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December 6th: Psalm 90 & Acts 28:1-15

December 5, 2020



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The psalm of Moses, the man of God. Paul on Malta.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Psalm 90, a prayer of Moses, the man of God. Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations, before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world. From everlasting to everlasting, you are God.

You return man to dust, and say, Return, O children of man! For a thousand years in your sight, are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. You sweep them away as with a flood. They are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning.

In the morning it flourishes and is renewed, in the evening it fades and withers. For we are brought to an end by your anger, by your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.

For all our days pass away under your wrath. We bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty, yet their span is

but toil and trouble.

They are soon gone, and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you? So teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom. Return, O Lord! How long? Have pity on your servants.

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.

Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us. Yes, establish the work of our hands. Psalm 90 is the first psalm of Book 4 of the Psalter.

Book 4 is the shortest of the five books. It is also the only material attributed to Moses in the whole of the Psalter. Such attributions are not necessarily inspired and may well be later additions.

Most scholars have rejected Mosaic authorship of this psalm, dating it to the post-exilic period, although some, like Mitchell de Hood, date it much earlier. Alan Ross is among those who make a case for the traditionally accepted Mosaic authorship as the most likely. He considers that the suggestion that the psalm is a composition that imagines how Moses would pray were he in the nation's current condition is unnecessarily contrived.

In the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy we have songs of Moses, but this prayer is only found in the Book of Psalms. The description of Moses as the man of God is also found in Deuteronomy chapter 33 verse 1. Beth Tanna is an example of someone who does not accept Mosaic authorship but thinks that a dedication to Moses is apt. She writes, A dedication to Moses would make sense, for Israel was again enslaved by a foreign power, and all of the signs of independence were erased.

Israel is back where it started. Moses was the leader who led them out then, so why not call upon their national hero now? In addition, a theme of this psalm is that God is angry at the people, and, if Clifford is correct, has been for a long period of time. If this is the case, it is possible that this superscription and connections in the psalm to Exodus and Deuteronomy are an attempt to imagine how Moses might have interceded again for Israel, as he did in the wilderness, another time where God was angry with the wayward people.

Of course, Tanna's argument could be reworked to make a case for the great resonance of a psalm of Mosaic authorship in a much later context. Other scholars see the figure of Moses as an especially prominent one behind the material of the fourth book, a

collection which includes exilic and post-exilic material. Marvin Tate suggests that book 4 of the Psalter might be termed a Moses book, with the Exodus and wilderness narratives being particularly important and prominent theological background, situating material that emphasises the Davidic covenant relative to this older covenant framework.

Scholars differ over how to classify this psalm in terms of its genre. While its style is consistent, some scholars have seen a disjunction in its logic and have suggested that it is actually two psalms joined together, verses 1-12 and verses 13-17. There is no reason to suppose that this is the case though.

It begins with the eternity of God, in terms of which human finitude and fleetingness will appear in the sharpest of relief. God himself is the dwelling place of his people, the one in whom they can find security. He is not subject to the changeableness of his creation.

He is firmer and more enduring than the mountains themselves. He pre-exists the creation itself. Even in the dislocation of captivity or exile, his people can dwell in him.

At many points in the psalms, Zion and the temple are presented as the site of God's dwelling, and the places where people can flee to no communion with and refuge in him. However, at points like this, the fact that God does not dwell in temples made with hands, but is himself the dwelling place for his people, comes into very clear view. In such verses we are given a vision of God's transcendence, the fact that he can't be contained within any of the horizons of his own creation, whether physical or conceptual.

He far exceeds them all. While the scripture does not typically adopt the modes of expression employed by the classical theism, at points like this we get a better sense of their conceptual proximity, their theological compatibility, and perhaps also their mutually illuminating character. God is above the order of the temporal creation.

He is not subject to the forces of change. He is not circumscribed by locality, but is the one in whom all creatures live and move and have their being. He is the dwelling place of his people in a special sense, as the one who sustains them, protects them, empowers them and surrounds them.

