

The Psalms as a Particular Mode of Revelation*

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Introductory Remarks

IN THIS ARTICLE, I wish to revisit an ancient understanding of the psalms as a God-given way to enter into living contact with him by allowing him to reveal himself in the words of prayer he has given to his people. In this act of revelation we are also revealed to ourselves and the disorders of our soul are healed. St. Athanasius of Alexandria, writing to his friend Marcellinus, points to this quality of the psalms by which our own emotions are rectified and brought into deeper contact with the realities that are mediated there by the word of God.

But in the Book of Psalms, the one who hears, in addition to learning these things, also comprehends and is taught in it the emotions of the soul, and, consequently, on the basis of that which affects him and by which he is constrained, he also is enabled by the book to possess the image deriving from the words. Therefore, through hearing, it teaches not only not to disregard passion, but also how one must heal passion through speaking and acting.¹

Our age and our culture are in need of this medicine. We are in a post-modern world, that is, a world that is consciously seeking to go beyond and to rectify the aberrations of modernity. Allow me to cite the remarks of two Catholic thinkers who reflected on the deficiencies of a modernism

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¹ Athanasius, *The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, Richard J. Payne, ed., Robert C. Gregg, trans. (New York: Paulist, 1980), 108.

that is still with us and part of us. Christopher Dawson speaks of our culture as “detached from spiritual aims and values” and “faced with a spiritual crisis of the most acute kind”; an atmosphere in which there is no “spiritual sense of religion as a objective reality transcending our private experience.” Paul Gallagher, who is citing Dawson, adds: “Modernity in this light, is a case of unbalanced growth, where the mentalities of secularism and technology are incapable of healing the broken unity of a previously spiritual culture.” The second Catholic thinker, Romano Guardini, spoke of the loss of “an objective sense of belonging to existence,” and the need for “root virtues of earnestness and gravity grounded in truth.”²

There are efforts being made to overcome the isolation effected by modernity while retaining those positive advances, which it did achieve. From a Christian perspective this means moving ahead to a deeper understanding that human existence is a gift that finds its perfection in responding to God, the Giver, and in accepting the communion with the Trinity that is offered to us in Christ. But this also means seeking communion with others in a mutual relationship of generosity and receptivity. In brief, the challenge is to recover a genuine interiority.

It is worth noting, then, in this regard how strong is the insistence in the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* that an important aspect of our moving out of the dilemmas of modernity is to retrieve and develop the *interpersonal* dimension of our knowledge of the truth. This is particularly stressed in §32:

Human perfection does not solely consist in acquiring an abstract knowledge of the truth, rather it finds its place in a living habit of self-giving and fidelity towards others. In this very fidelity in which a man learns how to give himself, he discovers full certainty and firmness of spirit. But at the same time knowledge that comes through confidence and depends on interpersonal esteem is not given without reference to truth: a man, by believing, is committed to the truth which another has shown him.³

Our journey back to truth begins by recognizing that truth is most often found in a relationship of trust in another that leads us to a move-

² I am taking these quotes from Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols. An introduction to Faith and Culture* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1997), 79–80. who is citing Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 217; and idem, *Understanding Europe* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1952), 241–45.

³ Translation from Laurence Paul Hemming and Susan Frank Parsons, eds., *Restoring Faith in Reason. A New Translation of the Encyclical Letter Faith and Reason of Pope John Paul II Together with a Commentary and Discussion* (London: SCM Press, 2002).

ment of self-giving and of commitment to the truth that the other has shown us. We must be clear about this: Thinking is an activity of the person and not merely of the mind, and thus the highest form of truth is found as an interpersonal possession. The interpersonal dimension of truth finds its perfection in relation to God. The foundation for this, as Thomas Aquinas teaches, is that God is known implicitly in every act of knowledge. Thus, in answering the question whether all things desire God himself, Aquinas confronts the objection that all things are ordered to God as knowable and desirable, but not all beings capable of knowledge actually know God, therefore neither do they actually desire him. This is his answer:

All knowing beings implicitly know God in whatever they know. For just as nothing is desirable except as it bears a likeness to the First Goodness, so nothing is knowable except as it bears a likeness to the First Truth.⁴

To move from an implicit knowledge of God to an interpersonal knowledge of him requires faith, an entrusting of oneself to him and an acceptance of what he says. What John Paul II said above in regard to interpersonal knowledge among human beings is super-eminentely true of our relation to God: “knowledge that comes through confidence and depends on interpersonal esteem is not given without reference to truth: a man, by believing, is committed to the truth which another has shown him.” This is truth in and through a communion of persons, and this communion with God comes about through prayer. It is for this reason that, as I hope to show now, the psalms are a revelation of God and of humanity, they are the word of God bringing us to that interpersonal sharing in which we enter into the awesome presence of God.

