of engagement with these texts. In the English-speaking world, we are all – since childhood – familiar with Juliet’s words: parting is such sweet sorrow. But sweet not because she is reflecting on her experience thus far of being in love, but because she knows she must go to sleep – and awake to a new day of being in love.

Contemplating ends, endings, and “lastness”, necessarily includes being aware of beginnings, including new beginnings. In a set of remarks such as these, the normal way to capture the sweet sorrow would be to address it ... at the end. But let’s do it now. We began our study of the Psalms in Bendorf, at the Hedwig Dransfeld Haus, the “HDH”, over 20 years ago. Our parting from that place was very sorrowful, not sweet. The house, our home, had to close, urgently, completely suddenly; and we who were there in those days were also shattered by two traumatic deaths so very near to us: in 2002, Andreas Hinz, a German rabbinic student at Leo Baeck College (who once lived and worked in Osnabrück) and in 2003, our last Bible Week at Bendorf, Father Paul Eisenkopf, who was working with us in the team, preparing our reading of the Psalms.

Yet when I look back to that final time in Bendorf, and those very Psalms we read in those years, I find myself remembering Psalm 8, and feeling the complete exaltation it expresses, *Ma adir shimcha bechol ha-aretz*, “how glorious is Your name throughout the world”. *That* is what stays with me; alongside the memory of loss and grief.

Our texts this year, these last Psalms, more than once address the great span of wholeness: both beginnings and endings. Loss, change, and the need to find a voice in a new place, are evoked in Psalm 137. Though here we are confronted with an issue we’ve often struggled with: how to deal with poignant, eirenic reflections on life, “by the rivers of Babylon”, which appear alongside other verses which are anything but poignant and eirenic: a snarl of violent, destructive rage? How we as readers, and as Jews and Christians, deal with the snarls of bitterness, and all that we find harsh and “problematic”, has been something of a theme here.

The span of life, all beginnings and endings, and the world not beyond death but before birth, are the subject of what for me is a text of towering greatness, Psalm 139. There is no snarling here. No other Biblical text in my view so eloquently expresses the mystery of our being in the world, and the place of that world within a greater divine universe. The vastness of the undertaking is also exemplified by another of our Psalms, 145, via an utterly different structural form – the feature, possibly, that has enabled it to have a prominent position in the Jewish liturgy.

As we see from these few examples, there are many ways to contemplate the broader perspective, to speak of and to address eternity and the Eternal. One is the poetic voice. Psalms 139 and 145 excel in guiding us to the peaks of contemplation by means of the language of poetry – in such different ways. Another is music, reflected in names applied to our texts, Greek “psalm”, *psalmos*, Hebrew *mizmor*. How often in these Psalms we find music explicitly referred to – also celebrated as a dimension of our experience of the Psalms. Another is praise: going beyond Psalm 8’s “your name is great throughout the world” which moved me 20 years ago, to expound upon the primacy of praise and rejoicing – a primacy acknowledged by rabbinic Judaism and confirmed in our liturgy. What is praise? Reflected in Hebrew terms *tehilim* and *hallel*, sometimes it encounters me as an outpouring of exaltation, sometimes an extolling of good qualities, sometimes a transcendental vision of eternity.

20 years ago the Bible Week left Bendorf. Our hearts were heavy with loss. But as Jonathan suggested to us in his sermon that Shabbat, the cloud, the pillar of fire, seemed to be on the move. And: it actually moved rather swiftly and decisively. To Holzhausen. Georgsmarienhütte! This is our twentieth Bible Week in our beloved home, Haus Ohrbeck. Most of you were never at Bendorf. Your realities, and our own years here, have become our shared Haus Ohrbeck story, the site of two momentous decades of Bible Week life. Where we weathered a global pandemic, a phenomenon well beyond our imaginings. Throughout those 20 years, the Psalms have accompanied us, and we have accompanied them. Maybe on occasion we supposed that certain other Biblical texts, which we interleaved every other year with the Psalms in the “early Ohrbeck era”, were exciting by contrast, but just as often, so many of us found ourselves rejoicing in returning to the five Books of the Psalms, re-entering the sophisticated structural landscape of the world of poetry, and also the worlds of song, theatre and performance, the world of interior reflection, the worlds of philosophy and liturgy: the many worlds of the Psalms. This is our last encounter with them. But as it has withstood a colossal world public health crisis, we may say with some confidence that our Bible Week will go on. Here. Next year and beyond.

*Halleluyah!*

That’s a quote. Psalm 150.

The End.

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