

**February 12, 2012**

Sunday of the Prodigal Son

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

My first exposure to Psalm 64 (Hebrew 65) was, I suppose, in the Introit of the Latin Requiem Mass. Among my most lively boyhood memories, I recall listening to the local choir chanting—not only at funerals, but at the votive Mass for the Faithful Departed, which often formed the daily morning service---*Exaudi orationem meam; ad Te omnis caro veniet*, "Hear my prayer; to Thee all flesh will come."

The special propriety of this verse for the remembrance of the dead was obvious to me. Later this sense of propriety was strengthened by more mature reflection on the harvest theme, which dominates much of the psalm.

Another of the verses provided the liturgical name for the Orthodox Church's observance of September 1 as "the crown of the year": *Evlogeseis to stephanon tou eniavtou tes chrestotetos sou*, "Thou shalt bless the crown of the year of Thy goodness." This reference to the autumnal harvest recognizes the historical relationship of the Church's liturgical observance to the Jewish feast of Rosh Hashanah.

Determining the psalm's original context is somewhat less easy. For some students of Holy Scripture, in fact, the structure of the psalm seems to indicate more than one original setting. Its two thematic parts---the first set within the precincts of the Temple and second in the larger world outside---has prompted some readers to speculate that this was originally two distinct psalms.

There are two compelling reasons, I believe, to discount this theory:

First, it does not really address the supposed dilemma; the explanatory task is simply delayed, not settled. That is to say, if it is difficult to understand why an original author chose to unite two settings in this single psalm, it is not a whit easier to explain why a later biblical editor decided to unite two different compositions into this one psalm.

Second, the theory is contradicted by the psalm's internal organization. These two parts need each other. The apparent disparity of their themes is incidental to the psalm's obvious literary unity. As it stands in the received Hebrew text, the psalm spans five stanzas, each with the regularity of three metric components. In the first stanza the cadence is set in a simple meter (3+2), which broadens (3+2+2) in the next stanza and then swells to more ample lines (4+5; 5+5) in the final parts. The overall effect is an evolving rhythmic crescendo.

Though an attempt to mimic this complex rhythmic form in translation is probably a doomed enterprise---the Greek and Latin translators did not try it---the slow, attentive recitation of this psalm in almost any language will convey the same growing sense of wonder and bewilderment, as the poet contemplates the goodness of God manifest in the stability of the mountains, the mighty grandeur of the seas, the richness of the earth, and the bounty of the harvest.

As the poet moves from contrition ("Thou wilt provide atonement") to praise ("They shout and sing for joy"), he steps outside the confines of the Temple to the larger world. As "all flesh" comes into the Temple at the beginning of the psalm, the grace of God goes out from the Temple to the world in its latter lines. In short, this seems to have been a single psalm from the beginning.

Nonetheless, speculation about its origins began rather early. For instance, there is the following note at the psalm's beginning in some manuscripts of the Septuagint: "An ode of Jeremiah and Ezekiel from the word of sojourning, when they were about to depart." That is to say, some later hand put this psalm on the lips of the two prophets as they were about to leave Jerusalem (and the worship in the Temple) for captivity, Ezekiel to Babylon in 598 and Jeremiah to Egypt sometime after 587. Thus interpreted, the psalm sees the whole world---including the lands of exile---as a temple in which God is manifested and worshipped. This reading of the psalm would surely have strengthened the distressed souls who experienced the destruction of the Temple and endured the Babylonian Captivity.

If one bears in mind that Christian hands copied all the extant manuscripts of the Septuagint, this note on the psalm may represent an early Christian understanding of it.

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