The temple may be a focal symbol of God as the one who gives his people refuge, but God himself far exceeds and cannot be contained by this symbol. Meditating upon the import of such descriptions of God and the fundamental claims about God as the uncreated creator of all things, theologians have recognised the limitations of all of our attempts to capture God in human or created categories, realities or language, as God so vastly exceeds them all. However, in his grace God has condescended to come near to us and has given himself to be understood truly by us in a manner that is analogical and never comprehensive.

In contrast to the eternity, immortality and immutability of God, mankind's transitory

nature, his mortality and frailty are most apparent. Man was created from the dust and God can return man to pulverise dust. The word for dust here is not the same as that in Genesis chapter 3. Spans of time that are almost incomprehensible to man are as nothing to God, like a few hours of the night might feel to us, or as a single day passing.

The transient character of life is comparable to the passage into a dream or to the grass that flourishes in the morning and fades and withers by evening. Human life is fleeting and God sweeps it into the sleep of death. We are barely awake to ourselves and reality until we pass into deep sleep.

Like grass in the morning we are born and we rise up. Like grass in the evening we wither and pass into the night of death. The same imagery as we see here is also famously employed in Isaiah chapter 40 verses 6-8.

All flesh is grass and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it. Surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. The brevity of life is related to God's wrath and anger in verses 7-12. William Brown comments upon the employment of the imagery of God's face in these verses.

God's face is often sought by the psalmist, who longs for God's reviving presence in his distress. However here we see a different aspect of God's countenance. As Brown observes, the divine light of God's face not only exposes hidden sins, it consumes life itself.

The psalmist seems to be speaking here of something more than merely mortality as such, even mortality as a result of the fall. This is life lived in alienation from God's favour. It's a thin, pale, shadowy thing beneath the searching light of God's consuming holiness.

This is a doomed generation of the children of Israel, dying out in the wilderness, or Judah in captivity in Babylon. Life slips away and ends like a sigh, a surrendering of a final breath, so light and fragile a thing as human existence. Perhaps we might cling on to life for a little longer, an extra decade perhaps, but we will have little to show for such gains.

Such years are no less fleeting and typically afflicted with added pain. Tanner argues that verse 11 is a rhetorical question, asking how long God's anger will continue. The point is to provoke a sense of the greatness of the anger of an immortal God, he argues, following Richard Clifford.

He notes that based on Ugaritic and Akkadian uses of cognates, the phrase to count the days does not refer to the span of life, but to a specific pre-set period of time. Verse 12 then is not a plea for God to teach the humans wisdom, but a plea for the humans to

accurately tally the days of God's wrath, so that they will understand there is indeed an end to it. Other interpretations have been proposed for these verses.

Ross suggests that it refers to the need to consider the experience of the wrath of God, of pronounced frailty and mortality, according to the fear of the Lord. In this context, numbering our days involves evaluating our lives, rather than simply passing through them insensibly. We must consider the limits of human life, be aware of the death that awaits us, and consider the passing of our fleeting time as we hasten towards it.

Reflection upon the brevity of life and the finality of death is an important theme in the wisdom literature, especially in the book of Ecclesiastes. For instance, in Ecclesiastes 7, verses 1-4, a good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind and the living will lay it to heart.

Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. In numbering our days we abandon our denial and consider our lives in the light of God's character.

Death, as the manifestation of our physical finitude and mortality, forces us to reflect upon our end in a fuller sense, upon what it means to be frail creatures of a holy and eternal God, considering what we have been created for. The psalm ends with an extended plea to the Lord. The psalmist pleads with the Lord to return to his people in grace and mercy, having pity upon them.

There might be an allusion here to the petition of Moses in Exodus 32, verse 12. Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. He petitions the Lord's favour, that God's steadfast love would satisfy his people in the morning, that the brief span of their lives would be lived under the smile of his kindness.

They have suffered and wasted away under his displeasure for years, but he prays that the Lord would turn their fortunes around, permitting them to enjoy his goodness for a time of equal measure to their sorrow. God's goodness seems so very distant, so he prays that he would visit them and their children, revealing his work and his glory to them. A prominent theme in the Book of Ecclesiastes is the way in which human labours vanish, leaving no trace behind, the futility of our attempts to make anything to last or to leave anything behind us.