Psalm 86

I have chosen this psalm for several reasons. First, it is an intensely personal psalm that appropriates the prayer tradition of Israel even while

⁴ *De Veritate* 22, 2, ad 1. The same thing is said in the *Summa theologiae* (I, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1). “To know that God exists in a certain common and confused way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is the happiness of man. For man by nature desires happiness. And whatever is naturally desired by man is naturally known by him. But this is not to know in an absolute way (*simpliciter*) that God exists, just as to know that someone is coming is not to know Peter even if it is Peter who is indeed coming.” Translation from Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, David Schindler, ed., Marc Sebanc Alexander Dru and Cassian Fulsom, trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 75.

it expresses the suffering of one person. The pronoun “you,” not usually necessary in Hebrew, is addressed to God six times within a tone of direct address sustained throughout the whole psalm. Secondly, though it is personal, it is not individualistic. Not only is the covenant with Israel evoked by several allusions but also Israel’s role in regard to the nations is set forth with prophetic insight. Finally, by the place assigned to it in the final edition of the Psalter, it acquires an added dimension of meaning that is important for Israel’s self understanding and that of the Church as well.

The discussion of the place of the psalm within a series of “editions” may strike some as a new notion. Serious work, building on observations as ancient as the rabbinic writings, has shown that the clearly visible editorial work that assembled the Psalter into five “Books” was only part of the profound and refined organization of the psalms that gave them an enhanced meaning that includes and transcends the meaning that the individual psalm had in its own right.⁵ Collecting independent works and placing them in mutual context is much like placing bells or chimes in a carillon in order to create a specific sound effect: Collecting psalms and placing them together serves to create a “meaning effect.” This is part of the Holy Spirit’s action in revealing both God and humanity to us.

Commentators usually classify Psalm 86 as an “individual lament,” meaning a prayer in time of suffering that appeals to God for help. The psalm is surely that, but it is also a psalm whose central section (Ps 86:10–13) includes praise and prayer both for the universal reign of YHWH and for deeper personal conversion that includes an expression of confidence in God’s saving help. The title given to the psalm is, “A Prayer of David,” or less likely, “A Prayer for David,” thus making it one of approximately seventy-two psalms which bear his name in their title.⁶ The attribution fulfills various functions and is often, as here, an editorial designation meant to evoke the figure of David, the ideal king, the model of prayer, the embodiment of Israel and, as Ezekiel 34:23–24 promises,

⁵ There are five “books” which make up our present psalm collection: 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, 107–50. These books, perhaps modeled on the five books of the Pentateuch, are clearly delineated by a doxology at the end of each collection: Pss 41:14; 72:18; 89:53; 106:48; Pss 148–50. For an introduction to this aspect of research in the psalms, one may consult Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, *Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series* 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); and J. Clinton McCann, ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, England: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1993).

⁶ Some manuscripts omit the title, probably correctly, at Psalm 133 while the Septuagint has the title over fourteen other psalms.

the king who will be “prince” and “shepherd” when God himself reigns over his people.⁷

We may ask the question, then, who is praying this psalm and in what context? Most likely, this prayer was first composed by a person who was able effortlessly to incorporate phrases from other psalms and other places in Scripture in order to express his plight before God, to pray for a universal manifestation of God, “the worker of wonders,” and to ask for the gift of a unified heart. The fact that the psalm was known and ultimately found a place in the Third Book in the collection of 150 psalms may point to a use in the public worship of Israel where the people prayed as one, appropriating as individuals and as a corporate group, the words of the psalm. At one point, the individual was identified editorially with David in whom all Israel found expression. Thus, psalms such as this became the prayer of all Israel in its centuries of suffering during the exile and after. People prayed individually or collectively in union with the prayer of David in whom they saw themselves summed up. This ability to identify with David, the king, as he prayed in suffering was part of the heritage of Israel that enabled the Christians, seeing in Jesus the new David, to pray in union with him and with one another. This mystery was plain to St. Augustine who, commenting on this very psalm, had this to say:

