

On the psalms

The starting point for the psalms, as for any other document of the Old Covenant, has to be the Hebrew Massoretic text, even though this is medieval. But we know that it is at the end of a process of change. To work backwards, the vowel signs are a late addition to the consonantal text. They indicate how rabbinic scholars thought the text should be pronounced and so understood. But this may not be the same as the original psalmist expected. Evidence from Qumran often validates the consonants, but sometimes shows a variant text which may indeed be superior. Then there is the Septuagint, which (not without inadequacies and with its own theological tendencies) is evidence for a text perhaps two centuries older than Qumran (and, to some extent, for the vowels then assumed). To recognise these facts is a simple matter of textual criticism; as soon as there is a variant, judgement as to which form of the text (if either) is most likely to be original is simply unavoidable. If God had revealed to us that a particular identifiable form of the text was his exact word, matters would be different. But he has not done so. Human judgement is unavoidable.

The psalms, like many other documents of the Old Covenant, are basically in verse. The entire corpus of such verse (including Proverbs, most of Job, much of the prophets) can therefore be studied in order to appreciate, as well as can be done, on what principles such verse was composed. (This is a task which also has to be done in order to study ancient Greek poetry.) It may be taken as established that the basis of the psalms is a stressed metre (like English verse, but unlike Greek) in which there may be a variable (but limited) number of unstressed syllables to each stressed syllable. A line usually has a break near its middle, so common line patterns are 3:2 or 3:3 stressed syllables. There are others.

The next important truth is that verse is composed with various forms of parallelism between lines. The most common are a repetition of the same idea, or its antithesis. Where we have a repetition, it is a mistake of exegesis to try to find a separate meaning. A more debated topic is whether there is a larger grouping of lines. Refrains are sometimes found in the text; whether they were more frequent is debatable. Experts will know this is a quick summary. It is not intended to be comprehensive.

Some psalms are obviously constructed with each line beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, or variants on this. It is a reasonable assumption that if the alphabet is almost complete, then it was originally complete, and indeed in one case of incompleteness in the Massoretic text the missing line (or an ancient conjecture!) has been found at Qumran.

So far there is little controversy (unless one is a fundamentalist, whether Orthodox Jew or Protestant). But what is to be done if the Massoretic text seems to “break the rules”? I have used scare quotes here, because we have no evidence but the texts for rules of composition. We infer normal practices, and there must be some uncertainty at the margin. But it remains a sensible judgement that sometimes the text is overloaded (especially if what we have is neither normal metre nor parallelism), and the striking out of some word or words would result in more normal verse. And it may also be a sensible judgement that some word or words have been lost.

Now any ancient text has suffered the ordinary accidents of copying, and ancient Hebrew verse might originally have been orally transmitted, then written (consonants only) in the old alphabet, and then transcribed into the familiar square capitals. And no copyist is perfect. God has not miraculously intervened to prevent the ordinary mistakes of copying, though it is true that many of the Qumran scrolls have the same consonants as the Massoretic text (or only trivial differences which do not affect the meaning), so a high degree of stability over a period of a thousand years is evidenced. But we might want to go back as much as another thousand years.

Can the original context of the psalms be recovered? First, a warning. “Of David” (found in the heading preceding some psalms in the Hebrew) is not a secure translation. It might mean more like “belongs to the royal collection”. These headings (which are not part of the original composition) sometimes contain interesting information, such as a tune (not that we can recover it). They

sometimes contain fanciful “contexts” in the life of David, which are unlikely to be true. So generally our only evidence for the original context is the original text, if we can recover it.

Now sometimes there seems to be considerable evidence. For example, in psalm 84, a pilgrimage of some distance to the central place of worship makes sense from late in the pre-exilic period onwards (whenever there is a functioning Temple), and the reference to an anointed one might suggest the period of the monarchy, though it could be the anointed high priest after the return from exile. “From strength to strength” might mean from one fortified place to another, which suggests a time of banditry where such safe halting places are desirable.

It might be the case that use of the divine name in the divided kingdoms is more typical of Judah, and its avoidance of Israel. From this clue, Psalm 45 has been linked to the marriage of Ahab and Jezebel(!) rather than that of Solomon and Pharaoh’s daughter.

But generally we do not have even this level of context, and are piling conjectures about particular psalms on top of conjectures about forms of worship. When conjectures are multiplied in this way, the chance that the whole is correct is very low. And some psalms (not least psalm 1) are of a “wisdom” type, which is unlikely to originate in worship (certainly not sacrificial worship) however it may be used later. So the search for an original context is not usually very rewarding, and it would seem unsafe to make amendments on the basis of what would suit an assumed original context. It is hard for us to reconstruct the judgements of a distant age. For example, we may feel “how could anybody put the sacrificial addition on the end of psalm 51?” But it was done – and the issue is the same if it was not an addition but part of the original composition.

Pure conjecture is therefore best avoided in our attempt to reconstruct an original text. This is very different from the unavoidable task of coping with existing variants. Our practical approach to seeking the original text is therefore very limited. Yes, psalms 9 and 10 were originally one alphabetical psalm (and there is no separate header in the Hebrew of psalm 10), but there is damage in the middle and there is no certain way of fixing it. Similarly psalms 42 and 43 belong together.

We have also to recognise that even if we have a secure text, we cannot always be sure of the meaning. Honest translators will note this in footnotes. For study, this is the only right course. But for practical use in worship, the translator has to be decisive.

For worship, there is a tendency to preserve a familiar rendering, even though it is probably wrong. The “valley of the shadow of death” (psalm 23) is not defensible. “How amiable are thy dwellings” (psalm 84) is less wrong, but in modern use “amiable” is a weak word and the Hebrew requires something more passionate. The more respect we give to the bible, the greater the duty of accuracy.

It is important for Anglicans to realise that the Prayer Book psalter is an early and ill-informed translation into English. Even if the scholarship available to church translators has declined somewhat from its best, it is still far more capable of accuracy than the sixteenth century, which had little Greek and still less Hebrew. Right belief by itself is not a substitute for technical knowledge.

If we have (or where we can recover) the original verse, then there must be a case for a rendering into corresponding verse. So far forth (and without comment about the music or the responsorial approach), Gelineau is reasonable for some psalms. But there is no point in rendering a text which does not work as Hebrew verse into the Gelineau format. The Hebrew we have can often only be sung as prose (as the Jews came to do), and therefore prose translations are suitable. This is the only approach which can be applied to the whole psalter.

The monastic tradition used the entire psalter, and eventually this was made binding on all Western clergy. The Church of England retained this obligation for its clergy, and on paper made daily Morning and Evening Prayer available to its laity in every parish. In practice, this did not happen or was not much used. Subsequent rules for the use of the psalter made it easy to avoid some psalms where Morning and Evening Prayer were maintained as acts of Sunday but not weekday worship. 1928 legitimated the disuse of some psalms and mutilation of others. And now, most laity will only experience even small snippets of psalms where these have been made part of the Eucharist.