Coverdale’s God: The Theology of the Psalms

John Goldingay

In the sixteenth century, Miles Coverdale was involved with William Tyndale in the first translation of the Bible to be printed in English. Eventually, of course, the “King James Version” was produced and it became the “Authorized Version” for use in church, but Coverdale’s translation of the Psalms had already been put into the Prayer Book, and there it stayed. I first got to know Coverdale’s Psalter, though I didn’t know that’s what it was, when I was a choirboy. I especially remember how we sang the Venite, Psalm 95, every Sunday, and sometimes we sang a setting of the Jubilate, Psalm 100, as well. I had no idea then that they are a great place to start in understanding God.

## The God We Give Praise To

Here is the beginning of Coverdale’s Psalm 95:

1. O come, let us sing unto the Lord :

let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation.
2. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving :

and shew ourselves glad in him with psalms.
3. For the Lord is a great God :

and a great King above all gods.
4. In his hand are all the corners of the earth :

and the strength of the hills is his also.
5. The sea is his, and he made it :

and his hands prepared the dry land.
6. O come, let us worship and fall down :

and kneel before the Lord our Maker.
7. For he is the Lord our God :

and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

I’ll leave the last part of the Venite for now and come back to it later. The psalm invites people into enthusiastic rejoicing on the basis of two complementary truths about God. First, the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods. Now one modification to Coverdale’s translation will help us get the point here. He follows the Vulgate in using the word Lord to replace the actual name of God, Yahweh, which is what the psalm uses. Sometimes that change makes no difference, but sometimes it means we lose something. To say “the Lord is a great God” does say something. But the psalm’s point is a different one. It is that *Yahweh* is a great God. That statement is a much bolder one. because the Israelites were surrounded by people who thought that Marduk was a great god or Baal was a great God, and they were perpetually tempted to give into those other beliefs. In worship you say things about God that people outside don’t believe, and it makes a difference to your life. People who believed that Baal was God could be prepared to sacrifice their children to Baal to show how devoted they were. Yahweh wasn’t that kind of God.

To say that Yahweh is a great King above all gods is also a bold statement, because Israel was usually under the control of a great king such as Asshurbanipal or Nebuchadnezzar. In the New Testament, to say “Jesus is Lord” was a brave declaration because you were suppose to say “Caesar is Lord.” To say Yahweh is a great King is to say something brave and important. It’s to say that you don’t have to be afraid of the world’s big political authorities and that you mustn’t rely on them. You have someone bigger.

There’s something else in that statement. The psalm isn’t interested merely in monotheism, in the idea that there is only one God. Well, it is interested in that idea, but only in association with the fact of who the one God is. Yahweh is the one God. He is the one who owns the entire created world because he made it. We could think about that fact as we concern ourselves with the need to stop destroying it.

So Psalm 95 says, rejoice in Yahweh because he is a great and powerful God. It also says, fall down and kneel before Yahweh, because he’s *our* Maker, *our* God, and we are the people he pastures, we are the sheep in his hand. This second declaration is more personal. Now when my wife and I drive around England we love seeing sheep on the hillsides minding their own business. I guess the shepherds are somewhere, but they’re nowhere to be seen. The sheep look after themselves. It’s not like that in Israel. Grass is a rarer commodity there, and in Old Testament times Israel had lions and tigers, so having a shepherd to look after you is a matter of life and death. And “we are the people he pastures, the sheep of his hand.” He provides for us and he protects us. He knows where there’s enough moisture in the soil to make grass grow, and his hand points us towards it. So being his sheep means following his direction, otherwise we are screwed. He directs us, we follow.

That’s Psalm 95, the Venite. Here is Psalm 100, the Jubilate, and from now on I will put the name Yahweh in where the psalm has it, instead of the expression “the Lord.”

1. O be joyful in Yahweh, all ye lands :

serve Yahweh with gladness,

and come before his presence with a song.

2. Be ye sure that Yahweh he is God :

it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves;

we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
3. O go your way into his gates with thanksgiving,

and into his courts with praise :

be thankful unto him, and speak good of his Name.
4. For Yahweh is gracious,

his mercy is everlasting :

and his truth endureth from generation to generation.