When we speak to God, praying, we do not separate the Son from him, and when the Body of the Son prays it does not separate its head from itself. Thus it is he, the one Savior of his Body, our Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God who prays for us and prays in us and is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our Head, he is prayed to by us as our God. Let us then, recognize our voice in his and his voice in ours.⁸

In what follows, we must try to bear in mind all the levels of the psalm as it is now present to us. There is the level of the suffering poor man, then that of the community identifying itself with him, and then the personification of the community in David, and then in Jesus. Because the first level is the foundation of all the rest, I will devote most of my time to it, allowing the word of God to reveal him as we enter into it, and in this process we will come to understand ourselves in dialogue and in communion.⁹

⁷ For an early study on this point, see James Luther Mays, “The David of the Psalms,” *Interpretation* 40 (1986): 143–55.

⁸ In Psalm 85,1 (Corpus Christianorum Latinorum 39, 1176 [Turnholt: Brepols, 1956]).

⁹ A good commentary on this psalm, one sensitive to many of its dimensions and competent in discussing its technical aspects, can be found in Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 374–84.

The First Section of the Psalm: Verses 1–7

A prayer of David.

- Incline your ear, O YHWH
for I am poor and needy
- 2 Preserve my soul
for I am loyal.
Save your servant, you are my God,
save this one who trusts in you.
- 3 Be gracious to me, my Lord,
for I call to you all day long.
- 4 Make the soul of your servant glad,
for to you, my Lord, I lift up my soul.
- 5 For you, my Lord, are good and forgiving
and great in loyal-love to all who call to you.
- 6 O YHWH listen to my prayer,
be attentive to the sound of my pleading.
- 7 On the day of my distress I call to you
for you will answer me.

Something mysterious happens when we call to someone: We place ourselves and the other in a new manner of relating. This call activates for the first time, or reactivates and deepens for a time past counting, the transition from relation to relationship: to a mutual presence and attention in love. The psalm begins, as do so many, by a direct call and a plea that the Other turn as well to me. This interior gesture is so instinctive that even atheists make it: It is an indication of our implicit knowledge of the First Goodness and the First Truth, and of the fact that we know that this Other is personal and capable of response. Here, of course, we are not dealing with a vague and implicit knowledge but are calling to the God of the covenant, YHWH.

The psalmist, with whom we are identified, asks that the Lord “pay attention” to him because he is poor and needy. A poor man is one who finds confidence in the experience of dependence upon God. He is poor, and therefore has a special right to God’s care who, as the King of Israel, must, as he has instructed the earthly kings of Israel, care for those who cannot assert their own rights. Thus, the ideal king to come “shall rescue the needy when they cry out, and the poor when they have no one to help them” (Ps 72:12). However, even when we wish to place ourselves in such a position of being poor and needy, we find in all that we have absorbed from our culture a pervading cynicism that fears such vulnerability and intimacy. But this is the word of God, given to us precisely to enable us to move beyond the illusions of our culture to a position of

communion and trust. It is also being prayed by “David” as the embodiment of the people, and as Augustine often remarks, as Christians see it, there is one person praying:

All the members of Christ, the body of Christ diffused throughout the world, are like a single person asking God’s help, one single beggar, one poor suppliant; and this is because Christ himself is that poor man, since he was rich became poor, as the apostle tells us: *Though he was rich he became poor, so that by his poverty you might be enriched* (2 Cor 8:9).¹⁰

The original petition of direct address is followed by three more: “preserve my soul . . . save your servant . . . be gracious to me.” And three reasons are given: “for I am loyal . . . you are my God, [I am] one who trusts in you . . . I call to you all the day long.” The word I have translated as “loyal” here is the famous word, *ḥāsīd*, deriving from the noun, *ḥesed*. The more one encounters this word in the Scriptures, the more it yields its secrets, revealing God as affectionately faithful to his promises and covenant, indeed making him present in the very act of “doing *ḥesed*.” God is faithful even when his people are unfaithful; he does not revoke his choice of them, and this consistency is seen as his mercy. The response to God’s *ḥesed* can be described as obedience born of trust, gratitude, and praise: all personal actions that lead to intimacy.¹¹ This word is one of the leitmotifs of the psalm.

