THE DYNAMIC CYCLE OF PRAISE AND PRAYER

IN THE PSALMS

In his stimulating essay on "Psalms and the Life of Faith" in

*JSOT* 17 /1/, Walter Brueggemann finds a certain ambivalence

in the "Psalms of orientation". He notes (pp. 6-7, 11) that they

express a confident assurance in God's providential care and in

the security of this good world; but they are not the most

interesting of the Psalms, they can be rather unimaginative,

and they may at times stand in need of the radical criticism of

suspicion. The aim of this paper is to offer a footnote to

Brueggemann's essay, looking further at this ambivalence.

In *The Praise of God in the Psalms* /2/ (pp. 36-51, 152-155),

Claus Westermann makes a comparison of Babylonian and

Israelite psalmody. Both, he suggests, comprise address, praise,

lament, petition, and vow of praise, but they differ in that

Babylonian psalmody characteristically incorporates all five

elements in each individual psalm, whereas Israelite psalmody

characteristically divides into two major types, psalms of praise

(comprising the first two elements) and psalms of petition

(comprising the last three). In Israel, then, praise can subsist on

its own; in Babylon (and Egypt), it generally forms only an

introduction to lament and petition. At the same time,

Westermann notes a further contrast between Babylonian and

Israelite praise. The former is almost exclusively praise of

God's being and actions in general ("descriptive praise"); the

latter includes the descriptive (which constitutes part of

Brueggemann's psalmody of orientation), but it is frequently

praise of a particular act of God in the worshipper's life

("declarative praise"). This last forms the link between petition

and renewed praise of God's being and actions in general;

"descriptive praise" is thus given new stimulus by the psalmist's

personal experience of God acting on the petitioner’s behalf. In

Babylon, then, the characteristic movement is from praise to

petition; in Israel, it is from petition to praise.

In his desire to highlight the difference between Babylonian

and Israelite psalmody, however, Westermann (in my view) at

this point - although not at others - understates the presence in

Israelite psalmody, too, of a movement from praise to petition,

or of an interweaving of praise and lament as the psalmist

wrestles to be true both to past experience and the

convictions of faith, and also to the reality of present

experience of affliction (see, for instance, among the psalms

Westermann himself refers to, 22; 42-3; 44; 74; 85; 89; 106) /3/.

In actual fact, in Israel petition can lead to praise or praise can

lead to petition. Either way, the two are linked closely

together, and one begins to wonder whether it is wise to

emphasize a division in Israel between the first two elements of

the "circle of praise" analysed above and the last three

elements. Indeed, the very observation that the praise of God's

particular acts, Israel's distinctively characteristic form of

praise, links petition and "descriptive praise" puts a question

mark by the emphasis on this division. Brueggemann (p. 16)

suggests that the link between declarative and descriptive

praise is merely formal; functionally, they are quite diverse:

"they stand at the opposite extremes of Israel's experience of

life and of God". But the association between them evidenced

by Westermann from the psalms themselves is functional as

well as formal. Declarative praise leads into descriptive praise,

breathing new life into its affirmations.

Now Westermann's phrase "circle of praise" is a suggestive

one. It seems to me that if this analysis points to a difference

between Israelite and Babylonian psalmody, this difference is

actually that the former is cyclic, the latter is linear. Babylonian

psalmody, that is, moves in one invariable and irreversible

direction, from address to praise to lament to petition to vow

of praise. Psalmists will, of course, cover this ground on

many occasions, but their various psalms are all independent

examples of the same linear sequence, like a collection of short

stories of parallel structure but independent plot.

In contrast, Israelite psalmody is cyclic, in that the end of

one psalm can be the beginning of another. The psalmist's life

of faith moves from lament and plea in some crisis, to vow of

praise and declarative praise for Yahweh's response, to descriptive

praise of Yahweh as the one who always cares and judges,

to lament and plea in some new crisis which shatters security in

any such conviction, to vow of praise and declarative praise for

another experience of Yahweh responding, to renewed descriptive

praise...

Descriptive

Praise

Declarative

Praise Lament

 О

Call to Praise Plea

Vow of praise

Any particular psalm may enter the circle of

praise at any point and may stay at that point or move one or

two stages round it or move round the whole circle. Thus the life

of believers with God is lived in an ever-repeated alternating

of praise and prayer, prayer and praise as they live by this cycle.

Yesterday's descriptive praise is indeed a mile away (i.e. a

lament away) from today's declarative praise. But today's

declarative praise merges directly into tomorrow's descriptive

praise.

Admittedly cycle or circle may itself be a misleading word.

Such terms are, indeed, often pejorative ones, especially in Old

Testament study. In the context of worship, they could suggest

the ceaseless repetition of a lifeless and boring ritual. And such

will be this alternating of praise and prayer unless each journey

round the circle leads believers on in their life of faith. If the

cycle of praise is genuine, it must do that. For each journey

round it takes them through a new experience of calling on God

in need, of wrestling to keep faith in God despite affliction, of

self-examination which will issue in confession or the cry of

innocence, of experiencing God turning, answering, and acting,

and of joyful confession that Yahweh is after all the one who

hears and saves. Someone who has been through that experience

is not the same person at the end as at the beginning. One

may use the same words of descriptive praise to acknowledge

what God always is and how God characteristically acts, but one

puts new meaning into them.

