

## Psalm 1 as the Preface to the Psalter

1.0 INTRODUCTION: Since Origen's first serious commentary at the beginning of the third century, Psalm 1 has been interpreted as the introduction to the whole Psalter. Jerome described it as Prefatio Spiritus Sancti as inspired by the Holy Spirit to be the preface of all the Psalms. He linked Psalm 1 with Deut 30:15-20, as the need to have the same spirit to enter the Psalms. One of his most favourite texts was "But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in His Law he exercises himself day and night". This he found impossible to do in Rome, so he took refuge in a grotto in Bethlehem in 385 to live as the Psalmist of Ps 1.

2.0 ONE PSALM, ONE PSALTER: Many commentators argued that the absence of a title and no authorship evidenced its introductory character. As Remigius of Auxene (c. 841 – 908) states: "The first Psalm does not have a title, since it is as it were the title of the whole book; for it opens up the whole purpose of how the book ought to be understood."

- Peter Lombard (1100-1160) gives a succinct title to the Psalter: "Here begins the Book of Hymns and Soliloquies of the Prophet about Christ". He accepts Peter's statement in Acts 1:20, "just as it is written in the Book of Psalms". "Accordingly, let us see concerning the first Psalms where it ought to be considered why a title is not placed above it like the others ... a title is not given for the reason that this Psalm is the beginning, both of the preface and the head of the book, just as it is said '...It is written of me at the head of the book' (Heb 10:7). "And it treats of that One who is the beginning of all Christ who does not have a beginning ... For it contains the sum and subject matter of the whole book. But the subject matter of the Psalms is the same as that found within the whole book, namely the whole Christ."
- Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) likewise states: "this first Psalms expresses the feelings of a man who is lifting his eyes to the entire state of the world and considering how some do well, while others fall".
- Later in the Puritan era, Thomas Watson (1660) described Psalm 1 as "the Psalm of Psalms, because it contains the vigour and extract of Christianity. It carries blessedness in its architecture".
- Matthew Poole (1683) stated "Psalm 1 is put first as a preface to all the rest [of the Psalter], as a powerful persuasive to the diligent reading and serious study of the whole book, and the rest of Holy Scripture taken from that blessedness which attend to its study and practice".

3.0 SEEKING THE FACE OF THE "I AM"

- The Psalms invite participation between God and humanity. As the prayer book of Israel, such relationships are sought in manifold ways. But the early Church now expressed being drawn into the triune community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. "Participation" now first used by Justin Martyr, and developed by Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa and later fathers as "the Christian way of living".
- Hilary of Poitiers (c. 320-367/8) encountered God like Moses before the burning bush as "I AM WHO I AM", to become the first bishop of Gaul. Ps. 139 reinforced the experience for him. "I was filled with admiration at such a clear definition of God, which spoke of the incomprehensible nature in language most suitable for our human understanding. It is known that there is nothing more characteristic of God than 'to be'".

Likewise from Ps. 139:7-10, Hilary realized that “there is no place without God,” for God as Creator has created all things. The life of contemplation is then to act as a personal participant, in the Word of God, by which all were created. In the Psalms, Hilary then learnt that God is only known by devotion, and only in receiving “the I AM”, that we know.

- Augustine of Hippo (354-430) also encountered God in his Word: “far away in the region of unlikeness you cried to me ... ‘I AM WHO I AM’ I heard it as one hears a word in my heart and no possibility of doubt remained to it; I could more easily have doubted that I was alive, than the truth existed, truth that is seen and understood through the things that are made”. For Augustine, Ps 1:5 reminds us “God knows the way of the godly” for it is participatory of ‘the way of the Lord’”. Augustine sees “the I AM” as “the Eternal”, but in mercy He has become “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” i.e. the God turned toward our humanity, so he sees all the praise of the Psalter, as celebrating this divine condescension. “Let us therefore ineffably praise His essence and love His mercy”. “Adoration” is this human response to “the I AM”.

#### 4.0 PSALM 1 AS THE BEATIFIC LIFE OF CHRIST

Rather than a prayer or a hymn, Psalm 1 is a Beatitude celebrating wisdom. But whereas baruk refers to the blessed source or environment of the godly, the use here of ashre “how blessed that one is”, specifies the whole social and personal life of the wise one who is so wholly alive. As Christ is “the beatific life” of the Beatitude so Christ is portrayed as the Blessed One here. Augustine in his concern for the totus Christi, interprets Ps 1 as the way the Church takes, over against the way of the world.

But those with a more humanistic, low view of the Gospel reflect this in their interpretations.

Theodore of Mopsuentia (c 350-428) exemplifies homospectans and sees Ps 1 as the reform of Josiah (2 Kings 11), “a moral psalm” that is rabbinical in character.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) compiled an “Exposition” or enarratione of Ps 1 in 1515, somewhere between a sermon and an essay. It is “a blessing” sent to his friend Beatus who shares with him “the blessed life of the ancient philosophers”. It reflects upon the moralism of the Enchiridim (1501) that the human spirit reflects upon the divine Spirit with little grasp of the seriousness of sin. Avoiding evil and embracing good are wholly human endeavours. How then could he have contributed to the Reformation?

#### 5.0 JOHN CALVIN (1509 – 1564) AND PSALM 1

While Luther preferred the attacks against Erasmus and Renaissance humanism, it is Calvin who most profoundly responded. Firstly, Calvin identified himself with David as the penitent sinner. For the Psalms are the antitheses of the Stoic values of humanism. “Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned” is what was central to Calvin, as to David, in Ps 51.

“Earnest prayer springs first from a sense of our need, and next, from faith in the praises of God”. “So it is within the Psalms that the Christian is taught ... not only how familiar access to God may be opened up to, but how we may lawfully and truly hope before Him like infirmities which a sense of shame prevents our confessing to men”. Indeed Calvin sees the Psalms as a unique presentation how we may confess, praise, celebrate, adore, the goodness of God.

Nowhere can one write one’s own biography so clearly than within the Psalter. Then we can become “real” within the presence of “the reality of God”.