

I. STORY
 II. SONG
 III. SENTENCE

-----II. SONG: THE PSALTER

Simplifying the forms or types of biblical literature down to "the three 'Ss,'" we have seen that Torah ("Moses," Pentateuch [Genesis through Deuteronomy]) is a mixture of all three, with Story predominating--Story, whose peculiar power is that it teaches us how to see the world, including our life and the future, through the happenings-events-(hi)story of the past. In "the Wisdom Literature," again we have a mixture, but Sentence is the typical form within this genre--Sentence, with its sharp pointing to truth and value through idea (a Greek word meaning a "seeing," but this time a "getting it," a "grasping" of meaning, "comprehending").

Please note now what we should *not* expect from Song: (1) Teaching as to how to see the world, or (2) Wisdom as to how to live in the world. Now, let's not go to the extreme here! The Psalms ("Psalter") is the Bible's hymnbook, its one songs-collection. I'm not saying that we can derive from it no wisdom (for what is wiser than to know what to sing about and how to sing?) and no philosophy (if we may take "philosophy" to mean a way of seeing the world, which indeed I think it precisely is). Rather, I am saying that we shall judge Song fairly, and to our best advantage, only if we look for some value other than wisdom and philosophy. For while it is the way of wisdom to teach us about the world, it is the way of Song to teach us about our own heart, which is so often at odds with the world--and, indeed, of which we are conscious only when it is at odds with the world. And while it is the way of philosophy to package reality for us, it is the way of Song to celebrate our participation in a supernal reality that comprehends both the world and our heart, and does so in both meanings of "comprehend": to leave nothing out, and to understand.

Can you keep in mind this strength of Song? If you can, you will not turn away when, as it does occasionally, Song offends against worldly sense. Let's be specific: if you can get past the first line of the first Psalm, you'll probably sing your way all the way through the last line of the Psalter, Psalm 150:6b, with only occasional offenses against your sense of reality and morality.

Jay (his real name) was anguished to lose, from refusal to give "something under the table," the biggest contract of his life. His heart could not stand the anguish, and stopped. His widow, who was to become the first woman minister on the staff of New York's Riverside Church, far from being turned away from

biblical faith by this tragedy, came to me to enquire as to how she might become a minister of the biblical Gospel.

Now let's put this contemporary story alongside Psalm 1. The husband's experience disproves the first line, and the wife's faith-in-action (not faith in action!) proves the whole psalm's spirit! Instead of being "blessed" or "happy" as one "not following the example of sinners," Jay was dead, a victim of profit for profit's sake, degenerate capitalism. By "walking in the counsel of the wicked" with a good though not clean conscience, he could have been "blessed" with continued life and increased wealth. His story, oft repeated in forms varying with the various workworlds, contradicts our first line of the Psalter in its plain sense. (Have nothing to do with oily interpreters who would slip you out of this contradiction!)

What to do? We might....

....(1) quit reading the Psalms, on the assumption that, the first line being untrue, it would be all downhill, or at least lowlevel, from there throughout. Who needs a Polyanna falsifying of life's defeat of noble human efforts? Who needs additional distortion, from roseate idealism, of one's perception of the human actualities? In a world so hard to live in, who needs it made harder by puristic illusions?....Now here I must be realistic: quitting reading, I observe as Christian and as biblical scholar and teacher, is precisely what millions of honest folk have done! Now just because, as they politely say, "The Bible is hard to understand," but because they have found in it a discouraging amount of nonsense, of what is not only implausible but, according to their own experience and observation, unbelievable. If the reader is in this case, know that I both respect your conclusion and plead that Scripture is worth another look from another angle. In the instance of Psalm 1, why not....

....(2) read through the whole Psalm slowly enough so that your slow body can feel the Psalm's mood. What is it? Is it not a quiet confidence that "things will work out" for God's glory and our good? Well, what are the alternatives to that confidence? and how do they compare, in human effects, with this confidence?

Now, alone or in your group, use Method F (p. _____) for studying Psalm 1. NOTE: (1) Jeremiah 17:5-10 is necessary prophetic background for understanding this "Pharisaic" Psalm; (2) What "joy" have you found "in obeying the Law of the LORD" and "studying it day and night"?; (3) How does the nature metaphor in vv.3f strike you?; (4) How do you feel about the use of alienation-separation in vs.5?; (5) Vv.1 and 6 teach the same "Deuteronomic" ethic of consequence: what sense, if any, does it have for you (a) personally and (b) on the world scene?