You can see that much of that overlaps with Psalm 95, but there are some extra theological points it makes. First, it urges all countries to be joyful in Yahweh. Now mostly the Psalms focus on Israel and its relationship with God, but they don’t think that Yahweh is just Israel’s God, he’s not just a little local God for Israel, so that it’s fine for the Babylonians to worship Marduk and the Canaanites to worship Baal. Yahweh is the only God, and the entire world needs to acknowledge it. And it’s not bad news for them, but good news – think again about the contrast with a religion that expects you to be willing to sacrifice your children. So all the countries are invited to be joyful in Yahweh.

Then there are three things that are said about Yahweh in the last verse of the psalm. In one sense it’s the same thing said three times in slightly different way, which is the way the parallelism in psalms works. The first thing is that Yahweh is gracious. Again I think Coverdale is influenced by the Vulgate, which uses a word that suggests he is winsome or lovely or gentle. Only in the course of preparing this lecture did I discover that Coverdale didn’t know Hebrew when he produced his translation, though he did learn it later. He produced his translation on the basis of retranslating the Latin translation known as the Vulgate, and Luther’s translation into German, and maybe others. So I think he got the word “gracious” from there.” It’s a slightly odd translation because the Hebrew word is the ordinary word for “good.” But that Hebrew word can carry the connotations that attach to the word good when we say something is good to eat or that someone was good to me. It’s the word in Genesis when it says that God looked at what he had made and it was good. Yahweh is good in the sense of gracious, graceful, gentle, tender, kind.

The second thing is that Yahweh’s mercy is everlasting. The psalm is talking about a particular kind of mercy. It uses the Hebrew word *ḥesed*, which often gets translated steadfast love, or constant love, or just love. There are two kinds of mercy or love that it refers to. Sometimes a person may act towards you in a merciful or loving way, a way that makes a kind of commitment to you, and there is no reason why they should have done it. They were not under obligation to you, but they acted as if they were. And sometimes a person may carry on acting towards you in a merciful or loving or faithful way when you have let them down and done the wrong thing and been unfaithful to them. Those are two contexts in which Hebrew talks about *ḥesed*, about this kind of mercy, about steadfast love. The English word “commitment” is close to the idea – when you make a commitment that you didn’t have to make, or when you keep a commitment when the other person has forfeited any right to your doing so. The psalm says, that’s what Yahweh is like. He makes commitments to us when he doesn’t have to, and he keeps them when we have forfeited the right to his doing so. Ands, it say, his mercy or commitment is everlasting. He keeps on doing it.

The third way of making the point is to say that his truth endures from generation to generation. His truth is his truthfulness or faithfulness or steadfastness. Yahweh is someone you can rely on to keep his word, to keep his promises. The Hebrew word for truth is *emunah*, which is related to the word Amen*.* It suggests that Yahweh keeps saying amen to the things he has said before.

## The God We Pray To

Those two psalms, 95 and 10, are two psalms in which people are praising God. Now we will look at two psalms in which people are praying for something, and see what that kind of psalm tells us about God. They are Psalms 42 and 43, which are two psalms, though I cheat slightly because there are overlaps between them in the way they express themselves, and it looks as if Psalm 43 has been composed to be a continuation of Psalm 42.

Here’s the second half of Psalm 42.

8. My God, my soul is vexed within me :

therefore will I remember thee

concerning the land of Jordan, and the little hill of Hermon.
9. One deep calleth another, because of the noise of the water-pipes :

all thy waves and storms are gone over me.
10. The Lord hath granted his loving-kindness in the day-time :

and in the night-season did I sing of him,

and made my prayer unto the God of my life.
11. I will say unto the God of my strength,

Why hast thou forgotten me :

why go I thus heavily, while the enemy oppresseth me?
12. My bones are smitten asunder as with a sword :

while mine enemies that trouble me cast me in the teeth;
13. Namely, while they say daily unto me :

Where is now thy God?
14. Why art thou so vexed, O my soul :

and why art thou so disquieted within me?
15. O put thy trust in God : for I will yet thank him,

which is the help of my countenance, and my God.