The fifth direct address of petition asks: “Make the soul of your servant glad, for to you, my Lord, I lift up my soul.” In Hebrew the word “soul” (*nepeš*) evokes the whole *physical* human being, living, desiring, relating, but seen, as it were, from the inside. This is not far from the way “subjectivity” is used in modern theological anthropology. The interior gesture of lifting up one’s soul implies an act of entrustment, of confiding oneself to God expecting protection and guidance. We read in Deuteronomy 24:15 that a person who hires a day laborer must not withhold his pay: “For he is poor and he is lifting up his soul for it.” Just as the poor man

¹⁰ On *Psalms* 39, 18. Translation is from St. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, vol. 2, John E. Rotelle et al., eds., Maria Boulding, trans. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), 221.

¹¹ H. J. Stoebe describes the reality mediated by the word *ḥesed* in these terms: “an expression for magnanimity, for a sacrificial, humane willingness to be there for the other. . . . It is a given that *ḥesed* always has to do in some way with the life of the other, and one expects and hopes from the recipient of such *ḥesed* a similar willingness that surpasses the obligatory.” Stoebe, “*ḥesed*,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 2, Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, eds. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 456

lifts his soul for his wages, which he needs for his existence, so the one praying directs his whole being toward God who alone is his trust and the object of his longings.¹²

Intimately linked with the interior gesture of “lifting one’s soul,” of entrusting oneself to the Author of the Covenant, is the prayer for guidance, of needing YHWH’s covenant faithfulness, as the psalm later says: “Teach me, YHWH, your way; I will walk in your faithfulness.” It is remarkable that this same type of petition for guidance is found as well in the only other two psalms that have the phrase “To you I lift up my soul.”¹³

After the five requests the reason for our confidence is expressed: “For you, my Lord, are good and forgiving and great in *hesed* to all who call to you.” There has already been an allusion to the psalmist’s covenant relation to God in the phrase “You are my God,” echoing and individualizing the formula: “I will be to you a God, and you will be to me a people.” Now we find the first of two allusions to a crucial turning point in Israel’s relation to God, one whose narrative, while difficult to piece together on our western norms, is fraught with an anxious question: Can a broken covenant be renewed? This is a question often pondered in the postexilic editing of the sacred tradition.

According to Exodus 32:1–29, while Moses was receiving the Law from the Lord, the people rebelled against its very first commandment and persuaded Aaron to make a golden calf which they then considered their god and the one who brought them out of the land of Egypt. On the next day, Moses interceded for them asking that he himself also be blotted out of the Book of Life if that were how God so intended to punish his people. God answered, “Him only who has sinned against me will I strike out of my Book” (Ex 32:33), but then added that he would no longer travel with his people, “because you are a stiff-necked people, otherwise I might exterminate you on the way” (Ex 33:3). Moses continues to plead with the Lord who finally accedes to Moses’ request that the Lord continue to go with his people: “This request too which you have made, I will carry out, because you have found favor with me and I know you by name” (Ex 33:17). Moses then goes further and asks for a guarantee that God will keep his promise: “Do let me see your glory!” (Ex 33:18, compare Jn 14:9). The Lord explains that Moses cannot see his face

¹² I owe this insight and part of its wording to A. A. Anderson, *Psalms* (1–72) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 207.

¹³ Ps 25:1, 4, *et passim*; note the prayer for Israel in the editorial conclusion; Ps 143:8. On the contrary, the man who “lifts his soul to Fraud” cannot climb the mountain of the Lord (Ps 24:4).

and live, but that he will make all his beauty pass before him and will pronounce his name. The medieval Jewish commentator Rashi echoes a long tradition that God did this in order to teach Moses and others how to call upon him when they intercede for the people.

