

conviction that God cares which prompts the prayer. And the act of praying—even though no answer appears to come—functions as a lifeline in mortal life, for to pray is to keep open the relationship with God, in which ultimately is to be found the meaning of life itself. As so often is the case in the Psalter, Ps 38 survives not merely as a tribute to the poetic artistry of an era long since passed, but as a prayer for use in the modern era, in which sickness remains as an ever-present reality.

A Meditation and Prayer on the Transitory Nature of Life (39:1-14)

Bibliography

Beuken, W. A. M. "Psalm 39: Some Aspects of the Old Testament Understanding of Prayer." *Heyf* 19 (1978) 1-11. Stolz, F. "Der 39. Psalm." *Wort und Dienst* 13 (1975) 23-33.

Translation

- ¹ For the musical director. For Jeduthun. A psalm of David.
- ²⁽¹⁾ *I said: "I will guard my ways,
taking care not to sin with my tongue.
I will put^a a muzzle in my mouth,
as long^b as the wicked are before me."* (3+2)
- ³⁽²⁾ *I was dumb with silence;
I kept quiet even about good matters.
But my agony was aroused;* (2+2)
- ⁴⁽³⁾ *my heart grew hot within me.
A fire burned in my mutterings;
I spoke with my tongue.* (2+2)
- ⁵⁽⁴⁾ *"O Lord, explain to me my end
and the meaning of the measure of my days.
I would like to know how transitory I am."* (3+3+3)
- ⁶⁽⁵⁾ *Behold, you have made my days mere handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.
The totality of mankind, standing firm, is merely^a vapor. SELAH* (4+3+4)
- ⁷⁽⁶⁾ *Man walks about, merely an image;
he heaps up wealth,^a merely vapor;
and he knows not who will gather it.* (3?+3+3?)
- ⁸⁽⁷⁾ *And now, what have I hoped for, O Lord?
My hope is for you!* (3+3)
- ⁹⁽⁸⁾ *Deliver me from all my transgressions;
don't make me the object of a fool's reproach.* (3+3)

- ¹⁰⁽⁹⁾ *I have become silent. I will not open my mouth,
for you have acted.* (3+3)
- ¹¹⁽¹⁰⁾ *Turn your stroke away from me.
I have been destroyed by the hostility^a of your hand.* (3+4)
- ¹²⁽¹¹⁾ *You have disciplined man with reproofs because of wickedness,
and you make his desires melt away like a moth.
All mankind is merely vapor! SELAH* (4+3+3)
- ¹³⁽¹²⁾ *Hear my prayer, O Lord,
and give heed to my cry;
do not be deaf to my tears.
For with you, I am an alien,
a sojourner like all my fathers.* (3+2+2)
- ¹⁴⁽¹³⁾ *Look away from me, that I may be cheerful,
before I go and no longer exist.* (3+3)

Notes

2.a. The second ׀שׁמ׀ר "I will guard" is probably a scribal error; the translation is based on the reading ׀שׁמ׀ר, implied by G.

2.b. Dahood translates ט׀ by "full of glee," linking it to the Ugaritic root *ġdd*, which he says has the meaning "to be gleeful" (*Psalms I*, 240). The suggestion is particularly curious in the light of other suggestions made by Dahood in the same volume. At Ps 10:18, he proposed that ט׀ meant "arrogant," citing Ugaritic *ġdd*; see my note b on 10:18. At Ps 32:9, he proposed that ט׀ meant "petulance" on the basis of Ugaritic *ġdd*. Here, citing the same Ugaritic cognate and the same Ugaritic text (but with a different translation than in the previous note!), he suggests ט׀ means "glee." The irony is that only in the present context might the suggestion be possible (though it is not probable), for Ugaritic *ġdd* does indeed seem to designate "laughter, mirth." But from a philological perspective, the entire procedure is unconvincing and betrays an elastic concept of the semantic range of roots and forms derived from them.