Two or three things about God here. First, God allows us an astonishing freedom in the way we talk to him. “Why hast thou forgotten me,” the psalm asks. It’s rather disrespectful, isn’t it? Can you say that kind of thing to God? Apparently you can. Remember the psalm that Jesus uses on the cross, Psalm 22, which begins “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Can you accuse God of having abandoned you or forgotten you? Apparently you can. When we think about the inspiration of the Psalms as part of the Scriptures, it evidently means something different from when we think of the inspiration of the Prophets. They’re just as inspired, but inspired in a different way. When a prophet says “Thus says the Lord,” the implication is that God is the origin of the words, almost as if he dictated them. In a psalm, a human being says to God what that human being wants to say, and the people of God said, “That’s a good prayer, put it in the book,” and God said, “That book’s good, I like it.” In the New Testament’s words, every scripture is given by divine inspiration, which includes the Psalms. It turns out that the Psalms are 150 examples of things you can say to God. And one of them is, “Why have you forgotten me?”

You can say anything to Coverdale’s God. Now here’s an odd thing. The Psalms don’t refer to God as our Father. Just once they say God is like a father to us, in Psalm 103. Yet they picture God in a way that shows he has all the characteristics of a father. We’ve seen it already. He’s gracious and merciful and faithful. I don’t mean he is like a father as opposed to a mother. Actually there is an amusing aspect to that comparing of God to a father in Psalm 103. It says that God is like a father in the way he has compassion on his children. But the Hebrew word for compassion is the word for a woman’s womb. Compassion is the feeling a mother has for the children she bore. So in the very verse where the psalm says God is like a father it also says God is like a mother. In fact there are quite a few psalms that say that God has those motherly feelings, though there is just the one that explicitly says God is like a father.

Yet I suggest that the way the Psalms assume you can say anything to God shows that he is like a father. There were times when I had to say tricky things to my father, but I always got away with it. I hope my sons could say anything to me. The Psalms show that God is like a father in that respect. You don’t have to wait until you’ve calmed down or regained your balance before you talk to God. If you feel angry or abandoned or scared, that’s not your barrier to prayer, it’s your way into prayer. If you’re not sure you believe in him, you start by telling him that.

There’s another significance to this disrespectful courage that the Psalms show. Suppose you are angry about something that is nothing to do with you and that you can’t do anything about. A couple of years ago in the United States I took part in a Eucharist at the border fence at San Diego, a Eucharist we shared with Anglicans the Mexican side of the fence whom we could see and sing with but not touch or share bread with (they banned even the service the next year). It could make you angry. The Psalms are free with being angry. We can be free to God with our anger on our own behalf when we pray the Psalms. But we can also be free with our anger on other people’s behalf when we pray the Psalms. Because we are talking to our Father, and we can press him to do something about it.

The possibility of pressing him to do something about it links with another point about the way the Psalms say that God has abandoned us or forgotten us. It might look like a contradiction to complain to God that he has abandoned us or forgotten us. If someone has forgotten you or forsaken you, then by definition they are not listening. But that puts us on the track of something significant about the meaning of those words. When God abandoned Jesus, it meant he did nothing to help him, not until two days later. It didn’t mean he wasn’t there watching Jesus suffer. There’s something there about the way God relates to the world. It’s not just that he doesn’t micromanage it. It’s almost that he doesn’t manage it at all. He created it in such a way that he could then leave it to run itself. In some respects he gave it over to humanity to manage. He may not let it get terminally out of hand, but he doesn’t intervene in it very often. That would negate the point about creating it. But he does intervene in it sometimes. So it’s possible to say to him rhetorically, “Why have you abandoned me” and to urge him to come back to you, or to utter that protest and pray that prayer for other people.