The time has arrived when you shall see of My Glory so much as I will allow you to see according as I wish and *therefore* I find it necessary to teach you a set form of prayer. Just now when you felt the need to pray for mercy on Israel's behalf you besought me to remember the merits of the patriarchs and you thought that if the merits of the patriarchs are exhausted there is no more hope—I will therefore cause all the attributes of my goodness to pass before you on the rock whilst you are placed in the cave . . . to teach you the formula when praying for mercy even though the merits of the patriarchs should be exhausted.¹⁴

The Lord instructs Moses to ascend the mountain alone and to cut two stone tablets “that I may write on them the commandments which were on the former tablets which you broke” (Ex 34:1). When the tablets were cut:

YHWH came down in a cloud and took his stand with him there, and he called on the name of Y H W H. And YHWH passed before his face and he called out: Y H W H, YHWH, compassionate and gracious God, long suffering and great in *hesed* and faithfulness; keeping *hesed* for a thousand generations, lifting off wickedness, rebellion and sin, and not declaring the guilty guiltless, visiting the sins of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third generation and a fourth (Ex 34:5–7).

This formula, then, appears at a crucial moment, that is, when Moses is pleading for a restoration of the Covenant and asking specifically that the Lord give a sign that he will continue with his people. The Lord answers with this self-description. Rashi remarked that YHWH gave to Israel this means of calling upon him when the sin of Israel is so great that “the merits of the patriarchs” appear to be exhausted. This seems to be borne out in Numbers 14:8, the only other occurrence of the full formula, where Moses is pleading for the people who had just openly refused to believe the Lord and enter the Promised Land as he had commanded them.¹⁵

¹⁴ Translation from *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth, and Rashi's Commentary*, Rev. M. Rosenbaum and Dr. A. M. Silberman, trans. (Jerusalem: Silberman Family, 1930), *Exodus* 190.

¹⁵ In addition to the phrases in Psalm 86, which we will discuss now, resonances of this formula can be found in Pss 103:8; 145:8, and in Joel 2:13; Nah 1:3; Neh 9:17; Jonah 4:2.

There is yet another echo of this formula in our psalm, it is in verse 15 and thus serves to frame the central section: “And you, my Lord, are a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and great in *hesed* and faithfulness.” It is certainly true that the psalmist, and any one of us, could evoke these words in an individual appeal for mercy. But there is more. This psalm “of David” is clearly inserted in the midst of five psalms attributed to “the sons of Korah.” Preceding our psalm we find Psalm 84, a pilgrim song longing for the presence of God in the temple, and Psalm 85, which expresses a plea for restoration and revival. On the other side of Psalm 86 there are three “Korah psalms.” Psalm 87 celebrates the mystical reality of Zion as the mother of all the nations;¹⁶ Psalm 88 is a bitter prayer of distress delivered by Israel; and Psalm 89 expresses an anguished questioning of God’s faithfulness to his Covenant with David now that the monarchy has disappeared.¹⁷ In our Psalm, therefore, David, that is, an individual and the nation (the “servant” of YHWH: verses 2, 4, 16) through the mouth of David, is pleading for a restoration of Israel and recalling to the Lord his self-description of being “great in *hesed* to all who call to you,” and “a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and great in *hesed* and faithfulness.” In our individualistic worlds such identification with God’s people as a whole, such anguish over our communal inability to show to the world the *hesed* of God, is both a challenge and a revelation of God who awaits such prayer from us. It is also a revelation of ourselves as the other dialogue partner who can be enabled by the word of God to say in the last line of this section, “On the day of my distress I call to you *for* you will answer me.”

The Second Section of the Psalm: Verses 8–13

- 8 There is none like you among the gods, my Lord,
no deeds like yours.
- 9 All the nations whom you have made
will come and bow down before you, my Lord,
and glorify your name.
- 10 For you are great, and a worker of wonders;
you are God, you alone.

¹⁶ For a commentary on this psalm and its significance for a grasp of Israel’s later self-understanding in regard to the nations, see Norbert Lohfink and Erich Zenger, *The God of Israel and the Nations. Studies in Isaiah and the Psalms*, Everett R. Kalin, trans. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), chapter 5.

¹⁷ Psalm 89 is the concluding psalm of Book III of the present psalter and it also concludes the “Messianic Psalter” that extends from Psalm 2, includes Psalm 72 (the last psalm of Book II). For a brief treatment of this see *ibid.*, 159.

- 11 Teach me, YHWH, your way;
I will walk in your faithfulness;
unify my heart for the fearing of your name.
- 12 I will thank you, my Lord, my God, with all my heart,
and I will glorify your name forever.
- 13 Yes, your *hesed* is great in my regard;
and you will rescue my soul from the depths of Sheol.

