PSALM 90:
WISDOM MEDITATION OR COMMUNAL LAMENT?

RICHARD J. CLIFFORD, S. J.

Readers through the ages have found in Psalm 90 a rich and diverse trove of sentiments. The author of 2 Pet 3:8 discovered in its portrayal of God’s nature an explanation for the apparent delay of the coming of the Lord: “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.” Francis Bacon in the seventeenth century regarded Ps 90:11-12 as an invitation to remember our mortality and gain wisdom, “Teach us, O Lord, to number well our days … for that which guides man best in all his ways, is meditation of mortality.” Isaac Watts in the early eighteenth century emphasized the contrast between the eternal God and ephemeral human beings: “Time, like an ever-flowing stream, bears us all away.” The psalm is no less fascinating to modern readers as the continuing stream of scholarly studies makes clear.

In an important study that appeared in 1994, Thomas Krüger of the University of Zurich described the scholarly consensus regarding the interpretation of Psalm 90: it laments the transience of human beings, a transience that is attributed to God’s anger at human sin. The major disagreement among commentators is whether guilt and transience are to be accepted as part of the human condition or are to be protested against.1 Since Krüger’s assessment, studies and commentaries have added nuance, but have not significantly departed from the consensus. Klaus Seybold regards Psalm 90 as a late and much redacted prayer on the “wisdom-philosophical” theme of time (God’s and ours), which is provoked by a severe crisis or by an “experience of loss of time or life.”2 Johannes Schnocks disregards genre considerations as unhelpful for analyzing what is essentially a wisdom meditation on time and eternity.3 To James Luther Mays, the psalm is “the theological ac-

---


3 “Ehe die Berge geboren wurden, bist du”: Die Gegenwart Gottes im 90.
count of the human predicament ... the wrath of God at human sinfulness.”

Christine Forster’s study of the theme of human transience in wisdom Psalms (chiefly Psalms 39, 49, and 90) views the psalm as an attempt to incorporate wisdom reflection into prayer so that pray-ers will be better able to cope with their limited span of life. Erich Zenger also sees the poem as a wisdom-inspired reflection on human transience that aims at attaining wisdom about life. Though conceding the artistic unity of the present poem, Zenger (also Seybold and others) follows Hermann Gunkel in viewing vv. 1-12 as the core that was later expanded.

The present essay challenges the consensus. It argues that the poem is not a wisdom meditation on mortality and the brevity of human life, but a communal lament that asks God to bring an end to a lengthy period marked by divine wrath. The theme of brevity of life is only a piece in the argument that a whole generation of Israelites will die without knowing the gracious God of their ancestors! Krüger and Forster correctly judge that vv. 7-10 are distinct from vv. 1b-6 and describe a specific period of wrath. Verses 11-12 ask to know the duration of the divine punishment rather than of human life. Among the weaknesses of the “wisdom-meditation on mortality” interpretation is its vague definition of “wisdom” and its inability to explain the psalm without postulating a two-stage composition.

Why has the consensus (“wisdom-meditation on the brevity of life”) stood for so long? I suggest that factors extrinsic to the psalm have played an inordinate role. One can name three such factors: (1) the


4 *Psalms* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1994) 292. Robert Davidson notes that the psalm “addresses no specific crisis in the life of the community. Indeed, it deals with a basic human problem, the universal need for wisdom (v. 12)” in *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 299–300.

5 Begrenztes Leben als Herausforderung: Das Vergänglichkeitsmotiv in weisheitlichen Psalmen (Zurich: Pan, 2000). Forster deals with Psalm 90 on pp. 137–200. She departs from the consensus in accepting Krüger’s view that vv. 7-10 refer to a specific past event rather than to the general transience of the human race.
