

Two-part article

The cradle of the Psalms

1. Psalm 90

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This two-part article, first published in January and February 1948, expounds Psalms 90 and 91 as the earliest of the psalms.

THERE IS NO BOOK of the Old Testament better loved than the Psalms, which has been rightly called "the hymn book of the ages". The various authors cover a period of more than 1,000 years, from Moses to Ezra. Not only is the prophetic content of untold wealth to the Bible student, but the ethical and exhortatory element has proved of surpassing value to people in all walks of life.

Universal appeal

What is the secret of this universal appeal to all types of men? Firstly, they contain a complete register of all human experience, from the depths of anguish and sin to the heavenly heights of praise and fellowship with God. Secondly, the authors were men of stirring experience capable of intense feeling, and guided in their recording by the overshadowing spirit of Almighty God.

The quickly changing moods of this book, and the vivid glimpses of personality, prove conclusively that the writers were more than human typewriters mechanically recording a Divine message. Though guided and controlled by God's spirit, the Psalms were cradled in human experience, such as the delirious happiness reflected in 52 and 144, the sorrow-stricken remorse in 51, or the tranquil thankfulness for a difficulty solved in 73. Both national and personal experiences were selected by God and moulded into a form suitable for His purpose: "whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).

The sufferings of David, for example, were the Divine mould in type of his 'Greater Son', and Psalm 8 is so used in the second chapter of Hebrews, whilst Psalm 22 was in the mind of Jesus

when he was impaled upon the cross. Their effect is obvious upon the mind of all New Testament writers, and the derived "patience and comfort" are well illustrated in the narrative of early missionary preaching (Acts 2:22-36).

A prayer of Moses

From a cursory reading of the Psalms we obtain only a fraction of the help available, and it is in looking behind the form of words to the historical background and personal experience in which they were cradled that we may enter into the full comfort. The most ancient portion of the Psalter is generally admitted to be Psalms 90 and 91, and these two are selected for study.

The title prefixed to Psalm 90, "A prayer of Moses the man of God", transports us back to the fifteenth century B.C. Scholars are in agreement that an air of antiquity pervades the psalm, and one of them, Fausset, has described it as follows: "Grave, solemn and majestic, terse in its conceptions; a vein of sadness runs through it, but relieved by hope and trust in Yahweh".

The last four verses would indicate as a setting the latter part of the wilderness journey, whilst the general symbolism of mountains, hills, floods, grass, pestilence, trees, confirms this impression. Further confirmation may be drawn from the contrast expressed between the eternity of Yahweh Elohim and the transitory nature of man so painfully impressed upon their mind by the falling of the stricken multitude by the way (Ps. 95:8-11; cf. Heb. 3:7-11):

"For all our days are passed away in Thy wrath:

We spend our years as a tale that is told.

The days of our years are threescore years and ten;

And if by reason of strength they be fourscore years,

Yet is their strength labour and sorrow;

For it is soon cut off, and we fly away"

(Ps. 90:9,10).

The background should be remembered when applying this limit. Not at all times is it correct to say that a man's age is limited to seventy or eighty years; it was the position in which the younger of those coming under condemnation (twenty to forty years old when leaving Egypt) found themselves. The older were already dead, and as the end of the journey drew near, their own sentence of death became due for execution (Num. 14:26-30).

This psalm, then, is occupied with the sorrows of the vast multitude that perished in the wilderness, an indication, however, which is only approximate in time. Noting the identification of the writer with those under sentence of death—

“For *we* are consumed by Thine anger,
And by Thy wrath are *we* troubled.
Thou hast set *our* iniquities before Thee,
Our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance” (vv. 7,8)—

we may come closer to the date by assuming that, if sentence was also passed upon Moses, it was written during or after the incident at Kadesh (Num. 20:1-13). The writer to the Hebrews says that the multitude perished because of unbelief (3:19), and the sentence of God upon Moses was, “Because ye believed Me not” (Num. 20:12). Hence Moses also entered not in because of unbelief; he came under the same condemnation as the numbered multitude. Quite rightly, therefore, he could identify himself with the people, as does the writer of this psalm.

Further indications of this date for composition may be found by careful comparison with Deuteronomy 32 and 33. Among the more obvious parallels are the title, “Moses the man of God” (cf. 33:1); the prayer that God will repent (90:13; cf. 32:36); the reference to “the mountains” (90:2; cf. 33:15) and the eternal God as “our dwelling place” (90:1; cf. 33:27, RV), while many smaller details may be found, all of which accord well with the theory that Moses wrote the psalm just before his death.

Help in exposition

This time fixing can be of great importance when we attempt a detailed exposition of the psalm. One of the most striking features of the Exodus is the Divine preservation of footwear and clothing: “I have led you forty years in the wilderness: your clothes are not waxen old upon you, and thy shoe is not waxen old upon thy foot” (Deut. 29:5), a providence which also extended to physical wellbeing: “Thy raiment waxed not old upon

thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years” (8:4). We are told that at the time of their coming forth from Egypt “there was not one feeble person among their tribes” (Ps. 105:37), whilst Nehemiah adds, “forty years didst Thou sustain them in the wilderness, so that they lacked nothing” (9:21).

The Mosaic narrative adds detail to these general assertions, such as direct guidance, an angel in the cloud, food, manna, clothing, footwear, health, worship and laws; in all things they were entirely dependent upon God, and moved at His volition within the protection of His overshadowing power. Yet, despite this presence of Divine perfection, many thousands perished miserably and left their carcasses by the wayside. Each one was under the curtain of Divine protection when leaving Egypt, and each was protected, led and maintained in the wilderness.

The basic answer as to how the destruction fell upon them is contained in verse 7 of Psalm 90:

“For we are consumed by Thine anger,
And by Thy wrath are we troubled”.

The reason also for this visitation is clearly stated in verse 8:

“Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee,
Our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance”

It is interesting to note that in this place alone “the light of [God’s] countenance” is used to signify Divine displeasure; in every other occurrence the phrase represents favour in God’s sight. The Hebrew phrase might well be rendered in modern parlance, ‘the X-ray glance of Deity’, and the effectiveness of this light has been well described by an inspired writer: “. . . sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit . . . and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in His sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with Whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:12,13). It was by the light of this countenance that the evil heart of unbelief was found and the owners perished.

Here is certainly the basic answer to the problem, but we think that interesting subsidiary detail is to be found in Psalm 91, and Part 2 will deal with that subject.

[\(To be concluded\)](#)

We apologise for the wrong numbering of Bible Workshop in the October issue, which should have been numbered 6. Confusion has arisen because 1 and 2 were published together.