

A spirituality shaped by the Psalter

Perry B. Yoder, Professor of Old Testament
Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary

Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. For if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their servants, and their people. But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation. (Jer. 22:3–5; all Scriptures are quoted from the NRSV)

A brave prophet's brave words. But was this the first time Israel had heard this message? By no means! Jeremiah preached what he learned at church, from the Psalter. In the opening words of Psalm 72, we find this plea:

*Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor. (Ps. 37:1–4)*

The language of the psalmist's petition is strikingly similar to that of Jeremiah. It is a short, though courageous, step from this petition to Jeremiah's demand. He had the *chutzpah* to expect what the psalmist pleaded for!

How could the Psalter foster such courage? To understand the power of a spirituality nourished by the Psalms we need to examine its characteristics. We expect to find in the Bible God's words to humanity. But in the Psalms, a book treasured through the millennia, we find words people addressed to God. In this part of the Bible we find human words that matter. What characterizes the spirituality expressed in the words the psalmists address to God? How do these words matter?

Psalms of lament

The words the Psalms address to God are bold words. The psalmist's voice is not shy or pious, by our standards. In the laments, the largest group of psalms in the Psalter, we hear the voice of despair, expressed not meekly but assertively.

*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. (Ps. 13:1-4)*

This familiar psalm begins with a heartrending plea to a God who is absent. In God's absence the enemy is getting the better of the petitioner. Indeed, the psalmist fears for his life. His plight is not his own fault, but God's. It is God's absence that has led to his decline and possible demise. Here is no pious confession of sin or of wrongdoing but a plea to God to get on with it. Strong words.

Just as God is the problem, so is God the solution. The psalmist does not ask God to give him strength to bear up in difficult times. He does not pray for the courage and power to prevail over his enemy. No, the psalmist leaves the solution to God. This profound trust in God is a dominant characteristic of these psalms. Virtually all of the laments end on a note of confidence and triumph. The conclusion of Psalm 13 is typical:

*But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me. (Ps. 13:5–6)*

First of all, then, if the Psalms shape our spirituality *we will speak boldly to God, but rely completely on God*. A faith nurtured by the Psalter will display trust in God alone, even when we have no apparent reason to trust.

Another significant element in the laments is their frequent mention of enemies. Enemies abound in these psalms, and the psalmist does not hesitate to request their defeat. In Psalm 3, the introductory lament to the first book of the Psalter, we read:

*O LORD, how many are my foes!
Many are rising against me;
many are saying to me,
“There is no help for you in God.” Selah (Ps. 3:1–2)
Rise up, O LORD!
Deliver me, O my God!
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;
you break the teeth of the wicked. (Ps. 3:7)*

These sentiments may shock us. We do not normally identify our troubles or despair with particular individuals. Evil is often faceless for us. Neither do we feel comfortable asking God to defeat and humiliate others. Yet in many places in the world our brothers and sisters in Christ live in fear of what those they can name might do to them. Such psalms express the anguish of Christians in Indonesia who face persecution and the destruction of their churches at the hands of their neighbors. Indian Christians who face persecution and an uncertain future in their homeland might also cry out to God in this way.

The spirituality of these psalms is the spirituality of those who suffer, of those who are set upon by people more powerful than they are. In the midst of suffering they cry out to God for relief and vindication. Yet it is exactly this cry of suffering that we in North America excise from the Psalter! When we use laments in worship, we read only the trust parts, only the positive verses. We

In studying our heritage we acknowledge that our personal experience is an inadequate horizon within which to draw conclusions about God and about how we should live.

leave out the troubling parts. We seem to have no place in worship for pain, for despair, for suffering. Yet, even in North America, many Christians suffer at the hands of others. Women are abused by husbands, male friends, and employers. Men, too, are abused by employers and fellow employees in their places of work. Children are abused at home and outside the home. When we avoid lamenting, we separate our worship from the worship of many of our brothers and sisters whose spirituality, like the psalmist's, is marked by tears.