Life is like a mist, it vanishes without residue or mark. Recognising our inability to establish our legacy and the trials of our current lives, it can be easy to despair. The psalmist ends by turning to the Lord, requesting that he would establish the work of their hands, ensuring that their labours are not in vain or soon brought to nothing.

Our years and our labours are in the hands of the Eternal God and he can establish them. A question to consider, how would you further develop the connections between this psalm and the wisdom material of scripture? Acts chapter 28 verses 1-15 Now in the neighbourhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery, and Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him.

And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They also honoured us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed. After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead.

Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days, and from there we made a circuit and arrived at Regium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. There we found brothers, and were invited to stay with them for seven days, and so we came to Rome.

And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius, and three taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. In Acts chapter 28 we are in the finishing straight of the book.

Paul and his companions have been shipwrecked, and after spending some time upon the island of Malta, they finally complete their journey to Rome. Through miraculous divine protection, Paul and all of the 276 persons aboard the shipwrecked vessel made their way safely to land. The soldiers had planned to kill all of the prisoners, but the centurion prevented them from doing so.

Having been driven by the wind for fourteen days, without sight of sun or stars, they didn't have a clear idea of where they were. When they arrived, they discovered that they had landed on Malta. There are competing claims about the identity of the island, arising in part from a narrower construal of the Sea of Adria mentioned in chapter 27 verse 27.

Some have seen it as a more limited region of the modern Adriatic Sea, between Italy and the Balkans. The island of Mildiad, off the Croatian coast near Dubrovnik, is suggested as a possible alternative to Malta. However, this identification is unpersuasive and rejected by most scholars.

When we consider the direction of the wind that drove them away from Crete, their concerns about the sands of the Sirtis, and the fact that the ship that they later board goes via Syracuse, which a vessel of Mildiad would not have done, Malta is by far the more likely location. Several commentators note that the name of Malta means refuge, although Luke does not seem to make anything of the etymology here. Malta is a smaller

island than Crete or Cyprus.

It's about 95 square miles or 250 square kilometres. It's 27 kilometres or 17 miles long and 14.5 kilometres or 9 miles wide. It's about 93 kilometres or 58 miles south of the island of Sicily, in the middle of the Mediterranean.

The local people are here described as barbarians, in verse 2, neither Greek nor Latin speakers, and likely without the Greco-Roman culture associated with those languages. They would probably chiefly have been people of Phoenician origin, speaking Punic, although there would be Greek and Latin speakers around, such as Publius. The distinction between Greeks and barbarians is one that Paul himself employs in Romans 1.14. It need not be taken in a derogatory sense, as it principally refers to the linguistic differences.

Luke presents the Maltese natives very positively. He praises their hospitality, which would have been most important for survivors of a shipwreck, who would have been greatly at risk if they had been among inhospitable peoples. The survivors are presumably soaked through from the swim, so the natives kindle a fire.

Possibly several fires were made for various groups of the shipwrecked persons, but Paul here might refer to a fire made for his own group of survivors. Paul gathered wood with the others, but a viper came out and bit him on the hand. Having been tempest-tossed and shipwrecked, many pagans might have speculated that the gods were against Paul.

The goddess Justice, a daughter of Zeus, clearly had fated Paul to destruction for some wickedness and wasn't going to allow him to escape. However, Paul shook off the viper and neither suffered immediate harm nor swelled up and fell down dead afterwards. Some have raised questions about the plausibility of this account, as there are no poisonous snakes on Malta today.

Indeed, this is one of the considerations some advance in favour of a different island being in view. As the reasons for identifying the island as Malta are strong on other grounds, it seems reasonable to suppose that the locals are Maltese. They seem to expect that Paul would be injured by the snake, which would be surprising if no poisonous snakes were to be found on the island.

It is quite possible that there were once poisonous snakes there, but that they went extinct or were destroyed by humans, as they have done in other places. The story of the viper might remind the hearer of statements of Christ in the Gospels, speaking of his followers' power over serpents, as symbolic of their power over the evil one, the great serpent of old. Luke 10, verse 19, Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.

The longer ending of Mark's Gospel also has a teaching of Christ on the subject. Mark 16,

verses 17-18, And these signs will accompany those who believe. In my name they will cast out demons, they will speak in new tongues, they will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them.