There’s a kind of converse point about the idea of God forgetting us. We may think of forgetting as something that happens inside our heads and as something that happens by accident. The Psalms are more Freudian. They think of forgetting at least as often as something one does deliberately, and as something that involves action not just thoughts. To forget is to put something out of mind, and to remember is to apply your mind to something. To forget is then to fail to take action about it and to remember is to take action. In the Psalms, God forgets and God remembers. God forgets, by that logic I just suggested: he is not much in the business of intervening. In the Psalms, God also remembers, which means he then does intervene and act. So when the Psalms urge God to remember, they are urging God to make this occasion one when he does intervene.

That fact links with Psalm 43

1.Give sentence with me, O God, and defend my cause against the ungodly people :

O deliver me from the deceitful and wicked man.
2. For thou art the God of my strength, why hast thou put me from thee :

and why go I so heavily, while the enemy oppresseth me?
3. O send out thy light and thy truth, that they may lead me :

 and bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy dwelling.
4. And that I may go unto the altar of God,

even unto the God of my joy and gladness :

and upon the harp will I give thanks unto thee, O God, my God.
5. Why art thou so heavy, O my soul :

and why art thou so disquieted within me?
6. O put thy trust in God : for I will yet give him thanks,

which is the help of my countenance, and my God.

“Give sentence with me, O God, and defend my cause against the ungodly people.” That’s how Psalm 43 starts. The King James Version changed it to “Judge me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation.” Giving sentence with me (Coverdale) could be good news. Judging me (King James) sounds like bad news. The context makes clear that the psalm is indeed assuming that Yahweh is someone who judges, but that Yahweh’s giving judgment can be a positive thing for you. The verb for giving sentence or judging is the word that lies behind the word for the judges in the Book of Judges. For the most part they were not people who made decisions in a court but people who acted decisively and authoritatively as leaders of their people. ‘Leaders” would be a better word to describe them. Judging needn’t be a negative word. It means having authority and acting decisively, which will be bad news if you are the bad guy but will be good news if you are bad guy’s victim. That’s why in the development of this first verse in the psalm, it goes on from “give sentence with me” to “defend my cause” to “deliver me.” And incidentally, that fact about the meaning of this verse is significant in another context in the Psalms. When the Episcopal Church of the United States produced its revision of the Book of Common Prayer, in 1789, it reworked the Venite. Here is the last part of the Venite.

8. To-day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts :

as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness.
9. When your fathers tempted me :

proved me, and saw my works.

10. Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said :

It is a people that do err in their hearts, for they have not known my ways;
11. Unto whom I sware in my wrath :

that they should not enter into my rest.

The United States Prayer Book omits that section and replaces it by verses from the end of Psalm 96:

9. O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness :

let the whole earth stand in awe of him.
13. For he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth :

and with righteousness to judge the world,

and the people with his truth.

And the *Alternative Service Book 1980* in part did the same. I have two comments. I don’t know what led to the changes, but I’ve heard it suggested that the last part of Psalm 95 surely applied only to Israel under the old covenant, and that the idea of God being grieved with us or loathing us (as the NRSV puts it) is surely inappropriate. Whatever the reasoning, it is ironic that it should be this last section of the psalm not the first part that is quoted in the New Testament, in Hebrews 3 – 4, and made the subject of a kind of homily. The New Testament thinks that we need to take seriously the fact that God can get angry with us. The other comment is that the talk of God judging the world sounds negative, but a realization that the verb means something more like rule or exercise authority changes things. especially when we take account of the fact that this exercise of authority is concerned not with God acting like a judge in a court but God acting as someone who defends people and delivers them.

Psalm 43 puts it like this: “O send out thy light and thy truth, that they may lead me : and bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy dwelling.” It’s a great image of God’s involvement in the world. While the Psalms don’t call God Father, we have noted that they do sometimes call him King. But as is the case with calling him Father, they also describe him in kingly terms without actually using the word, and this is an example. It links with another point about monotheism. Other peoples in Israel’s world believed in quite a few gods, and these gods sometimes argued with each other and fought each other. The Old Testament knows that Yahweh is the only God. But it also knows that there are lots of other supernatural beings, the beings we may think of as angels, which it refers to as sons of God or God’s envoys, gods with a small g. They aren’t divine; they are created by the one God and they can die if they don’t conduct themselves in the proper way as God’s servants. They are the members of Yahweh’s cabinet. They join with him in discussing what needs to happen in the world, and God then sends them out with commissions to do what the cabinet decides. That’s the background image to the prayer in Psalms 43, “send out thy light and thy truth, that they may lead me : and bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy dwelling.” God’s light and God’s truth or his truthfulness are demythologized versions of those envoys that are members of God’s cabinet going out to implement its decisions.

