

II. QUOTABLE QUOTES AND SUMMARY NOTES

“Every kind of godless violence is directed at getting something or holding on to it—power, oil. Satisfaction, vengeance, personal or national security. But the battle of the saint is always fundamentally directed toward giving praise to God.” (Ellen Davis, cited in Goldingay, Psalms 90-150, 744.)

“If this psalm [146] too dangerous to sing in our more bourgeois liturgies, then we may want to consider how such liturgy becomes innocuous and cuts God off from God’s deeply rooted social intention.” (Brueggemann, cited in Goldingay, Psalms 90-150, 743.)

“While Psalm 1 asserts in a decisive way that life under torah is the precondition of all these psalms, Psalm 150 states the outcome of such a life under torah . . . unincumbered praise. Thus the expectation of the Old Testament is not finally obedience but adoration.” (Goldingay, 750, largely citing Brueggeman.)

More on ‘vengeance’ in Psalm 149

“to translate . . . ‘vengeance’ gives a misleading impression Indeed the function of the redress is to rebuke them (cf. the word order in 141:5). It is to put them in their place, to chastise them for their attitudes and to get them to see the truth about their position in the world and before Yhwh. . . The further account of the way this redress and rebuke will be administered [in Psalm 149:8-9] continues to follow the promises of Isa. 40-55. These chapters speak of kings being put in their place, of people coming to Israel in shackles (Isa. 45:14). Noteworthy is the reversal this involves over against Israel’s own earlier experience It was necessary for Judah to be put down for its wrongdoing, but it is also necessary for other nations to be put down for their wrongdoing.” (Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 742, slightly adapted.)

“Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming in the synagogue at Nazareth that he himself fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy but significantly he stops short at 61:2a. His coming into the world brings ‘the year of the Lords favor.’ Not until his second coming will ‘the day of vengeance of our God’ arrive. Retribution for the *nations*, that is for all who refuse to accept him as King and thus become his people, is threatened (and properly so) in Psalm 149:7 and in Isaiah 61:2b. It is in abeyance so long as the message of Christ is being made known. It finally comes home to roost in Revelation 19:1-3, where the saints praise god for the day of vengeance.

For the evil that stems from rebellion against God and plays havoc with his wonderful world must be destroyed sooner or later. The second psalm tells us that Messiah will *dash . . . to pieces* the rebellious nations (2:8-9); here, the second to last psalm picks up a belief hinted at in a number of ancient scriptures, that in some way Messiah’s people will be associated with him in this judgment.¹

In the meantime, whatever the last judgment will be like and whatever the church’s part in it, the conflict in verses 6-9a of our Psalm is already a reality. So far from toning down its

¹ Wilcox cites as examples, Dan 7:22 (ancient Greek translation/AV/RV; 1 Cor 6:2; Jude 14-15.

violent language, the New Testament backs it up. The fighting talk of 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 and Ephesians 6:10-18, and hymns derived from it like Wesley's 'soldiers of Christ arise,' show us the proper target of Christian aggression. Both sides in the religious wars of the past have misused this and similar war-like psalms, but that does not mean that they do not have a proper use. The powers of evil are abroad in our world, and it is for the Church of God, with the praise of God in her mouth and the double-edged sword of Bible truth in her hands,² to see that they do not have their way—that their plans are frustrated and their captives liberated. Where we know for certain the great Enemy is mobilized, most especially within ourselves, let no quarter be given." (Wilcock, *Psalms 73-150*, BST, 284.)

3. "And a Two-Edged Sword in Their Hand (v. 6b)

Various interpreters have suggested ways by which the reference here to a sword might be tempered. Some have suggested the setting of a sword dance, but evidence for the existence of such in the culture at the time is lacking. Others have suggested, plausibly in light of the varying uses of the Hebrew word usually translated "and" (*waw*) either a comparison ("let the praises of God in their throats *be like* a two-edged sword. . . ") or explication ("let the praises of God be in their throats, and *let that be* a two-edged sword. . . "). Rashi, a famous Jewish interpreter known for his sober literal interpretations understood "a sword in their hand" simply to be another way of saying "acclamations of God in their mouth." (There are of course poetic links between the effect of words and a sword; as well, verse 6 is not prelude to slaughter but to a redressing, a change in attitude towards God.) The ancient Christian Cassiodorus interpreted the two edges to be the OT and NT of the sword of the Word. Most interpreters reject these options in light of the following verses which imply physical subjugation. I consider this the most likely option as well but find solace in the broader Messianic context, namely that those who stand ready to enact such retribution act in solidarity with the Messiah who in his first coming and in his teaching of the kingdom until he comes again refrained from exercising this prerogative and taught his disciples to do the same.