6.a. The first כ׀ ("all"), preceding ה׀ב׀ל ("vapor"), is omitted (being presumably a dittography), with the support of many Heb mss (De-Rossi, IV, 27).

7.a. MT יה׀מ׀י׀ן (from ה׀מ׀ה, with the sense "bustle about") is curious, both in its plural form (where a singular is expected), and in its failure to provide antecedent sense to the following clause. ה׀מ׀ן is read, with the sense "wealth," as in Ps 37:16.

11.a. Hebrew ת׀ג׀ר׀ה (rendered "hostility") is a *hapax legomenon* of uncertain meaning. For a general discussion of the problem, see Dahood, *Psalms I*, 241-42. Possibly the idea of "reach" is implied: viz. there is no place beyond the *reach* of the divine hand (cf. Caquot, et al., *Textes ougaritiques*, I, 308).

Form/Structure/Setting

Psalm 39 is an *individual lament*, containing a mixture of sad reflection and prayer. It is not only an *individual* psalm in general terms; it is much more personal and intimate than many laments, being characterized by an autobiographical nature in parts. The background to the psalmist's lament and prayer is not entirely certain; some scholars have suggested it was prompted by grave sickness, as was Ps 38. But sickness may be incidental to the principal element in the background, which appears to be the reflective consciousness of old age. Sickness may be a part of the experience of age, but it is primarily the awareness of the nearness and inevitability of death that provokes the lament and prayer.

The sentiment of the psalm is mixed; while parts would be fully at home in the cultic tradition of Israel's worship, other parts are more typical of the reflective tradition of wisdom. Hence there can be no certainty concerning whether or not this psalm was employed within the Israelite cult (cf. F. Stolz, art. cit). The weight of the evidence might suggest that the psalm was the private composition of a poet in the wisdom tradition. The mood of the opening verses is akin to that of Qoheleth (though it is a little more positive). And though the psalm ends in fairly conventional prayer (vv 13-14), it ends with a twist—it is the kind of prayer Qoheleth might have prayed, if he could have summoned sufficient faith. So although uncertainty remains, it is perhaps preferable to interpret the psalm as a private song of a literary, non-cultic nature.

The psalm is introduced by a description of the psalmist's state of mind (vv 2-4) and then moves to a reflection on the transitory nature of human existence (vv 5-7), concluding with the principal portion which is the prayer as such (vv 8-14).

Comment

Title. "For Jeduthun" (39:1). It is generally assumed that Jeduthun, in the psalm titles (cf. 62:1 and 77:1), is a personal name, specifically one of David's principal musicians along with Asaph and Heman (1 Chr 9:16; 16:38, 41; etc.). Mowinckel, however, has suggested that the term should be interpreted as a noun, not a personal name (*The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, II, 213); derived from יָדָה, it would have the meaning "confession" (though it might be added that "thanksgiving" would be equally possible in terms of the root derivation). Mowinckel goes on to propose that these psalms of "confession" would have been employed in some liturgical context of penitence. But the argument is not entirely convincing, principally because the names of David's other chief musicians (Asaph and Heman) also occur in psalm titles. It is most likely then, that the term is a personal name, but still its significance remains uncertain. The title could be rendered: "For the musical director, Jeduthun." Alternatively, the name of the person could have become the name of the tune, or musical setting, according to which the psalm was to be sung, which may be the implication of the use of the preposition לַע ("on, upon") with the name in the two other psalm titles in which it is employed.

The psalmist's state of mind (39:2-4). The psalmist's opening words are addressed to himself; within his own mind, he expresses his determination to keep quiet, come what may. Aware that he already has sufficient trouble for one person, he determines not to compound his problems by saying anything evil; so, in the metaphor, he "muzzles" himself. But this determination to keep silent presupposes the urge to speak, and the urge to speak was presumably provoked by the wicked people in his presence (v 2d). The very presence of the wicked, in other words, provoked the desire to speak, and at the same time created the self-imposed discipline of silence, presumably because any words he would use would run the risk of being sinful. At the root of his dilemma, one must suppose that the psalmist had within him questions, such

as those Job raised, about the prosperity of the wicked (Job 21:7-16); the sin would lie in answering such questions in anger and haste, which could only imply that God was not just and fair in his dealings with human beings.