It is remarkable that immediately following a personal and communal plea for the renewal of the covenant, we find this section whose first part, in anticipation of the following psalm,¹⁸ is a celebration of the universal rule of YHWH to be realized through Israel, itself embodied in David, the servant. In Psalm 22, also “of David,” we find the same rhythm: a lament that begins with the cry of a suffering servant, “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?” and ends by celebrating God’s universal reign in words evoked as well by Psalm 86: “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to YHWH; *all the families of the nations will bow down before him*” (see verse 9 above).

Israel is praying in David, and David in Israel. The rhythm of suffering and exaltation is found throughout Israel’s history and is held up for all here to see and enter into by the word of God. Experiencing the time of exile and postexile when there is “no prince, prophet or leader” (Dan 3:38), and longing for restoration, Israel remembers the future when the ideal king will come will come and “All kings shall bow down before him, and nations shall serve him” (Ps 72:11). But as these horizons expand through suffering it becomes clear that the renewal of the covenant for which Israel is praying is somehow going to include all the nations: “And of Zion they shall say: ‘One and all were born in her’” (Ps 87:5). That is why: “There is none like you among the gods, my Lord, no deeds like yours. . . . For you are great, and a worker of wonders; you are God, you alone.”

Then, as we arrive at the hinge at the center of this section of the psalm, the direction changes again. Closely connected with this statement of universality is a petition whose spiritual depth reaches to the very core of a person and a people: “unify my heart for the fearing of your name.”¹⁹ The heart is the “within” of a person. “In addition to feelings and emotions, the

¹⁸ Some of the expressions in Psalm 87 are as follows: “I tell of Egypt and Babylon among those that know the Lord; of Philistia, Tyre, Ethiopia: ‘This man was born there.’ And of Zion they shall say: ‘One and all were born in her.’”

¹⁹ For the reading “unify,” preferred by a majority of commentators, rather than “rejoice,” as read by the Septuagint and some modern translations see Tate, Psalms 51–100, 376.

heart contains as well our memories, thoughts and ideas, our plans and our decisions.”²⁰ Robert Sokolowski, following the lead of Robert Spaemann, speaks of the heart in these terms.

[The heart] “is the ground for the turning away from the good,” and it is also, conversely, the ground for the turn toward the good and toward truth. Furthermore according to Spaemann, this turning toward or turning against is not just a response to an argument or to an idea, but a response to someone—God, and in the more immediate situation, Christ—who discloses the truth. . . .

This concept of the heart is an ultimate “explanation” for the turn toward truth or darkness, and it is original in the New Testament: “The heart is the unfounded foundation in a sense for which there is no thinkable or conceptual equivalent in antiquity.”²¹

It would seem to me that the newness of the New Testament understanding of “heart” lies rather in uncovering new depths of a reality already known and spoken of clearly in the Old Testament. In this instance, as in so many others, the Old Testament provides the initial understanding that is subsequently needed and taken up in the context of Christ.²² To pray that God “unify” the heart, then, is to pray that this “unfounded foundation” within us, the center of our personhood, cease to be divided between good and evil and respond with integrity to someone, to God. In one movement of prayer, the carefully constructed isolation of modern and postmodern humanity is done away with: We are confronted with our ineluctable orientation to Transcendence and its accompanying responsibility.

The psalmist prays that *God himself* work the change, in keeping with the whole of the biblical understanding that a “pure,” that is, a single or

²⁰ Jean de Fraine and Albert Vanhoye, “Coeur,” in *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*, Xavier Léon Dufour, ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1971), 176–79.

²¹ Robert Sokolowski, “The Autonomy of Philosophy in *Fides et ratio*,” in *Restoring Faith in Reason: A New Translation of the Encyclical Faith and Reason of Pope John Paul II together with a Commentary and Discussion*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons and Laurence Paul Hemming (London: SCM Press, 2002), 277–91. Sokolowski is drawing upon Robert Spaemann, *Personen: Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen ‘etwas’ und ‘jemand’* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta Verlag, 1996), 288.