In the study of interpretation, we are used to the phrase

"hermeneutical circle". One of its significances is that interpretation

proceeds by a dialectic in which we ask a question

which by its very nature presupposes a certain shape of answer.

And unless this question is totally inappropriate, the text will

give it some sort of answer. This experience issues a gentle

challenge to us. Will we be so grateful to receive an answer to

our question that we think that the question-and-answer dialectic

has achieved its purpose? Or will we notice that only part

of the text is required to give this answer, and thus only part of

the text's meaning is unveiled by our question? Are we then

more interested in our questions or in the text's answers (to

questions we have not yet formulated)? In the former case, the

hermeneutical circle is a vicious one; it simply goes round and

round. But the true hermeneutical circle is really more a spiral.

A question provokes an answer, but the answer provokes a

different question, and thus another answer, and yet another

question, as we move towards the eschatological goal of understanding

a text and having no more questions /4/.

The dynamic cycle of praise and prayer, prayer and praise

might also be better seen as a spiral, because of the fact that

each journey round it leaves the believer a different person

when he comes to the top of the circle from the person he was

last time he came this way. At least it should do that. But of

course this circle, too, can become a vicious one, a cycle in the

bad sense, a going through the motions of praise and prayer,

prayer and praise. And it is the reality of these two possibilities

that explains the ambivalence of descriptive praise. Descriptive

praise can be a merely conventional acknowledgment of the

power and caring of Yahweh, which deserves all the suspicion a

hermeneutic can bring to it. Alternatively, it can be the fruit of

a new re-orientation, or the means of such as the believer under

pressure wrestles to forbid the reality of his present dislocation

to occupy the whole horizon.

Brueggemann himself believes that "the settled songs of

orientation" may "at times ... assert the new and at times stand

in need of the radical criticism of suspicion" (p.ll). I accept

this, if the "at times" denotes not "in some examples in the

psalter" but "on some occasions when these psalms are used by

believers". When we are interpreting the psalms, we cannot

necessarily (indeed, perhaps we can never) discern how

authentic was the experience and faith that found expression in

particular words of praise and prayer. Apparently deep

agonizing may conceivably reflect a mere following of the

forms and motifs of lament; unimaginatively expressed confident

assertions of Yahweh's power and care may well express

deeply held reaffirmations arising from the experience of dislocation

and reorientation. Copious enthusiasm for the torah

(Ps. 1; 19; 119) may reveal an anxious and guilt-ridden legalism

or a deep and authentic commitment to walking in the ways of

the God by whom the psalmist is aware of being grasped /5/.

The desperate attempt to sustain praise when one's world is

falling apart (e.g., Ps. 22; 42-3) may indicate an immature

unwillingness to let go of an outworn system or an adult

unwillingness to let one person's current experience undo rather

more broadly-based certainties /6/. We cannot be sure what

experience and attitude on the psalmist's part such words

expressed. At each point, everything depends on what those who

use the psalms bring to them and mean by them.

Thus, for the ancient or modern user of the psalms, to affirm

the coherence of life in the terms of the psalms of orientation

may reflect uncritical equilibrium or post-critical celebration.

The descriptive psalms refer to no change /7/; but this does not

tell us whether they presuppose some new experience of crisis

and grace. Doxology (the place where re-orientation and

celebration ultimately take us) /8/ is essentially so God-centred

that its text may have no place for revealing the experiences

and feelings of its speaker. If there is an openness about lament

language like that of the description of the servant in Isaiah 53

/9/ (indeed, is not the latter an instance of the former?), there

is also an openness about the language of praise. And thus the

psalms of orientation do not require a third hermeneutic /10/.

One of the two hermeneutics Ricoeur speaks of will do for each

of them. But which one is appropriate depends on the psalm; or

rather on the one who sings it (and the one who studies it).

NOTES

1 *JSOT* 17(1980)3-32.

2 ET Richmond: John Knox, 1965/London: Epworth, 1966,

from *Das Loben Gottes in den Psalmen* (Berlin: Evangelische

Verlagsanstalt, 1953; 2Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1961).

3 Cf. Westermann's own comments on pp. 55-7.

4 I think I owe this allegorization of John 16:23 to a book

on the new hermeneutic, but I cannot now locate the quotation.

5 Cf. the remarks of H.-J. Kraus, "Freude an Gottes

Gesetz: ein Beitrag zur Auslegung der Psalmen 1, 19B und 119",

*EvT* 10 (1950-1) 337-51; *Psalmen* (BKAT; Neukirchen: Neu-

kirchener Verlag, 1961, 51978), in loc.

6 Brueggemann apparently assumes that the struggle to

maintain expressions of trust and praise which appears in some

laments is necessarily immature; they seem to me to be more

ambivalent than this implies.

7 Brueggemann, p. 7.

8 Brueggemann, p. 15.

9 Brueggemann, p. 8.

10 See Brueggemann, p. 19.