## The God We Give Thanks To

Suppose God does as you ask and he does send out his light and his truth and he does make it possible for you to go to worship him again: what happens next, what do you do when you get there? Well obviously you give thanks to him for doing it. And so there are psalms of thanksgiving that you can pray when you get there. Here is the first half of Psalm 30.

Psalm 30

**1. I** will magnify thee, O Lord, for thou hast set me up :

and not made my foes to triumph over me.
2. O Lord my God,

I cried unto thee : and thou hast healed me.
3. Thou, Lord, hast brought my soul out of hell :

thou hast kept my life from them that go down to the pit.
4. Sing praises unto the Lord, O ye saints of his :

and give thanks unto him for a remembrance of his holiness.
5. For his wrath endureth but the twinkling of an eye,

and in his pleasure is life :

 Heaviness may endure for a night,

but joy cometh in the morning.

The second half of the psalm then essentially says the same thing again. It’s a bit the way the second half of a verse in a psalm often restates the first half, as if saying it once isn’t enough. But for our purposes just one half will do. Psalm 30 is a psalm of praise like the Venite and the Jubilate in a way, but there’s a difference. You can say the Venite or the Jubilate any time, so the way they appear in the Prayer Book is quite appropriate. They say the things that are always true about God. But a thanksgiving psalm like Psalm 30 gives the kind of praise that you give when God has just got you out of a specific mess. So you’ve been praying for God to send out his light and his truth to rescue you from people attacking you, and he has done so, and now you come to the temple with your thankoffering and you pray your thanksgiving prayer so that everyone knows about it and they have their faith built up, too.

There are two things in the psalm that I want to comment on in connection with our thinking about the theology of the Psalms, about Coverdale’s God. First, the psalm is giving thanks “for a remembrance of his holiness.” There’s that idea of remembering again, of mindfulness, of keeping in mind and therefore acting in the light of what we remember. Earlier on we saw the idea applied to God. Here it’s applied to us. Part of the point of the psalm is to get other people to be mindful of what God has done for this person and to let it shape their own faith and their own hope. There’s something else there in that verse that’s worth noting in this connection. The psalm calls us saints, and the word for saints is an adjective related to that word for steadfast love or commitment that appears in the Jubilate. God is characterized by commitment to us. We are people who are characterized by commitment to him. We are the people who are committed to him. That’s what being saints means. When you come across the word “saints” in the Prayer Book Psalter, that’s usually what the word means.

The way the psalm then expresses the point is in terms of remembering or being mindful of God’s holiness. Now it’s a bit pathetic that I have got this far through my talk without referring to God’s holiness, but at least I have got there eventually. Yahweh is the holy one. In a sense it’s just the same as saying that he is God. It’s been said that describing God as the holy one is about the only thing about God we can say that is literally true. Because when we say that God is Father or King we are using images from human life, images that apply to human beings first but that we can then apply to God. Holiness works the other way around: it’s a term that applies to God first and then to us. God’s holiness means that God is different, another kind of being, supernatural, awesome, overwhelming, extraordinary, out-of-this-world. The seraphs that attended on God cried out holy, holy, holy. And the fact that God is the holy one means we have to take him really seriously. He is not just your friend, your buddy. But he *is* your friend. Or as this psalm puts it, he *is* the one who healed me, who kept my life from going down to the pit. God is the great, awesome, holy one. He is also the one who comes down to us in our need. When God became a human being and lived among us full of grace and truth in Jesus, he wasn’t doing something odd that was alien to what he had always been. He had always been that kind of God. What he did in Jesus was embody what he had always been.