But the determination to keep silent, even on "good matters" (v 3b) or safe ground, was too much for him. The questions were burning within him and couldn't be contained (cf. Jer 20:9). The expression "my heart grew hot" is used in Deut 19:6 to describe the angry and uncontrollable reaction of a person who learns that a loved one or relative has been killed; it is the same kind of uncontrollable reaction that is growing within the psalmist and finally converts the fiery mutterings into full-blown speech.

The transitory nature of human existence (39:5-7). Nevertheless, when the psalmist does speak, he addresses his subject indirectly, still attempting to keep his tongue from sin (cf. v 2). He does not say directly: "evil people prosper, while I suffer," for that would be to imply directly that God was unjust. He asks, then, for an explanation of the meaning of his existence, and even in phrasing the question (v 5) begins to point to a part of the answer. The very ability to articulate a question about the transitory nature of human life betrays an insight that was lacking in wicked persons, who were the immediate source of his grief. Though the question is addressed to the Lord, the psalmist begins to answer it himself (vv 6-7), for in framing the question, he has begun to perceive its solution.

His days are mere "handbreadths" (v 6). The "handbreadth" (1 Kgs 7:26; the measurement was that of four fingers, Jer 52:21) was one of the smallest measures in the Hebrew system of measuring, so that the metaphor reduces the span of human life to something tiny from the perspective of God. In v 6c, he expands the comparison from his individual life to the corporate existence of mankind, but even that is insubstantial ("merely vapor") in the divine presence. The point of the question and its preliminary answer emerges in v 7. The psalmist's anger, provoked by evil persons, their success and accumulation of wealth at his expense, was based on something insubstantial. To become so upset and angry because of the wicked was to grant them an importance and permanence they did not really have (they could indeed acquire wealth, but did not know who would possess it when they died: v 7c). By beginning to perceive clearly the transitory nature of human existence, the psalmist was also beginning to gain a broader perspective within which to interpret its difficulties and hardships; value in life and appreciation of life must somehow be grasped within a full knowledge of its transitory nature.

The psalmist's prayer (39:8-14). Sobered by his reflection on the impermanence of human existence, the psalmist begins the more formal part of his prayer; in the opening words, he gets right back to basics. "What have I hoped for?" Was it wealth, success, victory over enemies, freedom from persecution, or things of that nature? No! When he got right down to his most fundamental aspirations in life, the psalmist's hopes and desires focused upon God himself. And the realization that his ultimate focus in life was God created a new issue for the psalmist; it was no longer his enemies who were a primary source of external vexation, but an awareness of his own transgressions which became a primary source of internal vexation. If life was so transitory, and if God was its principal goal and meaning, then it was vital that transgressions

(or sin) be dealt with, lest they destroy the potential and meaning of existence. His failure to perceive this truth made him vulnerable in another sense; he claimed to be a man of faith, but his obsession with enemies and the trappings of mortal life had become such that even a fool could see he had missed the point of life (v 9b). The fool might not agree with this perspective on life, but could reproach him for the double standard by which he lived. So the psalmist becomes silent again (v 10); this time, it is not self-imposed restraint to stop himself from speaking sinful words, but the silence of perception, for he has seen how God has acted.

He prays for divine mercy (vv 11-12), recognizing now that his former suffering at the divine hand has brought him to a point of insight and understanding. The word "stroke" (v 11a) may indicate disease or "plague" (cf. Ps 38:12), but in this context it probably refers metaphorically to God's chastisement of the psalmist. The general principle of divine action in v 12 is now understood by the psalmist at a personal level. Human beings so easily have "desires" (the word is a form of תָּוַו , "to covet"), which may turn to wickedness, a contravention of the tenth commandment. The desires come to dominate life to such an extent that they become the meaning and end of existence, and life's transitory nature is forgotten. God's discipline may make those desires "melt away like a moth" (v 12b). Their disappearance may be a terrible judgment to those who had established their lives on desires and ambitions; but it may be a blessing to those who had been sidetracked by desires, forgetting that the only permanent meaning in a transitory life was to be found in the relationship with God.