They will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. Given Exodus' themes in the preceding chapter, we might also think of some connection with the character of Moses, who also shows power over serpents as the messenger of the Lord and as a sign of his authority. He turns his staff into a serpent and then picks it up as a rod again.

Paul seemingly picks up a stick for the fire, but is unharmed. In Numbers chapter 21, verses 4-9, the Israelites are judged for their grumbling by fiery serpents, but Moses sets up the brazen serpent, to which they can look and be healed. The response of the natives is to regard Paul as a god, much as the pagans in Lystra had done in Acts chapter 14.

In that city there was a sudden shift of the people's attitude to Paul, from regarding him and Barnabas as gods to regarding them as people to be put to death. Here the movement goes in the opposite direction, but it illustrates the same level of superstition among the pagans. Publius is the chief man of the island, presumably a procurator and a Roman citizen.

The fact that his father is present on the island suggests, as Craig Keener notes, that Publius was from the island. Publius received them in his house for three days, presumably not all of the survivors of the shipwreck, but the people of higher status. While they probably don't have much, if any money to pay for lodgings after the shipwreck, the centurion and the soldiers would probably have been able to secure some lodgings by virtue of their military status.

This is also an example of fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. Publius' father was suffering from fever and dysentery. Depending on its kind, a fever could last for an extremely long time, for months or even a few years.

Darrell Bock is one of several commentators who mentions a microbe found in goat's milk in Malta that could be the cause of such fevers. However, Keener cautions against taking this identification as certain, given the fact that there were many other potential causes of such fevers, and there was also the additional symptom of dysentery. It is likely that the events of the voyage and Paul's vision and prophecy came up during their conversations with Publius, for Paul visited Publius' father, prayed for him and put his hands on him, so that he was healed.

After this remarkable healing of a man with a serious medical condition, many people from around the island came to Paul and his companions and were also healed. Another thing that we see here is Paul's common dealings with people of authority. We've seen this throughout the Book of Acts.

He deals with Sergius Paulus in chapter 13. He has friends among the Asiarchs in Ephesus. He speaks to the Sanhedrin, to Agrippa, Festus and Felix, and now also to Publius.

The Gospel is addressed to all people, but it is also for people as groups, and so it addresses their leaders in a special way, the ones who represent them. It calls for them to repent, not just individuals as detached persons. The people of Malta send them on their way with everything that they need, considering the huge quantity of possessions that they have presumably lost in the shipwreck.

This was an immense blessing. Finally, after wintering in Malta, they take another Alexandrian ship heading up the western coast of Italy. The ship has the twin gods, the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux as its figurehead, for which the ship would likely have been named.

The twin gods, of course, are Gemini in the Zodiac. They were patrons of navigators and were also regarded as the punishers of perjurers and the guardians of truth, so the fact that they are figureheads on Paul's ship might be apt. While I see no clear evidence that there is something more going on here, it is curious to see a number of signs of the Zodiac randomly appearing throughout Luke's narrative, in his Gospel and now in the Book of Acts.

The Virgin, two fish, a man carrying a water pitcher and now the twins. Several scholars have speculated also upon a Zodiacal ordering of the nations in Acts chapter 2. Whilst scripture clearly does not advocate the practice of astrology, in various places it does seem to use some celestial symbolism for its own purpose, such as in Revelation chapter 12 and perhaps also in the story of the Magi. This is likely around February of 60 AD.

This would be the earliest time when sailing would have opened up again in the region. Presumably they didn't want to stay too long in Malta, imposing on their hosts without money to pay them or in requisitioned lodgings. The most dangerous stretch of the journey would be from Malta to Sicily.

Julius the Centurion would probably have requisitioned passage on this vessel to Italy, another Alexandrian ship. Their journey there seems to have been safe and fairly uneventful. Paul finally gets to meet the Christian from Rome here.

Paul was presumably well known by many of the Christians in Rome already, as his letter to the church there indicates, but he had yet to visit. By this point Paul had seemingly obtained great favour with those holding him and he was permitted considerable freedom, even while technically still in custody. A question to consider, what are some of the chief miracles associated with each of Paul's four journeys in the Book of Acts?