Secondly, then, if we let the Psalms shape our spirituality, *we will give voice to our pains and fears*. The laments remind us that our prayers are not an escape mechanism, but a channel for acknowledging the suffering in our lives and in the lives of others. When we use the laments we identify with those for whom the presence of enemies is real. We offer to God our plea that the wicked be thwarted in their plans.

Psalms of belief

Although the laments are the most numerous type of psalm, they presuppose the faith that is confessed in the psalms of belief. A significant body of these psalms is found between Psalm 90 and Psalm 100. In these psalms of belief, the reality of God's reign and providence is affirmed. Also in these psalms we find a confession of God's justice, which is the foundation of God's kingdom.

*The LORD is king! Let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!
Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
Fire goes before him,
and consumes his adversaries on every side.
(Ps. 97:1-3)*

Further on in Psalm 97 we find the assertion that God is for the just and lowly:

*The LORD loves those who hate evil;
he guards the lives of his faithful;
he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.
Light dawns for the righteous,
and joy for the upright in heart. (Ps. 97:102–11)*

The bedrock of faith expressed in these psalms is that God is a just and right-making king, an all-powerful sovereign who will act on behalf of those who are faithful and just. Of course, it is the dissonance between such faith and the experiences of life that sponsors the laments. It is also the certainty of faith expressed in these hymns that leads both to petition and hope.

In the third place, then, if our spirituality is nurtured by the Psalms *we will confess our faith in God's reign and its justice*. This confession of faith will guide us, shape our understanding of the events of our lives, and influence our response to them. The courage to petition and trust is based on the courage to believe and confess the reign of God.

Psalms of wisdom

But how did the psalmist know what to confess? How did the psalmist come to a right belief about God? The first psalm, the introduction to the Psalter as a whole, points to an answer. In this familiar wisdom psalm the way of the right one, as opposed to the way of the wicked, is characterized by immersion in the Torah. All the differences between the right and the wicked mentioned in the rest of the psalm flow from this basic distinction.

At the beginning of a book we associate with public worship, the first psalm teaches the individual practice of learning God's instruction. This instruction transcends the experience of any one individual. It represents a communal trust that is passed on from generation to generation so that each new generation can learn about God and about the intersection of the community and God. Psalm 114, for example, transmits part of the heritage of faith that is available to each individual.

*When Israel went out from Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
Judah became God's sanctuary,*

*Israel his dominion.
The sea looked and fled;
Jordan turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs.
Why is it, O sea, that you flee?
O Jordan, that you turn back?
O mountains, that you skip like rams?
O hills, like lambs?
Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
who turns the rock into a pool of water,
the flint into a spring of water.*

A fourth characteristic of our spirituality when the Psalms shape it is that *we prepare for speaking to God by listening to the witness of the community about God*. In studying our heritage we acknowledge that our personal experience is an inadequate horizon within which to draw conclusions about God and about how we should live. Rather, in studying the revelation handed on by the community, we find our horizon enlarged and joined together with that of others, past and present, who worship God.

Psalms of praise

But the confessions of the psalmist are not rooted only in the study of God's Torah. The psalmist also participated in public ceremonies and celebration. Psalms of praise give human voice to the presence and action of God in the present life of the community. These psalms of celebration are at the opposite end of the continuum from those of lament. The book of Psalms embodies this continuum. It begins with laments, like Psalm 3, quoted above, and ends with psalms of thanksgiving and praise, Psalms 145–150.

Psalm 150 indicates the celebrative and festive nature of the psalms of God's praise.

*Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance;*

praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals! (Ps. 150:3–5)

The celebration was noisy. People danced! It was a creative experience. In such performance, membership in the community was affirmed and deepened. Belief was not only intellectual but was also embedded in the whole being through participation.

In the fifth place, when the Psalms nurture our spirituality *we celebrate God in physical ways such as playing musical instruments and dancing.* When we involve our whole body in praise, faith percolates through dimensions of our being that we might otherwise neglect or leave undeveloped. Celebration sustains the life of faith and the community of God's rule.