Those facts about God link with the other thing I wanted to note in connection with the way this psalm talks about God. Let’s think some more about the way it describes God’s act of healing and rescue. “Thou, Lord, hast brought my soul out of hell: thou hast kept my life from them that go down to the pit.” Now in the creeds we sometimes refer to Jesus going down into Hell, but it’s misleading. The New Testament has two words for Hell, the word Hades and the word Gehenna. Hades is the place where everyone goes when they die, at least for a while. It’s a kind of non-physical equivalent to a tomb. It’s not a place of suffering. Gehenna is a place of torment that is a kind of negative equivalent of life in the new Jerusalem, the new heavens and the new earth. When Jesus dies, the New Testament says he went to Hades, not to Gehenna. And it’s Hades that the psalm is referring to. The Hebrew name for it is Sheol. The Old Testament never talks about Gehenna, a place of torment, it only talks about Sheol, which is quite a nice place, really, it’s a place where you can go to sleep for along time. But you don’t want to go there too soon, do you? I mean, I’m getting on, though I’ve got two or three more books I’d ideally like to write, but if the time comes, it comes, and I’ll have a nice sleep, and then I’ll wake up for resurrection day. So the Old Testament’s ideal is that you die full of years, as Coverdale did, and then go and join the members of your family who’ve passed already. But it’s then a bit sad to die young, when you haven’t lived a full life. So the psalm is giving thanks for the experience of having a near-death experience but of that not being the end. “You didn’t let my foes triumph over me. You healed me. You brought my soul out of Sheol. You kept my life from them who go down to the pit.”

There’s an important theological point here. The Canaanites, who believed in lots of gods, believed there was a god in charge of death, Death with a capital D. He was a powerful figure. He could defeat the regular gods that you turned to for help and rescue and life. The Old Testament knew that there wasn’t a separate god of death. Yahweh was the only God, and he was therefore in control of death as he was in control of everything else. Suppose it seemed that death was about to take hold of you before your time, as happened to Tyndale when he was half Coverdale’s age. God could keep your life from going down to the pit. Death has no power except the power that God allows it. We have nothing to be afraid of in death.

What about that phrase “you brought my soul out of hell,” out of Sheol? There s another point there. The Old Testament does sometimes tell of God bringing someone back from the dead, but the Psalms also talk about God bringing you back from death in another sense. When you are seriously ill, for instance, it is as if death has got hold of you already. We can talk about feeling like death. The New Testament will likewise talk about us being dead in trespasses and sins and God then giving us new life. So this psalm points to another aspect of the Psalter’s understanding of God, something else that is good news. If death seems to have got hold of you, God can bring you back to fullness of life.

One final thing about these thanksgiving psalms. We always have things to thank God for, but the way these psalms work relates to the way God does things for us from time to time when we are in special need, and then we have special reason for giving thanks. So on any given Sunday, most people will be praising God for the things that are always true, but it’s quite proper that there are a few people who have reason especially to thank God for something that happened that week. Likewise on any given Sunday there will be some people in church in pressing need who could pray one of those protest and prayer psalms with feeling, but most of us won’t need to. So how do we relate to the psalms that don’t apply to us personally in that way this week? Part of the answer is that we pray them with the people who need to pray them, people who are there in church and people in other parts of the world. Another part of the answer is the one that applies to the Scriptures as a whole. We immerse ourselves in the Psalms so that they shape our thinking about God and about our relationship with him. When we enter the Book of Psalms, we enter a different world from the everyday world, and they help to shape us so that we live in their real world and don’t get swallowed up by the apparently real world outside church.

Coverdale’s God, the God of the Psalms, is a great God and a great King, the only God, and one who shepherds his people. He’s the God of all peoples, the God who is gracious and committed and truthful. He’s the God to whom you can say anything, like a father, and who sometimes gets angry and acts in the world with authority on behalf of victims of wrongdoing. He sends out his light and his truth to set us free. He’s the holy one, awesome and transcendent, who rescues us from death.

“O come, let us sing unto the Lord : let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation.”