In the concluding portion of the prayer (vv 13-14), it is clear that the psalmist has traveled a great spiritual distance from the point at which he began. His prayer is clearly one of repentance, characterized by tears, as has already been articulated in v 9. He has come to the realization that life's meaning cannot be related only to land and all that goes with it; he is a transient sojourner in the land, whose only home is God (cf. Beuken, art. cit). In this sense, the ethos of the prayer contrasts sharply with Ps 37 and its constant emphasis on the "inheritance of the land." But Ps 37 was directed toward the young, and Ps 39 reflects the wisdom of old age (cf. v 14b), and perhaps also the wisdom of another era, when the land was more dream than reality. The "alien," or "sojourner," lived in the land with the permission of its owners, but had no permanent stake in it. He received protection and certain privileges from its citizens, but never had full legal status (cf. Deut 24:17-22). "Look away from me" (v 14a): the sense is "turn aside the face of anger and discipline" (cf. v 11), so that I can live and die in peace. "Before I go. . . ;" though any person could make such a remark, it has the ring of a person who, in old age, has regained his perspective on the transitory nature of human life and can face death with calmness.

Explanation

The central concern of the psalm is that of an appropriate *perspective* within which to live out the single, but short human life which each person has

received. Standing reflectively at a distance from human life, it is obvious that if any human being is to find meaning and fulfilment in existence, there must be some understanding and perspective. But the nature of the daily press and grind, which is the common experience of human living for many people, is such that the daily pressures and concerns, often legitimate in themselves, become subtly magnified into the meaning of life itself. Land, income, desires, enemies, friends—these are things that may become the stuff of life, as if it were somehow going to continue forever. But life is limited in its span; if its meaning is to be found, it must be found in the purpose of God, the giver of all life.

The psalmist, in his reflection and prayer, begins in the bustle of life and the pressure of everyday evils, which cloud his vision and disrupt his sense of values. He begins to doubt the purpose of it all and doubts, by implication, divine justice. But his doubt is rooted in a judgment based on a false measure: namely, that meaning is to be found in such things as freedom from enemies, wealth, security and the like. It is only when he rises to a mountain top that he regains the true perspective; life is extremely short, and what matters above all else is the relationship with God. Perceiving this, he confesses his sin. But the vision from the mountain takes him further; as he now looks down on the bustle of life from a distance, he perceives that though he is a part of that world, he is only a sojourner there. His deeper life was rooted in God; the world was the stage in which it was lived out. And it is this perspective of the psalmist which is taken up and developed in the NT. Peter, in his ethical admonitions to his readers, reminds them that they are "strangers and pilgrims" in this world (1 Pet 2:11; cf. Ps 39:13). But above all, it is the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews who develops the theme. In developing the great catalogue of men of faith, he says of them: "they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth" (Heb 11:13), again employing the words of Ps 39. In the psalm, the perspective is developed as one appropriate for living *this life*; in the NT, it is broadened to incorporate the life beyond as well. But it is healthy to begin with the psalm; in this life, our permanence is not to be found in the world as such, but in God who granted us life in the world. To combine an awareness of the transitory nature of human life as a whole, with the wisdom that "sufficient for the day is the evil thereof," is a starting point in achieving the sanity of a pilgrim in an otherwise mad world.

A Royal Liturgy of Supplication (40:1-18)

Bibliography

Airoidi, N. "Il Psalmo 40 B." *RevistB* 16 (1968) 247-58. Braulik, G. *Psalm 40 und der Gottesknecht*. Würzburg: Echter Verlag 1975. Johnson, A. R. *The Cultic Prophet and Israel's Psalmody*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1979. Leveen, J. "Textual Problems in the Psalms." *VT* 21 (1971) 48-58.