A multifaceted spirituality

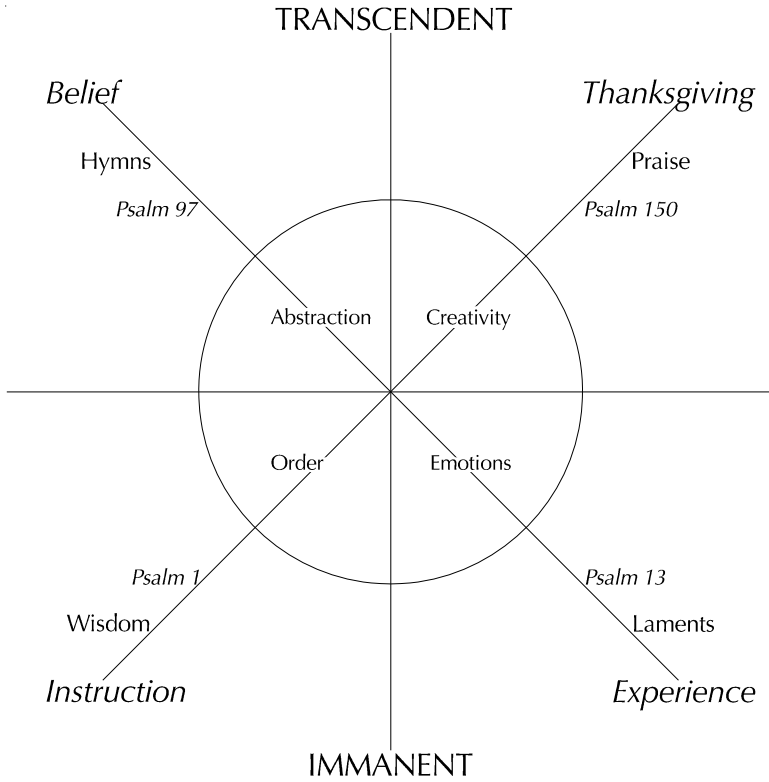
A robust spirituality depends on a variety of experiences and expressions. A strong spirituality grows from keeping these facets of the spiritual life together, and is thereby able to encompass them all. An anemic spirituality results from overemphasis on one or two characteristics. It develops a spindly and lopsided form.

One continuum the Psalms contain moves between belief, on the one hand, and what actually happens to the believer, on the other. What we confess often does not fit neatly with what we experience. Neither end of this continuum should be dismissed or ignored. I suggested above that we have neglected the laments and the experience they represent, to our detriment. A vibrant spirituality encompasses our anger and our trust, our doubt and our belief.

When we involve our whole body in praise, faith percolates through dimensions of our being that we might otherwise neglect or leave undeveloped.

Another such continuum moves between the wisdom psalms' emphasis on instruction and achieving the right order, and the emphasis in the psalms of praise on

thanksgiving and celebration. A robust spirituality must keep these two aspects of experience in tension as well. We should avoid both a cold adherence to tradition and an ignorant emotionalism. Rather, we must be schooled in Scripture and also join in celebrating the goodness and greatness of our God.



A robust spirituality thus involves all four of these elements. Interestingly, the human brain also has four quadrants or centers: for abstract thought, for orderliness, for emotions, and for creativity. As we, with the psalmist, exercise the whole brain in our spirituality, we also grow and mature as whole, spiritually vigorous persons. When we neglect any of these dimensions, we are less mature, more lopsided, with an increasingly fragile spirituality.

If we follow Jeremiah in letting the Psalter nurture our spirituality, we may find anemic aspects of our own faith growing and developing. We may indeed find ourselves echoing his bold demands for justice, his bold words of challenge addressed to God. We may even find ourselves understanding and accepting his raw, heart-worn anguish as an integral part of our own experience with God:

O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. (Jer. 20:7–8)