²² This process is aptly described by Bernard Lonergan, by the term “sublation,” using an insight he attributes not to Hegel but to Rahner: “What sublates goes beyond what is sublated, introduces something new and distinct, yet so far from interfering with the sublated or destroying it, on the contrary needs it, includes it, preserves all its proper features and properties, and carries them forward to a fuller realization within a richer context.” Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 241.

simple heart, is literally the creation of God: “A pure heart *create* for me, O God, renew in me a steadfast spirit” (Ps 51:12). What Israel is praying for in both Psalm 86 and in Psalm 51 is not only moral integrity, but the new covenant as described in Jeremiah 31:31–34, Ezekiel 11:19–20 and 36:25–28 and elsewhere which will be characterized by an action of God putting within the heart the power to respond wholeheartedly to himself. In this, the allusions to the renewal of the covenant found in the use of YHWH’s self proclamation are made more explicit. Such a renewal will bring about the perfection of the “fear of God,” that is, “fearing his name” in a deep experience of the presence of God mediated by single-hearted submission to the expression of his holiness and glory. Holiness is the inner mystery of God’s unique being. Glory is the outer manifestation of that mystery, and Name is the expression of his being that he shares with us as a gift.

At this point, the poor man, David, Israel, promises to the God of the covenant (*my* Lord, *my* God) that he will thank him with all his heart, probably alluding to the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4–5 calling us to love YHWH “with all your heart.” He promises further: “I will glorify your *name* forever.” Is it too much to understand that at this level of the psalm’s history and in the light of the universalist psalm edited to follow, Israel is here looking forward to that future restoration when the nations, as just described in verse 9, will, along with Israel, pray for an undivided covenant heart and also “come and bow down and *glorify your name*”?²³ In any event there is little doubt that the prayer is moving in that direction.

The Third Section of the Psalm: Verses 14–17

- 14 O God, those who defy you have risen against me
and a pack of ruthless men seek my soul;
they do not put you before their eyes.
- 15 And you, my Lord, are a merciful and gracious God,
slow to anger and great in *hesed* and faithfulness:
- 16 turn to me and be gracious to me;
give your strength to your servant,
and save the son of your handmaid.
- 17 Work a sign on my behalf
that those who hate me will see and be confounded
that you, YHWH, have helped me and consoled me.

These concluding verses return to the theme and the tone of the opening section, but they have to be understood in the light of the intervening

²³ I owe this suggestion to Lohfink and Zenger, *The God of Israel*, 158.

section. In the opening verse the poor man asks God to look on his plight: The words are almost exactly the same as Psalm 54:5, also a psalm “of David.” It is difficult to determine whether there is any conscious borrowing and, if so, in what direction it took place, but in both contexts, and especially in Psalm 86, the poor man’s suffering has become that of the king and the nation. Those who seek his life are ruthless and godless.

In even stronger terms than in the opening section, verse 15 evokes the covenant gift of God’s self identification as “merciful, gracious, slow to anger, great in *hesed* and faithfulness.” This is followed by a prayer: First that God save his servant, one born in his house so to speak, and secondly, that he work a sign in the sight of the servant’s enemies so that those who hate him will be confounded and see that YHWH has helped and consoled him. What kind of a “sign” is being asked for? Clearly, some act of God delivering the poor man from his persecutors, but then also one that restores kingship to David and to Israel, and perhaps one that draws the nations into the privileges of Israel as the psalm announces. This prayer is still echoed in the Catholic liturgy that prays during the Paschal Vigil: “grant that the fullness of the whole world pass over to the status of the sons of Abraham and the dignity of Israel.”²⁴ For Christians, therefore, the looked-for sign in its definitive expression is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this event the poor man has been heard (Ps 22:25), David reigns, and Israel has begun its vocation as the gathering place of a new people. As Charles H. Dodd expressed it some fifty years ago:

It is this far-reaching identification of Christ, as Son of Man, as Servant, as the righteous Sufferer, with the people of God in all its vicissitudes that justifies the apparent employment of the early Church of Hos. vi. 1–3 as a prophecy of the resurrection of Christ; for the resurrection of Christ is the resurrection of Israel of which the prophet spoke.²⁵

Conclusion

As the word of God, the psalms bear us along into a dialogue with God as we make their words our own. I said at the outset that our present day isolation needs this divine help in order to recover an orientation toward the Transcendent. Our journey toward an openness to dimensions beyond the reach of our instrumental reason is not so much a movement back as it is a movement forward, born along by the word of God that is

²⁴ Prayer after the Third Reading (Ex 14:15–15:1).

