

The Psalms as the Bible in Miniature

1.0 INTRODUCTION – Many commentators have observed the Psalms contain all essential aspects of Christian doctrine in poetic form. Its antiquity is immense – the Iron Age, but its spiritual orientation as between Man and God is great too. The central figure is God as the “I AM”, in his unique Being, and of a unique relatedness to Him. Stress is placed in the prevenience of God in all their diversity of expression. The whole range of human aspirations are also communicated.

“The matter of the Psalms is universal because whereas the other books of the Bible only deal with certain subjects, the Psalms embrace the whole of theology” – Thomas Aquinas

2.0 DIVISIONS OF THE PSALMS as reflections of a microcosm

- Hilary of Poitiers: a life after the flesh; after baptism; and after a mortal life, in the eternal state
- Augustine: in state of penitence; or justice meeting peace; and as the glorified eternal life
- But Origen, Jerome, Eusebius, Gregory of Nyssa affirm its five books, as comparable to the Pentateuch

3.0 ORAL USAGE OF THE PSALMS, as Psalmo-therapy.

- Evagrius of Ponticus: “Psalmody calms the passions, quietens the body’s intemperance; prayers arouses the intellect to activate its own proper powers”, i.e. of contemplation. The psalms were used as defence against demon possession to live “the angelic life”.

3.1 Use of “Arrow Prayers” in the Psalms

3.2 Our Feelings as our Teachers – John Cassian and Palladius

4.0 THE APOSTLES’ USE OF THE PSALMS, in “the Parchments”. 4 Maccabees story of the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons uses Ps. 34:20 to apply to their own suffering (4 Mac 18:15)

- Use of Psalms in the Gospels
 - Mark: Ps 2, 18, 110, 22
 - Matthew: Ps 91, 78, 8, 118, 110
 - Luke: 90, 117, 109, 30, 68, 108, 15, 131
 - Acts: Ps 109, 117, 13

Use of Psalms in the Epistles eg. Romans

- Romans (Ps 71:1-2; 44:10; 98:2-39; 106:20; 62:13; 51; 36:6-7; 36:12; 143:2; 44; 18:50)

5.0 ATHANASIUS’ ANALOGY OF THE GARDEN IN THE PSALMS

- Athanasius (c. 296-373) in his letter Marcellinos echoes the teaching of “an old Man”, possibly Anthony, to use the Psalms as the Life of the Exodus
- Sections 3-8 recapitulate the Law and the Prophets
- Section 9 as prediction of the Advent of Christ

- Sections 10-13 he argues for the uniqueness of the Psalter in anticipating the Incarnation
- Sections 14-26 a classification of the Psalms
- Sections 27-33 Abuses and Misunderstandings about the Psalms are corrected to provide “the perfect for the soul’s course of life”

6.0 ALCUIN OF YORK (734-804) – his Nine Uses of the Psalms

1. Penitential Use – Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 101, 130, 143
2. To encourage spiritual job and gladness – Psalms 17, 25, 54, 67, 70, 71, 86
3. Thanksgiving, such as the Alleluia Psalms – 105-107, 111-118, 135, 146-150
4. In times of temptation, use of Psalm 2, 64, 69
5. In times of weariness (apatheia), use of Psalms 42, 84, 63
6. In times of feeling abandoned by God, use Psalms 13, 31, 44, 55, 15
7. In times of prosperity, Alcuin cites Psalms 30, 34, 103
8. Psalm 119 is unique expression of meditation upon the Word of God
9. On meditating upon the first and the second Advents of Christ use all the Psalter. But the ideal is expressed in Psalm 1 “meditating day and night”

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Psalms were used in vernacular languages. The Council of Toulouse (1229) sustained this usage

7.0 JOHN CALVIN’S REVIVAL OF THE PSALTER IN REFORMED ORTHODOXY

John Calvin (1509-1564) learnt to see the Psalms as “the mirror of the soul”, expressive of “the double knowledge” of knowing oneself in the light of knowing God”. He never intended to write a commentary on the Psalms, since he had learnt so much from others.

- From Martin Luther (1483-1546) he learnt to see Christ in all the Psalms
- From Martin Bucer (1491-1551) he inherited the Psalms set to metrical hymnody, and the Hebrew commentary of the Psalms
- From Philipp Melancthon (1497-1560) he learnt to exegete with simplicity and clarity of method
- From the early Fathers, especially Hilary of Poitiers and Jogn Shrysostom he learnt exegesis subordinate to the self-explication of the truth of the scriptural text (mens scriptoris)
- Uniquely, however, Calvin lives within the Psalter, to interpret “the plain meaning” of the text, in a personal rebuking, healing and asserting way. For the Psalter is “An Anatomy of the Soul” before God
- Like the primitive Church, he revitalized the Church to become a singing community

Not to be reproduced without permission