4. Is it really as simple as Psalm 1 and 150 seem to imply?---yes and no!

The "Psalm with which the psalter ends is . . . as deceptively simple as the one with which it begins. To present either of them out of its context is to provoke puzzlement, if not outcry. The good prosper and the wicked perish and everything will work out just fine says Psalm 1, and the answer of Psalm 150 is: praise God, so it does. And the perplexed Bible reader says, "Yes, but does it?"

So we must see these two psalms in their context. What has happened is that the intervening 148 have worked their way, often painfully, through all the 'Yes, but's'. They set forth the conflicts, burdens, mysteries and sufferings that both the individual believer and the assembly have to cope with, and all that God, as their covenant Lord, does for them on the journey of faith. In doing so they help us to grasp what the first and last psalms are really about.

Walter Brueggemann describes the progress from one to the other as a movement 'from obedience to praise.' We have to begin by submitting to what God says; and what he says is, in outline, the simple facts set out in the first Psalm.

² Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12.

But it does not take us long to realize that living God's way is a great deal less easy than we thought. Things happen that seem to belie the simple truth we started with. . . . [Yet] the single minded praise of 150 which sees no evil is not shutting its eyes to awkward facts. It is not naive even if we might have thought (wrongly) that the simplicity of [Psalm] 1 was naive. It knows that all such things will in the end have been dealt with by *god's acts of power* [150:2a] and in the meantime abandons itself in total trust to the Lord who has so revealed himself and his purposes." (Wilcocks, 286.)

IV. RELEVANT PASSAGES

Isaiah 61:1-3 (cf. Luke 4:16-21, where Jesus stops at v. 2a)

'The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress³ instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.'" (ESV.)

1 Maccabees 2:42-46—*a Jewish text that celebrates 'godly covenanters' (Hasideans) enacting retribution against wicked opponent*

"Then there united with them a company of Hasideans, mighty warriors of Israel, all who offered themselves willingly for the law. ⁴³ And all who became fugitives to escape their troubles joined them and reinforced them. ⁴⁴ They organized an army, and struck down sinners in their anger and renegades in their wrath; the survivors fled to the Gentiles for safety. ⁴⁵ And Mattathias and his friends went around and tore down the altars; ⁴⁶ they forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys that they found within the borders of Israel. ⁴⁷ They hunted down the arrogant, and the work prospered in their hands. ⁴⁸ They rescued the law out of the hands of the Gentiles and kings, and they never let the sinner gain the upper hand.

Appendix: Extracts from C. S. Lewis's chapter "A Word About Praising," in his *Reflections on the Psalms*.

"He is that object to admire which (or, if you like, to appreciate which) is simply to be awake, to have entered the real world; not to appreciate which is to have lost the greatest experience, and in the end to have lost all." (p. 79.)

"We are under an obligation to go to church. . . [I]t is in the process of being worshipped that God communicates His presence to men. It is not indeed the only way. But for many people at

³ The word "head-dress" is the same word *p'e'er* that is rendered verbally in Ps 149:4; here in Isaiah it is the basis of a wordplay on "ashes" (*'ēper*).

many times the ‘fair beauty of the Lord’ is revealed chiefly or only while they worship Him together.” (p. 79.)

“The miserable idea that God should in any sense need or crave for our worship like a vain woman wanting compliments or a vain author presenting his new books to people who never met or heard of him is implicitly answered by the words, ‘If I be hungry I will not tell thee’ (50, 12).” (p. 79.)

“I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless (sometimes even if) shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise-lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least

I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: ‘Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?’ The psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about.” (p. 80)

“To see what the doctrine [of praising God] really means we must suppose ourselves to be in perfect love with God—drunk with, drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up within ourselves as in communicable, hence hardly tolerable, bliss, flows out from us incessantly again in effortless in perfect expression, our joy no more separable from the praise in which it liberates and utters itself than the brightness a mirror receives is separable from the brightness it sheds In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.”⁴ (C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 82.)

⁴ In light of our consideration of Psalm 150, which summons an orchestra to praise God, it is interesting to note how Lewis continues: “Meanwhile, of course, we are already, as Donne says, tuning our instruments. The tuning up of the orchestra can be itself delightful, but only to those who can in some measure, however little, anticipate the symphony. The Jewish sacrifices, and even our own most sacred rights, as they actually occur in human experience, are, like the tuning, promise, not performance. Hence, like the tuning, they have in them much duty and little delight; or none. But the duty exists for the delight. When we carry out our ‘religious duties’ we are like people digging channels in a waterless land, in order that when at last the water comes, it may find them ready.” (Ibid.)