²⁵ C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures. The Substructure of New Testament Theology* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1952; reprint, 1961), 103.

both ancient and always new. Such a movement, as *Fides et Ratio* reminds us, requires trust and a recognition that all knowledge is an implicit invitation to communion with God.

Psalm 86, as understood on the various levels of its inclusion within the faith life and worship of Israel and its inclusion among the collection of psalms, is capable of bringing us into a living contact with God. First, we are led to understand that underlying all address to God is the fact that God has taken the initiative. From out of the depths of his ineffable holiness he created, and then he chose. There is none among the gods like him; there are no deeds like his. Needing nothing, yet seeking our love, he is, by his own self declaration, good and forgiving, merciful and gracious, great in *hesed*, stable, truthful, and loyal. Yet, the power of his love can make itself felt as wrath and anger: He hates sin and will allow human evil to play itself out in order finally to bring us back to him.

God acts in the realm of human history and his action is self-authenticating. It is continued when, by this same action, the event is transposed into word, not as an empty memorial but as a living presence of God. When we pray we are brought to enter more deeply into those actions through the words he gives us. We hear him call to us and teach us to pray: "Return, Israel to YHWH, your God. Yes, you fell in your own evil. Take words with you and return to YHWH. Say to him: Lift off this guilt, take the good, and we will restore to you the fruit of our lips. (Hos 14:2–3). We learn that the presence of God does not leave us at ease but moves us to call out in our own suffering and that of those bound to us in God. We may be angry, disconsolate, humiliated, and frightened by our sins, but somehow we know that the initiative of God, his covenant, is unbreakable from his side. The very words he gives us lead us to become aware of his presence. For when the Holy Spirit anoints the word of God, then God is present and we pronounce his name: YHWH, Abba. Little by little we are led to affirm what we have always dimly known: God is to be trusted even when he is silent. In this covenant trust we recover and make more explicit an instinct for his awesome presence and his love that confounds our small expectations and meager thoughts.

But the psalms also reveal us to ourselves. We come to know our poverty and need, and are not afraid to own it. We realize that God has made a covenant and renewed it and that his promises are unalterable. We pray to be guided because we begin to understand the immeasurable consequences of our decisions: We are far greater than we wish to be—we do not want the responsibility that God has placed in our hands. Most importantly, the psalms in general, and Psalm 86 in particular, reveal to us our heart: that ineradicable place that is always open to God and that is

the locus of our relation to him. Our heart bears witness: No matter how we twist and turn and deny, by our inner decisions we will either move toward God or away from him. We pray to God, the only one who can accomplish such a thing, to unify our heart, to create a pure heart, so that we will worship and obey him and enter into that communion with him that opens up once again the world we have tried to close to him.

In this movement we also learn that we cannot pray as isolated monads. We belong to a people and we must carry the weight of that reality whenever we pray. Together we are the poor and needy man who prays for a universal sharing in the privileges of Israel, one day to be shared by us all in that moment when “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26). The radical wing of Islam accuses us, Christians and Jews, of having been false to our heritage and having succumbed to the isolation created by the philosophies we have let dominate us. This, they say, has led us to apostasy. When we look at the degree to which the closed system thinking of the world has shrunk our vision, we have to acknowledge the truth contained in this charge. Christian persecution, culminating in the Shoah, has sullied us all, perpetrators, onlookers, and victims, creating a present climate of uneasy manmade arrangements: guilt on one side, fear on the other. It may be that the thought of transcendence is too difficult for us. However, if we turn to God and together pray for a unified heart, we can show the world what a gift it is to know God’s will, what a privilege to share a heritage. The steps from there are hidden in the same will of God. Perhaps what we experience now is God’s anger, but as Abraham Heschel reminds us:

God’s anger is not a fundamental attribute, but a transient and reactive condition. It is a means of achieving “the intents of his mind.” Inscrutable though it appears to the people, “in the end of days” they “will understand clearly” (Jer. 23.20).²⁶

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²⁶ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2nd ed. (New York: Perennial Classics, Harper Collins, 2001).